UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Morality and Irony

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Philosophy

by

Andrew McKay Flynn

2021

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Andrew McKay Flynn

Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Barbara Herman, Co-Chair

Professor Alexander Jacob Julius, Co-Chair

This dissertation is about the moral importance of irony. In the first chapter, I introduce the topic. I argue that having values makes us vulnerable to facing choice situations that we properly regard as absurd, and I articulate a form of ironic playacting as an apt response to those choice situations. The subsequent chapters draw out the implications of this account. The second chapter treats akrasia. I defend the virtues of an overlooked kind of self-awareness in akrasia. In doing so, I articulate the importance of taking oneself seriously in a way that will make akrasia apt to seem absurd and to call for ironic playacting. In the third chapter, I argue that contentment and affirmation play a wide-ranging role in our practical thinking, in light of their ubiquitous connection to what we value, and this makes us apt to encounter absurd choice situations that call for irony. In the fourth chapter, I consider a common but puzzling phenomenon: the way in which the thought that some emotion is "not worth it" shows the emotion not to be fitting. My explanation of this phenomenon shows how we can end up in emotionally absurd situations that call for ironic playacting.

The dissertation of Andrew McKay Flynn is approved.

Pamela Hieronymi

Gavin Lawrence

Barbara Herman, Committee Co-Chair

Alexander Jacob Julius, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

For my parents, who taught me to love learning

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I need to thank first my entire committee. Each member was indispensable and spoke to a different part of my philosophical soul: Pamela Hieronymi to my penchant for thinking about ethics through action theory, Gavin Lawrence to my covert Wittgensteinianism and Aristotelian naturalism, A.J. Julius to my love of film and temptations to grand theory, and Barbara Herman to my love of Kant and my attraction to the messiness of ordinary life. I wouldn't know how to do philosophy without what I learned from each of them. Special thanks to Barbara Herman, who went above and beyond in keeping me on track, and who never gave up on this project.

Discussions with a huge number of fellow graduate students and with post-docs were the cornerstone of my philosophical education. I thank: Gregory Antill, Sarah Beach, Paul Blaschko, Ian Boon, Timothy Buchanan, Tristen Cardwell, Sara Copic, Cory Davia, Christian de Leon, Jenna Donohue, Gabe Dupre, Jonathan Gingerich, Brian Hutler, Gabby Johnson, Kim Johnston, John Kardosh, Amber Kavka-Warren, Bill Kowalsky, Rose Lenehan, Suzie Love, Piera Maurizio, Brad McHose, Emily Page, Alexi Patsaouras, David Pederson, Samuel Pensler, Mark Puestohl, Dan Ranweiler, Ayana Samuel, Kirun Sankaran, Lauren Schaeffer, Kyle Scott, Sam Segal, Vaheh Shirvanian, Ally Peabody Smith, Mat Snow, Paul Talma, Jordan Wallace-Wolf, Aaron West, and Ekin Zeytinoglu. Special acknowledgment is due to Sandy Diehl, who, although a continent away, has accompanied me in philosophical thought and feeling for almost a decade.

I would not have made it through without the love and support of wonderful friends and family. I'm grateful to Raymond Coffman and Greer Gregory, who have trudged the road to happy destiny alongside me. My best friend Greg Leporati, who shows up many times in these pages, is a constant source of needed sanity. And, of course, my family. To my sister and brother-in-law, Claire

and Michael D'Emic: I love you so much. To my parents, Culum and Rosaleen Flynn: you are why this exists.

VITA

2008	B.A. History and Philosophy (double major) Columbia University New York, New York
2013	M.A. Philosophy University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Milwaukee, Wisconsin
2015-2021	Teaching Assistant Department of Philosophy University of California, Los Angeles
2019-2021	Instructor Department of Philosophy University of California, Los Angeles

CHAPTER ONE: Introducing Irony

"Solidarity with the New Yorker Union. If I am hired as a replacement worker by Condé Nast during a strike I pledge 4% of my earnings towards pro-union efforts. I will also make a $25 contribution to the IWW if my position lasts more than three months." – Don Hughes (@getfiscal) on Twitter, 10:07 PM, Mar. 26, 2021

1. Setting the Stage

This dissertation is about irony and its moral importance. Irony is not a familiar topic in contemporary philosophy, but the topic has an important philosophical pedigree – in the irony of Socrates and Kierkegaard especially, in 19th century German philosophy, and in the philosophical aesthetics of Georg Lukács.[1] I think what I will say here bears on the problems that have been discussed by philosophers under the heading of "irony." But I want to begin with something much more mundane: the kind of irony that is a pervasive part of internet culture, especially on Twitter. Consider the epigraph that opens this chapter: a representative tweet from Twitter personality Don Hughes. The tweet – like almost all of Hughes's tweets – is ironic. Dissecting it – as I am about to do – will ruin the humor of the irony. But grant me this one indulgence, please. Laying out the different dimensions of irony in Hughes's tweet will allow me both to get the basic phenomenon on the table and to say a bit about why it is morally interesting.

If it wasn't obvious, Hughes's tweet is not serious. Hughes does not intend to be hired as a replacement worker by Condé Nast. He does not think that an appropriate way of showing solidarity with the New Yorker Union would be to scab while giving some of his earnings to pro-union efforts. The point of his tweet is to express something like the opposite sentiment: Hughes's

[1] On the German tradition, see Fred Rush, *Irony and Idealism: Rereading Schlegel, Hegel, and Kierkegaard.* (For an idiosyncratic take, see Hans Urs von Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord.*) For Lukács, see his *The Theory of the Novel*, as well as J.M. Bernstein's *The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism, and the Dialects of Form.*

opposition to scabbing. In this way, the tweet is a variation on the most basic form of irony: sarcasm. In being sarcastic, one says p in order to convey ~p.[2] But Hughes's irony is slightly more complex than mere sarcasm. Many features of context may allow one to convey ~p by uttering p. And there are many reasons why one might speak sarcastically, rather than simply convey one's message straight. But Hughes has something specific in mind. His context is this: a social world where unions have become very weak, where attempts at social betterment frequently take the form of trivial ameliorative efforts, and where it is commonplace for those with power and capital to flatfootedly express solidarity with those facing genuine problems by trumpeting their good works which, in the grand scheme of things, are really trivial ameliorative efforts.

