

Prudential Reasons

D. CLAYTON HUBIN, Ohio State University

So much of importance hinges on judgments about someone's rationality that it is nearly disgraceful how unclear we are about this concept. Judgments of irrationality are used to justify paternalistic intervention into people's lives and, as a result, mental institutions are replete with people who are in cages because their actions are 'contrary to reason'. Furthermore, when someone engages in extremely dangerous or bizarre behaviour simply because he enjoys it, this is seen by many as proof of at least some degree of irrationality. The idea appears to be that imprudent acts are irrational.

This claim seems to me to engender confusion. But, after all, rationality is a difficult concept; we should not be surprised to find that many are unclear about it. We might, though, expect philosophers to be more clear than most about rationality and its relation to prudence.

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And, in a sense, we are not disappointed; for when philosophers are confused about these issues, their confusions are more clearly stated.

Noble or otherwise, there is a philosophical tradition which holds that rationality requires the performance of certain acts and the avoidance of others. Some versions of natural law theory represent a crude application of this principle to ethical and legal questions. Also in this tradition, Kant clearly holds that there are substantive constraints on what anyone can rationally will and, hence, on what acts they can rationally perform.¹ More recently, we find Thomas Nagel,² David Gauthier,³ and Russell Grice⁴ all claiming that everyone has a reason to act morally. Each of these philosophers begins by arguing that *prudence* is a requirement of rationality. The strategy has then been to extend the same argument, in some fashion or other, to yield the conclusion that morality is also a rational requirement. Presumably they believe it easier to show the connection between prudence and rationality than that between morality and rationality.

My primary concern in this paper is not with the dispute over whether everyone necessarily has a reason to act morally, though I will have a few comments to make about that dispute in closing. I am chiefly interested here in the question of whether *prudence* is a rational requirement. I shall argue that prudential reasons are not necessarily reasons for every person. Of course, if I succeed in showing this, it will make the arguments of Nagel, Gauthier, and Grice considerably less plausible. Furthermore, the distinctions I draw and the arguments I present will be directly applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to the question of the rationality of immorality. My arguments will also have consequences for those theories which would justify paternalistic intervention on the grounds that the person interfered with is irrational.

Agent-Perspective Reasons and Reasons from a Point of View

I shall begin by pointing out a distinction which would be too obvious to mention were it not for the fact that it is often overlooked or

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- 1 See, for instance, Kant's examples of the first formulation of the categorical imperative.
 - 2 Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).
 - 3 David Gauthier, *Practical Reasoning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).
 - 4 Russell Grice, *The Grounds of Moral Judgement* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967).

denied.⁵ This distinction is between agent-perspective reasons and reasons from a point of view. I will not say all that needs to be said about these two senses of 'reason', but I think that the distinction will become clear.

Imagine a person so incredibly wealthy that ordinary economic considerations do not provide reasons for him. A natural way of describing such a case is to say that economic reasons are not reasons for this man. Perhaps this is simply because economic reasons do not apply to a person of such wealth. But consider another case. Imagine, if this is still conceivable, a person who is appointed to political office but is a statesman by nature rather than a politician. For such a man, political reasons — reasons in terms of his, or his party's, future in politics — may not be reasons for acting. It is not that political reasons do not apply to a man in such a position; it is, rather, that they do not apply to such a man (that is, a man having his concerns and interests). This is not because he doesn't recognize them as political reasons (and, hence, as reasons in one sense of the word). Indeed, it may be precisely *because* he recognizes them as political reasons that they do not serve to justify his actions⁶. Such a man simply does not care about the goals and values that generate political reasons. Political reasons are, then, reasons from a point of view — from the political point of view. They need not be reasons from any particular agent's point of view (agent-perspective reasons), though, for no one need adopt the political point of view.

In general, a person may ignore reasons from some point of view even if he is well aware of them without this counting against his rationality. To ignore a known political reason counts, usually, against one's being a political person — not, all by itself, against one's being a rational person. It only counts against one's rationality if one *is* a political person — if one does care about the goals and values which generate political reasons.

On the contrary, to ignore a known reason of the kind I shall call 'agent — perspective reasons' does always count against one's rationality. A person has this sort of reason for acting if, and only if, there is a reason

5 This confusion seems pervasive enough that it is somewhat arbitrary to single out any author as suffering from it. Grice surely confuses these two senses of 'reason' in the previously cited work. D. A. J. Richard seems also to muddle the distinction because he treats rationality as if it is a substantive point of view and claims that moral reasons are superior to reasons derived from it.

