

## HUME ON THE REASONABLENESS OF HUMAN ACTIONS

The purpose of this paper is to examine Hume's notion of reason with reference to human actions. There are, in Hume, three notions of 'reason'. They may be mentioned as follows : the Discovery view of reason; the Regularity view of reason; and the Rule view of reason. The first and the second views presuppose the epistemological theses that actions are simple impressions. The third view anticipates an influential contemporary opinion.

My contention would be that the three views of reason make three alternative descriptions of human actions, and that they are mutually non-exclusive alternatives. In Hume's final view, if any, on the reasonableness of human actions, the second and the third views play the most important role. I shall give two arguments for showing that the first view is a half-truth, and its epistemological basis cannot be maintained as an adequate story about human actions. Hence the relevance of the two other views.

On page 176 of the *Treatise* we are told that human actions performed with a view to attaining desired ends "are guided by reason and design". Such actions are neither inadvertent nor results of mere habitual adaptation of means to ends. How does such a view square with Hume's remark that actions (*qua* events) are neither reasonable nor unreasonable ? If goal-directed human actions are guided by *reason* and design, how can they be independent of considerations of reasonableness or unreasonableness ? Hume has taken a too narrow view of reason, and consequently of reasonableness and unreasonableness. He keeps the question of reasonableness or unreasonableness of human actions hooked on to the notion of reason as the discovery of truth or falsehood, or to true or false judgments.

Hume takes up this issue in Book III of the *Treatise* in connexion with his critique of such views that hold that moral distinctions are derived from reason. He argues that for any thing to become an object of reason is to be susceptible of agreement and disagreement. If a certain thing is referentially opaque, that is, it does not refer to any other thing, then no

question of agreement or disagreement arises. Actions, together with passions, he tells us, are such entities that are "complete in themselves", and no action can be said to be an object of reason, or, for that matter, reasonable or unreasonable, since it does not imply a reference to any other actions. Whether such a thoroughly non-intentional view of actions is viable is open to question, just as his view about the non-intentionality of passions. As regards the latter, Hume has gradually veered towards a dispositional and intentional account. As to actions of course we have a different picture. But it can, I suppose, be pertinently asked if one gives up the notion of reason as the discovery of truth or falsehood, would one also have to maintain that actions are neither reasonable nor unreasonable? I do not think it would be the case. What is more interesting is that there is another notion of reason in Hume according to which actions can be said to be reasonable or unreasonable.

This is the notion of reason as causal explanation, and our goal-oriented behaviour may be said to be guided by it. One can speak of an action as reasonable if it be causally explicable in terms of reasons, i. e., the motives and intentions of the agent. An unreasonable action would be one that is uncharacteristic of the agent, given his motives and intentions. Hume does not explain what he really means by "reason" in the context above. But if it be possible to take the term to stand for desires, intentions, beliefs, situations and character of the agent, then reasons would be assimilated to what may be called mental causes. Should this reading be permissible, then to say that our actions are "guided by reason" and also to say that actions are neither reasonable nor unreasonable would be to leave one certainly uneasy. There is no denying the fact that given Hume's notion of reason as the discovery of truth or falsehood, he is consistent in saying that actions are neither reasonable nor unreasonable.

The Indian philosophers of the *Nyāya* school had anticipated the Humean sort of argument when they said that actions are never properly speaking objects (*Viśaya*) of knowledge, or reason, of one so likes. To say that one can have a knowledge of actions is only a borrowed decoration—*yācitmaṇḍana*, a

figurative way of speaking. Yet it is interesting to notice that *yukta*, the Sanskrit word for 'reasonable', according to the *Nyāya* philosophers, means related. An action, they say, if it is reasonable, is related to such causal factors or mental causes as the agent's desires, beliefs, characters and dispositions (*samskāras*) including and in part formed by his past actions. Reasonableness of an action is its causal explicability. To say that an action is reasonable would mean that it is possible to adduce reasons for the agent's having done it, or to state the mental causes which would explain the action. Mental causes like motives, dispositions, passions, etc., move men to action, and cause people to have the aims they do have. It is in conjunction with some desire or aim that a passion can determine action. We do sometimes attribute human actions to desire for this and that, and sometimes characterise actions as due to this or that passion. Often ordinary language does not make any systematic difference between reasons and causes. And in many cases the distinction between being determined by reasons and being determined by causes may be impossible to draw. On this view there can be a sense in which actions may be called reasonable if some explanatory account is available for them.