Hughes ironically parodies the form of misguided pledges of solidarity in his tweet in order to express his sense of how ridiculous such pledges are. This is irony as playacting norms that you think are ridiculous, precisely because you think they are ridiculous. Why do we do this? Often irony is motivated by the sense that things are so bad that there's nothing much left to do but to mock them. The idea that parodying norms would be a particularly apt thing to do in such cases – that it would be a particularly apt expression of how one feels about such cases – stems from the nature of such cases. That one feels hopeless to affect change comes from the feeling that everyone around one – or less hyperbolically, a salient group – takes seriously a bad set of norms. This is what makes change impossible. Parodying the norms ironically, then, looks like an apt expression of one's frustration.

Irony, then, comes from a sense of – and expresses – the absurdity of things. It is of moral interest, then, insofar as being properly attuned to reality calls for a sense of the absurd and calls for

[2] The locus classicus for this core idea that irony involves saying one thing to convey the contrary is Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, Book 9.

a response to a sense of the absurd. The conviction behind my project is that being properly attuned to reality does involve these calls, although charting the terrain is difficult.

A first step is to contrast Twitter irony with some intuitive concepts of cynicism and nihilism.[3] The cynic is skeptical about values that are prized by the world around them, but not about their own code of values. The nihilist rejects all values to the extent that this is possible. (They may not be able to avoid committing in limited ways, but they are not moved by the kinds of attachments that appear in a normal human life.) In this sense cynicism is only a pejorative if the values prized by the world are in fact worth being skeptical about. Often they are. But cynicism can also be used as a as a pejorative to pick out cases in which the cynic's skepticism is motived by a kind of jadedness that blinds them to what is really valuable, even if its being prized by the hoi poloi manifests itself in crude expressions worth criticizing in all kinds of ways. Nihilism is a pejorative, full stop. There are values.

One may also become unmoored by *irony*, no longer able to recall what one believes, perhaps being overtaken by the irony of everything. Not finding oneself motivated by what is valuable is not exactly cynical or nihilistic. It lacks the alternate code that marks cynicism as I've defined it, although it may stem from an analogous feeling that everything on offer is phony. In this way, being unmoored looks closer to nihilism. But being unmoored is not exactly to reject all value either. The unmoored need not reject value; they simply cannot find it anymore, or cannot remember what it was like to get seriously invested in something, or cannot distinguish between being serious and being ironic. Indulgence in irony can turn in on itself, though, and begin to look closer to either

[3] I mean this discussion to involve semi-stipulative precisifications of ordinary uses of "cynical" and "nihilistic." I don't want to stake anything on a conceptual analysis of these terms, but rather simply to give some rough and ready points of orientation that can help us make sense of our uneasiness with irony. And I'm aware that I'm running roughshod over the history of philosophically sophisticated positions that have been called "cynicism" and "nihilism." My apologies. For a crucial discussion that helped me get clear on my own thoughts about these distinctions as they appear in ordinary life, I'm grateful to Kyle Scott and Samuel Pensler.

cynicism or nihilism. One may seek to justify feeling unmoored by appeal to the fact that everything is phony or the fact that nothing is really worth going after. Then we may have arrived at cynicism or nihilism.

What this shows is that irony has dangers. There are a number of strands here. The first is a natural fact about human beings, central to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: we habituate ourselves to virtue. If you overdo playacting, you end up being unable to distinguish cases where playacting is appropriate and cases where it is not. Insofar as playacting seems called for where something of real value is not available, one can malform one's dispositions in such a way that it no longer looks like there are opportunities to go after anything of value. This is a danger of irony. Another is the way in which constant irony and becoming unmoored from value may make pointless mayhem seem just as sensible as anything else.

So, irony has its dangers. And focusing on Twitter may make its benefits seem slight – may make the moral sense embodied in ironic expression seem shallow and detached from matters of real ethical import. Twitter irony is a useful starting place, though, because it is the *visible* tip of a mountain: it is already familiar to – or at least easily explainable to – anyone who has absorbed the ambient culture of the early decades of the 21st century.[4] But it is *merely* the most visible part of the mountain. And if Twitter irony is inherently pathological – a symptom of the kind of political cowardice fostered by our current social conditions – it is a pathological twisting of something important. The tip of the mountain may crumble or melt away, but the mountain will remain.

The rest of this chapter aims to show why I think that there is a mountain. It is noteworthy that others, too, have had this sense. I mentioned that irony is not a standard philosophical topic. On reflection, it may seem puzzling that anyone *ever* thought it profitable to think philosophically

[4] We can probably trace the roots back a bit further in American culture. In his documentary *HyperNormalization*, for instance, Adam Curtis locates a kind of irony in the pathological responses to the financialization of the US economy in the 1970s. See also David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction."

about irony. Irony is, paradigmatically, a linguistic phenomenon. Its interest, then, may seem limited to philosophers of language and literary critics.[5] And, even though the phenomenon falls within their ambit, it isn't obvious that it is a particularly *interesting* phenomenon that falls within their ambit. Amongst those philosophers who have found irony of philosophic interest, many have been sensitive to this fact, their work following out the hunch that behind a mere linguistic phenomenon lay an experience, attitude, or stance towards life of profound ethical importance. Richard Bernstein has recently categorized philosophers who see irony this way – philosophers who explicitly or implicitly stand in the tradition of Socrates and Kierkegaard – as interested in irony as an "art of living."[6] On Alexander Nehamas's reading of Socratic irony, the silence of Socrates – his refusal to put forward clear resolutions to his seemingly paradoxical claims – stands at the ethical center, challenging readers to make sense of why they find themselves attracted to the life lived by the protagonist of Plato's dialogues even as they are unable fully to grasp the wisdom animating that life.[7] On Bernstein's own reading of Kierkegaard, irony is a form of ethical passion that subjects the world to unrelenting criticism, while avoiding both the temptation to offer naïve positive alternatives and the temptation to nihilistic destruction.[8] The most notable recent members of this tradition are Richard Rorty and Jonathan Lear. For Rorty, an ironic stance towards life is important, because it manages to combine a thoroughgoing commitment to liberal values with the sober recognition that such values cannot, in the end, be defended as accurate descriptions of mind-independent reality

[5] For classics of the literary-critical canon on irony, see Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Irony*; William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*; and D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*.

