

---

# Maintaining Conviction and the Humean Account of Normativity

Valerie Tiberius

---

Normative judgments – judgments about what is good, reasonable, or obligatory – make a claim to authority in a person’s deliberation. It is this claim to authority that distinguishes normative judgments from simple desires, wishes and feelings. Explaining the nature and the sources of this authority is one of the central problems of moral philosophy. The main debate about the source of normative authority has taken place among those who share an internalist assumption, that is, the assumption that judgments must be capable of motivating an agent in some way if they are to count as authoritative. Among those who accept this assumption, there are two camps: The first, following Kant, argue that normative authority derives from principles of reason to which rational beings are committed in such a way that they are, when rational, motivated by them.<sup>1</sup> The second, following Hume, argue that normative authority derives from our passionate nature, our sentiments, emotions and desires.<sup>2</sup>

The first option takes on the large burden of proving that there are principles of reason that answer to the needs of an account of normative authority, that is, principles capable of motivating us (at least sometimes) and sufficiently objective to ground the authority of normative claims. Philosophers have been skeptical about both features of the Kantian position.<sup>3</sup> Given this burden, the second option has its advantages. We know that we have passions, sentiments and desires and we know that they can motivate us to action; more argument is required to show that there are principles of practical reason and that these are capable of motivating us. But the Humean position has serious problems of its own. One might think that the claim that normative judgments are authoritative in virtue of our passions or sentiments does not explain why these judgments are *authoritative* at all. After all, the problem of explaining the authority of normative judgments arises because we are seeking what distinguishes these judg-

ments from expressions of desires and feelings that do not appear to have any authority. The Humean position also invites skepticism, then, because our sentiments seems to require something further to give them normative authority.

One aspect of this objection to the Humean position is that the position does not provide an adequate account of the source of normative authority because the answer it gives undermines the conviction we have in our normative judgments. Authority as the Humean understands it, then, cannot do the work we need it to do. We cannot continue to be confident in our own normative judgments if we believe that their authority derives from our passions because we do not think that our passions always give us good reasons for action. For example, consider a person who is committed to the principle of charity because he believes that God prescribes this principle. Upon losing his faith in God, he begins to think that it is only his own desire to help others that provides a basis for his commitment. We can imagine that such a person might become skeptical about the value of his charitable acts because there no longer seems to be any good reason for them. After all, he might think, he has desires to do many things God does not sanction and he does not take these desires to provide him with reasons to act. The convictions he once had about what he thought valuable might weaken considerably in response to his ceasing to believe in what he took to be the basis of these commitments.

The main goal of this paper is to defend the Humean position against the charge that its account of normative authority is inadequate because it undermines normative conviction. This defense relies on considerations about the nature of practical deliberation and its implications for our normative commitments. I argue that people who are concerned to engage in reasoning about their commitments ought to develop certain dispositions



with respect to these commitments. I then argue that people with these dispositions would have good reasons to maintain their commitments even if they were to come to believe the negative thesis of the Humean position, that Reason does not bestow normative authority. Even people who are committed to the necessity of the sanction of Reason, I argue, do not have reasons to abandon all of their commitments if the Humean position is true. This is because people who are well suited for successful deliberation have more reason to keep their many commitments to practical reasons and to abandon their commitment to the need for Rational sanctions than they have to do the reverse. This argument does not solve all of the problems for the Humean position, but it does, if successful, alleviate the concern that this position is self-effacing.<sup>4</sup>

Three points of clarification are in order before we proceed. First, I use the term “commitment” to indicate the attitude or set of attitudes we have toward the things we take to have (at least some) normative significance. Commitments are, at least in part, constituted by passions and sentiments that motivate us to act. I do not mean to presuppose any particular view about the exact nature of these psychological states. The important point for the Humean is that there are no Rational Principles that prescribe the having of particular commitments; commitments are, ultimately, contingent parts of our nature, although this does not imply that people take the value of that to which they are committed to be contingent. Normative significance, as we shall see, is not limited to moral importance; it can attach to any of a person’s ends, to her reasons for these ends, or to her view about what counts as appropriate evaluation of these reasons.