To come back to Hume. It may fairly be objected that it is one thing to say that actions are guided by reason, while it is quite another thing to say that actions are produced or prevented by reason, taking the term 'reason' in the sense of the discovery of truth or falsehood. *Guiding* and *determining* are nonidentical tasks. It may be one of the employments of reason to *guide* actions, it does never *determine* them. In other words, reason has, according to Hume, a directive, though not a determining influence on actions through our will. Let us call it the action-guiding view of reason. If one takes the action-guiding view of reason an interesting point would emerge. To say that reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood is to imply that the action-guiding business of reason can only be asserting indicative sentences. Such sentences state or say that something is, or is not, the case. Now telling some one that something is, or is not, the case is not primarily intended to guide actions. There is another class of sentences, i.e. imperatives, which are primarily action-guiding. This is an influential contemporary

view. The philosophers of the *Mīmāṃsā* school in India also held a similar position. If an indicative sentence has action-guiding force, they said, it should rather be construed then as a disguised imperative. It turns out then that action-guiding need not be any task of reason *vis-à-vis* determination of the will. Hume, we have seen, assimilates reasons to mental causes, and if that be the case, it seems sensible to ask whether one can have a notion of reason, which would perform both the tasks of guiding and determining actions. This should be unexceptionable on Hume's terms. His view of mental causes of actions is such that they not only guide or direct our action, determine them as well; and thereby render actions reasonable or unreasonable in the sense of their explicability in causal terms.

Hume's thesis that actions do not imply any reference to other actions is grounded in his epistemological view that actions are simple impressions. It may be a conceptual point to say that entitative simplicity of actions implies their non-intentionality. I do not wish to consider this point in the present context. Rather, I should like to point out that actions, despite their simplicity, can hardly be taken to constitute a homogeneous collection. The concept of action extends over diverse human phenomena, from man's communicative enterprises such as speech-acts to a variety of his committed behaviour called moral, political and even economic actions. Again, such actions can become significant only in a non-solipsistic world. This means that the epistemological status of actions as simple impressions does not matter much in respect of their relevance in a social world, where we find ourselves either as agents or spectators.

A thesis about the simple impressional character of human actions is taken to deny continuity among actions, and for that matter any logical relationship between them. But should this be necessarily admitted? Let us consider the following case. Speech-acts are an important sub-class of human actions. Suppose a speaker makes a speech-act saying that he did not make another speech-act. Let us designate the two speech-acts as  $S_2$  and  $S_1$  respectively. Now our speaker makes  $S_2$  or says that he did not say  $S_1$ . If he is lying, we have two real speech-acts such that they cannot be true together. If he is not lying, we have one real

speech-act, and the other is intentional. In both the cases  $S_2$  implies a reference  $S_1$ . We may consider another situation, which would illustrate the fact that the word 'consistent' is used for principles as well as human actions. Some one may say to another person, 'What you say now is not consistent with what you said last week', or 'you are saying something different now'. What comes into question is not only the consistency of the propositions asserted, but also of the two speech-acts made by the addressee. The use of the word 'consistent' in this case is not necessarily a metaphorical one. It is no less interesting that abstracted from social situations in which human actions are performed, any question concerning their intentionality tends to lose its significance. If any action refers or leads to another, this may itself be a matter pertinent to the situation or context in which it is performed.

Again, the social world, which is the domain of our actions, is a continuous world. And in such a world as this there may be no reason to suppose that actions are disparate. Some form of necessity binds them together. The action of forming a political party and the action of framing its constitution are related by what we may sometimes like to call 'historical necessity'. Political and economic decisions often *entail* (in whichever sense of the term) actions that do imply a reference to one another. Such actions, had they been referentially opaque, would have remained inexplicable to political and economic spectators. Furthermore, according to Hume, 'necessity' lies in a determination of the mind of a spectator, if that be the way we have got to look at human actions, causal relationship between actions would also allow actions to imply a reference, rather lead to other actions. There are regularities in human actions, and these occur in a governed manner. Should it be unexceptionable to allow that there are no radical discontinuities among actions, it could then be thought that these implied a reference to one another. This may not be a knock-down argument against Hume's view of actions, it is at least worth considering. If it be possible to hold that causal relationship operates on the level of motives and actions, it need not be absurd to say that such a relationship would be ubiquitous on the level of actions.