[6] See Bernstein, *Ironic Life*, especially the introduction and chapter 1. Although I disagree with some of Bernstein's interpretations of the figures he treats, I'm indebted to him in the glosses I provide here.

[7] See Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*.

[8] See Bernstein, chapter 3.

which must be accepted on pain of irrationality.[9] And Lear, drawing heavily on his reading of both Plato and Kierkegaard, argues that a capacity for irony is a virtue, because it amounts to a susceptibility to experiencing a kind of uncanny disruption in the use of the concepts we employ in interpreting ourselves and constructing our identities – a kind of uncanny disruption that amounts to a mature recognition of the fragility and porousness of those concepts with which we must come to terms.[10]

More could be said – irony is a dense and tangled topic, and behind all the accounts just sketched lie dense and tangled arguments – and further examples could be added to the list.[11] But this brief survey of a representative sampling reveals something striking: the idea that irony is motivated by a sense that the world is in some way *absurd* or *ridiculous* does not show up. I mean this literally: the concepts are conspicuous in their absence, appearing only a handful of times.[12] One might, of course, imagine that with some work, one could draw interesting connections between these accounts and a sense of frustration at the absurdity of the world. Nevertheless, this much is true: on these accounts, the important experience, attitude, or stance does not seem to be fundamentally connected with finding one's social world absurd or ridiculous in the way that seems to motivate Twitter irony.

The absence of discussion of absurdity in connection with Kierkegaard may seem, well, ironic. Absurdity was a topic of substantial concern for Kierkegaard, and because it was a topic of

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[9] See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

[10] See Lear, *The Case for Irony*.

[11] For an important statement of the nature of irony which is primarily literary-critical in orientation, but which also bears on the "art of living," see Paul de Man's "The Concept of Irony." For discussions of irony in this tradition, see Armen Avanessian, *Irony and the Logic of Modernity*; Gary Handwerk, *Irony and Ethics in Narrative: From Schlegel to Lacan*; Kevin Newmark, *Irony on Occasion: From Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and de Man*; and Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*.

[12] The term does not make the index of either Bernstein's or Nehamas's volumes. It appears once in Lear.

substantial concern for Kierkegaard, it became a topic of substantial concern for later existentialists. A route then suggests itself: connect Kierkegaard's notion of the absurd with his account of irony. Or, more generally, draw on existentialist accounts of the absurd and work out their implications for irony. I'm not going to take this route. It is not that I think it obviously unfruitful. But – speaking a bit crudely – in this domain the absurd is *the Absurd*: a sense of the meaninglessness of life or the arbitrariness of reason as such.[13] Although I'm after big picture results, I want to start with a more ordinary sense that things are ridiculous.

So, in summary: with the tradition of philosophers who have defended irony as an "art of living," I think that a phenomenon of ethical importance lies behind some of our common linguistic expressions of irony. But the phenomenon I'm interested in – a phenomenon that has something to do with feeling that the social world is in some important way absurd or ridiculous, and that one is frustrated by and powerless in the face of this fact – has not been explored. This chapter offers a preliminary account of this phenomenon – an account which will be expanded and deepened through the rest of the dissertation.

Before I begin, however, I want to make one final set of distinctions. When people think of irony in the contexts I began with, it is often thought of as an action – being ironic as making ironic Twitter posts. There is doing irony. Often, this irony stems from a general disposition to engage in irony. But the person with the ironic disposition isn't responding to nothing. Their irony stems from a certain way of seeing the world – seeing things as apt for or calling for ironic responses. This is what I've referred to as seeing things as absurd or as ridiculous. To see things as absurd is to see irony as a reasonable response. To be ironic is to give expression to this feeling. We might then use "absurd" to label the passive dimension and "ironic" to label the active dimension. This is slightly complicated by an intermediary phenomenon. Following a standard schema in moral psychology, we

[13] For an overview, see the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry, "Existentialism," by Steven Crowell.

can distinguish roughly between the experience of an attitude or emotion and the expression of an attitude or emotion in action or speech. Wrongdoing makes it appropriate to feel anger, although this is a nonvoluntary response. Anger then may be expressed in certain stereotypical kinds of action and speech. The reasons that make it appropriate to feel anger also make it appropriate to express anger, although many other considerations bear on whether it is a good idea to express anger in any particular way. This is voluntary.[14] We might then apply the labels "absurd" and "ironic" to these two aspects. To feel a sense of the absurd is an appropriate response in certain circumstances. To make an ironic remark is to express that sense of absurdity.

My topic, though, is primarily an intermediary moment: one's experience of one's own choices and practical reasoning in action based on those choices as absurd. This combines the active and passive dimensions in an interesting way. We can become angry not just that someone has harmed us, but that we are acting as we are while we are acting. In the case of the absurd, however, an additional interesting feature appears. In seeing our own choices and actions as absurd—as the kind of thing that would call for irony – we can come to engage in them as a kind of playacting that is constitutive of ironic expression itself. We can lean into this playacting. We can see further ironic expressions as an apt way to make clear to others how we feel about what we are doing. In this sense, what I will say in this dissertation goes a long way to making sense of the rationale behind ironic expression in language. But I will be concerned primarily with this experience of one's actions as absurd, such that they become tinged with a kind of irony.