6 This is true because someone might hold that if this person were to mistake a political reason for some other kind of reason, and hence to believe that he had some sort of non-political justification for his action, his action may be (in some subjective sense) justified.

in virtue of *his* desired ends — in virtue of the goals and values which *he* wishes to be realized whatever these may be. Clearly, as I am using the phrase, one may have a reason for acting without knowing that he does and even without being able to entertain it. (I will deal later with the person who pursues ends we consider irrational and in what sense such a person might be called irrational.) We may think of agent-perspective reasons as reasons from the agent's point of view, but they are clearly distinct from what I have been calling 'reasons from a point of view'. Agent-perspective reasons are reasons merely in virtue of a means/end relationship between a given action and the desired ends of the agent. No constraint is put on the content of the agent's desires and, hence, the phrase 'the agent's point of view' does not define a substantive point of view.

Reasons from a point of view, on the contrary, do define substantive points of view. Reasons from a point of view are reasons in virtue of being derivable from certain principles which define that point of view. (If the point of view is purely teleological, one can think of the point of view as being defined by certain goals, and reasons from this point of view as being generated by the fact that certain actions lead to the realization of these goals.)

Given what has been said about agent-perspective reasons it is clear why ignoring known reasons of this sort *does* always count against one's rationality. In contrast to reasons from a point of view, we cannot say that a person does not care about the goals and values which generate agent-perspective reasons. These goals and values are simply whatever goals and values the agent *does* care about.

I will have more to say later about the distinction between reasons from a point of view and agent-perspective reasons. Specifically, I shall discuss the relationship between agent-perspective reasons and rationality. In so doing, I will consider some objections to the view I am giving of that relationship and of agent-perspective reasons. First, though, I wish to introduce and examine the topics of prudence and prudential reasons. Here and later, I shall be interested in distinguishing prudential reasons from agent — perspective reasons. I am interested in arguing that just as military, economic, and political reasons are not necessarily reasons for every person, so prudential reasons are not necessarily reasons for every person.⁷

⁷ I will here and in the future speak of whether prudential (economic, moral, etc.) reasons are reasons for every person. I shall understand this to be the question of whether such reasons are agent-perspective reasons for every person (that is, whether they are tied to what I shall call formal rationality). When people have asked whether moral reasons are reasons for every person they have meant to ask whether they are agent-perspective reasons for every person. It is trivially true that they are reasons in some sense of the word.

Prudence and Prudential Reasons

We often call a man 'prudent' and mean by this nothing more than that he is a careful and cautious man. This seems to be the primary legal use of 'prudent', especially in the definitions of 'recklessness' and 'negligence' where many statutes include such phrases as 'failure to take the precautions that a reasonably prudent man would take'. Though this is a perfectly proper use of the term in ordinary language, philosophers interested in the concept of prudence have not, generally, been very interested in this meaning of the word. Rather, they have meant by 'prudential reason' something more like an egoistic reason. A man is said to have a prudential reason for acting if there is a reason in terms of his interest, or well-being. (I shall use these two terms synonymously. Obviously, to do so, one must sharply distinguish what is in an agent's interest from what that agent is interested in — though these are often co-extensive.) Prudential reasons are self-regarding reasons in the sense that they aim at the good or well-being of the agent.⁸ It is this sort of reason that I shall call a prudential reason and that I shall argue is not necessarily a reason (in the sense of being an agent-perspective reason) for every person.

A prudential reason is a reason from the prudential point of view. This point of view is defined by certain reason-making principles the most basic of which would be, "One ought to act so as to maximize his own well-being", (or possibly, "One ought to act so as to achieve a satisfactory level of well-being"). Since this principle is wholly teleological, we might say that the goal which defines the prudential point of view is one's well-being. One has a prudential reason for acting in virtue of there being a means/end relationship between a given action and this goal.

Though I shall have much to say about it, the concept of well-being will remain unanalyzed here. 'The well-being of a person' may be taken as synonymous with 'the good of a person'. It is not my purpose to develop a full theory of value — though this would clearly be required in order to give an adequate account of the prudential point of view. Here, I am primarily concerned with certain logical relationships between prudential reasons and agent — perspective reasons (and ultimately the rationality of action). I believe that what I have to say about this can be

8 This sense of "self-regarding" is narrower than that employed by C. D. Broad in his piece, "Egoism as a Theory of Human Motives" (*The Hibbert Journal* 48, (1949-50), pp. 105-114; Reprinted in C. D. Broad, *Ethics and the History of Philosophy*, London; Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1952). Nevertheless, it is a perfectly natural sense of the word.

said without giving a positive analysis of 'well-being'. Nevertheless, at times I shall, for purposes of exemplification, suggest a partial analysis. This is done only to facilitate discussion.