Second, the Humean insight this paper concerns is that there are no Rational Principles to sanction our commitments and bestow normative authority on them. This does not mean that there are no rational principles in a different sense. There may be principles to which we are committed as regulative rules of reasoning and these are rational principles in a sense compatible with the Humean insight. The Humean could also appeal to principles in the sense of general rules to which people have contingent, normative commitments. Taken in this sense, though, such principles do not solve the problem of supplying normative authority to unauthoritative passions. Such rational principles cannot ground a claim to authority that is independent of our commitments. The important Humean point is that normative authority

comes from us and our contingent natures, rather than from universal Reason.<sup>5</sup>

Third, my characterization of the Humean position in terms of the negative insight that there are no Rational Principles to sanction our commitments is very permissive. Given this characterization, many positions may count as Humean even though they are not Humean in other ways. For example, some Aristotelian ethical theories might count as Humean in this sense, but not in other senses.<sup>6</sup> I do not mean to imply that sharing this negative insight makes a theory Humean in any other, richer sense. However, the permissive characterization is useful insofar as the argument given here for the claim that the Humean position is not undermining could be used by many theories that share the negative insight.

The question of whether the Humean position undermines one’s commitments arises in the context of deliberation about those commitments. We will begin, then, with an examination of the deliberative perspective.

### 1. The prerequisites of successful deliberation

Deliberation proceeds by considering and examining the force of the considerations in favor of various options. If I am deliberating, for example, about whether taking up rollerblading would be a good thing for me to do, I will ask myself what rollerblading has in its favor. I may remember enjoying ice skating and decide that the skating motion is an intrinsically enjoyable one. I may think that the fact that it would provide me with exercise and an excuse to be outside are also reasons in support of it. At this point I may go on to question the value of enjoyment, or exercise, or being outdoors, but at some point I must be able to stop questioning the normative force of the reasons I consider. If there are no values I am willing to hold constant then my deliberation will never arrive at any answers at all.<sup>7</sup> Each deliberative enterprise will launch me into more critical reflection on the reasons I take myself to have for pursuing any option. I cannot question all of my commitments to what I find valuable at once if deliberation is to be practical. For this reason, successful deliberation requires at least synchronic stability in our normative commitments.

Synchronic stability is not enough, however. One also needs some stability over time. To see why, imagine a person who is extremely fickle: she has no stable set of ends, rather her commitments fluctuate from day to day.

Such a person would be able to deliberate in a minimal sense. She could on day 1 decide to hold certain values constant for the sake of deliberating about a particular option. On day 2, she could hold a different set of values constant. Unlike the person who does not even have synchronic stability, she could arrive at some answers in deliberation because she is willing to refrain from questioning everything at once. But, although she is able to arrive at some answers, her deliberation will not be able to carry out its main function: it will not be able to determine plans and courses of action.<sup>8</sup>

We deliberate in order to decide what to do, what plans to make, and how to allocate our limited time and resources. Deliberation allows us to narrow down our options so that we can devote ourselves to the few we think are best for us. We need to devote ourselves to a few valuable ends because, usually, the kinds of ends we think are valuable demand enough attention that we cannot pursue every option we have. For example, I might have several options for how to spend my free time: I might study the violin, the piano, or the flute, learn to ski, to snowboard, or to figure skate, take up gardening or redecorating, or volunteer for a charity. But the kind of satisfaction I can get from these activities, and the value I can realize by doing them, cannot be achieved if I do everything on my list. Therefore, I must deliberate about the *best* way to spend my time.

Now, the problem with the deliberator who has no diachronic stability in her values is that her attempts to use deliberation to help her plan will be frustrated. For such a person, the answers to deliberative problems will not be consistent over time. If she were to deliberate about the same thing every day with a changing set of standards, then she could very well come to different answers on successive days. This means that one day her plan to take violin lessons may seem like a reasonable one, and the next day she may be planning to buy a piano. Unless she is willing to adhere to one set of standards, and the results of one deliberative effort, she will be ill equipped to make the kinds of plans that will allow her to realize the value of any ends.<sup>9</sup>

How can deliberators achieve synchronic stability of the kind necessary for deliberation? I argue that the requisite stability is secured by the cultivation of a pattern of dispositions or habits of thought, action and feeling. If we think of character traits as acquirable dispositions to think, feel and act in certain ways, then we can say that stability demands a certain kind of character.