With this set of distinctions in mind, I'm going to begin to make my case for the moral importance of irony. To start, we need to bring into sharper focus an idea I've been employing: that

[14] For this distinction, see Amia Srinivasan's "The Aptness of Anger," §IV.

of some situation's being absurd or ridiculous.[15] In §2, I turn to Thomas Nagel's essay "The Absurd." Nagel's account of a situation's being absurd is a useful starting place, because it gives the general contours of the phenomenon I'm interested in: a situation's being absurd involves an egregious deviation between aspiration or pretension and reality. Nagel's way of spelling out the nature of the aspirations or pretensions involved – which he aptly labels "seriousness" – is untenable, however. In §3, then, I give a better account of the relevant sort of seriousness by drawing on the literature on values and valuing; the way in which judging things valuable and valuing things involves taking some considerations to be more important than others allows us to articulate the intuitive idea that agents have aspirations or pretensions to seriousness. In §4, I apply the account to an agent's relationship to their own choice situations. I argue that taking things seriously in the way that is connected to having values and valuing things makes agents vulnerable to finding themselves in choice situations they properly regard as absurd. In such cases, finding a choice situation to be absurd is a manifestation of the fact that an agent *does* take certain things seriously. Thus, a vulnerability to finding oneself faced with absurd choices is tied to an absolutely central feature of being a human, moral agent: having values and valuing things. In §5, I turn to the motivational problems that absurd choice situations create for agents who face them. I draw on some work by J. David Velleman on make-believe to show how a passive sense of the absurdity of one's choices may aptly be transformed into an active kind of irony in action. This constitutes my initial case for the moral importance of irony. In §6, I conclude the main body of the chapter with a coda that treats a particularly complex case involving an absurd choice situation, in order to display the way in which my account generalizes and handles a variety of phenomena. In §7, I conclude by

[15] From here on out, I'll stick with "absurd," although aspects of the phenomenon I describe are picked out by numerous ordinary concepts like "ridiculous" or "farcical."

giving a roadmap of how my account will be extended and deepened throughout the remainder of the dissertation.

2. Nagel on the Absurd

What makes a situation absurd? Let's start with some ideas from Thomas Nagel in his essay "The Absurd." According to Nagel, an absurd situation involves a kind of discrepancy:

> In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality: someone gives a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already been passed; a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation; you declare your love over the telephone to a recorded announcement; as you are being knighted, your pants fall down. (13)

Nagel further explicates this discrepancy as one between two salient standards: "In ordinary life, to be sure, we do not judge a situation to be absurd unless we have in mind some standards of seriousness, significance, or harmony with which the absurd can be contrasted" (18). I am going to narrow our discussion to standards of practical rationality – though I'll speak simply of "standards" for brevity – because these are the kinds of standards that are of primary interest for Nagel's ultimate project and for my own. This restriction is not at odds with many of Nagel's cases: the standard at issue in the case of someone giving a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already passed is practical. Giving the speech appears to aspire to affect the passage of the motion; the person in question appears to be employing a basic standard of instrumental reasoning. We observers may regard the speech as absurd because we know that the motion has already been passed, and so it is no longer instrumentally rational to attempt to pass the motion by giving a speech. There is a discrepancy between the standard that is being employed and the standard that should be employed. Further, although Nagel speaks of absurd situations, he and I are both interested specifically in actions which seem absurd. So, I will speak of absurd actions.

Nagel's gloss contains two additional ideas that seem to me necessary to explicate the idea of absurdity at issue: "conspicuous" and "pretension or aspiration." Nagel's idea that the discrepancy must be conspicuous seems designed to focus our attention on a particular set of cases involving discrepancy. Discrepancy alone will not get us absurdity, as all mistakes involve discrepancies, but all mistakes are not absurd. (I watch you filling out your taxes, and I notice that you've done the math wrong. There's a discrepancy between the way you've calculated and the way you should calculate. But I don't think your mistake is absurd – it's a normal human error.)

But what does a discrepancy's being conspicuous amount to? Characterizing a discrepancy as conspicuous might simply mean that it is easy to notice. In that sense, the conspicuousness of a discrepancy will not help us. I notice the discrepancy in your tax calculations, and it was not particularly difficult to do so. But, characterizing something as conspicuous may indicate that the object has some property in virtue of which it is easy to notice. (If you told me to make myself conspicuous, you'd be telling me to do something to make people notice me.) Taking a situation to be absurd, then, seems to require there being something *egregious* about the discrepancy in virtue of which it is conspicuous. To get the flavor of this sort of egregiousness, I want to consider three cases: (i) the comically oblivious absurd, (ii) the painted-into-a-corner absurd, and (iii) the rationally untenable absurd.

For (i), the comically oblivious absurd, we have as a paradigm example Kramer in *Seinfeld*. Kramer is famous for ridiculous, absurd behavior. Specifically, Kramer will blurt out his judgments on anything and everything, regardless of the social norms that counsel tact. This is his key role in a sitcom that is primarily about social conventions. When Jerry, George, or Elaine erupts at Kramer's having put them in an awkward situation due to his outbursts, Kramer never gets why he's done anything wrong, even if the violation of important social norms is obvious both to the other characters and the viewer. There's a discrepancy between the norms of behavior by which Kramer

governs his actions and the norms that most others (including most viewers) think should govern his actions. And they are such obvious norms that it is almost impossible to imagine someone simply *not getting* them. Kramer should get them. And yet he doesn't. The audience regards Kramer's behavior as absurd.

For (ii), the painted-into-a-corner absurd: In this case I am thinking of a version of the motion-passage case that Nagel employs, which I glossed above. The person giving a speech might be construed as an instance of the absentminded professor type, who is simply oblivious to the fact that the motion they're advocating for has already passed. Their speech, then, might seem absurd in the comically oblivious sort of way to an audience that is in tune with normal epistemic standards. But we also might imagine a different version, in which the person is painted into a corner by parliamentary procedures. Suppose by some quirk of the rules, the person is required to give their speech even though the motion has already passed. They give the speech – perhaps to save face, or perhaps because they don't know what else to do – as though the motion were still up for debate. The speech will seem absurd precisely because it *appears* to ignore basic facts about what is still possible, which anyone employing ordinary epistemic norms will be aware of – even the speaker themselves.

Finally, for (iii) we have the rationally untenable absurd. This occurs often in political contexts. Consider, for instance, Mitch McConnell's recent claim, in response to corporate criticism of Georgia's voting rights laws, that corporations should stay out of politics, except for donating money.[16] McConnell was lambasted for being hypocritical.[17] He is, after all, the standard bearer for a party that has pushed for and succeeded in vastly increasing the political power of corporations. And

[16] See Glenn Thrush, "McConnell, long a defender of corporate speech, now suggests executives 'stay out of politics," *New York Times*, April 6, 2021.

