

STRENGTH OF MIND AND THE CALM AND VIOLENT PASSIONS

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Abstract: Hume's distinction between the calm and violent passions is one whose boundaries are not entirely clear. However, it is crucial to understanding his motivational theory and to identifying an unusual virtue he calls "strength of mind," the motivational prevalence of the calm passions over the violent. In this paper, I investigate the parameters of these passions and consider the constitution of strength of mind and why Hume regards it as an admirable trait. These are provocative issues for two reasons. First, it seems as though one might exhibit the prevalence of calm over violent passions, even if the prevailing calm passions are vicious traits of character. Second, the natural virtues for Hume are non-moral motives that garner approval for the effects they tend to produce. But strength of mind is unique in that it is not defined in terms of a particular motive, but in terms of the causal force (strength) of any number of motives in competition with others.

Hume's distinction between the calm and violent passions is one whose boundaries are not entirely clear. However, it is one that is crucial to understanding aspects of his motivational theory and to identifying an unusual virtue he calls "strength of mind," the motivational prevalence of the calm passions over the violent. Hume defines the division between calm and violent passions in terms of the internal upheaval with which a passion is felt. He says that calm passions cause "no disorder in the soul," are known by their effects, and are often mistaken for reason (T 2.3.3.8).¹ Violent passions, by contrast, evidently create internal disorder, are known by their internal feeling, and are clearly identified as passions.²

¹ Citations to Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740 [2007]) are to "T," followed by Book, Part, Section, and paragraph number in the Clarendon Edition of the *Works of David Hume*.

² Louis Loeb (2002, 6) opens a recent book on Hume with a discussion of calm and violent passions in order to make the point that calm passions are associated with stability, which is a predominant theme in Hume, with regard to both emotion and belief.

The distinction is problematic, however, given that Hume offers it as a fundamental division of the passions right at the beginning of Book 2 of the *Treatise*, where he first introduces discussion of the passions, and then immediately calls it a “vulgar and specious” distinction. Then, two parts later, the distinction becomes important to Hume’s theory of motivation—both in explaining the seeming combat of reason and passion and in explaining how we can make sense of a person’s doing something that she “doesn’t want to do,” given that all actions are caused by passions that function as desires.³ Moreover, in suggesting that those for whom the calm passions are motivationally stronger than the violent passions possess the virtue of strength of mind, Hume introduces what seems to be a character trait. Yet, if it is a character trait, it is one that, contrary to other virtues and vices, is identified in terms of a competition between types of passions. Virtues, for Hume, are admired qualities of persons (and other animals, too). Personal virtues include passionate dispositions and talents and certain other attributes expressed habitually in action, all of which garner approval of spectators from a general or common point of view.⁴ So, among the virtues are approved passions, like gratitude, when they are consistently motives to action (and so count as dispositions); but also constant mental qualities like discernment; talents like wit; physical endowments like dexterity; and other agreeable traits like decency (e.g., EPM 6.21, 6.26, 7.12).⁵ Strength of mind is different from the other natural virtues (perhaps with the exception of courage)⁶ because it is not identified with any particular single natural trait. So, to get an understanding of Hume’s conception of strength of mind, we need to get some clarity both on Hume’s distinction between the calm and violent passions and on how strength of mind qualifies as a virtue in Hume’s normative ethical theory.

In this essay, I will take up these and related issues. In the first part, I discuss how the calm/violent distinction fits into Hume’s overall theory of the passions, noting which passions are (generally) calm. In the second part, I ask questions about the conditions necessary for strength of mind. I ask, first, about Hume’s ability to sustain the distinction between (motivational) strength and violence. Second, I ask about the possibility of motivational conflicts, given Hume’s account of our psychology in which dominant passions absorb their competitors. In the third part of the paper, I examine

³ A reader might think that actions are caused on Hume’s view by various passions, and not just by passions that are identified as desires. While it’s true that Hume thinks actions are caused by passions, for every passion he cites as a motivating one, he also gives a definition of it in terms of desire. See [Bricke 1996](#), 36–37 for discussion of this point.

⁴ Hume writes, “We are never to consider any single action in our enquiries concerning the origin of morals; but only the quality or character from which the action proceeded. These alone are *durable* enough to affect our sentiments concerning the person” (T 3.3.1.5).

⁵ Citations to *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751 [1998]) are to the Clarendon Critical Edition, designated by “EPM,” followed by section and paragraph number.

⁶ Courage raises questions similar to strength of mind, since it involves the overcoming of other passions like fear.

how strength of mind can be a natural virtue, given that natural virtues for Hume are typically single motivational traits. There I argue that strength of mind is indeed a natural virtue, but one defined in terms of a cluster of traits of proper strength.

1 What Are Calm Passions, and Which Passions Are Calm?

The calm/violent distinction may have a long history, with its roots in the Stoics, who regarded passions as perturbations causing emotional upheaval (see Fieser 1992, 3–4). Francis Hutcheson, writing prior to Hume, distinguishes “affections,” which are calm or reflective passions, from non-reflective passions. The latter are composed of a “natural propensity” attended with “confused” sensations or prolonged by bodily motions. These passions can arise without any notion of good, either private or public, and can obscure our practical reasoning (Hutcheson 1728 [1971], 28–29, 60). So Hume was obviously aware of a traditional philosophical characterization of certain unreflective passions as disturbances to reason. He regards this as a false portrayal of the relation between reason and passion, given his argument that the two cannot be at odds with one another over the direction of action (T 2.3.3.4).⁷ At the beginning of *Treatise* Book 2, he calls the calm/violent division “a vulgar and specious” one, perhaps because of his dispute with the way the traditional distinction is described, but also, I think, because he sees the designation as fluid. Immediately before offering this judgment of the distinction’s status, he writes, “This division [calm/violent] is far from being exact. The raptures of poetry and music frequently rise to the greatest height; while those other impressions, properly call’d passions, may decay into so soft an emotion as to become, in a manner, imperceptible” (T 2.1.1.3).

