

Acting for a Reason[©]

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I. Introduction: Reason and Reasons

The question I am going to discuss is what a practical reason is: that is, what we are referring to when we talk about “the reason for an action,” and what happens when someone acts for a reason. The answer I am going to present is one that I believe is common to Aristotle and Kant, and that distinguishes them from nearly everyone else. I am also going to suggest that their answer is correct, for an important reason. As I will try to explain, the view I believe we find in Aristotle and Kant enables us to connect their account of what *reasons* are with an important feature of their account of what *Reason* is: namely, that Reason is in a particular way the *active* aspect or dimension of the mind.

More generally, when we talk about reason, we seem to have three different things in mind. In the philosophical tradition, reason refers to the active rather than the passive or receptive aspect of the mind. Reason in this sense is opposed to perception, sensation, and perhaps emotion, which are forms of or at least involve undergoing. The contrast is not unproblematic, for it seems clear that receptivity itself cannot be understood as wholly passive. The perceived world does not merely enter the mind, as through an open door. In sensing and responding to the world our minds interact with it, and the activity of our senses themselves makes a contribution to the character of the perceived world. Though at some level innate and automatic, this contribution may be shaped and extended by learning,

changed by habituation and experience, and perhaps even consciously directed. But the mental activity that we associate with reason goes beyond that involved in even the most sophisticated receptivity. Reasoning is self-conscious, self-directing activity through which we deliberately give shape to the inputs of receptivity. This happens both in the case of theoretical reasoning, when we are constructing a scientific account of the world, and in the case of practical reasoning, where its characteristic manifestation is choice.

Reason has also traditionally been identified with either the employment of, or simply conformity to, certain principles, such as the principles of logical inference, the principles Kant identified as principles of the understanding, mathematical principles, and the principles of practical reason. A person is called reasonable or rational when his beliefs and actions conform to the dictates of those principles, or when he is deliberately guided by them. And then finally, there are the particular considerations, counting in favor of belief or action, that we call “reasons.”

The use of the English word “reason” in all of these contexts, and the way we translate equivalent terms from other languages, suggests a connection, but what exactly is it? Aristotle and Kant’s conception of what practical reasons are, I believe, can help us to answer this question, by bringing out what is distinctive, and distinctively active, about acting for a reason. That, at least, is what I am going to argue.

II. Three Questions about Reasons

There are actually three, or at least three, questions about the ontology of reasons for action. The first question is what sorts of items count as reasons for action – in particular, whether reasons are provided by our mental states and attitudes, or by the facts upon which those states and attitudes are based. (I’ll explain this contrast in greater detail below.) The second question is what kinds of facts about actions are relevant to reasons, and in particular

whether reasons always spring from the goals achieved through action or sometimes spring from other properties of the actions, say that the action is just or kind. This question is most familiar to us from the debate between consequentialists and deontologists. The third question is how reasons for action are related to actions themselves, and in particular whether this relation is to be understood causally or in some other way.¹ Put in more familiar terms, this is the question what we mean when we say that someone is “motivated.”

How do we answer these questions? Most philosophers would agree that practical reasons have at least some of the following properties: (1) They are normative, that is, they make valid claims on those who have them. (2) They are motivating, that is, other things equal, the agents who have them will be inspired to act in accordance with them.² And (3) they are motivating in virtue of their normativity, that is, people are inspired to do things by the normativity of the reasons they have for doing them, by their awareness that some consideration makes a claim on them. I will call this property being “normatively motivating,” and, although it is not uncontroversial, I am inclined to assume that this is what is what a practical reason should essentially be: a normatively motivating consideration. We answer questions about the ontology of reasons by asking whether our candidate items could possibly have the properties in question, and by keeping our eye on the connection between Reason and reasons.

¹ The answers admit of a rough, though only a rough, grouping. Empiricists tend to think that reasons are provided by our mental states, especially our desires; that the relevant facts concern the desirability of the goals to be achieved through action; and that the relation between reasons and actions is causal. Rationalists tend to believe that reasons are provided by the facts in virtue of which the action is good, that these facts need not be limited to the desirability of the goals that are achieved through action, but may concern intrinsic properties of the action itself; and that the action is caused not by the reason, but rather by the agent’s response to the reason. To some extent, this paper follows the familiar Kantian strategy of making a case by showing how the debate between rationalists and empiricists leads to an impasse.

² These remarks are of course tautological; this is because the properties in question are essentially indefinable. These two properties I’ve just gestured at are sometimes referred to as normative and motivational internalism, respectively, but I prefer to avoid these terms.

The first question – whether reasons are provided by mental states or by the facts upon which those states are based - leads to a problem, which I will call the problem of the reflexive structure of reasons, and which I will describe in the next section. I will then show how Aristotle and Kant’s view solves that problem, by the way that it answers the second question, about whether the value of actions rests in their consequences or elsewhere. Finally in the last section I will say a little about the question how reasons and actions are related, the question of motivation.

III. Mental States and Good-making Properties

Bernard Williams once wrote: “Desiring to do something is of course a reason for doing it.”³ Joseph Raz disagrees. “Wants ... are not reasons for action,” he writes. “The fact that [actions] have a certain value – that performing them is a good thing to do because of the intrinsic merit of the action or of its consequences – is the paradigmatic reason for action.”⁴ The debate about whether reasons are provided by mental states or by facts about the value of the actions arises in part because our ordinary practice of offering reasons seems to go both ways. Suppose I ask: “Why did Jack go to Chicago?” Sometimes we offer as the answer some mental state of Jack’s. We might say “he wanted to visit his mother,” for instance. The mental state might be a desire, as in the example I have just quoted, or it might be a belief. “He believed his mother needed his help.” Many philosophers, of course, think that the reason is given by a belief/desire pair. For instance, he wanted to visit his mother, and believed that she was to be found in Chicago; or, he wanted to help his mother, and believed that he could help her by going to Chicago. On that showing, the answers I

³ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 19.

⁴ Joseph Raz, *Engaging Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 63. Raz actually says “options” not actions, but he means the actions among which we are choosing, so I’ve changed the quotation for clarity in this context.

gave earlier are partial, offered on the assumption that the questioner can easily work out the rest for herself. When I reply “he wanted to visit his mother,” for instance, I leave the questioner to conclude that he believed his mother was to be found in Chicago.