[17] See, for example, Michael McGough, "If Mitch McConnell is a hypocrite on corporations and politics, he's not alone," *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 2021.

there doesn't appear to be a principled reason to distinguish between the kind of corporate spending that McConnell endorses and the corporate moves regarding Georgia that he rejects. To most, McConnell's statement seems disingenuous, stemming from his being a purely results-driven practitioner of Machiavellian politics. But, regardless of whether we can conclude that McConnell is strictly speaking a hypocrite – however that vexed term is to be pinned down – there is clearly a sense in which his statement may be regarded as absurd, a sense that is tied to whatever the intuitive thought behind calling him a hypocrite is. McConnell presents his statement as one of principle. But it seems completely untenable as a statement of principle. Here lies the sense of the absurdity. (Of course, you might not think that it is completely untenable; but then you won't find the statement to be absurd.)

In summary, for actions to be absurd in the sense that Nagel is after appears to require a discrepancy that is particularly egregious. The three cases just discussed are paradigm examples of this sort of egregiousness. For my purposes, it is not necessary to explicate the notion of egregiousness further. We can stick with the paradigms I've just introduced; there will be a natural variation in the kinds of actions different individuals find absurd, and this can be traced to their different senses of what is really egregious.

But we are left with a final question: what is the egregious discrepancy *between*? Nagel's intuitive initial gloss was that an absurd action involves a discrepancy between "pretensions or aspirations and reality." Nagel expands on what he has in mind here by describing the ways in which we have pretensions or aspirations to seriousness in our lives:

> We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others.… We take ourselves seriously whether we lead serious lives or not and whether we are concerned primarily with fame, pleasure, virtues, luxury, triumph, beauty, justice, knowledge, salvation, or mere survival. If we take other people seriously and devote ourselves to them, that only multiplies the problem. Human life is full of effort, plans, calculation, success and failure: we *pursue* our lives, with varying degrees of sloth and energy. (14)

This seems correct. And it seems to me that the absurdity involved in the cases described involves an egregious discrepancy in pretensions or aspirations to a kind of seriousness. The problem is that Nagel's official way of spelling out the idea of pretensions or aspirations to seriousness doesn't work. Nagel's ambition is to show that certain pretensions or aspirations to seriousness are unavoidable, and he makes this argument by identifying this kind of seriousness with the bare employment of standards of practical rationality. Since we can only live by using our practical reason, we cannot avoid having certain pretensions or aspirations to seriousness.[18] But the bare exercise of practical reason does not seem to require that we have any such pretensions or aspirations to seriousness in the intuitive sense at issue. Imagine putting on your pants. This is an exercise of your practical rationality. But it doesn't seem to aspire or pretend to any kind of seriousness. What we want, then, is some way of articulating the phenomenon of pretensions or aspirations to seriousness that goes beyond appeal to the bare fact of practical reasoning being employed. This is what I will attempt in the next section.

3. Seriousness, Values, and Valuing

The thesis of this section is that we can understand a commonsense notion of seriousness – employed in describing others or ourselves as taking things "seriously" – in terms of some basic features of value and valuing. In brief, to say someone takes something "seriously" is to say something about what they value or take to be valuable.

[18] See Nagel, pgs. 14-15.

3.1. Apparatus Introduced

I'll start with some basic ideas about value. Things are valuable, we judge them to be valuable, and there is much agreement in judgment on the sorts of things that are valuable in their own right; T.M. Scanlon offers a familiar list: "certain states of consciousness; personal relationships; intellectual, artistic, and moral excellence; knowledge; and human life itself."[19] Philosophers disagree about what value is. But it is uncontroversial to note that something's being valuable is connected to reasons for certain actions and attitudes. Using scientific inquiry as an example, Scanlon sketches the kinds of reasons involved in its value: reasons for people with intellectual ability to engage in scientific practice, reasons for scientists to inquire well, reasons for society to provide material support for scientific research, reasons for everyone to try to understand science as best as they are able, and reasons for everyone to respect and admire scientific achievement.[20]

The fact that the value of science involves these kinds of reasons means that, when an agent judges that science is intrinsically valuable, they are committed to the existence of these sorts of reasons. As Scanlon points out, if someone didn't recognize such reasons, they "could be said not to understand or not to care about the value of science."[21] If someone claimed that they thought science was valuable, but denied that any such reasons existed, we'd suspect that something was amiss – that they were being insincere in their expression of belief, or didn't really understand the value of science, or thought that science was only valuable as means to something else.

We also make comparative judgments about the valuableness of different things. It would be a mistake to think of ordinary – even wise – agents as holding an entire moral blueprint for the

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[19] See Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, pg. 84.

[20] Ibid., pgs. 91-94. Of course, Scanlon's ambition is to *explain* value in terms of reasons. But the first step in his project is to note the reasons that are intuitively connected to judgments of value. This provides the basis for Scanlon's further claim that the notion of "value" plays no independent explanatory role. I take no stand in this work on the ultimate nature of value.

[21] Ibid., pg. 91.

universe inside of their heads. But, as with all of our judgments, neither are our judgments of value a disconnected heap. We think that some things are more valuable than other things. This need not amount to a disparagement of the less valuable things, but simply a recognition of some structure and hierarchy inside of value. This fact is often implicit in our thinking, even when we are not explicitly making comparative judgments of value. And, if we take judgments of value to be connected to the recognition of certain reasons, this fact should not be surprising. To have some sense of the character of the reasons that, say, the value of science gives us is almost always to have some sense of the kind of reasons that would be outweighed, silenced, or otherwise trumped by the reasons of science. It is natural to think of these trumped reasons as connected to things that we implicitly take to be less valuable than science.

There is a related phenomenon "inside" of a single value, as it were. Here are two examples: Friendship's being valuable involves reasons for us to care about our friends and reasons to promote friendship amongst other people that we meet. But these reasons are not on a par, and someone who thought that friendship was valuable would have some sense of their relative importance, given the value of friendship. Scientific inquiry's being valuable gives us reason not to plagiarize scientific papers and reasons not to be careless in paying attention to the work of other scientists. But these reasons are not on a par. It would be a much more serious offense to plagiarize than simply to miss reading an important recent article due to carelessness. Properly understanding the value of science involves understanding this fact.[22]

Finally, these general facts about value are reflected in a related phenomenon that philosophers call "valuing." Judging something valuable involves seeing certain reasons, but our connection to some things of value is much more intimate. Both you and I may acknowledge that the pursuit of higher mathematics is valuable. But I simply judge higher mathematics to be valuable,

[22] Ibid., pgs. 90-91.

whereas you really "value" it – you've devoted your life to studying and teaching it. On a proposal by Samuel Scheffler that I find helpful, valuing is to be distinguished from judging valuable by appeal to additional dispositions and emotional vulnerabilities that valuers have: dispositions to treat considerations to be reasons for action in certain contexts and emotional vulnerabilities which the valuer is disposed to regard as appropriate.[23] You take the fact that you have a free afternoon to be a reason to spend some time working on a proof, but I don't. You are deeply saddened if an important mathematics journal shuts down. Although I can recognize the loss, I'm not deeply saddened, and if I were, I'd find this reaction strange and puzzling.

