

Hutcheson's Perspective on Passions

While the main focus of this paper is not Hume's relationship to the history of theoretical work on the passions, it will be useful to have, as a point of reference, a differently organized account of the passions. For Hume scholars, Hutcheson's *Essay on the Nature and the Conduct of the Passions* provides one particularly interesting example of a work that takes the analysis of desire to be central, and that treats standard topics such as the government of the passions.*

Hutcheson's aim was to show that not all of our actions proceed from self-love—that the desire for the good of others is a basic feature of human nature. He defined desire in a manner quite similar to Hume's later definition of the direct passions. "Desires arise in our Mind, from the Frame of our Nature, upon Apprehension of Good or Evil in Objects . . ." (*Essay*, 7).

Hutcheson developed an elaborate account of desire based on his theory that we have, in addition to the external senses, an internal sense, a public sense, a moral sense, and a sense of honor. Corresponding to each of these senses are distinctive pleasures and specific desires—desires of sensory and aesthetic pleasures, public happiness, virtue, and honor. The desire of these pleasures is either selfish or benevolent, depending on whether their object is pleasure for oneself or for another person. One form of desire, calm universal benevolence, is, on Hutcheson's theory, the motive most approved of by the moral sense, but the violent sensations that accompany many desires tend to "prevent all deliberate Reasoning about our Conduct" (*Essay*, 29). "We obtain Command over the particular Passions," Hutcheson wrote, "principally by strengthening the general Desires thro' frequent Reflection, and making them habitual, so as to obtain Strength superior to the particular Passions" (*Essay*, 30). Hutcheson's theory illustrates the contrast between Book II of the *Treatise* and earlier works, not only in its classification of the passions, but also in its thematic focus. The *Treatise* contains nothing like Hutcheson's dissection of desires. In one respect, Hume's attention to the indirect passions is not surprising: these were his invention. But Hume provides little guidance as to how the analysis of the indirect passions would either contribute to, or redefine, the ongoing philosophical debates that focused on the direct passions. Hume's comments on the relationship between the direct and the indirect passions are quite limited. Neither the "Abstract" nor "A Dissertation on the Passions" provides a clear picture of his account of the passions *as a whole*. The comparative brevity of Hume's treatment of the direct passions might suggest that, in this area, Hume thought that prevalent views of the direct passions were generally correct, needing only to be supplemented by the recognition of the indirect passions. I will argue that, on the contrary, Hume's theory forces a substantial reinterpretation of the nature of the direct passions.