First, stability in our commitments requires the dis-

position not to reconsider these commitments except under certain circumstances.<sup>10</sup> A constant readiness to reconsider the value of any of our commitments undermines deliberation because it renders us incapable of finding anything to be an appropriate stopping point. If at every turn in my deliberation I am willing to reconsider whether my reasons for maintaining some commitment are good reasons or not, I will never arrive at a point at which the balance of reasons favors a particular option. If I am unwilling to take anything I value to count as a consideration in favor of an option, I will not reach the conclusion that is the goal of deliberation, that some option is to be taken because it is supported by the balance of reasons.

The disposition not to reconsider one's commitments is not sufficient, though, because it is compatible with a complete unwillingness to reevaluate anything, which would also seem not to be compatible with deliberation. Further, the disposition not to reconsider is compatible with having commitments that are irrational, bad or crazy. If we take the goal of deliberation about one's value commitments to be to discover and choose the options that are best supported by reasons, then the possibility of steadfast commitments to crazy values conflicts with the goal of deliberation. Ideally, to be prepared for good deliberation, a person would take her commitments to be supported by reasons and she would be willing to suspend her disposition not to reconsider when appropriate, as for example, when her reasons for having the disposition come under fire.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that the disposition not to reconsider is supported by considerations the agent takes to be reasons for the commitment means that the agent should be willing to engage in deliberation when there is evidence that her reasons are misguided. Further, that her reasons derive from other of her commitments reveals a pattern among her commitments that rules out some forms of craziness or irrationality.

It is important to notice that the agent we have described has commitments to some considerations counting as reasons for others of her commitments. For example, a person who takes the value of health to be a reason for her commitment to eating organic food thinks that the fact that an option promotes health is a reason that supports other pursuits. Taking something to be a reason in this context, in which reasons are the door to reconsideration of commitments, implies further commitments to views about what counts as the appropriate assessment of a reason. For example, the person

above might think that the facts established by science are relevant to her taking health to be a reason to eat organic food. Given her commitment to taking the facts seriously in the evaluation of her reasons, she thinks that her reasons to eat organic would lose force if it turned out that they were based on mistaken beliefs. Of course, some people have seemingly crazy views about what counts as an appropriate assessment of reasons. For instance, the person above might take compatibility with her star chart to be an important factor in evaluating her reasons. For her, the fact that her astrologist tells her that natural food is healthier is relevant to the reason health provides for eating organic food. The point is not that every person's patterns of commitments will be perfectly rational. Rather the point is that there are such patterns: having reasons implies that we have commitments, perhaps usually only implicit, to what counts as good assessment of these reasons.

This last feature of the successful deliberator requires some elaboration. To take there to be reasons for having a commitment is to take there to be considerations that justify caring about it, finding it important or valuable. If one takes these considerations to *justify* a commitment, one is doing more than simply claiming that one promotes the other or that one is constitutive of the other. In taking  $x$  to be a justification for  $y$  one claims a relationship between  $x$  and  $y$  that would stand up under appropriate evaluative scrutiny. In taking a particular consideration to justify one's commitment to some end or value, then, one commits to making judgments about what further reflection could or could not defeat the force of this consideration.

We have now a picture of an agent with commitments she has reasons for valuing, which she is disposed not to reconsider except under certain circumstances.<sup>12</sup> Successful deliberators have commitments to some considerations counting as good reasons and to standards of evaluation for these reasons. In sum, any person who deliberates successfully about the value of her commitments must have a certain kind of character constituted by a disposition not to reconsider her commitments that is supported by considerations in favor of them, which she is willing to reconsider in accordance with her standards at appropriate times. Without this character, the deliberator is either fickle, stubborn, committed to her values without reason, or lacking any means to evaluate her commitments. The fickle are ill suited for deliberation because their decisions are not steady enough to allow them to reap the benefits of deliberation. The

stubborn, on the other hand, fail to appreciate the need for deliberation about their commitments. Those who have no reasons for their commitments and are not concerned about this state of affairs are people who simply have no interest in the kind of deliberation we are considering. Finally, those with no commitments to standards for assessing their reasons have no means by which to engage in deliberation.

