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David Hume's Theory of Action

ABSTRACT

The main goal of this paper is to reconstruct David Hume's theory of action from the perspective of the second book *Of the Passion* in his work *A Treatise of Human Nature*. My paper will proceed in three steps. In the first part I present the main assumptions of Hume's views on action together with a general outline of his theory. I show that for Hume action has a uniform character and that there is a constant relation between action and the motive which can be understood as desire or aversion. Next, in the second part, the main elements involved in the process of human activity will be outlined, such as: passions, will, liberty, and reason. Although Hume emphasizes that the passions are the main motive of action, since they have the power to initiate and withhold action, reason also plays an important role. In order to come to a better understanding, I will consider the functions which these elements are playing in human action and some of the problematic issues which are connected with them such as, whether each of the passions can motivate a person to action, what the relationship between passions and will is, and what kind of relation between passions and reason can be found. Finally, in the third and last part of my paper, I will conclude with a schematic outline of human action and the relation between different components engaged in the process of action.

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Keywords:

theory of action, motivation, passion, reason, will, liberty, necessity, human nature

1. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the primary goal which Hume set in his *Treatise* was to give a full image of human nature on the basis of experience because he believed that “the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences (...)” (*Treatise*, p. 4). Hume believed that the science of human nature can complement the natural sciences. Like Newton, who presented the fundamental laws by which physical reality can be explained, Hume wanted to discover the principles in the moral sciences and successfully apply them in order to improve people’s lives.

Providing a complete theory of action, however, doesn’t seem to be his main motivation and it was therefore not presented explicitly in his *Treatise*. Nonetheless, some elements of his theory and discussions about human action can be found in the second book *Of the Passion*. More concretely, we can find here information about the main motives determining the will. In contrast to other commentators which focus mainly on the third book *Of Morals*, and consider human action from the perspective of morality, I will present a reading independent from his theory of morality. Therefore the second book will be the main focus of my paper.

The question about the main motives of human action is still relevant today. Contemporary views on motivation which are inspired by Hume’s thought are referred to as the Humean theory of motivation.² The subject of analysis of this theory is the nature of mental states. The states which constitute motivations are intrinsic desires and means-end beliefs. Desires of an agent are objects which are perceived as some good and beliefs are indicating available means or ways which lead to the achievement of the desired good (Smith, 2010, p. 153).

Despite the name it is unclear whether the Humean theory of motivation is consistent with Hume’s views. For example, Millgram (1995) claims that the term “Humean” became a synonym of instrumentalism according to which the function of reason is only to satisfy the desires by pointing to means, and in his opinion such a view is incompatible with Hume’s thought in the *Treatise*. Another point

² There are proponents and opponents of the Humean theory of motivation. Among the proponents are B. Williams and M. Smith, and among the opponents there were some commentators as T. Nagel, J.M. McDowell, and M. Platts.

of discussion is whether Hume was a motivational internalist or not. According to internalist positions, there is a strong relationship between the reasons of action and motivation. The claim that Hume is a motivational internalist is not taken for granted and there is much disagreement among commentators. Brown (1988) in her article *Is Hume an Internalist?* claims that Hume is a non-cognitivist and motivational externalist. Hampton (1995) also argues for motivational externalism in her article *Does Hume Have an Instrumental Conception of Practical Reason?* (see Żuradzki, 2012, pp. 9–12, 161–181).

Although I consider the distinction between desires and beliefs to be consistent with Hume's thoughts and useful for its interpretation, I will try to present the foundations of Hume's theory of action on the basis of the *Treatise* without trying to resolve contemporary disputes related to the Humean theory of motivation. In this paper I will provide a historical reconstruction of Hume's view on action based on the second book. In the next section I will start by outlining his main assumptions. In the third section I will describe the main elements of human action. Finally, in the fourth section, I will provide a schematic outline of human action and the role which the different components play in the process of action.

