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## Chapter 5

### Reasons for Altruism

David Schmitz

We like to flatter ourselves with the false claim to a more noble motive, ... but if we look more closely at our planning and striving, we everywhere come upon the dear self.

Immanuel Kant (1981, 20-21)

#### 1. AN ANALYSIS OF OTHER-REGARD

Chapters 3 and 4 showed how final ends could be rationally chosen. Chapter 4 argued that it can be rational to have a plurality of final ends, leaving us with a theoretical possibility that moral ends could be among our final ends. Taking a more aggressive approach to connecting humanly rational choice and moral agency, this chapter explains why morality being rational is more than merely a theoretical possibility; it is in fact rational to have genuinely altruistic concerns and commitments.

According to a well-known version of the instrumental model, rational choice consists of maximizing one's utility, or more precisely, maximizing one's utility subject to a budget constraint. We seek the point of highest utility lying within our limited means. The term 'utility' could mean a lot of different things, but in recent times theorists have often taken the term to mean something related to or even identical to preference satisfaction (and thus utility functions are sometimes called preference functions). To have a preference is to care, to want one alternative more than another.

People are self-regarding insofar as they care about their own welfare.<sup>1</sup> People are purely self-regarding if they care about no one's welfare other than their own and recognize no constraints on how they treat others beyond those constraints imposed by circumstances: their limited time and income, legal restrictions, and so on. The question is, is it rational—is it uniquely rational—to be purely self-regarding? The instrumentalist model does not say. For that matter, neither does the instrumentalist model assume people care about welfare (their own or

that of others). The instrumentalist model allows that Hume could prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of his finger.

The departures from pure self-regard that concern us here come in two varieties. First, we might care about other people, which is to say their welfare enters the picture through our preference functions. Indeed, a desire to help other people often is among our strongest desires. Second, the welfare of others can enter the picture in the form of self-imposed constraints we acknowledge when pursuing our goals. In different words, an otherwise optional course of action may come to be seen as either forbidden or required, depending on how it would affect others. There may be limits to what we are willing to do to others in the course of pursuing our goals.<sup>2</sup>

When other-regard takes the form of caring about other people's welfare, one exhibits concern. When it takes the form of adherence to constraints on what one may do to others, one exhibits respect. As I use the terms, we have *concern* for people when we care about how life is treating them (so to speak), whereas we *respect* people when we care about how we are treating them, and constrain ourselves accordingly. Note: what motivates one kind of other-regard need not motivate the other. A person may find it out of the question to violate other people's rights but at the same time be unconcerned about other people's welfare.<sup>3</sup> Another person may care about feeding the poor and have no qualms about taking other people's money to buy the food. In short, unconcerned people can be principled, and concerned people can be ruthless.

I use the term altruism to characterize a kind of action. An action is altruistic only if it is motivated by regard for others. Expressing concern or respect as a mere means to some other end is not altruistic. The expression is altruistic only if concern or respect for others is what motivates it. (People can act from mixed motives. Robin Hood may undertake a course of action in order to help the poor, make himself look good, and hurt the rich. His action is at once altruistic, self-serving, and vicious.) Whether altruistic action is coextensive with other-regarding action is a terminological matter. Some classify respect for others as altruistic; others would say that to respect others is merely to give them their due, to do what justice requires, and thus cannot count as altruistic.

This definition of altruism leaves open questions about how altruism relates to justice and other essentially moral concepts. There is good reason not to try to settle these questions with definitions. For example, if we stipulate that an act cannot be altruistic unless it goes beyond what justice requires, then we cannot count ourselves as observing instances of altruism until we settle what justice requires. Defining altruism as other-regarding action beyond justice would

gratuitously remove altruism from the realm of the observable. The difficulties would be mere artifacts of a useless definition.

Terminological issues aside, the issue of substance is two-fold. We have both concern and respect for others, which raises a question: Are these departures from pure self-regard rational? This chapter explores reasons for both departures, while acknowledging that some people consider one or the other to be the canonical form of altruism.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, one account of our reasons for altruism is built into altruism's definition. As it happens, we are not purely self-regarding. We have other-regarding preferences that can weigh against our self-regarding preferences. If we prefer on balance to act on our concern for others, then by that very fact we have reasons for altruism. The reasons are not purely self-regarding reasons, to be sure, but they are still reasons, and reasons from our points of view. Therefore, given that we are as we are, altruism sometimes is rational.

It hardly needs saying, though, that no one will be satisfied with an argument that stops here. A satisfying account of our reasons for altruism won't take our other-regarding preferences as given. Neither is it enough to offer a purely descriptive account of concern and respect—a biological or psychological or sociological account of what causes us to develop concern and respect for others. Biology and psychology are relevant, but not enough. We want an account according to which it is rational for us to have other-regarding preferences in the first place.

The interesting question, then, is this: if we were to abstract from our other-regarding interests and consider the matter from a purely self-regarding perspective, would we have reason from that perspective to affirm our other-regarding interests? This section characterized altruism as action motivated either by respect or concern for others. The task now is to explain how self-regarding concerns could give people reasons to cultivate concern and respect for others.<sup>5</sup>

Since this chapter aims to rationally ground respect and concern for others, readers may expect me to take for granted that self-regard is a fixed point around which all else must revolve if it is to have a place in rational choice theory's normative universe. That is not the plan. To be sure, self-regard enters the argument as an explanatory tool rather than as the thing to be explained, but that does not mean we can take it for granted. On the contrary, the conclusion toward which previous chapters are driving is this: human self-regard is a fragile thing. Its fragility is one source of its explanatory power. Although we have a certain amount of respect and concern for ourselves, this amount is not unlimited and it is not fixed. It varies. It is

influenced by our choices, and this fact has a direct bearing on how regard for others fits into the lives of self-regarding human agents. The following sections elaborate.