In the opening paragraph of Book 2, Hume divides impressions into those of sensation (original impressions) and those of reflection (secondary impressions), and claims that impressions of reflection, which arise from sensations or from the ideas of sensations, include the passions and “other emotions resembling them” (T 2.1.1.1). Then he makes four significant points related to calm and violent passions. First, he divides all reflective impressions into the calm and the violent. Second, he names among each class the following. Among the calm passions are the sentiments of morality

⁷ On one interpretation of Hume, all passions are “reflective,” since they are sensations of reflection. This then explains Hume’s rejection of the traditional way of treating the calm/violent distinction, which presumes that some passions are unreflective. However, I don’t wholly agree with this depiction of Hume’s view of the passions insofar as it seems to imply that they are all intellectual or contemplative in some sense. Rather, they are reflective in the sense that they recur back to the sources of our pleasures and pains (i.e., they are “reflexive”). Hume writes that they arise from sensations or our ideas of sensations, so he apparently thinks that some impressions of reflection originate directly out of sensations of pleasure and pain, with no ideas interposed.

and beauty, while the violent include love and hatred, grief and joy, pride and humility. Third, as I've noted, he says this division is not exact. Fourth, he says he will use this distinction, vulgar and specious as it is, to organize his discussion, and so will begin by explaining the origin and effects of the violent passions.

However, the distinction is much more than a principle of organization. After the beginning of Book 2 in his general classification of the passions, the calm/violent distinction is invoked again in T 2.3, specifically in the discussion of motivation in T 2.3.3, "Of the influencing motives of the will" and in the subsequent section in which he explains the causes of violent passions. In T 2.3.3, in Hume's discussion of motivation, the calm passions are called upon to explain why it appears that reason can oppose passion over the determination of action. Hume says that any mental activity that operates with calmness and tranquility is confused with reason; so in fact, passions are opposing other passions (T 2.3.3.8). In this section, Hume offers further details on the calm passions. He calls them "real passions" but ones that "are known more by their effects than by the immediate feeling or sensation." He offers as examples two kinds of desires: original natural instincts, such as benevolence, resentment, love of life, kindness to children; and the general appetite to good and aversion to evil. He adds that violent emotions of the same kind can prompt action as well; I might feel a violent passion of resentment toward someone who hurts me and then desire that some evil befall that person (T 2.3.3.8-9). But what makes the distinction between calm and violent passions crucial to Hume's theory is that it explains how his causal theory of motivation makes sense of our conventional understanding of motivational psychology. Hume emphasizes the distinction between a violent passion and a causally strong one, and between a calm passion and a causally weak one (T 2.3.4.1). This distinction allows that we can act on passions that, in a phenomenal sense, we hardly feel, even when having an intense experience of a contrary passion. Hence, calm passions can have greater causal strength than violent ones and be effective in action, even though felt much less powerfully than the violent. This, of course, is the state invoked in Hume's description of strength of mind. I will address issues related to conflict of motives in [section 2](#).

How to position the calm/violent distinction within Hume's theory of the passions isn't clear. I take seriously Hume's division of all impressions of reflection into calm and violent—at least into the generally calm and generally violent, following Louis Loeb (1977)—although not all commentators agree about this.⁸ Of all the commentaries offered on the taxonomy

⁸ Norman Kemp Smith interprets Hume's scheme as dividing all passions into two classes: instincts (primary passions) and those derived from pleasure and pain (secondary passions). The derived or secondary passions then divide into direct and indirect, with direct passions being further divided into calm and violent (Kemp Smith 1941, 164–168). But, as Páll Árdal notes, the indirect passions of pride, humility, love, and hatred are (generally) violent passions

of the passions, Loeb's is probably the best, although it misses some important details. On Loeb's interpretation of Hume, impressions of reflection are emotions, and the violent emotions are the passions.⁹ The passions divide into the direct and indirect, depending on whether they are produced directly from an idea of a pleasurable or painful object (as a desire for a particular pastry is), or indirectly, by the interposition of another idea (as pride in my lovely flower garden is) (T 2.1.1.4).¹⁰ Loeb argues further that neither a direct nor an indirect passion *could* be calm, given the psychological mechanism by which each is produced. The indirect passions are produced by "a double relation of impressions and ideas," which increases the feeling of the resulting passion. Loeb illustrates the point with one of Hume's own cases: suppose a suit of fine clothes causes one pleasure. This pleasure immediately causes the direct passion of joy. When the clothes are considered as one's own, they are associated with an idea of oneself. Since joy is agreeable, it resembles the impression of pride. This double relation of ideas and impressions then causes the indirect impression of pride. Hume states that this indirect passion in turn gives "new force," or "additional force," to the initial joy (T 2.3.9.2-4; Loeb 1977, 398). So, both the direct passion of joy and the indirect passion of pride are experienced with an internal forcefulness that makes them violent passions. The direct passions, which play a role in the production of the indirect, are reinforced by the indirect passions they resemble and help produce, and so tend to be violent just as the indirect are (Loeb 1977, 398).

