

HUME ON THE LIMITS OF REASON IN THE REALM OF THE PRACTICAL: SOME ARISTOTELIAN OBSERVATIONS

Marián Kuna

Abstract: This essay examines critically the impact of Hume's conception of reason on ethics. In Hume's empirical ethics, the role traditionally attributed to reason is played by sentiment. Hume's conception of reason and its ethical implications are presented and possible objections to the limits he imposed on the role of reason in ethics are indicated. This analysis relies on Aristotelian arguments, and suggests that reason seems to play a more significant role in human action than Hume claimed. The paper concludes that showing Hume's restrictions on reason in human action as incorrect remains a genuine possibility.

Keywords: Hume, Aristotle, practical reason, moral sentiments, desire, the ergon argument, the human good.

Introduction

Reason is, and ought to be only the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.

David Hume (1987, 415)

[A]nd if appetites are strong and violent they even expel the power of calculation. Hence they should be moderate and few, and should in no way oppose to reason - and this is what we call an obedient and chastened state - and as the child should live according to the direction of his tutor, so the appetitive element should live according to reason. Hence the appetitive element in a temperate man should harmonize with reason.

Aristotle (NE 1119b 10-16)

This essay examines critically the impact of Hume's conception of reason on the realm of the practical. Hume's ethics, a significant part of his reflection on human action, rests largely on his distinctive understanding of reason. Reason is understood as a cognitive capacity that is fully descriptive, which results in imposing relatively strong limitations on its guiding ability in practical matters. Consequently, the impossibility of any rationalistic ethics is proclaimed. Hume proposed his own empirical

ethics where the role traditionally attributed to reason is played by sentiments which are said to be able to sustain our moral life.

My examination starts by describing the main features of Hume's conception of reason. After that I proceed to suggesting the basic implications of this conception for the practical domain. Finally, I will indicate possible objections to the limits Hume imposed on the role of reason in human action. My analysis relies on Aristotelian arguments, for I consider Aristotle a promising alternative to Hume. I will suggest some possible avenues of research that may establish the claim that reason plays a more significant role in human action than Hume claimed. I will conclude that the possibility of showing Hume's restrictions on reason in human action incorrect remains an open question.

1. The Notion of Reason

This section tries to answer the question: "What does 'reason' mean in Hume's thought and how did he arrive at it?" It may be unnecessary to say that to understand Hume's conception of reason one must take into account his empiricist assumptions. This requires bearing in mind that for Hume all knowledge is, in one way or the other, dependent on (sensual) experience. Then reason, being aimed at knowing the truth, must be primarily concerned with perceptions that are either impressions (vivid sensual experience) or ideas (faded impressions), see Hume (1975, section II). Perceptions constitute all the material of thinking and are derived either from sensation or from reflection, see Hume (1975, 19).

There are two forms of reasoning recognized by Hume, namely: demonstrative – concerning relations of ideas, and probable – concerning matters of fact and existence. Whereas the former provides us with certainty (having its objects accessible via intuition or demonstration), the latter provides us at best with probability.¹ This is because whereas probable reasoning deals with ideas and matters of fact, and is tied to experience as well as open to revision and falsification, demonstrative

¹ Demonstration requires, for Hume, some standard or measure which is possible only in algebra and arithmetic (Owen, 95). This is because, as Hume puts it, they are "the only sciences, in which we can carry on a chain of reasoning to any degree of intricacy, and yet preserve a perfect exactness and certainty" Hume (1987, 71).

reasoning is dependent only on ideas (and relations among them)² (see Hume 1987, 69). However, as David Owen suggests, Hume's treatment of these two types of reasoning as exhaustive might be seen as controversial (see Owen 1999, 86). He also argues against taking the "demonstrative/probable" contrast as something we understood by the "deductive/inductive" distinction (see Owen 1999, 87). Rather, he argues that Hume, following Locke and Descartes, did not mean demonstrative reasoning in the sense of its formal account (see Owen 1999, 91). Demonstrative propositions are those the falsity of which is inconceivable (see Owen 1999, 99). This explains why matters of fact (in which negation or falsity is always conceivable) cannot be known as demonstrations and fall into the scope of probable reasoning.³

