

Ethics // Spring 2026

Handout 4

Defending rationalist psychology: Kagan

BACKGROUND. Kagan situates the Humean theory of motivation within a sceptical argument of the following form: 248

- (1) (A) If moral realism is true, then moral values must be able to motivate people's actions.
- (B) But moral values can't motivate people's actions.
- (C) Therefore, moral realism is false.

The premiss (B) is defended with the following claim:

- (2) (A*) If moral values motivate us at all, they motivate us internally.
- (B*) But moral values can't motivate us internally (=moral internalism is false).
- (C*) Therefore, moral values can't motivate us (i.e., our actions).

The premiss (B*) is unpacked as a conjunction of two claims:

- (3) Moderate internalism: If there is a moral belief of the form ' S must ϕ ' (which is ultimately interpreted as a claim about moral values), then the agent S experiences some (not necessarily decisive) pull toward ϕ -ing. 253

Humean motivation: S is motivated to ϕ iff S has a ϕ -relevant belief B , and S desires to ϕ . 255

In other words, the sceptic first gives (with Kagan's help) the most plausible interpretation of internalism, and then launches a Humean assault on it. The sceptical position embodied in this conjunction is labelled 'non-cognitivism'.

THE HUMEAN THEORY OF MOTIVATION. The role of beliefs, according to the Humean theory of motivation, is in directing our desires. Namely, in being motivated to eat a cheesecake, say, I need to believe that the cheesecake is sweet, not poisonous etc. Had I known that the cheesecake was poisonous, certainly I wouldn't have been motivated to eat it. On their own, however, these beliefs don't motivate me to eat the cheesecake. You may know the same facts about the cheesecake as I do, yet you ignore it. Why? Because you simply don't want it! At the tip of your action, so to speak, there must be a blind desire to propel you in that particular direction.

KAGAN'S RESPONSE. The Humean theory of motivation is a general claim about all desires, all beliefs, and all actions. But why not a weaker claim? Some, or most, beliefs, are motivationally inert, yet some (few) are not so. 266

Example 1 (Bank statement). I have just shown you my bank statement showing that I have US\$1,000,000 in my account. You believe that it is genuine. Well, now you believe that I have US\$1,000,000 in my account. What explains this latter belief? Plainly, it is explained by your earlier beliefs about the bank statement and perhaps some other beliefs your (implicitly) drawn by means of an inference.

Based on Example 1 and similar examples, we conclude that beliefs have at least the power to *make* you believe certain things. But now, Kagan asks, why can't we naturally expand this further and also claim that beliefs can motivate to act, not just believe?

Example 2 (Dieting). You are told that eating a cheesecake makes you put on weight. On this basis you form the belief, 'eating a cheesecake will make me put on weight.' In turn, this belief makes you think, 'I should not eat the cheesecake.' Finally, because of this belief, you abstain from eating the cheesecake.

Following Example 2, we speculate that normative beliefs, or 'moral opinions', are exactly the kind of beliefs that may motivate us to act. To say otherwise would be merely dogmatic. 267

The Humean defence may follow two routes, thus splitting the Humean theory into two variations. The Humean minimalist might say normative beliefs must generate desires for us to act. Having a desire is a necessary condition of action. But Kagan argues that the moral realist/rationalist need not dispute that. He may argue that the causal machinery is such that you must have normative beliefs plus factual beliefs *first*, 'at the beginning'. Whether or not you then have the relevant desire to act, Kagan 266
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argues, is of no interest for the rationalist. The Humean maximalist (the ‘ more demanding version ’) insists, however, the desire should be prior to the normative belief for the agent to be motivated to act in that particular way. The desire must be among the ‘ initial ingredients ’.

Only Humean maximalism is a threat to moral realistic rationalism. But even that is not clear. For perhaps normative beliefs are partially conative: they pack desires in them. When you, that is, genuinely hold the belief, ‘ I mustn’t eat X ’, you have a desire to not eat X. Therefore, Humean maximalism must maintain the absolute division between beliefs and desires (and in particular, between normative beliefs and desires) for it to support non-cognitivism. 270

Kagan then asks whether the best argument for the belief/desire division required by the maximalist—namely, the direction of fit argument—is any good. We agree right at the start that both desires and beliefs represent the world. But beliefs represent how things are, desires represent how things should be. In the context of the present argument, this is the fundamental divide between beliefs and desires. Since there is such a divide, the Humean is on a solid ground in insisting that we can’t be motivated by desires, for two reasons: there *is* a distinction between desires and beliefs, and merely factual representations are inert. 271

The response Kagan offers is meant to build a desire-component into normative beliefs themselves. We now suppose that a normative belief such as, ‘ Helping is good ’ contains within it a desire to bring about helping—i.e., the desire to help. In general: 272

(4) When you believe a state of affairs is ‘ morally good ’, you represent the world as having the ‘ property of goodness ’:

As a belief: If you realize the state isn’t actually good, you replace the belief (Mind-to-World).

As a desire: Because the belief *contains* a representation of a possible state of affairs you value, you strive to alter the world to bring that state about (World-to-Mind).

This logic applies to wrongness as well. Thinking ‘ lying is wrong ’ is a belief about a moral property, but it also functions as a desire that leads you to ‘ refrain from changing the world ’ in ways that would involve lying.

THREE STRATEGIES FOR THE MORAL REALIST. Kagan concludes that the realist has three distinct paths to defeat the noncognitivist argument and prove that moral opinions are genuine beliefs:

(5) **Motive Externalism:** Reject the idea that moral opinions must motivate. If beliefs don’t move us on their own, there is no conflict.

