

# THE MYTH OF EGOISM

by

CHRISTINE M. KORSGAARD



The Lindley Lecture  
The University of Kansas  
1999

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# The Myth of Egoism

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“Man does not pursue happiness. Only the Englishman does that.”

–Nietzsche

*Twilight of the Idols*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Many philosophers believe there is a principle of practical reason that directs the rational agent to maximize the satisfaction of his own desires and interests. I will call this “the egoistic principle,” and the person who believes in it an “egoist.” Some philosophers believe that conformity to the egoistic principle is equivalent to the pursuit of happiness, or – if these are different – to the pursuit of the individual’s own good. In the social sciences, especially economics, it is widely believed that some form of the egoistic principle is both normative and descriptive: that is, that it tells us not only how we should act, but also how, at least in clear-headed moments, we do act. Philosophers who endorse this view sometimes take the egoistic principle to be *definitive* of practical rationality, and therefore suppose that the way to show that we have “reason to be moral” is to show that conformity to moral requirements will somehow maximize the satisfaction of our own desires and interests.

This is not, of course, how the rationality of morality has been understood in either the Kantian or the rationalist tradition. Both Kant and Sidgwick, for instance, claimed that the moral principle is a principle of reason in its own right.<sup>2</sup> But they also accepted the idea that something like the egoistic principle is a normative rational principle.<sup>3</sup> For Sidgwick, the egoistic principle is a rival to the moral principle of utility. Kant’s various remarks about the nature of happiness are not entirely consistent, but at one point he defines it as “the sum of satisfaction of all inclinations” (G 4: 399).<sup>4,5</sup> Kant thinks that the rationality of pursuing one’s own happiness is represented by the imperative of prudence, which he sometimes appears to believe governs the conduct both of wicked people all the time and of good people once the de-

mands of morality are satisfied.<sup>6</sup> But both those who think that the egoistic principle is definitive of rationality and those who think there is a separate rational principle of morality commonly believe that the egoistic principle has an advantage over the moral one. The egoistic principle, they suppose, more obviously meets the requirement of internalism – that is, the requirement that practical reasons must be capable of motivating us – since the egoistic principle essentially tells us to do what we want most. Even Kant believed that imperatives of prudence are hypothetical imperatives whose normativity can be established just as easily, and on essentially the same grounds, as that of instrumental principles. Contemporary egoists go one step further, and suppose that egoism is an expression of the instrumental principle itself. Egoism sees itself as a naturalistic view, which requires no extravagant assumptions about the metaphysics of the good or the possibility of pure practical reason.

In this paper I will present some reasons for doubting these familiar views. In Part I, I will examine some possible views about the normative foundations of the egoistic principle. I will argue that the view that egoism is a form of instrumentalism is based on a pair of false assumptions about the nature of practical rationality. When we abandon these assumptions, it becomes clear that the idea of a maximum of satisfaction is a substantive conception of the good. Egoism, I will argue, is essentially a rationalistic position: its normativity is grounded in a non-natural conception of the good, and its psychology requires the possibility of motivation by pure practical reason. In Part II, I will take a closer look at the content of this conception of the good. I will ask what exactly we must mean by a “maximum of satisfaction” if that idea is to ground a principle which is at once both plausibly rational and distinctively egoistic. I will argue that the relevant conception of the good is one recognizably grounded in the psychological assumptions of classical eighteenth-century British empiricism. Egoism therefore requires a familiar empiricist conception of the good, whose normativity can be defended only on rationalist grounds. It does not therefore follow that it is an incoherent position. It does however follow that it cannot be defended on any of the grounds which egoists usually offer in its favor.

## **I. Normative Foundations for the Egoistic Principle**

### ***1.1 Instrumental Egoism***

Not everyone believes that any argument needs to be made for the normativity of the egoistic principle. Characteristically, philosophers

and social scientists who believe that the egoistic principle is definitive of practical rationality also consider themselves to be instrumentalists about practical reason. That is, they endorse the view that the only principle of practical reason is the principle that directs us to take the means to our ends. For shorthand, I am going to call this position “instrumental egoism” and the person who believes it an “instrumental egoist.” Instrumental egoists usually also believe that the instrumental principle itself is either obviously normative or does not need to be normative, since we are in fact motivated to act in accordance with it. Elsewhere I have argued, as against that last view, that the instrumental principle is normative and that an account of its normative force is therefore required.<sup>7</sup>

However that may be, the view that egoism is a form of instrumentalism is incoherent on its surface. The instrumental principle tells us only that we must take the means to our ends; it says nothing whatever about what our ends should be. It therefore does not say either that we ought to pursue a maximum of satisfaction, or that we ought to prefer that maximum to the satisfaction of particular desires in cases of conflict. Since egoism requires us both to pursue a specific end and to prefer that end to all others, it has to go beyond the theory that all practical reasons are instrumental.

But instrumental egoists deny that the egoistic principle requires you to pursue a specific end. Happiness in the egoist's sense is supposedly not a specific end: it is just the maximum realization of the ends you already have. And more generally, all that the principles of rational choice do is apply some formal structure to the ends, whatever they might be, that are fed into its formulas. It is neutral about the good – or so its defenders claim.

I think that there is a mistake here like the one that John Stuart Mill makes in his proof of the principle of utility. Mill says that the only thing that ‘proves’ that anything is desirable and therefore good is that it is desired. Each person desires his own happiness, so the sum of everyone's happiness is desirable and therefore good.<sup>8</sup> But, we may object, at least for all we know, no one desires the sum of everyone's happiness, so if only desire makes for desirability, what makes the sum desirable? Mill wants to mean that each *part* of it is desired, by the person whose happiness it is.<sup>9</sup> But of course a maximum does not include its parts in *that* way: maximizing happiness is not like adding one acre of ground to another that adjoins it. Conflicts are possible, and if the calculation turns out so, I may have to sacrifice my happiness in order to maximize the total, and then where is my part? In the same way, if

my happiness consists in the maximum satisfaction of my desires, it is unlikely to include the satisfaction of each of my desires. And just as the individual person whose happiness is sacrificed for the sake of overall utility seems to have some right to protest, so also the individual desire whose satisfaction is sacrificed for the sake of overall happiness seems to have some right to protest. There are moments when the question "why should I be prudent?" is as much in need of an answer as its more famous cousin.

Why then does the instrumental egoist suppose that it is possible to believe both in instrumentalism and in egoism? How can he even imagine that these two positions are compatible? The instrumental egoist has to believe both that people do in fact desire maximum satisfaction and also that no real conflict can possibly arise between a person's desire for this maximum and her desires for particular things. One way to reach that conclusion is to suppose that satisfaction itself is the *only* thing which people want for its own sake, and that all desired objects are wanted as mere means to satisfaction. That is the view famously attacked as incoherent by Bishop Butler, on the grounds that an object cannot give us satisfaction unless we want it for its own sake.<sup>10</sup> I propose to set it aside here, not merely on the good Bishop's authority, but also because it so *obviously* involves a substantive, and controversial, conception of the good. I believe that the more common assumption behind instrumental egoism is that what a person *really* wants, deep down, just *are* the things that are consistent with or part of her happiness. According to this view, once you have understood that something would be detrimental to your happiness, you will cease to desire it. Our desires, when we are clearheaded, accord with prudence.

With that idea in mind, the instrumental egoist treats the possibility that someone might desire something inconsistent with her happiness as if it were exactly on a par with the possibility that she might miscalculate or simply make a factual error. Suppose someone mistakes white vinegar for vodka. "You do not *really* want to drink *that*," we say to her; and she does not; we are absolutely right. The instrumental egoist must suppose that it is true in *just that way* that the addict does not *really* want the heroin, or that the angry person does not *really* want to break the window, or that the adulterer does not *really* want to have the affair that will destroy his marriage. In these cases, the instrumental egoist must say, the person's mind is so clouded by addiction, rage, or lust that he is unable to identify what he really wants.

But considered as a psychological hypothesis, the idea that human



beings “really” have all and only these domesticated desires seems not only false but hilarious. As Bishop Butler wrote in his *Sermons*:

Men daily, hourly sacrifice the greatest known interest to fancy, inquisitiveness, love, or hatred, or any vagrant inclination.<sup>11</sup>

Someone who says the addict does not “really want” the heroin must be using “want” in some specialized sense, for in one familiar sense he very obviously does want it.

In my view, if we are tempted to think that the addict does not really want the heroin, that temptation must be *based on* our belief that it is irrational for him to want it, together with a certain conception of rationality. It is the hallmark of a rational agent, one may suppose, that his desires are directed and reshaped by his rational deliberations. So if the addict were thinking rationally, he would not want the heroin. But even if that is right, we cannot allow the egoist to posit that this reshaping has happened before the deliberation ever *starts*: that is, that his “real” desires somehow *already* accord with the results of his deliberations.

