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## ACTION IN A NARROW AND IN A BROAD SENSE\*

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The title of this essay suggests perhaps a too technical and analytical approach to a topic which, because of its relevance, should not be confined to the realm of the specialist. It is a fact, however, that a great deal of twentieth century philosophy, and not a few developments of social theory, can be understood as a continued reflection on action from different methodological perspectives and not merely from an analytical one. In fact, while analytical philosophy has shown an interest on action only in the second stage of its development, Marxism, Existentialism, Pragmatism, and Phenomenology had focused on action from their formative stages onwards.

It is not my purpose to summarize here the specific contribution of these perspectives to contemporary philosophy of action. Others have done this job before and better than I could in this limited space.<sup>1</sup> As Bernstein noted in his classical work *Praxis and action*, what distinguishes all these approaches (all which he views in confrontation with Hegel) from the analytical approach is that, unlike those approaches, committed to the practicality of action until suicide, analytical philosophy's interest in action has mostly been focused on the clarification of what sort of thing an action is, whether it can be analyzed in terms of causal relations, what is the nature of intentionality, and so on.

By examining the nature of action in this way, analytical philosophy not only has come to problematize the naturalist image of the human being, but has also come to deal with deep problems of the philosophical tradition, such as the body-soul problem, compatibility between determinism and freedom of the will, etc.<sup>2</sup> While the former problem is

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<sup>1</sup> See Bernstein, Richard J., *Praxis and action*, Duckworth, London, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> See Ginet, C., *On Action*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

derived from an indiscriminate expansion of the kind of causal-mechanic explanation of natural sciences to the human realm; the latter has reached important points of confluence with phenomenology, another one of the methodological approaches which has proven more fruitful for the study of action in the past century.

As it is apparent, I cannot touch on all these points presently. With a view to those controversies, however, I have limited myself to a very modest task: to identify the two senses of action that are suggested in the title. Despite limiting the topic in this way, I could not help suggesting deeper problems, whose study in depth should be left for another time.

### 1. Two senses of action

“Suppose you unexpectedly throw a ball to me and I spontaneously reach up and catch it—writes Bratman—. On the one hand, it may seem that I catch it intentionally; after all, my behavior is under my control and is not mere reflex behavior, as when I blink at the oncoming ball. On the other hand, it may seem that, given how automatic and unreflective my action is, I may well not have any present-directed intention that I am executing in catching the ball”.<sup>3</sup>

The dilemma that Bratman puts forward in this passage is connected with the debate about the nature of intentional action, which started with the publication of *Intention* by Elizabeth Anscombe in 1957.<sup>4</sup> According to Anscombe “intentional actions” constitute a class of actions “known without observation”, a category that would include also a certain class of involuntary acts.<sup>5</sup> In order to speak of “intentional action” in a certain

<sup>3</sup> Bratman, M., *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*, Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> In that work, Anscombe distinguished three meanings of “intention”—intentional action, acting with an intention, and having the intention to act—which belongs already to the background of analytical philosophy of action.

<sup>5</sup> Specifically, those whose cause we know without observation, and which need to be clearly distinguished from other involuntary acts, whose cause we know merely from observation—in this context Anscombe introduces the notion of ‘mental cause’. As she explains, mental causes refer so much to actions as to sensations or thoughts; in these cases, however, it is crucial distinguishing, among actions, between mental causes and

instance it would suffice that the question “why did you do that?” applies.

Very often, the answer to that question points at a future intention. Then we say that we “act with an intention”; for instance, we pump water with the intention of supplying the house—an end which, as an effect, follows from the action of pumping water. However, the motive that moves an agent to do a certain action needs not being a motive of future—we do something in order to get something else—, since there are also retrospective motives—such as revenge—, or more general motives—certain impulses or habits of character—. The case that Bratman puts forward seems to enter into this latter category. At any rate, “the term ‘intentional’ has reference to a *form* of description of events”:<sup>6</sup> precisely a description that allows a question about the meaning of the action.<sup>7</sup>

Harry Frankfurt, however, has suggested reserving the term “intentional action” to a particular class of actions, namely, those which the agent performs in a deliberate way, constituting them in a proper object of action—that is: actions performed “intentionally”. Besides this, there would be another class of actions, those lacking deliberation, which he suggests designating merely as “actions”, and describes as “intentional movements”.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, the case that Bratman puts forward would enter into this latter category, but not in that which Frankfurt calls intentional action.

motives, and, among sentiments or thoughts, between mental causes and objects of sentiment or thought. See Anscombe, G. E. M., *Intention*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1976, 2<sup>nd</sup> p. 15, n. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 84, n. 47.

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, it is very relevant to know whether the agent is informed about the relevant facts—for instance, whether the water is poisoned.

<sup>8</sup> “Let us employ the term ‘intentional’ for referring to instances of purposive movement in which the guidance is provided by the agent. We may say, then, that action is intentional movement. The notion of intentional movement must not be confused with that of intentional action. The term ‘intentional action’ may be used, or rather misused, simply to convey that an action is necessarily a movement whose course is under an agent’s guidance. When it is used in this way, the term is pleonastic. In a more appropriate usage, it refers to actions which are undertaken more or less deliberately or self-consciously—that is, to actions which the agent intends to perform. In this sense, actions are not necessarily intentional”. Frankfurt, H., “The problem of action”, in *The importance of what we care about. Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 73.

Yet, to what extent can we really speak of action in absence of deliberation? The study of spontaneous actions, as opposed to deliberate actions, constitutes a privileged place to answer this question and to clarify the very nature of action by showing in which sense spontaneous actions can be called intentional in Anscombe's sense: as actions about which the question "why did you do that?" makes sense at all.

In what follows, I have examined this contrast with the help of four classical authors who still represent the inspiration of much of the contemporary philosophy of action: namely, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume, and Kant. More than stressing the obvious differences among them, my interest is to identify the way in which each of them would conceptualize the contrast between deliberate action and spontaneous action. In order to do so, I will first analyze the distinction between spontaneous and deliberate action as it can be found in Aristotle, and then proceed to find out whether a similar distinction is present, and how, in the other authors I mentioned.

Yet, let us first recall Bratman's own comment on the example he previously advanced:

"First, many such spontaneous actions might best be characterized as actions that, although they are under the agent's voluntary control and are purposive, still are not intentional (even though they are not unintentional). Second, it may be in some cases that in catching the ball I am executing some long-standing personal policy—for example, a policy of protecting myself from flying objects".<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, many of the actions that we perform in a spontaneous way do respond to a plan we previously designed. Certainly, that plan of itself would not explain the spontaneity of our reaction, if that decision would have not become, in the meantime, a sort of second nature, that is, a habit. Yet there are other times in which that sort of spontaneous actions seems to derive merely from appetite. In these cases, we could reasonably ask whether we could still speak of action. Authors such as Ans-

<sup>9</sup> Bratman, M., *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*, p. 126.

combe<sup>10</sup>, Frankfurt<sup>11</sup>, Taylor<sup>12</sup>, or Korsgaard<sup>13</sup> would answer to that question in the affirmative, in so far they do not have inconvenience in

<sup>10</sup> "We certainly ascribe intention to animals. The reason is precisely that we describe what they do in a manner perfectly characteristic of the use of intention concepts: we describe what further they are doing in doing something (the latter description being more immediate, nearer to the merely physical): the cat is stalking a bird in crouching and slinking along with its eye fixed on the bird and its whiskers twitching. The enlarged description of what the cat is doing is not all that characterises it as an intention (for enlarged descriptions are possible of any event that has describable effects), but to this is added the cat's perception of the bird, and what it does if it catches it. The two features, knowledge and enlarged description, are quite characteristic of description of intention in acting. Just as we naturally say 'The cat thinks there is a mouse coming', so we also naturally ask: Why is the cat crouching and slinking like that? and give the answer: it's stalking that bird; see, its eye is fixed on it. We do this, though the cat can utter no thoughts, and cannot give expression to any knowledge of its own action, or to any intentions either". Anscombe, *Intention*, pp. 86-7.

<sup>11</sup> "The significance to our actions of status and events which depend upon the exercise of our higher capacities should not lead us, however, to exaggerate the peculiarity of what human beings do. We are far from being unique either in the purposiveness of our behaviour or in its intentionality. There is a tendency among philosophers to discuss the nature of action as though agency presupposes characteristics which cannot plausibly be attributed to members of species other than our own. But in fact the contrast between actions and mere happenings can readily be discerned elsewhere than in the lives of people. There are numerous agents besides ourselves who may be active as well as passive with respect to the movements of their bodies. Consider the difference between what goes on when a spider moves its legs in making its way along the ground, and what goes on when its legs move in similar patterns and with similar effect because they are manipulated by a boy who has managed to tie strings to them. In the first case the movements are not simply purposive, as the spider's digestive processes doubtless are. They are also attributable to the spider, which makes them. In the second case the same movements occur but they are not made by the spider, to whom they merely happen... This generic contrast cannot be explicated in terms of any of the distinctive higher faculties which characteristically come into play when a person acts... This does not mean that it must be illegitimate for an analysis of human agency to invoke concepts of more limited scope. While the general conditions of agency are unclear, it may well be that the satisfaction of these conditions by human beings depends upon the occurrence of events or states which do not occur in the histories of other creatures. But we must be careful that the ways in which we construe agency and define its nature do not conceal a parochial bias, which causes us to neglect the extent to which the concept of human action is no more than a special case of another concept whose range is much wider". Frankfurt, H., "The problem of action", pp. 78-9.

<sup>12</sup> "It makes sense to speak of 'action' and 'desire' in the case of at least some animals and try to put to the test the thesis that these differ from inanimate nature in the radical way outlined... There is also the fact that, as we approach the lower ends of the phylogenetic scale, such concepts of 'action', and even more, 'desire', in any sense stronger than

expanding the notion of action to animals, which act through appetite. Although in what follows we cannot enter into this question, it is convenient to note that those are two different issues.<sup>14</sup>

## II. Aristotle. Deliberate election versus spontaneous actions

According to Aristotle, starting an operation in a deliberate desire is a prerogative of the human being *qua* rational being, the only one about which it can be properly said that acts. Neither children –that have not reached the use of reason– nor animals –which lack the faculty of reason– are able to choose. About them we can say that they act, but not that they choose. Yet, that being said, it makes sense to ask whether spontaneous, but not deliberate, actions can be actions properly so called.

At this stage, I propose to call actions in a narrow sense those actions which represent the materialization of a deliberate desire –*prohairesis*–. By

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that which is involved in any non-constrained action, seems less and less appropriate. Thus, while we can speak of dogs as ‘wanting’, this becomes difficult with crocodiles, and totally impossible with beetles. The concept ‘action’ seems still to have some use at greater depths than ‘desire’ in this stronger sense, but it, too, becomes progressively emptied of content as we approach the bottom. Now, this fact certainly poses a problem for those who would hold that animate and inanimate are different, but it does not constitute an objection. For the decisive evidence for this thesis will have to be whether or not the type of explanation which in fact holds of certain ranges of animals, particularly man and the higher animals, is the type we have called explanation by purpose. If this is in fact the case, then the problem will remain of accounting for the growth of this type of being in evolution through a number of stages, an evolution which has left behind a phylogenetic trail in which there are no sharp breaks”. Taylor, Ch., *The explanation of behaviour*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1964, pp. 70-71.

<sup>13</sup> Korsgaard, C. M., “Acting for a reason”, in *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 227, footnote 25.

<sup>14</sup> One thing, indeed is classifying spontaneous movements performed from appetite, under actions, and quiet another assuming that animals act when they move from appetite. Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant were of the view that between the action of animals and that of human beings, including those cases in which human beings act from appetite, or those when animals seem to deliberate, there is an essential difference. Thus, Aristotle, who has no inconvenience in attributing voluntary movements to animals, thinks that action is exclusive of human beings. On the contrary, Hume seems more inclined to assimilate the behaviour of both.

contrast, spontaneous actions, or actions performed without deliberation, would be “actions in a broad sense”. In regard to the latter, it is important to note that the lack of deliberation can occur for two very different reasons: either the action flows from passion, or it flows from the agent’s own character or habit. In the first case, the spontaneous action shows lack of control. But this does not apply in the second case insofar as this is an elective habit resulting from preceding deliberation, and, as such, is determining of character.

