

## Chapter 2

### The Nature of Motives

In this chapter we examine the nature of motives.<sup>1</sup> The discussion addresses conceptual issues, in order to set the stage for the ethical issues that will be considered later. My formal definition is this:

The motive of an action is an ultimate desire of the agent that would be satisfied by some feature of it, or its effects, if she succeeds in doing what she intends to do, and that explains its occurrence, or some feature of it.

This definition is designed, as we will see, to cover certain unusual motivational phenomena. If we want to use ordinary words we can say that an agent's motive establishes her end in acting. After exploring the significance of this definition, I will conclude by returning to the examples in the previous chapter in order to evaluate whether they constitute motives or not.

#### I

#### Motives and 'Rationalizing' Explanations

Motives are mentioned when a given action needs to be explained or understood. In fact, the term has a common association with a specifically legal issue: the motive of a crime. Obviously, the term is used in other contexts. There are good and honorable motives that lead to praiseworthy actions: a sense of fair play, say, or patriotism.

At least two other forms of speech correspond roughly to talk of an agent's motive for doing something. Suppose that S has leaked some classified information to the

press. If we want to know S's motive we might simply ask why S did this. Or we might ask what S's reason for leaking it was. A plausible initial hypothesis is therefore that the motive of an action is the agent's reason for performing it.

The idea that motives are reasons for acting brings up a philosophical distinction. Two different types of reason for action are often noted. These are explanatory (or motivational) reasons for action, and normative (or justifying) reasons for action.<sup>2</sup> An explanatory reason, obviously, serves to explain why an agent acted as she did. Explanatory reasons can also be utilized in a discussion of actions that have not occurred; then the issue is what their explanation would be. Normative reasons, in contrast, state what the speaker believes are good or adequate reasons for a given agent to perform an action. They are articulated by means of evaluative, as opposed to purely 'factual' or descriptive, terms. The distinction could be made roughly in the following way. If S performs a particular action, then giving an explanatory reason for this action is saying why S chose to do it. Giving a normative reason for S's action is saying that some feature of S' situation spoke in favor of doing it. This is consistent with saying that she did not in fact do it.

We can utilize this distinction between types of reason to clarify the nature of motives. Let us begin by considering normative reasons for action. Normative reasons include, but are not restricted to, moral reasons for action. There are also prudential reasons for action, epistemic reasons, aesthetic reasons, reasons of etiquette, and perhaps others. Statements of normative reasons often contain terms like 'justified', 'rational', 'reasonable', 'obligatory', 'permissible', as well as 'unjustified', 'unreasonable', 'wrong', and so on. We can simply speak of 'good', 'adequate', or 'compelling' reasons for

acting, as well as ‘poor’, ‘inadequate’ or ‘insufficient’ ones. There are also ‘thick’ descriptions of actions that include evaluative components such as ‘statesmanlike’, ‘courageous’, ‘Christian’, and ‘considerate’ on the one hand, and ‘dumb’, ‘amateurish’, ‘servile’, and ‘mean-spirited’ on the other. The following, then, are a few schematic statements about S’s normative reasons for acting: ‘S is obligated to tell the truth’; ‘S should keep her weight down’; ‘S was dumb to take that bet’; ‘S should keep her knees covered in church’. We believe that various sorts of normative reasons to act can apply to an agent at one time. We say, for example, that S has a weak moral reason to donate to that charity, but good prudential reasons—since it will please her boss.

There is clearly a general distinction between normative and explanatory reasons. An example that brings this out is the case where there is an explanatory reason for an action but no normative reason. We could say that S’s reason for drinking the paint—that is, the explanatory reason—was her sudden urge to do so, but that she had no good reason to do this. On the other hand, there can be a strong normative reason for an agent to act which does not explain her action. This could be true simply because the action doesn’t occur. S may have a compelling moral reason to testify at a trial. This will not explain her testifying if she chooses not to testify! In fact, the moral reason may not explain her testifying, even if it does occur: S may testify from self-interest.<sup>3</sup>

Motives are explanatory reasons. But this claim, correct as far as it goes, needs some amplification. First of all, motives may be a type of explanatory reason, but there are explanations of actions that do not cite motives. If we explain S’s shouting at her daughter by saying that she drank too much coffee we are not mentioning any motive of hers.<sup>4</sup> And, in general, any explanation of an action that does not mention a certain sort of

psychological state of the agent does not cite its motive. The relevant psychological state is the one that philosophers call ‘conative’. That is, the state is (roughly, perhaps) a desire of the agent. S’s motive in leaking the information might be a desire for fame or a desire to take revenge.

The language that is used to speak of motives does not always mention desires explicitly. In specifying a person’s motive we often use simple terms like revenge or fear or greed. But such terms are understood to imply the presence of something like a desire. It would be absurd to say that S’s motive was greed but that she had no desire for money. The same point holds for those emotions that give rise to motives. (In fact, ‘motive’ and ‘emotion’ both derive from movere, to move.) The emotions we regard as motives characteristically generate desires to act in ways related to the content of the emotions. Envy, for example, gives rise to a desire to remove a valued object from another person. Emotions such as grief and anguish are different: they do not give rise to such desires, although they may give rise to various forms of expressive behavior. Gilbert Ryle writes, “A woman wrings her hands in anguish, but we do not say that anguish is the motive from which she wrings her hands.”<sup>5</sup> When we speak of certain emotions as motives we utilize an elision to refer to the actual motive, a desire, via its immediate cause.

