Rational and moral action: a critical survey of rational choice theory

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1. Introduction

In this chapter I raise the question: how we know whether the reasons for an action justify that action? Was there a good reason to act in that way? Was it rational for the agent to do it and was it good that he did it? How can we decide on the goodness of actions? And how can we take account of it. I take the last two questions to be central to the problem of valuation.

A valuation is meant to establish the (natural) properties of the object or the state of affairs under consideration, to assess their (intrinsic) value and to qualify the object/ event or state of affairs (‘X is good/bad’).

By way of introduction, I will first discuss the question how agents come to formulate their preferences. This concerns the question: ‘what is it that makes an action desirable’. I will formulate this as the question: ‘what attracts an agent, or why
does he prefer this object or this action above an alternative’. The formulation of preferences is from this point of view not different from the task of valuing objects, actions or the state of affairs resulting from actions.

Valuations touch the frequent debated distinction between facts and values. The question is how evaluative conclusions can be drawn or be separated from descriptions of objects and/or states of affairs. In the positivistic tradition the tendency of science, has been to purge the world of meaning. As a consequence, any candidate feature of reality that science cannot capture in this tradition is downgraded as a (mental) projection. All meaning or value beyond what is required for natural facts to be articulated is conceived of as a reflection of our subjectivity. 254 Meaning is not to be found in nature, but rather projected unto objective reality. Value is a subjective variable that cannot be subjected to rational discourse. The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that valuations are merely subjective findings, lacking authority. ‘Cognitivists’ (like ‘objectivists’) think that because valuations supervene on descriptions of natural properties they can, to a certain extent, be discussed rationally. For all values are related to objective facts about states of affairs, practices or objects.

The main part of this chapter is devoted to explaining the nature of valuation. Special attention will be given to Moore’s criticism of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’. I shall consider the relation between values and natural properties as a relation between secondary and primary qualities: the supervenience relation. This culminates in the proposal, with regard to the valuation of actions, to distinguish symbolic utility from substantive utility. Choices that aim at the realization of symbolic utility are intended to be proper and therefore to be

254 When I refer to natural facts I refer to facts about the world that the sciences study. This includes the human world as well as the natural world. The subjectivist view that is articulated here is partly the legacy of Hume who defended the view that all knowledge is derived from sensory perceptions (empirical facts) against the rationalism of Descartes.
justified in retrospect. But we may not deduce from this that preferences for alternatives that do not articulate symbolic meaning are therefore unjustified. Whether decisions can be justified also depends on the alternatives that are available.

2. The value of preferences

Let us take as point of departure the way preferences are defined. Preferences can be seen as a relation between objects or commodities (a preference for apples above oranges); or as a relation between actions (a preference for eating an apple above eating an orange); or a relation between states of affairs (a preference for the state of affairs in which one eats an apple above the state of affairs in which one eats an orange). Although these different ways of picturing preferences result in the same choice, the different formulations are not irrelevant. The most important difference is that we can conceive of actions or states of affairs in a way that is not conceivable in connection with objects, namely as the making of meaning and/or fitting the world to make it concur with our preferences, which is realized in the action itself. Another difference is that in case of a ranking between states of affairs we can also take the process leading to the state of affairs into consideration.

I shall discuss the following question: are objects/ states of affairs desired because they are valuable in one way or another, or is an object/state of affairs valuable just because it is desired? Do preferential attitudes bestow value on the objects/states of affairs to which they are directed, or are these objects/states of affairs valuable for what they intrinsically are? Intuitively, it seems that the order of explanation must run from value to desire. But theoretically we can distinguish two answers to the question regarding what is valuable to an agent. Is it a) that our intrinsic desires and preferences are satisfied, or is it rather b) that the states that are the objects of our desires/ preferences are realized. (Rabinowicz and Österberg, 1996, 2)
We have to consider two possibilities: is it the experienced enjoyment that follows from the fulfillment of an agent’s rational and fully informed desires or is it the state of the world that is realized that is valuable for the agent. Rabinowicz and Österberg give the following example: ‘when we wish that rainforests survive, is it then intrinsically valuable that we get what we wish or is it rather the survival of the rainforest.’ (Ib., 2) Rabinowicz and Österberg could not solve this question. The implication of the first interpretation is that what has value is anything that contributes to the satisfaction of an agent’s desires, whatever its content. It is good that people get what they want, because freedom of choice would be meaningless unless an individual gets what he or she wants. According to the second interpretation the value of a preference satisfied is determined by the intrinsic value of the preferred state of affairs itself, e.g., by the survival of the rainforest. The intrinsic value of the state in which the rainforest survives supervenes on those internal features of the rainforest for which agents intrinsically value it. 255