But philosophers like Raz insist that, despite the fact that we answer questions in this way, the reason is not given by Jack’s mental states, but rather by certain facts that those mental states are a response to: facts about what I will call the good-making properties of the actions. An important caveat here: I do not mean by using the phrase “good-making properties” to prejudge the question whether agents always act for the sake of what they regard as good in any moral or substantial sense.⁵ I am using the term ‘good’ here to refer to whatever it is about the action that makes it seem eligible to the agent. If St. Augustine is right, then the badness of an action may be one of its good-making properties in the formal sense in which I am using the term.⁶ We can still ask whether what gave the young Augustine a reason to steal those famous pears is the fact that the action is bad or his desire to do something bad. The defenders of the view that good-making properties are reasons will say that it is the *fact* that the action is bad, not his desire to do the bad. After all, these philosophers urge, reasons are things that agents act *on*. The agent is confronted by the reason, and the reason makes a kind of claim on him, it calls out to him that a certain action is to be done, or at least is eligible to be done. So we should identify as reasons the kinds of

⁵ In other words, I am looking for what it means to act for a reason in the descriptive sense of reason. An important feature of the terms “reason” “rational” and so forth is that they admit of either a descriptive or a normative use. In the descriptive sense, one can act “rationally” while acting for either a good reason or a bad one; rational action is opposed to non-rational action or perhaps mere movement or expression. In the normative sense, one counts as acting rationally only when the reason is good. Hence we can say either “that’s a terrible reason” (descriptive sense) or “that’s no reason at all” (normative sense) and mean the same thing. The point of focusing on the descriptive sense is that once we have identified which action or activity we have in mind when we talk about “acting for a reason,” we may then be able to locate the normative sense by asking what counts as being *good at* this activity. As I will observe below, I think that the account of acting for a reason that I give in this paper supports the claim that acting in accordance with the categorical imperative is a way of being good at acting for a reason. See note 29.

⁶ St. Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin. Penguin Books, 1961), Book II. Section 4, p 47.

items that first-person deliberators take to be reasons, the kind of items that play a role in deliberation. And – leaving Augustine and returning to the more benign Jack - unless Jack is really a very self-absorbed character, what he takes to make a claim on him are not his own mental states, but what's good about the action he proposes to do. After all, if you ask Jack why he is going to Chicago, it would a bit odd for him to say, "because I want to." He might of course say "Because I want to help my mother," but according to the defenders of good-making properties, we should not take this formulation to express the idea that his desire is his reason, for he could equally say, with exactly the same force, "Because my mother needs my help." Certainly it seems likely that when he talks to *himself* about the situation, and decides what to do, he talks to himself about his mother and her troubles, not about his own mental states. So if he does say "I am going because I want to help my mother," instead of taking that to mean that his desire is his reason, we should take it as a kind of announcement that he thinks he both has, *and is responding to*, a reason. Here he describes his response to the reason as a want, a desire. But he could equally well, or perhaps even better, say "I *need* to help my mother," or "I *have to* help my mother" where "need" or "have to" refers not merely to a psychological state (or not to a *merely psychological* state), but to a normative response – something along the lines of "I feel that I am under an obligation to help my mother."

But the view that the reasons are given by the good-making properties of the proposed actions also runs into certain objections. For there seem to be problems about saying that the (supposedly) good-making properties of action, all by themselves, can be normative or motivating. For one thing, there are the standard objections to normative realism. Objectors to realism insist that facts and natural properties by themselves (such as the fact that an action would help one's mother) are normatively inert. And for another, there are problems about explaining motivation and the sense of obligation by appeal to the

good-making properties of actions alone. After all, people who are aware of the good-making properties of action sometimes fail to be motivated by them or to acknowledge that they present any sort of normative claim. For the good-making properties of actions to have normative and motivational effects, to exert a claim on the agent in light of which he acts, there must be a certain uptake: the agent must *take* them to be good-making properties and be moved accordingly. And the defender of mental states will argue that when someone fails to respond to the good-making properties in question, we can identify what we would need to *add* in order to provoke the response. To the person who is not motivated by his mother's need for help we might add a desire to help her. To the person who finds no normative claim associated with helping his mother, we might add the belief that one ought to help one's family. And in this way we seem to come back around to the view that reason-giving force arises at least in part from the agent's mental states after all.

But the defender of good-making properties will deny this. The problem I just described, he will say, only arises from a shift in standpoint. When we talk third-personally about the fact that an agent did or did not respond to the reasons before him, we talk about his mental states, since those constitute the responses in question. But that doesn't mean that the mental states are part of the reason, or that they play any role in the agent's own deliberations. The good-making properties of the action provide the reason, and to say that the agent desires to help or feels himself obliged to help is only to say that he is responding appropriately to the good-making properties of helping. After all, if the good-making properties have no motivating or normative force on their own – if we have to *add* the mental states, in order to get the motivating or normative force – then someone who lacks the mental states in question will quite properly be unmoved by the supposedly good-making properties. But surely we *do* want to say that there is something amiss with someone who, say, finds no normatively motivating consideration in the fact that his mother needs help.

The mental states are not *added*, in order to *explain* or *provide* the normative and motivational force of the reason; rather, they are simply identified third-personally as the *appropriate response* to the normative and motivational force of the reason.

A minor problem with this argument is that there appear to be two kinds of cases, running roughly along the lines of the permissible and the obligatory. There are cases in which the reason does seem to depend for its existence on a mental state, in particular a desire, and cases in which it does not. Suppose Jack's mother is not in need of help, and his only possible reason for going to Chicago would be that he would enjoy a visit with her. In that case, whether the fact that a trip to Chicago would procure his mother's company is a good-making property of going on the trip *does* depend on whether Jack desires to see his mother. And this may seem to suggest that some reasons do after all depend on mental attitudes and states. But this little difficulty may be finessed. The defender of the view that reasons are good-making properties may agree that one of the possible good-making properties of an action is that it that it satisfies the agent's desire – or perhaps more simply that it satisfies someone's desire.

But there is a deeper problem with the view that the mental states we sometimes mention when we are asked for our reasons are really just the appropriate responses to reasons that exist independently of them. For what does it mean to say that motivation or a sense of obligation is the *appropriate* response? That claim itself appears to be normative – we are not saying merely that it is the usual or natural response. So the idea seems to be that the mental states in question – desire or a sense of obligation or a belief in obligation or whatever it might be – are responses that there is reason to have. So now we seem to have reasons to be motivated and obligated by our reasons. The first layer of reasons are certain facts about the good-making properties of actions, and the second layer of reasons are facts about how it is appropriate to respond to those good-making properties. Do we then need a

further layer of reasons about how it is appropriate to respond to the reasons in the second layer, and so on forever?