Reject Humeanism: Argue that certain beliefs (normative ones) *can* motivate even without an initial, separate desire.

The Double Nature view: Accept that motivation requires desire, but argue that moral beliefs are desires.

These defenses are not just for realists. Thus *moral nihilists* can also use them to maintain that moral opinions are beliefs (even if they believe those beliefs are all false).

Ultimately, because the noncognitivist argument fails to prove that moral opinions *cannot* be beliefs, Kagan argues we should drop the cautious term ‘ moral opinions ’ and return to the familiar, common-sense practice of calling them ‘ genuine moral beliefs ’. If we have a justified belief in moral facts, we have no compelling reason to deny that our moral thoughts are exactly what they appear to be: descriptions of the moral dimension of the world. See the summary in Figure 1.

DISCUSSION. It seems to me that Kagan didn’t give the Humean a fair hearing. In the first place, framing the maximalist/minimalist distinction in terms of ‘ who was there first ’ is not helpful. Who knows which one was first! What does it even mean, ‘ first ’ or ‘ at the beginning ’? If I form the belief, ‘ I mustn’t eat X ’ and abstain, and then recover evidence from two years ago of my desire not to eat X, would that be a good Humean defence? Hardly. What the Humean insists on is a *causal veto power* of desires, not a mere temporal priority. Secondly, and more ambitiously, he ascribes to desires the *explanatory* power of every action or of most actions. Here, then, is a different way to distinguish between Humean maximalism and minimalism.

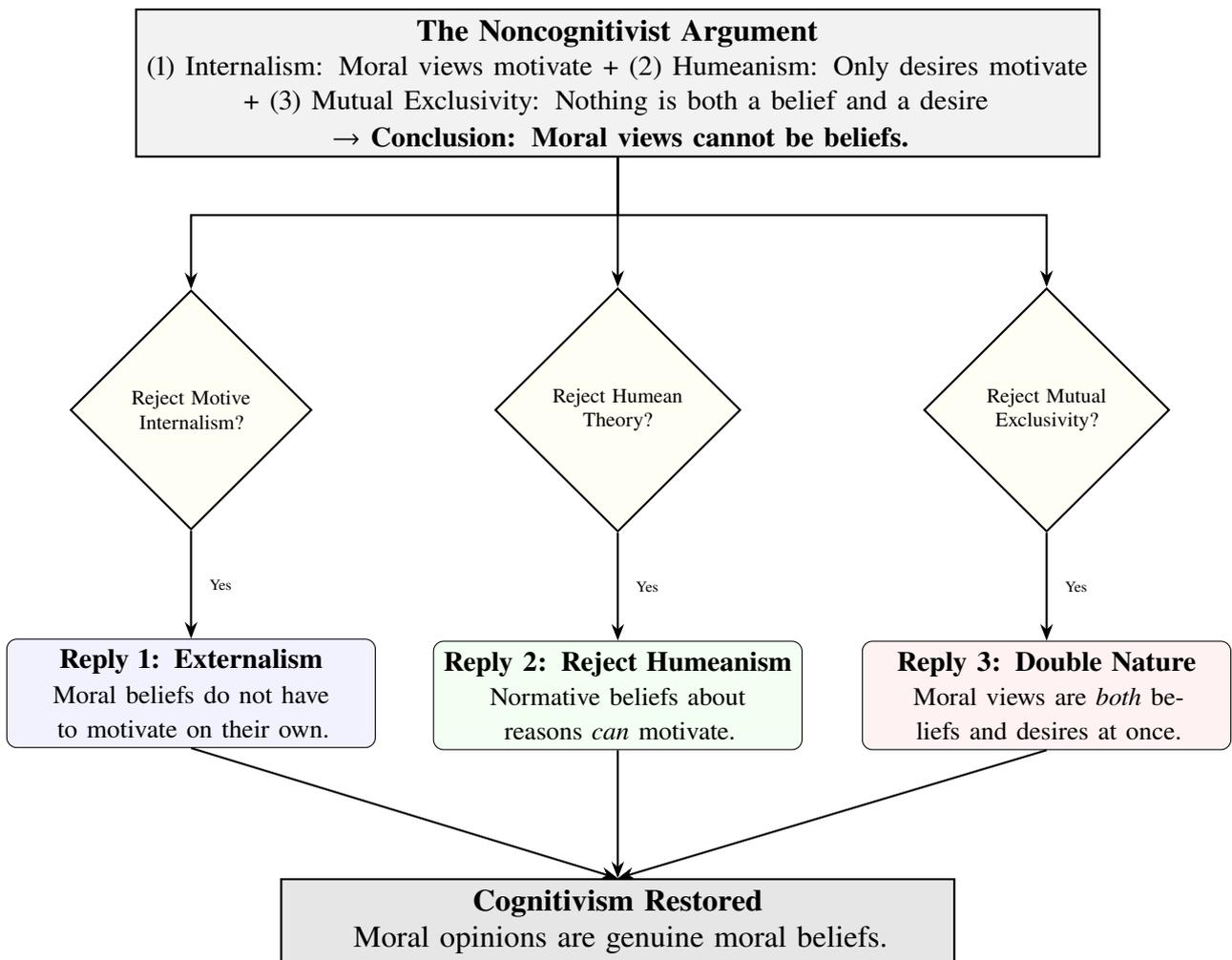


Figure 1: The realist's defence

The direction of fit business: if (and that's a big if) the direction of fit is defensible to begin with, what is the psychological reality of the belief-desire fusion offered by the realist?

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