This is the first of the two false assumptions about practical rationality that I mentioned at the outset of this essay: the view that practical reasoning really just serves to uncover our “real” desires. On this assumption, what we call “practical reason” is actually a form of theoretical reasoning about our psychology. This view is not one to which people openly subscribe, but rather an unconscious assumption which shows up in the way they argue, and we will see it at work again later on.<sup>11</sup> But practical deliberation is not aimed at psychological knowledge: its conclusions are not just *reminders* of what we already want, deep down. It is rather a way of determining what is good for us, what we ought to want.

In any case, the belief that it is irrational for someone to want heroin cannot be *based on* the instrumental principle, since it is a belief about what his ends should be. So if the instrumental egoist asserts that the addict does not “really want” the heroin, there must be a substantive view about what it is rational to want hiding under the cover of that word “really.” This is what enables the instrumental egoist to imagine that the only really *practical* reasoning going on here is instrumental.

This is even clearer when the egoist reverts to the use of that dangerous word “interests.” Until now I have been talking about desires and interests as if these ideas were interchangeable, but in fact this is correct only if we take the word “interest” in a rather peculiar sense.

When we say that someone “has a desire” for something, we are naturally understood as talking about an item in his natural psychology, an urge, or an attraction, or a disposition to find the object pleasurable, or something of that sort.<sup>15</sup> We may then see the principle of maximizing satisfaction as a principle of naturalistic construction, which applies a maximizing formula to certain items regarded as naturally or prima facie good, with the individual’s happiness or overall good coming out as the result of the exercise. Let me call that result “the maximum compossible set” of the objects of desire. The items from which the set is constructed must have some sort of prima facie normative *weight* – given by how strongly you desire them, for example – so that we can perform a maximizing operation. But they do not yet have what we might call a normative *ranking* – that is, we have not yet decided which of them you ought to pursue in preference to which. It is the point of the maximizing operation to *assign* them a normative ranking. It is important not to get confused about this: the prima facie weights do not settle the question of the normative ranking, since, for instance, a very strong desire may have to be suppressed (given a low or negative ranking) for the sake of maximizing the total. Now when we say that someone “has an interest” in something, we may not be referring to a natural psychological item, or at least not to one not yet normatively ranked, for the phrase “has an interest” is also used in a way that already implies a normative ranking. In this sense, when we say that someone “has an interest” in something, we imply *that reason favors his pursuing it over other options*. If we suppose that reason favors the satisfaction of those desires whose objects fit together into the maximum compossible set, then *those* are the desires in whose satisfaction you “have an interest,” and the idea of maximizing the satisfaction of your *interests* just says the same thing twice over. This is why the word “interest” is dangerous. The normative use of the word “interest” gives the formulation “maximizing the satisfaction of one’s interests” an agreeably rational ring, but in fact the egoist cannot mean “interest” in this normative sense without reducing his principle to an empty tautology.

Some rational choice theorists like to use the word “preference” (maximize the satisfaction of one’s preferences) but in my view this is even more misleading, for “preference” carries the idea of a comparative ranking on its *surface*. Of course it may not be a comparative *normative* ranking, but if that is not what it refers to then it must refer to a comparative natural ranking, perhaps one based on the comparative strength of desire. So why not say so? If the idea of egoism is that we can generate the notion of a person’s good or of his happiness sim-

ply by performing a maximizing operation on some naturally existing items, it is really better to keep this clearly before our minds by calling those items “desires.” But if we stick to “desire” and keep in view that we are talking about some natural psychological items, then the claim that a person’s “real desires” are directed to all and only those things which are consistent with his happiness seems patently false.

At this juncture it may be useful to review the points I have just made. Instrumental egoism is inconsistent on its surface. I have suggested that what enables people even to imagine that it might be right is that they make an implicit assumption – the assumption that people “really want” the things that make them happy, that is, that accord with their maximal satisfaction. Reasoning about how to get what you (“really”) want and reasoning about how to promote your maximal satisfaction therefore coincide. This assumption, I have argued, is in turn based on a false view of the role of practical reason – the view that practical deliberation “uncovered” our real desires – together, of course, with certain background assumptions about what those real desires must be.

But there is a second and even more serious problem with the assumption behind instrumental egoism. If it were true that we really desired all and only those things that are consistent with our happiness, egoistically understood, then we would automatically conform to the dictates of the egoistic principle, not because it is rational to do so, but because we would naturally want to. If someone did act against his own best interests, this would not be because he failed to conform his will to the egoistic principle, but rather because he was making some mistake in his calculations, and did not understand where his interests really lay. But if this were so, what need would there be for an egoistic principle of *practical* reason?

The point I am making turns on the distinction between making a mistake and true practical irrationality – that is, violating a principle of practical reason. When a person’s action is based on a mistake, the person does the wrong thing, objectively speaking, but that does not show that the person is truly irrational. A person who adds a little dry vermouth and some olives to glass of white vinegar, believing it to be a glass of vodka, is not doing anything irrational, for by her own lights the action makes perfectly good sense. There is nothing amiss with her motivation, nothing, if I may put it this way, wrong with her will: it is only her factual judgment that needs correcting. According to the assumption behind instrumental egoism, a person who desires to take heroin must suppose that it is consistent with his happiness to take it;

otherwise he could not even imagine that he really desires it. But that means he is conforming to the egoistic principle, by his own lights. His problem therefore is not true practical irrationality, but simply mistaken judgment. The mistake may have its source in his addiction – it may somehow be caused by the addiction – but what the addiction causes is not practical irrationality; it is bad theoretical judgment. But if people cannot ever be guilty of violating the egoistic principle by their own lights, then it is not a rational principle. It is simply a description of the inevitable effect that a certain kind of judgment has on the human will: prove to us that something is contrary to our happiness and we will forthwith cease to desire it.

This is the second of the two false assumptions about practical rationality that stand behind instrumental egoism: the view that rational principles are *essentially* descriptions of the *effects* that certain judgments have on the will. This assumption is also behind the commonly held view, mentioned earlier, that the instrumental principle is either already normative or does not need to be normative, because people actually are motivated to take the means to their ends. According to this view, if someone fails to take the means to an end, we are entitled to conclude either that he does not really want the end after all, or that he is making a mistake about how to promote it. But prove to him that the action will promote his end, and he will forthwith be motivated to do it. So no one ever violates the requirement of instrumental reason by his *own* lights. The principle of instrumental reason turns out to be essentially a description of the *effect* that means/end judgments have on the human will.<sup>14</sup>

The trouble with this conception of rationality is that it cannot support the normative use of “ought.” For according to this view, if I say to you “you really ought to see a dentist about that tooth” all that I mean – *all* – is that if you came to understand that a visit to the dentist is essential to the achievement of an end requisite for your happiness, you would in fact be motivated to go. The rational judgment is not really a recommendation, but rather a sort of hypothetical prediction. And it is *not* that I predict you would be motivated to go if you understood that going would promote your happiness because you would then see that you have a *reason* to go. It is not *that*, for on this view the claim that you have a reason to go *just amounts to* the claim that if you made the judgment you would in fact be motivated to go. So it turns out that what looks like the normative “ought” is really just a version of the “ought” of expectation. On this view, saying of someone on the brink of toothache that he ought to go to the dentist is exactly like saying of

someone who is late that he ought to be home by now. Given human nature, we would have predicted that the person on the brink of toothache would be motivated to go to the dentist; just as given the distance, we would have predicted that the person who left the office an hour ago would be home about now. If these predictions turn out false we know that something has gone wrong. But what has gone wrong can no more properly be described as a failure of practical reason in the first case than in the second.

The inadequacy of the view is clear from this fact: there may be many principles which accurately describe the way human beings are characteristically motivated. And this conception of rationality leaves us with no way of distinguishing which ones are principles of reason and which ones are not. We *can* reliably predict that people will be motivated to take the means to their ends. But suppose that we also could reliably predict that when criticized people will cry and stamp their feet. We would not be tempted to think that it follows that such behavior is rationally required of us.

### *1.2 The Imperative of Prudence*

We might at first think that a better account of the normativity of the egoistic principle is available in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant recognized both that the imperative of prudence, as he called it, is not the same as the instrumental principle and that it stands in need of a normative foundation. In the second section of the *Groundwork*, Kant proposes that there are three kinds of practical imperatives. First there are rules of skill or technical imperatives – that is, instrumental principles. Second there are counsels of prudence or pragmatic imperatives, which direct us to pursue our own happiness, identified, as I mentioned earlier, with “the sum of satisfaction of all inclinations” (G 4:399). And finally of course there are commands of morality, or categorical imperatives (G 4:416).