Perhaps an example would help to show how I conceive of prudential reasoning. Let us suppose that part of what well-being for a person consists in is that person's pleasure. If this is so, then the fact that a particular action would be pleasurable for the actor provides some prudential reason for performing that act. This is because, if pleasure is a part of well-being, then it is a prudential reason-making principle that one ought to act so as to promote circumstances that are pleasurable to him. This principle would in part define the prudential point of view and truth of the predicate, 'would be pleasurable for the actor' when applied to an act would always provide some prudential reason for performing that act.

The fact that prudential reasons are just self-regarding reasons does not mean that we will call all those who act on such principles 'prudent men' or all actions consonant with the best of such reasons 'prudent actions'.⁹ The word 'prudent' has certain positive connotations (suggestions). Its use in describing an action or an agent ordinarily implies worthiness. If a person acts so as to promote his own well-being at the extreme expense of others, we may not wish to praise the act and hence may label it 'egoistic' or 'selfish' (both of which seem to have generally negative connotations in ordinary discourse). But none of this means that the act or agent in question is not prudent. It simply means that as moral men (or for less laudable reasons), we do not tend to extol even the *prudential* virtues of immoral acts.¹⁰ Similarly, if we take a given military action to be immoral, we may be disinclined to extol even its military virtues. I am not interested here in the question of when we would be inclined to use the terms 'prudent' and 'imprudent'. Nor am I particularly concerned with when a person is, in fact, prudent or imprudent. My concern is with the less complicated question of when a

9 A similar point must be noted regarding 'imprudent'. Due to the negative suggestions of 'imprudent' we will not be inclined to call a person 'imprudent' if he sacrifices his own well-being for some laudable good.

10 It is this point that William Davie fails to appreciate in his article, "Being Prudent and Acting Prudently," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 10 (1973). Here he argues that there can be no conflict, as Kant supposed there could be, between morality and prudence. This implausible claim is defended by arguing that we would not call the perpetrator of a grossly immoral act 'prudent'. If this is true, it is due to implicatures generated by our *calling* him 'prudent', not to implications of 'prudent'.

person is acting in accordance with prudential reasons and when he is not.

As I have described the case, to say that a person has a prudential reason for performing an action is to say that from the prudential point of view (i.e., from the point of view of maximizing his own well-being), there is a reason for him to do that act. Whether every person necessarily adopts this point of view, or, if not, whether at least every *rational* person necessarily adopts this point of view, I shall take up after some consideration is given to the concept of rationality.

Acting Rationally

It is, I believe, necessary to distinguish two concepts of rationality of actions in order that my ultimate conclusions will not seem too implausible. The first sense of 'rationality' I wish to discuss is a purely technical (i.e., formal) notion. The principles that define this sense of rationality are technical (non-substantive) principles which require that one take the course of action which will lead to the maximal satisfaction of a given set of desires given that relative weights have been attached to the satisfaction of each member of that set. Formal (technical) rationality puts no constraints on the content of these desires. To act rationally (in this sense) is to act in accordance with these principles where the set of desires involved in one's own total set of desires and the relative weights are those that one actually attaches to the satisfaction of each of his desires. What I have in mind here is a decision-theoretic notion of rationality. However, I am considering only a very special case — that of decision-making under certainty. Though we seldom find ourselves in this happy situation, decision under certainty is a simpler case than decision under risk or uncertainty, avoiding as it does some tough epistemological and decision-theoretic problems. But despite its simplicity, it is adequate for the points I wish to make about formal rationality and its relation to reasons for acting.

It is clear that formal rationality is hooked up with agent-perspective reasons. If an act, *A*, promotes some end that is desired by an agent (and he knows this), then he has some reason to perform or promote the occurrence of *A*. If performing or promoting the occurrence of *A* does not hamper the satisfaction of his other desires and *A* is the most efficient means to the satisfaction of the desire in question (and he knows this), then he has an overriding reason to perform or promote the occurrence of *A*. His failure to do so, in this supposed case, would constitute acting irrationally (contrary to reason). The case I have supposed is highly idealized. I have supposed knowledge on the part of the agent that is often not present. I have also assumed that the act in question will not

hinder the satisfaction of any of the agent's other desires and that it is the most efficient means to the satisfaction of the desire in question. These conditions are seldom, if ever, met. I have used this idealized case to show how agent-perspective reasons can hook up with the technical notion of rationality. How these two concepts are related when the complications are not 'supposed away' is a topic for another time.