We can now see that most of us achieve this kind of agency, at least to some extent. Insofar as we are capable of reaching the goals of deliberation, we do achieve the character described above. For those whose deliberation is less successful, insofar as there is an interest in successful deliberation there is also a reason to develop these characteristics. Although I cannot argue for the claim here, it is plausible to think that the character required for deliberation can be acquired. The disposition not to reconsider one's commitments except under certain conditions can be developed by emulating a person who does have stable commitments and also by conscious attention and effort. The having of reasons for one's commitments can be developed in similar ways.

## 2. The practical deliberative perspective and the Humean position

We have been considering the deliberator in the practical deliberative perspective, the one we occupy when we are trying to figure out what to do in a particular situation or context. This perspective is to be distinguished from what we might call the philosophical perspective from which we reflect on more abstract matters that do not depend on particular features of context, for example, the objectivity of value. As we have seen, successful *practical* deliberators have relatively stable and reasoned commitments to projects, activities, and relationships that they take to have value. Now we must ask whether the commitments of these agents would be undermined by the discovery that the only normative authority their commitments could have must derive from their own sentiments, passions or contingent commitments. Could deliberators maintain their conviction if they were to discover that there is no sanction of Reason to give their commitments normative authority?

The question here is not a psychological question about what human beings are capable of, although

human abilities and limitations may be relevant to answering it. Rather, it is a question about what reasons there are to maintain or abandon commitments. As such, the answer to this question depends on what the agent in question takes to be evidence that is relevant to the reasons she has. Notice that what counts as evidence is relative to the agent in question and, therefore, that reasons too are relativized to agents.<sup>13</sup> This is an acceptable assumption for the purpose of arguing that the agent has no reason to abandon her commitments if the Humean position is true. Of course, if the Humean position is false and there is a defensible notion of a Reason that is not contingent on our commitments, then the fact that there is no reason from the agent's own point of view to abandon her commitments will not suffice to establish anything about the rationality of doing so. But the point of this paper is to deny a certain implication of the truth of the Humean position. It should not be surprising that the argument is uninteresting if the Humean position is false.

The point here is to show that if we take people as they are, we will see that, for the most part, the truth of the Humean position does not give us a reason to alter our ordinary normative practice. Critical examination of the basis of one's reasons is part of this practical deliberative perspective when this examination is relevant to the particular problem and not completely abstracted from all of one's other commitments. Most of us, then, also have some commitments to what counts as a good examination of our reasons and the grounds we have for them. We have these commitments in the practical deliberative perspective, the perspective from which we ask about the value of our commitments and the legitimacy of our reasons for the purpose of choosing between options and taking action. From this practical perspective, a person's commitments to appropriate ways of evaluating her reasons are crucial.

Consider again the person who thinks that health is a reason to eat organic food and who thinks that scientific facts about cancer rates in organic and non-organic food eaters are relevant to whether her reason is good or bad. Since normal people have much larger and more complicated sets of commitments, let us imagine that in addition to a commitment to taking empirical facts seriously, this person also has a commitment to evaluating her reasons in an unhurried, calm moment and to ensuring that her reasons are not the expression of unattractive character traits such as cowardice or selfishness. Such a person, who is not an unlikely char-

acter, would have grounds for distinguishing reason-giving commitments from other commitments and these grounds would not depend on the existence of Rational sanctions. People who do not particularly care about Rational sanctions, but who are committed to ensuring that their reasons are consistent with empirical facts, expressive of the best parts of their character and stable upon calm reflection, *can* take some of their passions to provide good reasons for action.