Valuing mirrors and builds upon the hierarchical structure of value. We value some things more than others, and this is primarily reflected in the related dispositions and emotional vulnerabilities. With the things I value most, I take considerations I regard as reasons to engage with them to be stronger than other reasons, and these reasons will show up in more contexts. My emotional vulnerabilities will be more profound. Sometimes, these facts about degrees of valuing simply mirror the facts about degrees of value I sketched above: I judge X to be more valuable than Y, and so I value X more than Y. But, as Scheffler aptly notes, very frequently valuing something more than another is explained by appeal to the role one gives the valuable thing in one's life.[24] You may value both higher mathematics and ancient history, and you may think them to be of more or less equal value. But you value higher mathematics more than history – with all the associated differences in dispositions and emotional vulnerabilities – because you've devoted your career to higher mathematics, whereas you dabble in ancient history as a hobby.[25]

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[23] See Scheffler, "Valuing."

[24] See ibid., pgs. 32-33.

[25] In what follows, I will often write exclusively about what an agent "values" as being manifested in action and displaying a sense of seriousness. I mean "values" here to be a blanket term that covers both judgments of value and the more committed notion of valuing that Scheffler articulates. I do this both for convenience, and because there are disputes about exactly which kinds of actions and attitudes are made appropriate by judging valuable alone and which are

3.2. Apparatus Applied to "Seriousness"

With these points about values and valuing on the table, we are in a position to see how a certain class of ordinary judgments about the way in which people take things "seriously" is connected to judgments about what they value or think is valuable. Consider three paradigm examples.

(1) I might say of my friend Greg that he takes F1 racing *seriously*, although I don't. Here's what I mean by this: Greg values F1 racing, and he's given it a significant role in the free time in his life. I, on the other hand, have not. And, I might think, in addition, that he takes F1 racing *particularly* seriously, thinking that it is something he values much more than lots of his other hobbies.

(2) I might say of a tennis player vigorously competing in a match that they are taking the game very seriously. Here's what I mean by this: there is something the tennis player judges valuable or values that makes winning here very significant – perhaps tennis itself, perhaps their reputation. And, in addition, I might think that this match seems *particularly* serious for them. Whatever they value, it makes winning this game more important than other things in these circumstances.

(3) I might say of someone crying with grief at a funeral or crying with joy at a wedding that they were taking this very seriously.[26] Here's what I mean: the funeral crying is motivated by the person's taking there to be a great harm to something the person values. The crying at the wedding

made appropriate or required only by a more committed kind of valuing. Some readers may think that the cases I describe are best understood simply in terms of judgments of value, where others will think the cases involve valuing. But ironing out these details does not matter to the substance of my arguments.

[26] Well, actually, that's a bit stilted: I'd probably say the person at the funeral was taking it hard and say that the person at the wedding was very moved. But it seems to me that these locutions can be heard as having the same senses as "taking things seriously." The problem in the case of the emotions is that "seriously" most naturally has a negative connotation – we use it when the person isn't taking things seriously enough, or when they are taking them too seriously.

is motivated by the person's taking there to be a great benefit to something the person values.[27] And, I might think that, in addition, a *particular* seriousness is displayed here: the harm or benefit must be connected to something that the person values very highly.

"Seriously" is, of course, said in many ways. We could create a more detailed taxonomy of the subtly different ways that we speak of people as taking things seriously. But I think we are in a good position to see the plausibility and fruitfulness of the explanatory strategy that I've developed here. Where we are inclined to talk about people taking something seriously, we will be thinking of something important to what they value being at stake. And this account suffices to respond to the problem that I raised for Nagel at the end of the previous section and to give a satisfying account of absurdity for my purposes.

3.3. Seriousness and the Absurd

I claimed that Nagel was on the right track in explaining the absurd in terms of particularly egregious discrepancies between the seriousness displayed by some action and what is in reality worth taking seriously. But I criticized Nagel because he claimed that the relevant kind of seriousness was displayed by the *mere* employment of practical reason, manifest in every action. But this seems false: in putting on my pants, I employ practical reason, but my action need not, nor would it usually, manifest my seriousness about anything, except in a trivial and uninteresting sense. The account just given shows what was missing and why it is easy to be misled into the position that Nagel puts forward. Putting on my pants is undoubtedly motivated by something or other that I take to be of value. But it isn't ordinarily motivated by the sorts of judgments of value that mark it out as

[27] Scheffler uses "harm" and "threat" to be blanket terms, covering some perceived bad thing happening with regard to an object of value; "benefit" is the positive analog. I often follow this practice throughout. In some cases, this vocabulary seems stilted, but there is almost always some available term that sounds more natural and plays the same role.

serious – I don't usually put on my pants because of, e.g., something particularly important to what I value's being at stake. But a narrower version of Nagel's insight is correct: whenever the standards of practical reason are in view, what an agent values will be in view. And so, in different contexts, actions which would normally display no sense of seriousness one way or another may in fact be aptly described as taking things seriously. If I took the time to meticulously put on my pants while my house was burning down, for instance, you might say: "Gee, he takes his appearance *really* seriously." My action displays that I prize appearance over safety – I take considerations of appearance to trump considerations of safety.