We also speak of reason itself as a motive, in addition to desires and emotions. Both self-interest and morality have been said by philosophers to involve reason as a motive.<sup>6</sup> These philosophers are in part emphasizing the fact that an agent can choose completely ‘coolly’, we might say, to further her own self-interest, or to do the right thing. For our purposes, though, I think we can say that all our motives are desires in some broad sense. We should therefore contrast them with two different kinds of belief:

purely factual beliefs about the agent's circumstances and opportunities, and normative beliefs about what is good, right, or desirable, etc. To do this is to utilize what is sometimes called the belief-desire model of explanation of human action. There are important philosophical disputes that arise about this model. In a footnote I say something about them.<sup>7</sup> But it is worth emphasizing that the model certainly allows us to say that human beings are sometimes motivated by self-interest and by moral reasons for acting, since they sometimes want to further their self-interest and do the right thing.

What is distinctive about the explanations of actions that cite their motives? Let us focus on what I will call 'the standard case' of an action from a given motive by a rational agent. In the standard case this agent has both a normative belief about her action and a desire that corresponds to it. We can say that the normative belief contains what G. E. M. Anscombe called a 'desirability' characterization of the action.<sup>8</sup> I will use 'desirable' to signify the most general positive normative term applied to actions, so that 'right', 'prudent', 'statesmanlike', etc., are all types of desirability. The agent's motive is a desire to achieve what she believes is desirable. In the standard case a motive explanation of the action is thus what Donald Davidson once called, a bit oddly, 'rationalizing'.<sup>9</sup> When I cite a motive in the standard case I am stating what I believe the agent took to be desirable or reasonable about acting. This sort of explanation of an action clearly contrasts with one that cites the agent's sleeplessness or excess caffeine intake. It would be absurd to say that S's reason for shouting at her daughter was that she had not slept the night before. We say that the reason S shouted at her daughter was that she had not slept the night before.

If the motive explanation of an action is a rationalizing explanation of it then we see that there is an important connection between the explanatory and the normative here. Suppose, again, that S's motive for leaking the information was a desire to embarrass her former lover. We could equally say that S's reason for leaking the information was a desire to embarrass her former lover. Here 'reason' carries its explanatory meaning. Indeed, if Davidson's famous contention is correct, the explanation of S's action it offers is causal.<sup>10</sup> The term is being used in exactly the same way as it is when we speak, say, of the reason for the bridge's collapse. But when I say in a standard case that S's motive was a desire to embarrass her former lover I am saying that S believed that embarrassing her lover was desirable, and that she desired to embarrass him. I may completely reject the assertion that this was desirable. Still, I am asserting that S believed that it was. This motive explanation thus appeals to what we could call subjective normativity or rationality, that is, to what an agent takes to be normative reasons for action.

There is another important connection between normative and explanatory reasons for action. Normative reasons can be acted on: we can do the right thing (in the broadest sense) for the right reason (in the broadest sense). People can (and do) perform dutiful and morally admirable actions; they are deliberately prudent, tactful, and tasteful; they seek knowledge for its own sake. This need not mean that normative reasons are identical (in some cases) with explanatory reasons. All that it need mean is that sometimes agents have true or reasonable beliefs about their normative reasons; they desire to act on these reasons; and they do so.<sup>11</sup>

It is an interesting and important fact that when someone is concerned to say if S has a normative reason for performing a certain action, this person will rarely refer to the

fact that S has a desire to perform it. No one—not even S herself—would say that what gave S a (normative) reason to leak the information was the fact that she wanted to embarrass her former lover. Someone stating a normative reason for so acting would speak of S’s former lover’s misdeeds or dangerousness or the fact that he deserved such treatment. Giving normative reasons for an action seems to swing the camera, as it were, away from the agent and onto the scene around her. This is why, I think, there is so much force to the claim that desires as such never, or, almost never, provide normative reasons for acting.<sup>12</sup> We can understand why this is so. If we examine the content of the normative beliefs in the standard case we discover what an agent believes is desirable about acting. But these beliefs depict as desirable certain features of the action itself, as well as features of the world that it brings about.<sup>13</sup> The motives of a rational agent are directed at features of the world surrounding her (including, also, possible worlds) that she believes provide her with normative reasons for action. Other persons may share the agent’s belief that these features provide her with normative reasons for acting. Or they may reject her belief that these features provide her with normative reasons for acting. But even if they accept her belief about what features of the world provide her with normative reasons for acting, they will not take her desire to perform a certain action to be one of them.

Nothing I have said entails that every action is to be explained by one motive. Sidgwick writes, “The more we contemplate the actual promptings that precede any volition, the more we seem to find complexity of motive the rule rather than the exception, at least in the case of educated persons.”<sup>14</sup> This is an exaggeration, but it is certainly true that people sometimes act from more than one motive. For a reason that I

will get to shortly, however, I think there is an important limit to how many motives a person can have for a given action.

## II

### Ultimate and Derived Desires

Let us continue to focus on the standard case of a rational agent who desires to do what she believes it is desirable to do. If we think about the structure of her normative beliefs we can further clarify the nature of motives.

Rational agents often deliberate about what to do before they act. Such deliberation resolves various issues. One such issue is finding suitable means. If S believes that it is desirable to bring about a state of affairs this may lead her to think about how to do so. In thinking about available means S may come to the conclusion that one type of means is most desirable.<sup>15</sup> There is a related form of deliberation often called ‘constitutive’ reasoning. If S believes that it is desirable to engage in a certain kind of activity this may lead her to reason about a desirable specific form of the activity. For example, if S believes that it would be desirable to have an entertaining evening, she may come to believe that playing Scrabble would be entertaining, and hence desirable. These are two forms of practical reasoning or ‘practical syllogism’. In both types of reasoning there is a movement from the general to the specific; there is also a kind of transmission of desirability from the general to the specific. This transmission does not mean that if an agent accepts the reasoning she believes that the general state of affairs or activity loses

its desirability. Rather, she believes that the specific action has its desirability in virtue of its relation to the state of affairs or activity.<sup>16</sup>

Practical syllogisms are structures that contain normative propositions.<sup>17</sup> In the standard case a rational agent accepts or believes such propositions when she acts, so that she has normative beliefs about her action. We now see that generally an agent will accept more than one desirability characterization even when she acts on one motive. This is because she accepts a set of propositions such that the desirability of the action derives from the desirability of some more general state of affairs or activity.