Human actions are identified by the world they bring about. An action is said to transform a given world into another. Let an action  $a_0$  transform the  $p$ -world into the  $q$ -world. Similarly, another action  $a_1$  brings about the  $r$ -world. To use von Wright's notations,  $a_0$  is causally efficient for  $pTq$ , and  $a_1$  for  $qTr$ . Now if the worlds  $pTq$  and  $qTr$  are not discontinuous, then actions  $a_0$  and  $a_1$ , identifiable as these are in terms of a common social world, should not be referentially opaque. Hume himself admits that actions leave something behind in the actor, i.e., his intentions, and actions arise from him, and in this way actions stand related to one another. Often we do take into account the agent's past actions in order to arrive at an estimate of his present actions. Ascription or responsibility, on Hume's terms, requires us to look for something "durable" in the agent; similarly, evaluation of actions in relation to the agent's conduct or character may not be made if his actions were isolated phenomena. Actions are inalienably related with actors on the one hand, and the social world on the other. To say that actions are simple impressions implying no reference to one another is to rob actions of their concrete social character. Any attempt to settle the questions concerning reasonableness or unreasonableness of human actions solely on epistemological grounds, not only denies the possibility of a social science, but leaves the issue in a state of practical disquiet.

There are philosophers who have argued that human social behaviour is to be understood as rule-following behaviour. Human actions in social situations are meaningful actions. Meanings are attached to their actions by human agents, and as for the spectators, what matters is whether such actions are rule-following behaviour. The rules that govern human social behaviour are public, this implies that criteria are available for assessing human actions. It also said that the relationship between rule-following and making behaviour intelligible to oneself or to others is conceptual, since it is a connexion of meaning. To borrow an example from H. L. A. Hart's *The Concept of Law*, the connexion between the lights turning red and the car stopping is conceptual, for in terms of the rules governing our behaviour on the road a red light means stop. This connexion of meaning is not causally explicable as to that between



clouds and rains for instance. The intelligibility of our social life depends on the meaningfulness of our social actions, and if such of our actions are not referentially opaque, rather imply a reference to one another, it is because the relationship that holds between these is one of meaning.

Actions, according to the view sketched above, can be called reasonable or unreasonable only with reference to the rules governing human behaviour in social situations. What we are to consider is what is expected of a human agent in a social situation, given the rules. On that view, there would moreover be no asymmetry between the agent's and the spectator's way of looking at actions, since, given the publicity of the rules and the fact that human actions are rule-following social behaviour, the only terms on which we can understand ourselves are those on which other people can also understand us. The criterion of significance of actions is the logic of the social order.

All these point to an interesting matter. Hume also is aware of the importance of rules in society. On page 210 of the *Enquiry* we notice that he speaks about traffic rules. In another passage on page 239 we are told that rules of conduct are "the result of our calm passions (for what else can pronounce any object eligible or the contrary?)" It would not be to have Hume's remark mistaken if it were said that in the passage cited he was endorsing some connexion between actions and the rules governing the actions. The calm passions are operationally reason-like and become settled principles of action. Reasonableness or unreasonableness of actions may then be a matter to be decided in reference to, what Hume calls, "our calm and general principles". When such principles determine our actions, these should be called "eligible" or reasonable and unreasonable, if contrary to the determination. The rules that guide human actions in social situations, or social rules, may also be considered as principles of calm passions. Such rules are inter-subjective or general; and Hume tells us on page 531 of the *Treatise* that general rules are formed by extending "our motives beyond those very circumstances, which gave rise to them." In a passage on page 583, it has been remarked that "a general calm determination of the passions...[is] founded on some distant view or

reflection." In this capacity the calm passions are reason-like, or so-called *reason*. There is another consideration which adds force to the intersubjective or a general nature of social rules. Advantage of language depends upon allowing us to communicate with our fellow men, and for this purpose, a general rule of usage must be observed by people speaking the language. Similarly, there is in society a tacit agreement to abide by intersubjective standards if its members are to perform meaningful actions. It is a matter of convenience, or in Hume's terminology social rules are *artificial*, i.e., contentional.