## 2. HOMO ECONOMICUS REVISITED

As already mentioned, to be instrumentally rational is to be committed to serving preferences of oneself, but one may or may not be committed to serving preferences regarding oneself. As Chapter 4 noted, though, when we combine the instrumental model of rationality with a stipulation that rational agents are purely self-regarding, the result is the Homo economicus model of rational agency. The point is worth mentioning again, because the reasons given here to nurture other-regard are reasons for beings like us, not for beings like Homo economicus. The Homo economicus model leaves no room for altruism. The fact that the Homo economicus model assumes exclusive self-regard, however, is only part of the reason why it leaves no room for altruism. The real problem lies in how the assumption of exclusive self-regard works when combined with the underlying instrumental model of rationality.

The instrumental model of rationality is static insofar as it does not provide for rational choice among ends. The instrumental model can (and for our purposes should) be enriched by allowing for endogenous preferences (that is, preferences that change in response to choices).<sup>6</sup> This enriched model might explain how we develop our preferences. Even so, something is missing, because a person could have endogenous preferences and still think preference satisfaction is all that matters. For Homo economicus, there remains only one question: how much can I get? We go beyond Homo economicus and develop a truly reflective rationality as we come to see that the quality of our lives is a function not only of what we can get, but also of what we can be.<sup>7</sup> And what we are, no less than what we get, depends on what we choose.

This section's main point is that whether or not we intend to do so, we develop new preferences as we go, which creates the possibility that beings like ourselves might come to be other-regarding. The next section argues that the same fluidity and capacity for reflecting on our ends that makes possible the cultivation of other-regarding concern also makes it important. There are reasons to embrace and nurture our concern for others, reasons that have to do with what is conducive to our own health, survival, and growth.

## 3. REASONS FOR CONCERN

As Thomas Nagel sees it, “Altruistic reasons are parasitic upon self-interested ones; the circumstances in the lives of others which altruism requires us to consider are circumstances which those others already have reason to consider from a self-interested point of view” (1970, 16). Altruistic reasons could be parasitic on self-regarding reasons in a second way, insofar as reflective self-regard is the seed from which our regard for others must grow. Or perhaps the last claim is too strong. Respect and concern for others might, for all we know, be the phenotypic expression of a recessive gene. Even so, it remains the case that we do not really give a rationale for other-regarding concerns until we explain how people could abstract from their other-regarding concerns and still find reason from a purely self-regarding perspective to embrace concern for others. Thus, for those who seek to explain how other-regard could be rational, it seems obvious that our other concerns, i.e., our self-regarding concerns, must inevitably have explanatory primacy. If we take this approach, it seems we are committed to viewing other-regard as parasitic on self-regard for its rational reconstruction even if not for its literal origin.

However, this is only half of the picture. On closer inspection, the apparently parasitic relationship between other-regard and self-regard turns out to be symbiotic. Insofar as other-regard must be nurtured, we need self-regarding reasons to initiate the nurturing. But self-regard is not automatic either. (It may be standard equipment, so to speak, but even standard equipment requires maintenance.) Our interests are not static. They wax and wane and change shape over time, and self-regarding interests are not exempt. An enduring self-regard requires maintenance.

How, then, do we maintain self-regard? Consider that our preference functions are, in effect, a representation of what we have to live for. To enrich the function by cultivating new concerns is to have more to live for. As we increase our potential for happiness, it can become harder to attain our maximum possible happiness, but that is no reason not to expand our potential. New concerns leave us open to new frustrations and disappointments, but also deeper and broader satisfactions. One of our main ways of nurturing self-regard is to nurture concerns that give us more to live for than we have if we care only about ourselves.

It is rational for beings like us to be peaceful and productive, to try to earn a sense of genuinely belonging in our community. Not many things are more important to us than being able to honestly consider ourselves important parts of a community. When evaluating our goals, we have to ask whether pursuing them is an appropriate way to use our talents, given our

circumstances and tastes. We also have to ask how valuable our services would be to others in the various ways in which we could employ our talents.

The latter consideration is not decisive, of course, for if you are bored by computers and feel alive only when philosophizing about morality, then devoting yourself to computer programming might be irrational, even though your programming services are in greater demand. (What might make it irrational: you would be responding to others at a cost of becoming unresponsive to yourself.) Nevertheless, to create a place for ourselves in society as peaceful and productive members, we must have regard for the interests of others, because serving the interests of others develops and gives value to our own latent productivity. For many of us, being honest and productive members of a community we respect is an end in itself. Even when it is not, the fact remains that much of what we want from life (and from our communities) comes to us in virtue of our importance to others.<sup>8</sup>

This is not to deny that when personal survival is an urgent concern, it can be quite sufficient to capture our attention. In such cases, we may have no need for other-regarding concerns. Indeed, we may view ourselves as not being able to afford other-regarding concerns. To cultivate additional preferences when our hands are already full is to cultivate frustration. But when circumstances leave us with free time, a more reflective kind of rationality will weigh in favor of trying to develop broader interests. We may begin with a goal of survival, but because we are reflective, we need to cultivate concerns other than survival. As noted in Chapter 3, if there was nothing for the sake of which we were surviving, reflection on this fact would tend to undermine our commitment to survival.