But the defender of good-making properties will again deny this. If someone fails to respond appropriately to the good-making properties of an action, one may argue, then he just is irrational, and that is all there is to it. That's what the normativity of the good-making properties of the action amounts to – that you are irrational if you don't respond to them in a certain way. In other words, rationality may simply be *defined* in terms of the appropriateness of certain responses. A practically rational being is *by definition* one who is motivated to perform actions by the perception or awareness of their good-making properties.⁷

But now we need to be more specific about what this means, for there are two possibilities here. One may perceive or be aware of X, but not under the description X. Does a rational agent find his reason in the good-making properties of the action themselves, or in the *fact* that those properties make the action good? Suppose it is good for a mother to protect her children from harm. Is a lioness who protects her cubs from a marauding male lion then acting for a reason, or rationally? Perhaps we do not know exactly how to think about the lioness's mental representations, but she is an agent, not a mechanism, and it seems clear that there is some sense in which she does what she does *in order to protect her cubs*.⁸ That aim guides her movements, and in that sense motivates them; and given the risks to herself that she is prepared to run for the sake of her cubs, one may even be tempted to say that she acts under the influence of a normative claim. If this is all

⁷ Elsewhere I have argued that this strategy cannot work, because it effectively blocks the attempt to give a descriptive account of what rationality is. See my "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason" in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, edited by Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997: pp. 213-254), p. 243. The argument of this paper is making good on that claim, even though in this paper I do not directly attack the idea of defining reason in terms of reasons.

⁸ For an argument that non-human animals count as agents see my *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

there is to rational agency, then of course it does not involve the exercise of any specifically human power which we might identify with the faculty of Reason: it is just a way we describe certain actions from outside, namely the ones that conform to rational principles or to the particular considerations we call “reasons.”

On the other hand, we may insist that there *is* something different in the human case, something that does involve the faculty of Reason. The human being is aware of the reason *as a* reason; she identifies the good-making properties of the action under the description “good” or “reason” or “right,” or some such normative description. She does not act merely in accordance with a normative consideration but *on* one. So rational action is not just a matter of being motivated by certain facts about the good-making properties of actions – say that the action will help one’s mother, or that it would satisfy one’s desire. Rather, it is a matter of being motivated by the awareness or belief that these facts *constitute* good-making properties of the action. To act rationally is to act from the belief that what you are doing is in some way good. But doesn’t that show that the normative force belongs to a mental state after all?

To understand the answer, we must first ask what it means to believe that the facts constitute good-making properties. Recall that we are using ‘good’ here in a minimal and formal sense. To say that the facts constitute good-making properties in this sense is just to say that they provide the agent with what the agent regards as appropriate grounds for motivation. That’s all goodness in this context is – appropriate grounds for motivation. So to say that you are motivated by the awareness that the good-making properties of the action make it good is just to say that you are motivated by the awareness that you have appropriate grounds for motivation. You are motivated by the idea that your motives are good. So rational motivation in a sense takes *itself* for its object. It has an essentially reflexive

structure.⁹ Kant at one point actually says something like this: he says we should act on maxims that can have as their objects *themselves* as universal laws of nature (G4:437; my emphasis).¹⁰ It sounds very mysterious, and as if we had run into a problem, but I don't think that we have. I think this is just a way of saying that rational action is action that is *self-consciously* motivated, action whose motivation is essentially dependent on consciousness of its own appropriateness. It is this property – *consciousness of its own appropriateness* – that the lioness's motivation lacks.¹¹

So to have a reason is to be motivated by the consciousness of the appropriateness of your own motivation. How is it possible to be in such a state? I will call this the problem

⁹ I can think of two other things that philosophers have claimed to have an essentially reflexive structure, or to take themselves for their objects. One is God, as conceived by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* XII.9, where God is identified with the divine activity of thinking on thinking – for Aristotle, the most perfect and purely active activity there can be. The other is personal identity. Some philosophers have claimed, rightly as I believe, that persons are not incidentally but essentially conscious of themselves. It's not as if you have a personal identity which you might or might not be conscious of; rather, if you are not conscious of your personal identity, then you don't have it. So the state of being a person takes itself for its object. [See for example Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1981), Chapter I, Part II, pp. 71-114.] I am claiming reasons are like that, and in my view this is no accident, since, as I argue in *Self-Constitution*, being a person is essentially an activity, and a person is in a sense constituted by her reasons.

¹⁰ References to Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* will be inserted into the text in the conventional fashion, using the volume and page numbers of *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (published by the Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin). Where I have quoted I have used the translation by Mary Gregor in the series *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Now at this point the defender of good-making properties may wish to argue as follows. The tangled formulation at which I have just arrived is result of the extremely broad definition of good-making property that I adopted at the outset. You will recall that I said that by good-making property I did not mean "good" in any substantial sense, but only whatever it is about the action that makes it seem eligible to the agent. If "eligible" means "appropriately motivating" then of course it follows that to be aware of the good-making properties is just to be aware of appropriate grounds for motivation. But the philosopher who proposes to define a rational agent as one who is moved by good-making properties does not mean good in this minimal or formal sense. Rather, the proposal here is that we define a rational agent as one moved by those properties that are genuinely good, in a substantial sense.

But this will not do. For we still have the problem of the lioness, and again she leaves us with two options. If protection of her cubs is genuinely good, in whatever substantial sense we have in mind, and to be rational is to be moved by the genuinely good, then on this showing she is a rational agent. Or if to avoid that, this philosopher accepts the claim that she must know her action is genuinely good, then all that this maneuver does is add an additional clause to my definition of rational agent. A rational agent is one who is motivated by the consciousness that her grounds for action are appropriate grounds for normative motivation *and gets it right*. This is not really a way of avoiding the issue.

What I have just said amounts to an argument to the effect that we must identify a descriptive sense of reason. See also notes 5 and 7.

of the reflexive structure of reasons. The problem is that you might think we have to choose between the two elements involved in the motivation. Either Jack is motivated by his mother's need for help, in which case one may complain that he is no more exercising reason than the lioness is; or Jack is motivated by the thought of his action's goodness, in which case one may complain that he is a self-absorbed jerk who really ought to be thinking about his mother instead of about how good his own actions are.