2. ASSUMPTIONS OF HUME'S THEORY OF ACTION

The first assumption of Hume's theory is the idea of the constant character of human nature. Based on this assumption is built a second one about the uniform character of human action, which is necessarily determined by motives. For Hume the relationship between action and motives is similar to the casual relation between events in the physical world. The first two assumptions are stated in the following quotes:

There is a general course of nature in human actions, as well as in the operations of the sun and the climate. There are also characters peculiar to different nations and particular persons, as well as common to mankind. The knowledge of these characters is founded on the observation of an uniformity in the actions, that flow from them; and this uniformity forms the very essence of necessity (*Treatise*, p. 259).

We must now show that, as the union betwixt motives and actions has the same constancy, as that in any natural operations so its influence on the understanding is also the same, in determining us to infer the existence of one from that of another (*Treatise*, p. 260).

Moreover, Hume claims that a community is based on principles which are natural, uniform, and necessary. People need to live in a society and produce hierarchies and divisions.

The different stations of life influence the whole fabric, external and internal; and these different stations arise necessarily, because uniformly, from the necessary and uniform principles of human nature. Men cannot live without society, and cannot be associated without government. Government makes a distinction of property, and establishes the different ranks of men. This produces industry, traffic, manufactures, law-suits, war, leagues, alliances, voyages, travels, cities, fleets, ports, and all those other actions and objects, which cause such a diversity, and at the same time maintain such an uniformity in human life (*Treatise*, p. 259).

According to Hume, the uniformity of the main powers of the human mind and the principles of action are a fundamental part of the science of human nature. Furthermore, since permanent and universal connections exist between motives and actions, the regularities which are present in human action also have a universal dimension, which according to Hume is not only independent of historical time and place, but also of age, gender, nation, social class or profession. This uniformity, moreover, allows one to discover the constant principles and common motives through which it is possible to determine and explain the nature of acts and even predict human conduct. Hume gives examples of people which are trying to predict the behavior of others and suggests that from certain actions some reactions can be expected.

A prince, who imposes a tax upon his subjects, expects their compliance. A general, who conducts an army, makes account of a certain degree of courage. A merchant looks for fidelity and skill in his factor or super-cargo. A man, who gives orders for his dinner, doubts not of the obedience of his servants. In short, as nothing more nearly interests us than our own actions and those of others, the greatest part of our reasonings is employ'd in judgments concerning them. Now I assert, that whoever reasons after this manner, does ipso facto believe the actions of the will to arise from necessity, and that he knows not what he means, when he denies it (*Treatise*, 260).

Different feelings are responsible for certain patterns of behavior. For example, jealousy is a motive which produces a certain pattern of behavior which is

completely different than malice. From the observation of the different patterns of behavior it is possible to identify the motives which an agent can have (Jenkins and others, 1992, pp. 92–93).

On the other hand, Hume was aware that human behavior is not always predictable, and it is impossible to fully know all the factors which influence behavior. Actions often contain a lot of unknown motives and causes, or contradicted aims, and this is why it is difficult to identify a typical pattern in them in similar way as physicists discover regularities in the natural world. Despite the complex and complicated character of actions it is nonetheless possible to identify tendencies or schemas of behavior, even though they are not so precise and certain as in the case of the natural science.

Human conduct is irregular and uncertain. (...) To this I reply, that in judging of the actions of men we must proceed upon the same maxims, as when we reason concerning external objects. When any phenomena are constantly and invariably conjoin'd together, they acquire such a connexion in the imagination, that it passes from one to the other, without any doubt or hesitation. But below this there are many inferior degrees of evidence and probability, nor does one single contrariety of experiment entirely destroy all our reasoning. (*Treatise*, p. 259).

In addition to the above two assumptions, we can also find a third assumption with respect to his views on motivation. Hume tried to answer the question what is the main motive of action by looking for the elements which are taking part in action as well as the necessary conditions which must be fulfilled to be able to talk about action. He claims that “(...) our actions have a constant union with our motives, tempers, and circumstances” (*Treatise*, p. 258). The most important role for Hume's theory is played by the motive which is passion. The motive is the explanatory principle of human action. The role of character (e.g. temper) or certain circumstances were not analyzed by Hume in detail, and thus seem to be of only secondary importance.

A motive is a passion which is either desire or aversion, which directs us toward the object recognized as good (which can be a source of pleasure) and moves away from the object perceived as bad (which can be a source of pain).