For reflective beings, it is conducive to survival to have a variety of preferences beyond a preference for survival. Concerns beyond survival can give survival a significance and value that it otherwise would not have. Paradoxically, it can be healthy to cultivate preferences that sometimes cut against the pursuit of health. Other ends compete for our attention with the end of health, but they also reinforce our concern for our health by giving it instrumental value. Developing concerns beyond the interest we take in ourselves is one way (even if not the only way) of making ourselves and our projects important enough to be worth caring about.

I conclude that we have self-regarding reasons to incorporate (so far as we are able to do so) other-regarding preferences into our utility functions, or in other words, to internalize other-regarding concerns. As these new preferences become part of the function, they acquire a certain autonomy, becoming more than mere means to previously given ends. The element of autonomy

is crucial. The new preferences must take on lives of their own; we must come to care about them independently of how seeking to satisfy them bears on ends we already had. If they fail to become ends in themselves, then we fail to achieve our purpose in cultivating them, which is to have more to live for. We cultivate a richer set of concerns as a means to a further end, but we cultivate so as to reap new ends, not merely new means of serving ends we already have.

That we nurture our emerging ends for the sake of preexisting ends does not stop them from becoming ends we pursue for their own sake. The cultivation process is an effective means to existing ends only if what we cultivate becomes more than that. Our ultimate interest is in having something to live for, being able to devote ourselves to satisfying preferences we judge worthy of satisfaction. Not having other-regarding preferences is costly, for it drastically limits what one has to live for. A person may have no concern for others, but her lack of concern is nothing to envy.<sup>9</sup> Concern for ourselves gives us something to live for. Concern for others beyond ourselves gives us more.

This section argued that, to the extent that we are reflectively rather than instrumentally rational, we cannot afford the poverty of ends with which pure self-regard would saddle us. Under conditions that leave us time for reflection, we need to have a variety of ongoing concerns with respect to which our survival—our selves—can take on value as a means. When these further ends are in place, survival comes to be more than a biological given; an agent who has further ends not only happens to have the goal of survival but can give reasons why survival is important. As a biologically given end, survival can confer value on our pursuits insofar as they take on value as means to the end of survival, but survival can also come to possess its own value insofar as it comes to be a means to our emerging further ends. Survival thus becomes an end we have reasons to pursue, quite apart from the fact that the end of survival is biologically given. The next three sections turn to the topic of other-regarding respect, and the more general phenomenon of commitment and counterpreferential choice. Section 4 discusses how our self-imposed constraints (along with our preferences) change over time, and Sections 5 and 6 discuss why we might want them to change.

#### 4. THE MECHANISM OF COMMITMENT

My distinction between concern and respect for others is like Amartya Sen's distinction between sympathy and commitment. Sen says that when a person's sense of well-being is

psychologically tied to someone else's welfare in the right sort of way, it is a case of sympathy, whereas commitment involves counter-preferential choice. "If the knowledge of torture of others makes you sick, it is a case of sympathy; if it does not make you feel personally worse off, but if you think it is wrong and you are ready to do something to stop it, it is a case of commitment" (Sen, 1990, 31). Whether or not we follow Sen in describing commitment as counter-preferential choice, there remains a difference between commitment and sympathy.

What I call concern for others seems essentially identical to what Sen calls sympathy.<sup>10</sup> What Sen calls commitment, however, is broader than what I call respect for others. Commitment involves adherence to principles, whereas respect for others involves adherence to principles of a more specific kind, namely those that specify constraints on what we may do to others in the course of pursuing our goals. This section describes a process by which we can become committed (in Sen's broad sense). Section 5 considers why it can be rational to cultivate commitments (in the broad sense), and Section 6 explores reasons why commitment typically seems to involve the more particular kind of commitment that I am calling respect for others.

Of course, not everyone sees a need to argue that there are processes by which people develop genuine commitments. Some believe we become committed by choosing to commit and that is all there is to it. I do not deny that we can simply choose to be committed. However, some people do deny it, and are skeptical about whether genuine commitment is possible. Accordingly, this section tries to engage skeptics by describing a process of recognizably human rational choice by which a person can internalize commitments, thereby making them genuine.

Geoffrey Sayre-McCord once proposed a thought experiment in which we imagine we have an opportunity to choose whether we will have a disposition to be moral. "With one hand, say, we might pull a lever that frees us of moral compunction and clears our minds of morality; with the other, we might pull a lever that gives us the will to do what we believe morality demands" (1989, 115). Which lever do we have reason to pull, all things considered?

The idea that we could choose a disposition is by no means merely a thought experiment. To borrow Sayre-McCord's metaphor, our actions pull the levers that form our characters. We would not want to pull a lever that would make us act as automatons. Nor can we, for we have no such lever. We would not want to pull a lever that would make us subject to absolute constraints. Nor can we. Again, we have no such lever. But many of us would pull a lever that would strengthen our disposition to be honest, for example, if only we had such a lever.



