Précis of Humean Nature. How Desire Explains Action, Thought, and Feeling

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In A Treatise of Human Nature, David Hume memorably claims that «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».¹ In Humean Nature,² I argue that we should accept the Humean view that desire drives all our motivation and practical reasoning because it provides the best explanation of how human beings act, think, and feel. This would be trouble for many metaethical theories, as they would then entail that human beings can’t make moral judgments. I propose a new theory of moral judgment that avoids this problem by understanding moral concepts in terms of feelings like guilt, admiration, and hope.

The Humean Theory consists of the following two claims, which give desires combined with means-end beliefs an important motivational role. In the following, “A”, “E”, and “M” suggest “action”, “end”, and “means”:

Desire-Belief Theory of Action: One is motivated to A if and only if desire that E is combined with belief that one can raise E’s probability by A-ing.

Desire-Belief Theory of Reasoning: Desire that M is created as the conclusion of reasoning if and only if the reasoning combines desire that E with belief that M would raise E’s probability. It is eliminated as the conclusion of reasoning if and only if the reasoning eliminates such a combination.

Many philosophers, including Michael Smith,³ formulate the Humean Theory so that it doesn’t include anything like the Desire-Belief Theory of Reasoning. But the most

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metaethically interesting version of the Humean Theory includes both principles, as I'll demonstrate. The metaethical significance of the Humean Theory comes mainly from the following puzzle, which Smith discusses at length. It consists of three claims, one of which must be rejected to avoid a disastrous result.

1. [Cognitivism] Moral judgments are beliefs.
2. [Internalism] Moral judgments can produce their own motivational force.
3. [Humean Theory]

[Disastrous result] There are no moral judgments.

Thomas Scanlon⁴ and many other players in recent metaethical debates combine cognitivism and internalism, treating moral judgments as beliefs that can produce their own motivational force. But the Humean Theory, as formulated above, leaves no way for beliefs to produce their own motivational force. They can't do it directly, and they can't do it by creating desires through reasoning. So if all three of these theories are true, we arrive at the disastrous result. No real mental state can do the things that are essential to moral judgment.

Leaving out the Desire-Belief Theory of Reasoning is essential to Smith’s solution. Internalists like Smith are satisfied if moral judgments produce motivational force by creating new desires through reasoning that doesn’t depend on pre-existing desires. (Internalism is false if the only way moral judgments motivate action is by combining with a pre-existing desire to act morally. Then the motivational force really comes from the desire, not from the moral judgment.) Smith permits beliefs to generate desires in a way that satisfies internalism and violates the Desire-Belief Theory of Reasoning. On his view, believing that an action is right can generate a new desire to act, through reasoning: «the new desire is acquired precisely because it is believed to be required for us to be rational».⁵ As Smith shows, his weakened version of the Humean theory permits us to make moral judgments that satisfy cognitivism and internalism.

But this is exactly why a metaethically significant version of the Humean Theory must include the Desire-Belief Theory of Reasoning. If you accept cognitivism and internalism, you don’t have to care about whether Smith’s weak formulation of the Humean Theory is true. Moral judgment as you describe it will be possible either way. But you have to deny the strong version of the Humean Theory that I defend, since it entails that no mental state can do what you think moral judgment would have to do. Since the strong version of the Humean Theory has the philosophically interesting consequences that Smith’s weak formulation lacks, the strong version is the one that it’s important to debate. (As a historical point, Hume’s famous line about reason being the “slave of the passions” fits poorly with Smith’s view, which allows beliefs about reasons to create and eliminate desires. That would make the passions the slaves of reason. While the metaethical literature treats Smith as the most significant contemporary defender of the Humean Theory, he should instead be regarded as betraying Hume to the Kantians.)

While some philosophers think of the Humean Theory as a conceptual claim about how action-explanations must be structured, I defend it as an empirical claim about human psychology. This leaves the puzzle just as gripping. If moral judgments are beliefs with their own motivational force, and humans are incapable of having such mental states, humans are incapable of making moral judgments. I call this disastrous result “human incapabilism about moral judgment”, or “incapabilism” for short.