'Tis obvious, that when we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity, and are carry'd to avoid or embrace what will give us this uneasiness or satisfaction (*Treatise*, p. 266).

3. THE MAIN COMPONENTS OF THE THEORY OF ACTION

Hume identifies three main powers of the human mind: passion, will and reason, which are the elements of his theory of action. Before we can understand how these elements are related to each other and lead to action, some information about each of them separately will be provided.

3.1. PASSION

Passion is recognized as reflective impressions which proceed from the original ones.

Original impressions or impressions of sensation are such as without any antecedent perception arise in the soul, from the constitution of the body, from the animal spirits, or from the application of objects to the external organs. Secondary, or reflective impressions are such as proceed from some of these original ones, either immediately or by the interposition of its idea. Of the first kind are all the impressions of the senses, and all bodily pains and pleasures: Of the second are the passions, and other emotions resembling them (*Treatise*, 181).

Hume uses the term passion in a very wide sense for feelings, emotions, sentiments, and desires. According to N.K. Smith, the term encompasses “all the various instincts, impulses, propensities, affections, emotions and sentiments of the animal and human mind” (1966, p. 162).

In the second book of *Treatise* we can find three main divisions of passion (*Treatise*, pp. 181–182).

1. Due to the source of passion: original and secondary
2. Due to the relation to pain and pleasure: direct passion (arises immediately from pain or pleasure): desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair, and security and indirect passion (caused also by pain and pleasure and by the conjunction of other qualities): pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice, and generosity.
3. Due to the degree of vivacity and impat: calm passion (“the sense of beauty and deformity in action, composition, and external objects” in: *Treatise*, p. 181) and violent passion (love and hatred, grief and joy, pride and humility).³

³ The most known are classifications of the Hume’s passions proposed by N.K. Smith (1966),

Although all the motives are passion, not all passion can be motives of action (Radcliffe, 1999, p. 102). Especially direct passions are able to initiate action because they have an aim and are necessary connected with desires. The different direct passions depend on degree of certainty with which an agent can achieve good and avoid evil.

When good is certain or probable, it produces joy. When evil is in the same situation there arises grief or sorrow.

When either good or evil is uncertain, it gives rise to fear or hope, according to the degrees of uncertainty on the one side or the other.

Desire arises from good considered simply, and aversion is derived from evil.

The will exerts itself, when either the good or the absence of the evil may be attained by any action of the mind or body (*Treatise*, p. 281).

Indirect passions, on the other hand, have a cause and object but they don't have an aim so they are not necessarily connected with desires. Hume gives the example of "pride and humility [which] are pure emotions in the soul, unattended with any desire, and not immediately exciting us to action" (*Treatise*, p. 237). Another example is love and hate, although in case of these passions there is still a desire for happiness for loved people and misfortune for enemy but it is not necessary connected with them.

According as we are possess'd with love or hatred, the correspondent desire of the happiness or misery of the person, who is the object of these passions, arises in the mind (...). This order of things, (...) is not necessary. Love and hatred might have been unattended with any such desires, or their particular connexion might have been entirely revers'd (*Treatise*, p. 237–238).

3.1. WILL

The second main element of Hume's theory of action is will, which he defines as:

the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind (*Treatise*, p. 257).

P. Árdal (1966) or N. Capaldi (1975).

Will is just a reflective impression and as a result of it, an agent can experience sensations such as movement or perception. This definition contrasts will and voluntary action with constraint when an agent is forced by external forces to execute an action which is incompatible with one's volition. Moreover will is mentioned on the list of direct passion (*Treatise*, p. 280) because the impressions of will or volition are appearing directly after the impressions of pleasure and pain and are their results. Direct passions accompany the will by pointing towards the direction of action which achieves pleasures and avoids pain. Although the feeling of agency is not given in immediate experience, it can be inferred by connecting motives with actions.

For the question of human action it is also important to consider an important attribute of the will, namely liberty. For Hume, the only kind of liberty which can be in a consistent manner attributed to will is a liberty of spontaneity when the reasons for decisions and actions are our own desires and beliefs. Hume claims that liberty of indifference which has no determining causes of action is an illusion and he claims that in this case human choices are only accidental. The actions of an agent which are unrelated to his beliefs and desires will then be taken completely arbitrary. People seem to confuse the ordinary ignorance of the causes which determine their decisions with the lack of such reasons.