And in fact, we do. One consequence of action is habituation. Since we are creatures of habit, there is a sense in which pulling the lever is possible and a sense in which doing so can be rational. With every action, we have a marginal effect on our own character and self-conception. Character is a variable, but it is not subject to direct control. Actions that shape character are under our control; character itself is not. It is neither fixed nor straightforwardly determined by choice. Rather, character is a function of choice. It is shaped by patterns of choice.<sup>11</sup>

Because people are creatures of habit, time eventually leaves a person with the accumulation of dispositions that we think of as a character. We do not face new situations as blank slates. Yet our accumulation of psychological baggage can seem obtrusive at times, leaving us to wonder why we are not blank slates. Why are we creatures of habit to begin with? We evolved as creatures of habit presumably because having routines for coping with repeatedly encountered situations helps us to conserve our cognitive capacities for circumstances that are novel. As Sarah Broadie says, “Habits of doing what is usually desirable are important, not least because at any level they free the agent to reach for special achievement on a higher level” (1991, 109). In any event, if the advantage in developing routine responses is real, we need not regret being creatures of habit. However, the price is that, if we are creatures of habit, shaping our characters as we go, then making sure we can live with the changing shape of our accumulation of dispositions will be an ongoing project.

Habituation, then, is a mechanism of commitment. Of course, this is not to say that habits and commitments are the same thing. Kate can be in the habit of checking her mailbox twice a day without being committed to doing so. Likewise, Kate can be committed to standing by her husband even if he is arrested for drunk driving, although she has not yet had occasion to make a habit of it. But the fact that habits and commitments are not the same thing does not stop habituation from being one kind of process by which Kate can internalize a commitment to her husband and thereby make it genuine. (Her commitment will then be operative in all kinds of circumstances, even the unprecedented circumstance of his being arrested for drunk driving.)

We might wonder why we pay relatively little conscious attention to the ongoing process of habituation by which we internalize commitments. Why are we so often oblivious to the importance of cultivating good habits? Natural selection builds in a bias—a sometimes unhealthy bias—for the concrete. We have a potential for reflective rationality, but its flowering has not been a precondition of genetic fitness. People are built to worry about things that can draw blood, not about the decay of their characters. The cost of damaging our characters is

easily overlooked, because it is not reflected in some obvious frustration of our preferences. Rather, it is reflected in something more subtle, a stunting of the preferences themselves.<sup>12</sup> And so it turns out that when it comes to sorting out what is in our self-interest, we are relatively inept in situations where what is at stake is our character. Our ineptness notwithstanding, however, it remains possible for us to develop and reinforce our commitments, including commitments that embody respect for others. The next two sections offer reasons why we might want to do so.

## 5. REASONS FOR COMMITMENT

Section 3 undertook to show that we have reason to try to enrich our preference functions, for if we develop preferences that go beyond pure self-regard, we will have more to live for. Section 4 explored habituation as a mechanism by which we might internalize self-imposed constraints. This section explains why we might consider some self-imposed constraints worth the price.

There is an important place in our lives for strategic behavior, i.e., for seeking effective means to current goals, given how we expect others to act and react. But this important place is not without limits. We want to achieve our goals, to be sure, but we also want to deserve to achieve our goals, and this is not at all like our other goals. (We care about what we are, not only about what we get.) We seek not merely to earn the respect and concern of others; more fundamentally, we seek to earn our own respect and concern. For whatever reason, a person of principle inspires more respect than a person driven by mere expedience. Kate may duly note that the object of her attention is herself, but that fact is not enough to guarantee that the object will hold her attention. The motivating power of Kate's self-interest is not without limit and it is not fixed. The more worthy her self is of her interest, the better off she is. Consequently, there is this advantage in having a principled character: we become selves worth struggling for.

Plato took justice to consist of giving each citizen his due, interpreted not as harming enemies and helping friends (Polemarchus's proposal in *Republic*, Book I) but rather as possessing one's own and performing one's own task (Socrates's proposal in Book IV). Plato tried to argue that, like unjust cities that degenerate into tyranny and civil war, persons whose parts fail to possess their own and do their own job will be at war with themselves. The ultimate point of the argument was to connect justice to rationality (without reducing it to rationality). Few people accept Plato's argument at face value, of course, but even if Plato failed to connect rationality to justice, he did in the course of the argument connect rationality to integrity.

Integrity and justice are analogous insofar as both are species of the genus “giving each part of the whole its due.” To have integrity is to be true to oneself, to give each part of oneself its due. To be just is to give each person, each part of the whole society, its due. Plato’s argument went awry when he mistook this analogy for a case of identity, which might be one reason why his conclusion about the rationality of being just rings false.<sup>13</sup> But what rings true is that having integrity is rational.

Having integrity is not merely good strategy, a matter of prudence. It is far more important than that. Being a person of integrity may sometimes be wildly imprudent, but that likelihood is not decisive even on prudential grounds. Indeed, the point here is that people who have no commitment to integrity have less to live for, which in the long run tends to undermine their commitment to prudence as well. Although integrity may be incompatible with prudence in exceptional cases, it also rationally justifies prudence in ordinary cases. Integrity rationally justifies prudence because it involves committing oneself *to having a self worth caring about*.

A person who does not have commitments has little with which to identify himself. What we are is in large part what we stand for. We think of having to make a stand on behalf of our ideals or on behalf of our loved ones as frightening and painful, and of course it can be. Yet, to make a stand for what we think is right is one of the most self-defining things we can do.

## 6. RESPECT FOR OTHERS

The reasons offered in section 3 for cultivating other-regarding concern had to do with the value of enriching our set of goals. Our goals are what we have to live for. Enriching our set of goals can give us more to live for. We do not live for our constraints. Neither would enriching our set of constraints give us more to live for in any direct way, but it does help define who we are living for. Defining our constraints is prior to the strategy we formulate and execute within those constraints. It is a prerequisite of prudence.