There is a different and vaguer notion of rationality. In this other sense of 'rationality', we might refer to a person and his actions as irrational even if his actions did not violate any of the principles of formal rationality. Suppose, for example, that a person has an overriding desire to paint everything he sees purple on every day except on alternate Tuesdays when he is to do nothing but clap his hands exactly once every 13 minutes. We are to suppose that he desires this course of action in itself and not merely instrumentally. Even if such a person adopts the most efficient means to this end, both he and his actions would be likely to be called 'irrational'. But this is a very different sense of 'rationality'. Here the irrationality is due *not* to the method he chooses to satisfy his desires but to the content of his desires. He is considered irrational precisely because he has certain desires and lacks certain others or because of the weight he attaches to the satisfaction of some of his desires. This I shall call substantive (material) irrationality.

An illuminating point of difference between these two senses of 'rationality' (and 'irrationality') is that with respect to formal rationality, the action is the primary subject of the predicate 'rational' ('irrational') and the agent is only derivatively called 'rational' ('irrational') insofar as he is inclined to knowingly perform or attempt to perform acts of that kind. However, it is the other way around with regard to substantive rationality. In this case, the acts are called 'irrational' because they are acts of a person who is irrational (and he is so-called because he has irrational desires and/or values). We indicate this in ordinary discourse by saying of such a person things like, "Given his desires, his actions aren't so irrational after all". It is not that his actions are contrary to reason in the sense that he is acting in a manner inconsistent with the reasons he has for acting; it is that what *do* constitute reasons for him are extremely bizarre, unintelligible or unacceptable to us as reasons for acting.

As the last comment suggest, in discussing the notion of substantive rationality I do not mean to be denying the Aristotlean-Humean view that ultimate ends — desires for something as intrinsically good — cannot be rationally evaluated. They were concerned to deny that there could be any *formal* criticism of ultimate ends — surely it was obvious to them that even ultimate ends could be criticised from some substantive point of view. What I am claiming is that when we evaluate a desire as

being irrational or a person (or action) as being irrational in the substantive sense of the word we are engaging in a *substantive* evaluation. We are *necessarily* evaluating from a point of view which the agent may not share. And we are no longer engaged in a purely logical endeavor. I think it would be better if we didn't use 'rational' and 'irrational' in this way so as not to confuse this notion with the formal sense of 'rationality'. I mention the substantive sense of the word only because we do, in fact, use it in this way and some have been led by this to confuse it with the formal sense of rationality. This confusion has, I think, led some philosophers to think that everyone has a reason to do certain things regardless of what they desire or do not desire. They are (mis-) led to this conclusion because we sometimes *do* call people's actions 'irrational' regardless of their desires.

Before discussing the relationship between prudential reasons and agent-perspective reasons, I wish to consider a possible objection to the position that I have been defending with regard to reasons for acting. I have postponed this discussion until now because a complete response to the objection will require the distinction between formal and substantive rationality.

It might be objected that the view I have outlined entails that any desire whatsoever is capable of giving a person a reason for acting. This is indeed a feature of the theory I have been developing. Someone might object to this in the following way: "If your theory simply implied that any desire is capable of motivating us, and hence of giving us a motivating reason, it might be acceptable. But you are saying that even the most vile, wicked, and sadistic desires give a person some *justifying* reason for acting so as to satisfy them. While these reasons may be overridden (on your theory, it seems, only in virtue of a person's having other, conflicting desires), nevertheless you are committed to the view that vile, wicked, and sadistic desires *tend* to justify vile, wicked, and sadistic acts. Certainly, this is an untenable consequence of your position." I wish now to argue that, properly understood, this is not an untenable consequence at all. It is only because of an ambiguity in the objection that it seems so formidable.

Ordinarily, when we talk of considerations which tend to justify an action we are understood as engaging in a moral dispute. We are understood as giving a moral justification — that is, a justification from the moral point of view. If what the objector has in mind is that, on my view, one's having wicked desires tends to *morally* justify his wicked actions, then he is quite wrong in thinking this is a consequence of my position. Such a view would be a sort of crude ethical egoism; I have offered no ethical theory whatsoever yet. Vile, wicked, and sadistic acts are, *ceteris paribus*, morally wrong regardless of the agent's desires. And

I am not committed to the view that the agent's having vile, wicked and sadistic desires even tends to make those actions morally justified.

Neither am I committed to saying that such desires tend to justify such actions from any particular non-moral point of view be that legal, economic, political, prudential, or whatever. My position commits me only to holding that such desires tend to justify the action from the point of view of the agent's desires and goals — that is, that such desires count in favor of the act's being a rational one for that person to perform. They do not count in favor of its being moral, wise, prudent, just, or any other predicate that tends to come to mind when we talk about justifying an action.

