Do Passions Seek to Justify Themselves by Misrepresenting their Objects? Hume’s reply to Malebranche and Hutcheson at T 2.3.3.5

Alison G. McIntyre
Wellesley College

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Map: http://www.ncsu.edu/campus_map/north.htm

All are welcome

Abstract: A short passage in Hume’s A Treatise of Human Nature (T 2.3.3.5) has confounded interpreters. On a common interpretation, Hume’s assertion that “A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification” amounts to the claim that a passion can have no “cognitive” content, and thus no intentional object, and should be treated as a mere feeling or sensation. This allegedly explains Hume’s anti-rationalist conclusion “[T]is impossible, therefore, that this passion can be oppos’d by, or be contradictory to truth and reason.” I offer a new interpretation of this passage that characterizes Hume as responding to the claim that passions tend to misrepresent their objects in a way that seems to justify them: anger, for example, tends to misrepresent the person it is directed at as motivated by malice. Nicolas Malebranche and Francis Hutcheson make such claims. I argue that they are Hume’s likely opponents throughout this section of the Treatise.

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