If the negative Humean insight is relevant from the practical deliberative perspective, it must be because the person who discovers it has a kind of Rationalist commitment as part of the set of commitments that make up her deliberative point of view. Not everyone has such a commitment, but we must now address the situation of those who do. Consider another organic food eater, whom we will call Ed. Ed is committed to the view that his reasons would lose authority if it turned out that they were not underwritten by authoritative Rational Principles. Here is someone for whom the truth of the Humean position would undermine his ordinary normative practice. Upon coming to believe that there is nothing to the normativity of reasons beyond our commitments and practices, given his commitments, Ed would have a reason to think that none of his reasons has any normative force.

Of course, the reason that Ed has to reconsider the normative authority of all his other reasons derives from his commitment to Rational sanctions. Here we should take notice that Ed has a conflict between his normative commitments. And given the type of conflict this is, it is not obvious that skepticism is the right way to resolve it. First of all, if upon coming to believe that there are no Rational Principles to sanction his reasons, Ed accepts only his commitment to Rational sanctions as authoritative, then he is in the paradoxical situation that the only consideration he accepts as authoritative requires for its own authority something that Ed believes does not exist. Perhaps Ed can avoid this paradox by delimiting the types of considerations to which his commitment to the need for Rational sanction applies. He might think that first-order commitments such as a commitment to "the fact that *x* is healthy is a reason for doing it", must have a Rational sanction, but commitments to claims about the necessary conditions for any reason to count as authoritative do not.

Second, even if Ed avoids the paradox, he must still evaluate the commitments he has and ask which ones ought to be abandoned. Ed must evaluate his commit-

ment to the need for Rational sanctions as he would evaluate any other commitment. And if Ed is a person with a concern to deliberate about his commitments and with the character needed for this practice, then it is even less clear that it would make sense for him to maintain his commitment to Rational sanctions at the cost of abandoning the view that some of his other commitments have authority. The person with strong dispositions not to reconsider their commitments and to defend them by appeal to reasons is unlikely to accept that there are no reasons at all, given how radical a change in her practice this would be. It is not that one must be a Humean in order to deliberate at all; rather, the point is that in the face of the Humean position people whose characters are equipped for successful deliberation will have more considerations in favor of keeping their many commitments to practical reasons and abandoning their commitment to the need for Rational sanctions than they will to do the reverse.<sup>14</sup> Unless the commitment to Rational sanction has some privileged position (a possibility to be considered in the next section), it seems that it will be outweighed by the various stable commitments to things valued and by the concern to avoid the normative nihilism that would follow from abandoning all of these commitments.<sup>15</sup>

A person with relatively stable and reasoned commitments who confronts the fact that there is no Rational sanction for these commitments in the context of deliberation about what to do does not have a reason to abandon her commitments and her sense that there are reasons for choice and action that have normative authority. Insofar as we are agents like this, we are not required to abandon our commitments and convictions. Insofar as we fall short of this kind of agency, but we are concerned to develop the traits necessary for deliberation, we still share the reasons she has not to abandon the commitments and convictions that make successful deliberation possible.

### 3. Beyond the practical deliberative perspective

I have argued that from the deliberative perspective of a person with strong, stable commitments to what counts as a reason and what counts as countervailing evidence, the Humean position does not necessarily, or even typically, provide reasons that undermine our conviction. But people can take a different perspective on their commitments, one that is removed or abstracted from

the attachments we have in our ordinary deliberative perspective. We might think of this as a philosophical perspective, the perspective from which we ask meta-ethical questions about our first-order commitments. It seems that we can take up such a perspective and that the truth of the Humean position is relevant here. Even if this is so, however, I will argue that it does not imply that the Humean position undermines our ordinary convictions.

The perspective we are considering now is one in which the person suspends her settled views about what considerations have normative authority, and what considerations count as evidence relevant to the authority of others in order to ask about the very nature of reasons and of normative authority.<sup>16</sup> Let us consider first the case in which the various theories of and claims about normativity are assessed by appeal to a coherence standard such as reflective equilibrium.<sup>17</sup> The negative insight of the Humean position is certainly relevant to deliberation about the nature of normative authority, and so it must be considered here. From this metaethical perspective a deliberator can ask whether the best account of normativity is one that is compatible with the Humean claim that there is no Rational authority to sanction her commitments. A person with a commitment to taking Rational sanctions as a necessary condition of normative authority will have to assess this commitment in the same way that she assesses the Humean insight. She must consider carefully which position best fits with considered judgments about what has value and about the nature of normativity, agency and practical deliberation.