Having sketched briefly some aspects of demonstrative reasoning I will now touch upon some basic aspects of probable reasoning (see Hume 1987, part 3 Book I, 3-6). The idea of causation plays an important role in Hume's effort to account for this sort of reasoning. This is because, as Owen suggests, for Hume "the only way we can come to believe in the existence of objects, or relations between them, that lie beyond what we can sense or remember, is to reason on the basis of the relation of causation" (Owen 1999, 113). Hume rejected the possibility of demonstration of the causal maxim, for it would be possible that experience would be unnecessary for identifying causal connections which are, however, counterfactual see (Owen 1999, 115). However, as Owen emphasizes, from this it does not follow that the maxim is not true; it is only its demonstrative certainty which is rejected (see Owen 1999, 116). Then, with respect to causation, we can never have knowledge, which is reserved to demonstrative sciences, but only probability. Owen stresses that when Hume is concerned with the examination of our beliefs, and of those in the unobserved in particular, his main concern is not with their justification, but rather with their explanation (see Owen 1999, 118).

² Propositions of demonstrative reasoning cannot be made false as "they depend solely on the ideas that make them up" (Owen 1999, 97). Hume claims that "the only [proper] objects of the abstract sciences or of demonstration are quantity and number, and [...] all attempts to extend this more perfect sciences of knowledge beyond these bounds are mere sophistry and illusion" (Hume 1975, 163).

³ Hume, for example, rejected the possibility of demonstrative inference with respect to causation (for the alleged cause is conceivable without the alleged effect) (see Owen 1999, 102).

So, what is then Hume's conception of reason? Owen mentions and rejects two positions typically ascribed to Hume, one that interprets him as an extreme sceptic with respect to probable reasoning, the other that sees him as one whose argument was mainly directed against an out-moded rationalist conception of reason (see Owen 1999, 120 – 121). He also suggests that understanding Hume's distinction between demonstrative and probable reasoning “requires rejecting the characterization of either type of reasoning as involving deductive validity” (Owen 1999, 124). By and large it is possible to argue that for Hume probable reasoning was not based in reason as a cognitive faculty.⁴ This is because, as far as probable reasoning is concerned, reason is not an explanatory faculty, but functions in the context of mutually interacting impressions and ideas; it is the associative principles of the imagination that provide this sort of reasoning with its proper basis (see Owen 1999, 222). This is a distinctive feature of Hume's account of reasoning which puts him at odds with his predecessors and suggests a very different schema of human understanding. As Owen puts it

[i]n Hume's view, reason is not an independently functioning faculty which acts alone, following only its own rules. The beliefs we form as a result of a chain of reasoning are formed only when enough vivacity is communicated to the last idea in the chain. Beliefs cannot be formed in isolation from the sensitive side of our nature [...]. And even if [...] beliefs could be formed by reason in isolation from the sensitive side of our natures, they would not survive [Hume's] sceptical arguments (Owen 1999, 192).

This brief sketch of Hume's conception of reason does not pretend to do justice to the complexity of his argument on the issue in question. However, I believe that for the limited purpose of this essay it is justifiable to proceed now to the question of the implication of this conception of reason for human action.

⁴ It is important to bear in mind Owen's interpretation of Hume's statement that in forming the results of probable reasoning we are not determined by reason. For it means neither that these results are unreasonable nor that they have no justification. He thinks that the claim rather points to the fact that “the production of beliefs in the unobserved is not explained by the faculty of reason functioning in the way it is normally functioning”, and at this stage rather than with justification of our beliefs Hume was concerned with explaining them (see Owen 1999, 137). Thus, Hume's point is that “any appeal to an independent faculty of reason would be explanatory fruitless” [*sic*] given his overall account of reasoning (see Owen 1999, 137).