Kant appears to leave room for the normativity of prudence, for in the *Groundwork* at least he seems to believe that we do not inevitably follow imperatives of prudence by our own lights. One of the four examples he uses in the first section of the *Groundwork* to explicate the difference between acting from duty and acting from inclination concerns a man who is tempted to imprudence; when prudence fails to govern him, morality steps in. Kant says:

To assure one's happiness is a duty (at least indirectly); for, want of satisfaction with one's condition... could easily become a great *temptation to transgression of duty*. But in addition, all people have

already... the strongest and deepest inclination to happiness because it is just in this idea that all inclinations unite in one sum. However, the precept of happiness is often so constituted that it greatly infringes upon some inclinations, and yet one can form no determinate and sure concept of the sum of satisfaction of all inclinations under the name of happiness. Hence it is not to be wondered at that a single inclination, determinate both as to what it promises and as to the time in which it can be satisfied, can often outweigh a fluctuating idea, and that a man – for example one suffering from the gout – can choose to enjoy what he likes and put up with what he can since, according to his calculations, on this occasion at least he has not sacrificed the enjoyment of the present moment to the perhaps groundless expectation of a happiness that is supposed to lie in health. But even in this case, when the general inclination to happiness did not determine his will... there is still left over here... a law, namely to promote his happiness not from inclination but from duty; and it is then that his conduct first has properly moral worth. (G 4:399)

Unfortunately – but interestingly – the example is muddled. Kant portrays the man as falling into doubt about whether the imperative of prudence that forbids the unhealthy treat is well-founded or not, being based on “the perhaps groundless expectation of a happiness that is supposed to lie in health.” Obviously, if there were *good reason* to doubt whether forgoing the unhealthy treat is a means to happiness, then the man’s resistance to the imperative that forbids the unhealthy treat would to that extent be *rational*. And in that case the indirect duty to pursue one’s happiness would no more forbid the unhealthy treat than the imperative of prudence does. It seems likely that what Kant is really thinking is that the man has a tendency to rationalization. “Oh, how does anyone know that health really leads to happiness anyway?” he says to himself, licking his lips at the thought of the treat. And then the thought of his duty stiffens his resolve. Even then it is not clear how exactly the example is supposed to work, since the rationalization works against the thought of duty in the same way it works against the thought of prudence. But at all events the case does show that Kant thought one could resist the normative force of prudence when that force “infringes upon some inclinations.” And indeed this is necessary to his account, for Kant recognizes that a principle cannot be normative unless it is possible to violate it. Imperatives are addressed to creatures who can violate them and so they are normative:

All imperatives are expressed by an *ought* and indicate by this the relation of an objective law of reason to a will that by its subjective constitution is not necessarily determined by it... They say that to do or omit something would be good, but they say it to a will that does not always do something just because it is represented to it that it would be good to do that thing. (G 4:413)

How then is the normativity of prudence to be established?

Rules of skill, or principles of instrumental reason, are hypothetical imperatives, taking the form “if you will this, then you must also will that.” According to Kant their normative force is based on the principle that “whoever wills the end also wills (insofar as reason has decisive influence on his actions) the indispensably necessary means to it that are within his power” (G 4:417). This principle, Kant claims, is analytic, because “in the volition of an object as my effect, my causality as acting cause, that is, the use of means, is already thought” (G 4:417). To will something is not merely to desire it, but to set yourself to bring it about - that is, to cause it - and so willing something essentially involves determining yourself to use the means to it.

Imperatives of prudence, Kant claims, are also hypothetical imperatives, arising from the fact that we necessarily will happiness. He says:

There is, however, *one* end that can be presupposed as actual in the case of all rational beings ... and therefore one purpose that they not merely *could* have but that we can safely presuppose they all actually *do have* by a natural necessity, and that purpose is *happiness*. (G 4:415)

And therefore:

If only it were as easy to give a determinate concept of happiness, imperatives of prudence would agree entirely with those of skill and would be just as analytic. For it could be said, here just as there: who wills the end also wills (necessarily in conformity with reason) the sole means to it that are within his control. (G 4:417-418)

We run into problems, however, when we try to make out what Kant could possibly mean when he claims that we “have” the end of happiness by a natural necessity. He could mean either that we necessarily *will* happiness, or that we necessarily *desire* it, but there are difficulties either way. On the one hand, if he means that we necessarily *will* happiness – that is, we necessarily choose it, when no moral obligation pre-

vents us – the claim seems to be contrary to his own views about our essential freedom of the choice of ends. In the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant says:

An end is the object of the choice (of a rational being), through the representation of which choice is determined to bring this object about. – Now, I can indeed be constrained by others to perform *actions* that are directed as means to an end, but I can never be constrained by others *to have an end*; only I can *make* something my end. (MM 6:381)

Here Kant argues that adopting an end is an internal action to which we cannot be compelled; hence it must be a free act. Although his contrast here is between freedom and constraint by other people, the claim that “only I can make something my end” seems equally to exclude ends determined by nature. More generally, Kant’s argument for the moral law starts from the definition of a free will as one that is not determined by any law outside itself, and involves the premise that we must regard ourselves, insofar as we are rational, as having free wills. We choose maxims for ourselves autonomously, and our ends are chosen as part of our maxims. The idea that we necessarily will happiness seems inconsistent with all of this.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, if all Kant means is that we cannot help but *desire* happiness, it is puzzling that he singles out a special sort of imperative to guide our pursuit of this desired end. For in the first place, there are many things, most notably the satisfaction of our physical needs, which we cannot help but desire, but Kant does not single out special imperatives for them. In the second place, and more importantly, mere desires for ends do not support hypothetical imperatives, which are based on the principle that whoever *wills* an end wills the means, and therefore cannot be derived from mere desires. Desiring an end does not analytically involve the thought of “my causality as an acting cause,” in the way that willing an end does. And in the third place, the mere *desire* for happiness would be only one desire among others, which would have to compete for our attention with other, more particular, desires and ends. In fact, even if Kant did have an argument to show that we necessarily *will* happiness as an end, it would not automatically follow that we should always rationally prefer it to more particular ends; nor does Kant give any argument at all to that effect. Happiness would at most be established as one end among others. And if there were a principle of practical reason, an imperative, directing us both to *have* happiness as an end and to *prefer* happiness to every other end, that



principle would seem to lie somewhere in between Kant's two categories of hypothetical and categorical imperatives. Unlike a hypothetical imperative, it would command us to pursue a certain end no matter what else we happened to want; but unlike a categorical one, it would hold only conditionally, since our pursuit of this end would have to give way to moral considerations.<sup>16</sup>

Of course Kant might after all mean that we always do pursue happiness, by our own lights, at least when not forbidden by duty. Later he seems to come around to this view, for in *the Metaphysics of Morals*, after arguing that "what everyone wants unavoidably, of his own accord, does not come under the concept of duty" (MM 6:386), Kant says:

Since it is unavoidable for human nature to wish for and seek happiness, that is, satisfaction with one's state, so long as one is assured of its lasting, this is not an end that is also a duty. (MM 6: 387)<sup>17</sup>

But if we cannot have a duty to pursue our own happiness because we inevitably do pursue it, then neither can there be an imperative of prudence, for the same reason. So this leaves us back where we were.

### ***1.3 A Kantian Conception of Rationality***

Perhaps it will seem that in making this argument I am rejecting the very idea of a theory of rationality that is at once both normative and descriptive. For I am insisting that if we necessarily do conform to a certain principle, then it cannot be normative. But the lesson need only be that that correlation must be understood in a different way. We can suppose that rational principles are descriptive of rational procedures or activities, and of human beings insofar as we engage in those procedures or activities. This is a view most naturally associated with Kant. Kant's account of the imperative of prudence in the *Groundwork* does not yet, in my view, express his mature conception of rationality.<sup>18</sup>

Kant views reason as the *active* aspect or dimension of the human mind, that is, as its power of self-determination. The principles of reason describe the active contribution of the mind to belief and to action. They are procedures we follow in determining our beliefs and actions, insofar as we are rational. A comparison may help to show why this makes them both normative and descriptive. The principles of English grammar are both normative and descriptive because they describe procedures we follow in constructing our sentences insofar as we are speaking English.<sup>19</sup> To speak English is essentially to be guided

by those principles; we may say that being guided by those principles is constitutive of speaking English. In the same way, the most general function of the mind is to think, and to think is essentially to be guided by the principles of logic. According to Kant, the mind is also faced with the more specific task of constructing a unified conception of the world from the phenomena, and to do this is to be guided by the principles of the understanding. And the mind is faced with the task of choice or volition, of the determination of our actions; and to will is to be guided by the principles of practical reason.