According to my definitions, necessity makes an essential part of causation; and consequently liberty, by removing necessity, removes also causes, and is the very same thing with chance. As chance is commonly thought to imply a contradiction, and is at least directly contrary to experience, there are always the same arguments against liberty or free-will (*Treatise*, pp. 261–262).

What kind of conditions are there for voluntary action? As we can see Hume's positions is in line with modern compatibilism according to which the opposition of liberty can be only constraint and necessity is an essential condition to talk about free action. In pursuing one's own desires an agent can realize his liberty (see e.g. C. Schmidt, 2003, pp. 197–210).

3.2. REASON

The final element we will consider is reason. The relationship between passions and reason is problematic not only on a theoretical level but also in practical life. What does it really mean that "reason should only be a slave of the passion"? And what are the consequences of this statement for human life? To answer these

questions we shall investigate more closely what the role of passions and reason is in action, and we will do this by commenting on the following passage:

Thus it appears, that the principle, which opposes our passion, cannot be the same with reason, and is only call'd so in an improper sense. We speak not strictly and philosophically when we talk of the combat of passion and of reason. Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them. As this opinion may appear somewhat extraordinary, it may not be improper to confirm it by some other considerations (*Treatise*, p. 266).

Hume claims that passions and reason have different functions in action.⁴ Since they cannot compete with each other or be in conflict, reason cannot defeat or overcome the passions. Beliefs, as a product of reason, have a representative function and they are true when there is a consistency between their content and the represented object. Passions, on the other hand, lack of the ability to represent the state of things and cannot be true or false.

Hume distinguishes between two types of reasoning. Demonstrative reasoning explores the relationships between ideas that are independent from reality and have the status of certain knowledge. In the domain of human action the facts we are primarily dealing with rely on probable reasoning based on causal inferences about the external world. Such reasoning, however, cannot be responsible for the stimulation or failure to act or to make moral distinctions. Hume states this in the following passage:

Since reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition, I infer, that the same faculty is as incapable of preventing volition, or of disputing the preference with any passion or emotion. (...) 'Tis impossible reason cou'd have the latter effect of preventing volition, but by giving an impulse in a contrary direction to our passion; and that impulse, had it operated alone, wou'd have been able to produce volition (*Treatise*, p. 266).

On the other hand, one can ask the question what reason is capable to do (in a positive sense). Reason seems to have an indirect impact on action by providing

⁴ E.g. Shaw (1992) analyzes the role of reason and passion, and the relationship between them, in Hume's theory of action.

information about the existence of the object of our desire and its properties and also by indicating the ways and means which are necessary to achieve this object. Hume claims that:

(...) reason, in a strict and philosophical sense, can have an influence on our conduct only after two ways: Either when it excites a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it; or when it discovers the connexion of causes and effects, so as to afford us means of exerting any passion (*Treatise*, p. 295).

It becomes clear that for Hume reason alone can never initiate or determine action, and does only have an indirect impact. He argues that people are often mistaken if they claim that reason itself is playing the central role. According to him, they have not thought carefully enough and mistakenly confuse the functions assigned to reason with calm passions. The reason for this mistake is that they are very similar, as he says the following passage:

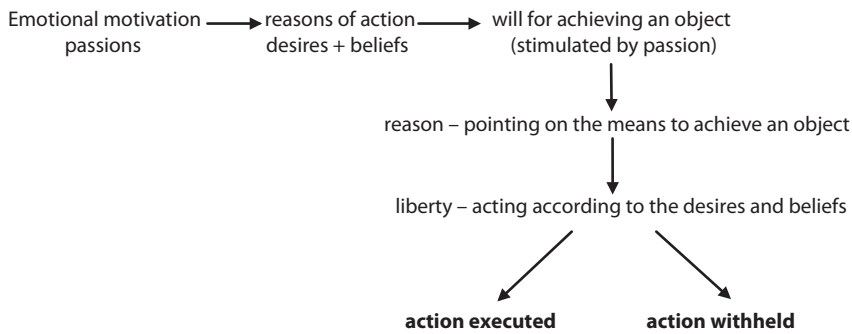
Now `tis certain, there are certain calm desires and tendencies, which, tho' they be real passions, produce little emotion in the mind, and are more known by their effects than by the immediate feeling or sensation. These desires are of two kinds; either certain instincts originally implanted in our natures, such as benevolence and resentment, the love of life, and kindness to children; or the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil, consider'd merely as such. When any of these passions are calm, and cause no disorder in the soul, they are very readily taken for the determinations of reason, and are suppos'd to proceed from the same faculty, with that, which judges of truth and falshood. Their nature and principles have been suppos'd the same, because their sensations are not evidently different (*Treatise*, p. 268).