Suppose that S accepts a practical syllogism and chooses to act on it. In doing this she is not simply affirming the truth of the statements contained in this reasoning. She does not merely believe, for example, that it would be desirable to have an entertaining evening, and that it would be desirable to play Scrabble. She could believe those statements and not act. She wants to have an entertaining evening and wants to play Scrabble. To say this is to reiterate the conative nature of motives and their difference from normative beliefs.

But while it is true that desires are not normative beliefs, the structure of the desires that S has here mirror the structure of a practical syllogism that she accepts. If she believes that it would be desirable to have an entertaining evening, then she wants to have an entertaining evening. Etc. Once we understand this we can see a critical point: the motive of an action corresponds to the major premise of the practical syllogism, not the conclusion. In our example we can say that S's motive for playing Scrabble is her desire for an entertaining evening. It would not be accurate or informative to say that S's motive for playing Scrabble was a desire to play Scrabble, even though she had this derivative

desire, too. Let us say that the ‘ultimate desire’ of an agent in the standard case is the one that corresponds to the major premise of the practical syllogism that she accepts. This leads us to say, tentatively, that the agent’s motive is her ultimate desire. We can say that an agent’s ‘motivation’ in performing a particular action encompasses more than her motive. Her motivation includes her derivative desires. It may include some other desires, as we will see shortly.

When a rational agent acts on ultimate and derived desires there is a sort of rational structure to her activity itself.<sup>18</sup> A motive establishes an end for an agent, and she guides her activity accordingly. As she acts she will monitor her activity to be sure that it is succeeding in achieving her end, and she will modify it if it is not. She will look to see that she is actually employing her chosen means properly. Or she will choose different means if she comes to believe that the ones she originally employed to achieve her end are proving to be ineffective. A similar structure exists in a connected series of actions that carry out a plan.<sup>19</sup>

It is this guiding function of motives that constrains the number of motives that is possible for a given action. If S acts to achieve an end, then she needs to monitor her activity to make sure that she is reaching it. To have two ends is “to ride two horses at once”<sup>20</sup> and therefore often to reduce the chances that one will achieve both. Obviously there are cases where people have two or three motives for performing a given action. But it is doubtful that there are cases where they have eight motives.

### III

#### Motive and Intention

Our tentative definition of a motive as an ultimate desire is not completely satisfactory. Here is why. We saw that it is possible for someone to believe, for example, that it is desirable to play Scrabble, but not desire to play it. It is also possible for someone to desire to play Scrabble, but not play it: she may decide that she ought to work instead. We need to augment what we have said by considering the notion of intention.

One way to state the additional point would be to say that the motive of an action is the ultimate desire that the agent intends to realize in acting. This seems to capture the point that the agent does not merely desire some state of affairs, but has decided to bring it about. She ratifies or endorses the desire in a distinctively practical way by choosing to pursue it. This suggestion is roughly, but not entirely, correct.

Let us focus on an agent's 'intention in acting'. We will therefore set aside conditional intentions and future intentions.<sup>21</sup> Desires can be ultimate or derived. It is important to see that intentions have the same sort of structure: there are ultimate intentions and derived intentions.<sup>22</sup> So we can say that S intends to have an entertaining evening and (therefore) intends to play Scrabble. Intentions do not seem to replace certain desires so much as consent to them or endorse them. We do not intend to X instead of desiring to X, but intend to X in order to realize something we desire about Xing. It seems that intentions are, as it were, overlaid on certain of the agent's desires, and have the same content. S wants to have an entertaining evening and intends to have it, etc. We might then suggest that an agent's motive in acting is her ultimate present intention.<sup>23</sup>

There is, however, a sort of case where the agent's ultimate desire and ultimate intention have different content. They do not coincide because the action has a result as an end that is so unlikely that the agent cannot intend to bring it about. Suppose that S buys one lottery ticket, knowing the long odds. We can suppose that her ultimate desire here is a desire for money. (We will discuss this particular desire more in a moment.) So we can say her end is to win the prize money. S has the intention to buy the ticket, but she does not have the intention to win the prize money. This is too unlikely a result for her to intend.<sup>24</sup> S wants to win the prize, and hopes to win the prize, and is trying to win it, but she does not intend to win it. S's ultimate desire, however, rationally governs her ultimate intention. If, for example, S comes to believe that the lottery is fixed then she will no longer intend to buy the ticket. Notice that this can be a standard case. S may believe that it is desirable to win the money.

We arrive, then, at the First Definition of Motive.

First Definition (D1). The motive of an action is the ultimate desire that the agent intends to satisfy, or try to satisfy, in acting.

This definition acknowledges the point just made about unlikely outcomes. When the agent's ultimate desire and ultimate intention diverge then she may only be able to try to satisfy the desire that constitutes her motive. We can also say, as a gloss on D1, that the agent's motive establishes her conscious end in acting.

## IV

### Non-Standard Cases

Our definition was developed with the standard case of acting from a motive in mind. There are a number of examples of acting from a motive that do not fit the description of the standard case. Some raise no problem for our definition; others do. I will list the various cases, starting with the standard case.