2. Hume's Reason and the Realm of the Practical

The implications of Hume's account of reason for the understanding and justification of human actions have proven significant. For, given his account of reason, reason is proclaimed incapable of providing us with reasons for actions and, consequently, any action-guiding conclusion based on reason is ruled out. Since enquiry concerning human actions (and morality in particular) does not deal with objects that *may not be* (but rather with propositions that may be false) we cannot have any *a priori* knowledge about them. Hume's argument (see Hume 1975, 103 – 104), goes like this:

1. Objects of enquiry are such that their negation:
 - i) *either* involves contradiction (e.g. quantity and number)
 - ii) *or* does not involve contradiction (the matter of fact and existence)
2. The existence of any object that is ii) can be proved only by arguments that depend on experience (object's cause and effect)
3. Demonstrative knowledge concerns i) and probability concerns ii)
4. All human actions fall under ii)
5. ∴ There can be no demonstration concerning human actions
(1 ii), 2, 3, 4)
6. ∴ There can be no *a priori* knowledge concerning human actions
(3, 4, 5)

This argument implies that any enquiry concerning human action, and so also morality, cannot have the form of demonstrative science, for it necessarily involves more than only those relations that have a relevant degree of certainty (and cannot be changed without any change in the ideas). This conclusion conjoined with his view of reason as inert lead Hume to the rejection of any rationalistic ethics. He believes that some non-rationalistic (namely empirical) ethics will provide us with guidance in moral matters, as reason is proclaimed incapable of doing so. Hume claims that sentiments (passions) have such guiding (motivational) authority over us in action. This conclusion is related to his argument concerning the motivational aspect of human actions. In the section "Of the influencing motives of the will" he argues that "reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will" (Hume 1987, 413) and the argument may be reconstructed as follows:⁵

⁵ I borrowed this formulation from Howard Robinson (Empiricism Course, Fall 2001 CEU Budapest).

1. Action necessarily involves desire (passion)
2. Reason concerns truth
3. Desires are neither true nor false
4. ∴ Reason cannot determine the appropriateness (correctness) of desire (2, 3)
5. ∴ Reason cannot determine action (1, 4)
6. ∴ No desire/preference is more or less rational (2, 3)

Hume allows for only two senses in which passion can be described as unreasonable, namely when it assumes something non-existent, or when we are mistaken about relevant means for its object (see Hume 1987, 416). So, when neither of these two instances is the case, it does not make any sense for Hume to speak about the opposition or any other motivational dissonance between reason and passion. All this seems to lead Hume to the radical statement that “[t]is as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledg'd lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than for he latter” (Hume 1987, 416).

Again, it is worth reminding ourselves of Hume's assumptions - findings he believes he has proved. Moral enquiry for Hume is not demonstrative science and therefore only the experimental method (and deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances) fits its subject matter (see Hume 1987, 174).

His claim that moral distinctions are not derived from reason can be understood after his account of morals and reason is presented. Starting from the fact that morality has influence on human actions, and given Hume's claim that “an active principle cannot be founded on an inactive principle”, once reason is considered as inactive in itself then it is declared incapable of motivating us to act (Hume 1987, 457). If this is true, then it might follow that morals cannot be derived (concluded) from reason (see Hume 1987, 456 – 457). However, before some objections are raised against this chain of reasoning, it may be important to remind ourselves what is here understood by reason.⁶ Reason concerns truth or

⁶ Hume claims that “[r]eason [...] is nothing but the comparing of ideas, and the discovery of their relations” (Hume 1987, 466). Then if morality consisted in these relations, Hume argues, animals and human beings would be susceptible of the same morality, given the fact that they are susceptible of the same relations. He gives an example pointing to the fact that, whereas incest is considered by human beings as criminal, the *same* relations in animals are not exposed to the same moral condemnation (see Hume

falsehood, and “truth [...] consists in an agreement or disagreement either to *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact” (Hume 1987, 458). Then, what is neither true or false cannot be the object of reason, which is for Hume precisely the case with passions. Consequently he claims that “[a]ctions may be laudable or blamable; but they cannot be reasonable or unreasonable” (Hume 1987, 458). Nevertheless, there is some room for the activity of reason with respect to human conduct, for it “[e]ither [...] excites a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it; or [...] discovers the connexion of causes and effects, so as to afford us means of exerting any passion” (Hume 1987, 459). Whereas the former concerns the descriptive ability of reason, the latter suggests Hume's instrumental understanding of it. Hume supports his view by appeal to the fact that individuals are not morally blamed when mistaken about facts (being involuntary), as falsehood is not generally considered immoral (see Hume 1987, 459). Moreover, moral distinctions influence our actions, but reason can be at best only the mediate cause of an action⁷ (see Hume 1987, 462). Thus Hume claims that reason does not play any active role in producing moral distinctions.⁸ Hume denies the possibility of demonstration in morality; furthermore, reasoning about any matter of fact is severely limited.⁹ Our conduct is regulated entirely by our sentiments since they have the highest degree of reality as far as the human being is concerned (see Hume 1987, 469; 1975, 165).