Quinn defends the second interpretation while formulating a similar problem as the one Rabinowicz and Österberg presented. His example is that someone wants to see famine ended in Africa. If she "attaches basic value to the end of famine, then it is the thought that doing such and such will help feed people that gives her the basic reason to do it -not the thought that it will bring her pleasure or save her pain". (Quinn, 1993a, 243) The pursuit is rationalized by the value of the object of the action.

The distinction between both interpretations does not really make a difference in practice. Given that a particular state of affairs is intrinsically preferred, the satisfaction of this preference takes place if, and only if, its objective is realized.256

255 If x is a state of affairs, situation or fact, what is intrinsic to x is whatever is entailed or necessitated by x. (Harman, 2000, 141) This definition does not fit the satisfaction interpretation.

256 This suggests that defining desires as a dispositions to realize itself could provide the solution to the theoretical impasse. A desire is a kind of proposition, a proposition to change the world in order to fit the desire.
However, value is defined very differently in the two approaches. We may, therefore, distinguish two theoretical grounds for attributing value: the constitutive argument and the supervenience argument. Either the fact that an object is desired or a state of affairs is preferred over alternatives determine its value (value is constituted by the desire) or, alternatively, the properties of the object or of the state of affairs determine its value. 257 This is the supervenience argument that grounds value in the natural properties of the preferred object/state of affairs.

Both the constitutive and the supervenience approach can be used to argue for the interdependency between an agent's desires and the characteristics of the state of affairs that results from an action, or of the object that is desired. This is aided by the fact that the desired thing will indeed have features or properties that make it desired, that enables it to arouse a desire etc. Mackie seems to have anticipated this, for he warned: “It is fairly easy to confuse the way in which a thing’s desirability is indeed objective with its having in our sense objective value.” (Mackie, 1998, 98)

Cognitivists find it, on the contrary, plausible to claim that, first, the features of the object exist independent of the provoked response, and second, that the response itself is a genuinely cognitive state of mind in some way directed to these features. They support the supervenience approach.

Quinn (1993b, 11ff) has tried to fashion a firm argument against the objectivist’s claim. To begin, he proposes that we grant the objectivist’s assumption that a U(tility)-response is cognitive in the sense that it essentially contains some genuine thought of its object as having the U-feature. Now, a

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(1) Smith, 1987). This would make that the two interpretations coincide. (see also the next chapter)

257 The object interpretation allows that something may be intrinsically valuable, even though nobody wants it (e.g., because it is hidden somewhere and nobody knows about its existence). Since the intrinsic nature of any object or state of the world is a non-relational property, it is not dependent on a state of mind such as interests or desires.
U-feature is never an identifying feature of an object. Size, shape and location serve to identify material bodies. Thus, we may suppose that the U-response contains the thought of the object having the U-feature, but we cannot exclude the possibility of illusion. Let us therefore, Quinn suggests, secondly, grant provisionally that the U-response is non-cognitive - some species of mere feeling, sensation, etc. But, which species? Approval, fear, delight? The subjectivist will find that he cannot differentiate the U-state except by referring in one way or another to the U-feature. This difficulty is most familiar in the case of colors. What makes the sensation of red different from the sensation of blue? And how can moral approval be distinguished from other types of approval? The key premise in the objectivist’s argument is that in order to differentiate the U-response, reference must be made, directly or indirectly, to the U-feature. But this argument will also lead to some form of circularity from the point of view of the subjectivists. That circularity occurs, the subjectivist will conclude, just at the point when we are forced to refer to the U-feature in order to explicate the U-response. For the U-feature itself should be analyzed into the U-response and not vice versa.