If it sounds strange to say that such desires tend to justify such actions in any sense at all, it is because we are so seldom interested — as practical men — in assessing whether an act is justified from the agent's point of view.¹¹ The fact that a man's actions are rational given his desires does not tend to make an immoral action one whit less morally objectionable. We do not generally care whether an act is justified from the point of view of the agent's desires. We care whether it is morally justified, legally justified, etc. And often we care whether it is justified from the point of view of our own desires, interests, and goals. This last point is important, for it helps to explain why we are so reluctant to say that wicked desires tend to justify wicked acts in *any* sense of 'justify'. Such acts are not typically justified from *our* point of view — i.e., the point of view of our desired ends — and the fact that the agent desires to perform acts of this kind is, generally, irrelevant to whether such acts are justified from our point of view.

It does not seem to me an untenable consequence of my position that it entails that wicked desires tend to justify wicked acts so long as we are clear that all this means is that such desires tend to make such acts rational for the person who has those desires. Now it is important to note that any person in whom such desires are operative — are not overridden by other desires — may well be classified as irrational in the substantive sense of 'irrationality'. But as was pointed out, to make such a judgment is not to make a formal judgment about the rationality of the agent's act, but to make a substantive value judgment as to the worth of the agent or his desires.

With this objection laid aside, I have two primary concerns. I want to show that prudential reasons are not necessarily agent-perspective

11 Sometimes, of course, we are interested in doing this. Psychiatrists, for example, are often concerned with assessing whether an action is justified from the agent's perspective.

reasons for every person and, hence, that imprudent acts are not necessarily contrary to reasons (formally irrational). Secondly, while it may be a requirement of substantive rationality that one have some prudential (self-regarding) concerns, it is not required that these concerns be overriding. That is, it does not necessarily count against one's rationality (in either sense) to knowingly act contrary to his own well-being.

Prudence and Rationality

I wish to show that a person may (logically) fail to adopt the prudential point of view and, hence, that prudential reasons are not necessarily reasons for every person. My strategy will be to consider and reject the possible relationships between one's well-being and one's desires which would entail that there *is* a logical relationship between prudential reasons and agent — perspective reasons. I believe the relationships that I will consider exhaust the possible relationships that have this consequence. In any case, they exhaust the plausible ones.

It must be admitted that one's well-being, or at least some aspect of it, is almost always required as a means to the satisfaction of one's desires — whatever they may be. Insofar as this is true, every person will have a reason to pursue his own well-being. This reason derives from the general (quasi-Hobbesian) principle that if one has a reason for promoting an end, then one has a reason for promoting effective means to that end. (Although, of course, the existence of this reason may not be known to him).

But it is important to note two things about this: (1) Since prudence is, on this view, only required instrumentally for the satisfaction of one's desires, the connection between prudence and rationality seems contingent. (It could, of course, be maintained that well-being is *merely* having the means to satisfy one's desires (whatever they may be.) In this case, prudence *would* be logically tied to (formal) rationality. I shall give reasons to think that this is not a correct view of well-being.) (2) Furthermore, it is *not* universally true that one's well-being is required for the satisfaction of his desires (as I shall argue below).

Nevertheless, the force of this point — that one's well-being is almost always required for the satisfaction of his desires — must be appreciated. Together with the fact that almost all of us *do* desire our own well-being intrinsically, it is the truth of this claim which will explain why my examples of people who are (formally) rational but ignore known prudential reasons will seem somewhat farfetched. I maintain only that the examples are consistently conceivable. This is enough.

In order to see why one's well-being is not always instrumental to the satisfaction of one's other desires, let us consider an extreme case. Imagine a person whose *sole* desire is to feel excruciating pain until he dies — a matter about which he is totally indifferent. If this is his only desire, it seems hardly reasonable to say that his well-being is required as a *means* to the satisfaction of his desires. This case also shows why it is implausible to suggest that well-being merely *consists* in whatever is required as a means to the satisfaction of one's desires. The satisfaction of this person's desires requires, not his well-being, but just the opposite. This much seems clear, and because of this, we cannot argue that there is a necessary connection between prudence and rationality in virtue of the former being a necessary means to the satisfaction of one's desires regardless of the content of those desires.

But some might argue that the well-being of a person just consists in the maximal (i.e., the most rational) satisfaction of his desires. I shall refer to this position as the 'satisfaction theory of value'. If such a view were correct, then, rather obviously, prudence and rationality are co-extensive and, insofar as the satisfaction theory of value constitutes an analysis of 'well-being', mutually implicative. I do not believe that this simple satisfaction theory of value is an adequate theory of value with which to fill out the account of prudence given earlier. To be sure, it may be that all that the *agent* believes to be valuable is the satisfaction of his desires and the requisite means to such satisfaction. Nevertheless, it is false and misleading to hold that whatever is valued by an agent must be valuable from the prudential point of view.