Hume's restrictions on reason's involvement in human action are likely to attract substantial disagreement among those who are more optimistic (for Hume probably too optimistic) about the guiding role of practical reason in action. A possible response these critics could offer against Hume's argument is the content of the next section.

1987, 467 - 468). However, I think that it is possible to question Hume's belief in the sameness of the aforementioned relations.

⁷ This is probably what Hume has in mind when suggesting that “*reason* and *sentiment* may concur in almost all moral determinations and conclusions” (Hume 1975, 172).

⁸ The claim that moral rules are not the conclusions of our reason means, according to Owen, that “a creature with all its rational capacities intact, but deficient in passions and sentiments, will be incapable of making moral judgements” (Owen 1999, 200).

⁹ Hume defends his claim by showing that as far as virtue and vice are concerned there can be no matter of fact about them, but only feelings (sentiments of approval or disapproval) (see Hume 1987, 468 - 469).

3. Aristotle and Hume on the Role of Reason in Human Action

Anyone who is reluctant to accept Hume's limitations imposed on reason in human action must answer the question: "What are the most problematic parts of Hume's account?" I suggest that there may be at least two lines of such a criticism. The first could be to search for some internal inconsistency in Hume's arguments. The second could be to accept the internal consistency of Hume's argument, but still deny that we should accept Hume's starting points, so his conclusions.

The option to challenge Hume's argument "from within" I will leave aside here and rather focus on the search for possible counterarguments from the position which is external to him. There are, on the whole, two most developed non-Humean accounts of practical rationality: Aristotelian and Kantian. Though each of them is worth considering as such I decided to concentrate here only on the (possible) Aristotelian response to Hume's account of practical rationality.

In spite of the fact that Hume and Aristotle are generally regarded as being at odds with respect to their accounts of practical rationality, I believe that some significant points of agreement may be found between the two. However, to suggest this is not to claim that Hume is in fact an Aristotelian and *vice versa*. My claim is rather more moderate than this, for I suggest that we may find some views shared by Aristotle and Hume while, at the same time, other views make them diverge from each other.¹⁰ Importantly enough, these latter views are quite fundamental and falsify any initial impression of similarity between the two. Put differently, I argue that a relatively small difference in their accounts makes a difference. To defend this conclusion I will first point to what I

¹⁰ Dagmar Smreková and Zuzana Palovičová make a provocative and interesting point claiming that the ethical theories of Aristotle and Hume, despite their differences (in content and methodology), fall under the same ethical tradition in which "what is (what is desirable) is not strictly separated from what is (from the facticity of human life)" (Smreková - Palovičová 2003, 11, my translation). The truth of this claim is going to depend, I think, upon their understanding of the notion of "ethical tradition". If understood more strictly, for instance, in the sense MacIntyre uses the term, their claim may prove more controversial than it may appear at the first sight. What MacIntyre means by "tradition" I critically analyze in my paper (see MacIntyre 1988; Kuna 2005). If, however, their claim is interpreted less strictly as pointing to the fact that both Aristotle and Hume shared a general commitment to a formulation of an adequate ethical theory based on some fundamental and essential features of human beings (e.g., a rational ability or capacity of having moral sentiments) then its plausibility will be much higher.

take to be the similarities between Aristotle and Hume on the issue in question, and after that I proceed to the points of their fundamental division. The aforementioned discussion will be an important step forward in establishing (though not yet within the framework of this essay) the claim that Aristotle's account of practical reasoning, one allowing practical reason to have some motivational force and action-guiding ability, better fits human moral experience, and can be demonstrated as superior to that of Hume.¹¹

I trust that any proper understanding of Aristotle's account of practical reasoning requires taking into consideration the complexity and interrelatedness of his argument in his *Ethics* centered around such notions as reason, (voluntary) action, virtues, and feelings, etc. The notion of the rational soul seems to be one of the best points to begin with, because it is distinctive of humans. It is comprised of two parts, each having its own proper objects, distinctive forms of excellence (virtues), and different involvement in human action. One of them – the scientific part – enables us to “study beings whose principles do not admit being otherwise than they are”, whereas the other – called by Aristotle the rationally calculating part – is concerned with objects that do admit alteration (see Aristotle NE 1139a 8). This point seems to resemble Hume's distinction between reason's capacity for demonstrative and probable reasoning.¹²

Another “Humean” statement can be read in Aristotle's claim that thought itself does not initiate motion (activity) and that the only way in which thought may exercise some motivational capacity is “thought aiming at some goal and concerned with action” (Aristotle NE 1139a 37).