Hume seems to change the common meaning of reason and shows that the functions attributed to reason are in fact the functions of calm passions. People are under the assumption that reason is able to determine action and direct their everyday activities, when in fact, according to Hume, the calm passions are responsible for this. He says that although it is commonly known that the reason is the opposite of violent passions, the real opposition should be between violent and calm passions. Conflicts between them arise when these passions are directed to different objects of desire or aversion or to different qualities of these objects. It seems that the violent passions have a stronger influence on the will because of

the possibility of immediately realizing the goal, while the calm passions pertain to the more distant good (*Treatise*, p. 269).

4. THE STRUCTURE OF HUMAN ACTION

Having outlined the characteristics of individual elements of human action I shall now show their mutual relations on the basis of the following schema which describes the process of human action.



An important feature of Hume's thought is that the main impetus for action comes from passions. The initiation and withholding of action depends on them. This kind of motivation can be described as emotional.

In the next stage, an important role is played by the reasons of action, which (a) consist of desire (as the emotional component) connected with the object of passions, and (b) beliefs (as the rational component) which provide information about the chosen goal. Already at this initial stage of action reason plays an important role in informing the agent about the existence and properties about object of desire.

Then the will can be stimulated to proceed to action, which is aimed at achieving the object perceived as a certain good. The will is subordinate to the feelings and the mind affects it only indirectly. But how are the will and feelings related? Hume indicates two stages of causal connections. First, we experience different feelings, which provide an impetus or motivation to act. Next the act of will arises which yields the beginning of the movement of a body or the new perception of the mind (Stalley, 1986, pp. 43–44). Though passions can compete with each other for the influence on the will – something which we experience in the case of conflicting motives – ultimately one dominant passion shall affect the will, which entails the movement of the body.

After the involvement of the will an important role is given to reason, which enables to achieve a goal. Firstly, the role of reason can consist in providing information about objects and their properties, as well as providing an indication of the beneficial or adverse effects of the consequences which are entailed by a particular decision. Secondly, reason can provide knowledge about the means for the actions or the ways to achieve the goal. Nonetheless the passions are still responsible for the guiding action, namely by choosing a certain goal. Thirdly, reason may to some extent correct the passions by paying attention to different reasons, aspects, and consequences of the choice or by providing an indication of self-interest in action, but it cannot oppose the passions on which it depends.

In the last stage the acts of the will can be realized or not realized. These two alternatives express an agent's liberty which is based on the possibility to act according to its own desires.

5. CONCLUSION

Hume claims that human nature is social, emotional, and that each man is created to act. A special role in his thought is played by passion which determines the dynamic of mental states. An expression of this dynamic is the constant tendency to strive towards new goals, make choices and to act in accordance with one's desires. Hume considers "the mind to be insufficient, of itself, to its own entertainment, and that it naturally seeks after foreign objects, which may produce a lively sensation, and agitate the spirits" (*Treatise*, p. 228).

For the proper course of action both components such as passion and reason are playing an important role. The relationship between passions and reason seems to have a complementary character based on mutually support and fulfilment.

Hume presents the necessary conditions for realizing the goals of action which can be both rational and free. Although each stage of action depends on passions and may at any time be stopped or withheld, beliefs have also an important impact on them by providing information which can indirectly correct the desires by pointing to the object of aspiration and what kind of measures are necessary for achieving it. Despite its supporting role, reason plays an essential place in the process of human action.

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