Aristotle advances an example of this class of spontaneous actions when he reflects on the nature of bravery:

“Someone who is unafraid and unperturbed in a sudden alarm seems braver than (someone who is unafraid only) in dangers that are obvious in advance; for what he does is more the result of his state of character, since it is less the outcome of preparation. If an action is foreseen, we might decide to do it (not only because of our state of character), but also by reason and rational calculation; but when we have no warning, our decision to act expresses our state of character”.<sup>15</sup>

A feature of these virtuous actions is, indeed, their spontaneity; but in this case it is a reasonable spontaneity, at least from a retrospective point of view. We view the action and say “this is what should be done, and it was the proper way to do it”. It is true, however, that sometimes spontaneous actions derive simply from appetite, lacking proper rational modulation. That human beings sometimes act in this way is clear from the behaviour of the incontinent, who, according to Aristotle, “acts on appetite, not on decision, but the continent person does the reverse and acts on decision, not on appetite”.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, the fact that the incontinent acts from appetite does not justify assimilating his behaviour merely to that of animals and children. For, as Aristotle notes, unlike animals, in which the voluntary can be identified with desire –either appetite or impulse–, in human

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<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 8, 1117a21-22.

<sup>16</sup> *NI*, III, 2, 1111b13-14

beings that have reached certain age “that, in fact, to which action is also ascribed”<sup>17</sup> we find both principles, reason and desire:

“For reason is among the natural starting-points, since it will be present if growth is allowed to proceed, and is not stunted; desire, too, because it is there straightaway and present from birth. And it is more or less by these two marks that we distinguish what (belongs) naturally: everything that is there straightaway as soon as something comes to be, and all that occurs to us if growth is allowed to proceed normally”.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that in this passage Aristotle employs the expression “by nature” in two different senses: nature as genesis and nature as *telos*. Appetite belongs to us by nature, if we take nature as genesis. Use of reason belongs to us by nature if we take nature as *telos*. At any rate, the presence of appetite and reason in human being explains the conflicts that characterize the continent and the incontinent. About each of them, indeed, we can say in a certain sense that they act voluntarily and against their will, depending on whether we focus either on their reason or else on their appetite. However, if we consider the soul in its totality, and not merely its parts, we must say that each of them act voluntarily and – Aristotle observes – “neither acts under compulsion, though an element in them does, given that by nature we possess both parts”.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, Aristotle understands that in an adult who has developed in a normal way we are authorized to suppose the use of reason, to which we owe the *capacity* or ability to take distance of appetite, of denying it, of controlling his own acts. This *faculty* or ability is supposed to be present

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, II, 8, 1224a28.

<sup>18</sup> *EE*, II, 8, 1224b30.

<sup>19</sup> *EE*, II, 8, 1224b25. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.II.q.10, a.3: “Since there is in man a twofold nature, intellectual and sensitive; sometimes man is such and such uniformly in respect of his whole soul: either because the sensitive part is wholly subject to this reason, as in the virtuous; or because reason is entirely engrossed by passion, as in a madman. But sometimes, although reason is clouded by passion, yet something of this reason remains free. And in respect of this, man can either repel the passion entirely, or at least hold himself in check so as not to be led away by the passion. For when thus disposed, since man is variously disposed according to the various parts of the soul, a thing appears to him otherwise according to his reason, than it does according to a passion”. *STh.* I-II, q. 10, a. 3, ad 2.

in adults even in the case that they do not exercise it – as it happens, with the incontinent. Now, the fact that he can – and must – control his own acts, although he does not do it, is all we need to consider him as principle of his own acts, and say, then, that he *acts*. But it is precisely this sort of control that we miss in animals.

Indeed, as we noted above, Aristotle himself, who does not doubt to attribute the voluntary and involuntary to animals, says explicitly in *Eudemian Ethics* that the “human being is a starting point of some actions, and he alone of animals; for of nothing else should we say that it acted”.<sup>20</sup> In order to appreciate the meaning of his words we should consider what he says next: “A human being is the starting-point of a certain kind of change; for an action is a change”.<sup>21</sup> Now, it is obvious that change can be attributed to other animals too. Hence, the particularity that Aristotle shows about human being, as he asserts that he is the only animal that acts would not be properly understood if by action we understand simply and merely change or movement: it is understood only if we concede the strongest meaning to the word “principle”. In other words: human being is not merely a means through which runs the motive force of adequately stimulated appetites; but rather, because of his being rational, he is – can be – genuine principle of certain movements; movements characterized by constituting a special order of elements which, from a natural point of view, are contingently related to each other.

And that principle is *prohairesis*, election or decision. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle regards the *prohairesis* as the principle which allows us to determine rational powers to one of the extremes to which they are opened by nature, assuming that, unlike natural powers, rational ones do not determine themselves to their own act simply because of the concurrence of a set of circumstances.<sup>22</sup> In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he specifies the nature of *prohairesis*, election or decision, as he defines it in terms of “understanding combined desire”, or else “desire combined with

<sup>20</sup> *EE*, II, 6, 1222b18.

<sup>21</sup> “But man is a first principle of a certain motion, for action is motion.” *EE*, II, 6, 1222b30.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IX, 5.

thought”, to add shortly afterwards: “and what originates movement in this way is a human being”.

This is so to the point that Aristotle places in this sort of principle, more even than in action itself, the criterion to evaluate a character.<sup>23</sup> And this precisely because it is in elections where the agent makes his own, or –as Harry Frankfurt would put it– where the agent “identifies himself”<sup>24</sup> specially with a certain principle of action, that is, with a certain end: so much that he does not stop until he finds the means to fulfil it.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> “Now that we have defined what is voluntary and what involuntary, the next task is to discuss decision; for decision seems to be most proper to virtue, and to distinguish characters from one another better than actions do. Decision, then, is apparently voluntary, but not the same as what is voluntary, which extends more widely. For children and the other animals share in what is voluntary, but not in decision; and the actions we do on the spur of the moment are said to be voluntary, but not to express decision. Those who say decision is appetite or emotion or wish or some sort of belief would seem to be wrong. For decision is not shared with non-rational (animals), but appetite and emotion are shared with them. Further, the incontinent person acts on appetite, not on decision, but the continent person does the reverse and acts on decision, not on appetite”. *NE*, III, 2, 1111b5-15.

<sup>24</sup> “A person is active with respect to his own desires when he identifies himself with them, and he is active with respect to what he does when what he does is the outcome of his identification of himself with the desire that moves him in doing it. Without such identification the person is a passive bystander to his desires and to what he does, regardless of whether the causes of his desires and of what he does are the work of another agent or of impersonal external forces or of processes internal to his own body. As for a person’s second-order volitions themselves, it is impossible for him to be a passive bystander to them. They constitute his activity –i.e., his being active rather than passive– and the question of whether or not he identifies himself with them cannot arise. It makes no sense to ask whether someone identifies himself with his identification of himself, unless this is intended simply as asking whether his identification is wholehearted or complete”. Frankfurt, H., “Three concepts of free action”, in *The importance of what we care about*, p. 54.

<sup>25</sup> With that he does not intend to rob importance to works. Thus, he writes: “We all offer praise and blame looking more at the choice than the actual deeds (though, even so, the actual exercise of the virtue is more worth having than the virtue itself), because men do bad acts when forced to do so, but no one chooses under those conditions. Another thing is that it is because it is not easy to discern what sort of choice it is that we are forced to judge from the deeds what sort of person someone is. So the activity is more worth having, but the choice is commended more”. *EE*, II, 11, 1228a12-18.

“Now –says Aristotle– nobody deliberates about his End –this everybody has fixed; but men deliberate about the means leading to their End– does this contribute to it, or does this? or when a means has been decided on, how will that be procured? And this deliberation as to means we all pursue *until we have carried the starting-point in the process of producing the end back to ourselves*”.<sup>26</sup>

Acting is starting a process, for which deliberation is a prerequisite; deliberation can be described as analyzing the end that is to be done in realizable elements, that is, in elements that are within our scope. Deliberation ends as soon as we have found the way to start the action, that is, once we have determined how to synthesize the elements so that they realize or produce the desired end. “Of thought, then, it is the end that is the starting-point, but of action it is the terminus of thought”.<sup>27</sup> At that point, the decision, choice, or election takes place. Choice is defined by Aristotle as a *deliberate desire* of things in our power<sup>28</sup>, something which he identifies simply with human being as such. In other words: action is something that properly can be ascribed only to the human being, understood as a specific kind of principle: “a human being would seem to originate action; deliberation is about the actions he can do; and actions are for the sake of other things”.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, not every desire is valid as a principle of action, but only the deliberate desire. Aristotle explains:

“By a ‘deliberative’ inclination, I mean one whose starting-point and cause is deliberation, and our inclination results from deliberation. So choice is not present in other animals, nor at every time of life, nor in a human being no matter what state he is in; for deliberation is not, either, nor an opinion about the why; an opinion about whether something should be done or not may well be present in many people, though not through reasoning. For that part of the soul is deliberative which is cap-

<sup>26</sup> *EE*, II, 10, 1226b10-15.

<sup>27</sup> *EE*, II, 11, 1127b34.

<sup>28</sup> *EE*, II, 10, 1226b17; *NE*, III, 3, 1113a10.

<sup>29</sup> *NE*, III, 3, 1112b30.

able of discerning a cause: the reason for the sake of which –which is one of the causes –‘cause’ being something because-of-which”.<sup>30</sup>

### III. Thomas Aquinas. Action as materialization of a perfect will

When Aquinas gives a definition to action, he seems to focus specifically in what we have called action *in a narrow or strict sense*. In his view, actions are properly human if and only if they proceed from deliberate willing. The rest that are attributed to the human being “may be called ‘acts of a man’, but not ‘human acts’, since they are not his precisely as a human being”<sup>31</sup>, that is, as a rational and free being. Now, this does not mean that what we have called “action in a broad sense” falls under the “acts of man”, since, unlike acts of man, actions in a broad sense do fall under the power of man as rational being.

Specifically, spontaneous actions that have their principle in appetite are included in the reference to a faculty of choice that could and should be exercised and yet is not exercised.<sup>32</sup> “We call something voluntary both because it falls within an act of the will, and because it falls within the power of the will”.<sup>33</sup> Now, this power can be diminished in the moment of action, because of a custom deeply engraved. Indeed, while Thomas insists in the possibility of acting against custom, he also acknowledges the power of custom in sudden situations:

<sup>30</sup> *EE*, II, 10, 1226b19-27.

<sup>31</sup> *STh*, I, q.1, a.1, sol.

<sup>32</sup> This is especially pertinent to expand the structure of action to omissions. For instance, that in the midst of a storm that threatens shipwreck, the pilot does not take the control of the ship can be considered an omission if and only if the agent could and should have acted. Besides, just like actions, also omissions can or cannot follow a deliberate principle, and, to that extent, reproduce the distinction between actions in wide sense and actions in narrow sense. Indeed, there are omissions which follow previous deliberation, and others which follow simply from the fact that, in the moment that the agent was supposed to act, he was doing something else. The latter are not intentional omissions, although they are indirectly voluntary ones. See *STh*, I-II, q. 6, a. 3: whether there may be voluntary without act.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 2. The text continues: “For in the alter case, we call even nonwilling itself voluntary, since it is within the power of the will to will or not to will, and likewise to do and not to do, something”. See Aristotle, *NE*, III, 1, 1110 a17-18.