But Loeb's scheme neglects to mention the instinctual passions,¹¹ some of which, as I've noted, are generally calm. Hume writes at T 2.3.3.8, in his discussion of motivation, "Now 'tis certain, there are certain calm desires and tendencies, which, tho' they be real passions, produce little emotion in the mind." Then he names the instincts I've mentioned (benevolence and resentment, the love of life, kindness to children and the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil). There are violent versions of at least some of these instincts; as I've noted, resentment is one: "[w]hen I receive any injury from another, I often feel a violent passion of resentment, which

for Hume; hence, Kemp Smith's interpretation cannot be correct. Árdal suggests instead that every class of passions should be further sub-divided into calm and violent: primary, secondary, direct, and indirect passions (Árdal 1966, 10–11). Terence Penelhum agrees with Árdal (Penelhum 1975, 89–97).

⁹ Páll Árdal thinks that all impressions of reflection are passions (1966, 8–11).

¹⁰ Direct passions arise immediately from pleasure or pain (natural good or evil), and the indirect arise from pleasure and pain in conjunction with other qualities. Indirect passions include "pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice, generosity, with their dependents." Direct passions include "desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair, and security" (T 2.1.1.4). Jane McIntyre notes that the direct/indirect distinction is entirely original to Hume (2000, 78).

¹¹ James Fieser notices this and suggests that generally violent passions divide into direct and indirect, with direct passions further divided into primary (instincts) and secondary (derived) (1992, 10–11). But I have to disagree with Fieser, for reasons I discuss here.

makes me desire his evil and punishment, independent of all considerations of pleasure and advantage to myself” (T 2.3.3.9). And a little farther on, Hume adds to the list of instincts desire of punishment to our enemies and of happiness to our friends, hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites (T 2.3.9.8), a list which surely includes some generally calm *and* some generally violent passions. Since the primary passions, or instincts, include both types, we cannot infer that all non-derived passions are calm.

So, I think the way to understand Hume’s scheme is this. The passions divide into primary (instincts) and secondary (derived); the secondary are derived either from pleasures and pains or from the primary, by interposition of an idea (which copies the primary impression). Primary passions can be either calm or violent, but the generally calm primary passions include at least the moral and aesthetic senses (which encompass certain calm pleasures and pains), benevolence, resentment, love of life, and kindness to children. I agree with Loeb that as a matter of psychological fact, all the secondary passions are *initially* violent due to their manner of derivation.¹² However, there is logical space for calm secondary passions, and Hume makes it clear that even if they originate with some violence, these passions can change: “when a passion has once become a settled principle of action, and is the predominant inclination of the soul, it commonly produces no longer any sensible agitation. As repeated custom and its own force have made every thing yield to it, it directs the actions and conduct without that opposition and emotion, which so naturally attend every momentary gust of passion” (T 2.3.4.1).

That any passion can be calm, on Hume’s theory, gives rise to questions about the proper understanding of strength of mind. Would we admire the constant triumph of calm resentment over violent passions? Perhaps; but the answer seems to depend upon what the objects of the latter passions are. Alternatively, maybe the issue concerning what particular calm passions overtake particular violent ones is irrelevant to the assessment of strength of mind, given that the virtue is defined in terms of a general tendency that encompasses many instances. However, before examining the details in Hume’s discussion of this virtue, I consider two conditions necessary for the expression of this virtue.

¹² Haruko Inoue ([Unpublished](#)) has suggested recently that the division between calm and violent passions in 2.1.1 is not entirely consistent with that of 2.3.3 unless the two are interpreted differently. The first discussion is to be read as offering a type distinction between the calm passions—i.e., the moral and aesthetic sentiments—which are not properly passions, and the violent passions exemplified by love, hatred, etc., which are properly passions. The second discussion concerns only the proper passions. There Hume makes the point that tokens of the genuine passions can also be either calm or violent; hence, resentment, love of life, and so on, are proper passions that can be experienced tranquilly or violently. While I don’t subscribe to this reading, I want to acknowledge it.

2 Some Questions about Conditions for Strength of Mind

Obviously, Hume's description of strength of mind implies that motivational force of a passion is not (always) a function of its violence. By distinguishing a calm passion from a weak one and a violent from a strong one, Hume clearly indicates that passions have a distinctive phenomenal dimension that does not correlate precisely with motivational force. This distinction indicates that the passion felt with the most internal turmoil among those present is not necessarily productive of action:

'Tis evident passions influence not the will in proportion to their violence, or the disorder they occasion in the temper; but on the contrary, that when a passion has once become a settled principle of action, and is the predominant inclination of the soul, it commonly produces no sensible agitation. . . . We must, therefore, distinguish betwixt a calm and a weak passion; betwixt a violent and a strong one. (T 2.3.4.1)

Hume makes the point that some passions are felt so calmly as to be mistaken for conclusions of reason, and yet among these calm passions are ones upon which we can act. Calm passions, on Hume's account, are either passions evoked by distant goods and evils (pleasures and pains) or passions that are settled or habitual principles of action. They are calm, as I've already noted, because they are barely perceptible, being produced with little "sensible agitation." Violent passions are evoked by near or immediate goods and evils and are felt with some disturbance or force. The psychological state of the person who experiences violent passion is described as "disordered."¹³ Since the calm are not necessarily motivationally or causally weaker than their rivals, and the violent are not necessarily motivationally or causally stronger than theirs, a person cannot determine by the experienced feeling of her passion whether it will be effective in action. Thus, it sometimes makes sense to say that we do something we really don't want to do. The sense in which I don't want to go to the dentist is the sense in which the aversion to the dental procedures is felt violently. The desire to take care of my dental health is felt calmly, but motivates me.