1. The Standard Case. A rational agent desires what she believes is desirable and seeks to satisfy the desire. In some cases she intends to satisfy the desire; in other cases she tries to satisfy the desire.
2. The actions of certain animals and children. These beings do not have normative beliefs. But they have desires, presumably both ultimate and derived, that they seek to satisfy.
3. Actions by rational beings who have no normative beliefs about their activity. Presumably some impulsive actions fit this description, though in other cases the agents have dispositional normative beliefs.
4. Akrasia, or actions contrary to the agent's normative beliefs. This is a form of subjective irrationality, since it involves an agent choosing to act in a way that diverges from her own normative beliefs. In the more common and moderate form of akrasia the divergence is not complete: the agent believes that what she is doing is not the most reasonable or desirable thing that she can do, but she chooses to do what she believes is desirable in some way. For example, S

may decide that it is best to refrain from eating a cookie, but nonetheless choose to eat it, believing as she does so that she is pursuing something desirable. Some authors argue that an extreme form of akrasia is possible where the agent believes that what she is doing is undesirable in every respect.<sup>25</sup>

5. Unconscious desires. I take it as well-established that there are such desires, and that they can operate as motives. This is not to say that a specific theory about the origin and content of unconscious desires such as Freudianism is correct. Unconscious desires can explain an action, or certain features of it. And they do this in the same way that conscious desires explain actions, rather than in the way that coffee intake does. So to cite an unconscious motive for an action is also to ‘rationalize’ it in a certain way.
6. Operatively Covert Desires. In this phenomenon an agent is aware of a favoring consideration that she does not consciously treat as her end. A morally important example of this is when an agent realizes that an action is in her self-interest and that she is morally obligated to perform it. She may nonetheless only regard its being obligatory as a reason to perform the action. That is, she may do it ‘only because it is right’. Still, it is possible or even likely, that she will perform this action from self-interest (as well as ‘from duty’). We do not have the ability to completely screen off or block the operation of desires that we know favor the very action we choose to do. It is not correct to say that the agent’s self-interest is here an unconscious desire. She is aware that her self-interest is furthered by acting as she does, but she is

unaware of its operation. Let us say that this is an operatively covert desire.

Here again the agent is not consciously guiding her activity by the end that the desire establishes.

Although the phenomena described under the second, third and fourth headings are not standard cases, they do not call for any revision of D1. In all of them the agent has an ultimate desire that she intends to satisfy by acting, or that she can try to satisfy by acting. In all of them the agent's ultimate desire establishes an end of her action that she consciously seeks to satisfy. The last two types of case do create problems for D1. In these cases the agent is either not aware of the relevant desire, or she is not consciously trying to satisfy it by acting.

In order to accommodate the last two possibilities I propose the following revision.

Second Definition (D2): The motive of an action is an ultimate desire of the agent that would be satisfied by some feature of it, or its effects, if she were to succeed in doing what she intends to do, and that explains its occurrence, or some feature of it.

I mean for D1 to be included in D2, so that any desire that D1 counts as a motive D2 will count as a motive, but not conversely. These definitions allow us to say that an agent normally satisfies the desires that are her motives by intending to do certain things. But other desires of hers may guide her activity in another way, and establish ends for her in this other way. We could say, as a gloss on D2, that a motive establishes an agent's end in acting. For the next four chapters we will not need to consider unconscious desires or operatively covert desires. We will return to them in Chapter 7. There we will need to

consider more carefully how such desires relate to conscious motives. Until then we can use D1 as a serviceable definition. And we can generally use standard cases.

## V

### Motives and Actions

We can now consider the relation between motives and actions. In an important sense the relation between them is ‘many-many’.<sup>26</sup> That is, for a given type of motive there are many different sorts of action it can give rise to or explain. And, a given sort of action can be performed from many different kinds of motive.

In the previous chapter I cited passages from Aristotle and Kant to make the moral point that someone can perform an obligatory action from various motives. But these same passages can be used to make a conceptual point about motives and action: a given action can be performed from different motives. A merchant might provide correct change from a sense of duty or from self-interest or from both. The conceptual point makes good sense if we think of a motive as an ultimate desire that an agent seeks to satisfy. The Aristotle/Kant point can then be restated as a point about the various practical syllogisms that can all have the same general sort of conclusion, namely, that it is desirable (in some way or other) to do X. The conclusions in Kant’s cases will not be identical, since one sort of merchant will conclude that it is morally obligatory to give the correct change and another that it is prudent to do so. But they will agree that it is desirable to do so. The practical syllogisms of these two sorts of merchant will not only differ in their major premise, that is, their ultimate normative reason for acting. They will

differ in their minor premises as well. That is to say, different factual features of the action will be singled out by the two sorts of agent. One will focus on the features that she believes make it obligatory to give the correct change. The other will focus on the features that she believes make it true that her self-interest is furthered by giving the correct change. It is possible that these two pieces of reasoning will have some propositions in common. But whenever two agents begin with ultimate normative terms that are not synonymous, there will be differences elsewhere in their practical reasoning as well. Different pieces of practical reasoning can support the conclusion that performing one action is desirable because actions have many characteristics. One piece of reasoning can assert that one characteristic of an action makes it desirable to perform, and another piece of reasoning can assert that some other feature makes it desirable to perform.

The Aristotle/Kant claim needs to be interpreted properly. If S returns change to a customer from duty and T returns change to a customer from self-interest they both have performed a token (or instance) of the action of returning change (to a customer). To say an action can be performed from different motives is to say, for example, that one token (or instance) of the type of action ‘returning change’ is motivated by self-interest and another token (or instance) of this type is motivated by the sense of duty.<sup>27</sup>

There is a complication that stands in the way of accepting the conceptual claim. Ordinary language contains a diverse and flexible set of terms for actions. Joel Feinberg spoke of the “accordion effect”, which allows us to find alternative ways of describing the same action that give more or less information about its effects. We can say ‘S opened the door’ and then say that this action caused T, who was inside, to be startled, or

we can say ‘S startled T’. The latter term squeezes the effect, as it were, into the action-term.<sup>28</sup> It was less frequently remarked that a similar point applies to the antecedents of action. Some action terms imply facts about events prior to a specific act and others do not. Of one and the same action we could say ‘S handed the book to T’ or ‘S returned the book to T’. These phenomena alert us to a third possibility: an act term might contain information about the motives of the agent. There are in fact such terms. One is ‘avenge’. Avenging is an action that can only be performed from one motive, revenge. An interesting feature of this term is its complete lack of information about the specific form of activity it describes. If I say that S avenged T’s insult I have not said anything about the specific action that S performed. This sort of verb nonetheless creates a problem for the Aristotle/Kant claim, since it is not true that S can avenge an insult from various motives.<sup>29</sup>

The Aristotle/Kant claim can, however, be vindicated for avenging acts. Whenever someone avenges an insult, say, there will be some specific form that her revenge takes, for example, setting fire to T’s house. This action can be performed from more than one motive.