Not all the possible results of reflective equilibrium are relevant here. If the conclusion of reflective equilibrium is that the Humean position is true and compatible with our practical commitments, we will have no particular reason to abandon our commitments in practice and there is no particular problem for the Humean. If the conclusion is that the Humean insight is false, then there is a different problem for the Humean than the one with which this paper is concerned. The worrisome case, for our purposes, is the conclusion that the negative insight of the Humean position is true, but, alas, that the Humean account of normativity is not sufficient to ground our practical commitments.

Fortunately for the Humean, this last worrisome possibility will not be stable for most investigators because of the data supplied by first-order commitments. If reflective equilibrium is the correct method for evalu-

ating accounts of normativity, then the philosophical perspective cannot be hived off completely from the practical one. In reflective equilibrium, considered judgments from the first-order, practical perspective are relevant to the evaluation of theories such as the theory of normativity.<sup>18</sup> Given this fact, the belief that the Humean perspective is inadequate will turn out to fit very poorly with our considered judgments and not to fare very well in our evaluation. Practical judgments about the value of particular things, although not taken as given as they would be in the practical perspective, must be taken account of in reflective equilibrium and the strength, stability and number of these judgments make it implausible to accept the claim that the Humean account of normativity is inadequate.

Upon philosophical reflection, we might find ourselves deciding that the truth of the Humean position is relevant to the reasons we take ourselves to have. But we cannot continue to believe both that the Humean position is true and that it is incompatible with our commitments while adhering to our ordinary commitments. If we believe that the Humean position is true and yet incompatible with maintaining conviction in our commitments, we seem forced to accept a kind of normative nihilism. Such nihilism implies that there are no goods or values, no real reasons for doing one thing rather than another, no obligations, rights or duties, and no appropriate standards for evaluating our reasons from the practical perspective. Given the tension between this kind of nihilism and our many first-order practical judgments, the commitment to taking the Humean position to undermine our commitments begins to seem untenable. The fact that nihilism is utterly incompatible with the entire set of our first-order commitments provides a kind of practical evidence against that metaethical position.

One might think that this argument sets a dangerous precedent because it suggests that we ought to believe falsehoods or dispose of true beliefs if the practical cost of doing so is high enough. This is not so, however, if, as we have been considering, the criterion for acceptance of an account of normativity is reflective equilibrium. It is not that we should believe what is false because of the practical cost of doing so; rather, the point is that the practical cost of believing that the Humean account is incompatible with maintaining conviction is evidence that this belief is, in fact, false.

We must now consider the possibility that a different standard rather than coherence will be used to evaluate

accounts of normativity from the philosophical perspective.<sup>19</sup> We cannot evaluate all possible methods of argument individually, but we must say something about modes of argument that deny that considered first-order judgments are relevant to philosophical reflection on normative theory. If the philosophical perspective uses reflective equilibrium to assess the Humean position, then our practical commitments can be brought to bear as evidence against the view that the Humean insight is incompatible with maintaining our conviction. From the philosophical perspective, the person who accepts reflective equilibrium has reason not to accept that the Humean insight undermines her normative commitments. This response is not available if the method of argument denies that these first-order judgments have any place in the philosophical perspective.

The case under consideration now is the case of a person whose reflection from the philosophical perspective reveals that there is no Rational sanction for her commitments (that is, the Humean insight is true) and who is now considering whether this fact undermines her conviction. Her philosophical views are such that she does not allow herself to bring her first-order commitments to bear on this matter. Let us consider the worst case for the Humean: she concludes from the philosophical perspective that the Humean thesis is not compatible with maintaining conviction. But now that her philosophical reflection has concluded, she once again faces a practical problem, much like the one faced by Ed in the previous section. The question of whether she ought to abandon her commitments is a practical question that must be answered from the practical point of view.