All philosophers who reject incapabilism and accept accounts of the psychology necessary for moral judgment are committed to empirical claims about human psychology. Consider cognitivist internalists who take moral judgments to be beliefs that can produce their own motivational force. Their ac-
count dictates that if human beings can make moral judgments, humans have beliefs that can produce their own motivational force. If the Humean Theory is true only about humans, cognitivist internalism leads us to the disastrous result that humans can’t make moral judgments. In that case, the conceptual possibility that nonhuman creatures can make moral judgments will be of little comfort to most cognitivist internalists.

Most of Humean Nature is an extended empirical argument for the Humean Theory. I argue that the Humean Theory provides the best explanation not only of motivation, but also of our thoughts and feelings in practical deliberation. The predictions of the Humean theory go beyond motivation, because desire does much more than motivate action. It causes pleasure when we think of getting what we want and displeasure when we think of failing to get it. It directs attention towards things we associate with the object of desire. All these effects become stronger when the object is more vivid. These aspects of desire explain the reflective and emotional phenomenology of deliberation.

For a quick illustration of desire’s phenomenological effects, consider the desire to eat that is part of hunger. Motivation to eat is only one of its many effects. Hungry people are also pleased to hear that they’ll be served delicious meals and displeased to hear that they won’t. They pay more attention to food items in their environment than other people do, and spend more time and energy thinking about how to get food. Sights and smells of delicious food strengthen all these effects of desire. Timothy Schroeder has described the neurological structures that underlie the motivational and hedonic effects of desire at length, and there is further evidence for connections between desire and the portions of the brain that direct attention and modulate the vividness of sensory and imaginative representations.

Aversive motivations like fear have similar effects. People who fear spiders feel the unpleasant feeling of fear when they think about spiders or are alerted to their presence, and may feel relief when the spiders are gone. When presented with situations that include spiders and innocuous household objects, they’ll pay more attention to the spiders. Vivid sensory or imaginative representations of spiders will increase the strength of all these aversive responses. Since aversions exhibit the properties of desires, they count as a subclass of desires.

If the Humean Theory is true, every motivational state in human psychology has similar hedonic, attentional, and vividness-related effects. This may be most obvious with motivational states broadly understood as desires or aversions, like desiring food and fearing spiders. But it’s less obvious in other cases, including willpower and moral motivation. The main task of Humean Nature is to consider the phenomena that opponents of the Humean Theory regard as most difficult for it to address, and show it provides better explanations of those phenomena than opposing views.

Consider cases where action is accompanied by the feeling of obligation. Kant and many others regard motivation in these cases as coming from a different psychological state than desire – perhaps a motivationally potent belief about one’s duty. The feeling of obligation is phenomenologically different from the feeling of desire as we experience it in many ordinary cases, lending support to this objection. Some anti-Humeans have presented this as a counterexample to the Humean Theory, treating the distinctive phenomenology as suggesting that motivation comes from a mental state other than desire.

Humeans can account for the feeling of obligation in terms of the phenomenology of aversion. If you’re the kind of person who takes your promises seriously, you’ll feel anxious when it looks like you’ll have to break a promise. Your attention will be drawn to things you associate with the promise, like the person to whom you made the promise and courses of action that might allow you to keep the promise. If you cleverly discover a course
of action that lets you keep the promise, you may feel some relief. But if you don’t, you’re likely to feel considerable displeasure about having to break the promise – especially if you have a vivid representation that you associate with it, like looking into the eyes of the person to whom you made it. In its attentional, hedonic, and vividness-related effects, motivation accompanied by the feeling of obligation displays the properties of desire.

The Humean Theory explains the phenomenology of obligation better than anti-Humean views can. If the accompanying motivation really comes from a belief about duty, why do its attentional, hedonic, and vividness-related effects more closely resemble the effects of aversion (which is a type of desire) than those of belief? There are more things anti-Humeans can say here, but I don’t see any way for them to eliminate the Humean advantage. By adding attentional, hedonic, and vividness-related effects to the properties of belief, they can account for the data. But then they duplicate all the properties of desire as properties of belief, so that the Humean Theory is simpler. When anti-Humean views are developed so that they can address all the phenomenological data, the Humean Theory invariably allows us to develop a simpler total psychological theory.