Why, then, does having a principled character involve respect for others? In other words, what gets us from Sen’s more general category of reasons for commitment to a more specific category of reasons to respect others? There is an alternative: we might embrace a demanding set of commitments to ourselves.<sup>14</sup> We might, for example, commit ourselves to achieving excellence in particular endeavors. Thus, reasons for commitment per se need not translate into reasons for commitments embodying respect for others. What then leads us to develop

commitments of an other-regarding nature? Something like this, perhaps: we want more than to be at peace with ourselves. We also want more than to be liked and respected by others. We want to deserve to be liked and respected. Being a liar can hurt us not only by disrupting our purely internal integrity, but also by precluding the kind of honest rapport we want to have with others, precluding our integration into the larger wholes that would otherwise give us more to live for. As Gerald Postema wisely observes, “To cut oneself off from others is to cut oneself off from oneself, for it is only in the mirror of the souls of others that one finds one’s own self, one’s character. The pleasures and satisfactions of conversation and intercourse are essential to human life, because they are essential to a sense of one’s continuity through a constantly changing external and internal world. ... Thus, a truly successful strategy of deception effectively cuts oneself off from the community in which alone one can find the confirmation essential to one’s own sense of self” (Postema, 1988, 35).

The point: psychology being what it is, respect for others turns out to be part of having integrity, because integrity has external as well as internal components. Being true to ourselves ordinarily involves presenting ourselves truly to others, but integrity involves not only honestly presenting ourselves to the world, but integrating ourselves into the world, achieving a certain fit. We give ourselves more to live for by becoming part of something bigger than ourselves. A principled character lets us pursue this wider integration without losing our own identity. People of principled character—those with nothing to hide—can seek integration on their own terms.

We may never quite swallow the conclusion that it is rational to be just, in the sense of giving each person what he or she is due. Yet, it surely is rational to give our own interests their due, and (human psychology being what it is) we have a strong interest in being able to think of ourselves as decent human beings. We identify ourselves largely in terms of what we do, and therefore individual rationality behooves us to do things that can support the kind of self-conception we would like to have. Thus, being a person of integrity rather than an opportunist is rational not only as a prospective policy (i.e., as something that is advantageous in a long run probabilistic sense); there is also something to be said for it on a case by case basis, even when we see in retrospect that we could have lied or cheated without being caught. We desire integrity not only in an internal sense but also in the sense of being integrated into a social structure—functioning well within structures that comprise our environment. We seek real rapport with others, not merely a sham. We want to feel that we belong, and it is our real selves for which we want a sense of belonging, not merely our false facades.

So, how does that give us reasons to fall on grenades for the sake of our comrades? It may not. Considerations weighing in favor of having a principled character in ordinary cases need not do so in extraordinary cases. Nevertheless, ordinary cases are the crucibles within which characters take shape. It is in the ordinary course of events that we create the characters that we carry into the emergencies. Conversely, in emergencies, we learn something about what we have created. We find out what we are made of, so to speak, and the knowledge can have a lasting effect, for good or ill, as we resume our normal lives. There is a precious dignity in having a character that does not wither away under pressure.

Insofar as we maintain a critical perspective on our ends, it is conceivable that, in an emergency, we will question the concerns and commitments that call on us to fall on a grenade for the sake of our comrades. Depending on how well we have internalized our concerns and commitments, we may find ourselves able to reject them. However, if we reject them, we cheapen our past as well as our future. We reveal ourselves to have been only superficially concerned and committed. Upon being convicted of corrupting the youth, Socrates willingly went to his death, so the story goes, because his other alternatives were inconsistent with principles by which he had lived. He was seventy years old and his life as a whole would not have been improved by running away to spend his remaining years as an escaped convict.

Our reasons for acting as we do in a given situation stem from concerns we bring with us to that situation. Thus the rationality of internalizing a given concern does not turn on the consequences of acting on it in a single case. Relevant consequences are those that follow from a certain concern being part of one's life.<sup>15</sup> This is why a task of providing reasons for altruism is first and foremost a task of providing reasons for altruism of the most mundane variety. It is fine to consider whether it can be rational to die for one's comrades, but the central cases are cases of simply lending a hand in the ordinary course of events. We stop to give people directions. We push their cars out of snowbanks. We hold open doors for people whose hands are full. And we walk away from these mundane encounters feeling fulfilled by the chance to be helpful.<sup>16</sup>

In nurturing concerns that give us more to live for, we develop concerns that can become more important to us than life itself. In the ordinary course of events, this is a splendid result, but in extraordinary situations, concerns worth living for can become concerns worth dying for. We may some day find ourselves in a situation where our other-regarding concerns dictate a course of action that will seriously jeopardize our purely self-regarding interests. The consequences might lead an observer to avoid developing similar commitments and concerns;

the observer has not yet internalized those concerns and commitments, and after witnessing their worst-case results, internalizing them may seem unwise if not downright impossible. But for us, already having those concerns and commitments, failing to act on them is what would be irrational. When the emergency comes that calls on us to pay the price of having our commitments, we no longer have the option of acting as if our slate of commitments were blank. We got the benefits of integrity by accepting the risks associated with becoming actually committed, and when the emergency comes, we are actually committed.