“Habits do not cause necessity absolutely, although they especially do so in sudden situations. For however much persons are habituated, they can still by deliberation act contrary to habit”.<sup>34</sup>

At this point, it is necessary to make a distinction between habit *qua* custom, or routine, and habit *qua* mark of character –either virtue or vice. For while the latter also imports a reference to a certain facticity incorporated in our behaviour, it is something more than that. Following Averroes, Thomas Aquinas says that a characteristic feature of habit is that the agent uses it whenever he wills, something that is particularly true of virtue: it is no chance that virtue is easier to loose than vice.<sup>35</sup>

Just like Aristotle, Thomas thinks that a definite sign of actions deriving from an elective habit can be found in the pleasure concomitant to actions. According to Aquinas, when someone does something that is unjust, this may happen because “the act fails to answer to a corresponding habit. For it may spring from a gust of passion, namely of anger or lust”; but other times it derives “from choice”, a sign of which is that, in this case, “the doing a wrong is itself pleasing”, because “it proceeds from a matching habit, for that is welcome for itself which agrees with a chosen and settled inclination.”<sup>36</sup>

In this way, Thomas acknowledges the difference between spontaneous actions deriving from passion and those deriving from habit. In a different place, he goes deeper in the structural diversity of both ways of acting, observing that powers which are not merely active and do not determine themselves to act through a natural form, do determine themselves to act through an acquired form, which either remains in them as owned by those very powers –it is the case of habits– or it is imposed upon them as an alien principle –as it is in the case of passion.<sup>37</sup> Accord-

<sup>34</sup> *De Malo*, q. 6, a. un., ad 24.

<sup>35</sup> In this double dimension of habit we find one of the most characteristic human tensions. Depending on which aspect is underlined, we will have a more institutional or else a more existential morality.

<sup>36</sup> *STh*, II-II, q. 59, a.2.

<sup>37</sup> Sensible powers, indeed, do not act of themselves; they act only if they are moved by other things: “these capacities do indeed need something extra to complete them for their activities. However, this is not in them like some form that is immanent in its possessor, but rather only in the manner of a passive experience, like an image on the retina.



ingly, a characteristic feature of spontaneous actions deriving from habit is that they are owned by the agent in a qualitatively higher level than those that are merely the product of passion.<sup>38</sup>

Although there is a clear continuity with the Aristotelian analysis of action, Thomas introduces different emphasis and new elements. He concedes more relevance to *intention*,<sup>39</sup> pays more attention to the scope of *imperium*, and dwells more in voluntary acts such as *consent* and active *use* of the will. In particular, the explicit consideration of intention as an act of the will, which should be distinguished from *simplex volitio* or *electio*, provides Aquinas' analysis of human action with a particular emphasis on the projective dimension of human action.

Now, in spite of stressing the projective dimension of action, Thomas does not question in any way the fact that action, as such, constitutes the materialization of decision or choice. This is why he has no inconvenience in saying that action "starts with the first step towards the final aim", and so, with decision, or choice.<sup>40</sup> However, the explicit considera-

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That is why the 'virtues' of these sorts of capacities are not dispositions, but rather the capacities themselves, insofar as they are actively acted upon by their corresponding powers. The sort of capacity that both acts and is acted upon is moved by the powers that activate it in such a way that it is not determined by them to do one thing. It has the possibility of acting or not: for example, our powers that are in some way rational. These capacities are fulfilled for activity through the help of something extra; that, however, is in them in the manner not of passive experience, but of a form that rests and remains in its possessor; this happens, however, in such a way that the capacity is not forced necessarily by it to do one thing (for then the capacity would not be in control of its own actions). The virtues of this type of capacity are not the capacities themselves. Nor are they the passive experiences, as in our powers of sense. Neither are they qualities that act in a necessary way, such as the passive qualities of natural things. Rather, they are dispositions, such as that someone is able to act with them when he wishes to, as Averroes says. Augustine says that a disposition is the thing by which one acts, when it is time to do so". Thomas Aquinas, *De virtutibus in commune*, a. 1, sol. See also Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 20, a. 2.

<sup>38</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *In Sent* III, d. 23, q. 1, a. 1, co.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Rhonheimer, M., *Praktische Vernunft und die Vernünftigkeit der Praxis*, Berlin, 1994.

<sup>40</sup> "...This holds true also of final causality, and for the double pattern of intention and of execution; for each we must set up something that comes first. In the order of intention it is that which originally moves desire; take this away, and desire would be moved by nothing. In the order of execution it lies in that whence the activity starts; take this away, and no one would begin to do anything. The plan starts with the final aim; the performance with the first step towards it. So then on neither side is the process infinite.

tion of intention does lead him to stress the fact that the very election takes place *because of an end*, which provides a peculiar form to the action which is the object of election and decides about the agent's character. Thomas repeats an example taken from Aristotle: "he who steals in order to commit adultery is directly more adulterer than thief".<sup>41</sup>

At any rate, the action does not "start" until the agent involves himself in the world, and begins to materialize his election. Since this could require certain conditions which do not depend on the agent himself,<sup>42</sup> we could then say that the form of the action is present, but the matter is missing, and, insofar it is missing, there is no action. However, assuming my decision, say, of buying a car, and the coincidence of the circumstances which make possible the materialization of this decision, the action—in this case the purchase—, will *necessarily* take place. According to Thomas this necessity is the mark of a perfect will: "*non est perfecta voluntas, nisi sit talis quae, opportunitate data, operetur*".<sup>43</sup> In other words, a perfect will is that which, given the opportunity, is materialized in action.

Accordingly, it could be asserted that what we have called "action in strict sense" constitutes for Thomas the materialization or expression of a perfect will. By contrast, "action in broad sense" would be that which materializes or expresses an imperfect—*not deliberate*— will. Just as in Aristotle, spontaneous actions would fall under the latter category, with analogous qualifications: it is not the same to act spontaneously from appetite or passion than led by character.

At any rate, seeing action as a materialization of the will means that action is not a simple means to realize an end external to it. Thomas speaks in this context of exterior act of the will. It is another way of saying that, in action, the will exteriorizes itself. Commenting on a text of

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Were there no ultimate end, nothing would be desired, no activity would be finished, no desire would come to rest. Were there no first step to the end, no one would start doing anything or make up his mind, but instead would deliberate interminably". *STh*. I-II, q. 1, a. 4, sol.

<sup>41</sup> See *STh*. I-II, q. 18, a. 6, sol. See *STh*. I-II, q. 18, a. 7, sol. See *De Malo*, q. 2, a. 6, ad 1.

<sup>42</sup> For instance: when after certain deliberation I decide to buy a car and, yet, I delay the execution of my plan until more convenient circumstances do come up, then I have taken a decision, whose realization is retarded merely by a series of factors which do not depend on me, but without which action cannot take place.

<sup>43</sup> *STh*. I-II, q. 20, a. 4.

Aristotle, Aquinas speaks in this regard of a particular *factio* which, nevertheless, remains within the agent, and, to this extent, participates in the immanency of perfect acts.<sup>44</sup>

Regarded as an operation which, like art, involves certain transitivity and yet, as every other vital operation, is an immanent operation, action designates a *sui generis* reality, only to be comprehended insofar as we take into account the characteristic intentionality of voluntary acts. Indeed, unlike cognitive acts, which are intentional simply because of its object, the intentionality of voluntary acts is not merely a property of their objects but also of acts themselves, and in the last account, a property of the subject. For, in willing, it is the agent who impels himself towards that which he wills; unlike knowledge, which reaches merely an intentional identification with its object, the will intends a real identification with its own object, to become one with it.<sup>45</sup>

In the light of these reflections, we could say that action in strict sense has a pre-history—intention and deliberation on the means leading to an end, as well as to the consent to those means and election among them. But only in consent and election the subject constitutes himself in a principle of action and starts the action itself, with an act of reason which commands its realization. Command incorporates the *logos* or *ratio* of action, the ‘program’ which is to be executed in order to realize the intended end. Part of this program includes the use of other powers and

<sup>44</sup> “For evidence of this we must consider that activity is of two kinds, as noted in the ninth book of the *Metaphysics* (Ch. 8, 1050 a 23; St. Th. lect. 8, 1862-1865). One, which remains in the agent himself, as seeing, wishing and understanding, is an operation of the type properly called “action.” The other is an operation passing over into external matter and is properly called “making.” Sometimes a person accepts external matter only for use, as a horse for riding and a zither for playing, and at other times he takes external matter to change it into some other form, as when a carpenter constructs a house or a bed. Accordingly, the first and second of these operations do not have any product which is their term, but each of them is an end. The first, however, is more excellent than the second, inasmuch as it remains in the agent himself. But the third operation is a kind of generation whose term is a thing produced. So, in operations of the third type, the things done are the ends.” Thomas Aquinas, *In Ethic.* I, lectio 1, n.13.

<sup>45</sup> This is why, unlike knowledge, described by Aristotle as perfect praxis, voluntary acts constitute an imperfect praxis; they do not stop at the intentional possession of their object, but rather aspire to a real possession of it, which does not obtain in every voluntary act, but only in the last of all, that is, in joy. At that point, intention has really reached its object. Action, in what it has of a process, has concluded.

means. Thus, action makes its physical entrance into the world, inevitably producing collateral effects. But the heart of action is not in any of those effects, but in the order which reason, moved by the will of certain means to an end, introduces into the world.<sup>46</sup>

#### IV. Hume. Action between passion and artifice

Unlike Aristotle and Thomas, Hume and Kant live in a horizon of ideas marked by the discovery of necessary laws in nature, and dominated by a mechanical image of the world. In such a context, ethical reflection focuses not so much into the analysis of action but rather in the very possibility of free action.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> According to Aquinas, neither intention nor deliberation, nor consent, nor election, nor command (*STb.* I-II, q.17, a.2, ad 3, ad 1) nor the active use of the will can be found in animals. All of them are exclusive acts of man. This does not mean that we cannot find analogous acts in animal behaviour, and say, for instance, that they execute certain actions (*STb.* I-II, q.15, a.2, ad 2), that they act for the sake of certain ends, and even that they deliberate (*STb.* I-II, q. 13, a.2, ad 3). However, between animal behaviour and human behaviour persists a fundamental difference; the end by reference to which animals guide their movements is an object perceived under a particular consideration—for instance, under the consideration of food—whose convenience perceives by natural instinct. In contrast, the ends by reference to which human beings guide their movements are susceptible of many considerations, none of which is determinant of the action all by itself (*STb.* I-II, q.1, a. 2, ad 3), so that it must be the agent the one who determines himself to act for one reason or another (*STb.* I-II, q.6, a.2, ad 2). Accordingly, only about human agents can be said with property that “set ends for themselves” and control with them their behaviour (*STb.* I-II, q.1, a.2, ad 2) since only they are in conditions of making certain ends their own ends.

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, as Aristotle had said already in the *Metaphysics*, if every effect proceeds from some cause, and every cause necessarily produces its effect, everything would be necessary. In such a universe, there would be no place for free actions, not determined by nature. Following Aristotle, Aquinas set that problem aside pointing out that not every effect has a natural cause—*per se*—, because there are effects which take place accidentally. Aquinas solved quite quickly the problem: “As the Philosopher says in the *Metaphysics*, if every effect were to result from a natural cause, and every natural cause necessarily to produce its effect, then everything would be necessary. But both of these suppositions are false. For some causes, even if they be sufficient, do not produce their effects, since the causes can be prevented from doing so, as is evident in the case of every kind of natural cause. Neither, moreover, is it true that everything that happens has a natural cause. For natural efficient causes do not cause things that happen by accident, since

Because he thought that physical universe was causally determined, Hume rejected the idea of a free will as an absurdity. The idea of a free will has for him no meaning, ultimately because he holds there is no point in distinguishing between a power and the exercise of that power.<sup>48</sup> In a sort of reedition of the ancient Megaric position, Hume considers that power is always referred to its effective exercise, and this depends not so much on the existence of a faculty invested with causal power but rather on the agent having efficacious motives to act in one way more than in another.<sup>49</sup>

This approach involves that, if we are to identify what we have previously called actions in strict sense and actions in a broad sense, we can no longer appeal to the will understood as a faculty, nor to the subject of those faculties as their principle. The division of the soul into faculties – later restored by Reid – is absent in Hume's analysis, who speaks generically of the mind<sup>50</sup>, a space through which perceptions – impressions and

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things that happen by accident are neither beings nor intrinsically one...". *De Malo*, q. 6, a. un., ad 21.

<sup>48</sup> This is one point discussed by Thomas Reid in his *Essays on the active powers of man* (1788).