The problem is whether the intrinsic value of a state of affairs really is a non-relational property, or that there exist interdependencies between the object’s properties and the subject’s psychological state towards the object. Putnam opts for this possibility. “Nothing at all we say about any object describes the object as it is ‘in itself’ independently of its effect on us (..)” (Putnam, 1981, 61) The idea that value can simply be deduced from properties has to be rejected. 258 This

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258 From Descartes we inherit the view of a strict dualism between an outer world that we experience with our senses and an inner world, the world of our thoughts. What we find in this inner world can be described in isolation from the outer world. In fact a thought is a representation of our concepts that are depicted on the world outside. The opposing view reverses the sequence: a thought is a reflection of the state of affairs in the real world. Putnam opposes both views. There is, in his opinion, no gap between mind and world that must be bridged by representations. Our
statement does not deny that values or qualities can be objectively discussed; but it denies that it is possible to claim that there is one true result of a valuation process. Wiggins even claims that we have to treat psychological states and their objects as equal and reciprocal partners. Consequently, it can be true both that we desire X because we think X is good, and that X is good because we desire it. (Wiggins, 1998, 158/9) This claim goes much further then the thought that there are interdependencies. It undermines the idea of an interchange between properties of states of affairs and the perception of the agent. Therefore, I think we should reject it.

In many cases the question whether some actions are worth pursuing can only be answered by comparing the properties of the resulting states of affairs with some standard of excellence that has emerged in social practices. Raz (2003) has developed the ‘social dependence thesis’ that says that some values exist only if there are (or were) social practices sustaining them. This applies only to ‘intrinsic’ or ‘cultural’ values.260

view of the world is the concerted action of our concepts and the real objects in the world. Perceptions are not passive acts, but active interferences of our thoughts to open up reality. (Putnam, 1981)

259 A specific person may think that she desires X because X is good. But from this we cannot conclude that it is good in general unless we know that the qualities of X can be objectively discussed, allowing for the possibility that the precise nature of that quality is under discussion. We have to stick to the distinction between objective properties and the awareness (and possibly distortion) of those properties. Wiggins thinks that anything that matters in life is arbitrary, contingent and unreasoned. It is something that cannot be criticized or adjusted with an eye to what is true or reasonable. Wiggins emphasizes that his position does not deny all objectivity to practical judgments. He only stipulates that practical questions often have more than one answer. This, of course, is true, but it does not require the belief that what is desired is therefore good.

260 Raz does not claim that all values are socially dependent. He allows for a distinction between (a) values that depend on social practices, such as those of the opera; (b) values that do not depend on social practices but to which we have access only through social practices, such as beauty or sunsets; (c) values that are not socially dependent at all, such as
The existence of a sustaining practice is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the existence of some kind of value. How does value depend on social practices? Raz claims that what counts as ‘excellence’ or best realization of a value depends on the standards of some social practices. The fact that a value depends for its existence on a sustaining practice does not of itself show that this value engages people. When we judge anything as good owing to a value, we do so in stages. "First, we identify a kind to which it belongs, a kind that by its nature or constitution is governed by a particular value (that is, by the standard of excellence for being good for that kind), and second we judge the item under consideration good (or bad) to the extent that it is a good (or bad) of its kind". (Raz, 2003, 138) That something is good or of value entails that there is reason to respect it, as well as reason to engage with it in a way appropriate to its value.

Many values are mixed values: the value of being a good opera consists in the way music, visuals, lyrics and action combine. Their required combination makes the values they define distinct. But not every combination constitutes a distinct value. A musical can have all the necessary elements, but when it fails to integrate them it lacks a distinct value. The combination of properties allows us to recognize the existence of values with apparently contradictory criteria. 261

3. Valuation and the naturalistic fallacy

The seminal statement with regard to the question how can we decide on the goodness of actions is Moore’s assertion that many theorists have been victims of the naturalistic fallacy. In the course of time there have been different readings of the content of this fallacy. Originally it was meant as a critique of Mill’s argument that just as the only proof that an object is visible is that people see it, so the only instrumental values and some moral values. (see Raz, 2003, 33ff)

261 A novel, for instance, can be praised for its style, but be criticized for its lack of a plot.
evidence that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it. Moore’s objection to Mill was that he defines the word ‘good’ as ‘desired’, while it is clearly an open question whether what is desired is good. Desirable does not mean ‘able to be desired’, as visible means ‘able to be seen’. There may be desirable objects that are not desired. And since desirable includes the moral predicate ‘good’ in it’s meaning, it is fallacious to define desirable by means of the empirical predicate “what people do actually desire.” (cited in Crisp, 1997, 73)