Most of *Humean Nature* is devoted to showing that the Humean Theory provides the best explanations of phenomena that have been presented as evidence for anti-Humean views. After addressing the feeling of obligation, as summarized above, I consider other phenomena largely explained by the Hedonic Aspect of desire:

Desire that \( E \) combined with increasing subjective probability of \( E \) or vivid sensory or imaginative representation of \( E \) causes pleasure roughly proportional to the desire’s strength times the increase in probability or the vividness of the representation. (With decreasing subjective probability of \( E \) or vivid sensory or imaginative representation of not-\( E \), it like-

Stephen Darwall\(^8\) proposes a counterexample to the Desire-Belief Theory of Reasoning. He describes a case in which his protagonist, Roberta, learns of others’ suffering. She responds with shock and dismay, and forms a desire to help them from her beliefs alone. I respond that the unpleasant phenomenology of discovering others’ suffering – a realistic feature of his case – is evidence of Roberta’s pre-existing aversion to suffering. The Hedonic Aspect of desire explains such unpleasant feelings when one receives vivid evidence of something one is averse to. Reasoning proceeds from this aversion, as the Humean Theory requires. Belief alone lacks this robust hedonic phenomenology, so anti-Humean views don’t explain the shock and dismay that we feel under these conditions.

Danielle Bromwich\(^9\) argues that motivation to answer questions can come simply from the belief one expresses in answering, and not from desire. I reply by noting the hedonic phenomenology associated with receiving questions, which can include displeasure about being unhelpful to the questioner or saying something false. Since the mental state motivating us is hedonically charged, it must be a desire and not a belief.

Sabine Döring\(^10\) challenges Humeans to explain expressive actions like kicking a table out of anger, which are accompanied by strong feelings and don’t involve thought of further ends. I suggest understanding anger as including a desire to act violently, for which kicking a table is a constitutive means rather than a causal means. The Hedonic Aspect explains our feelings in these cases, while also addressing others where motivation and feeling occur at different times. My aversion to being naked in public causes feeling without motivation when I vividly imagine being naked in public, and causes motivation without feeling when I dress myself in the morning. Since means-end beliefs activate motivation while feeling is activated by new evidence and vivid representations, motivation
and feeling will occur separately when only one activation condition is present, and occur together when both activation conditions are present.

The Hedonic Aspect gives the Humean Theory a broad explanatory advantage. It explains the correlation between being motivated to make something happen, being pleased by representations of it, and being displeased by representations of its not happening. Theories on which a belief about reasons is sufficient for motivation fail to explain this correlation, as belief doesn’t have the right functional properties to explain pleasure and displeasure.

The emotional perception model incorporates the Hedonic Aspect into a Humean account of moral judgment (see Fig. 1).

Moral judgment formation typically begins when representations of objects activate our emotional dispositions, producing feelings like guilt, horror, and admiration towards the objects. These moral feelings perceptually represent the objects as morally significant. Horror makes situations look horrible; guilt makes actions look wrong; admiration makes people look virtuous. These feelings cause beliefs about the facts they represent, as perceptual experience often does. Just as a yellow experience in looking at a lemon can cause the belief that it’s yellow, a feeling of guilt in considering an action can cause the belief that it’s wrong. My model is much like that of Jesse Prinz, except that I treat the moral judgment merely as the belief generated at the end of the process, which concerns an objective moral fact. This maintains cognitivism and objectivity.

Since moral judgments are beliefs, they can be created through testimony or argument as well. Like beliefs about color, moral beliefs can be learned from what others tell us or inferred from premises. But these processes usually require a previous step of moral feeling causing belief, where one accepts a premise of the inference, or where others form the belief that they communicate.

If we believe we can prevent the situations that horrify us, or act in ways we’d be proud of rather than guilty about, we’re usually motivated to do so. As the diagram indicates, this motivation usually comes directly from the emo-
tional disposition, which is also the source of the moral feeling. (Since the emotional dispositions involved in moral judgment motivate action, produce pleasant and unpleasant feelings, and display the other aspects of desire, I describe them as containing desires. The properties of desire are a subset of the properties of emotional dispositions.) In some cases, moral motivation involves the moral belief generated at the end combining with a desire that has moral content. Desiring not to do what's wrong and believing that lying is wrong can motivate me not to lie. Either way, moral beliefs don't motivate action by themselves.