A further important point that supports the impression of similarity between Aristotle and Hume concerns their respective views of the role of human feelings and emotions in human action. Aristotle clearly acknowledges the fact that desires (emotions, feelings) not only do play, but also ought to play, a very important role in motivating the rational agent to perform specifically human action.¹³ Moreover, such an agent

¹¹ A possible strategy of defending a distinctively Aristotelian understanding of rationality is (in a Thomistic fashion) exemplified by MacIntyre and I depict his approach in my paper (see MacIntyre 1988; Kuna 2005).

¹² This is misconceived, however, and this is clear once the nature of Aristotle's practical reason is properly interpreted.

¹³ It appears, almost as a matter of common sense, that any agent who lacks her emotional and desirative capacities would be in some significant sense one we do not generally

would be for Aristotle one that cannot enjoy the status of the excellent (virtuous) human being due to the lack of proper emotional responses to the situation in which she is expected to act.

These two apparent points – first, the inability of theoretical reason to provide motives for action, and second, the understanding of desires as motive-providing states – may be taken, having Aristotle's argument misread, as evidence of a fundamental agreement between Hume and Aristotle. In order to refute this it is important to show that although the points of disagreement are not very apparent at the first sight, nevertheless they are fundamental.

Reason and Action. With respect to the first point it needs to be said that, though Aristotle acknowledges no guiding role for theoretical reason (the scientific part) in action, still practical reason (the rationally calculating part) is crucial for deliberating about, and performing, an action. It is also very important to not overlook Aristotle's comment that “the function of each of the understanding parts is truth; and so the virtue of each part will be the state that makes that part grasp the truth most of all” (Aristotle, NE 1139b 12). I realize that the Humean may accept this and nevertheless still argue that it is not, but compatible with, Hume's account of practical reason understood as purely instrumental and generating hypothetical reasons for action. However, I think that this remark would miss the point. This is because for Aristotle's (practically) intelligent agent (*phronimos*) to have developed well the capacity of instrumental calculation it is only necessary, but far from sufficient. Put in the Aristotelian manner, the intelligent person must be clever, but a clever person is not yet intelligent (see Aristotle, NE 1144a 30).

Intelligence (*phronesis*) is an intellectual excellence (virtue) of that part of the soul that concerns deliberation and action. Before more is said about this virtue I would like to point to Aristotle's view of the relation between rationality and motivation for action. For Aristotle

the principle of an action – the source of motion [...] – is decision, and the principle of decision is *desire together with reason* that aims at some goal. Hence decision requires understanding and thought, and also a state of char-

consider a fully human agent. I am aware of the fact that this is commonsensical only for those who do not adhere to the Kantian picture of practical rationality and deliberation.

acter, since doing well or badly in action requires both thought and character (Aristotle, NE 1139a 32, my italics).

He also claims that "(d)esire is for the goal. Hence decision is either understanding combined with desire or desire combined with thought; and what originates movement in this way is a human being" (Aristotle, NE 1139b 4). These remarks seem to draw a picture of reason's involvement in action that is less limited than that of Hume.

As I said earlier I will now turn to the virtue of intelligence and its corresponding figure, the intelligent agent (*phronimos*). Such an exposition may help us to understand the important aspects in which she is more than the clever (purely instrumentally calculating) agent – which is the most Hume would allow for rationality to take part in human action. Hume's clever agent uses instrumental rationality to achieve her goals *whatever* they happen to be. Contrary to mere cleverness, Aristotle's virtue of intelligence is "a state grasping truth, involving reason, concerned with action about what is *good* or *bad* for human being" (Aristotle, NE 1140b 5, my italics). I have already suggested that cleverness (the capacity for purely instrumental deliberation) is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for being the intelligent agent. I want to point to another important aspect of this. It can be found in Aristotle's view that whereas the clever agent might and might not be good, the intelligent agent *is* good and *vice versa* (see Aristotle, NE 1144a 25-35).