Moore was concerned with the equation of goodness, which he saw as a non-natural property, with a natural property. 262 He argued that being good cannot be identified with (or reduced to) any natural property, for ‘good’ is a non-natural property, i.e. totally outside the physicalist ontology of the natural sciences. ‘Good’ refers to a simple, indefinable, non-natural property. Everything that is good has this property. The apparent diversity of intrinsic values -such as, beauty, friendship or knowledge- is unified by the fact that they all share this common good-constituting property. Therefore, the first definition of the naturalistic fallacy is that goodness is a non-natural property that cannot be equated with natural properties. Moore has been attacked for relying on a mysterious and extravagant metaphysics. What could a non-natural property be, and how can one detect it? Since goodness is a non-natural property, it cannot be known by any of the senses. So it must be a matter of intuition. (Mackie, 1998, 94)263 Frankena was convinced that Moore’s arguments against naturalism are inconclusive. He considered three interpretations of the

262 But Mill did not claim that goodness is the same as what is desired he only claimed that desire offers the only evidence for something’s being good. Most of the objects of our desires we desire because we believe them to be valuable or desirable in some respect. (Crisp, 1997)

263 Out of this criticism came theories such as emotivism and expressivism. Since goodness is not a natural property but only refers to it, it must be the expression of a pro-attitude or the recommending of something.
‘fallacy’: (Frankena, 1967, 51ff)
1. it is the mistake of defining a non-natural property like goodness in terms of a natural one,
2. it is the mistake of defining a property in terms of another,
3. it is an attempt to define the indefinable.
Frankena argued that whichever version we take, Moore has failed to show that any mistake is involved. He has merely asserted things without proof. The naturalist fallacy is only a fallacy because it involves a definitional fallacy. And a definitional fallacy is the process of confusing or identifying two properties. The fallacy is simple that two properties are treated as one and it is irrelevant that one of them is natural and the other non-natural. (Frankena, ib., 57) The objections of both Gauthier and Putnam are similar to the criticism as expressed by Frankena. Gauthier agrees that a non-natural property such as good cannot be identified with some natural property. But a case of improper identification is not a case of unjustified correlation. (Gauthier, 1967, 315) Putnam blamed Moore for conflating properties and concepts. From the non-synonymy of words nothing follows about the non-identity of properties. Temperature and mean molecular kinetic energy are two concepts that are not identical, but they correlate. The first is a practical concept, the second a theoretical. (Putnam, 1981, 207ff) Gibbard formulated a similar objection. (Gibbard, 2002, 272/3)

The conclusion to be reached from all this is that value corresponds to natural properties, and goodness is the articulation of value and, therefore, goodness depends indirectly on these natural properties. (Anderson, 1993, 22/3) 264 This is a conclusion that we encountered before in connection with the supervenience approach. If objects are equivalent in natural properties they must be equivalent in value. And if objects are equivalent in value, they must be equivalent in goodness. The supervenience approach is not the same as

264 Thomson’s distinction between first-order and second-order ways of being good, whereby the second-order rests on the first-order can also be understood in this way. (Thomson, 1997, 281)
reductionism, but there is some similarity. If values are not reducible to facts, then at least they are dependent upon them.

Before introducing the second definition of the naturalistic fallacy, I want to recall the subjectivist’s or non-cognitivist’s argument that meaning is not to be found in nature, but rather is projected onto reality. The language of evaluation is ‘emotive’. It expresses a speaker’s feelings and attitudes, as well as inducing similar feelings and attitudes in others. The making of any sincere evaluative judgment goes beyond description or assertion of fact. Hence, the apparently unquestionable distinction between ‘descriptive’ and ‘evaluative’ language. The second definition of the naturalistic fallacy, therefore, says that it is not possible to derive an evaluative conclusion from entirely non-evaluative premises. This definition is closely connected with the one that says that the naturalistic fallacy is to derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’. Both arguments are based on the strict distinction between values and facts, with the implication that values betray emotions that are not amenable to rational discussion. ‘Objectivists” challenge both arguments. They argue that many ‘virtue terms’, terms that describe how human beings can excel or fail are concepts, which simultaneously describe and evaluate. Putnam, for instance, denies the possibility of dividing up a term like cruelty or bravery into a ‘purely descriptive part’ and a ‘purely evaluative part’. There are facts that only come into view through the lenses of an evaluative outlook. "If we define a ‘brave’ person merely as someone who knows no fear (or does not succumb to fear), then (..) we shall miss the crucial distinction between bravery and foolhardiness. Therefore, value judgments and factual judgments are entangled in many ways". (Putnam, 2003, 396)