<sup>49</sup> In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I. Part 3. Section 14, p. 171, Hume rejects the distinction between efficient and final causes, between physical and moral necessity. Hence he is coherent when he assimilates natural and rational powers: both would be reduced to act in the same way; by finding the appropriate circumstances. "It has been observ'd in treating of the understanding, that the distinction, which we sometimes make betwixt a power and the exercise of it, is entirely frivolous, and that neither man nor any other being ought ever to be thought possess of any ability, unless it be exerted and put in action... 'Tis evident the error of distinguishing power from its exercise proceeds not entirely from the scholastic doctrine of free-will, which, indeed, enters very little into common life, and has but small influence on our vulgar and popular ways of thinking". *Treatise*, II. I. 10, nn 311-12. Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, will be quoted by their initials (*T*, or *EPM*) followed by book, part, section and page, according to the Selby-Bigge editions, revised by P.H. Niddich.

<sup>50</sup> "What we call a mind, is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and suppos'd, tho' falsely, to be endow'd with a perfect simplicity and identity. Now as every perception is distinguishable from another, and may be consider'd as separately existent; it evidently follows, that there is no absurdity in separating any particular perception from the mind; that is, in breaking off all its relations, with that connected mass of perceptions, which constitute a thinking being". *T*. I. 4. 2, p. 207. That is Hume's "psychological atomism".

ideas – flow, as the only elements with which we can count to explain human knowledge<sup>51</sup> and action.

According to Hume, the moral philosopher distinguishes himself from the natural philosopher in that the latter focuses on the analysis of impressions of sensations, while the former analyzes impressions of reflection – passions, desires, emotions –, which usually follow from ideas. If the moral philosopher is interested in ideas, or in the rules of association of ideas<sup>52</sup>, it is only insofar as these have some influence on passions, which – according to Hume – are the ones in charge of moving us to act.

Now, unlike the "mere passive admission of the impressions thro' the organs of sensation",<sup>53</sup> action involves activity, and following Hume, also causation or production of certain effects. Hume thinks that the latter goes together with the very notion of action, to the point of asserting that "action or motion is nothing but the object itself, consider'd in a certain light"<sup>54</sup> – that is, from the point of view of production. In speaking of the production of action, Hume avoids the reference to the will understood as a causal power – for him, the will is nothing more than an idea of reflection, accompanying the production of an action – and goes

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<sup>51</sup> "Nothing is ever present to the mind but its perceptions; and that all the actions of seeing, hearing, judging, living, hating, and thinking, fall under this denomination. The mind can never exert itself in any action, which we may not comprehend under the term perception; and consequently that term is no less applicable to those judgments, by which we distinguish moral good and evil, than to every other operation of the mind". *T*. III. 1. 1, p. 456.

<sup>52</sup> That is the laws of association of ideas: by resemblance, contiguity, or causality, that Hume introduces in *T*. I.1.4. Later on he clarifies the way in which the connexion takes place, namely: naturally, without determination of reason: "We have already taken notice of certain relations, which make us pass from one object to another, even tho' there be no reason to determine us to that transition; and this we may establish for a general rule, that wherever the mind constantly and uniformly makes a transition without any reason, it is influenc'd by these relation... When the mind, therefore, passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determin'd by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the imagination". *T*. I. 3. 6, p. 92.

<sup>53</sup> "When both the objects are present to the senses along with the relation, we call this perception rather than reasoning; nor is there in this case any exercise of the thought, or any action, properly speaking, but a mere passive admission of the impressions thro' the organs of sensation". *T*. I. 3. 2, p. 73.

<sup>54</sup> *T*. I. 1. 4, p. 12.

directly to the examination of motives, which appear as the determining factors of human actions, and make the resort to free will irrelevant or even contradictory.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, Hume invokes what he regards the *vulgar* and *popular* way of thinking about motives, against the scholastic doctrine of free will. For according to Hume, the latter holds that

“Motives deprive us not of free-will, nor take away our power of performing or forbearing any action. But according to common notions a man has no power, where very considerable motives lie betwixt him and the satisfaction of his desires, and determine him to forbear what he wishes to perform”.<sup>56</sup>

Hume thinks that the presence of a powerful motive excludes the reference to free will, understood as the power of determine oneself to act in a way or another; only the efficacious motive, which in fact produces or causes the action involves a motive. Hence he writes: “the union betwixt motives and actions has the same constancy, as that in any natural operations”.<sup>57</sup> The sentence, which involves his negative to accept any

<sup>55</sup> In his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume refers to the will as an “idea of reflection”, and argues that this idea of reflection, to which the idea of causality is associated, cannot be proved according to the rules of experimental method, neither in that referring to production of organic movements, nor in that referring to the production of ideas; in both cases we are aware of certain connexion, but not the way in which this connexion is produced. More generally he concludes that “upon the whole, there appears not, throughout all nature, any one instant of connexion which is conceivable by us. All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem conjoined, but never connected. And as we can have no idea of any thing which never appeared to our outward sense or inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion seems to be that we have no idea of connexion or power at all, and that these words are absolutely without any meaning, when employed either in philosophical reasonings or common life”. *EPM*. 7. 2, p. 73-4.

<sup>56</sup> *T*. II. 1. 10, p. 312.

<sup>57</sup> *T*. II. 3. 1, p. 404. “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. I can imagine only one way of eluding this argument, which is by denying that uniformity of human actions, on which it is founded. As long as actions have a constant union and connexion

difference between final and efficient causes,<sup>58</sup> between physical and moral necessity, will be qualified in one on his essays.<sup>59</sup> However, generally speaking Hume considers that asserting that the actions are motivated is the same as asserting that actions are determined. No matter that we feel otherwise; in his view,

“We may imagine we feel a liberty within ourselves; but a spectator can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character; and even where he cannot, he concludes in general, that he might, were he perfectly acquainted with every circumstance of our situation and temper, and the most secret springs or our complexion and disposition. Now this is the very essence of necessity, according to the foregoing doctrine”.<sup>60</sup>

Freedom as indifference disappears in favour of freedom as spontaneity.

Indeed, insofar as, according to Hume, causality consists of certifying the regularity of a sequence of events, provided that we detect the regularity of certain actions after certain motives, we would be legitimated to

with the situation and temper of the agent, however we may in words refuse to acknowledge the necessity, we really allow the thing. Now some may, perhaps, find a pretext to deny this regular union and connexion. For what is more capricious than human actions? And what creature departs more widely, not only from right reason, but from his own character and disposition?... Necessity is regular and certain. Human conduct is irregular and uncertain. The one, therefore, proceeds not from the other. 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 phaenomena 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... No union can be more constant and certain, than that of some actions with some motives and characters...”. *T*. II. 3. 1, pp. 402-404.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *T*. 1, 3, 14, p. 171.

<sup>59</sup> Specifically in his *Essay Of National Characters*: “By moral causes. I mean all circumstances, which are fitted to work on the mind as motives or reasons... By physical causes I mean those qualities of the air and climate, which are supposed to work insensibly on the temper, by altering the tone and habit of the body...” (p. 198). Quoted by Antony Flew, *David Hume. Philosopher of Moral Science*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, pp. 132-3.

<sup>60</sup> *T*. II. 3. 2, p. 408-9.

conclude that those motives are the ones constituting the causes of those actions,<sup>61</sup> actions which could be perfectly spontaneous.

In fact, Hume considers actions as mere signs of motives, which –not the will in its classical sense– would be the true determining causes<sup>62</sup> of someone's character, as well as his or her moral quality.<sup>63</sup> For Hume, those motives refer ultimately to our passions, that is, to impressions of reflection, also called "secondary impressions" because they follow a previous perception –either an original impression or its idea<sup>64</sup> (in which case, Hume speaks of "will").<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> According to Hume, "our actions have a constant union with our motives, tempers, and circumstances" (T. II. 3. 1, p. 401). "There is a general course of nature in human actions, as well as in the operations of the sun and the climate... The knowledge of these characters is founded on the observation of a uniformity in the actions, that flow from them; and this uniformity forms the very essence of necessity. I can imagine only one way of eluding this argument, which is by denying that uniformity of human actions, on which it is founded". (T. II. 3. 1, p. 403). "In judging of the actions of men we must proceed upon the same maxims, as when we reason concerning external objects... No union can be more constant and certain, than that of some actions with some motives and characters". T. II. 3. 1, p. 403-4.

<sup>62</sup> Hume considers that in a universe causally determined by universal laws there is no room left for freedom of the will, because this freedom could compromise the connexion between actions and their causes, without which it would not be possible to attribute actions to their authors.

<sup>63</sup> T. II. 3. 2, p. 412.

<sup>64</sup> "As all the perceptions of the mind may be divided into impressions and ideas, so the impressions admit of another division into original and secondary. This division of the impressions is the same with that which I formerly made use of when I distinguish'd them into impressions of sensation and reflexion. 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". T. II. 1. 1, p. 275.

<sup>65</sup> "We come now to explain the direct passions, or the impressions, which arise immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure. Of this kind are, desire and aversion, grief and joy, hope and fear. Of all the immediate effects of pain and pleasure, there is none more remarkable than the Will; and tho', properly speaking, it be not comprehended among the passions, yet as the full understanding of its nature and properties, is necessary to the explanation of them, we shall here make it the subject of our enquiry". T. II. 3. 1, p. 399.

Hume provides us with several possible classifications of the passions –original, direct, indirect;<sup>66</sup> serene and violent;<sup>67</sup> strong and weak,<sup>68</sup> simple and complex<sup>69</sup>–, although all of them have in common their source

<sup>66</sup> "By direct passions I understand such as arise immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure. By indirect such as proceed from the same principles, but by the conjunction of other qualities. This distinction I cannot at present justify or explain any further. I can only observe in general, that under the indirect passions I comprehend pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice, generosity, with their dependants. And under the direct passions, desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair and security". T. II. 1. 1, p. 277. "'Tis easy to observe, that the passions, both direct and indirect, are founded on pain and pleasure, and that in order to produce an affection of any kind, 'tis only requisite to present some good or evil... The impressions, which arise from good and evil most naturally, and with the least preparation are the direct passions of desire and aversion, grief and joy, hope and fear, along with volition. The mind by an original instinct tends to unite itself with the good, and to avoid the evil, tho' they be conceiv'd merely in idea, and be consider'd as to exist in any future period of time. But supposing that there is an immediate impression of pain or pleasure, and that arising from an object related to ourselves or others, this does not prevent the propensity or aversion, with the consequent emotions, but by concurring with certain dormant principles of the human mind, excites the new impressions of pride or humility, love or hatred. That propensity, which unites us to the object, or separates us from it, still continues to operate, but in conjunction with the indirect passions, which arise from a double relation of impressions and ideas". T. II. 3. 9, p. 438-9.

<sup>67</sup> "The reflective impressions may be divided into two kinds, viz. the calm and the violent. Of the first kind is the sense of beauty and deformity in action, composition, and external objects. Of the second are the passions of love and hatred, grief and joy, pride and humility. This division is far from being exact. The raptures of poetry and music frequently rise to the greatest height; while those other impressions, properly call'd passions, may decay into so soft an emotion, as to become, in a manner, imperceptible. But as in general the passions are more violent than the emotions arising from beauty and deformity, these impressions have been commonly distinguish'd from each other". T. II. 1. 1, p. 276. "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 falsehood". T. II. 3. 3, p. 417.

<sup>68</sup> T. II. 3. 4, p. 419.

<sup>69</sup> "'Tis evident, according to the principles above mention'd, that when an object produces any passion in us, which varies according to the different quantity of the object; I say, 'tis evident, that the passion, properly speaking, is not a simple emotion, but a compounded one, of a great number of weaker passions, deriv'd from a view of each part of the object". T. I. 3. 12, p. 141.

in an original perception and not simply in our physical complexion. This could suggest that our passions, taken as motives of action, are not simple physiological processes that lead causally to their respective objects,<sup>70</sup> but rather are responses to a certain content that can be articulated. Yet, while Hume himself does distinguish between the cause and the object of a passion for instance as he explains the nature of pride and humility,<sup>71</sup> he gives to the term “object” a merely material meaning, according to which, opposed passions would have the very same object, so that distinguishing among them would depend on a different factor, namely: on the idea that originally stimulated the passion—in the case of pride, the perception of a good quality, in the case of humility a bad one: from then on, the “self”—an object common to both passions—would appear under a positive or a negative light.