Jeremy Bentham undoubtedly deserves the credit for emphasizing the other conceptual point about motives and actions. He claims that a given motive can lead to the performance of many different sorts of action. The chapter on motives in An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789) laboriously makes this point about a number of motives.

In order to make this point he first has to clarify something about the language we use to describe motives. Ordinary language confuses us, because the common names of motives often incorporate moral judgments.

Now lust is always a bad motive. Why? Because if the case be such, that the effects of the motive are not bad, it does not go by, or at least ought not to go by, the name of lust. The case is, then, that when I say, 'Lust is a bad motive', it is a proposition that merely concerns the import of the word lust; and which would be false if transferred to the other word used for the same motive, sexual desire.<sup>30</sup>

We might put his point in contemporary language by saying that many terms for motives express 'thick' moral concepts, incorporating both descriptive and evaluative components. Bentham is thinking about the terms used by a second person who is speaking about someone else's motives. The evaluation that he is referring to must be distinguished from the one I discussed above. I said that in the standard case the agent herself is making an evaluation of her own activity. The contrast between these two kinds of evaluation is clearest when they differ radically. S may imply, by calling it 'lust', that T's sexual desire in doing X is a bad thing. T may well believe her desire to X is a good thing. More precisely: T may believe that the sexual act that she desires to engage in is desirable.<sup>31</sup>

Bentham insists that a given motive be characterized by a term that has no evaluative component before we can grasp his second point. Here is an example:

1. To save the trouble of taking care of it, a parent leaves his child to perish. In this case the motive will be deemed an abominable one, and, because indolence will seem too mild a name for it, the motive will, perhaps, be changed, and spoken of under some such term as cruelty. 2. To save yourself from an illegal slavery, you make your escape. In this case the motive will be deemed certainly not a bad one: and, because indolence, or even the love of ease, will be thought

too unfavorable a name for it, it will, perhaps, be styled the love of liberty. 3. A mechanic, in order to save his labor, makes an improvement in his machinery. In this case, people will look upon his motive as a good one; and finding no name for it that carries a good sense, they will be disposed to keep the motive out of sight: they will speak rather of his ingenuity, than of the motive which was the means of his manifesting that quality. Yet in all these cases the motive is the same: it is neither more nor less than the love of ease.<sup>32</sup>

Bentham's point here nicely meshes with the picture of practical reasoning that we are utilizing. A given normative proposition of some generality can be supplemented by various factual minor premises. That is to say, some desirable activity or state of affairs can be brought about or realized by various sorts of action. If S wants to have an enjoyable evening on two occasions she may end up playing Scrabble one night and watching a movie on another. This is due to her having different factual beliefs on the two days about how to enjoy herself.<sup>33</sup>

This point of Bentham's also must be interpreted properly. To say that a given motive (described neutrally) can lead to the performance of many different sorts of action is to speak about motives generically. If S abandons her baby from the love of ease and T devises an improvement in her workplace from the love of ease then we have two instances or tokens of the generic motive, the love of ease. S's action is a product of one token of the love of ease, and T's action is a product of another token of the love of ease. We can also say that they involve two instances of a certain type of desire.

Richard Brandt once claimed that the point Bentham stresses undermines a well-known argument by Kant that tried to establish that suicide is wrong. Kant gives the example of an agent who is considering committing suicide in order to end her suffering.

He claims that the Categorical Imperative shows that this action (from “self-love”) would be wrong. Kant writes:

A system of nature by whose law the very same feeling whose function is to stimulate the furtherance of life should actually destroy life would ...contradict itself.<sup>34</sup>

Brandt comments:

What Kant finds contradictory is that the motive of self-love (interest in one’s own long-range welfare) should sometimes lead one to struggle to preserve one’s own life, but at other times to end it. But where is the contradiction? One’s circumstances change, and...one sometimes maximizes one’s own long-range welfare by trying to stay alive, but at other times by bringing about one’s demise. So, if one’s consistent motive is to maximize one’s long-term welfare, sometimes (usually) one will do one thing, but sometimes another.<sup>35</sup>

Bentham states with no sense of paradox that the love of ease can lead a person to do work. He would presumably agree with Brandt that there is no contradiction in saying that self-interest (or “self-love”) leads a person to commit suicide.

Finally, we should note that actions have motives, but motives are not themselves actions. Motives are the ultimate desires that explain actions. It is an interesting and subtle question whether we can choose our motives, or choose to perform a specific action from one motive rather another. This issue will also be examined in Chapter 7. But even if we can do this, the motive chosen is not an action.

## VI

### Intrinsic Value and Ends

The account I have given of the nature of motives might seem to be unacceptable because of the implications it has about the desire for money. I will explain the problem and my response.

The motive of an action in the standard case corresponds to the ultimate normative proposition about her action that the agent accepts. This account might seem to be inadequate with regard to a motive like the desire for money. We believe that there are many cases in which people act from this motive. But we also believe that people only rarely take money to be an end in itself. People typically have only a derivative desire for money because of the various ends, both egoistic and altruistic, that they can achieve with it. Or, in normative terms, people rarely assert or believe that having money is intrinsically desirable. My account seems to imply that the desire for money only is a motive when it moves a miser—who does desire money for its own sake—to act. But clearly many other sorts of people act from the motive of a desire for money.