What is meant by facts and values? In the traditional empiricist view a fact is something one can picture; facts corresponds to sense impressions. But this connection has lost meaning since science came to speak about unobservable atoms or ‘curved space time’. And what is a value judgment? From the point of view of logical positivism value judgments
are either expressions of feelings, or expressions to commend something. But Putnam emphasizes the diversity of value judgments. Not all value judgments are ethical judgments and not all ethical judgments involve praise or blame. The judgment that the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 was a bad thing is also a counterexample to the idea that all value judgments have the function of prescribing something. (Putnam, ib., 399)

Hare explains that words like ‘good’ and ‘should’ are used evaluative when they are used with commendatory force. He attacks ethical naturalism, defining a naturalist as someone who believes that he can deduce an ethical conclusion from descriptive premises. Geach agrees with Hare that ‘good’ is an action-guiding word, for people should choose things that they consider to be good. But this does not mean that the word ‘good’ must be used for commending, because it can have a straightforward descriptive sense. He distinguished two sorts of adjectives: attributive adjectives (a good book) and predicative adjectives (this book is red). ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ are always attributive, not predicative adjectives. (Geach, 1967, 64) Attributive adjectives must always be combined with a noun (as in 'a good book' or 'a good meal'). The meaning of predicative adjectives does not depend on any noun to which it is attached. (see Rind and Tillinghast, 2008)

The analytical philosophers traditionally held that terms like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are being used in a commendatory way. That saying “this is a good book” means some-thing like “I recommend that book”. Geach rejected this view which denies that there may be a context in which good is primarily a descriptive term. He also denied that good is a non-natural attribute, "for nobody has ever given a coherent and understandable account of what it is for an attribute to be non-natural". (Geach, ib., 66) Hare correctly responded that Geach’s approach is only justified in the case of functional objects. In this case the term ‘good’ is essentially an attributive adjective, which is applied in the form “X is a good A”, where A stands for a specific class of objects (for instance a knife) and ‘X is a good A’ means, this specific knife is a very good (sharp) knife. Thus we can use ‘good’ as a
descriptive term in the case that the term ‘good’ qualifies as a functional (or instrumental) term, and when understanding the meaning of it requires knowledge of the use to which the object it denotes is typically put, or the end which that object serves. (Hare, 1967, 79) This corresponds to Thomson’s use of first-order ways of being good, such as: good for use in, good at, good for, and so on. We can extend this, I suggest, to all cases in which we encounter instrumental values.

What Geach’s argument tells us is that goodness can be directly deduced from the natural properties of objects or states of affairs when we know the ends or goals for which they are used, respectively, the states of affairs aimed at. This contradicts the common view among subjectivists (as Mackie) that goodness can never be reduced to a natural property because it has emotive force. This argument is clearly wrong, as many descriptive predicates naturally acquire emotive force.

What, then, are the relations between the properties of objects to be acquired or of states of affairs to be realized, and the reasons that we have for behaving in a certain way. There seem to be two possibilities. The first is that when something has the right properties, it has the further property of being valuable, and that property gives us reason to behave in certain ways with regard to it. This is Moore’s position. It is compatible with the supervenience approach to treat those properties as secondary qualities or secondary properties. Secondary properties are powers that objects, states or actions have to produce effects in the consciousness of observers. "If an act is right (and if we ought to do it), then there is something about it that would evoke an attitude of approval in us, if only we could think clearly and objectively about it". (Rachels, 1998, 16) 265 This view is a compromise between objective and subjective views of ethics. "It is objective in the

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265 Rachels suggests furthermore that the nature of secondary qualities provides a connection between recognizing something as right and being motivated to act. I agree on the condition that this relation is seen as a contingent one.
sense that it identifies good and evil with something that is really there in the world outside us, but at the same time what is there has the power to produce feelings inside us. (..) This view seems promising because it requires only ordinary objects, events and the like, and human beings who interact with them". (Rachels, ib., 15)

The alternative, which Scanlon believes to be correct, is to hold that being good, or valuable, is not a property that itself provides a reason to respond to in certain ways. Rather, to be good or valuable is to have other properties that constitute such reasons. It differs from the first alternative simply in holding that it is not goodness or value itself that provides reasons, but rather the natural properties that evoke these qualifications. (Scanlon, 1998, 97)

The difference with the first interpretation seems superficial. What Scanlon’s view adds are two things: first, he thinks that a reference to the term good is redundant, and second he believes that in order to understand the value of something it is not enough to know how valuable it is, but it is rather a matter of knowing how to value it -knowing what kinds of actions and attitudes are called for. 266 This applies in particular to ‘moral’ actions. "Judgment rather than knowledge is what the practically wise person possesses". (Raz, 2003, 48)