Gregory Kavka (1984, 307-10) points out that it can be rational to accept a risk of death even when it would not be rational to accept certain death. And when we develop concerns so deep and genuine that they may some day lead us to willingly give our lives for our comrades or our children, we are accepting a risk, not a certainty. Meanwhile, those concerns give us more to live for. We have no intention of actually dying for them, but if we get unlucky, we may some day find ourselves in a situation in which dying for them is our preferred alternative.

Altruism will involve self-sacrifice in exceptional cases, but not as a matter of routine. Altruism involves costs, of course, as does any action, but that an action is costly is not enough to make it a self-sacrifice. Cost-bearing becomes self-sacrificial only when agents deliberately give up something they prefer more for the sake of something they prefer less. Thus, only purely self-regarding agents will view altruism as necessarily self-sacrificial. For agents who have other-regarding concerns, acting on those concerns will be self-sacrificial if it costs too much, and only if it costs too much.

Needless to say, we may regret sacrificing one goal for the sake of another, even when both goals are of a self-regarding nature, and even when we have no doubt that what we give up is less important than what we gain. I may feel anguish when I give up coaching Little League baseball in order to pursue my career in a different city, but the regret I feel when I sacrifice one part of my life for the sake of another is neither necessary nor sufficient to indicate that my choice is a self-sacrifice. However painful it feels, I am not sacrificing myself when I sacrifice a less important goal for the sake of a more important goal. On the contrary, in a world that sometimes requires painful tradeoffs, we affirm ourselves and our commitments and our values when we act for the sake of what we consider most important, and this is what altruism often amounts to for other-regarding agents.<sup>17</sup>

That also reveals the limits of rational altruism. For beings who begin with self-regarding ends, it would be irrational to nurture commitments that lead to self-sacrifice as a

matter of course. The point is to have more to live for, and to meet the prerequisites of prudence. We accomplish this by nurturing respect and concern for family, friends, neighbors, the strangers we meet, and so on. There are forms of respect that, under normal conditions, we can easily afford to extend to the whole world, but we have only so much capacity for genuine concern. If we tried to care about everyone, our lives would be impoverished rather than enriched.

This has implications for morality as well as for rationality. Although I think morality requires us to respect everyone, I do not believe it requires us to care about everyone.<sup>18</sup> This chapter has not argued for that conclusion, of course, but in any event, if morality does require us to care about everyone, then this is one area in which morality and rationality part company.

## 7. FROM RATIONAL CHOICE TO MORAL AGENCY

The model of reflective rational choice is, we have seen, rich enough not only to allow for but even to justify developing other-regarding concern and respect. In particular, the fragility of self-regard can give us reason to develop concerns and commitments that go beyond self-regard. In the process, we acquire a rationale for our fragile self-regard and thereby make it more robust.

The emergence of these new reasons for action is driven by instrumental reasons, but this does not imply that the new reasons are themselves instrumental reasons. Concern and respect for others that is rationally grounded in reflective self-regard may be entirely wholehearted and uncalculating. Indeed, that is what we are striving for, for those are the most rewarding concerns a person can have.

Does this mean that concern for others is rationally required? I would say not. That concern for others is rationally justifiable does not imply that a lack of concern is unjustifiable. To be sure, most of us are rationally required to nurture other-regarding concerns and commitments, but we are rationally required in virtue of social and psychological circumstances that are not quite universal. People whose survival is immediately secure will be driven to cultivate concerns beyond mere survival.<sup>19</sup> However, being driven to develop concerns beyond survival is not the same as being driven to develop concern for others. Some people have the option of fashioning more ambitious sets of concerns that would be fulfilling yet would still count as purely self-regarding. Even for such people, caring for others remains reasonable, because caring for others remains a particularly effective way of giving oneself more to live for. But it is not uniquely reasonable. Many kinds of commitments and concerns can be motivated

by our need to have something to live for; not all of them are other-regarding, and some of them are evil. People commit acts of vandalism for the sake of having something to do. They go to war for the sake of having something to live for.

Be that as it may, the project of showing that altruism is reasonable does not require us to show that altruism is uniquely reasonable. We do not need to prove that failing to care about others would be unreasonable. For most of us, failing to care about others really would be unreasonable, because for most of us, there are no self-concerns that could give us as much to live for as we have in virtue of caring for others. Section 3 argued that we cannot afford to be purely self-regarding, but that may not be true of everyone. There are reasons for altruism, but there also are people for whom those reasons are not compelling. Is the existence of such people a problem? It surely is a practical problem, insofar as the rest of us need to deal with such people. Some readers might feel that the existence of such people is also a problem for my argument; that is, a person might reply to my reasons for altruism by insisting that not everyone has the kind of reasons discussed in this chapter. There are people, sociopaths perhaps, who have no reasons to care about others.

My response is that looking for reasons for everyone is a mistake. If we presume at the outset that our reasons to care about others must be reasons for everyone, the reasons we produce are likely to be reasons for no one. Such reasons are likely to be mere philosophical sleight of hand, a distraction from our real-world concerns. Let us face the fact that our reasons for altruism can be real without being reasons for everyone. We must look for the real reasons, and accept that human societies need to deal with the fact that not everyone has real reasons.

In closing, let me say how this chapter fits into the larger project of identifying connections between rationality and morality. There is a limit to how much other-regard is rational, but whether that opens a gap between rationality and morality is an open question, for there is also a limit to how much other-regard is morally required. This is in part a point about morality leaving room for people to pursue their own projects, but it is also a reminder that the consequences of other-regard are only so good. Whether other-regarding action has better consequences than self-regarding action in a given case is an empirical matter.