To conclude: Aristotle's practical reason plays a fundamental role in human action and this role goes beyond a mere instrumental calculation of the ways to achieve an end, for it also engages in the *determination* of which goals are worth pursuing (substantive deliberation). Now, let us move to the second point of disagreement between Hume and Aristotle, namely to the problem of the relation between reason and desires.

Reason and Desires. Hume considers desires as motivational or, in other words, end-directed states. They originate in the sensitive part of human nature and constitute the active principle that influences us in performing our actions. Given Hume's understanding of reason as inert, in itself, and concerned with truth/falsity rather than with action, I think that in his account the distinction between the desirable/undesirable goals seems to collapse into the distinction between desired/undesired goals. Now, though Aristotle would agree with the claim that emotions do motivate us towards and against some goal or course of action he would

certainly have kept the two distinctions quite separate from each other.¹⁴ In other words, whereas Hume presents something like a desire-dependent account of the good (things *are* good because we desire them), Aristotle's account is a desire-independent one (things that *seem* to us good are desired by us; they *might* and *might not* be *really* good, nevertheless). Aristotle recognizes that desires are deeply rooted in our nature, from which it does not follow however, that all of them are equally correct/natural.¹⁵ (Now, let me remind ourselves that the question of correctness/falsity of desires makes no sense for Hume.¹⁶) Humans have some desires that support and some that conflict with (go against) the full development of human being. And here Aristotle's intelligent agent is crucial, for it is the one who not only judges rightly but also has correct desires, and in this sense she is a sort of standard or measure: all this is due to her having acquired all the necessary virtues to lead the good life (see Aristotle, NE 1113a 33-4). Only she can properly decide which desires are valuable and which are destructive of human well-being and ought to be rejected and suppressed. Aristotle's excellent person, having correct rational assessment of the situation along with proper desires, performs excellent actions. For, as he puts it, "if [...] the deci-

¹⁴ Now, Aristotle may allow for Hume's claim that a desire is required for motivation, but still maintain that desire is correct only if its object is what is *really* good. With respect to this point Aristotle's discussion of the points of difference and similarity between the virtuous, continent and incontinent person may be very instructive. What they all have in common is the right judgement, but whereas the first has also correct desires, the desires of the second and the third figure are base. However, whereas the continent person is able to act against her desires, the incontinent person does not display this sort of rational self-control (see Aristotle, NE 1145b 12-15). The incontinent person is the most interesting here, given the argument of this essay, due to her *ability both to be motivated and to act against her desires*. This seems to suggest that reason can have some important motivational force. The Humean may object, of course, that an incontinent person is motivated by another desire which conflicts with the original desire that urges her to perform a morally bad act. The only answer I can offer here is that this "another desire" (or in this case the stronger one) seems to be inseparably tied to the human capacity of rationality. If it is possible to demonstrate this, then it may follow that reason cannot be entirely ruled out of motivation.

¹⁵ Desires may be, according to Aristotle, so powerful that they prevent an agent even from instrumental reasoning. He believes that they should be moderate and obedient to reason (see Aristotle, NE 1119b 10-13).

¹⁶ Why this is so is clear once Hume's understanding of truth is recalled. Let me also quote Hume again when saying that "[r]eason [...] is nothing but the comparing of ideas, and the discovery of their relations" (Hume 1987, 466).

sion is excellent, the reason must be *true* and desire is *correct*, so that what reason asserts is what desire pursues"¹⁷ (Aristotle, NE 1139a 23, my italics). This is the point where Hume would probably object to Aristotle's chain of reasoning. For Aristotle's argument clearly presupposes his teleological account of human nature and of the good, one unacceptable for Hume.¹⁸ Consequently, the question that remains for any Aristotelian is whether Aristotle can provide a compelling argument for his teleological scheme along with his formulation of the good for man. In other words, it is important to answer successfully Hume's criticism of deriving evaluative claims from non-evaluative facts. This sort of criticism is directed against deriving "ought" from "is" and is well known as "Hume's Law". However, Hume's argument can be read in more than one way. First, it may mean that the transition from "is"-statements to "ought"-statements deserves careful examination and no one (including Aristotle) would probably deny this. It is quite a different thing however, if his point is taken as suggesting the impossibility of this derivation.¹⁹ So, it is important to ask the following questions: "Does Aristotle derive "ought" from "is"?" or, in other words, "Does he reduce evaluative claims to empirical facts?" I believe that he does not commit the sort of reductionism Hume criticized. This is because his *ergon* argument, employed in his formulation of the human good, does not presuppose the inferential derivation from fact (about human nature) to value (the human good). Why?