Hume thinks that perception of pain and pleasure is the main resort and ultimate origin of all our actions: an immediate origin in the case of direct passions—desire, aversion, sadness, joy, hope, fear, despair, trust...—through the addition of other qualities, in the case of indirect passions. But, in addition, he holds that “pain and pleasure have two ways of making their appearance in the mind; of which the one has effects very different from the other. They may either appear in impression to the actual feeling, or only in idea, as at present when I mention them”.<sup>72</sup> In this latter case, originated passions are weaker than in other cases.

Yet, Hume considers that this situation is a wise provision of nature, which could have avoided the inconveniences that would follow from

<sup>70</sup> “Passions are connected with their objects and with one another; no less than external bodies are connected together. The same relation, then, of cause and effect, which belongs to one, must be common to all of them”. *T. I. 3. 2*, p. 78.

<sup>71</sup> *T. II. 1. 2*, p. 277. Indeed; in speaking of pride and humility he distinguishes between object and cause, but in a different sense: he understands that both have the same object (the self), and that, because of that reason, the difference between both passions cannot be explained through the object. According to Hume, in order to stimulate one of those passions, but not the opposite, first we need the idea of a cause which stimulates the passion connected to it, which, in turn, once it has been excited, directs our attention to another idea, which is the idea of self. Thus, Hume thinks that every good quality of the mind can serve to cause pride, and every bad quality can cause humility. Cf. *T. II. 1. 2*, p. 278-9.

<sup>72</sup> *T. I. 3.10*, p. 118.

both extremes.<sup>73</sup> For, if pain and pleasure would appear in the mind always as effects of impressions, we would be always at the mercy of passions, for—says Hume—“we should not be provided by nature with any principle of action, which might impel us to avoid them”; if, on the other hand, every idea had influence upon our actions, “our condition would not be much mended”, for, given the course of our unstable thought, we would be in constant agitation, and very likely without “eliciting” action of any kind. This is why Hume thinks that nature has provided us with an intermediate way between impressions and ideas, a way without which we could give no account of human action, namely: *belief*. As he puts it,

“Belief is somewhat more than a simple idea. ‘Tis a particular manner of forming an idea... is a lively idea produc’d by a relation to a present impression”.<sup>74</sup>

In other words: what belief adds up above mere ideas is a greater vivacity or force, so that our passions can be awakened and we may be moved to act. This is what Hume says: “The effect of belief is to raise up

<sup>73</sup> “Did impressions alone influence the will, we should every moment of our lives be subject to the greatest calamities; because, tho’ we foresaw their approach, we should not be provided by nature with any principle of action, which might impel us to avoid them. On the other hand, did every idea influence our actions, our condition would not be much mended. For such is the unsteadiness and activity of thought, that the images of every thing, especially of goods and evils, are always wandering in the mind; and were it mov’d by every idle conception of this kind, it would never enjoy a moment’s peace and tranquility”. *T. I. 3. 10*, p. 119.

<sup>74</sup> *T. I. 3. 7*, p. 97. “’Tis certain, that the belief super-adds nothing to the idea, but only changes our manner of conceiving it, and renders it more strong and lively... There enters nothing into this operation of the mind but a present impression, a lively idea, and a relation or association in the fancy betwixt the impression and idea; so that there can be no suspicion of mistake”. *T. I. 3. 8*, p. 101. When I have an idea whose corresponding impression I have forgotten, I can still depart from the idea and come to conclude that the impression existed once; in this way I acquire a belief, whose strength, according to Hume, derives from the present idea: “... For as this idea is not here consider’d, as the representation of any absent object, but as a real perception in the mind, of which we are intimately conscious, it must be able to bestow on whatever is related to it the same quality, call it firmness, or solidity, or force, or vivacity, with which the mind reflects upon it, and is assur’d of its present existence. The idea here supplies the place of an impression, and is entirely the same, so far as regards our present purpose”. *T. I. 3. 8*, p. 106. “Belief in general consists in nothing, but the vivacity of an idea; and an idea may acquire this vivacity by its relation to some present impression”. *T. I. 4. 2*, p. 208.

a simple idea to an equality with our impressions, and bestow on it a like influence on the passions".<sup>75</sup>

In this way, reasoning based on causality, grounded on the experience<sup>76</sup> of a constant conjunction of causes and effects, which impacts upon imagination<sup>77</sup>, may come to affect our will and our passions. In this way, we make sure that, as we act, we are not merely under the influence of passions immediately derived from impressions; our belief that a certain effect can be achieved through the interposition of a certain cause, may give place to a passion which prompts behaviour.<sup>78</sup> Relatedly, Hume observes that a way to weaken the motive force of belief is to complicate it with too subtle reflections.<sup>79</sup> This is why Hume thinks that animals

<sup>75</sup> T. I.1.10, p. 119. According to Hume, the liveliness or strength of an impression is a quality which can be transmitted to every idea connected with it through any relation: "The relation causes a smooth passage from the impression to the idea, and even gives a propensity to that passage" (T. I. 4. 2. 2, p. 208). This process takes place not only in the realm of thought but also in the realm of action (T. I. 3. 10, p. 120), because, in order to move me to action I have to believe that a certain effect, in which I am interested (because of my passions or natural constitution), follows from a certain cause, which is at my disposal: "Remark, not only that two objects are connected by the relation of cause and effect, when the one produces a motion or any action in the other, but also when it has a power of producing it. And this we may observe to be the source of all the relations of interest and duty, by which men influence each other in society, and are plac'd in the ties of government and subordination". T. I.1. 4, p. 12.

<sup>76</sup> Hume says that experience is a principle that informs me about the different conjunctions of object in the past, whilst habit –or custom– is a different principle, which determines me to expect the same in the future (T. I. 4. 7, p. 265). When the action of both principles coincide upon imagination, they generate belief, whereby human beings usually move themselves to action.

<sup>77</sup> See T. I. 3. 16, p. 178. "All kinds of reasoning from causes or effects are founded on two particulars, viz. the constant conjunction of any two objects in all past experience, and the resemblance of a present object to any one of them. The effect of these two particulars is that the present object invigorates and invivens the imagination; and the resemblance, along with the constant union, conveys this force and vivacity to the related idea; which we are therefore said to believe, or assent to. If you weaken either the union or resemblance, you weaken the principle of transition, and of consequence that belief, which arises from it". T. I. 3. 12, p. 142.

<sup>78</sup> T. III. 1. 1., p. 459. At the basis of the motives there is the belief that a certain effect, that we naturally desire, can be reached through a certain cause, which is at our hand.

<sup>79</sup> "As the emotions of the soul prevent any subtle reasoning and reflection, so these alter actions of the mind are equally prejudicial to the former. The mind, as well as the body, seems to be endow'd with a certain precise degree of force and activity, which it

perform many actions similar to ours:<sup>80</sup> insofar as they lack refined reasoning<sup>81</sup>, and experience acts in them simply through custom.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, although Hume thinks that pleasure and pain constitute the last resort of action, the mediate motives are constituted by the different passions, some of which are originated in impressions while others are in beliefs. At any rate, it is not an indeterminate reference to pleasure that moves us to act, but, rather, determinate passions, constitutive of human nature,<sup>83</sup> which Hume takes to have an efficient-causal influence on our

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never employs in one action, but at the expense of all the rest. This is more evidently true, where the actions are of quite different natures; since in that case the force of the mind is not only diverted, but even the disposition chang'd, so as to render us incapable of a sudden transition from one action to the other, and still more of performing both at once. No wonder, then, the conviction, which arises from a subtle reasoning, diminishes in proportion to the efforts, which the imagination makes to enter into the reasoning, and to conceive it in all its parts. Belief, being a lively conception, can never be entire, where it is not founded on something natural and easy". T. I. 4. 1, p. 186.

<sup>80</sup> "We are conscious, that we ourselves, in adapting means to ends, are guided by reason and design, and that 'tis not ignorantly nor casually we perform those actions, which tend to self-preservation, to the obtaining pleasure, and avoiding pain. When therefore we see other creatures, in millions of instances, perform like actions, and direct them to like ends, all our principles of reason and probability carry us with an invincible force to believe the existence of a like cause... The resemblance betwixt the actions of animals and those of men is so entire in this respect, that the very first action of the first animal we shall please to pitch on, will afford us an incontestable argument for the present doctrine". T. I. 3. 16, p. 176 y ss.

<sup>81</sup> Hume even compares our reason with the instinct of animals, although he also notes a relevant difference: "Reason is nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls, which carries us along a certain train of ideas, and endows them with particular qualities, according to their particular situations and relations. This instinct, 'tis true, arises from past observation and experience; but can any one give the ultimate reason, why past experience and observation produces such an effect, any more than why nature alone shou'd produce it? Nature may certainly produce whatever can arise from habit: Nay, habit is nothing but one of the principles of nature, and derives all its force from that origin". T. I. 3. 16, p. 179.

<sup>82</sup> "Beasts certainly never perceive any real connexion among objects. 'Tis therefore by experience they infer one from another. They can never by any arguments form a general conclusion, that those objects, of which they have had no experience, resemble those of which they have. 'Tis therefore by means of custom alone, that experience operates upon them. All this was sufficiently evident with respect man. But with respect to beasts there cannot be the least suspicion of mistake". T. I. 3. 16, p. 178.

<sup>83</sup> Along these lines, he also considers that virtue is desirable by itself, if only because it effects a particular sentiment, which makes us distinguish between good and evil.

behaviour, similar to that which other causes would exert in natural world, provided the confluence of the appropriate circumstances.<sup>84</sup>

From this causal perspective, the more relevant classification of passions is that which divides them in strong and weak ones,<sup>85</sup> one that does not coincide with the classification in serene and violent passions.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, there are serene passions –such as the general appetite of good– which are strong from the causal point of view; this is exactly what according to Hume, may lead us to confound (calm) passions and reason. As it is well known, Hume holds that reason lacks causal power on our behaviour: the original impulses to act would spring from passion.<sup>87</sup> For Hume, a passion can be counterbalanced only through another passion, and this is why he defines the moral task as the development of a configuration of passions or character so that the serene passions are stronger than the violent ones:

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<sup>84</sup> In the *Enquiry* Hume puts an example which can be useful to appreciate how motives operate: “Ask a man why he uses exercise; he will answer, because he desires to keep his health. If you then enquire, why he desires health, he will readily reply, because sickness is painful. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason why he hates pain, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object. Perhaps to your second question, why he desires health, he may also reply, that it is necessary for the exercise of his calling. If you ask, why he is anxious on that head, he will answer, because he desires to get money. If you demand Why? It is the instrument of pleasure, says he. And beyond this it is an absurdity to ask for a reason. It is impossible there can be a progress *in infinitum*, and that one thing can always be a reason why another is desired. Something must be desirable on its own account, and because of its immediate accord or agreement with human sentiment and affection. Now as virtue is an end, and is desirable in its own account, without fee or reward, merely for the immediate satisfaction it conveys; it is requisite that there should be some sentiment which it touches, some internal taste or feeling, or whatever you please to call it, which distinguishes moral good and evil, and which embraces the one and rejects the other”. *EPM* Appendix, I, 293-294. This text is interesting for two reasons: on the one hand, it reveals the hypothetical structure of practical reasoning, which, as we have just noted, incides in us through belief; on the other, because it also suggests that pleasure and pain are not the only motives determining us to act.

<sup>85</sup> See *T*. II, 3. 4, p. 419.

<sup>86</sup> “We must, therefore, distinguish betwixt a calm and a weak passion; betwixt a violent and a strong one”. *Ibid*.

<sup>87</sup> *T*. II, 3. 3.