Now it is clear that motives never correspond to abstract general propositions about which kinds of things have value or are desirable. An agent's practical reasoning will never rest on such general propositions, since the truth or falsity of these statements will not be affected by anything she does. Furthermore, I can believe that there is value to be found in many things that I lack the time or ability to pursue.<sup>36</sup> What I can do is realize some limited state of affairs that I believe is valuable or desirable, or prevent the realization of some limited state of affairs that I believe is bad or undesirable. So I will

always accept some restricted normative proposition about a value I realize in acting. This does not mean that I only have normative beliefs about the value of what I can realize in a particular act. I can accept a policy of doing certain things in certain circumstances, and such a policy can function as a motive.

It is a mistake, however, to suppose that the ultimate normative propositions that an agent accepts in acting—whether they concern a specific action or a class of them—must characterize the act or acts as intrinsically valuable (or desirable). In an important article Christine Korsgaard distinguishes between valuing something as an end and believing that it has intrinsic value.<sup>37</sup> She contends that to say something is intrinsically valuable “is to say that it has its goodness in itself. It refers, one might say, to the location or source of the goodness...”<sup>38</sup> To value something as an end is, she says, to value it for its own sake. But an agent may value something as an end that receives its value, as it were, from something external to it.<sup>39</sup> The sort of cases where this distinction is helpful, she says, are “mixed values”, which include “luxurious instruments”. A mink coat has instrumental value, but the people who want one do not want it simply in order to keep warm. So the best way to characterize how people value them is this: “they are valued for their own sakes under the condition of their usefulness.”<sup>40</sup>

Korsgaard’s point about this distinction is helpful. And in fact our example can bring out the difference more sharply, since most people desire money only because of its extrinsic value, unlike mink coats. We can still distinguish two different ways in which a desire for money guides their practical reasoning. Sometimes they will seek to acquire money with some definite use of it in mind. At other times they will seek to acquire money with no such use in mind. In the latter cases they are treating money as a

provisional end. If S wants money in order to buy a pair of socks then clearly her desire for money is itself derivative and not the motive for whatever action she performs in order to get the money. On the other hand, S may want to acquire money with no specific use of it in mind. This desire can be the motive of her action. So S can believe the abstract proposition that money is only extrinsically desirable, but also believe that having a certain sum of money now is desirable as an end, and proceed to acquire it.<sup>41</sup> In the circumstances the desirability of having the money is the ultimate reason S has for acting. S will regard her action as successful if she comes to possess the money. This structure of a provisional end covers many more goals than the pursuit of money. The pursuit of health works the same way.

The picture that John Rawls gives of his contractors bargaining over principles of justice in the ‘original position’ has this sort of structure. The only difference is that the ‘veil of ignorance’ compels them to reason with provisional ends. His contractors have, and know that they have, various further goals for their lives. But because of the veil they do not know what these are. So they take acquiring Rawls’ “primary social goods” (“rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth”) as their provisional end and seek to reach an agreement about the principles governing the pursuit and distribution of these goods.<sup>42</sup> They believe that having more rather than less of these goods will facilitate the pursuit of whatever further goals they have. The motive of Rawls’ imaginary contractors is therefore the desire to secure the most of these goods that they can.<sup>43</sup>

We can now see that Anscombe’s phrase “desirability characterization” as a way of speaking about motives from an agent’s point of view is incomplete in two ways. It is

true that when an agent acts from a motive in the standard case she believes that something is desirable. But she also believes that something else is desirable, namely, her means (or constitutive activity). Furthermore, if an agent has the end of bringing a certain state of affairs about, she may not believe that its existence is intrinsically desirable.

## VII

### Conclusion

In the previous chapter I offered three examples of actions where a motive seems to have deontic relevance. We need to consider whether the examples do involve motives. The examples turned on certain actions arising from a desire for money, cruelty and prejudice like racism or anti-Semitism.

I have already argued that the desire for money is a motive when it operates as a provisional end.

Cruelty is also clearly a motive in some cases. If cruelty is a desire to harm or hurt another as an end, then it is a motive.

Prejudice like anti-Semitism is a more complicated issue and there are a number of psychological structures that correspond to it. But one sort of prejudice is a kind of selective hatred and even cruelty, and insofar as we are thinking of this we are again thinking of something that can be an ultimate desire.<sup>44</sup> We will discuss some other forms that prejudice can take in Chapters 3 and 4.

The examples can indeed be conceived of as involving motives. But there is a catch: they can in some cases, anyway, be conceived of as not involving motives. The

desire for money can be a motive. But it also can fail to be a motive because it is a derivative. Return to the example of having sex for money. It is possible that a person who is doing this has no particular use in mind for the money, in which case the desire for money is a motive. But the person doing this may want to have the money in order to pay the rent. In that case, on my theory, the desire for money is not a motive. Similarly, we will later take note of the fact that someone may harm or fail to benefit Jews only in order to keep customers coming to her store. In that case the anti-Semitism (if it can still be called that) is not a motive, since it is derivative. This brings up an important point that we will need to return to. But I suggest that it need not detain us. All we need for now is that the desire for money, say, when it does operate as a motive, seems to have deontic relevance.

The definition of motive that I have defended yields the verdict that the three examples I offered in the last chapter can be interpreted as involving motives. They are therefore at least tentative counterexamples to the claim that motives never have deontic relevance. We now need to see if some substantive moral theory can explain why the motives are deontically relevant in these cases. We have to be prepared to conclude that our best moral theory will not leave all of them standing as counterexamples. But we can see that moral theorists must shoulder a burden of proof. They must show why their theory supports the claim that in some or all of these cases the motive is deontically relevant. Or else they must convince us that the appearance that they are deontically relevant is deceptive.