4. Symbolic utility

The question I want to address now is how we should value the moral properties of actions. I shall first present an approach that is suggested by Khalil, amongst others. Khalil takes the view that is similar to the one we just have discussed, namely that moral properties supervene on the natural properties of actions. He describes moral considerations in fact as qualities that are embodied in the

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266 To be intelligible, values must have some link, even if indirect, with our beliefs. What demands respect, we must be able to see as respectable. What commands protection must be able to strike us as worth being protected.
characteristics of the states of affairs that result from the action, or from the process that leads to the result. Symbolic utility is the expression of ‘goodness’ that supervenes on the characteristics of an action, which underlie its substantive utility. Symbolic utility is a ‘by-product’ of substantive utility.

Important in this approach is that every choice involves the sacrifice of foregone opportunities. Therefore, every choice involves costs. By stipulating that each action should be submitted to a cost-benefit analysis, Khalil wants to prevent actions from being judged without information about their comparative opportunity costs. He also wants to exclude irrational conduct (e.g., actions in which potential costs far exceed the expected benefits) from the domain of actions where symbolic utility is pursued.

Khalil’s point of departure is that, theoretically, it is not fruitful to start with a moral/material dichotomy. As he puts it: "(..) there is no such thing as a moral action standing on its own, i.e., separate from the substantive input of interest (..)." (Khalil, 1997, 515) But neither is it fruitful to model the taste for, say, honesty as not different from other tastes. For this would entail that, as soon as the incentives for cheating would increase, agents would substitute at the margin between honest and dishonest behavior. Khalil suggests we should treat the taste for moral sentiments as a by-product effect of the pursuit of an interest deemed preferred.267

Why should an agent aspire to act properly? Because he cares to preserve his integrity. "The moral by-product arises from executing what is determined to be the preferred

267 The concept of a 'by-product effect' should not be confused with Elster’s (1983) description of by-products. Elster defines by-products as satisfactions that cannot be willed directly, such as enjoyment, sleep, good conversation, etc. To Elster, by-products emerge as the outcomes of situating oneself under proper conditions. The concept of a 'by-product effect' should also not be confused with the idea of unintended consequences of an action. The idea of a 'by-product effect' rather captures the shadow of an act that arises when such an act is meant to be a proper act. The way an action is conducted is relevant or, to put it differently, the process to achieve a result matters.
interest. The connection between commitment and preferred interest is integrity." (Khalil, 1997, 515) For an action to yield symbolic utility it is irrelevant who will be the recipient of the substantive utility. "It is granted that the agent can smoothly substitute between self-interest and other-interest." (Khalil, 1997, 497) This is surprising for 'moral choice' is habitually associated with other-regarding choice. But Khalil refuses to see a difference, in moral worth, between self-care and other-care (in this he joins Foot and Parfit). Building one's own house can be as worthwhile as volunteering one's labor to help the poor.

The next question that immediately announces itself is whether symbolic and substantive utility are interchangeable. Though Khalil denies that substantive and symbolic utility can be substituted along a smooth utility function, he does think they are comparable and, within certain limits, interchangeable. This allows for the possibility of a limited trade-off.

Summarizing: Khalil's approach to integrating moral sentiments and interests is characterized by three distinct features. His central idea is that, since there is no separate moral domain, moral qualities need a substantive stratum. The second feature is that symbolic utility is an intended by-product, and the agent wants to express commitment, appreciation and the like. In general, an act delivers symbolic utility when it is conducted properly. A third feature is that an agent does not want to act properly at every price. There is some (discontinuous) trade-off between symbolic and substantive utility. 268

Thomson agrees with Khalil that being generous, kind or just can be very costly, and that there are cases in which paying these costs would be supererogatory. Under normal

268 In my opinion this is the only justification for a reference to a cost-benefit analysis when one intends to act properly. Since moral sentiments, as secondary qualities, are not quantifiable, symbolic utility can be quantified only indirectly by measuring the amount of substantial utility in the next best option (the fore-gone opportunity). This equates the moral 'worth' of an action with its material 'sacrifice.
conditions, morality may require us to incur costs, she argues, but it does so only when refusing to pay would be mean, cruel or unjust. (Thomson, 1997, 287) Her criterion for acting morally requires us to do a thing if and only if not doing it would be unjust, mean or cruel. In other words, we must prevent other subjects from being treated in an unjust, mean, or cruel way, even when we have to pay a (high) price. In these circumstances it is improper to apply a cost-benefit method, for a moral imperative applies. \(^{269}\)

I will complicate matters further by introducing a distinction between prudent and moral action. This distinction is akin to Sen's well-known and useful distinction between actions driven by 'sympathy' and actions driven by 'commitment' (see the chapters I and XIX). My motive for this further distinction is that I want to retain the possibility of moral actions that are not instrumental to non-moral ends.