Other-regarding action can sometimes seem morally dubious even apart from its immediate consequences in a given case. Paternalism, for example, is a form of altruism, an expression of concern for others (i.e., for their welfare) that overrides one's respect for others (i.e., for their preferences). Altruistic though it might be, paternalism often is objectionable. To



give another example, teachers should grade term papers on the basis of what they believe the papers deserve, not on what they believe the authors need. Anyone who has ever graded term papers knows how difficult it can be to ignore one's concern for others, but there are cases in which one is morally required to make the effort. From the viewpoints both of the agent and of those the agent might affect, neither self-regard nor other-regard is intrinsically exalted. A great deal depends on how a concern plays itself out.

In *The Republic*, Socrates concluded that individuals need justice within themselves for more or less the same reasons and with more or less the same urgency as society needs justice within itself. But this did not answer Glaucon's question. Glaucon did not ask whether the individual needs to give each part of himself its due. He did not ask whether society needs to give each part of itself its due. What he asked was whether the individual needs to give each part of society its due. If Thrasymachus neglects to give other people their due, must he at the same time be neglecting to give a part of himself its due?

He might be. Characters like Thrasymachus have reason to act only when doing so will satisfy their purely self-regarding ends. Because almost nothing counts as a reason for Thrasymachus to act (in particular, regard for others cannot move him to act), Thrasymachus's life is impoverished in a certain way. He has fewer reasons to live than the rest of us. (To have fewer reasons to live is not necessarily to have less reason to live, but that will be the tendency.) Thrasymachus lacks a kind of respect and concern for others that could have given him reason to pursue a range of goals. I realize that if Thrasymachus were here, he would laugh at me for saying this, for the range of goals I am talking about would mean nothing to him, but the bottom line remains: those goals could have enriched his life.

### ***Epilog 2014: So, Why Be Moral?***

Without yet having ventured into moral theory, the book's conclusion so far is that humanly rational choice supports a way of life that intuitively has a lot to do with being moral. I've also implicitly launched a broadside against one traditional way of treating the "why be moral" question. That is, I think that crushing Thrasymachus in philosophical debate has almost nothing to do with making the true case for being moral.

The truth is, being moral is a choice. It is not our only choice, and sometimes it is not an easy choice. It is not a choice the rationality of which can be assessed case by case, because to

choose to be moral is to choose a way of life. Moreover, the case for it being humanly rational to be moral depends on empirical psychological postulates that can be factually correct in your case, and true of nearly all of your fellow readers, and yet not be true of every human being. There is some pretty aberrant psychology out there. There may be people who think they are vampires. There may be people who think they are rabid dogs, or members of a superior race. It has absolutely no bearing on whether you or I are a kind of being for whom being moral is a real possibility and a reasonable aspiration.

If I were writing today, I would draw on Adam Smith. I would talk about the contingent connection Smith sees between being esteemed by others and between esteemed by self. What makes Smith's contribution special is that he sees something quasi-objective underlying it all. We can tell the difference between being esteemed and warranting esteem. Knowing that we warrant esteem grounds self-esteem in a way that the mere fact of esteem does not. At full maturity, we become capable of choosing what warrants esteem when the two come apart. We never become so asocial that we stop caring about the fact of being esteemed. But we do, at full maturity, learn that there is a special joy in doing good deeds that no one will ever know about.

Twenty years ago, I thought (and it still looks right today) that by this point I had said enough about life-choices that it is humanly rational for us to make, and the time had come to switch to the even more controversial task of articulating a theory of the humanly moral. The second part of this book asks, what kind of thing is morality such that it is better (in *some way!*) for humans to be moral than not? What is morality such that it is better to have a better understanding of our real reasons to be moral? If we were to hear that our loved ones had chosen to be moral, we would hear that as a cause for celebration rather than lament—moreover, we would be glad for *them*, not only for the people with whom they deal. Why? What exactly makes it great to be moral?

So much really worthwhile stuff has been published since I first wrote this. Some day I will republish this book with QR codes at the end of each chapter, pointing readers toward a library of new materials. Meanwhile, as a down payment, let me recommend the work of Cheshire Calhoun in general, and in particular her recent article “On Being Content With Imperfection,” *Ethics*, vol. 127 (2017) 327-52, which she recently represented in draft form at the U of Arizona.