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<sup>1</sup> On motives see Jeremy Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (London: Methuen, 1970), ch. 10 (hereafter abbreviated IPML); C. D. Broad, "Analysis of Some Ethical Concepts," in

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Broad's Critical Essays in Moral Philosophy, ed. David Cheney (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971), pp. 63-81, at 65-71 (first published, 1928); W. H. F. Barnes, W. D. Falk, and A. E. Duncan-Jones, "Symposium: Intention, Motive, and Responsibility," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 19, suppl. (1945), pp. 230-88, esp. pp. 230-39; Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of Mind (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1949), ch. 4, esp. pp. 83-98; 110-15; Kurt Baier, The Moral Point of View (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), ch. 6, esp. pp. 156-61; R. S. Peters, The Concept of Motivation, 2d ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), ch. 2; G. E. M. Anscombe, Intention, 2d ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963), pp. 15-25; Anthony Kenny, Action, Emotion and Will (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), ch. 4; Eric D'Arcy, Human Acts: An Essay in Their Moral Evaluation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), pt. II; Geoffrey Russell Grice, The Grounds of Moral Judgment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), ch. 1, esp. pp. 8-15; William Alston, "Motives and Motivation," in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), vol. 5, pp. 399-409; Roy Lawrence, Motive and Intention (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1972); Monroe Beardsley, "Motives and Intentions," in Action and Responsibility, ed. Michael Bradie and Myles Brand (Bowling Green, Ohio: Applied Philosophy Program, 1980), pp. 71-79; Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson, Unto Others (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), ch. 6; Barbara Herman, "Motives," in The Encyclopedia of Ethics, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Lawrence Becker and Charlotte Becker (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1185-8. Most of the material published in the 1950's and 1960's responds to Ryle. See also Michael Gorr, "Motives and Rightness," Philosophia 27 (1999), pp. 581-98.

<sup>2</sup> The distinction has been traced back to Francis Hutcheson. See Baier, Moral, op. cit., pp. 148-56; Stephen Darwall, Impartial Reason (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 28-32; David Brink, Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 39-40. For an alternative account of the history of the distinction see Jonathan Dancy, Practical Reality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 20-25.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between explanatory and normative reasons for action is not the distinction between the first and the third person. It is not the case that only some other person will explain S's action but that S herself will give normative reasons for performing it. S herself can explain her own action. And a third person can say why S has or had some normative reason for action. Contrast R. Jay Wallace, Normativity and the Will (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 65-6.

<sup>4</sup> Cp. D'Arcy, Human, op. cit., p. 131.

<sup>5</sup> Ryle, Concept, op. cit., p. 97. Cp. N. J. H. Dent, The Moral Psychology of the Virtues (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 64 f.; William Lyons, "Emotions and Motives," Canadian Journal of Philosophy 6 (1976), pp. 501-16; Ronald de Sousa, The Rationality of Emotion (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 120-21.

<sup>6</sup> The idea clearly occurs in Kant, e.g., G 66 (398-9). Contemporary discussion of it begins with Thomas Nagel, The Possibility of Altruism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). See also Jonathan Dancy, Moral Reasons (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), chs. 1-3 and, for his later view, Dancy, Practical, op. cit.

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<sup>7</sup> One debate is in metaethics: philosophers disagree about whether moral language, or normative language in general, expresses any sort of belief. A comprehensive anthology on these questions is Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton, eds., Moral Discourse and Practice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. part 3. Another debate occurs in moral psychology. It is about whether desires are always necessary for motivation, or whether normative beliefs—which might be thought to be the verdicts of ‘practical reason’—by themselves provide motivation. The previous note mentions some proponents of this view. See Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton, op. cit., part 4, for some responses, as well as Alfred Mele, Motivation and Agency (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 5; Timothy Schroeder, Three Faces of Desire (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 157-61. The two debates are not unrelated.

<sup>8</sup> Anscombe, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” in his Essays on Actions and Events (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Davidson, Essays, op. cit., ch. 1, taking issue with Ryle, Concept, op. cit., among others.

<sup>11</sup> Compare Dancy, Practical, op. cit., and the response by Wallace, Normativity, op. cit., ch. 3, pp. 63-70.

<sup>12</sup> Darwall, Impartial, op. cit., chs. 2 and 3; Dancy, Practical, op. cit., ch. 2; Thomas Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 41-9.

<sup>13</sup> Cp. ME 362.

<sup>14</sup> ME 368. Cp. 438.

<sup>15</sup> This shows why a mere statement of the motive for an action might not explain it adequately, even if true. This could happen if the agent’s beliefs about means were not clear to the person to whom the explanation is being offered. If someone says to me that S’s motive for leaking the information was the desire to embarrass her former lover this would not be an adequate explanation for me if I don’t understand how leaking the information would embarrass him. The listener needs to understand the entire structure of the agent’s practical reasoning.

<sup>16</sup> Cp. Mele, Motivation, op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>17</sup> Such reasoning is difficult to formalize. See Henry Richardson, Practical Reasoning about Final Ends (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 33-41.

<sup>18</sup> Cp. John Searle, Rationality in Action (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 51-2. A good discussion of the guiding role of intentions occurs in Scanlon, Moral Dimensions, op. cit., ch. 1, sec. 5. Wallace notes that this guidance occurs even in radically akratic action. Wallace, Normativity, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>19</sup> These play a central role in Michael Bratman, Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> This is an old phrase well applied by David Velleman to the phenomenon of mixed motivation. See his Self to Self (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 323. His discussion of acting from mixed motives, pp. 320-4, is the only philosophical treatment of it that I know. There is interesting material on the psychological interaction of mixed motives in Richard Layard, Happiness: Lessons from a New Science (New

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York: Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 158-60; Barry Schwartz, "Money for Nothing," The New York Times, July 2, 2007, p. A 21.

<sup>21</sup> For conditional intentions, see Davidson, Essays, op. cit., pp. 92-5; for future intentions, see Bratman, Intention, op. cit., pp. 3-9.