Recall that previously, in our discussion of Ed we concluded that given the strength, stability and scope of his first-order commitments, normative nihilism was not the most reasonable option. The person we are considering now differs from Ed in that her commitment to Rational sanctions is the result of a philosophical argument. However, even in this new case it is not obvious that total normative nihilism is the most reasonable position to take for a person with the kinds of stable commitments that equip her for successful deliberation in the first place.<sup>20</sup> Such a person would have many reasons to maintain her commitments and to abandon the particular practical commitment to Rational sanctions implied by the philosophical argument. There are two ways she could explain her rejection of this commitment to Rational sanctions. First, she could

abandon the mode of argument altogether, deciding that any argument that leads to such a repugnant conclusion must be suspect (thus appealing to coherence considerations). Alternatively, she could decide that philosophical arguments do not have direct bearing on practical questions.

It will be objected again that this latter option sanctions believing falsehoods for the sake of avoiding practical costs. Although the implication may be unattractive, it is true that the practical question of whether a person has reason to abandon all her normative commitments is not settled by the fact that in order to avoid this course of action she must reject a conclusion arrived at in philosophical reflection. A person can have practical reasons for doing something that imply that she should suspend her belief in something true. On the Humean account, these practical reasons are supplied by first-order normative commitments.

The agent's situation here seems paradoxical: she takes as reasons not to believe that the Humean account is incompatible with her convictions considerations that would not be reasons if this belief were true. But to say that the only solution to this paradox is to abandon the Humean notion of practical reasons is to fail to take the practical point of view seriously. Those of us who find reflective equilibrium compelling will take this result as a reason to think that reflective equilibrium is the correct kind of argument for assessing normative theories. Our practical deliberative point of view is such a pervasive part of our reflective life, and the cost of normative nihilism so high, that modes of argument that have implications for our normative practice without taking this point of view seriously seem suspect.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have tried to show that people who engage in ordinary deliberation about the worth or value of their commitments are such that their commitments ought not to be undermined by the Humean position that there are no Rational sanctions that bestow authority on any of our norms or values. This argument is only one piece of a large puzzle that, when completed, would show how a Humean can give an adequate account of normativity. Notably, I have not tried to solve the problem of how the Humean will delineate which commitments, passions or sentiments count as having normative authority. Importantly, though, if the argument of this

paper has been successful, there is some reason to think that a solution to this further problem should be forthcoming. After all, if people *do* take some, but not others, of their commitments to be normative because of their commitments to standards for evaluating reasons, then there would seem to be a basis for making the distinction that is available to the Humean.

Moreover, the problem I have discussed, namely, that the Humean position is not one that can be believed by people, is a serious one and an obstacle to further progress. Often in defending theories of normativity, it is taken to be an important point to be accommodated that we cannot accept that normative authority derives only from our own sentiments, passions or commitments; we cannot take this as a satisfactory stopping point for normative inquiry. I have argued that we can because of the scope and strength of the commitments we have and their importance to our going on as we do.<sup>21</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example, Christine Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason", *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (January 1986), pp. 5–25; Jean Hampton, "On Instrumental Rationality", in J. B. Schneewind, ed., *Reason, Ethics, and Society* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1996), pp. 84–116; and Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> On the first, see Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons", in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101–113; and on the second see Simon Blackburn, "Practical Tortoise Raising", *Mind* 104 (1995), pp. 695–711.

<sup>4</sup> In particular, this paper does not supply an account of the conditions under which our passions are reason giving. Certainly, the Humean position cannot be successful without such an account, however, this paper addresses a different problem for the Humean and proceeds on the assumption that the requisite account can be provided. I have argued for one solution to this problem in my "Humean Heroism: Value Commitments and the Source of Normativity", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 81(4) (December 2000), pp. 426–446.

<sup>5</sup> I capitalize "Rational Principles" and "Reason" in order to distinguish these from the notions that are compatible with the Humean insight. Rational Principles in the non-Humean sense are ones that derive their authority from a source other than contingent human nature, sentiments and passions.