Implicit in the emotional perception model is a cognitivist, externalist, and Humean solution to our metaethical puzzle. The model is cognitivist, treating moral judgment as belief. It’s externalist, as it doesn’t give moral beliefs intrinsic motivational force. It’s Humean, treating desire-belief pairs as the psychological causes of all motivation and practical reasoning.

I argue that the model provides the best explanation of a wide range of experimental phenomena. Its perceptual account of how moral feelings generate moral beliefs helps to address manipulations of moral judgment by Schnall12 and Laham and colleagues,13 as well as Haidt’s14 dumbfounding results. Since moral beliefs are typically caused by hedonically charged feelings rather than reasoning, artificially inducing unpleasant feelings can make us see things as morally worse. Like color beliefs, moral beliefs can be manipulated by changes in the perceiver’s color experience. Further support comes from research on psychopaths, who exhibit motivational and conceptual deficiencies that the model would lead us to expect from people unable to have moral emotions.

The emotional perception model treats moral beliefs as formed through moral feelings, much as color beliefs are formed through color experience. Many philosophers see color experience as giving us our grasp of color concepts. If the analogy holds, moral feelings might give us our grasp of moral concepts. This experientialist analysis of moral concepts develops this idea (See Tab. 1).

Experientialism treats moral judgments as concerning the objective accuracy-conditions of feelings. Moral concepts resemble color concepts in that we can’t fully master them without having particular sorts of experience. Without knowing what yellow-experience is like, we can’t master the concept of yellow. Without knowing what guilt feels like, we can’t master the concept of wrongness. Fundamental moral questions aren’t fundamentally about what to do, but what to hope for, whom to admire, and what to feel proud or guilty about doing – the last of which can be reinterpreted as the moral “What to do?” question.

The Attentional Aspect of desire explains phenomena that appear in activities as diverse as reasoning and daydreaming:

Desire that E disposes one to attend to things one associates with E, increasing with the desire’s strength and the strength of the association.15

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<tr>
<td>GOOD</td>
<td>states of affairs objectively represented by accurate hope and delight</td>
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<td>RIGHT</td>
<td>actions objectively represented by accurate pride and approval</td>
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<tr>
<td>VIRTUE</td>
<td>character traits objectively represented by accurate admiration</td>
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<tr>
<td>BAD</td>
<td>states of affairs objectively represented by accurate horror and sorrow</td>
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<tr>
<td>WRONG</td>
<td>actions objectively represented by accurate guilt and indignation</td>
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<tr>
<td>VICE</td>
<td>character traits objectively represented by accurate contempt and hatred</td>
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For a simple illustration, consider how the hungry pay more attention to food than those who have eaten their fill, and how sexual desire directs attention towards the people one finds attractive. Things we associate with the objects of our desires are more salient to us than things we don’t associate with the objects of our desires.

The Attentional Aspect lets desire itself explain practical reasoning. Desire directs attention onto the premises of our practical inferences. If I desire E, attending to the fact that A-ing will raise the probability of E can motivate me to A. Attention is important for generating motivation. Even if I know that a particular bus will take me to the train station I want to reach, I won’t be motivated to board it if I don’t attend to this fact in time.

Philosophers in the Anscombean tradition have taken interest in our automatic knowledge of what we’re doing intentionally. Part of the explanation is that desire directs our attention towards our actions, since we believe that they’ll help us attain desired things. Attending to something helps us learn the obvious facts about it, and attending to our actions lets us know that we’re doing them. This is an alternative to an anti-Humean explanation preferred by some Anscombeans, on which this knowledge results from intentions being motivationally potent beliefs.

Nishi Shah and David Velleman ask why we move so quickly from the question “Whether to believe that p?” to “Whether p?” While they argue that this psychological transition reveals our concept of belief to include a norm of truth, Humeans can simply understand it in terms of desire redirecting our attention. Since our interest in whether to believe something usually comes from whether it’s true, our attention typically shifts toward the more salient question. But when truth isn’t the most important issue, our attention often shifts in other ways.

The Attentional Aspect explains much about the course of our daydreams. Hunger makes us daydream about food; sexual desire makes us daydream about people we’re attracted to. The Hedonic Aspect explains why these thoughts are often pleasant.