The correct interpretation of Aristotle's *ergon* argument is crucial, for it may be taken mistakenly as evidence of his fallacious naturalism. The argument is introduced at the beginning of Aristotle's substantive account of the good for man and goes roughly as follows.²⁰

¹⁷ Correct desires are, according to Aristotle, those that have the (objective) good as their object.

¹⁸ This is important, for if Aristotle is able to offer a compelling account of value he will also be able to demonstrate that what is good for an agent is independent of her motivational states. This is necessary to make sense of his further claim that only action that is good (or, in other words, is in the true interest of an agent) can be considered as rational to choose. The possible answer is suggested in his *ergon* argument that I will touch upon in what follows.

¹⁹ Mackie lists several possible ways of deriving "ought" from "is", which count against this stronger reading and show it as controversial (see Mackie 1980, 61 – 62).

²⁰ The distinction between Aristotle's substantive and formal account of the good for man I borrowed from Timothy Roche (see Roche 1992, 177).

1. Anything that has an *ergon* (function) is evaluated on the basis of how well it performs that *ergon*.
2. Man has a function and it is a specifically human function, for it would be strange if man “has none, and it is by nature idle” (Aristotle, NE 1097b 31).
3. What is this function? Being a specifically human function, it is something that human beings do not share with plants or animals.
4. Therefore it is “some sort of life of action of the <part of the soul> that has reason” (Aristotle, NE 1098a 4).
5. The good for man is exhibited by someone who performs the specifically human function well (see Aristotle, NE 1098a 14).
6. The human good is defined as “the soul’s activity that expresses virtue [... a]nd if there are more virtues than one, the good will express the best and most complete virtue” (Aristotle, NE 1098a 16).
7. Finally, it must be done “in a complete life”, since *eudaimonia* is an enduring state concerning one’s life as a whole.

Now, what is it we might learn from this? Alfonso Gomez-Lobo interprets this argument in a way that challenges its traditional reading. He argues that Aristotle does not argue that the good of human beings consists in the (unqualified) exercise of their function (characteristic activity), but rather in exercising it *well* (see Gomez-Lobo 1989, 172 – 173). Further, the notion of *ergon* is not evaluative, but neutral and entirely descriptive.²¹ Aristotle’s reference to the human function does not provide us with any sort of evaluation and “[t]he evaluative judgement about the performance of an *ergon* is logically independent of the discovery and neutral description of the characteristic activity of a given class of objects or persons” (Gomez-Lobo 1989, 175 – 176). Then, if a good X is to be identified, two steps are required: first – descriptive (the identification of X’s *ergon*), and second – evaluative (the identification of a good performance of this *ergon*). This enables Gomez-Lobo to conclude the existence of the logical independence between facts (human *ergon*) and value (the human good) in Aristotle’s *ergon* argument. This is to proclaim that Aristotle does not commit fallacious inference from step 4 to step 5 of my reconstruction. Even if we accept this, some question remains. It concerns

²¹ To establish this conclusion, Gomez-Lobo points to the fact that an unqualified performer and a good performer have generically identical functions, for there “is no ergon peculiar to good performer” (Gomez-Lobo 1989, 176).

step 2 of the argument, which asserts that there is the specifically human function. For if it is possible that there is no such function, the rest of the argument would seem to lack its foundation. This, however, goes far beyond the scope of this paper and therefore I cannot pursue this question here. I would rather conclude that Gomez-Lobo's advocacy of Aristotle's formulation of the good for man, as one that is not founded in fallacious derivation of value from fact, seems to pose a serious challenge to any Humean denial of desire-independent account of the good.²²

Then, given the discussion above, it seems that it is possible to establish the claim that desire (can be correct/incorrect and) is correct only if its object is what is really good. Consequently, the Aristotelian may reasonably claim that what makes action good is independent of an agent's contingent motivational states.