Aristotle and Kant, I am about to argue, show us the way around this: how the two elements of motivation, its content and the judgment of its goodness, may be combined. And this is no surprise, for to say that a rational agent is motivated by the appropriateness of being motivated in exactly that way is to articulate the deep root of Kant's dictum that a morally good agent acts not merely in accordance with duty but *from* it. In fact what I've just argued is that the problems usually associated with Kant's idea of acting from duty – the appearance that it somehow excludes acting from more attractive motives like a direct concern for others – is a problem that arises from the very nature of a reason for action. That is, once we understand that acting for a reason requires that one be conscious that one has a reason, we can also see that asking “Did he do it in order to help his friend, or because he thought it was his duty?” makes just as little sense as it would to ask, “Did he do it in order to help his mother, or because he thought he had a reason?” In order to explain how Aristotle and Kant solve the problem of the reflexive structure of reasons, I now turn to the second of the three questions I raised: whether the reason for an action always rests in the goal that is achieved by it, or in other facts about the action.

IV. The Goodness of Action

According to a number of familiar theories of goodness, the standards of goodness for a thing are given by the nature of the thing itself, especially by its functional nature. A

thing is good when it has the properties that make it good at being what it is, or doing what it does. If these theories are correct, then to determine what makes an action good, we ought first to ask what an action is – what its functional nature is – and then we will know what makes it good, to what standards it is subject.

Now John Stuart Mill thought he knew the answer to both of these questions. In the opening remarks of *Utilitarianism*, he says:

All action is for the sake of some end, and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and color from the end to which they are subservient.¹²

According to Mill, action is essentially production, and therefore its function is to bring something about, to achieve some end. Whether an action is good, Mill concludes, depends on whether *what* it brings about is good, or as good as it can be.¹³

But it has not always seemed obvious to philosophers that action is essentially production. In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says:

Among the things that can be otherwise are included both things made and things done; making and acting are different.... so that the reasoned state of capacity to act is different from the reasoned state of capacity to make. Nor are they included one in the other, for neither is acting making nor is making acting. (NE VI.4 1140a1-15)¹⁴

¹² John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1979), p. 2.

¹³ Actually, Mill is wrong about this. The theories of goodness I mention in the text seek to identify what are sometimes called “internal” or “constitutive” standards of goodness. These are standards that hold of an object in virtue of what it is. On Mill’s own theory of action, the only constitutive standard of actions is effectiveness. The achievement of a good end, as opposed to whatever end is aimed at, is only an external standard for actions. Technically speaking, aiming at the good is a side constraint on action. For more on internal or constitutive standards see “The Normativity of Instrumental Reason” (cited above), especially pp. 249-250 and “Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant” (*The Journal of Ethics*, 3: 1-29, 1999: pp. 1-29), especially pp. 14-15.

¹⁴ References to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* will be inserted into the text, using the abbreviation NE followed by the book and section numbers, and then line and column numbers which refer to Immanuel Bekker’s

According to Aristotle, action and production are two different things. And in the following section Aristotle remarks on one of the most important differences between them, namely that:

while making has an end other than itself, action cannot; for good action itself is its end. (NE VI. 5 1140b5-10)

Actions, or at least good actions, Aristotle says, are chosen for their own sakes, not for the sake of something they produce.

Actually, this is one of three different things Aristotle tells us about why good actions are done by virtuous agents. First of all, in at least some cases an act is done for some specific purpose or end. For instance, Aristotle tells us that the courageous person who dies in battle lays down his life for the sake of his country or his friends (NE IX.8 1169a17-30). In the same way, it seems natural to say that the liberal person who makes a donation wants to help somebody out; the magnificent person who puts on a play wants to give the city a treat, the ready-witted man wants to amuse his audience, and so on. At the same time, as I've just mentioned, Aristotle says that virtuous actions are done for their own sakes. And finally, Aristotle also tells us that virtuous actions are done for the sake of the noble – *to kalon* (e.g. NE III.7 1115b12; III.8 1116b3; III.9 1117b9, 1117b17; III.11 1119b15; IV.1 1120a23; IV.2 1122b6).

If we suppose that the reason for an action rests in its purpose, as Mill does, these will look like three inconsistent or competing accounts of the purpose or aim of virtuous action. But when we consider Aristotle's own conception of an action we can see why there is no inconsistency here. What corresponds in Aristotle's theory to the description of an

edition of the Greek text and which are standardly used in Aristotle scholarship. These numbers are found in the margins of nearly all translations. I have used the translation by W. D. Ross, revised by J. O. Urmson, which is found in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1984.

action is what he calls a *logos* – as I will render it, a principle. A good action is one that embodies the *orthos logos* or right principle – it is done at the right time, in the right way, to the right object, and – importantly for my purposes – with the right aim. To cite one of many such passages, Aristotle says:

... anyone can get angry – that is easy --- or give or spend money; but to do this at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy; that is why goodness is both rare and laudable and noble. (NE II.9 1109a25-30)

The key to understanding Aristotle's view is that the *aim* is included in the description of the action, and that it is the action as a whole, *including the aim*, which the agent chooses. Let us say that our agent is a citizen-soldier, who chooses to sacrifice his life for the sake of a victory for his polis or city. The Greeks seem to think that that is usually a good *aim*. Let's assume that our soldier also sacrifices himself at the right time – not before it is necessary, perhaps, or when something especially good may be achieved by it - say cutting off the enemy's access to reinforcements. And he does it in the right way, efficiently and unflinchingly, perhaps even with style, and so on. Then he has done something courageous, a good action. Why has he done it? His *purpose* or *aim* is to secure a victory for his city. But the object of his choice is the whole action – sacrificing his life in a certain way at a certain time in order to secure a victory for the city. He chooses this whole package, that is, to-do-this-act-for-the-sake-of-this-end -- he chooses *that*, the whole package, as a thing worth doing for its own sake, and without any further end. “Noble” describes the kind of value that the whole package has, the value that he sees in it when he chooses it.

Now this means that Aristotle's view of the nature of action is the same as Kant's. Kant thinks that an action is described by a maxim, and the maxim of an action is also of the “to-do-this-act-for-the-sake-of-this-end” structure. Kant is not always careful in the way he

himself formulates maxims, and that fact can obscure the present point, but on the best reading of the categorical imperative test, the maxim which it tests includes both the act done and the end for the sake of which that act is done. It *has* to include both, because the question raised by the categorical imperative test is whether there could be a universal policy of pursuing *this sort of* end by *these sorts of* means. For instance in Kant's own *Groundwork* examples the maxims tested are something like "I will commit suicide in order to avoid the personal troubles that I see ahead" and "I will make a false promise in order to get some ready cash." What the rejection of these maxims identifies as wrong is the whole package – committing suicide in order to avoid the personal troubles that you see ahead, and making a false promise in order to get some ready cash. The question of the rightness or wrongness of, say, committing suicide in order to save someone else's life, is left open, as a separate case to be tested separately. Indeed, Kant makes this clear himself, for in the *Metaphysics of Morals* he raises the question whether a man who has been bitten by a rabid dog and commits suicide in order to avoid harming others when he goes mad from the rabies has done something wrong or not.¹⁵ Committing suicide in order to avoid seriously harming others is a different action from committing suicide in order to avoid the personal troubles that you see ahead, and requires a separate test.