- <sup>1</sup> Insofar as we can distinguish between interests and preferences, welfare is a matter of serving interests rather than satisfying preferences. There is a perfectly natural sense in which many people have preferences the satisfaction of which would not be in their interest.
- <sup>2</sup> People have tried to distinguish between self-regarding and other-regarding actions, separating actions affecting only the agent from actions affecting others as well. (See John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, for example.) The distinction is supposed to define a sphere of self-regarding activity with which society may not interfere, but it has proven notoriously difficult to draw, because a person seeking to justify interference with activities she dislikes can always claim she is being *affected* in some way, and thus that the activity is not purely self-regarding. By contrast, the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding concerns is unproblematic. However hard it is to find important examples of actions that affect only oneself, the distinction between caring about others and caring only about oneself remains sharp.
- <sup>3</sup> The distinction between respect and concern does not correspond to a distinction between duties of noninterference and duties to provide positive aid. Expressions of concern typically will involve lending aid; yet, out of concern, one might resist one's urge to help a child, knowing that children need to learn to take care of themselves. And expressions of respect typically will involve noninterference; yet, out of respect, one might lend aid to a war veteran.
- <sup>4</sup> The people I have polled usually agree that one of the two is the canonical form, but it turns out that they are evenly split on which one it is.
- <sup>5</sup> It may seem that if the original motivation is self-regarding, then we cannot be talking about genuine altruism. On the contrary, the point of the discussion is to consider whether we can be motivated by reason A to endorse a disposition to be motivated by reason B. (Can one be led by concern for one's health to try to cultivate a liking for vegetables?) Whether the acts motivated by reason B are altruistic depends on the nature of reason B, not reason A. If reason B consists of respect or concern for others, then acts motivated by it are altruistic. It makes no difference whether reason A consists of something else.
- <sup>6</sup> Herbert Gintis's (1974) Marxist critique of neoclassical economics rests on the welfare implications of endogenous preferences. See also Peter Hammond (1976) and Akerlof & Dickens (1982).
- <sup>7</sup> I thank Jean Hampton for suggesting this way of describing the contrast.
- <sup>8</sup> As Phillip Bricker (1980, 401) says, "to be prudent is to effect a reconciliation between oneself and one's world." And, we might add, our world consists in large part of other people.
- <sup>9</sup> Similarly, Gregory Kavka says "an immoralist's gloating that it does not pay him to be moral because the satisfactions of morality are not for him [is] like the pathetic boast of a deaf person that he saves money because it does not pay him to buy opera records" (1984, 307).
- <sup>10</sup> Sen (31) considers sympathy to be egoistic, however, on the grounds that sympathetic action is still action done to satisfy one's own preferences. For what it is worth, I disagree. Whether my preferences are egoistic depends on their content, not on the bare fact that I happen to have them.
- <sup>11</sup> Thus, when we interpret Sayre-McCord's thought experiment as a metaphor for habituation, we reproduce a core insight of Book II of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. On the choice of character, see also Roderick Long (1992).
- <sup>12</sup> Allan Gibbard (1990, 276) notes that feelings can induce beliefs whose acceptance makes the feelings seem reasonable. The beliefs induced, we might add, can amplify our original feelings in the course of rationalizing them. Some of us, when angry at our spouses, are tempted to dredge up a history of slights suffered at the hands of that person so as to justify our present feelings, and our new beliefs about that person's general inhumanity amplify our original anger to the point where our final blow-up is quite spectacular, and only barely intelligible to observers. We need to be careful about our negative feelings, for the beliefs they induce can do lasting damage.
- <sup>13</sup> Unlike the analogy between integrity and justice, the often-discussed connection between the soul of the state and the soul of the citizen is much more than a matter of analogy. Jonathan Lear (1992) argues that Plato believed not only that the souls of citizens and the soul of the state are like each other but also that the reason they are like each other is because they are outgrowths of each other. The state is the milieu within which children grow up, and so the characters of its adult citizens reflect that milieu. At the same time, the state's ongoing evolution or devolution lies in the hands of its adult citizens, and so reflects the characters of its adult citizens.
- <sup>14</sup> Can self-regarding commitments be thought of as moral commitments? See Chapter 8. See also Neera Badhwar (1993) and Jean Hampton (1993).
- <sup>15</sup> Edward F. McClennen (1988) argues that one can be better off as a resolute chooser, i.e., a person who can stick to a plan. For example, suppose Kate wants to buy a television set, but if she does, she will then need to decide

whether to watch game shows. Kate's most-preferred option is to buy the television, resolving never to watch game shows. However, she is not sure she can trust herself never to watch game shows, and would rather not have a television set at all than to end up watching game shows. Will it make any difference that she resolved last week when she bought her television never to watch game shows? My theory is that resolve is something we build. Reflectively rational agents can habituate themselves to virtue. Kate is rational to build up her capacity for resolve because, as she proves to herself that she can carry out plans calling for resolve, she becomes able to trust herself to make choices that will be optimal if and only if she ignores temptations associated with those choices.

- <sup>16</sup> It would be a mistake to say something cannot be altruistic if you really enjoy it. This would put the cart before the horse. If you help other people for their sake, you are altruistic regardless of whether you prefer to have the concern for others that your action expresses. In *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant said getting joy out of an action can rob it of moral worth, which seems wrong, but even if he had been right, enjoying an action can affect its moral worth without changing the fact that the action is altruistic.
- <sup>17</sup> I thank Lainie Ross for helping me work out the connection between altruism and sacrifice. See also Aristotle's discussion of friendship and sacrifice in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1169a).
- <sup>18</sup> William Galston (1993) distinguishes between progressively more expansive forms of altruism, and draws attention to the moral cost of altruism in its more expansive incarnations. For example, Galston says, the concern expressed by rescuers of Jewish refugees in Nazi-occupied Europe was an expansive, cosmopolitan form of altruism. Commendable though it was on its face, this cosmopolitan form of altruism often went hand in hand with a failure to express concern for family members thereby put at risk by the rescue effort. The more cosmopolitan form of altruism came at the expense of the more parochial form. More parochial forms of altruism sometimes are not consistent with expressing concern for everyone.
- <sup>19</sup> This claim rests on Chapter 3's argument that the goal of bare survival drives us to convert the goal of bare survival into something that has instrumental value within a larger corpus of ends. However, if our will to survive is too weak in the first place, it may not be strong enough to drive us to nurture the further ends that would protect our will to survive against further decay.