One way of seeing that there is something wrong with the satisfaction theory of value is to look first at a criticism which is spurious but enlightening. The satisfaction theory of value seems, at first glance, to blur the distinction which Joseph Butler found crucial to the refutation of psychological egoism.¹² We must distinguish between the objectionable and false claim that "of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself"¹³ and the innocuous and, I believe, trivially true claim that every voluntary act is undertaken because the agent finds it desirable (either intrinsically or instrumentally) to do so. What is meant by this later claim is nothing more than that when an agent acts voluntarily, he acts as he does because he prefers to act thusly given the alternatives.

12 Joseph Butler, *Five Sermons* (London, 1726), Sermon IV. Paragraph 7.

13 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Michael Oakeshott, (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1969), p. 105.

On inspection, however, it is clear that the satisfaction theory does not destroy this distinction. The satisfaction theory of value does not claim that everyone *aims* at his own well-being (good) but only that well-being *consists* in the rational satisfaction of one's desires. These are distinct for several reasons. One is due to the intentionality of the verb 'aim'. Perhaps a more profound reason that the satisfaction theory can maintain the needed distinction is that it is false, as Butler has shown us, that the objective (aim) of each of our actions is the satisfaction of some one of our desires.

But the above criticism of the satisfaction theory of value, while not cogent, suggests one which is. Consider this case. A sadistic hypnotist kidnaps a man and gives him the following alternatives: Either the man is to turn over his children to the hypnotist or the man will be brutally tortured and murdered. If the man chooses the first alternative, his children will meet the same fate he would were he to choose the second but the hypnotist will, by post-hypnotic suggestion, remove from the man any memory that he has made such a trade for his life and, indeed, any memory that he had children. We are to suppose that if the man chooses the first alternative, he will lead a normal, productive, and happy life from that point on. Nevertheless, the man cares more about his children than his own future. He chooses to submit to the dreadful fate himself rather than allow his children to be subjected to it. His desire for the well-being of his children is absolute with respect to his other desires.

Now, the satisfaction theory of value requires us to say that, in choosing as he did, the father was, perhaps unintentionally, best promoting his *own* well-being. But surely what he was doing was sacrificing his own well-being for that of his children. Not only was his own well-being not the objective of the act, it was not the result either. And this is true even though, given the rather limited alternatives, he chose that alternative which best satisfied his total set of desires.

In light of this, one might propose a revision of the satisfaction theory of value. One might hold that well-being consists not in the maximal satisfaction of an agent's total set of desires, but in the maximal satisfaction of his *self-regarding* desires. This sort of limited satisfaction theory of value becomes clearly counter-intuitive when we consider the case of a person whose self-regarding desires are entirely destructive. The man who despises himself, seeks only his own misery and debasement, and promotes this end, is not thereby promoting his own well-being.

It seems more likely that the theory of value required for a "fleshing out" of the skeleton account of prudence which I have given needs to be an ideal theory of value. I am using this term in a somewhat non-standard way to mean any theory of value which holds that well-being is a partly (or less plausibly, wholly) determinate concept in the sense that

certain things are constituents of well-being regardless of whether or not they are desired by the agent or are a means to something desired by the agent. Many candidates have been suggested as essential elements of well-being: healths, self-respect, security, autonomy, self-development, etc. It is not my purpose here to give a theory of value adequate for the concept of prudence. It may even turn out that the only determinate aspect of well-being is pleasure. Though I find such an account implausible, even a simple hedonic theory of value would provide an alternative to the satisfaction theory of value which would be adequate for my present thesis. (Though hedonic theories of value are not usually characterized as ideal theories of value, they are like them in the respect mentioned above.) It is certainly possible for acts, states of affairs and experiences to be pleasurable without their being antecedently desired. Likewise, it is quite possible for acts, states of affairs, and experiences to be unpleasant despite their being antecedently desired.

If the satisfaction theory of value is, as I have argued, inadequate, we seem forced (happily, I think) to the alternative view that some things are prudentially valuable regardless of whether or not the agent desires them or anything that they are a means to. There is only one more point which must be made if we are to get the conclusion that prudential reasons are not necessarily reasons for every person. I have already argued that the end which generates prudential reasons (one's well-being) is not necessarily a means to the satisfaction of a person's desires. Nor is it the case, I have argued, that the satisfaction of one's desires necessarily *constitutes* one's well-being. In order to show that prudential reasons do not entail agent-perspective reasons for anyone, it remains only to be shown that it is false that people necessarily desire either their own well-being or the constituents of it under some description. This must be shown because one might argue that while well-being is a determinate concept, it is composed of elements which every person necessarily desires.