Even though Hume is clear that violence is a dimension of a passion different from its causal strength, the two, on his account, are apparently often connected. He writes that it is "certain" that if we want to push someone to action, "'twill commonly be better policy to work upon the violent than the calm passions, and rather take him by his inclination, than what is vulgarly call'd his *reason*" (T 2.3.4.1). Hume's advice is that we

¹³ Katharina Paxman (2015) argues that the crucial distinctions between the calm and violent passions is not the "feeling" of the respective passions, but the presence or absence of disruption and the disordering of natural or customary ways of thinking.

employ strategies that increase the violence of the passion, which is then more likely to increase its motivational strength. A variation in the situation of the object relative to the agent will change the calm and violent passions into each other. When a good is viewed from a distance, such as when the completion of a valued project in June is contemplated in January, it produces a calm reaction. When that same good is brought nearer—say, when April comes around and much progress has been made—the thought of completion can produce a violent token of that same type of passion and perhaps motivate the person to work harder. So, we might increase the violence of passions toward pleasurable objects and thereby increase a person’s motivation toward those objects by bringing them nearer, when possible (T 2.3.4.1).

However, given this phenomenon, one might wonder how Hume can carve out a practical gap between the strength of a passion and its violence, if in fact violence turns out to be very important to a passion’s effect in action. Hume spends five sections (2.3.4 to 2.3.8) in Book 2, Part 3, “Of the will and direct passions,” on the topic of augmenting and diminishing the motivational strength of the passions. There, he writes about several factors that affect the motivational force, typically by working on the violence or calmness of the passions (although not in all cases). The impact of custom, of the imagination, and of contiguity and distance in space and time each get treated in separate sections. Jane McIntyre (2006, 397) comments that Hume has a problem substantiating the strength/violence distinction because he offers very little commentary on how to increase the causal strength of a passions without working on increasing its violence.

I think the question whether Hume is able to carve out the necessary space between motivational strength and violence is even more pressing in light of the following considerations. Hume’s reference to the effect on a passion of the force and vivacity with which the object of the passion is conceived raises the question how force and vivacity of a mental state are related to the two dimensions of a motivating passion with which we are here concerned, violence and strength. I want to take seriously the suggestion that force and vivacity invoked in Book 1 of the *Treatise* are the same factors as violence invoked in Book 2. The fundamental difference between impressions (sensations and passions) and ideas is, of course, their relative degrees of force and vivacity. Among ideas, beliefs are more lively and vivacious than ideas that are not believed. Perhaps, then, a violent passion is also simply one with a higher degree of force and vivacity than a calm passion. In treating the psychological impact that contiguity in space and time has upon our passions for objects, Hume writes,

Here then we are to consider two kinds of objects, the contiguous and remote; of which the former, by means of their relation to ourselves, approach an impression in force and vivacity; the latter by reason of the interruption in our

manner of conceiving them, appear in a weaker and more imperfect light. This is their effect on the imagination.

So far, Hume is talking about the manner in which we conceive the objects, but then he continues:

If my reasoning be just, they must have a proportionable effect on the will and passions. Contiguous objects must have an influence much superior to the distant and remote. Accordingly we find in common life, that men are principally concern'd about those objects, which are not much remov'd either in space or time, enjoying the present, and leaving what is afar off to the care of chance and fortune. Talk to a man of his condition thirty years hence, and he will not regard you. Speak of what is to happen to-morrow, and he will lend you attention. The breaking of a mirror gives us more concern when at home, than the burning of a house, when abroad, and some hundred leagues distant. (T 2.3.7.3)

So, the force and vivacity of an idea of an object are influenced by the contiguity of the object to the agent, and either because of this fact, or analogously to it, an agent's interest in closer objects is greater than her interest in distant objects. Consequently, the motivational force of her interest varies in proportion to the distance from the object. Hume doesn't actually say that the violence of the passion for the closer object is greater (one might have great concern, but experience it calmly), but it's reasonable to suppose that this is what he means when he writes about "more concern," since he has been discussing in this context the effects of violence on motivation. What he also doesn't say, which is significant to the present topic, is that increased force and vivacity of the passion is responsible for increased motivational effect. His reference in the passage to force and vivacity has to do with the liveliness of the idea of the object of the passion and how its liveliness varies with distance across space and time.

If the violence of a passion is the same feature as force and vivacity, the problem of distinguishing motivational force from violence is even more pronounced, given his comments about the relation between force and vivacity and motivational strength. I do believe there are good reasons to think that calmness or violence of passions *is* the same feature as the force and vivacity of mental states in Hume's theory. First, it would be an unduly complicated picture of our mental life to suppose that all mental states vary in force and vivacity, a phenomenal dimension, but that impressions of reflection (the passions) vary in yet another, very similar phenomenal dimension. Rather, it makes best sense of Hume's philosophy of mind to see the characteristic of force and vivacity as a continuum along which fall ideas, beliefs, and impressions, with some impressions having

more forcefulness than others. In fact when Hume describes the distinction between impressions and ideas, which he says at first is a difference between them of “force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind,” he uses the term “violence” in the next sentence: “Those perceptions, which enter with the most force and violence, we may name *impressions*” (T 1.1.1.1.). So, it would make sense to think that in the case of impressions of reflection, the internal upheaval that is definitive of the violence of a passion just is its force and vivacity. Second, Hume makes the comment that the calm passions are often mistaken for reason, saying that “every action of the mind, which operates with the same calmness and tranquility, is confounded with reason by all those, who judge of things from the first view and appearance” (T 2.3.3.8). This can be explained by the fact that reason deals with the logical connections between ideas, and ideas are on the low end of the force and vivacity—or violence—continuum, close to the calm passions.