<sup>22</sup> Cp. Searle, Rationality, op. cit., pp. 51-2.

<sup>23</sup> Compare Beardsley, op. cit.; J. L. A. Garcia, "The Right and the Good," Philosophia 21 (1992), p. 236. This is not the position I took in "Motive and Rightness," Ethics 106 (1996), pp. 327-49, at 336-8. But I now think that it is close to correct.

<sup>24</sup> I here adapt a point made about intentional action to the concept of intention. See Alfred Mele and Paul Moser, "Intentional Action," Nous 28 (1994), pp. 39-68, at 59-62.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Stocker, "Desiring the Bad," Journal of Philosophy 76 (1979), pp. 738-53; Mele, Motivation, op. cit., p.75; Wallace, Normativity, op. cit., pp. 84-92, 97. Wallace thinks that in the most extreme cases of akrasia the action will still seem desirable in some way. This calls to mind something Kant called "an old formula of the schools: Nihil appetimus, nisi sub ratione boni". Critique of Practical Reason, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1993), p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> I borrow this useful terminology from Onora Nell (now O'Neill). See her Acting on Principle (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), pp. 13-14. She was actually discussing Kantian 'maxims', a topic we will consider later.

<sup>27</sup> The metaphysical question whether the same 'act token' could be performed from different motives is one that we do not need to address.

<sup>28</sup> Joel Feinberg, "Action and Responsibility," in his Doing and Deserving (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 134. See also Davidson, op. cit., p. 53f. This was one impetus for the ensuing sophisticated discussion of 'act individuation'.

<sup>29</sup> I am grateful to Robert Johnson for some comments on this issue.

<sup>30</sup> IPML 114-15.

<sup>31</sup> The contrast is also well brought out by Bernard Williams, who writes, "it is not the basic characteristic of a generous man's deliberations that they use the premise, 'I am a generous man.'" Bernard Williams, "Utilitarianism and Moral Self-indulgence," in Moral Luck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 48.

<sup>32</sup> IPML 114. Pages 103-114 make the same point about various motives.

<sup>33</sup> Barbara Herman, a distinguished Kantian, seems to have neglected this point in an important essay on the sense of duty as a motive. Kant writes that non-moral motives "will now and then produce actions which accord with the [moral] law, but very often actions which transgress it." G 58 (390). Cp. G 79 (411); Immanuel Kant, The Metaphysics of Morals, trans. Mary Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 241 (= 447). (Hereafter abbreviated 'MetM'.)

Herman, perhaps pursuing the implicit contrast found in these passages, suggests that the motive of duty is distinctive precisely in that if an agent is moved to perform some action from it, "its being a right action" will be "the nonaccidental effect of the agent's concern." Barbara Herman, The Practice of Moral Judgment (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 6. Cp. pp. 8, 9, 12. (Hereafter PMJ.) Now, it is obvious that people who act from the motive of duty in the generic sense do not always do what is right, let alone what is non-accidentally right.. If we think of all the moral convictions that could motivate people to act, they sometimes lead people to do what is

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wrong. Herman is presumably thinking only of what she believes are the correct moral principles. But even people acting from these principles could do wrong if they had false factual beliefs. It follows that if they had false factual beliefs they could do the right thing accidentally. Suppose that S accepts the correct moral principles, and as a result is motivated to keep her promises. S promises to meet T at 5 o'clock. At 4:45 she looks up at the clock on the bank, which reads '4:45' and hurries to meet T at 5. But suppose that the clock was out of order and that it had read '4:45' all day. S mistakenly believed that the clock was working. Hence, S acts from duty, and does the right thing, but she does it accidentally. For more on this issue, see my "Kant, Nonaccidentalness and the Availability of Moral Worth," The Journal of Ethics 5 (2001), pp. 293-313, esp. 303-7.

<sup>34</sup> G 89 (422). There are debates among interpreters of Kant about how to understand the form of the 'Universal Law' argument used here. Some Kantians find this argument against suicide difficult to defend. See, e.g., Christine Korsgaard, Creating the Kingdom of Ends (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 3, pp. 77-105, esp. 87-92, 100. (Hereafter CKE).

<sup>35</sup> Richard Brandt, Morality, Utilitarianism, and Rights (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 321. Brandt does not mention Bentham. Cp. Pascal's Pensees, tr. Martin Turnell (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), p. 187. After asserting "all men seek happiness", Pascal continues "...however different the means used, they all tend towards this goal. What makes some men go to war and others not is the same desire, which is common to both of them, and is prompted by different views....It is the impulse behind all human actions, even those of men who go and hang themselves."

<sup>36</sup> Cp. Scanlon, op. cit., p. 119; Elijah Millgram, Practical Induction (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 24, n. 18.

<sup>37</sup> "Two Distinctions in Goodness," CKE, ch. 9. See also Rae Langton, "Objective and Unconditioned Value," Philosophical Review 116 (2007), pp. 157-85, esp. 160-65.

<sup>38</sup> CKE 250.

<sup>39</sup> CKE 250.

<sup>40</sup> CKE 263-4, at 264.

<sup>41</sup> Compare Langton, op. cit., p. 165. It is perhaps significant that both Korsgaard and Langton contrast the way things 'have' value and our 'valuing' them. Ibid., pp. 161; 164. We are interested in the pursuit of valuable or desirable states of affairs. Maybe only a miser can 'value' money as an end, but non-misers can pursue it (or having it) as an end.

<sup>42</sup> John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 92. (Hereafter abbreviated 'TJ'.)

<sup>43</sup> Just as it is possible that a desire for an instrumental good is ultimate, it is possible that a desire for an end is derived. See Mele, Motivation, op. cit., p. 132, n. 24, though he uses the term 'intrinsic', rather than 'as an end'.

<sup>44</sup> There are some interesting remarks on such emotions in Jon Elster, Alchemies of the Mind (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 66-68.