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The Moral Self and the Indirect Passions

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Hume Studies Volume XXIII, Number 2, November 1997, pp. 195-212 The Moral Self and the Indirect Passions
SUSAN M. PURVIANCE David Hume¹ and Immanuel Kant are celebrated for their clear-headed rejection of dogmatic metaphysics, Hume for rejecting traditional metaphysical positions on cause and effect, substance, and personal identity, Kant for rejecting all judgments of experience regarding the ultimate ground of objects and their relations, not just judgments of cause and substantiality. Nevertheless, each argues that practical activity is not compromised by the rejection of metaphysical claims that others had taken to be crucial. Kant and Hume thought that political and moral life did not depend upon theoretical knowledge of the nature of the self, free will, or knowledge of the true motives of actions or the character of the agent. Because the grounds of morality and politics were too important to leave to the mercies of speculative metaphysics, each moved their foundations to higher ground, insulating the grounds of practical activity from the threat of metaphysical turmoil and skepticism. Contemporary philosophers have generally followed Hume and Kant in this regard, but often select very different strategies. Some think that the best way to avoid the problems associated with contemporary scientific ontologies is to separate

ethics from the factual domain entirely. Some give moral and political language a noncognitivist interpretation, and others have interpreted values as a projection of the passions and affections of the subject or as the constructions of suitably situated practical reasoners.² At the same time there has been a resurgence of interest in moral realism. Moral realists think that the objectivity of moral discourse, and hence the possibility of moral truth, depend upon the existence of moral facts.³ Moral realists have tended to concentrate on the role of facts in establishing the truth of general moral principles, or the tightness or moral value of particular individual actions. For moral realists, moral facts are the states of affairs that make general moral principles or particular moral judgments true. Whether these facts are of a naturalistic sort or not, whether they are literally on a par with natural facts, or whether they simply play the same role in practical knowledge that natural facts play in theoretical knowledge, is an open question. Moral realists often are naturalists, like David O. Brink and Jonathan Dancy, but they may be nonnaturalists, like G. E. Moore.⁴ Ethical naturalism accounts for moral motivation and the cultivation of good character in terms of moral qualities, and many hope to ground it in (or at least show that it is compatible with) the scientific understanding of objects and their relations and qualities. Naturalism is only one option, but realism has received support because it is not clear that antirealists have developed a convincing alternative to the grounding of concepts of moral agency and moral judgment in some sort of moral facts. Questions abound about what it means to ascribe responsibility to a moral self and how we can defend a notion of enduring character. Although moral realists have paid less attention to the ontological status of virtues and character traits than to moral principles, their status is equally important. Here the concern is with the sort of metaphysics of the self thought to be necessary to account for moral agency, responsibility, praise, and blame. I shall argue that there is a class of moral facts that justify or perhaps merely vindicate the ascription of moral powers to agents, and that these are the sorts of facts another sort of theorist is interested in, whereas the states of affairs that make moral judgments true are the sorts of facts that moral realists have been interested in. In order to distinguish this use of moral facts I shall call this sort of theory a Fact of Agency Theory, and it is a version of this theory that can be found in Hume's discussion of the problem of the self and the indirect passions. A realist metaphysics of morals needs to address two questions, the question of the reality of the...

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