Now to return to the question at hand: Can Hume carve out space for the practical distinction between strength of motivation and violence of a passion? I think he can, and does, by pointing to the fact that strength of calm over violent passions is never possessed by anyone constantly. When he introduces the virtue, he does so in the context of a conflict between concern for long-term self-interest and a violent passion (say, a desire for something immediately appealing, but unhealthy in the long run):

Men often act knowingly against their interest: For which reason the view of the greatest possible good does not always influence them. Men often counter-act a violent passion in prosecution of their interests and designs: 'Tis not therefore the present uneasiness alone, which determines them. In general we may observe, that both these principles operate on the will; and where they are contrary, that either of them prevails, according to the *general* character or *present* disposition of the person. What we call strength of mind, implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent; tho' we may easily observe, there is no man so constantly possess'd of this virtue, as never on any occasion to yield to the sollicitations of passion and desire. From these variations of temper proceeds the great difficulty of deciding concerning the actions and resolutions of men, where there is any contrariety of motives and passions. (T 2.3.3.10)

Here Hume describes the will as being determined sometimes by present uneasiness (or easiness), and sometimes by distant good (or bad), as the case may be. The passion or passions that become the more habitual principles of action are the prevailing inclinations, but even these are at times overcome, it seems, by other passions. To say this is consistent with

the view that the easiest way to motivate a person *typically* is by augmenting the violence of the relevant passion or desire. The person with strength of mind, however, can be motivated by another kind of appeal, at the times when the person is in possession of that strength.

A second condition for the exercise of strength of mind is the possibility of conflicting motivations. In the section following the introduction of strength of mind, “Of the causes of the violent passions” (T 2.3.4), Hume describes a phenomenon among the passions that might raise questions about the motivational conflict that a person with strength of mind is said to overcome. Hume writes that when one passion attends another, the one is easily converted into the other, even when the two are contrary: “the predominant passion swallows up the inferior” and “[t]he spirits, when once excited, easily receive a change in their direction” (T 2.3.4.2). At first glance, it looks as though Hume is suggesting that when a passion becomes part of one’s general character, clash of motives no longer exists, since one passion incorporates the other into itself. However, here it is crucial to bear in mind the violence/strength distinction. Since Hume’s topic is how passions are made violent, the sense in which a passion is predominant over another is just that: in terms of its violence (its phenomenal dimension), rather than in terms of strength (its motivational dimension). Hume’s examples bear on this point.

Politicians excite curiosity about an issue and then delay in satisfying it, producing impatience. The anxiety of waiting intensifies interest in the topic. A soldier in battle feels stronger courage when inspired by thoughts of his comrades and their courageous feelings, and feels increased fear at the thoughts of his enemies’ fearful reactions to the confrontation (T 2.3.4.3). In both cases, we have two emotions each intensifying emotions similar to themselves, not an opposing emotion extinguishing the other. Hume also describes one object’s inspiring opposing passions, which causes disorder and which in turn increases the force of the predominant passion.

Hence we naturally desire what is forbid, and take a pleasure in performing actions, merely because they are unlawful. The notion of duty, when opposite to the passions, is seldom able to overcome them; and when it fails of that effect, is apt rather to encrease them, by producing an opposition in our motives and principles. (T 2.3.4.5)

While we are inclined to do right, the wrong object becomes more alluring by the thought that it is forbidden, and the dissonance increases the force of the desire for the forbidden object. Hume thinks that, in such cases, most often regard for duty is also too motivationally weak to win out. Since these are illustrations meant to show how a “dominant” passion converts another over to its use, it’s not the case that dominance here indicates strength. That is, it is not the case that *motivationally* stronger passions swallow up passions pushing in a contrary direction. Rather, Hume is here

explaining how a passion's violence is increased by the presence of another passion: the two passions become one, with an intensified psychological effect that neither passion had on its own. Nonetheless, these violent passions are still at times in motivational conflict with *other* passions, either calmer or more violent. The possibility of motivational tensions allows for the phenomenon of strength of mind, where a person is moved to action by calm passions, despite the presence of the violent.¹⁴

3 What Is Strength of Mind and How Is It a Virtue?

Here I want to delve more deeply into the matter of the constitution of strength of mind and the question why Hume regards it as a virtue, or an admirable trait. These are provocative issues, given a couple of considerations. First, it seems as though one might exhibit strength of mind, the prevalence of calm over violent passions, even if the prevailing calm passions are vicious traits of character. While Hume recognizes that most characters are mixtures of virtuous and vicious traits, the implication that we might admire someone specifically for coolly and consistently exhibiting commonly non-admirable traits seems implausible as a description of the psychology of approval. This is so in part because sympathy with those affected by an agent is the source of moral approval and disapproval, and resolute evil has more devastating effects on others than wavering evil does. Hence, our sympathies would indicate that the person with the former disposition is worse than one with the latter. Second, the virtues for Hume (at least in the case of natural virtue) are all non-moral motives that garner approval for the effects they tend to produce. Hume states as an "undoubted maxim" in his discussion of morality that "*no action can be virtuous, or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it, distinct from the sense of its morality*" (T 3.2.1.7). For instance, relieving the distress of others is morally good because it is done from a motive of benevolence or regard for the good of humanity. But strength of mind is unique in that it is defined in terms, not of a particular motive, but in terms of the causal force (i.e., strength) of any number of motives in competition with others.

Before addressing these issues, I want to put aside one natural way to think of strength of mind: to regard it as the opposite of weakness of will.

¹⁴ Annette Baier (1991) raises a different question about clashes of motives. She asks how a calm passion could ever oppose a violent one over direction of action, since the mere conflict is itself violence-inducing and the combat will always be between two violent passions (167–168). Her answer on behalf of Hume includes two points. (1) Perhaps the calm passions become "briefly violent" during the time of opposition. So, Hume can say at most that typically calm passions oppose typically violent ones. (2) According to Hume, it is only "commonly" that opposition of passions causes disorder, "so in theory there might be occasional calm negotiated victories of more considered preference over momentary gusts of more violent opposed passions" (168). Such occasions, she thinks, would be infrequent, though.