The view that every one necessarily desires his own well-being or the constituents of his well-being is suggestive of two different views which may well be correct. I shall discuss both later. But as it is stated, this view is false. There seems to be nothing which a person must, as a matter of logic, desire. There is no object (action, or state) which cannot be described in some way which renders logically consistent the claim that an agent fails desires to it.

I am interested in showing that it is false that everyone *necessarily* desires his own well-being. That this view is false is, I think, clear when we understand the necessity involved to be logical necessity. My thesis commits me only to showing that it is not logically necessary for everyone to desire his own well-being. I think that it is also false that everyone does, as a matter of fact, desire his own well-being. But I do

not mean to suggest by this that it is a mere accident that people desire their own well-being. Nor do I mean that a person would be considered fully rational in both senses of that word if he totally lacked a desire for his own well-being.

Indeed, one of the probably correct views that is suggested by the claim that everyone necessarily desires his own well-being, is that it is more than a mere accident that almost all of us do have these sorts of concerns. It seems that this is more than an accident because it is capable of a sound scientific explanation. This explanation is in terms of evolutionary theory — especially the theory of natural selection. It seems reasonable to suggest that the very survival of our species has depended on there being a very widespread prudential concern on the part of the members of our species. (It also seems reasonable, by the way, to suggest that it has also depended on a fairly widespread altruistic concern.)¹⁴

A second claim that is suggested by the assertion that everyone necessarily desires his own well-being is the claim that every *fully rational* person necessarily desires his own well-being. At least in part because a prudential concern is so natural and widespread, we tend to view a person who totally lacks such a concern as being in some sense irrational. (A similar point could be made about people who totally lack an altruistic concern.) But it should be clear that 'irrational' is here being used in its substantive sense. The fact that we tend to call a person 'irrational' for needlessly and knowingly thwarting his own well-being whether he desires his own well-being or not has led some to think that a person always has a reason for promoting his own well-being regardless of his desires. To reason in this manner is to confuse formal and substantive rationality.

Saints and Fanatics

The argument is now complete. I wish here to consider how the view of prudence and rationality that I have been advancing might be applied to the kinds of problematic cases that philosophers ponder. First, I want to discuss an example which is due to Russell Grice.¹⁵ Grice

14 This point was, perhaps, first made by Charles Darwin in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London, 1871). See, in particular, chapter 5, "Of the Development of the Intellectual and Moral Faculties During Primeval and Civilised Times".

15 Russel Grice. *op. cit.*, p. 16.

asks us to consider a poor and talentless would-be actor who desires above everything to be a Shakespearean actor. He has virtually no chance of success and his continued pursuit of this goal will only lead to his further frustration and misery. Grice even suggests that this person may, if he changes his occupation, come to desire his new occupation and be glad of the change. Perhaps he even knows this. Still the man is resolved. His acting is more important to him than his happiness.

It might be protested that if he feels this strongly about acting, it could not be in his interest, or contribute to his well-being, to leave his career. But, through natural processes or actual or imaginable psychiatric techniques, the person could be led to overcome any resentment he might feel or even to forget that he ever desired to become an actor. Desires can be altered. It is, I believe, a correct tenet of psychiatric practice that sometimes people are better off if some of their desires are 'removed' rather than satisfied.

Of our miserable actor, Grice claims that if, as seems to be true, it is in his interest to change occupations, then he has a reason to do so regardless of his desires. Now, this seems to me to be correct if what Grice meant was that the person has a *prudential* reason for quitting the theater. As the case has been described, it would promote his well-being to choose another career. (If this is not clear as it stands, the story could be suitably embellished.) But Grice does not mean this. He means that the actor has an agent-perspective reason to give up his career. Though Grice does not make the distinction between reasons from a point of view and agent-perspective reasons, he uses 'reason' in such a way that acting contrary to the best reason (in his sense) necessarily constitutes acting irrationally.

But the case Grice has described is one in which, *ex hypothesis*, the agent does not adopt the prudential point of view. The actor does not care about his well-being. (At least, his concern for acting is absolute with respect to his concern for his well-being.) Given what he does care about (namely, a career as a Shakespearean actor), Grice has given us no reason to suppose that he is not acting in the most rational way possible. We may find the actor's desires, or at least the weight he attaches to them, unintelligible; but to have unintelligible goals does not imply that the agent is acting irrationally. The fanatic is not necessarily irrational in his actions.

I agree, then, with Grice that, "It is not true that when a man does not want to do something we can show that it is in his interest to do it only by appealing to other desires which he has."¹⁶ But Grice is wrong

16 Ibid. p. 16.

in thinking that being in one's interest can generate an agent-perspective reason without the agent 'taking an interest' in what is in his interest. It is true, I think, that when a man does not want to do something, we can show that he has a reason to do it *only* by appealing to other desires which he has.