The important thing to emphasize about this conception of rationality is that rational principles describe activities: they tell us what the rational mind as such *does* with certain items that are given to it, rather than merely describing the effect which those items will have on the mind. The principles of logic and the canons of evidence describe what the thinker as such *does* with the incoming evidence: arriving at a belief through reasoning is an active process, a process by which the mind determines itself to a conclusion. Rational principles may be seen as *directions* in the most literal way. Given *P* and *if P then Q* infer *Q*: modus ponens is a direction for thinking. We can predict with some confidence that the rational mind when confronted with this argument will believe *Q* but it is certainly not inevitable. And if the mind does believe *Q* when faced with the argument, that is an *effect* of its rationality, not the *essence* of its rationality. Inferring *Q* from *P* and *if P then Q* is no more the same as merely being caused to believe it than jumping off a cliff is the same as merely being caused to fall off of it, for the aspect of self-determination is missing. What makes your beliefs logical is not that *they* conform to the rules of logic, for you could believe *P*, *Q*, and *If P then Q*, and never notice any connection between them. Nor is it that believing the premises causes you to believe the conclusion, for this too could happen without your notice. What makes your belief logical is that you *put* the two premises together in the way required by modus ponens, and so *cause yourself* to believe it. In the same way, the principles of practical reason describe what the *will* as such does with certain items, say beliefs and desires, that are given to it. Volition, the determination of our actions, is an active process, a process by which we cause ourselves to act. It is not just something that happens in us or to us. The instrumental principle, for instance, on this view, is an *instruction* for willing: if you are to *will* the end, rather than merely wishing for it or wanting it, and these are the means, then you must determine yourself to take these.

Now it may seem as if there is something paradoxical about this con-

ception of rationality. The principles of practical reason govern action. Yet I am claiming that reasoning *itself* must be seen as a kind of action, in order to capture the element of self-determination that is essential to volition. If reasoning must be seen as a kind of action, what captures the element of self-determination that is essential to reasoning itself? Do we need some deeper sort of rational activity that in turn captures that? A regress obviously threatens. We are here confronting one of the deepest problems of philosophy, the problem of identifying the exact nature of the self-determination that distinguishes actions and activities from mere events. This problem rests behind the persistent philosophical temptation to try to reduce both action and reason, as forms of self-determination, to special forms of causation. One expression of that temptation is what I have identified as the second false assumption about rationality, the view that the principles of reason merely describe the effects that certain judgments have on the will or the mind.

Kant offers us a way to block the regress. To explain it, it will be helpful to distinguish between a weaker and a stronger version of the Kantian conception of rationality. According to both versions, the principles of reason are principles of rational activity, principles that describe the mind's active contribution to thinking or volition. The stronger version adds a further thought, namely, the thought that we can derive the *content* of the principles of reason from this very conception of what they are. The principles of reason, on this view, are not just principles that direct us to do this or that, but principles whose content captures the very essence of activity or self-determination. Consider once more the way I formulated the instrumental principle a moment ago: If you are to *will* the end, rather than merely wishing for it or wanting it, then you must determine yourself to take the means. Seen this way, the instrumental principle is intended to capture something about the very essence of volition, in particular what makes volition different from mere desire. You are not *willing* the end at all unless you determine yourself to cause the end to come about, that is, to use the means. The categorical imperative, in its universal law formulation, wears this thought on its face, for what it tells us to do is to give ourselves a law – that is to say, what it tells us to do is to determine ourselves. The Kantian arguments for these principles are meant to establish that you succeed in exercising the self-determination that is essence of volition only to the extent that you follow these principles.<sup>20</sup>

Now let me return to a point I made earlier. I argued that if we

support instrumental egoism with the view that people do not “really want” things that are inconsistent with their happiness, we must say that people who pursue ends which are in fact inconsistent with their happiness are guilty of mistake, of bad theoretical judgment. But I also said that the mistake might be caused by the agent’s condition – by addiction or rage or lust, for instance. Whereas the instrumental egoist regards these conditions as causes of confusion, making people unable to see what they really want, the Kantian will say that they are, directly, causes of true practical irrationality – or to put the same point another way, conditions that undermine our power of self-determination. We do not have to suppose, as the instrumental egoist does, that the addict’s condition makes it impossible for him to *understand* that there is good reason for him not to take heroin. We can say that his addiction makes it impossible, or maybe just hard, for him to guide himself in accordance with that reason. Or rather, if we do imagine that he says to himself, at least at very the moment when he takes the stuff, that it is consistent with his happiness – for I am inclined to think that something like that does happen – we can see that as *rationalization*. That is, if he says to himself that just now, this time, just once, it really is good for him, or anyway not bad, to take the drug, we can see that as an attempt to conceal his failure of self-determination or self-control from himself, rather than seeing it as a mistake that causes behavior which is not actually irrational by his own lights. So the order of what happens is different. The instrumental egoist says that the addiction causes an error of judgment which in turn leads to conduct which only looks practically irrational from the outside, but which is not really so by the addict’s own lights. The Kantian says instead that the addiction causes genuinely, inwardly, practically irrational conduct – causes a defect in the will – which the agent then scrambles to *rationalize* by the invocation of the mistaken belief.

Apart from the fact that this second way of seeing the situation is consistent with the possibility of practical reason, while the first way is not, the second way seems to me to be getting things the right way around. In fact there is room here for an interesting account of what rationalization is and why it is so pervasive. Because we are self-conscious we are faced with the task of self-determination, both of our beliefs and of our actions. It is a task that requires a degree of vigilance and self-command that is often beyond our powers. The need to maintain the fiction that we are always in control, both in our own eyes and in those of others, is a deep human drive. Think of the difficulty older people have in admitting they have dozed off for a moment. Or

the temptation to make an awkward physical movement look as if it were some sort of deliberate step. Or the temptation, in the heat of argument, to defend a thesis just because it has somehow fallen out of your mouth, and someone else has objected to it. Get a person to do some odd action under the influence of post-hypnotic suggestion, and then ask him why he did it. He will not say "I do not know." He will make up a plausible story and tell himself as well as you that that is what he had in mind. The use of rationalization to conceal our failures of self-determination in thought and action from ourselves is all of a piece with these things, an attempt to maintain the appearance of perfect self-command.

#### *1.4 Implications of the Kantian Conception for Egoism*

In this paper I am not going to argue for the stronger version of the Kantian conception of rationality, the version that derives the content of rational principles from the very idea of self-determination. But I cannot resist mentioning one ramification of that view for rational egoism. I hope that you can at least see how someone might be tempted to think that the categorical and hypothetical imperatives are principles that capture the very essence of self-determination. But it is not even remotely plausible to suppose that *the egoistic principle* captures the very essence of self-determination. That is, it is not plausible to think that you only succeed in exercising self-determination if you aim to maximize the satisfaction of your desires; or that you are not really willing at all unless *what you will* is maximum satisfaction. If we accept the stronger version of the Kantian conception, then the egoistic principle simply seems to be *the wrong sort of thing* to be a principle of practical reason. To put the point in somewhat more old-fashioned Kantian terms, the egoistic principle is concerned with the *content* of the will, not with the very *form* of willing.

But as I said, I do not propose to argue for the stronger version of the Kantian conception here. I do mean to argue, however, that in order to get the normative "ought" we need to see the principles of reason, as Kant does, as principles that describe mental activities, and not just the effects of judgments on the will. But even this weaker version has important implications for the way we conceive of rational egoism. For if we accept it, there are certain elements of Kantian moral psychology that we must accept along with it.

In Kantian moral psychology, the mind determines itself by operating in accordance with a rational principle on certain items that are given to it. The rational principle is descriptive of the mind's activity,

of what it does with the items given to it. In the case of practical principles, some of these items have a *prima facie* motivational force: they present a possible action to the will as eligible. Kant calls such a motivational item an “incentive.” Desires, in Kant’s view, function as incentives. So every willed action involves both an incentive and a principle: something presented to the will, on which it then acts. If a desire directly caused a person to act, there would be no contribution from the agent’s own activity or self-determination, and so it would not be a case of volition. Suppose that an agent experiences a desire, and acts on it. To the extent that the agent determines himself, he *takes* the desire to be a reason to act; and that is not the same as its causing him to act. We may represent this fact – the contribution of his own activity – by saying that it is his *principle* to do what he wants. The principle describes his activity. If we want to reserve that troublesome word “motive” for what actually produces the outward act, then it is not quite right to say his desire is a motive. His desire is an incentive. His motive is, speaking very roughly, that he takes the desire to be a reason.

This has two implications. The first is that rational egoism is not the same as the thesis that only desires are motives. In fact it is inconsistent with that thesis. If desires produced human actions directly, without the intervention of principles, we would not be practically rational in any sense, egoistic or otherwise.<sup>21</sup> The second implication is less obvious. It is that rational egoism is not the same as the thesis that only desires are incentives. It is also inconsistent with that thesis.

I can most easily bring out the reason for this by means of a comparison. As an internalist, Kant supposed that the moral law applies to us only if respect for law can serve as an incentive for the will. The reason is simple. Suppose that your principle is to act only on a maxim that can serve as universal law. Suppose also that, with some ordinary desire serving as the incentive, you formulate a maxim that turns out to be incompatible with that principle. Wanting to spend the day at the beach, you are tempted to break your promise to help your neighbor paint his house on the first sunny day. You test your maxim, it is rejected, and you therefore do help your neighbor to paint his house as you had promised. If rational action always involves both an incentive and a principle, what is your incentive for doing that? What presents “keeping your promise” to your mind as an eligible action? According to Kant, it is respect for law, the moral law’s operation as its own incentive. In other words, the thought that you are required to keep a promise can itself serve as the incentive for keeping it. This is what Kant means by being motivated by pure practical reason – that the

thoughts generated by the rational principle can serve as incentives for the will.