Weakness of will, by all standard accounts, Hume's included, is the case of the actor's thinking she ought to do one action, but having a causally stronger motive for a competing action. But while strength of mind is exhibited when a person overcomes a motive that she feels with some urgency and turmoil, it is not the same as acting from a sense of duty, that is, from realization that a certain action is the one that ought, morally-speaking, to be done. Strength of mind could *sometimes* involve the motive of duty, as in the case where a moral sentiment (approval or disapproval from the common point of view) overcomes a violent passion like anger in causing action. But since there are many other calm passions besides the moral sentiments, any of their triumphs over the violent passions might constitute strength of mind. Strength of mind also surely includes cases of acting on dispositions for the long-term good over the short. Furthermore, if "strength of mind" were meant to describe a person who lacks weakness of will, given that such weakness is episodic, it follows that the person with strength of mind would *never* give in to the violent passions over the calm. That is, she would consistently resist the force of the violent passions, since to lack weakness of will entirely is never to give in to temptation. But Hume himself says that the person with such strength sometimes does cave in: "there is no man so constantly possess'd of this virtue [strength of mind], as never on any occasion to yield to the sollicitations of passion and desire" (T 2.3.3.10).

Hume clearly believes that strength of mind is a feature approved from a general or common point of view, a view divested of personal interest. On his account, moral admiration is derived from our sympathizing with the effects on others or on the agent of the actions caused by the trait in question. So it follows that, generally, actions motivated by calm passions like benevolence, love of life, concern for long-term rather than short-term good, settled principles of character, and moral sentiments, have positive consequences of which we approve. However, this seems false when the trait in question is a settled principle of character that also is ordinarily thought a vice, such as malevolence. So, here is the first puzzle about strength of mind (which I have already noted): Can persons in whom calm vicious traits prevail over violent or vivacious virtuous traits possess strength of mind?

A few avenues for addressing this question suggest themselves. First, we might think that vicious motives are rarely, if ever, felt calmly, even when a person has become habituated to act on them. Anger and malice are motives that seem consistently experienced with internal disorder or upheaval. So, perhaps we needn't worry that strength of mind would encompass the prevalence of vices over virtues. On the other hand, it's hard to see why it would be the case that all vices are experienced vivaciously and forcefully when they act as motives. Furthermore, just as one might postpone the fulfillment of immediate desire in order to achieve a long-term, but distant, good, one might put off the production of near or immediate

evil to produce a more lasting, but distant, devastation. So, strength of mind could theoretically include vicious dispositions that restrain the immediate desires in order to produce a more profound evil. Hence, the suggestion that vicious motives are always violent passions is simply false.

A second related, but more plausible, suggestion is that while vicious motives might be felt calmly, virtuous ones are never violent. So, a calm vicious motive that triumphs over a virtuous one is not calm over the violent, but one calm passion's exerting causal strength over another calm passion. This seems plausible when the passions under consideration are instincts like benevolence or kindness to children, but as Loeb has argued (1977, 398), all the secondary passions—at least when first acquired—are violent. Various desires that have to do with the good of those we care about might be experienced with violence, as for instance, when a mother's child is threatened by an intruder. Surely these are among the admirable motives, even if experienced with some psychological disturbance. So, it also seems false to say that virtuous motives are never lively and vivaciously felt.

A third suggestion is that what we admire when we approve of the calm passions' defeating violent ones is the resolve or determination it takes to resist acting on immediate desires, whatever they aim for. So, strength of mind isn't actually the prevalence of calm passions over violent passions, but is instead a fortitude that can be valued apart from the other traits that accompany it. So, someone who is able to act on calm passions—even if these may be such motives as malevolence or spite—is admirable, not for the calm passion, but for having a certain resolve. Of course, this is not exactly what Hume says about strength of mind, but it is not an implausible way to see it. We might wonder whether it takes a great deal of fortitude to act on entrenched principles, but it sometimes does take fortitude to act in such a way as to turn certain motives that are not customary into habits. While doing so would not be an effort for someone who is naturally disposed to act in these ways—such as a person disposed by their natural desires to care about others—it would take some effort and resolve, say, to turn a miser into a generous person. So, perhaps, fortitude *is* what we admire in the persons who have strength of mind. I'll return to this suggestion later.

A fourth possibility is to say that acting from established vicious dispositions is simply not indicative of strength of mind because strength of mind is not delineated solely by prevailing calm passions, but by the prevalence of calm passions within certain limits. I think this reading gets support from the context in which Hume introduces strength of mind as a virtue. He has been discussing how calm passions, known more by their effects than by how they feel, are frequently mistaken for reason. He says that these desires are of two kinds: certain instincts implanted in our natures (he gives the examples I've named) and the general appetite to good and aversion to evil. Then he writes that there are certain violent emotions of

the same kind. I have quoted the sentence about the instinct of resentment, but it bears repeating, this time, along with what follows it:

When I receive any injury from another, I often feel a violent passion of resentment, which makes me desire his evil and punishment, independent of all considerations of pleasure and advantage to myself. When I am immediately threaten'd with any grievous ill, my fears, apprehensions, and aversions arrives to a great height, and produce a sensible emotion. (T 2.3.3.9)

So, here we have examples of resentment and love of life as violent passions, even though they are generally calm. Then he writes the paragraph, part of which I've already quoted, introducing strength of mind (T 2.3.3.10).¹⁵ Hume seems to have in mind there two situations under which persons demonstrate possession of this virtue. One is that they have general characters such that they pursue their long-term natural good (pleasure) over their immediate and intensely-felt desires. The other is that they have general dispositions to pursue the ends of morality over other immediate interests. Then he goes on to say that no one is constantly possessed of strength of mind, however. "From these variations of temper proceeds the great difficulty of deciding concerning the actions and resolutions of men, where there is any contrariety of motives and passions" (T 2.3.3.10). I take it Hume means that we often have a difficult time determining whose character actually embodies this broad virtue.