And "moral worth" or being done "from duty" functions in Kant's theory in the same way that nobility does in Aristotle's. It is not an alternative purpose we have in our actions, but a characterization of a specific kind of value that a certain act performed for the sake of a certain end may have. When an agent finds that she *must* will a certain maxim as a universal law, she supposes that the action it describes has this kind of value. Many of the standard criticisms of the Kantian idea of acting from duty are based on confusion about

¹⁵ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6:423-424.

this point. The idea that acting from duty is something cold, impersonal, or even egoistic is based on the thought that the agent's *purpose* or *aim* is "in order to do my duty" *rather than* "in order to help my friend" or "in order to save my country" or whatever it might be. But that is just wrong. Sacrificing your life in order to save your country might be your duty in a certain case, but the duty will be to do that *act for that purpose*, and the whole action, both act and purpose, will be chosen as one's duty.

Let me introduce some terminology in order to express these ideas more clearly. Let's say that the basic form of a Kantian maxim is "I will do act-A in order to promote end-E." Call that entire formulation the description of an action. An action, then, involves both an act and an end, an act done for the sake of an end. In the examples we've been looking at, making a false promise and committing suicide are what I am calling "acts," or as I will sometimes say "act-types." Making a false promise in order to get some ready cash, committing suicide in order to avoid the personal troubles that you see ahead, and committing suicide in order to avoid harming others are what I am calling "actions."

Now a slight complication arises from the fact that *acts* in my sense are also sometimes done for their own sakes, for no *further* end, from some non-instrumental motive like anger or sympathy or the sheer pleasure of the thing.¹⁶ In this case, doing the *act* is itself the end. To describe the whole *action*, in this kind of case, we have to put that fact into the

¹⁶ Kant's notorious example, from *Groundwork* I, of the sympathetic person who lacks moral worth, is like this: Kant specifies that he "has no further motive of vanity or self-interest" (G 4:398) and does the action for its own sake. The agent who acts from duty also does the action for its own sake. Discussions of the argument of *Groundwork* I frequently overlook this, and suppose instead that Kant is contrasting two different purposes one may have in one's actions, one's own pleasure and duty. For further discussion see my "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. 205-213. Kant does describe another of his *Groundwork* I exemplars, the prudent merchant, as performing an action for an instrumental reason (G 4:397). If the argument of this paper is correct, Kant should not have done that: the prudent merchant in fact chooses something like "to charge my customers a fair price in order to profit from the good reputation of my business" as an action worth doing for its own sake.

maxim, and say that we are doing it for its own sake, for its inherent desirability, or however it might be. So for instance, if you choose to dance for the sheer joy of dancing, then *dancing* is the *act*, and *dancing for the sheer joy of dancing* is the *action*. We might contrast it to the different action of someone who dances in order to make money, or to dodge the bullets being shot at his feet. As I said before, it is the action that is strictly speaking the object of choice. And according to both Aristotle and Kant, it is the *action* that strictly speaking is, as Kant would have it, morally good, permissible, or bad; or as Aristotle would have it, noble, or at least not ignoble, or base.

The view that actions, acts-for-the-sake-of-ends, are both the objects of choice and the bearers of moral value sets Aristotle and Kant apart from many contemporary moral philosophers, less because of overt disagreement than because of unclarity about the issue. Here again, our ordinary practices of offering reasons give us unclear guidance. Earlier I noticed that when we ask for the reason for an action, we sometimes cite a fact, and sometimes a mental state. But another way we often answer such questions, cutting across that debate, is to announce the agent's purpose. "Why did Jack go to Chicago?" "In order to visit his mother" is the reply. Jack's purpose is offered in answer to the question about his reason. This makes it appear as if his purpose is the reason for his choice, and as if what he chooses, in response to having that purpose, is only the act. But this appearance, I believe, is misleading.

To explicate this point I will first take a detour. One way to accommodate talk of reasons to the distinction I've just made between acts and actions would be to distinguish the reasons for acts from the reasons for actions. We could say that the act is performed for the sake of the purpose it serves, while the whole action is performed for its own sake – say because of its nobility or lawfulness or rightness. Then we might think that confusion arises from thinking there is always "a reason" for what someone does, when in fact the phrase

“the reason for what he does” is ambiguous between the reason for the act and the reason for the action.

This proposal, although tempting, is not satisfactory. One problem with it springs from the fact that reasons are supposed to be normative. If a reason for an act is its purpose, and reasons are supposed to be normative, then it follows that the purpose itself is normative for the agent. This is certainly not what either Aristotle or Kant thinks. Kant does think that there are some purposes we ought to have – our own perfection and the happiness of others, which are identified as obligatory by his contradiction in the will test. These we must stand ready to promote if an opportunity comes in our way. But he does not think that our purposes are *in general* normative for us in this way. In Kant’s theory, normativity arises from autonomy – we give laws to ourselves. But we do not first choose a purpose, enact it into law, and then scramble around for some way to fulfill it, now being under a requirement to do so.¹⁷ If it worked that way, we *would* be in violation of a self-legislated requirement every time we gave up a purpose because we were unable to find a decent and reasonable way to achieve it. But this isn’t what happens. If you can’t get to Paris without stealing the ticket money, stowing away on a boat, or risking your life trying to cross the Atlantic in a canoe, then you may drop the project, and you have not thereby violated any norm.¹⁸ What we will as laws are maxims, which describe actions, and we normally adopt a purpose as a *part* of an action.

¹⁷ In the past I have sometimes suggested that Kant could be interpreted as allowing for maxims of having purposes – for instance in “Morality as Freedom” I imagine a maxim like this: “I will make it my end to have the things that I desire.” [in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 164] I now think that is wrong, and that purposes are adopted only as parts of whole actions, for reasons given in the text. The maxims associated with the contradiction in the will test should be understood as schematic maxims of action: roughly “I will do whatever I (decently and reasonably) can to promote the happiness of others and my own perfection.”