“When a passion has once become a settled principle of action, and is the predominant inclination of the soul, it commonly produces no longer any sensible agitation. As repeated custom and its own force have made every thing yield to it, it directs the actions and conduct without that opposition and emotion, which so naturally attend every momentary gust of passion”.<sup>88</sup>

However, this does not prevent Hume to attribute reason an instrumental and informing function in the design of an action<sup>89</sup>; be it through the correction of belief at the basis of passions, or the reasoning through which we think, erroneously, that a certain course of events will lead us to fulfil our desires. Likewise, reason can help us to particularize the objects of our passions, design a plan for the satisfaction of them or establish priority among them.<sup>90</sup> In this way, in the course of deliberation reason helps us to modify in some measure the degree and weight of passions, and exert a relative control upon them. The nature of this control, however, is singular, since, far from being exercised directly upon passions or their objects, it involves an enlightened detour around the world. Indeed, according to Hume, reason contributes to the control of behaviour insofar as it learns to play with distances:

“When we wou’d govern a man, and push him to any action, ‘twill commonly be better policy to work upon the violent than the calm passions, and rather take him by his inclination, than what is vulgarly call’d his reason. We ought to place the object in such particular situations as are proper to encrease the violence of the passion. For we may observe, that all depends upon the situation of the object, and that a variation in this particular will be able to change the calm and the violent passions into each other. Both these kinds of passions pursue good, and avoid evil; and both of them are encreas’d or diminish’d by the encrease or diminution of the good or evil. But herein lies the difference betwixt them:

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<sup>88</sup> *T*. II, 3. 4, p. 419.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Pitson, A. E., *Hume’s Philosophy of the Self*, Routledge, London, New York, 2002, pp. 137 y ss.

<sup>90</sup> Rawls, J., *Lectures on the history of moral philosophy*, ed. Barbara Herman, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. & London, 2000, p. 40 y ss.



the same good, when near, will cause a violent passion, which, when remote, produces only a calm one".<sup>91</sup>

That we in fact deliberate on possible courses of action and elect among them is something that Hume cannot ignore. But, instead of interpreting this aperture of alternatives as a specific property of reason, whereby human beings constitute themselves in a specific kind of principle, not to be activated merely by natural causes, he prefers to interpret it as the natural effect of positioning oneself at a certain distance from his own behaviour, so that we can appreciate the difference between satisfying short term interests or long term interests, and introduce the necessary institutional artifices which oblige ourselves to stick to long-term interests. This is precisely what Hume explores in the second part of the third Book of the *Treatise*. In those pages he says that certain institutions such as the one which fixes property or the rules of its transference, promises or the institution of government, were initially introduced for a motive of interest, but over time came to generate in ourselves a peculiar sense of duty which leaves us to abide by them, even in case that its utility is not apparent.

Hume calls "strength of mind" that quality of character whereby a person is able to resist a violent passion, directed to satisfy immediate objectives,<sup>92</sup> with a view in a remote interest, associated to serene passions, such as "the general appetite of good" (one of the most mysterious passions, according to Rawls).<sup>93</sup> The possibility of resisting a violent

<sup>91</sup> T. II. 3, 4, p. 419.

<sup>92</sup> "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 falsehood. Their nature and principles have been suppos'd the same, because their sensations are not evidently different... Besides these calm passions, which often determine the will, there are certain violent emotions of the same kind, which have likewise a great influence on that faculty". T. II. 3, 3, 417.

<sup>93</sup> See Rawls, J., *Lectures on the history of moral philosophy*, pp. 43 y ss. "Men often act knowingly against their interest: For which reason the view of the greatest possible good

passion aiming at an immediate gratification, because of the consideration of remote interests, associated to serene passions, opens up some room for deliberation, or, as Pitson notes, for a sense of agency which goes beyond mere adaptation to variable stimulus.<sup>94</sup> However, a complete reading of the *Treatise* suggests that this is possible only where the individual has been socialized so that he has internalized institutionalized patterns of behaviour.

From this perspective, Hume's approach looks like an attempt of balancing the disappearance of the concept of free will by means of an intelligent combination of nature and artifice. When he affirms that actions, insofar as they are performed with certain design and intention, are artificial entities, he is saying very clearly in which way he understands the role of reason in human behaviour,<sup>95</sup> and so also in which way his approach allows us to speak of action in strict sense.

Thus, when we explain human behaviour in terms of motives ultimately grounded on passions, and institutions whereby we delay the satisfaction of some of them, Hume elaborates a psycho-social action theory, apt to inspire theoretical models of human behaviour. In the possibility, institutionally mediated, of repressing the satisfaction of present interest because of the consideration of a remote interest –ability which Hume regards the essence of strength of mind– we could recognize the psycho-social characterization of action in a strict sense.

Likewise, Hume's insistence on the motive force of passions, as well as in the force of custom, does not leave doubts about the possibility of speaking in him of actions in a broad sense, not mediated by any deliberation. This is clear in those cases in which we act by impulse, renouncing

does not always influence them. Men often counter-act a violent passion in prosecution of their interests and designs: 'Tis not therefore the present uneasiness alone, which determines them. In general we may observe, that both these principles operate on the will; and where they are contrary, that either of them prevails, according to the general character or present disposition of the person. What we call strength of mind, implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent; tho' we may easily observe, there is no man so constantly possess'd of this virtue, as never on any occasion to yield to the solicitations of passion and desire. From these variations of temper proceeds the great difficulty of deciding concerning the actions and resolutions of men, where there is any contrariety of motives and passions". T. II. 3, 3, 418.

<sup>94</sup> See Pitson, A. E., *Hume's philosophy of the self*, p. 138.

<sup>95</sup> See T. III. 1. 2, p. 475.

to introduce a balance of passions; but also in those other cases in which we simply act based on previous experience, without deliberation.

Custom comes to constitute, also for Hume, a second nature, inasmuch as custom distinguishes itself from behaviour guided by deliberate reasoning. However, in contrast to classical notion of habit, whose actualization, according to both Aristotle and Thomas, is left to the choice of the agent, Hume prefers to insist on habit simply as an effect of nature.

To a certain extent, he reduces reason itself to nature when he describes the former as “a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls, which carries us along a certain train of ideas, and endows them with particular qualities, according to their particular situations and relations”.<sup>96</sup> However, even when he observes that “this instinct... arises from past observation and experience” he leaves on the air the interesting question: “can any one give the ultimate reason, why past experience and observation produces such an effect, any more than why nature alone shou’d produce it?”.<sup>97</sup>

#### V. Kant. Freedom and moral self-determination

Without discussing the necessity that, according to Kant, rules the kingdom of nature, where every phenomenon is determined by an antecedent cause, Kant takes distance from Hume in the way he approaches the problem of action.

On the one hand, he distinguishes more clearly than Hume between the theoretical and the practical perspective on human action. While the theoretical approach involves a consideration of action as a phenomenon similar to other natural phenomena, and hence under the same laws than the others, the practical perspective requires an assumption of the freedom of the will. On the other hand, Kant, unlike Hume, retains the classical reference to a variety of powers and faculties, and, among them, a faculty of desire (*begehren*), that Kant defines as “the faculty to be by

<sup>96</sup> “Nature may certainly produce whatever can arise from habit: Nay, habit is nothing but one of the principles of nature, and derives all its force from that origin”. *T. I.* 3. 16, p. 179.

<sup>97</sup> *T. I.* 3. 16, p. 179.

means of one’s representations the cause of the objects of these representations”.<sup>98</sup>

In this definition, which is still too generic, there is an implicit reference to a possible causation of the objects of representation. Now, according to Kant, the faculty of desire can be determined either by reference to the *content* of the representation or by reference to the *form* of the representation. In the first case, some empirical and particular element, and hence, ultimately an element of the sensible world, determines the appetite, which then is sensible appetite.<sup>99</sup> On the contrary, the possibility of determining oneself merely by reference to the –universal– form of representation would be what defines the rational faculty of desire, that is, the *will*.

“Everything in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the capacity to act in accordance with the representation of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or has a will”,<sup>100</sup>

and is, in that sense, a *causa noumenon*.<sup>101</sup> Apart from the metaphysical problem that Kant puts forward in the Third Antinomy, regarding whether the acts whereby reason prescribes laws are themselves determined

<sup>98</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* (onwards *MM*) *MM*, 6: 211. Kant’s works, with the exception of the *Critiques*, which will be quoted by their initials in German, will be quoted either by their abbreviation or initials in English, followed by the volume and page in the standard edition of the Akademie.

<sup>99</sup> “Desire (*appetitio*) is the self-definition of the power of a subject to imagine something in the future as an effect of such imagination. Habitual sensuous desire is called inclination. Desiring without emphasis on the production of the object is wish. Wish may be directed toward objects for whose production the subject himself feels incapable; in such a case it is an empty (idle) wish. The empty wish to overcome the time between the desire and the acquisition of the desired object is yearning. The undetermined desire, as to the object (*appetitio vaga*), which only incites the subject to get out of his present condition without knowing where he wants to go, can be called a capricious wish (which cannot be satisfied with anything). The inclination which can hardly, or not at all, be controlled by reason is passion. On the other hand, emotion is the feeling of a pleasure or displeasure at a particular moment, which does not give rise to reflection (namely the process of reason whether one should submit to it or reject it)”. Kant, *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* (onwards *Anthropology*), *Anthropology*, 7: 251.

<sup>100</sup> Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (onwards *GG*) *GG*, 6: 413.

<sup>101</sup> See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, (onwards *KpI*), *KpI*, 5: 55.

by other influences, Kant makes room for the practical experience of freedom, as it is experienced by the agent<sup>102</sup>, who, in action, is aware of the infinite distance between acting moved by sensible incentives or acting determined by the mere form of duty: “However many natural grounds or sensible stimuli there may be that impel me to will, they cannot produce the ought”.<sup>103</sup>

The moral fact stresses the freedom of the will, its lack of determination by natural causes. The condition of possibility of the experience of duty, indeed, is that reason remains free to build for itself an order of its own. Without this, the human being can neither call himself free nor reaching the natural or moral perfection.<sup>104</sup>

“Whether it is an object of mere sensibility (the agreeable) or even of pure reason (the good), reason does not give in to those grounds which are empirically given, and it does not follow the order of things as they are presented in intuition, but with complete spontaneity it makes its

<sup>102</sup> “Whether in these actions, through which it prescribes laws, reason is not itself determined by further influences, and whether that which with respect to sensory impulses is called freedom might not in turn with regard to higher and more remote efficient causes be nature—in the practical sphere this does not concern us, since in the first instance we ask of reason only a precept for conduct; it is rather a merely speculative question, which we can set aside as long as our aim is directed to action or omission. We thus cognize practical freedom through experience, as one of the natural causes, namely a causality of reason in the determination of the will, whereas transcendental freedom requires an independence of this reason itself (with regard to its causality for initiating a series of appearances) from all determining causes of the world of the senses, and to this extent seems to be contrary to the law of nature, thus to all possible experience, and so remains a problem. Yet this problem does not belong to reason in its practical use...”. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (onwards *KrI*), *KrI*, A 803/B831.

<sup>103</sup> The text goes on saying: “but only a willing that is yet far from necessary but rather always conditioned over against which the ought that reason pronounces sets a measure and goal, indeed, a prohibition and authorization” *KrI*, A 548/B576.

<sup>104</sup> “The inner perfection of man consists in having the power to use all his faculties, a power to subject their use to his own free volition. For this, it is necessary that his understanding should rule without weakening sensibility (which in itself is like a mob of people since it does not think) because without sensibility no material would be provided for the use of the law-giving understanding”. *Anthropology*, 7: 144. Already his natural perfection—or culture (*MS*, 6: 391-2)—involves, according to Kant himself, the disposition to whatever ends; but, specially the perfection of his will—or morality (*MS*, 6: 392)—involves the subjection to duty, that is, to an order which reveals itself as practically necessary only in the light of reason itself.

own order according to ideas, to which it fits the empirical conditions and according to which it even declares actions to be necessary that yet have not occurred and perhaps will not occur, nevertheless presupposing of all such actions that reason could have causality in relation to them; for without that, it would not expect its ideas to have effects in experience”.<sup>105</sup>

As we see, in this passage Kant describes the formation of a certain act of command, particularly, the command of a purely moral act, not infected by incentives different from the pure sense of duty. As I see it, the formation of such an act does not exclude the presence of sensible incentives in the origin of the impulse to act; it merely excludes them as the determining motive of action, something which happens every time that the sensible incentive takes over the soul and gives place to what Kant calls “passion”.

Kant defines passion as an inclination that has become habitual, and is therefore difficult to overcome by the subject—something which, according to Kant, marks the difference between passion and mere affect or “emotion”.<sup>106</sup> Although both are infirmities of the soul<sup>107</sup>, that, either

<sup>105</sup> *KrI* A 548/B576.