The context here suggests that strength of mind specifically has to do with pursuing long-term, prudential and moral goods over short-term, self-interested goods. Calm benevolence that manifests itself in a plan of long-term giving is approved over immediate intense feelings of benevolence that, due to a sudden plea, overcome us, causing us to give without consideration to future demands on our resources. Action due to calm, considered resentment is healthier than action due to momentarily provoked resentment. This reading is substantiated by two other mentions of strength of mind in Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. One is in section 4, "Of Political Society":

HAD every man sufficient *sagacity* to perceive, at all times, the strong interest, which binds him to the observance of justice and equity, and *strength of mind* sufficient to

¹⁵ That passage is: "The common error of metaphysicians has lain in ascribing the direction of the will entirely to one of these principles, and supposing the other to have no influence. Men often act knowingly against their interest: For which reason the view of the greatest possible good does not always influence them. Men often counter-act a violent passion in prosecution of their interests and designs: 'Tis not therefore the present uneasiness alone, which determines them. In general we may observe, that both these principles operate on the will; and where they are contrary, that either of them prevails, according to the *general* character or *present* disposition of the person. What we call strength of mind, implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent" (T 2.3.3.10).

persevere in a steady adherence to a general and a distant interest, in opposition to the allurements of present pleasure and advantage; there never, in that case, been any such thing as government or political society, but each man, following his natural liberty, had lived in entire peace and harmony with all others. (EPM 4.1)

And later in section 6, “Qualities Useful to Ourselves,” in an eloquent passage, Hume connects strength of mind with happiness and its lack with misery, there defining it in terms of forgoing short-term pleasures for long-term interest:

All men, it is allowed, are equally desirous of happiness; but few are successful in the pursuit: One considerable cause is the want of STRENGTH of MIND, which might enable them to resist the temptation of present ease or pleasure, and carry them forward in the search of more distant profit and enjoyment. Our affections, on a general prospect of their objects, form certain rules of conduct, and certain measures of preference of one above another: And these decisions, though really the result of our calm passions and propensities, (for what else can pronounce any object eligible or the contrary?) are yet said, by a natural abuse of terms, to be the determinations of pure *reason* and reflection. But when some of these objects approach nearer to us, or acquire the advantages of favourable lights and positions, which catch the heart or imagination; our general resolutions are frequently confounded, a small enjoyment preferred, and lasting shame and sorrow entailed upon us. And however poets may employ their wit and eloquence, in celebrating present pleasure, and rejecting all distant views to fame, health, or fortune; it is obvious, that this practice is the source of all dissoluteness and disorder, repentance and misery. A man of a strong and determined temper adheres tenaciously to his general resolutions, and is neither seduced by the allurements of pleasure, nor terrified by the menaces of pain; but keeps still in view those distant pursuits, by which he, at once, ensures his happiness and his honour. (EPM 6.15)

Hume mentions both sorrow and shame as the effects of a deficit of this virtue, and both happiness and honor as the effects of its possession. Hence, my view is that strength of mind, for Hume, is not simply any calm passion exercising control of actions over the violent passions. It has to do specifically with those calm passions that have as their aim the long-term

interest of the agent or the goals whose pursuit are approved by the moral sentiments.¹⁶

As a matter of fact, Hume indicates that living morally and acting for long-term self-interest are connected in an important sense, given what he writes of the circumstances of the sensible knave in section 9 of EPM. The sensible knave is surely possessed of calm vicious passions in his taking advantage of the system of justice and making himself an exception to the rules when it serves his interest and does no harm to the institution: “a sensible knave, in particular incidents, may think, that an act of iniquity or infidelity will make a considerable addition to his fortune, without causing any considerable breach in the social union and confederacy” (EPM 9.22). Hume admits that some people will not be repelled by the “baseness” demonstrated by such behavior, but he continues with the often-quoted passage:

But in all ingenuous natures, the antipathy to treachery and roguery is too strong to be counterbalanced by any views of profit or pecuniary advantage. Inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct; these are circumstances very requisite to happiness, and will be cherished and cultivated by every honest man, who feels the importance of them. (EPM 9.23)

So, when we turn our moral sensibility inward, take stock of our own character, and find it deficient, we’ll suffer a loss of the peace of mind necessary to happiness. Lack of strength of mind results in behavior that undermines enlightened self-interest, whether the deficiency be lack of prudential, self-interested sentiments or of moral sentiments.¹⁷

This leaves the second puzzle: how strength of mind fits into Hume’s theory of the virtues, since it is defined, not as a particular trait, but as the prevalence of certain passions over others. It shares this puzzle with courage, which seems to be characterized as the feature of a person’s character that allows that person to confront and overcome fear. (See [McCarty 2012](#).) The question that both strength of mind and courage raise is just what natural motive we approve when we approve of behavior that exhibits that virtue, given that the defining feature of each is its causal strength to influence action.

¹⁶ Karl Schafer (2008) maintains that Hume generally approves of strength of mind, “but this should not be taken to mean that he believes that the calm passions always ought to prevail over the violent ones. Rather, it is simply that he endorses a general tendency for ‘reason’ in this sense (the calm passions) to move one to act in opposition to the violent passions” (207, n.24). I here agree with Schafer’s point that Hume does not think all calm passions should prevail over violent, but this is because I take strength of mind to encompass the prevalence of only some of the calm passions.