Sandbu also introduces symbolic utility in his analysis of actions. Following Sen who showed how processes might enter preferences, he emphasizes the process character of actions. Agents may care about the way an action is executed. In such cases the agent is not indifferent to how an outcome is produced. We can say that the outcome is process-dependent or that the preference is process-nonseparable. The process is part of the preferred outcome; e.g., it is itself a valued end. These processes are neither independently nor instrumentally valued. They depend for their value on the causal connection with the outcome they aim for. In such preferences, processes have dependent non-instrumental value. "It is this dependent non-instrumental mode of valuation we need in order to account for process-nonseparability". (Sanbu, 2007, 222) "By indicating or symbolizing something valuable - in other

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\(^{269}\) Thomson's definition of a proper act resembles Scanlon's notion that an act is wrong if it will affect someone in a way that cannot be justified. See the formulation in the previous chapter "the desire to be able to justify one's actions to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject." (Scanlon, 1982, 116; 1998)
words, by representing it- an action is endowed with symbolic value over and above its instrumental or independent value. (..) These kinds of value are dependent - since they depend on the representative relation- but not instrumental- since their value is derived through (..) symbolic relations, not a causal one". (Sandbu, ib., 225). 270 By indicating or symbolizing something valuable an action is endowed with symbolic value over and above the value of its consequences. Rules and principles are particularly well suited to create representative relations.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I discussed what it means to say that there was good reason to act in a certain way. Is this just another way of saying that something is rational to do or does it mean something more, or something else, for instance to say that it is the proper way to do something

How do we know whether an act is proper or good? The answer depends in the first place on the nature of our preferences for certain objects or states of affairs. Utilitarianism identifies the good with the object of a rational desire. What is good is what an agent would desire if she were fully rational. This was the constitutive argument. The alternative view was the supervenience argument that grounds value in the natural properties of the preferred object/state of affairs. I concluded that there usually is some interdependence between the natural properties of an object and its desirability. A second discussion concerns the nature of ‘good’. Is it a natural or, as Moore argued, a non-natural property. Many scholars endorse the view that, leaving the functional or instrumental good aside, good is a non-natural

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270 Symbolic utility cannot simply be incorporated in decision theory, for symbolic utility does not obey an expected utility formula (Nozick, 1995). Process-nonseparable preferences can generate choices that violate WARP (see Sandbu, ib., 214 for an example). Symbolic utility can be incorporated in a modified non-expected utility function.
property and defend the supervenience approach. Though values are not reducible to facts, they are dependent upon them. The next question to be answered is how to account for the goodness of a state of affairs. Extending this point of view to moral considerations, I have considered the approach of Khalil and Sanbu. Their approach says, in short, that among the consequences of a moral action is the action itself.

I adopted the concept of symbolic utility that expresses the rightness of an action. When an agent intends to act properly, she may obey certain norms or moral principles because she wants to express some symbolic meaning. The mere fact that she aspires to add symbolic meaning to her action does not necessarily explain the outcome of that action (for when a runner contemplates to win fair or to win by cheating and decides for winning fair then the outcome remains the same: the runner wins), but it has some value or utility for that person and this utility is imputed back to the action, adding symbolic utility to its substantive utility. Sandbu emphasized the process character of actions. Symbolic meaning must be treated as a separate component of the utility an action can generate. The most important thing in valuing alternatives is to know what kind of actions and what kinds of attitudes are called for. The import of valuations for human beings is “(...) to understand what matters to them, and so what is worth their aiming at.” (Griffin, 1996, 48) An agent’s response may, in part, be governed by the view of the person he wants to be.

An additional question, that will be discussed in the next chapter, is that if we could rationally discuss what is 'good', if we had reasons to qualify a state of affairs as 'good'; reasons that would justify an action, would these reasons also be motivating agents?