<sup>6</sup> Given Rosalind Hursthouse's view about moral objectivity, her position might count as Humean in this limited sense. See her *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), in particular

pp. 190–191. Martha Nussbaum also seems to share this assumption in her *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), in particular pp. 76 and 83.

<sup>7</sup> I use the term “value” here to refer to that to which a person is committed because she finds it valuable. No particular metaethical position about the nature of value is implied.

<sup>8</sup> My thinking about the relationship between deliberation and planning has benefitted greatly from the work of Michael Bratman. See his *Intention, Plans and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Notice that regular vacillation is different from changing one’s mind, which is consistent with good deliberation. Changing one’s mind about an option happens over a period of time during which one proceeds from the view that some option is good, to doubt about its value, to the view that the option is not good. A person in the process of changing her mind will not regard her deliberation as complete until this process has settled on a stable position, whereas the fickle person regards each daily deliberation as completed. Furthermore, the fickle person’s fluctuations will continue on *ad infinitum*, whereas the person who changes her mind moves over a period of time from one relatively stable position to another.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Bratman argues that the disposition not to reconsider except under appropriate circumstances is essential to acting out our plans. *Ibid.*, pp. 64–70. Since our plans are often constructed in order to achieve that to which we are committed, it makes sense that these commitments too would require the disposition not to reconsider.

<sup>11</sup> I take a reason to be any consideration that an agent takes to count in favor of her commitment. A reason, then, could consist in a very strong feeling or intuition about the intrinsic value of this commitment. I use this very weak, subjective notion of a reason in order to include as many people as possible in the domain of those who are prepared for deliberation. I do not mean to suggest that there is nothing more to the concept of a ‘reason’, but this conception is the relevant one for the purposes of my argument.

<sup>12</sup> The exact nature of these circumstances is a difficult question. I discuss this further in my “Virtue and Practical Deliberation” (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>13</sup> I thank Carla Bagnoli for bringing this issue to my attention.

<sup>14</sup> This kind of argument, according to which we have one kind of reason to adopt some disposition or attitude which, once adopted, changes the structure of our subsequent reasons, has been made in a different context by David Gauthier, *Morals By Agreement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> There may be some people for whom the commitment to Rational sanctions is so strong and so integrated into their pattern of com-

mitments that this commitment is not outweighed by competing considerations. I do not mean to rule out this possibility. But it should be observed that it is not likely that this is the average case and that most people will follow the pattern I have outlined.

<sup>16</sup> As will become apparent, I do not think that even from the philosophical perspective one can suspend all of one’s commitments. In particular, I am assuming that there is a commitment to some method for assessing theories from the philosophical perspective. I do not mean to suggest that these methods cannot be the object of philosophical scrutiny; rather, the point is that when the focus of inquiry is the adequacy of accounts of normativity, some method of evaluation or criteria of success must be assumed.

<sup>17</sup> Reflective equilibrium is perhaps the best articulated version of the coherence method. See Norman Daniels, “Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979), pp. 256–282; and John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 48–51. In addition to its Rawlsian adherents, the method is also accepted by realists such as Richard Boyd, “How to Be a Moral Realist” in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, ed., *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 181–228; and Aristotelians such as Martha Nussbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 101. My own view is that reflective equilibrium is the correct method for evaluating theories. I agree with Rawls that conceptual analysis does not have the resources to establish interesting moral conclusions, *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, *op. cit.*, pp. 47–51.

<sup>19</sup> For an overview of such approaches with respect to arguments about the nature of practical reason see Elijah Millgram, “Practical Reasoning: The Current State of Play”, in E. Millgram, ed., *Varieties of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Peter Strawson makes a similar argument regarding the rationality of reactive attitudes and the truth of determinism in his “Freedom and Resentment” in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 59–80.

<sup>21</sup> I would like to thank Carla Bagnoli, Dale Jamieson and Elijah Millgram for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

*Department of Philosophy*  
*University of Minnesota*  
*Twin Cities, Minneapolis*  
*USA*  
*e-mail: tiber201@umn.edu*