¹⁷ See [Immerwahr 1992](#) for an enlightening discussion of the effect of calm passions on happiness. Immerwahr says that Hume connects with the prevalence of violent passions all of the following: misery, folly, vice, love, factions, polytheism, popular religion (302).

One suggestion is that strength of mind might be identified with the trait of prudence, which is typically thought of as concern for one's long-term good. The text, however, does not corroborate this interpretation. Prudence is mentioned several times as a virtue in Book 3 of the *Treatise* (T 3.3.1.24, 3.3.2.11, 3.3.4.4.), but strength of mind is never mentioned in Book 3 at all. In the second *Enquiry*, prudence appears in a long list of qualities useful to the self, but strength of mind is not included in that list:

[D]iscretion, caution, enterprize, industry, assiduity, frugality, economy, good-sense, prudence, discernment; besides these endowments, I say, whose very names force an avowal of their merit, there are many others, to which the most determined scepticism cannot, for a moment, refuse the tribute of praise and approbation. *Temperance, sobriety, patience, constancy, perseverance, forethought, considerateness, secrecy, order, insinuation, address, presence of mind, quickness of conception, facility of expression.* (EPM 6.21)

Prudence is also called “an intellectual virtue” in Appendix 4 of EPM, but strength of mind is not mentioned in that context (although it surely is also an intellectual virtue). Strength of mind is noted in EPM 4.1 (quoted earlier) as a virtue that, if everyone had it all the time, would make political society unnecessary, and in the passage from EPM 6.15 (quoted earlier) as a trait useful to the self because it is necessary to happiness.

The same kind of argument can be made against identifying strength of mind with perseverance or fortitude. Perseverance appears in the above list of features useful to the self and is mentioned in connection with the virtue of industry in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*: “*Industry, perseverance, patience, activity, vigilance, application, constancy*, with other virtues of that kind . . . are esteem'd valuable upon no other account, than their advantage in the conduct of life” (T 3.3.4.7). In EPM, Hume cites the example of the industrious tortoise in the fable who “by his perseverance, gained the race of the hare” (EPM 6.10). The conclusion to EPM (section 9) lists perseverance, along with industry, discretion, frugality, secrecy, order, forethought, judgment (and, Hume says, a long list of other features) as virtues whose tendency to promote the happiness of their possessor, is the sole foundation of their merit (EPM 9.12). Strength of mind is not mentioned explicitly in any of the discussions of perseverance, fortitude, or industriousness.

The way to understand strength of mind is, I think, not as any particular motive, but as a constellation of traits comprising certain calm passions: of benevolence, resentment, love of life (self-love), kindness to children, and of the moral and aesthetic sentiments. One in whom these qualities manifest themselves in action, overcoming the vivacious passions that push one to immediate and short-term gratification, exhibits strength of mind. Thus,

strength of mind is a general disposition we attribute to a person, rather than a single natural motive or narrow disposition; it is a disposition that depends on both the presence and the strength of other specific motives. It makes sense to see it this way, since such a conception of strength of mind allows for our imputing specific causes to the action, namely the particular calm passions that motivate, and it allows for attributing a general character assessment to an actor. The broad character assessment is not identified with those individual motivating passions, but is one that refers to an overall tendency in the person. The overall tendency of one's character is defined in terms of the causal strength of the individual motives.

This way of interpreting strength of mind is not inconsistent with Hume's undoubted maxim, as far as I can see. It isn't quite like the case of justice in Hume, in which the search for an original natural motive to the rule-following behavior demanded by justice either turns up nothing, or else appeals to a complex transformed self-interest (depending on one's reading). Jane McIntyre (2006) has argued that strength of mind is a "quasi-artificial" virtue, having features in common with both the natural and the artificial virtues associated with justice in Hume's theory. Strength of mind is like the natural virtues because it is useful to the self, perhaps also immediately pleasurable to self and useful to others. It's like the artificial, she says, in that it does not result in good in every single act, but rather, the praiseworthy ends of acts that exhibit strength of mind are only achieved through adherence to an overall plan, just as in acts of justice. I think, however, that strength of mind is clearly a natural virtue for Hume.

First, there are numerous natural motives we might find behind such behavior. That is, one is in possession of this virtue when any of a number of particular calm motives for distant and long-term goods are causally strong enough to overcome the violent urges for near and intense momentary goods. Second, while the behavior exhibited by strength of mind requires the postponement of gratification for a longer-term good (for instance, saving one's money for college instead of spending it on eating out at fine restaurants), that such behavior serves the longer term good is clear. In the case of justice, the agent might very well wonder whether or not following the rules when others are doing the same will make any difference to the effectiveness of the system overall. Thus, the original motive to live according to the rules of justice is harder to find than is the motive to save my money instead of spending it on fine dining. Strength of mind, I think, is no more an artificial virtue than are its cousins, prudence, industry, perseverance, and fortitude, all of which require restraint in fulfilling immediate desires.

Consequently, strength of mind, on my interpretation, is properly considered a natural virtue in Hume's theory. As I noted earlier, Hume writes that a person with strength of mind "adheres tenaciously to his general resolutions, and is neither seduced by the allurements of pleasure, nor terrified by the menaces of pain; but keeps still in view those distant pursuits, by which he, at once, ensures his happiness and his honour." The person with such

strength behaves in these ways by acting on a calm benevolence or a calm self-interest (love of life) or a calm moral sentiment (among other motives) whose force is greater than the causal force of violently-felt competing motives. I have not here discussed how one who lacks this virtue may acquire it.¹⁸ This is perhaps an even harder, although not unanswerable, question for Hume than many of the topics treated in this discussion.

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¹⁸ See Zimmerman 2007 and Immerwahr 1992 for discussions of how Hume thinks we might increase the strength of calm passions. McIntyre (2006) has a bit to say about this as well.

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