<sup>106</sup> “Affects and passions are essentially different from each other. Affects belong to feeling insofar as, preceding reflection, it makes this impossible or more difficult. Hence an affect is called precipitate or rash (*animus praecipiti*), and reason says, through the concept of virtue, that one should get hold of oneself. Yet this weakness in the use of one’s understanding coupled with the strength of one’s emotions is only a lack of virtue and, as it were, something childish and weak, which can indeed coexist with the best will. It even has one good thing about it: that this tempest quickly subsides. Accordingly a propensity to an affect (e.g. anger) does not enter into kinship with vice so readily as does passion. A passion is a sensible desire that has become a lasting inclination (e.g. hatred, as opposed to anger). The calm with which one gives oneself up to it permits reflection and allows the mind to form principles upon it and so, if inclination lights upon something contrary to the law, to brood upon it, to get it rooted deeply, and so to take up what is evil (as something premeditated) into its maxim. And the evil is then properly evil, that is, a true vice. Since virtue is based on inner freedom it contains a positive command to human being, namely to bring all his capacities and inclinations under his (reason’s) control and so to rule over himself, which goes beyond forbidding him to let himself be governed by his feelings and inclinations (the duty of apathy); for unless reason holds the reins of government in its own hands, his feelings and inclinations play the master over him”. *MM*, 6: 408.

in that moment or as a permanent matter, exclude the control of reason, passion is a more severe infirmity<sup>108</sup> –insanity or cancer of practical reason, says Kant<sup>109</sup>– because it takes roots at the bottom of the soul and contaminates the behaviour of the subject, who sees the progressive diminution of his capacity to compare the object of that passion with the sum of all inclinations,<sup>110</sup> and, instead of that, starts deliberating as if passion were a practical principle.<sup>111</sup> (It is not by chance that Kant reserves the term “passion” for rational beings).<sup>112</sup>

<sup>107</sup> “To be subject to emotions and passions is probably always an illness of mind because both emotion and passion, exclude the sovereignty of reason. Both are also equally strong according to degree; but in accordance with their quality, emotion and passion are essentially distinct from one another as to the method of prevention as well as in that of cure which the physician of souls would have to employ”. *Anthropology*, 7: 251.

<sup>108</sup> “Emotion is surprise through sensation, whereby the composure of mind (*animus sui compos*) is suspended. Emotion therefore is precipitate, that is, it quickly grows to a degree of feeling which makes reflection impossible (it is thoughtless)... Wherever there is much emotion, there is generally little passion... Emotions are honorable and unconcealed, while passions are deceitful and hidden... Emotion is like an intoxicant which can be slept off; passion is to be regarded as an insanity which broods over an idea that is imbedding itself deeper and deeper...” *Anthropology*, 7: 252.

<sup>109</sup> “Passions are cancerous stores for pure practical reason, and most of them are incurable because the sick person does not want to be cured and avoids the dominion of the principle by which alone a cure could be effected. In the area of what is sensuously practical, reason proceeds from the general to the particular, according to the axiom not to please only a single inclination by placing all the rest in the shade or in a dark corner, but rather to see to it that it shares properly with the totality of all inclinations”. *Anthropology*, 7: 266.

<sup>110</sup> “A subject’s sensuous desire which has become customary (habit) is called inclination (*inclinatio*). Inclination, which hinders the use of reason to compare, at a particular moment of choice, a specific inclination against the sum of all inclinations, is passion (*passio animi*)”. *Anthropology*, 7: 265.

<sup>111</sup> “Since the passions can be coupled with the calmest reflection, one can easily see that they must neither be rash like the emotions, nor stormy and transitory; instead, they must take roots gradually and even be able to coexist with reason. One can also easily see that passions do the greatest harm to freedom; and if emotion is a delirium, then passion is an illness which abhors all medication. Therefore, passion is by far worse than all those transitory emotions which stir themselves at least to the good intention of improvement; instead, passion is an enchantment which also rejects improvement”. *Anthropology*, 7: 265-6.

<sup>112</sup> “Even the strongest inclination (such as the mixture of breeds) is not called passion among mere animals, because they have no reason. Reason alone establishes the

It is only by attending to this difference between determining oneself to act based on sensible incentives and determine oneself to act based on mere reason –that is: the difference between animal will animal (*arbitrium brutum*) and free will (*arbitrium liberum*)<sup>113</sup>–, that we can best recognize in which way Kant approaches the difference between action in a wide sense and action in a strict sense, between acting moved from the outside or acting by oneself. To appreciate it, however, we must distinguish carefully between the question of motivation –which sooner or later incorporates the reference to some sort of sensible incentive– and the question of determination of the will. It is the latter that marks the distance between the animal and the rational in the human being.

In addition, we should distinguish, with Kant himself, between the problem of the rational –moral– determination of the will and the eventual efficacy in the world of such a determination. It could well happen that the moral law prescribes an action which, because of reasons not depending on our will, cannot become real. Nevertheless, assuming that the actions projected by reason are, generally speaking, efficacious, that is, assuming “that reason actually does have causality in regard to appearances”, we could conclude, with Kant, that “in its effects in appearance this reason exhibits a rule, in accordance with which one could derive the rational grounds and the actions themselves according to their kind and degree, and estimate the subjective principles of his power of

concept of freedom, and passion collides with it. The outbreak of passion must be attributed to human beings”. *Anthropology*, 7: 269.

<sup>113</sup> “A faculty of choice, that is, is merely animal (*arbitrium brutum*) which cannot be determined other than through sensible impulses, i.e., pathologically. However, one which can be determined independently of sensory impulses, thus through motives that can only be represented by reason, is called free choice (*arbitrium liberum*), and everything that is connected with this, whether as ground or consequence, is called practical. Practical freedom can be proved through experience. For it is not merely that which stimulates the senses, i.e., immediately affects them, that determines human choice, but we have a capacity to overcome impressions on our sensory faculty of desire by representations of that which is useful or injurious even in a more remote way; but these considerations about that which in regard to our whole condition is desirable, i.e., good and useful, depend on reason. Hence this also yields laws that are imperatives, i.e., objective laws of freedom, and that say what ought to happen, even though perhaps it never does happen, and that are thereby distinguished from laws of nature, which deal only with that which does happen, on which account the former are also called practical laws”. *KrV*, A 802/B830.

choice".<sup>114</sup> From this perspective it would be possible to propose a science of human behaviour, in Hume's sense, inferring character from actions. Kant does it in the second part of his *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*, not without distinguishing carefully several meanings of character: the natural, the temperament, and the character in proper sense, or moral character, in such a way that he draws a significant contrast with Hume.

Indeed, while "a natural good disposition" is merely "an incentive to the practical good, even though such a characterization is not bestowed according to principles", regarded from the subjective point of view (the sentiment of pleasure or displeasure), and "the *temperament*" refers to the way of activity that the subject develops insofar he is moved by sensibility, "*character as a way of thinking*" refers to that "that property of the will by which the subject has tied himself to certain practical principles which he has unalterably prescribed for himself by his own reason".<sup>115</sup>

To speak of a moral character in strict sense, the agent has to determine himself to act according to universal principles, valid for every rational being, that is, moral laws. Moral action, therefore, involves that the agent derives his particular actions from universal principles. Such a derivation, brought about by reason<sup>116</sup>, does not take place on the air; it is possible thanks to what Kant calls "maxim", a subjective principle of action, which "contains the practical rule determined by reason conformably with the conditions of the subject (often his ignorance or also his inclinations)".<sup>117</sup> The maxim has in Kant an analogous role to belief in Hume. There is no action without its maxim. Likewise, there is no

<sup>114</sup> *KrV*, A 549/B577.

<sup>115</sup> Kant considers that although the principles adopted were false, the formal aspect of the will provides the human agency with a dignity which lacks the behaviour simply guided by sensible stimuli. In this sense, Kant says that there is no wickedness properly following from principles, but because of the abandonment of them: "One cannot properly say that the wickedness of this person is a quality of his character, because then it would be diabolic. Man never sanctions the evil in himself, and so there is actually no evil coming from principles, but only from the forsaking of them". *Anthropology*, 7: 293.

<sup>116</sup> Reason is entrusted the task of mediating between the universality of the law and the particularity of the action. And this is why Kant identifies will and practical reason. "Since reason is required for the derivation of actions from laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason". *GG*, 4: 412.

<sup>117</sup> *GG*, 4: 421, footnote.

maxim without content, that is, without object or end, which is what the agent intends with his action. Accordingly, in every maxim we can assume the structure of the hypothetical imperative: "if you want to get this end you have to perform these acts". The acts which should be performed, in each case, are those which, adopting the point of view of the legality of nature, lead naturally to the realization of the end, only that, in the formulation of the maxim, we find the opposite order: while the laws of nature account for the regularity with which certain effects follow certain antecedents, the maxims of action anticipate the end-effect and prescribe the means to realise it.<sup>118</sup>

In turn, the end that the agent intends to realize with his action admits of a double consideration: for the agent can be mainly interested in the action itself or merely in satisfying a certain inclination. Kant expresses this with his distinction between "taking an interest" and "having an interest". It is a distinction which applies only to human beings, insofar their will depends on rational principles and, yet, it is not of itself consigned to reason, because it is affected by sensible incentives and has, therefore, inclinations.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Charles Taylor expressed himself similarly in his book *The explanation of Behaviour*. In that book, he attempted to mediate in the debate, following the publication of *Intention* by Elizabeth Anscombe, between those who favored a causalist explanation of action and those who favored an intentional approach. Against Anscombe's proposal, to confront past actions appealing to intentionality, and her negative to interpret intentionality as a sort of efficient cause, other authors insisted on offering a causal explanation of actions, which involved also offering an explanation of intentionality in more or less "human" terms, as beliefs plus desires. In this context, Taylor concerned himself with clarifying why the appeal to ends and purposes did not make redundant the resort to causes. On the contrary: "Explanation by purpose involves the use of a teleological form of explanation, of explanation in terms of the result for the sake of which the events concerned occur. Now when we say that an event occurs for the sake of an end, we are saying that it occurs because it is the type of event which brings about this end. This means that the condition of the event's occurring is that a state of affairs obtain such that it will bring about the end in question, or such that this event is required to bring about that end. To offer a teleological explanation of some event or class of events, e.g., the behaviour of some being, is, then, to account for it by laws in terms of which an event's occurring is held to be dependent on that event's being required for some end". Taylor, Ch., *The explanation of behaviour*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1967, p. 9.

<sup>119</sup> "The dependence of the faculty of desire upon feelings is called inclination, and this accordingly always indicates a need. The dependence of a contingently determinable will on principles of reason, however, is called an interest. This, accordingly, is present

In the *Anthropology*, Kant describes the interest as a result of the order that the understanding introduces in the sensible representations, so that they can determine the will.<sup>120</sup> And in the *Groundwork*, he is even more explicit: “An interest is that by which reason becomes practical, i. e., becomes a cause determining the will”.<sup>121</sup> In other words: had we no interests, we could not act at all. However, it is not the same to act *for interest* than to *take an interest*. Indeed –he says–:

“Human will can take an interest in something without therefore acting from interest. The first signifies practical interest in the action, the second, pathological interest in the object of the action. The former indicates only dependence of the will upon principles of reason in themselves; the second, dependence upon principles of reason for the sake of inclination, namely where reason supplies only the practical rule as to how to remedy the need of inclination. In the first case the action interests me; in the second, the object of the action (insofar as it is agreeable to me). We have seen... that in the case of an action from duty we must look not to interest in the object but merely to that in the action itself and its principle in reason (the law)”.<sup>122</sup>

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only in the case of a dependent will, which is not of itself always in conformity with reason; in the case of the divine will we cannot think of any interest”. *GG*, 4: 414.

<sup>120</sup> “Sense perceptions certainly precede perceptions of the understanding and display themselves *en masse*. Yet the harvest (*Ertrag*) is more abundant when the understanding with its order and intellectual form is added. The same is true when, for example, the understanding brings into consciousness significant expressions for the concept, emphatic perceptions for the feeling, and interesting perceptions for the determination of the will”. *Anthropology*, 7: 144.