In a similar way, if there is an egoistic principle of practical reason, it must be capable of generating an incentive of its own, an incentive for doing those things which we must do if we are to maximize our satisfactions, and which we do not otherwise want to do. Suppose for instance you are tempted not to go to the dentist, since you are afraid of the drill. Let us suppose that the egoistic principle says that you must go, since the your desire to avoid the toothache ahead gets a higher normative ranking than your desire to avoid the drill now. It is no use insisting that the incentive you act on when you conform to the egoistic principle is your desire to avoid the toothache ahead, for if that were a sufficient incentive to get you to go to the dentist, you would not have been tempted to violate the egoistic principle in the first place. To suppose that your desire to avoid the toothache ahead is, *after all*, strong enough to overcome your fear of the drill is to revert to a version of the first assumption about rationality I criticized. It is to suppose that the role of practical deliberation is to uncover the psychological facts, to show you that you already, deep down, prefer to brave the dentist than to face the toothache later. We have seen that that assumption is not warranted. Your incentive must rather be provided by the thought that it is better for you overall if you go to the dentist. So *rational* egoism is not compatible with the view that only desires can serve as incentives. Only completely wanton action is compatible with that. Rational egoism requires the possibility that we can be motivated by pure practical reason, in exactly the same way that morality does. It is only *what* it tells us to do that is different.

### ***1.5 The Realist Egoist***

We have seen that the egoistic principle cannot be reduced to the instrumental principle. If it is a rational principle at all, it must be a principle in its own right. If it is to be a normative principle, associated with a normative ought, the egoistic principle must describe a rational activity. So in order to determine whether the egoistic principle is a normative principle, we need a way to identify rational activities. The stronger version of the Kantian conception, which tries to derive the content of rational principles from the very idea of self-determination, gives us one way of doing that, but we have seen that it is not a promising route for the egoist to take. The remaining option seems to be a form of realism. Just as realists think that following the principles of logic and the canons of evidence is guiding yourself in mat-

ters of belief by the aim of achieving the True, so they may think that following the principles of practical reason is guiding yourself in matters of action by the aim of achieving the Good. A person's happiness is *her own good*, so of course it is normative for her. Or perhaps it is just plain *good*, and so normative for us all.

Now it is important to see that by itself, this sort of move does not get us to rational egoism. Suppose that we say that a person's happiness is good for her (or just good, it does not matter for this argument), meaning that maximum satisfaction is good for her. It seems natural to give one of two explanations of what makes happiness in this sense good. The first is that the satisfaction of each of her desires is a good thing for her, so that by maximizing her satisfactions she is maximizing good things. The second is that her happiness is good because she in fact desires it, and so good for her for the same reason that each of the objects of her particular desires is good for her. In whichever of these ways we establish the goodness of happiness, we get the result that each of the person's particular desires has the same kind of normative claim on her that her happiness does. So if the aim of maximizing satisfaction comes into conflict with the aim of satisfying one of her desires, she now has a normative reason to do each of these things, and she needs some further reason to prefer the maximum satisfaction to the particular satisfaction. The problem of why she should be prudent, which before seemed to be a problem about *whether* there is a normative principle of prudence, has simply reappeared in the guise of a conflict among a plurality of normative principles.

Now perhaps you will agree that this problem does arise for someone who claims that happiness is good because we desire it, and therefore places happiness exactly on a footing with the other objects of desire. But you may be tempted to think it does not arise for someone who claims that happiness is good because the satisfaction of each of her desires is a good thing, and therefore that happiness is a maximum of good things. For it is obvious that a maximum of good things is better than any one good thing, on the principle that more is better. But recall that we are not claiming that satisfaction is the only thing you want for its own sake, so we are not talking here about getting more of the only thing you want. You also want the particular objects of your desires. So the trouble with this argument is that it does not explain the authority of the egoistic principle, but rather simply asserts it. The imprudent person is not denying that he will get more satisfaction if he acts prudently – he is asking why he therefore has a reason to do so, especially since he may have to give up something else he wants.<sup>22</sup>



There is one final move available to the realist egoist, though. Earlier I claimed that behind instrumental egoism stands a certain psychological thesis, namely the thesis that people only *really want* what is consistent with their happiness. The realist egoist can transform this thesis into a view about what is *really good*. He can say that only the maximum compossible set of the objects of a person's desires, and the various objects that are parts of that set, are really good. So only those desires whose satisfaction is consistent with happiness have normative standing, and others do not. By turning that thesis into a thesis about the good, rather than a thesis about real desires, the realist egoist escapes the problems I mentioned earlier. He avoids the charge of domesticating human psychology, since he is no longer making a psychological claim. And he also avoids the charge of emptying the principles of practical reason of their normative content, by making us incapable of disobeying them. He is not claiming we can be *motivated* only by the good, for we have non-normative desires that also move us.

But he avoids these charges at the cost of giving up the view that the egoistic principle is a principle of naturalistic construction, and embracing in its place a pure form of dogmatism. For now the good is not constructed out of items regarded as naturally or *prima facie* good. The realist egoist can no longer explain the goodness of happiness in terms of the goodness of satisfying desires, in either of the ways I mentioned above. For now he has embraced the view that not every satisfaction is good, and more generally that not everything a person desires is good. This form of egoism is a top-down version, which tells us that it is *prima facie* rational to be motivated by our desires only *because* the maximum compossible set of their objects is the Good.

On this view, the good for a person *just is* the maximum compossible set of his desires. This is not because the maximum compossible set is necessarily *what he wants most*, for we have dropped the assumption that an agent always *actually* prefers his happiness to any particular desired end, in order to secure the normativity of the egoistic principle. Nor is it because it includes *most of what he wants* – for we have dropped the assumption that an agent's wanting something is in itself the source of a normative claim, in order to avoid generating a plurality of normative claims that will conflict with that of the egoistic principle itself. The claim that the maximum compossible set of one's desires is the good is therefore a dogmatic claim. The answer to the question why you should be prudent is simply that prudence is the pursuit of the maximum compossible set and that *just is* your good. This

position appears to be logically unassailable, but that is no reason to pass out cigars. All dogmatic positions are logically unassailable.

So egoism is a dogmatic rationalist view, which derives the normativity of its principle from a substantive conception of the good. Let us now look more closely at this conception.

## **II. The Content of the Egoistic Principle**

### ***II.1 Balancing and Particularity***

I want to begin this part of the paper by saying something about the intuitive ideas that the egoistic principle is meant to capture. By way of approach to one of these ideas, notice that there is widespread agreement that reason requires us to take the means to our ends. But many people believe that this by itself does not capture the demands of instrumental reason. Surely we should take the most efficient means, and there are problems about how those are to be specified; and of course there are the notorious problems about how to handle risk when we are pursuing ends under uncertainty. Many people think of solving these problems as part of working out the correct formulation of the instrumental principle.

Actually, however, these problems are generated by the same very basic idea that also seems to stand behind the egoistic principle. To formulate this idea, I will use the word “project” as a neutral term for anything that gives you a reason, whether it is a goal you are pursuing, a principle you live by, a cause you adhere to, your standing concern for the welfare of a friend, or whatever. I will speak of “promoting projects” and ask you to remember that promoting a project need not always involve pursuing a goal. The basic idea I have in mind is that you have more than one project and rationality requires you to take into account the impact which promoting one project will have on the others. Considerations of efficiency and caution spring from this idea in a generalized form: if you have reason to minimize your expenditure of time and resources, it is for the sake of your other projects, not for the sake of the project you are promoting right now.

I am going to call this basic idea the requirement of balancing – meaning that whenever we make a choice, we are required to balance the reasons stemming from the project we are now pursuing against the reasons stemming from our other projects.<sup>23</sup> The idea that there is a requirement of balancing is an important element in egoism, but there is nothing inherently egoistic about it. The belief in egoism also seems to import another idea, which is that the overall good you are pursuing or constructing when you engage in this balancing is partic-

ularly your own. I am going to call that idea the idea of particularity. The familiar ambiguity in the term “prudence” picks up both the ideas of balancing and particularity: people are described as prudent when they remember to attend to interests they will have in the future as well as the ones they have now, and also when they seem to be especially attentive to their own good.<sup>24</sup>

There is room for disagreement about how exactly the egoistic principle captures the idea of particularity – about what it is that makes egoism *egoistic*. What makes the successful pursuit of a project a part of my own good? Is it just that the project is mine, or is there some subset of my projects whose success constitutes “my own good”? Or is it rather something about the *way* the egoist proposes to meet the requirement of balancing, which is by maximizing his own satisfaction? On the first of these options, the idea of particularity is supposed to be captured by the kind of items that go into the egoistic calculation – they are mine, my desires, my projects, my personal concerns. The egoist reasons from egoistic materials. On the second, the idea of particularity is supposed to be captured by the structure or form of egoistic deliberation: it is because *satisfaction* is the basis for assigning weights to the items in the egoistic calculation that egoism counts as a pursuit of the agent’s own good. The egoist reasons about a general range of materials, but reasons in a specifically egoistic way. In what follows, I will examine each of these possibilities in turn.