¹⁸ I now think that what I say about this in “The Normativity of Instrumental Reason” (cited above) on pp. 245 ff., where I portray an agent as enacting ends into law prior to enacting means into law, is misleading. At the time I wrote that paper, I believed that its argument showed that hypothetical imperatives depended on

Another problem with the proposal is that it suggests that in asking for “the reason” for what someone does, ordinary language is misleading, because there are always, so to speak, two reasons, one for the act and one for the action. But that in turn suggests a different way of looking at the situation, which does not require us to say that the idea of a reason is ambiguous, but only that we tend to misinterpret what we are doing when we offer a reason. If Aristotle and Kant are right about actions being done for their own sakes, then it seems as if every action is done for the same reason, namely because the agent thinks it worth doing for its own sake. This obviously isn’t what we are asking for when we ask for the reason why someone did something, because the answer is always the same: he thought it was worth doing. What may be worth asking for is an *explication* of the action, a complete description of it, which will show us *why* he thought it was worth doing. Now normally we already know what the act was, so the missing piece of the description of the action is the purpose or end. “Going to Chicago in order to visit one’s mother” is intelligible as a worthwhile thing to do, so once we have that missing piece in place, we understand what Jack did. That the purpose by itself couldn’t really be the source of the reason shows up clearly in this fact: if the purpose supplied is one that fails to make the whole action seem worthwhile, even though the purpose is indeed successfully served by the act, we will not accept the answer. Suppose Jack lives in Indianapolis. Then if I tell you that Jack went to Chicago to buy a box of paperclips, you will not accept the answer, even though one can certainly buy a box of paperclips in Chicago. You will say “that can’t be the reason,” not because the purpose isn’t served by the action, but because going from Indianapolis to Chicago just to buy a box of paperclips is so obviously not worthwhile. Thus when we ask for the reason we are not just asking what purpose was served by the act – we are asking for

categorical ones; I now believe it shows that, strictly speaking, there are no separate hypothetical imperatives. See note 20.

a purpose that makes sense of the whole action. And as Aristotle saw, there will be cases where supplying the purpose will not be sufficient to make the action intelligible even where it is, so to speak, weighty enough to support the act. “Why did Jack go to Paris?” we ask. “He has always wanted to see the Eiffel Tower” is the reply. “No, but why just now?” urges the questioner, for Jack has taken off quite suddenly in the middle of the semester. And as Aristotle says, in order to be worthwhile the action must also be done at the right time and in the right way. So the practice of answering the motivational question “why” by citing the agent’s purpose does not really suggest that what we choose are acts, and our reasons are provided by our purposes. It is just that the purpose is often, though not always, the missing piece of the agent’s maxim, the piece we need to have in place before we can see why the agent thought that this action as a whole was a thing worth doing.¹⁹

The way Kant presents the hypothetical and categorical imperatives in the *Groundwork* suggests that he himself may have fallen into the kind of confusion that I’ve been describing, at least about bad actions. He presents them as two different kinds of imperatives, on a footing with each other, and occasionally makes remarks suggesting that we are acting on either one *or* the other.²⁰ For instance at one point, after distinguishing the two imperatives, Kant contrasts someone who avoids making a false promise because it is

¹⁹ Gisela Striker reminds me that a word often translated from Greek as “reason” in the sense of “a reason” is *aition*, the why or the cause. The purpose of an action is its final cause, which appears as a part of the *logos*. Translations of this kind thus pick up the tendency to identify the reason with the purpose.

²⁰ I have in mind remarks that suggest that bad or heteronomous action is done on hypothetical imperatives while good or autonomous action involves categorical imperatives. See for instance G 4:441, where Kant associates heteronomous accounts of morality with hypothetical imperatives. In fact, if actions are chosen for their own sakes, then every action is chosen in accordance with a law that has elements of both imperatives. The action must be chosen as something good in itself, which means it is governed by the categorical imperative. And every action must involve an act that is a means to an end, in a very broad sense of ‘means’ – it may cause the end, constitute it, realize it or whatever it might be. The right way to think of the law governing action, I now believe, is as a practical categorical imperative, where the instrumental element enters with the thought that the law must be practical.

“in itself evil” (G 4:419) with someone who avoids making a false promise because it will damage his reputation if it comes to light.

As I have already said, what Kant’s view actually implies is “in itself evil” is making a false promise in order to get some money. But the slip is understandable, although this will take a moment to explain. As I mentioned before, on the best reading of the categorical imperative test, the question whether we can universalize the maxim is a question about whether we can will the universal practice of pursuing *that* end by *that* means. Or, to put the point more carefully, you ask whether you could will to be part of an order of things in which this was the universal practice, and at the same time rationally will the maxim in question yourself. For instance, you ask whether you could will to be part of an order of things in which everyone who needed money attempted to get it by means of a false promise, and at the same time will the maxim of getting money by means of a false promise yourself. According to Kant, in such an order of things people would just laugh at promises to repay money as vain pretences, rather than lending money on the strength of them (G 4:422). Since making a false promise would then not *be* a means of getting the money you need, you could not rationally will to get money by that means. And so the maxim fails the test.

This is not the place to discuss in detail how well this test works as a guide to moral judgment.²¹ What I want to point out now is that there is one sort of case in which it works almost too well. Some act-types are purely natural, in the sense that they depend only on the laws of nature for their possibility. Walking and running, slugging and stabbing, tying up and killing – these are acts-types that are made possible by the laws of nature, and accordingly, one can do them in any society. Elsewhere I have noticed the difficulty of using the

²¹ For more extensive discussion see my “Kant’s Formula of Universal Law” in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 77-105.

universal law test work to rule out maxims involving these kinds of acts.²² But other act-types depend for their possibility not just on natural laws, but also on the existence of certain social practices or conventions. Writing a check, taking a course, running for office are act-types of this kind: you can only do them in societies with the sorts of institutions and practices that make them possible. Now where an action involves an act-type that must be sustained by practices and conventions, and at the same time violates the rules of those very practices or conventions, it is relatively easy to find the kind of contradiction that Kant looks for in the universalization test. This is because practices and conventions are unlikely to survive their universal abuse. Thus it hardly seems to matter *what* the purpose is for which you perform such an act; nearly every action involving such an act will fail the categorical imperative test. Charitably interpreted, Kant is recording this fact when he says that false promising is “in itself evil.” Yet the remark is misleading at best. Even if Kant were right in thinking that any action involving the act-type “false promise” will fail the test, that wouldn’t show that the act-type is inherently evil. It would only show that members of the class of actions involving that act-type are inherently evil.