The trouble with Grice's view is that it fails to recognize the fundamental similarity between the frustrated actor and the father in the case of the sadistic hypnotist (see p. 75). They are both fanatics in Hare's sense of the word.¹⁷ That is, they both allow their ideals to override their interest (well-being). The difference which we discern between the saint (hero, martyr, etc.) and the less laudable forms of fanaticism is not in the rationality of their actions but in the worthiness of their ideals. (To see the situation thus, we must strip the word 'fanatic' of its negative connotations and use it to mean simply what Hare defines it to mean. It is *this* property that is common to the saint and the person ordinarily considered a fanatic.)

Prudence, Altruism, and Morality

Though my comments will be sketchy, I wish to say something of the relationship between prudence and the concepts of altruism and morality.

Just as prudence is defined by a set of principles or values, so altruism is to be defined. The altruistic point of view seems to be similar to the prudential point of view except that in the former it is the well-being of others that is valuable. We might think of the basic altruistic reason-making principle as being, "One ought to act so as to maximize the well-being of others." Clearly, as Thomas Nagel points out,¹⁸ we don't reserve the adjective 'altruistic' for people who act solely from other-regarding motives nor for those who always allow their own interest to be overridden by the interests of others. (We have another adjective for these people.) But to say that a person has an altruistic reason for doing something is to say that there is a reason in terms of the well-being of others for him to do it. So while the altruist may be simply one who counts the interests of others equally with his own, an altruistic reason is necessarily other-directed.

17 R. M. Hare. *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.) Chapter 9.

18 Thomas Nagel. *The Possibility of Altruism*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). See, for example, page 79.

The moral point of view is generally conceived to be, *in some sense*, a combination of the prudential and the altruistic points of view. To say this is clearly to reject an ethics of self-sacrifice — a purely altruistic ethical theory — and also its more popular counterpart, an ethics of self-satisfaction (i.e., ethical egoism). I think that it is fairly safe to do so. To say that the moral point of view is in some sense a combination of the prudential and the altruistic points of view, is really only to say that from the moral point of view, the well-being of all sentient creatures is valuable — not just that of the agent or just that of other beings.

If one chooses to combine the prudential point of view with the altruistic point of view by the simplest method — by simply adding them together and counting each person for one and none for more than one — one will be led to some sort of utilitarian theory. What sort depends, of course, on what theory of value one adopts.

On the other hand, one might choose to represent the interests of all in another, more complicated manner. One might, for example, adopt something like the ideal contract theory in order to define the moral point of view. This view, though more complicated in its combinatorial principle, seems also to result in a blending of prudential and altruistic concerns. (Of course, if one adopts a deontological view of morality, the moral point of view cannot be defined by values to be maximized and must, instead, be defined by certain principles. This presents no problem. Purely teleological points of view can also be defined by principles and, hence, *this* is the theory-neutral way to describe points of view.)

In any case, regardless of how one defines the moral point of view, it seems clear that reasons derived from it, as well as reasons derived from the altruistic point of view, are, like prudential reasons, not necessarily reasons for every person. To show that they are, one would have to show that everyone necessarily adopts these points of view. This seems even more difficult than showing that everyone necessarily adopts the prudential point of view.

Some have tried to show that moral reasons are reasons for everyone by showing that it is in each person's interest to act morally — that is, by showing that each person has a prudential reason for acting morally.¹⁹

19 This view is suggested by Plato's protracted arguments in *Gorgias* and *The Republic* to show that the virtuous man is happier than the vicious man. Although in "Moral Beliefs" Phillipa Foot gives a correct account of agent-perspective reasons, some of what she says there suggests that she then thought that showing that morally right actions were also prudent would guarantee that everyone has a reason to be moral. She now clearly rejects both this view and the view that there always are prudential reasons for acting morally.

The account of prudential reasons I have developed explains why such an attempt is fundamentally misguided from a theoretical point of view even if it could be valuable from a practical point of view. Even if it were the case that it is in each person's interest to act morally —which it obviously is not — this in itself would not guarantee that each person has a reason to act morally. For it may be that some do not have a reason to act prudently.

If the view of rationality, reasons for acting, and prudential reasons I have been developing is correct, then the saint and the martyr are freed of the charge of irrationality. At least, they are not to be thought irrational just because they sacrifice their well-being for that of others or for some ideal. But this is done at the cost of including the fanatic and the scoundrel in the community of rational people. I don't find this a high price. Reckless people are imprudent and scoundrels are immoral. Neither need be irrational.