## ***II.2 Reasoning from Egoistic Materials***

First, are the materials that go into egoistic reasoning somehow inherently egoistic? For instance, is the egoist pursuing his own good because the incentives on which the egoistic principle operates are his desires? The trouble with this thought is that the word “desire” either refers to a particular kind of incentive, or it does not. If the word “desire” refers to anything that can serve as an incentive for the will, or perhaps we should say any incentive except those generated by the egoistic principle itself, then all of one’s incentives are trivially “desires,” and nothing is added to the idea of balancing. On the other hand if “desire” refers to some particular kind of incentive, say those that are associated with appetite or pleasure, then we are owed an explanation of why the egoistic principle commands us to promote projects grounded in this particular kind of incentive in preference to or at the expense of other projects. Whatever that explanation might be, it will not refer to the fact that the other incentives are not *your own*, but rather to the fact that the other incentives are not *desires*. There is no obvi-

ous sense in which a principle like that is either rational or egoistic.

A more tempting option is that it is not the bare fact that something is a desire but its content that is relevant. In his essay "Egoism and Altruism" Bernard Williams proposes that we can isolate a category of egoistic desire by means of a device intended to isolate the content of a desire. The device is to represent the desire in this way:

I want that (.....)

where what we put in the parentheses is a description of the desired state of affairs. Then we can say that a desire is egoistic if the self appears somewhere in that description:

I want that (....I.....)

Williams calls such a desire an I-desire.<sup>25</sup>

But actually this device does not seem to capture the intuitive idea of egoism. In fact what it seems to capture is rather the idea of narcissism. For instance, someone in the grip of a pathological case of remorse or masochism might want that he should suffer. Or someone might want to be the author of some good thing of which he himself may never get the benefit, like someone who wants to be the one who discovers a cure for cancer. And then there are the desires we would most naturally formulate not in terms of "I" but in terms of "my own," like the godfather's desire that his own family should remain in power or the patriot's desire that his own country should be free. Or suppose an artist wants his own paintings to make the world a more beautiful place. Are these desires egoistic? They contain a self-reference, but they certainly do not all concern things that you want *for yourself* in any intuitive sense. Or course we could say that a desire is only egoistic if the person wants something good for himself but then we cannot use these desires to *define* the notion of a person's good.

Nevertheless, let us suppose that the device does pick out a category of egoistic desire. Now we must be careful to avoid a confusion. Psychological egoism, in one of its many forms, is the view that human beings have only egoistic desires. Those who believe it usually also believe that all human projects are grounded in desire. If these things were true, you would always pursue things you wanted for yourself, and the requirement of balancing would require you to pursue your own overall good. But this would not be because it is rational to pursue your own good as such. The only rational element in this picture is the requirement of balancing, which is not essentially egoistic; the egoism here is psychological. If the requirement of balancing has only egoistic materials to work on, it commands the pursuit of your own good by default, and not because a focus on your own good is rational.

So if the question of *rational* egoism is even going to come up, we must suppose that human beings have both egoistic and non-egoistic projects. Suppose you want things both for yourself and for others, and perhaps have some impersonal desires for states of the world in general. According to this view it is a requirement of reason that you should prefer those things you want for yourself to the things you want for others or impersonally, no matter how badly you want those other things. Why would this be rational? Do not be tempted by the thought that your I-desires are favored by reason *because* they are the ones directed to your own good. The claim here is not that you first form some conception of the good, and then form egoistic desires by applying it to your own case. If that is the way it is, the good is not a maximum of satisfaction, but something else altogether, which desire merely aims at. This version of egoism is rather the view that your good is *constituted* by the maximum compossible set of the objects of your I-desires, *whatever* those happen to be, and even if they include things like wanting yourself to suffer.

That is not very plausible. But in any case it is not the route that most egoists take. Social scientific egoists, in particular, have insisted that they can be neutral about what sorts of elements may go into the maximum compossible set. If this is right, then what is egoistic about egoism must be the form of balancing that it directs us to do. It must be that it is the pursuit of satisfaction.

### ***II.3 The Pursuit of Satisfaction***

The view that we are to maximize the satisfaction of our desires is ambiguous, because the idea of "satisfaction" is ambiguous. "Satisfaction" may refer either to an objective or a subjective state. Objective satisfaction is achieved when the state of affairs that you desire is in fact realized. For instance, you want your painting to hang in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and it does. Obviously, you could achieve the satisfaction of your desire in the objective sense without knowing anything about it: you may never know that your dream of artistic fame has been realized. Subjective satisfaction by contrast is a sort of pleasurable consciousness that objective satisfaction obtains. You know that your picture has been hung in the Museum, say, and you feel good about it; you reflect on the fact with pleasure. Although subjective satisfaction is pleasurable, it is important to distinguish it from pleasure in general; and in particular from pleasure that is caused by the satisfaction of a desire by any route whatever.<sup>26</sup> Egoism is not supposed to be the same thing as hedonism. Subjective satisfaction is a specific kind of

pleasure, pleasure taken in the knowledge or belief that a desire has been satisfied.

Now someone who deliberates with the aim of achieving the maximum sense of subjective satisfaction over the whole course of his life seems to be in a recognizable sense egoistic. His conduct is governed by the pursuit of something that will be experienced as a good by himself. But there is a problem about saying that he is rational. Subjective satisfaction is the pleased perception of objective satisfaction and so is conceptually dependent upon objective satisfaction. And so, one would think, its importance must be dependent on the importance of objective satisfaction as well. There would be something upside down about thinking it mattered that you should achieve subjective satisfaction independently of thinking that it mattered that you should achieve objective satisfaction. You can see the problem by imagining a case in which they pull apart. John Rawls used to tell the following story in his classes.

A man is going away to fight in a war, in which he may possibly die. The night before he leaves, the devil comes and offers him a choice. Either while he is away, his family will thrive and flourish, but he will get word that they are suffering and miserable; or while he is away his family will suffer and be miserable, but he will get word they are thriving and happy. He must choose now, and of course he will be made to forget that his conversation with the devil and the choice it resulted in ever took place.

The problem is obvious. The man loves his family and wants them to be thriving and happy, and this clearly dictates the first choice, where his family thrives but he believes they do not. But the goal of achieving subjective satisfaction seems to favor the second choice, where he gets to enjoy the satisfaction of believing they thrive when actually they do not. So here we have *rationality* dictating the choice of a pleasing delusion over a state of affairs which the man by hypothesis genuinely cares about. He must care about it, or he could not get the subjective satisfaction: that was Butler's point. The pursuit of subjective satisfaction in preference to objective satisfaction can lead to madness, in the literal sense of madness: you can lose your grip on *reality*.

So suppose instead that we take the claim that we should maximize our satisfaction to be a claim about objective satisfaction. Now we run into a new problem. The idea of *maximizing* objective satisfaction makes no obvious sense. Even supposing that we had some clear way of individuating and so counting our desires, nobody thinks that max-

imizing objective satisfaction is rational if that means maximizing the raw number of satisfied desires, for everyone thinks that our desires differ greatly in their importance and centrality to our lives. Maximizing satisfaction must have something to do with giving priority to the things that matter more to us. So we need some way of assigning *prima facie* weights or measures of some kind to our desires or more generally to our projects before we know how to maximize satisfaction. And these weights or measures must be based either on reason or on our psychology.

Suppose first that the weights are grounded in reason: we ask how strong a reason, relatively speaking, is provided by each of our projects. There are two things we might mean by this. First, we may be asking how important the project is to our happiness, how much of a contribution it makes. As I have already suggested, when I talked about the dangerous word "interest," the egoist cannot use this measure going in to his calculations, for it is precisely this measure that is supposed to emerge from his calculations. Finding out how to maximize satisfaction is supposed to *tell* him which projects he must give priority to if he is to be happy. Second, we may be asking how strong a reason the project provides by some other rational measure, some measure that may derive in part from rational considerations or convictions other than those springing from the egoistic principle itself. For instance one may hold the view that reasons deriving from morality or, say, friendship are weightier than reasons deriving from personal comfort. Roughly speaking, the measure of a project's importance is given by how good a reason there is to promote it. Provided we have a theory of practical reason rich enough to assign such measures, this is certainly an intelligible procedure. But it is not egoistic, for this is simply the procedure of determining what we have most reason to do. In other words, this is simply the requirement of balancing, taken all by itself, and in its most starkly formal sense. Furthermore, and importantly, if we are going to allow the initial measures to reflect rational considerations, we must leave it open whether it will turn out that balancing will take a maximizing form or not. For perhaps some reasons are unconditional and some are not, or perhaps some are by their nature lexically prior to others. If these things are so, balancing requires us to take them into account. Balancing is a matter of maximizing only if we start with items that vary only in a raw commensurable weight.