<sup>121</sup> The text continues: “Hence only of a rational being does one say that he takes an interest in something; non-rational creatures feel only sensible impulses. Reason takes an immediate interest in an action only when the universal validity of the maxim of the action is a sufficient determining ground of the will. Only such an interest is pure. But if it can determine the will only by means of another object of desire or on the presupposition of a special feeling of the subject, then reason takes only a mediate interest in the action, and since reason all by itself, without experience, can discover neither objects of the will nor a special feeling lying at its basis, this latter interest would be only empirical and not a pure rational interest. The logical interest of reason (to further insights) is never immediate but presupposes purposes for its use”. *GG*, 4: 460.

<sup>122</sup> *GG*, 4: 414.

We can find a similar thought in the following comment by Thomas Aquinas: “Delight in his act, rather than the act itself, is the end of the intemperate man, and for sake of this delight he consents to that act”.<sup>123</sup> Kant would say that, in his maxim, the intemperate lets himself to be determined by the most empirical aspect of his action, that is, the less universalizable aspect of the action.<sup>124</sup> On the contrary, that who acts in conformity to a universalizable maxim suggests that, in acting, he regards himself as a rational being, equal to every other rational being, that is, subject to the same law as the rest of them.

Yet, in addition, a true moral agent should act out of duty. In order to act morally it is not enough to act in conformity to a maxim that is objectively universalizable, but the morally objective quality of the maxim should constitute also the determining motive of action.<sup>125</sup> In regard to this, Kant himself affirms that there is no way to know whether someone has ever performed a genuinely moral act. The purity of the moral incentive does not admit of empirical demonstration. The properly moral dimension of our actions is inaccessible to the knowledge proper of

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<sup>123</sup> *ST*, I-II, q.15, a. 3, ad 2.

<sup>124</sup> In fact, the concept of maxim is grounded on that of interest. From then on, a moral maxim requires that the interest upon which it is grounded is an interest in complying with the law: “From the concept of an incentive arises that of an interest, which can never be attributed to any being unless it has reason and which signifies an incentive of the will insofar as it is represented by reason. Since in a morally good will the law itself must be the incentive, the moral interest is a pure sense-free interest of practical reason alone. On the concept of an interest is based that of a maxim. A maxim is therefore morally genuine only if it rests solely on the interest one takes in compliance with the law. All three concepts, however –that of an incentive, of an interest and of a maxim– can be applied only to finite beings. For they all presuppose a limitation of the nature of a being, in that the subjective constitution of its choice does not of itself accord with the objective law of a practical reason; they presuppose a need to be impelled to activity by something because an internal obstacle is opposed to it” (*KpI*, 5: 79-80). Now, this means that the maxim is universalizable, so that the action can be object of a categorical imperative: “the categorical imperative would be that which represented an action as objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end”. *GG*, 4: 414.

<sup>125</sup> One of the most common objections to the Kantian position is that it lacks a proper foundation of moral motivation. How could be possible to move oneself to act merely through the thought of the morality of the action? A good part of those objections derive from ignoring the fact that the possible universalization of the maxim generates, according to Kant, its proper incentive, a specifically moral one. And that this is precisely what defines the Kantian position: the human being experiences in himself the subjection to the moral law.

natural sciences. Insofar as the experimental method requires us to give the causes of observable phenomena, the properly moral determination is out of the reach of that method.<sup>126</sup>

Thinking of the moral agency as an agency determined by the formality of duty, more than by a motive ultimately backed up by moral sentiments rooted in human nature is one of the points that take apart Kant from Hume.

A further difference is that Kant is far from having a positive appraisal of habit or custom.

“Acquired habit—he writes in the *Anthropology*—deprives good actions of their moral value because it undermines mental freedom and, moreover, it leads to thoughtless repetitions of the same acts (monotony), and thus becomes ridiculous... The reason for being disgusted with someone’s acquired habits lies in the fact that the animal here predominates over the man, so that instinctively, according to the rule of acquired habit, that person is categorized as another nature, a nonhuman nature, so that he runs the risk of falling into the same class with the beast”.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>126</sup> Indeed, both if the maxim of the action is not universalizable—but merely generalizable—as if the agent does not determine himself to act because of the moral quality of the maxim but rather because any other motive, in the last account an eudemonistic motive, the action is not morally correct. In the first case that would be a sign that the agent considers certain empirical particularities, which separate himself from the rest of the rational beings, as determinant of his action; that is, the agent would consider himself an exception; in the second case, it would be a sign that, in his action, the agent inverts the due order of incentives: he subordinates the moral law to his own satisfaction, instead of subordinating his satisfaction to the fulfilment of the moral law. Insofar as the law, but not happiness, is the only universalizable thing, his action would be also influenced by empirical motives: “The human being (even the best) is evil only because he reverses the moral order of his incentives in incorporating them into his maxims. He indeed incorporates the moral law into those maxims, together with the law of self-love; since, however, he realizes that the two cannot stand on an equal footing, but one must be subordinated to the other as its supreme condition, he makes the incentives of self-love and their inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law—whereas it is this latter that, as the supreme condition of the satisfaction of the former, should have been incorporated into the universal maxim of the power of choice as the sole incentive”. Kant, *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason*, (onwards *Religion*), *Religion*, 6: 36.

<sup>127</sup> *Anthropology*, 7: 149.

Hence, Kant’s resistance to define moral virtue in terms of habit.<sup>128</sup> In this point, however, Kant introduces a significant difference between custom (*assuetudo*) and what he calls “free habit” (*habitus libertatis*): for him, moral virtue can only be defined by reference to the latter, and to this extent it must be considered not merely a disposition of *Willkür* but of the *Wille*.<sup>129</sup> In this way, Kant is probably closer to Scotus than to Aquinas, but at any rate, he stresses the difference with Hume: if it is to be moral, habit can never be a mere custom, because it has to affect radically our mind, rectifying it by reference to the law.

For Kant, what distinguishes the human being not merely from the rest of animals but also from the rest of nature is not merely the capacity of choice or deliberate desire, but rather the capacity to determine himself out of rational principles. In fact, in his writings on philosophy of history it is precisely the capacity of moral self-determination, the only aspect which subtracts itself to the cunning of nature, which covers all the realm of pragmatic reason—what Kant calls “culture”, which corresponds quite fine with Hume’s artifice. Indeed, insofar as culture or artifice can be the result of deliberation guided by passion, we have not yet reached a properly moral state, in which the human being determines himself out of merely rational principles.

Thus, the very fact that Kant develops his moral thought against a determinist view of nature does not lead him to exclude the possibility of

<sup>128</sup> “Virtue is not to be defined and valued merely as an aptitude and a long-standing habit of morally good actions acquired by practice. For unless this aptitude results from considered, firm, and continually purified principles, then, like any other mechanism of technically practical reason, it is neither armed for all situations nor adequately secured against the changes that new temptations could bring about”. *MM*, 6: 383-4.

<sup>129</sup> “An aptitude (*habitus*) is a facility in acting and a subjective perfection of choice. But not every such facility is a free aptitude (*habitus libertatis*); for if it is a habit (*assuetudo*), that is, a uniformity in action that has become a necessity through frequent repetition, it is not one that proceeds from freedom, and therefore not a moral aptitude. Hence virtue cannot be defined as an aptitude for free actions in conformity with law unless there is added ‘to determine oneself to act through the thought of the law’, and then this aptitude is not a property of choice but of the will, which is a faculty of desire that, in adopting a rule, also gives it as a universal law. Only such an aptitude can be counted as virtue. But two things are required for inner freedom: being one’s own master in a given case (*animus sui compos*), and ruling oneself (*imperium in semetipsum*), that is, subduing one’s affects and governing one’s passions. In these two states one’s character (*indoles*) is noble (*erecta*); in the opposite case it is mean (*indoles abiecta, serva*)” *MM*, 6: 407.

free causality. Moreover, his approach contains an invitation to think which form could adopt this causality in a world causally determined. Indeed, his approach allows to make explicit in which sense human agency is not reducible to natural events: precisely to the extent that the perspective of the agent cannot be reduced to the perspective of an external observer. Now, saving the irreducibility of action to natural events causally determined does not mean to introduce anything materially new into the world, anything, therefore, which concurs with legal causality in its own terms. What the agent introduces into the world is a determined form of assuming the causality of nature, namely: the form that derives from those ends that the agent imposes to himself.

#### VI. Recapitulation

We asked ourselves at the beginning in which sense spontaneous actions, which do not include deliberation, can be really regarded actions –if not intentional in Frankfurt’s sense, at least in Anscombe’s sense: as actions by reference to which we can put the question: “why did you do that?”. After this survey of several classical authors, it is time to recapitulate some achievements.

For Aristotle, action is an operation specific of rational agents, because only these can deliberate and order their behaviour according to what they think is best. In action the human being reveals himself as a specific kind of principle, not determined to one single effect, either by nature or by circumstances, in clear contrast to natural powers. In this sense, deliberate action appears as action in a strict sense, by reference to which we could explain also action in broad sense: either in terms of “lack of control” –that which derives from impulse or appetite– or else in terms of “accumulated elections” –that which derives from habit. A similar approach is to be found in Aquinas. For both authors, action in broad sense is action insofar as it refers to action in strict sense, something which “action in a broad sense” requires to retain the notion of power.

For Aristotle and Thomas, practical order requires freedom from natural determination, and this is assured in part through the contingency of the physical world. Yet, as soon as we consider that the natural uni-

verse is causally determined, so that there is no room left for contingency, it is no longer clear in which relevant sense human being can still regard himself as a different kind of principle. The only truth is that every natural effect has an equally natural cause; what we call freedom could be no more than an appearance. This is what Hume thinks, for whom deliberate action should not be explained by resort to a rational power, but only to the intelligent combination of psychological and social factors, passions and institutions. For him, action in strict sense is no more than a particularly artificial action.

That this solution is not a necessity is proven by the fact that in the very same universe Kant thinks that the reality of freedom could still be saved, if we depart from the moral fact as a fact so unavoidable as the fact of natural science, and legitimizing a perspective on human action diverse from that of natural science. However, the modern worldview, which accounts for the progress of natural science, forces Kant to formulate a concept of morality devoid of nature. Reduced now to pure form –the pure form of duty– morality appears now as the last refuge of humanity, for, in its material aspect, action is subject to the same laws as the rest of nature. Only from the moral perspective alone can the human being be recognized as a specific kind of principle, a principle not reducible either to natural laws nor the cunning of nature.

In the modern universe, at any rate, it is not strange to expand the use of the term “action” merely to every action in wide sense, but rather to the causation of every other movement<sup>130</sup>, just like we speak of the “action of water on stone”. Indeed, applying the causal scheme to human agency involves certain problems: if we understand the intentionality of action –its coming from deliberation or referring to it– in the same terms as we speak of some other natural cause, how could we be able to distinguish between the reflex movements –naturally caused– and properly intentional movements? How could we be able to account for omissions?

No matter how we answer those questions, which point at a more fundamental question about the nature of human agency, we have seen that in both Hume and Kant we can distinguish that structural duality

<sup>130</sup> Hume, for instance, speaks of action of the mind to refer to acts of perception, and Kant refers generally to the exercise or application of a force in the realm of nature.



between action in strict sense and action in wide sense, a duality, nevertheless, that each of them interprets in his own particular way.

Hume values above all the naturalness with which an action flows from character. This is why he privileges action conveyed in the spontaneity of custom. However, he retains a strict sense of action, insofar as the strength of mind involves the capacity to defer the gratification of a present passion because of the anticipation or the promotion of a remote interest, something which at any rate involves deliberation. For sure, this is not enough to speak of election in the active sense that the term has in Aristotle: to put oneself deliberately in the position to be determined by alien causes is not the same as deliberately choosing for oneself. This is why the control over passions, for Hume, depends more on the way our character has been configured than on the deliberation itself.

Kant, by contrast, wants to save the freedom of moral agency. For him, what truly distinguishes human action from every other causal process resides in the fact that the maxim informing the action follows from principles and not merely from passion. Insofar as the latter is compatible with deliberation and election, the more distinctively human action, the emphatically free action is no longer merely the one which follows a deliberate desire, but rather the one which results from a rational self-determination according to principles, which means a more restricted concept of action than the Aristotelian one.

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