Though I cannot yet provide an ultimate argument for the superiority of Aristotle's account of practical rationality to that of Hume, I believe that my discussion of these issues may serve as a good starting point for such an argument. It may be best if I finish my paper with an assessment summary the Aristotelian could offer faced with Hume's argument as formalized in the second section of this paper. The argument went as follows:

1. Action necessarily involves desire (passion)
2. Reason concerns truth
3. Desires are neither true nor false
4. ∴ Reason cannot determine the appropriateness (correctness) of desire (2,3)
5. ∴ Reason cannot determine action (1, 4)
6. ∴ No desire/preference is more or less rational

Aristotle would agree with 1, but immediately comment on 2 that it is not only theoretical reason which concerns truth, since there is also something like the truth in practical activity, and practical reason is the special cognitive capacity concerned with it. The person who is excellent in the exercise of this latter capacity is called intelligent (*phronimos*). The figure of the intelligent agent enables us to connect 2 and 3 since she is

²² A quite different strategy would be to claim that man's *ergon* is not in fact non-evaluative and therefore Aristotle *cannot* reduce values to the facts here. However, I do not want to pursue this line of argument here, as I found Gomez-Lobo's argument quite compelling.

also the one who is good and has correct/rational desires. Moreover, 3 – desires are neither true nor false – is not true for Aristotle, since some desires are correct and some are incorrect (given his desire-independent account of the good), and it is precisely the intelligent agent who is in possession of (not only right judgement but also) correct desires. Consequently, the three conclusions do stand in need of a substantial modification, which may go as follows: 4, (practical) reason can (and ought to) determine appropriateness of desire (and it is up to the intelligent agent to do so); 5, reason (collaborating with desire) can (and ought to) determine action; and also 6, some desires are more rational than others (namely those which have the [objective] good as their object).

The thrust of this essay was a critical examination of the impact of Hume's conception of reason on the realm of the practical. I started with describing Hume's notion of reason. After that I suggested implications of this conception of reason on the realm of human action. Finally, I indicated and elaborated possible objections to Hume's approach. My analysis relied on Aristotelian arguments, for I have considered Aristotle a superior alternative to Hume. I discussed the points of similarity along with the points of difference between them, mainly with respect to two issues: first, the relation between reason and action; and second, the relation between reason and desires. This enabled me, I believe, to indicate some possible avenues of further research that may establish the claim that reason plays a more important role in human action than was allowed by Hume.

My concluding suggestion is that though the Aristotelian picture of the role of reason in action has not yet been conclusively proven superior to that of Hume's, I doubt the opposite has been demonstrated either. Consequently, I believe that the possibility of showing Hume's restrictions on reason in the sphere of action incorrect remains open.

*Katedra filozofie
Filozofická fakulta KU v Ružomberku
Hrabovská cesta 1
034 01 Ružomberok
kuna@fphil.ku.sk*

REFERENCES

- BUNIN, N. – TSUI-JAMES, E. P. (eds.) (1996): *The Blackwell's Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- GOMEZ-LOBO, A. (1989): The Ergon Inference. *Phronesis* 34, 170 – 184.
- HUGHES, G. J. (2001): *Aristotle on Ethics*. London: Routledge.
- HUME, D. (1975): *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- HUME, D. (1987): *A Treatise of Human Nature*. (ed.) L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- IRWIN, T. – FINE, G. (1995): *Aristotle: Selections*. Indianapolis, In. – Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett.
- MACINTYRE, A. (1988): *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth.
- MACKIE, J. L. (1980): *Hume's Moral Theory*. London: Routledge.
- MOORE, G. E. (1922): Hume's Philosophy. In: Moore, G. E.: *Philosophical Studies*. London: Kegan Paul.
- KENNY, A. (1998): *A Brief History of Western Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- KUNA, M. (2005): MacIntyre on Tradition, Rationality, and Relativism. *Res Publica. Journal for Social and Legal Philosophy* 11, č. 3, 251 – 272.
- OWEN, D. (1999): *Hume's Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ROCHE, T. (1992): In Defense of an Alternative View of the Foundation of Aristotle's Moral Theory. *Phronesis* 37, 46 – 84.
- SMREKOVÁ D. – PALOVIČOVÁ Z. (2003): *Dobro a cnosť. Etická tradícia a súčasnosť*. Bratislava: Iris.