So if we are to get a distinctively egoistic principle, and not just the requirement of balancing, it seems as if the initial weights we assign to our projects must be based on something psychological, something

about our own attitudes towards them. An initial temptation is to turn back to the idea of subjective satisfaction, which may seem like the relevant sort of quantum. Although we can agree that it is objective satisfaction that matters, the test of how much it matters is subjective: that is, it is how much subjective satisfaction we would experience if we knew that the desire were objectively satisfied. But the problem of the conceptual dependence of subjective satisfaction upon objective satisfaction again arises. Surely the degree of our subjective satisfaction should depend on how important the objective state of affairs is to us, and not the reverse. Subjective satisfaction cannot serve as an independent measure.

This means that the measure must be provided by some subjectively identifiable or anyway psychological quantum other than the degree of satisfaction. In other words, it has to be something roughly along the lines of intensity of desire. In this case egoism is normally misdescribed, for conformity to the egoistic principle will really lead to a maximum of *satisfaction* only on the hypothesis that the degree of subjective satisfaction exactly corresponds to the intensity of the desire which gets satisfied. This was indeed the assumption of the British empiricists who originally brought us this theory. "Every affection," Hume declares, "when gratified by success, gives a satisfaction proportioned to its force and violence."<sup>27</sup> We need not linger over the question whether that is true, because it is inessential to the theory. The essential idea is that egoism is egoistic because the measure of a desired object's *prima facie* weight is how badly you want it. It is as if adding up all the intensities of your particular desires produces, in the case of the maximum compossible set, a single desire for the set as a whole with such a high degree of intensity that it *transmutes* into normative force.

However that may be, the use of intensity of desire as the measure means that the egoist cannot have the neutrality he often claims about the kinds of items that go into the calculation. In fact a dilemma faces the egoist here. On the one hand, we may allow the items that go into the calculation to get their initial weights from any source, including normative sources such as personal commitments or the other principles of reason. This gives us the desired neutrality, but in that case what is supposed to be the egoistic principle is really just the requirement of balancing, and the form that that requirement takes will not necessarily be a maximizing one. Or we may insist that the items going into the calculation are items of a quite particular kind, psychological items with a measurable intensity or some other introspectively accessible psychic magnitude that reflects our personal



attitudes. Then we get egoism, but we do not get the desired neutrality. To this extent, the egoistic principle cannot after all be detached from its origins: it is a child of introspective psychology, grounded in the British empiricist theory of happiness or the good.

### Conclusion

Let me now sum up my conclusions. Egoism is not consistent with instrumentalism or with the view that human beings are motivated only by desires. Like any substantive theory of what it is rational to do, egoism requires the possibility of motivation by pure practical reason. The egoistic principle differs from the categorical imperative by having a different content, not by the kind of motivation it involves. The egoistic principle tells us that we must treat a certain conception of the good as having normative authority over our conduct. This conception of the good is not philosophically neutral, nor is it merely the result of imposing a little order on the natural *prima facie* goods that it starts from. In fact, if the arguments of both parts of this paper are correct, egoism must be based on a rational intuition that happiness as it was conceived by the British empiricists is the Good, and is therefore the source of a normative principle. I therefore think that Nietzsche was right in the *Twilight of the Idols* when he dismissed rational egoism as a myth. Man does not pursue happiness, at least as happiness must be conceived by the rational egoist. Only the Englishman does that.<sup>28</sup>

### NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, Maxims and Arrows, number 12.

2. Sidgwick is a utilitarian about the content of the moral principle, but his account of its normative foundation is rationalistic. See Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (7<sup>th</sup> edition, 1907, reprinted in Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), especially Book III, Chapter XIII. Eighteenth century rationalists, such as Clarke and Price, think that moral principles are rational principles, and tend to see the principle of rational self-interest as a branch of duty. For them the rival of morality is not rational self-interest but passion, vice, and corruption. But twentieth century ethical rationalists like Ross and Prichard seem to hold the view that duty and interest are different forms of reason.

3. I say "something like the principle of egoism" because Sidgwick thinks of egoism as a principle of maximizing one's own pleasure or "agreeable consciousness" rather than of maximizing the satisfaction of one's desires. See Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, 1907, reprinted in Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981.

4. References to Kant's works are inserted into the text, using an abbreviation for the title of the work followed by the volume and page number of the Prussian Academy Edition (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902—) found in the margins of most translations. The

translations I have used are those of Mary Gregor published in the series *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy*. G = *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); C2 = *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); MM = *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

5. Kant's remarks on happiness are not easy to reconcile with one another. Elsewhere in the *Groundwork* Kant says that happiness is "an ideal of the imagination" or "an indeterminate concept" because I cannot be sure which elements I should include in it in order to achieve "a maximum of well-being in my present condition and in every future condition" (G 4: 418). In these passages Kant portrays the agent as wondering which ends will as the elements of happiness – whether to will, health, wealth, or knowledge, say. What seems to make these elements candidates for inclusion in the happy life is not that they are the objects of the agent's own inclinations but that they are the sorts of things that usually bring about, or constitute, "well-being." Sometimes these remarks are interpreted hedonistically – happiness is not the satisfaction of inclination but pleasure, to which the satisfaction of inclination is related causally. This is in part because Kant makes other remarks that seem to call for a hedonistic interpretation, most notably the parallel remarks in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (C2 5:23-26). In another passage, Kant defines happiness as an ideal in which "all inclinations unite in one sum" (G 4: 399), suggesting that happiness is not just a maximum of satisfaction but rather an ideal of having *everything* one wants. And it is arguable (although I will not argue it here) that the argument of the Dialectic of the *Critique of Practical Reason* make best sense if happiness is understood as success in attaining one's willed ends. These are all different ideas.

6. That is, Kant thinks this if we suppose that the principle of self-love, which according to Kant governs the evil will, dictates something like the maximization of a person's satisfaction. Kant does sometimes seem to think of the principle of self-love that way, in particular in the opening sections of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. But at other times, in particular in the first section of the *Groundwork*, he seems to think of it more as a "wanton" principle, the principle of (unreflectively) following the desire of the moment. I have argued that this is how it should be understood in "From Duty and for the Sake of the Noble: Kant and Aristotle on Morally Good Action" in *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, edited by Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996: pp. 203-236), especially pp. 208-212.

7. In "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason" in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, edited by Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 215-254.

8. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861; Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979), Chapter IV, especially p. 34.

9. Mill actually says this is what he meant in a letter to Henry Jones:

As to the sentence you quote from my *Utilitarianism*, when I said that the general happiness is a good to the aggregate of all persons I did not mean that every human being's happiness is a good to every other human being; though I think, in a good state of society & education it would be so. I merely meant in this particular sentence to argue that since A's happiness is a good, B's a good, C's a good, &c, the sum of all these goods must be a good.

*The Later Letters of John Stuart Mill*, ed. Francis E. Mineka and Dwight N. Lindley, Volume III, p. 1414. I owe the reference to Charlotte Brown and Jerome Schneewind.

10. Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, reprinted in *Five Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel and A Dissertation Upon the Nature of Virtue*, edited by Stephen Darwall. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Sermon IV (Originally Sermon XI), especially pp. 47-49.

11. Joseph Butler, in the Preface to the *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, reprinted in *Five Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel and A Dissertation Upon the Nature of Virtue*, edited by Stephen Darwall. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, p. 21.

12. The assumption that practical reasoning reveals our “real” desires to us is an expression of romantic metaphysics in the most literal sense, and it is tempting to speculate that its influence on Anglo-American philosophy springs from Hegel. The distinction that Aristotle and Kant make between theoretical and practical reason is elided by the assumption. But it may also be an expression of the empiricist view, found for example in Hume, that “reason” just is “the discovery of truth and falsehood” (*The Treatise of Human Nature*. 1739-1740; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and revised by P. H. Niddich. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, p. 458).

13. The word “desire” is a source of confusion in philosophy because of the many ways it is used. The idea voiced in the text – that “desire” refers to an item in one’s natural psychology – might be disputed, or anyway deemed misleading, by philosophers who think desire is a response to the perception of reasons. The instrumental egoist, however, needs to understand the idea of desire naturalistically, since he thinks there are only instrumental reasons.

14. The two false assumptions may be thought related: it is because the instrumental egoist supposes that the conclusion of practical reasoning uncovers your real desire that he supposes it will cause a motive in you. But I am not certain of this. Consider the theoretical analogues of the two false assumptions. The analogue of the first assumption would seem to be the view that logical reasoning is actually a sort of empirical reasoning that uncovers our “real” beliefs – or, alternatively, a Platonic view that makes all a priori reasoning a matter of recollection. The analogue of the second false assumption is that logical reasoning is a matter of the (merely causal) effect of certain conjunctions of judgments on the mind. The first assumption seems to me to be more commonly made about practical reasoning than about theoretical reasoning, and made as a way of making all reasoning seem theoretical. But as I will suggest later, I think the second assumption is commonly made about both kinds of reasoning. This makes me think the two errors may have separate sources.