To consider one of his own examples: "Waggoners, coachmen, and postilions have principles, by which they give the way". This means that, for Hume traffic rules are *artificial*. Now giving way by the traffic rules is a rule-guided action. Would Hume be prepared to say that there holds a *conceptual* relationship between the traffic rules and giving way according to them? A difficult question indeed to answer. Let us take another case. Borrowing money and paying back one's debt are actions guided by artificial rules, and each one of them implies a reference to the other. In that case, there might be no fair reason to suppose that these are conceptually unrelated. The unclarity about the logical status of *artificial* rules would have the issue left undecided. Even then, it appears that Hume would go a long way with those philosophers who argue for the intersubjective nature of social rules, and for rule-guidedness of human actions. He would even agree with them in holding that language is essentially social, though I am not sure, if he would also say that human actions in social situations are essentially linguistic. He would rather say that learning a language is learning to share rules with others in community, just as learning to behave meaningfully is to learn to behave according to public rules. On that score, he should concede that there are normative constraints of actions, and in this sense, actions can be reasonable or unreasonable, just as linguistic usage can be correct or incorrect. But in both the cases, for Hume, the primary consideration for having rules is the advantage or utility in view. Of course, in another way, it might be suggested that given the social nature of man meaningfulness of human actions is *defined* in terms of the rules of social situations. We are



inhabitants of a non-solipsistic world, our passions, which motivate us to act in social situations, are "social passions". Even pride, which Hume tells us in a "pure" emotion, is a "social passion" in Book III of the *Treatise*, and it is rightly so. Since if our passions be social passions, they would presuppose social standards of worthiness, and only be experienced in a non-solipsistic world. (Hume's explicit statement in this regard occurs on page 491 of the *Treatise*: "*Vanity* is rather to be esteem'd a social passion". We might in this context overlook the subtle difference between pride as self-esteem and vanity as the desire of reputation. What is more important is the fact that both pride and vanity have the same qualities, circumstances and causes.) It seems arguable that given "human conventions" or "human society" (the phrases are Hume's) human actions in social situations would be rule-guided, and if that be the case as Hume also agrees, such actions would acquire meaningfulness or be intelligible to others by their being connected with one another in terms of the social rules. Hence the question of reasonableness and unreasonableness would not remain irrelevant to the issue of human actions. Hume's own story in Book III shows that his social philosophy does not appear at all places to agree with his philosophy of the passions.

He treats the words 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' as cognates of 'truth' and 'falsity'. One might feel that he wishes the words to be differentiated from such words with commendatory force as 'laudable' or 'blameable'. But can we say of an action that it is laudable *and* unreasonable? Something sounds unhappy about the conjunction. If 'reasonable' be primarily a descriptive epithet, by virtue of its being a cognate of 'truth', even then we cannot perhaps say that to commend an action as laudable is unrelated to its being reasonable or unreasonable. There is a sense in which to say that an action is reasonable is also to engage in commending it. Even if Hume consents to allow the use of the words 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' he might yet maintain that these words behave in logical independence from such words as 'laudable' and 'blameable'. This would be consistent with his notion of reason as the discovery of truth or falsehood.

We have so far tried to bring forward the suggestions of two views implicit in Hume. According to one, we can use the words 'reasonable' etc., in the context of human actions only if these are causally explicable. This may be called the regularity view. The other states that reasonableness or unreasonableness of human actions is a matter to be decided only in the context of social rules. Meaningfulness of human actions in social situations is implied by their rule-guidedness. Let us call this the rule-guidedness view. Now what could be the relationship between rules and regularities in terms of Hume's philosophical position? The two views are not so incompatible as it might be supposed. An avowal of either of them need not entail a rejection of the other. Often, display of regularities in human actions is used as evidence for the existence of rules. The regular aspect leads us to look for a meaning of actions. To Hume, in social situations and for actions, regularity implies rules. On page 475 of the *Treatise* he tells us that "the actions themselves are artificial." This should mean that human actions in social situations become explicable in terms of the concepts available to the agents and spectators. Such concepts are the mirror images of the social rules which shape their lives in their society. The artificial rules define the human society. And hence among human actions there holds a connexion of meaning. A tacit admission of this may be read into the following passage on page 490: "*the actions of each of us have a reference to those of the other, and are perform'd upon the supposition, that some thing is to be perform'd on the other part. Two men, who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement or convention, tho they have never given promises to each other*" (italics not in the text). This characterization of human actions hardly suggests that the data of regularity are either unnecessary or illusory. Regularity is necessary, though not always sufficient for the explanation of human actions.

Postscript. It may be admitted that on the supposition that actions are simple impressions they may be described as serial. Seriality need not be incompatible with "galley effect". But the point is that seriality of human actions is not enough. Nor are serial human actions non-habitual. Habitual actions are reasonable. This is in accordance with Hume's intentions. Aristotle's

notion of virtue is an example of reasonable habitual action. Though not all habits can be spoken of as 'artificial' in Hume's sense, habitual behaviour may be congruent as in the case of pulling the oars of a boat. When such actions are instances of rule-following behaviour they are called reasonable.

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