This gives an illuminating account of the kind of egregious discrepancy involved in cases (i)-(iii) in virtue of which the actions seem absurd. Kramer's behavior is absurd because what he takes seriously and what he doesn't is highly idiosyncratic and hard to fathom. He's very serious about his deli meat and showers, for instance, and not at all serious about the basic norms of personal interaction. That is: he seems to *really* value thin slices of roast beef and value not at all personal privacy in ways that diverge egregiously from values that most audience members attach to these things. And so, his behavior seems absurd. The politician giving the speech for a motion that has already passed gives a speech which implies that making the speech is really important to something they value: whatever it is that they value about passing the motion. But this deviates egregiously from reality: we all know that it isn't really important to what is valuable about the motion, because the motion has already passed. Mitch McConnell's statement suggests that he values fighting the corrupting influence of corporations in politics. But this diverges egregiously from reality: his past actions show us that he doesn't value that, or that, at the very least his understanding of what it is to value that diverges egregiously from what the audience that finds his statement to be absurd takes to be involved in really valuing that.

To conclude this section, I want to distinguish between two ways in which an action may manifest a kind of seriousness that leads to the absurd – a distinction Nagel gestures at in passing when he talks about "pretensions" and "aspirations" to seriousness. To see this distinction, consider a case of absurdity that Nagel mentions: "a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation" (13). I believe that Nagel here is thinking of the Ford Foundation's appointing McGeorge Bundy president immediately upon his leaving the Johnson administration in 1966.[28] Bundy was a notorious criminal in the sense that, as National Security Advisor in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, he was a well-known hawk and architect of the US's escalation of the brutal and criminal war in Vietnam. The Ford Foundation is a philanthropic organization that takes its mission to be the promotion of human welfare, economic improvement, democracy, and world peace. The Ford Foundation ostensibly takes these values seriously. If a foundation takes these values seriously, they should, among other things, choose a president that reflects the importance of these values. And the Ford Foundation may present their appointment of Bundy as such. This seems absurd, because Bundy's track record regarding Vietnam should rule him out as a candidate to lead any organization that values world peace in the way that the Ford Foundation claims to. And this may be because the Ford Foundation's claims to value certain ideals are mere pretense. The Ford Foundation is not really interested in world peace, but rather in extending the reach of neoliberal capitalism in the philanthropic realm. The absurdity of hiring Bundy shows this – shows that they are not really serious about world peace, although they claim to be. On this reading of the Bundy case, the Ford Foundation merely has "pretensions" to taking world peace seriously.

But we might read the case differently. After all, there were plenty of people who didn't find the appointment of Bundy absurd, precisely because they didn't take Bundy's track record to conflict

[28] Thanks to A.J. Julius for pointing this out.

in any way with the Ford Foundation's professed values. Sustaining world peace requires defeating communism, and the Vietnam War was a noble effort to do just that. And the higher ups at the Ford Foundation might very well think just that and find Bundy to be not simply an acceptable choice, but a very good one, in light of what they value. Here the Ford Foundation "aspires" to seriousness; it genuinely takes Bundy to reflect what it thinks is important in light of the value of world peace. Nevertheless, Bundy's hiring may still seem absurd to third parties, because it shows just how egregiously the Ford Foundation's conception of the value of world peace diverges from what is really valuable about world peace.

4. The Absurd as a Practical Problem

4.1. Setup

Now, I've offered an account of absurd actions in terms of egregious divergences in seriousness, articulated in terms of value and valuing. The aim of this chapter, however, was not simply to give an account of absurd actions, but to explain why a certain kind of frustrating sense of the absurd behind the impulse to irony is ethically significant. My target was, in the first instance, an attitude or experience, which is something I have not yet addressed. The gap between attitude and object, though, is not large. Nagel himself vacillates between talking about absurd situations and situations which generate a sense of the absurd, or which are naturally experienced as absurd. It is not surprising that we might run these two things together. In thinking about what it is for some situation to fall into the category of the "absurd," we are thinking about the kinds of situations in which it would make sense to have a kind of affective reaction. And, to articulate what is involved in experiencing a sense of the absurd, it makes sense to turn not to brute features of phenomenology – which might come over one in all sorts of deviant ways – but to the features in the world that such

an affective response seems to be tracking when appropriate.[29] In articulating what it is for some action to be absurd, we have simultaneously shed light on the sense of the absurd by showing how features of a situation can be regarded as reasons for feeling a sense of the absurd.

There are two reasons, however, that my task is not complete. The first has to do with my claim that a sense of the absurd is "ethically significant." The second has to do with my characterization of the relevant sense of the absurd as "frustrating." The idea that some subjective response is "ethically significant" or "morally important" is vague. At some level of generality, I've already given an account of the ethical significance of a sense of the absurd: I've articulated features of the world that rationalize a sense of the absurd. It's ethically significant that our attitudes and emotions respond to the reasons there are, and so I've explained the ethical significance of a sense of the absurd by articulating these reasons. But I'm after something more substantial. We're now in a position to put my hunch from the introduction in more perspicuous form. My thought was that the experience of the absurd behind Twitter irony was more important than it might initially seem by simple reflection on the behavior on Twitter. We might reflect on the reasons that an attitude or emotion or experience seems fitting and find that we can articulate a practical problem that the attitude is responsive to – a distinctive kind of problem that is significant in our lives, but that we wouldn't have noticed otherwise. I have not yet done this, and this is the shape of my strategy in this section. Such a strategy seems promising, because the kind of experience of the absurd I had in mind has a distinctively negative valence – it is frustrating – and negative attitudes are often taken to be responsive to what are variously called problems, threats, or harms.

This leads right to the second issue: the idea that the experience of absurdity can be classified as a negative attitude, because it is "frustrating." Although Nagel doesn't explicitly classify a sense of the absurd as frustrating, he seems to be on the same page, because he takes it to be the case that a

[29] See Talbot Brewer, "On Alienated Emotions."

sense of the absurd is something that we desire to be rid of. He explains this feature of our sense of the absurd in terms of a desire to resolve the discrepancy or avoid the situation entirely.[30] The difficulty is: nothing about absurd actions as I've accounted for them explains why they are a problem, or why, correspondingly an agent would wish to avoid them. On reflection, further, absurd actions are not *as such* a problem. Return to the absurdity of Kramer's behavior on *Seinfeld*. The absurdity of Kramer's behavior is not bad, problematic, threatening, etc. It is one of the core things that makes *Seinfeld* good. To resolve the discrepancies would ruin the humor; to avoid watching *Seinfeld* is literally to miss the humor altogether. So, absurdity does not, on its own, call out for resolution or avoidance. This is reflected in the fact that viewers have no desires to resolve or avoid the discrepancies and do not experience a sense of the absurd which is frustrating.