The attractions of the Humean theory include a desire-belief account of intention that responds to objections from Michael Bratman. According to the account, A intends that if A has a desire and belief such that for some behavior B and situation S:

1. A desires that φ.
2. The desire is combined with a belief that S will obtain, and that A’s B-ing in S would make φ more likely.
3. If the desire were combined with a belief that S obtains now, they would without further reasoning produce motivational force sufficient for A to immediately initiate B-ing.

Bratman argues that such accounts can’t explain the role of intentions in planning. Why, for example, does my intention to go to the library dispose me to deliberate about how to get to the library? The Attentional Aspect explains this. An intention to go to the library includes a desire to go to the library, which directs attention towards going-to-the-library-related matters. Deliberating about how to get to the library includes attending in this way. Such attention will combine premises of practical inference to generate further intentions about how to get there.

How do agents with lots of desires and beliefs manage to form intentions without being overloaded by computational complexity? Part of the answer is that we only engage with the desire- and belief-contents that we can attend to at once. This avoids cognitive overload, but leaves us at risk of making bad decisions if we don’t attend to all the relevant considerations. Humans frequently make poor decisions by failing to attend to all the relevant considerations in this way, as the Humean Theory predicts.

Revising our intentions has a hedonic phenomenology. If you’ve long intended to take a vacation to the beach, you may be disappointed if travel problems keep you from
going there. The Hedonic Aspect explains this. Your subjective probability of desire-satisfaction has declined, creating displeasure.

Bratman’s recent work defends a reduction of joint intention to individual intention. I argue that a desire-belief account can help with this project. When agents have joint intentions of the sort Bratman describes, they exhibit all the aspects of desire. So if Bratman accepts a desire-belief account, his reductionism about joint intention can explain these phenomena.

Another aspect of desire, Amplification by Vividness, is particularly useful in explaining irrational behavior:

The effects of desire that \( E \) increase proportionally with the vividness of sensory or imaginative representations of \( E \).

As Hume notes, vivid representations of their objects can turn our calm passions violent. A hungry person presented with vivid representations of delicious food will be more motivated to eat it, more pleased to receive it, and more disposed to attend to it.

Procrastination provides a simple illustration of Amplification by Vividness. I’ve wasted a lot of time on the internet when I should’ve been writing this article. When I opened Facebook, all the interesting things my friends were posting were more vivid to me than the long-term benefits of making progress on my work. If the benefits of working had been represented with equal or greater vividness, I probably would’ve gotten more work done.

Akrasia provides another illustration. Sometimes when I tell myself that I really should get back to work and stop wasting time on the internet, I keep wasting time anyway. My occurrent belief that it would be better to work can’t motivate me by itself, and my desires to work are overpowered by desires amplified by vivid representations on the internet. As this case demonstrates, the Humean Theory can predict and explain irrational behavior just as it predicts and explains rational behavior.

Some phenomena that Tamar Gendler explains in terms of alief are better explained by Amplification by Vividness. These include the fear and hesitation of those who walked onto the clear glass of the Grand Canyon Skywalk, with a 2000-foot drop vividly represented beneath their feet. Gendler’s formulation of alief doesn’t provide any precise predictions of how they feel and act. Amplification by Vividness predicts that those with an ordinary aversion to heights will hesitate to step onto the walkway despite knowing they’re safe, with fearful attention to the drop below.

We can exercise willpower by redirecting attention away from temptation or towards a goal. Doing so makes temptation less vivid or the goal more vivid, reducing motivation to pursue temptation or increasing motivation to pursue the goal. This redirection of attention is an intentional action that fits into the dual-process model popular among psychologists as a System 2 process.

Richard Holton challenges Humeans to explain why willpower is «something that it takes effort to employ, that tires in the short run, but that can be built up in the long run». It takes effort to redirect attention against our natural tendencies, like the tendency to attend to nearby temptations. Behavior that takes effort tires us in the short run, but can become more automatic in the long run.

The Humean account of how we perceive and act on reasons largely follows the emotional perception model of Chapter 4. Desire makes its objects hedonically and attentionally salient. Courses of action that are salient in this way seem to invite further consideration, giving us a sense that we might pursue them. Experiences of salience cause beliefs about reasons for action, in the same perceptual way that color experience causes color belief.