15. In “Korsgaard on Choosing Non-Moral Ends” (*Ethics*, Volume 109, No. 1, October 1998) Hannah Ginsborg argues that Kant’s view is that we are free to act against our happiness only when the moral law demands it. There are certainly passages in his works that can be taken to support that view. But I do not see how it can be squared with the claim that we “act under the idea of freedom.” Admittedly, the foundational argument in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is often thought to be different from, and to represent a rejection of, the foundational argument of the *Groundwork*, and in the second *Critique* Kant does not appeal to the thesis that we act under the idea of freedom. In fact he argues there that our freedom is revealed to us only by the experience of moral obligation: we know we are free to act against even our strongest desire, since we know that we can do what we ought (C2 5: 29-31). Morality is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom, although freedom is the *ratio essendi* of morality (C2 5:4n.). But the freedom thus revealed must be general. For even here Kant argues that freedom is the *ratio essendi* of morality – the moral law applies to us because we have free will, not the reverse. For more on these arguments see my “Morality as Freedom” in Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (New York: Cambridge, 1996: 159-187) and “Motivation, Metaphysics, and the Value of the Self: A Reply to Ginsborg, Guyer, and Schneewind” in *Ethics*, Volume 109, No. 1, October 1998.

16. This discussion is largely lifted from “Motivation, Metaphysics, and the Value of the Self: A Reply to Ginsborg, Guyer, and Schneewind” in *Ethics*, Volume 109, No. 1, October 1998.

17. It is unclear whether Kant means to imply that the duty to pursue happiness can only be an indirect one (not an end in itself, but only a means to the avoidance of temptation) or whether he has changed his mind about the duty to pursue one’s own happiness altogether. But either way he now seems to think we do pursue inevitably pursue happiness.

18. I make a similar argument – that Kant’s account of instrumental imperatives in the *Groundwork* does not represent his mature view – in “The Normativity of Instrumental

Reason" (in Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut, eds., *Ethics and Practical Reason*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 239-240.

19. I owe the example to Barbara Herman.

20. I say "to the extent" because it is important to this account that self-determination can be partial and therefore defective. Something must count as trying to determine yourself and failing, for example willing the end but failing to will the means. Otherwise it will be impossible to violate practical imperatives: you will either determine yourself successfully or not at all. To see the importance of this, consider the comparison to language again. If you violate the rules of English, there is a sense in which we might say, "You are not speaking English." But in another sense, if you were not speaking English, the rules of English would not apply to you and so you would have done nothing amiss. If not speaking English at all were the only alternative to speaking English perfectly, the rules of English would not be normative, since the moment they failed to be followed they would also fail to apply. But of course that is not how it is: you can certainly violate a rule of English and still be, recognizably, trying to speak English. What matters is that your efforts at speaking are generally guided, even if unsuccessfully, by the rules. This is what makes normativity possible.

21. Actually, something stronger is true: there would be no actions. A movement caused by a desire or a passion is not an action. Blushing, trembling, and salivating are not actions. This is not to say that one must employ rational principles in order to act; the other animals act. But in their case instincts play the role of principles: they determine what the animal does with the sensory and desiderative inputs that assail it. See my "Motivation, Metaphysics, and the Value of the Self: A Reply to Ginsborg, Guyer, and Schneewind" in *Ethics*, Volume 109, No. 1, October 1998, especially pp. 49-54.

22. To see this, recall the comparison to Mill. The argument for the principle of utility depends on the idea that each person's happiness is a good and therefore the utilitarian must grant that each person's happiness is the source of a normative claim. Again what we get in the first instance is a plurality of normative principles, one for each person's happiness, and one – assuming that adding makes sense – for the total. Someone who challenges the principle of utility when his own happiness is to be sacrificed is not denying that there will be more total happiness if we follow the principle of utility. He is asking why he therefore has a reason to give up his own happiness, which the utilitarian must agree is also a good.

23. Is the principle of balancing, taken by itself, a principle of reason? Let me first back up. In both *The Sources of Normativity* and "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason" I argue that the principle of instrumental reason is normative on the grounds that it is a constitutive principle of willing. I mean this in a strong sense of constitutive: there is a sense in which acting on the principle of instrumental reason *gives* you a will, that is, an agency that is unified and distinct from the particular incentives over which it has authority. More precisely, it makes you such an agency. The general idea is that if you were swayed from the pursuit of an end *whenever* you experienced an incentive (say, difficulty, boredom, temptation) that made you reluctant to take the means to that end, you could not be said to have a will to pursue the end – or taking the point generally, to have a will at all. Since you would be moved by any incentive or impulse that came along, you would not be distinct from your impulses, and so would be a sort of disunified heap of impulses. (In *The Sources of Normativity* and "Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant" I make a similar argument about the principle of universalization.) The principle of balancing also seems necessary to secure the unity of your will, at a sort of next level up from the instrumental principle: we might say that without it, you are a mere heap of projects, each wholly engrossing you, and so in effect being you, at the moment of its ascendancy. This is vague and I am not perfectly happy with it, but it may be taken to indicate that unlike the egoistic principle, the principle of balancing is the right sort of thing to be a rational principle. For the relevant arguments see *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Section One of the Reply, especially pp. 225-233; "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason" in *Ethics and Practical*

*Reason*, edited by Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), especially pp. 245-250; and "Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant" (*The Journal of Ethics* 3: 1-29, 1999), especially pp. 23-27.

24. My attention was drawn to this by Thomas Nagel, in *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 36.

25. Bernard Williams, "Egoism and Altruism" in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). My discussion throughout this paper owes much to Williams. Williams borrows the device of the I-desire from Anthony Kenny, who uses it in *Action, Emotion, and Will* (London: Routledge, 1963).

26. See note 27.

27. David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751; 3<sup>rd</sup> edition edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and revised by P. H. Niddich. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 281-282. Hume, following Butler (that is, following the argument mentioned in note 11 above), is arguing that satisfying the passion of benevolence makes at least as much of a contribution to your own happiness as satisfying a less altruistic desire. Like Butler, Hume goes on to throw certain pleasures into the calculation along with that proportional satisfaction – the immediate feeling of benevolence, which he says is "sweet, smooth, tender, and agreeable" (p. 282), the pleasing consciousness that we have done well, and so forth. The argument is hedonistic, and satisfaction is thrown as one of the relevant pleasures; and yet it follows from the argument that we could not get the satisfaction if we acted for the sake of the satisfaction *rather than* for the sake of helping the other. If this argument were intended to motivate an agent, authentic benevolence and the desire for one's own satisfaction and pleasure would have to be combined somehow in the agent's motivation. With a theory of volition such as the Kantian account described in this paper, we might explain how this combination is possible. The benevolent person *desires* the other's good for its own sake, but he *chooses* to act on that desire rather than some other desire because of its special advantages. But Hume and Butler do not have a theory of volition, so their accounts leave it unclear how we could be moved at one and the same moment by the desire for another's good and the desire for our own. I do not consider this to be a problem for Hume, since in his case I think the argument is not intended to motivate; its aim is rather to establish congruence between the moral and the self-interested points of view. (See Charlotte Brown's unpublished paper "Hume Against the Selfish Schools and the Monkish Virtues," and my own account in *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Sections 2.2.4-2.2.7, pp. 60-66.) But it may be a problem for Butler.

28. The argument of this paper may leave the reader with a pair of related worries. First, one may wonder why, if the idea of rational egoism is as confused as I have claimed, the temptation to believe in the egoistic principle is so strong and so perennial. Second, and more importantly, one may wonder where the argument leaves the idea of happiness or the individual human good, and the rationality of pursuing that good. I have not discussed hedonism much in this paper, but like many of my readers I do not find it plausible, at least in its modern, Benthamite form. But if we reject both hedonism and the desire-satisfaction model, it may seem as if we are left with only a kind of "external realist" conception of the individual's good or happiness. On such a conception, the good is something defined independently of the individual's natural desires and capacities for interest and enjoyment. This seems absurd, since most of us believe that a person's good or happiness must be something *necessarily* capable of motivating, interesting, or pleasing him. And of course there is a connection between these two worries, for the unpalatability of external realism about happiness or a person's good has something to do with the perennial temptation to believe in egoism. To do justice to these questions would require another paper, and it is a topic I hope to take up on some future occasion. For now I will only indicate where I think the answer lies. The ancient Greeks, especially Aristotle, offer a conception of the human good which is psychologically grounded, but which cannot be identified with either the desire-satisfaction model or Benthamite hedonism. The rough idea is that happiness rests in the excellent activ-

ity of our healthy faculties, an activity that we necessarily experience as pleasurable, although not because it is the cause of a pleasant sensation. I believe some version of this conception can be shown to be much more plausible than its modern, less sophisticated, alternatives. See Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and the discussion of pleasure and pain in *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Sections 4.3.1-4.3.10, pp. 145-153.

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