No doubt remarks like the one about false promising being “in itself evil” are part of what has led to the widespread misconception that Kant’s ethical system is supposed to generate rules against act-types. But this is not just a confusion about Kant’s theory. It is a familiar confusion about ethics itself. And another thing that supports this confusion is the existence of words in the language that seem to name wrong act-types, but actually name wrong actions, though somewhat schematically described. Aristotle himself trips over this one when he says:

But not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness... in the case of actions, adultery, theft,

²² “Kant’s Formula of Universal Law” (cited above), pp. 84-85 and 97-101.

murder... nor does goodness or badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong. (NE II.6 1107a 9-15)

In fact, Aristotle is running together slightly different kinds of cases, but none of them shows that there are act-types that are inherently wrong. The example that best fits the point I want to make is murder. To say that murder is wrong is not to say that there is an act-type, murder, that is wrong no matter what end you have in view when you do it. Rather, “murder” is the name of a class of *actions*. A murder is a homicide committed for *some end or other* that is inadequate to justify the homicide. We don’t call execution or killing in battle or killing in self-defense “murder” unless we believe that those actions are not justifiable, that punishment or war or self-defense are not ends that justify killing.

“Theft,” another of Aristotle’s examples, is not quite like that, or rather, it depends on how we are using the word. If by “theft” we mean “taking property that is not legally your own,” we do have an act-type, but one that doesn’t already imply wrongness, although it certainly gestures at a very likely reason for wrongness. It is like false promising – a violation of social practices that is *almost* sure to turn out wrong no matter what your end is. So here Aristotle may have been derailed by the same thing that derailed Kant. But of course there is a sort of colorful use of terms like ‘theft’ in which we do use them to indicate wrongness, precisely because the case *isn’t* legally one of theft. Thus if a shop charges too much for an article people desperately need, we say “that’s highway robbery!” to express our disapproval. In that usage, robbery or theft, like murder, already implies wrongness, but in that usage, theft is not an act-type. It is class of actions, roughly those that take people’s property away for ends that can’t justify doing that.

As for adultery, it also depends on the usage. If it means “having sexual relations with someone other than the person to whom you are married, or with a person who is

married to someone else” it is like theft. It is an act-type, but again Aristotle is wrong. It is intelligible to ask whether perhaps at this time and in this place and with this particular person it is all right to commit adultery, just as it’s intelligible to ask whether it is all right to violate society’s property arrangements for some extraordinary purpose. Perhaps if your love is true and mutual and faithful, your spouse has been in a coma for the last fifteen years, the doctors say he is brain-dead but the law forbids removing life support, and divorce in these circumstances isn’t legal, then adultery in this strictly legal sense isn’t wrong – at least it makes sense to ask. But the word “adultery” may be used, like the word “murder,” only to indicate *unjustifiable* violations of the marriage conventions. If one may say, without any misuse of language, “it isn’t really adultery, for my husband and I have a very special understanding...” then “adultery” is like “murder”, a term only used when we think the whole action is wrong.²³

V. Motivation: the Relation Between Reasons and Actions

According to Aristotle and Kant, then, the object of choice is an action, in the technical sense I have explained – an act for the sake of an end. The reason for the action is expressed in the agent’s *logos* or principle. Roughly speaking, what happens when an agent chooses an action is something like this: The agent is attracted on some occasion to promoting some end or other. The end may be suggested by the occasion, or it may be one

²³ It is a different question whether there are categories of actions that are always regrettable because they violate the (in this case, Kantian) ideal of human relationships – that there should be no coercion or deception. In “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil” (in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, cited above, pp. 133-158), I argue for a “double-level” interpretation of Kant’s theory, with the Formula of Universal Law representing an absolute but minimal standard of justification, and the Formula of Humanity representing an ideal of human relations. When dealing with evil agents or certain kinds of tragic circumstances, we may have to violate our ideal standards, but we are never justified in violating the Universal Law formula. The argument of this paper takes place in the terms of the Formula of Universal Law, and so is about what can be justified given the circumstances, not about the ideal. I thank Marian Brady for pressing this question, and Tamar Schapiro for discussion of the issue.

he standardly promotes when he can. He reasons about how he might achieve this end, or what he might do in its service, and he arrives at a possible maxim or *logos*. He considers promoting a certain end by means of a certain act done in a certain way at a certain time and place. That is to say, he considers an action, and he asks himself whether it is a thing worth doing. And he determines the action to be noble or at least not base, morally worthy or at least permissible. Kant thinks he makes this determination by subjecting the maxim to a test, the categorical imperative test, and Aristotle does not, but for present purposes that is not important. Determining the action to be good, a thing worth doing for its own sake, he does the action. He is therefore motivated by the goodness of being motivated in the way he is motivated: or, to put it more intelligibly, by he is motivated by his awareness that his end is one that justifies his act in his circumstances, that the parts of his maxim are related in the right way.²⁴ Aristotle and Kant's view, therefore correctly identifies the kind of item that can serve as a reason for action: the maxim or *logos* of an action, which expresses the agent's endorsement of the appropriateness of doing a certain act for the sake of a certain end.

At the same time, their view brings out one of the ways in which having a reason is an exercise of an agent's activity. On their view, the agent chooses not only the act, but the purpose or end – he chooses the act for the sake of the end, but in doing so he chooses to promote or realize the end. Although his attraction to the end may be thrust upon him by nature, the decision to pursue the end is not. So choice on this view is a more fully active state than on the view that what we choose are mere acts, motivated by ends that are given to us. The agent does not just choose an act as a reaction to an end that is given him by his

²⁴ Elsewhere I have argued that Kant's notion of the form of a maxim can be understood in terms of Aristotle's sense of "form." A thing's form in Aristotle's sense is the arrangement of its parts that enables it to perform its function. In a good maxim, the act and the end are related to each other in such a way that it can serve as a universal law. [see Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), §3.3.5, pp. 107-108]. I have also suggested that we might understand Aristotle's notion of the *orthos logos* in the same way – the parts are all related in a way that gives the action its nobility. See "From Duty and for the Sake of the Noble: Kant and Aristotle on Morally Good Action" (cited above), p. 218.

desire or even by his recognition of some external value. Since both the end and the means are chosen, the choice of an action is an exercise of the agent's own free activity.