Motivation to act for reasons typically comes from desires that caused experiences of salience that caused beliefs about reasons. We can be motivated in other ways. If one has a desire to act for reasons, the belief about reasons can act as a means-end belief.
If one accepts a Humean theory of reasons and knows what one desires, one can be motivated by recognizing that action will raise the probability of attaining one of the many things one desires. But beliefs about reasons lack intrinsic motivational force.

Responding to T.M. Scanlon, I explain how reasons can be excluded from consideration in deliberation. If I know that I won’t pursue a particular object of desire because my other desires push so strongly against doing so, the object seems inaccessible and is excluded from consideration. It’s as if a physical barrier prevents me from pursuing it, though in fact the barrier is constituted by my own motivational structure.

Kieran Setiya challenges Humeans to explain how we can choose to do a particular action for one reason rather than another. This happens when strong desires not to do something for a particular bad reason motivate me not to do it for that reason. I may then do it for a different reason without interference from these desires. This requires an impressive sort of self-knowledge about my motivations, without which I might act for the bad reason while thinking I’m acting for a better reason.

David Enoch presents several arguments that non-natural reasons are indispensable to deliberation. These arguments tacitly assume an anti-Humean deliberative psychology. Substituting a Humean psychology would turn them into arguments for Mark Schroeder’s view. One argument is that reasons seem just too different from natural facts for naturalistic reductions of reasons to be true. But in their hedonic and attentional salience, reasons seem just like natural facts seen in the light of desire.

Moral requirements are often understood as providing categorical reasons for action, which Humean accounts of reasons don’t support. I agree with Philippa Foot that this is the wrong way to understand moral requirements. I instead propose the experientialist analysis: moral requirements concern objective accuracy-conditions for feeling, which require no further explanation in terms of reasons for action.

The psychological explanations provided so far combine to support a Humean account of agency. This account treats all of the agent's desires as partially constituting the agent. (I take “self” and “agent” to refer to the same thing in the context at hand.) One's self includes whatever explains one's actions and one's thoughts and feelings in practical deliberation. Desire is the sole motivational state explaining these phenomena, doing away with the need for motivationally potent beliefs and irreducible intentions. So the self includes no motivational states apart from desire.

Kantians often object that the Humean Theory leaves no place for agents in the causation of action, since it appeals to beliefs and desires rather than agents. The Humean account of the self provides a straightforward response. The desires constitute the agent, and cause action. Agents can cause action because of the causal powers of the desires constituting them.

Christine Korsgaard has argued that reflective endorsement is essential to agency. This view fails to account for a variety of intentional actions that don’t involve reflective endorsement, including spontaneous behavior and the cases of rational akrasia described by Nomy Arpaly. Reflective endorsement is also insufficient for unifying the self, in any ordinary sense of what one’s self is. Desires that don’t align with one’s decision remain in the self, causing dissatisfaction with one’s reflective decision.

How the Humean Theory addresses cases where one is internally divided or alienated from the mental states driving one’s behavior will depend on whether these mental states display all the properties of desire, including the Hedonic Aspect. If so, one performs a genuine intentional action, even if one is alienated from one’s behavior. But if not, as in some cases of purely compulsive behavior, it isn’t intentional action. Without the emotional investment that the Hedonic Aspect provides, the action isn’t one’s own at all.
I conclude by surveying the metaethical consequences of the Humean Theory. Views that combine cognitivism and internalism, treating moral judgments as beliefs with intrinsic motivational force, don’t allow human agents and other Humean agents to make moral judgments. A similar bad result holds for some sophisticated noncognitivist views, which invent new mental states that combine inferential relations typical of belief with the motivational force typical of desire. All these views lead to human incapabilism about moral judgment, since they understand moral judgments as mental state types that humans don’t have.

Fortunately, a better theory of moral judgment is available. A cognitivist view that abandons internalism for experientialism fits well with our Humean nature.

Notes

7. N. Sinhababu, _Humean Nature_, cit., p. 28.
18. N. Sinhababu, _Humean Nature_, cit., p. 36.
21. R. Holton, _Willing, Wanting, Waiting_, cit., p. 120.
22. See T. Scanlon, _What We Owe to Each Other_, Harvard University Press, 1998.