But there is one last problem. Suppose someone objects that Aristotle and Kant's view does not actually solve the problem posed by the reflective structure of reasons. The Aristotelian or Kantian agent, the objector will say, is motivated by the nobility or moral worth of the whole action *rather than* by its content, by the end that it serves. I have still not shown that you can be motivated, as it were, in both ways at once. Nor (therefore) have I successfully shown that the agent is active in the way I've just claimed. On my theory of motivation, the agent's choice of the action is just a reaction to the goodness of the whole action, in the same way that, on the alternative theory, the choice of an act is just a reaction to the goodness of the end. So goes the objection.^{25, 26}

This objection, I believe, is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to be motivated – a misunderstanding of the way in which reasons and actions are related. The objection assumes that a motivating reason is related to an action in the same way that a purpose is related to an act. The purpose is something separate from or outside of the act, for the sake of which one does the act. But the reason for an action is not related to an action in that way. So this brings us to the third question: how reasons and actions are related, or what it means to be motivated.

²⁵ Notice that if this objection were correct, merely permissible action would not be possible, or at least there would be a difficulty about it, since in that case the action is judged to be "not bad" or "not ignoble" and that hardly sounds like a reason for doing it. The content of the maxim must play a role in motivation if permissible action is possible. The account I am about to give shows how permissible action is compatible with autonomy.

²⁶ Another way to put the objection, or at least a similar objection, is to wonder why "doing my duty" should not be regarded as a further end, to which the action as a whole serves as a kind of means. In this case the answer is to start the argument over, and to ask whether it is the fact that the action is a means to doing one's duty, or the agent's belief that the action is a means to doing his duty, that serves as the reason for doing it. We can only solve the problem by supposing that reasons have a reflexive structure, and to explain how that is possible, we have to come around once more to a view like Aristotle and Kant's – understood as I have presented it in the text.

An essential feature of the view I have attributed to Aristotle and Kant is that the reason for an action is not something outside of or behind or separate from the action. Giving a description or explication of the action, and giving a description or explication of the reason, are the same thing. The *logos* or maxim which expresses the reason is a kind of description of the action, and could be cited in response to the question: *what is he doing?* just as easily as it can in response to the question *why is he doing that?* Indeed – to make one last appeal to our ordinary practices – their view explains why in ordinary language these questions are pretty much equivalent. For the demand for justification can as easily take the form: *what are you doing?* or more aggressively and skeptically *what do you think you are doing?* as it can *why are you doing that?*²⁷ The reason for an action is not something that stands behind it and makes you want to do it: it is the action itself, described in a way that makes it intelligible.

I can best convey what I have in mind here by drawing your attention briefly to the middle player in the trio of items that we associate with the idea of reason – principles. The agent's *logos* or maxim is, as Kant puts it, his subjective principle. What exactly is a principle, metaphysically speaking, and what does it mean to say that an agent has one or acts on one? Some recent moral philosophers have been critical of principles, thinking of them as something like rules that function as deliberative premises. "I believe in the principle of treating people equally, and therefore I will show these particular people no favoritism, though they happen to be my relatives." And then it may seem as if there is an option to acting on principle, such as being moved by love or compassion or loyalty instead.

²⁷ Despite the apparent complexity of their view, the idea behind Aristotle's and Kant's conception of what it means to have a reason is in one way simpler than that of their contemporary competitors. To have a reason is to be motivated by certain considerations, taking them to be appropriate grounds for motivation. To have a reason, in other words, is to *know what you are doing*.

But I don't believe that, at least for a rational agent, there is any option to acting on principle.²⁸ To believe in a principle is just to believe that it is appropriate or inappropriate to treat certain considerations as counting in favor of certain acts. Because that's what a principle is: a principle is a description of the mental act of *taking* certain considerations to count in favor of certain acts.²⁹ Suppose that Jack is tempted to take a trip to Chicago by the fact that it will help his mother, and he decides to act accordingly. The belief that the trip will help his mother does not cause him to act. Rather, he *takes* it to provide him with a reason for the action. We may represent this fact – his *taking* the fact that it would help his mother to count in favor of making the trip – by saying that it is his *principle*, his *logos* or *maxim*, to take a trip to Chicago in order to help his mother. So to say that he acts on principle is just to *record the fact* that he is active and not merely causally receptive with respect to his perception of the good-making properties of the action. Jack's actively, self-consciously, taking the fact that it will help his mother to count in favor of making the trip *amounts to* his judging that the whole action is good. And his taking the fact that it would help his mother as a reason for making the trip, and in so doing judging that the whole action is good, is coincident with his *doing it*.³⁰ I don't mean that he doesn't think, he just acts: as I said earlier, reasoned action is above all self-conscious. What I mean is that the judgment that the action is good is not a mental state that precedes the action and causes it.

²⁸ Actually, I believe that there is also a sense in which non-human animals act on principle: their instincts serve as their principles. See my "Motivation, Metaphysics, and the Value of the Self: A Reply to Ginsborg, Schneewind, and Guyer" [*Ethics* 109 (October 1998): pp. 49-66], especially pp. 49-51, and my forthcoming book *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (cited above, note 8).

²⁹ The categorical imperative, in its universal law formulation, is in a way both descriptive of and normative for this act. It is descriptive insofar as the agent who takes end-E to count in favor of doing Act-A in effect makes "doing Act-A for the sake of End-E" her law, the law that governs her own action. It is normative insofar as it indicates what counts as performing this act well – namely, reflecting on whether that maxim is really fit to serve as a law. See note 5.

³⁰ It is frequently argued that intentions must exist separately from actions because we often decide what we will do (and why) in advance of the time of action. I believe, however, that we begin implementing or enacting our decisions immediately, for once a decision is made, our movements must be planned so that it is possible to enact it. I thank Luca Ferrero for illuminating discussions of this issue.

Rather, his judgment, his practical thinking, is embodied in the action itself. That's what it means to say that the action is motivated and not merely caused. For a motive is not merely a mental cause. And an action is not merely a set of physical movements that happens to have a mental cause, any more than an utterance is a set of noises that happen to have a mental cause. An action is an essentially intelligible object that *embodies* its reason, the way an utterance is an essentially intelligible object that embodies a thought. So being motivated by a reason is not a reaction to the judgment that a certain way of acting is good. It is more like an announcement that a certain way of acting is good. The person who acts for a reason, like God in the act of creation, *declares* that what he does is good.³¹

³¹ I would like to thank Charlotte Brown, Tamar Schapiro, Ana Marta González, for valuable comments on drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank audiences at the Catholic University of America, the University Carlos III in Madrid, the University of Navarra, the University of Virginia, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for helpful discussion. The arguments of section IV are drawn from my 2002 Locke Lectures (forthcoming as *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, cited above) and in that form were presented to an audience at Oxford, whom I also thank for discussion.