The issue of frustration, it seems to me, is connected to a certain contingent feature of Nagel's examples: the fact that they are most easily understood as involving two different agents – one observing some absurd series of actions and another carrying out said series. It was useful to hold this feature fixed in order get the basic account on the table. But this feature is not essential to the account, and it actually makes it difficult to understand how the absurd could present a distinctive problem or be distinctively frustrating. The problem shows up most forcefully when the absurd is considered from the first-person point of view. And this coincides with my initial hunch – what motivates Twitter irony comes from the first-person point of view – from a sense that *one's own world* is in some way absurd. Capturing this thought requires that we shift from actions in general to actions viewed from the first-person point of view, or – more specifically – action from the first-person point of view *in prospect*: choice situations. Here is the thesis that I will argue for in the remainder of the section: taking things seriously in the way that is connected to having values makes one vulnerable to finding choice situations to be absurd. To establish this thesis, I will first argue

[30] See Nagel, pg. 13.

that taking seriously what we value involves not just recognizing certain reasons for action and being disposed to act on them, but also framing the choice situations we face in terms of the broader context in which they are embedded. When things have gone wrong with the things we value, one paradigmatic way of manifesting our seriousness is by framing our choice situations in terms of the way in which the value in question cannot be realized by or responded to by our choices. When the importance of the choices we can make pales in comparison with the value we cannot respond to, we will find our choice situation to be absurd.

4.2. Seriousness and Choice Situations

To start, I want to show how a choice situation could "manifest" a sort of seriousness analogous to the kind that actions do. And I think that this can be done, once again, by appeal to the way in which what we value affects the way in which we frame our choice situations, and how framing a choice situation can manifest a sense of seriousness. The reasons for action connected to what we value are by their very nature reasons that bear on our choices. But values shape the way that we think about our choice situations in a way that seems broader. What we value shapes how we think about what is going on in the broader context in which a choice situation is embedded, such that certain aspects of the choice situation seem particularly important in light of what we value. I'll call this "framing" a choice situation. This point can seem trivial in many standard cases. To say that what an agent values shapes how they frame a choice situation seems simply to amount to saying that what an agent values shapes what considerations seem to be salient as reasons for action in that choice situation. The interestingness and plausibility of the claim become clearer if we look at cases in which what an agent values leads them to frame a choice situation in ways that go beyond simply noticing the actions available to them and the reasons that count for or against those actions.

Consider a case of valued friendship. I am in a valued friendship with my best friend Greg. This involves me having certain emotional vulnerabilities. If Greg predeceases me, I will grieve his death and the end of the friendship. And it will be rational for me to do so, explained by the role an emotional vulnerability to experience grief plays in valuing the friendship. If I didn't experience grief, we would doubt that I really valued the friendship or properly valued it. Grief involves many things. But one paradigmatic aspect of grief is framing choice situations. Amidst my grief, I find myself thinking about how to spend the afternoon. I think about taking a walk or watching a movie. But I immediately notice that these are the kinds of things that I loved to do with Greg and my grief intensifies. My framing here involves framing my choice of how to spend the afternoon as one in which important reasons connected to my friendship would bear if Greg were not dead. Were Greg not dead, my relationship with him would make it salient to think about my choice of how to spend the afternoon as a potential opportunity to spend some time watching a movie or taking a walk with Greg. Even though he is dead, however, the relationship still makes it salient to frame the choice situation in this way – as an expression of the seriousness with which I take the loss. Grief, after all, is a way of registering my loss emotionally; a constitutive part of my loss is the loss of the shared activities of friendship; and this loss is registered by noticing how the loss shows up in one's choice situations, which involves framing them as I've described. And framing the situation in this way is an expression of what I value: that I took my friendship with Greg seriously.

This will happen too in cases of wrongdoing. You promise to pick me up at the airport, but you flake. I'm furious, frustrated in trying to rearrange my plans for the afternoon. Part of my frustration is just about the unexpected difficulty of what I'm now confronted with doing: figuring out how to get my children picked up from school and how to find someone to check on my ailing mother. This would not be fun in any circumstance. But a good part of what I'm feeling is about my choices *in light* of their source – in your having wronged at me. I shouldn't have to be doing this, I

think. One natural way of spelling this out is in terms of the way that I frame my choice situation. Other reasons *should* bear on how I spend my afternoon. Thinking in this way is a manifestation of the fact that that I take the wrong seriously. Perhaps not all wrongs make appropriate thinking about one's choices in this way. But some do and framing the choice situation in this way is a manifestation of the fact that one takes the wrong seriously.

So, in summary, we frame choice situations, and how we frame them can be a manifestation of what we take seriously. Now I want to show how framing choice situations in terms of what cannot be done can amount to finding a choice situation to be absurd.

4.3. *Danton's Death*

As a case, I want to take the last days of Georges Danton during the French Revolution, as depicted in Georg Büchner's play *Danton's Death*. The play depicts Danton's self-consciousness of his last days *as* last days. A fervent Jacobin, Danton has become disillusioned with the turn that the Revolution has taken towards indiscriminate violence under the sway of Robespierre. He can no longer participate in the Revolution if it is being carried out in this way. But he is also a man without power, marginalized and cognizant of the fact that he cannot alter the direction of unfolding events. He simply can no longer participate in the Revolution. And because he cannot participate, he knows that he will be viewed as a traitor and will soon be guillotined, as he in fact was and as the play's final scenes depict. At the center of the play are the final actions of Danton: futzing around and waiting to die. He drinks coffee. He reads the paper. He cracks jokes. Then he is guillotined.[31]

[31] See Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*. Apologies to devotees of the French Revolution and fans of Büchner's play: what I say about Danton's situation and emotional life here are almost comically simplified. But to say more would involve both a crash course in the French Revolution – particularly the *incredibly* complicated events of 1793-4 – and character studies of two world-historically complex individuals: Georges Danton and Maximilien Robespierre. For such a crash course, I highly recommend the third series of Mike Duncan's fabulous *Revolutions* podcast. For character studies, in addition to Büchner's play, one might check out David Lawday's *The Giant of the French Revolution: Danton, A Life*, Peter McPhee's *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, and Hilary Mantel's novel *A Place of Greater Safety*.

Büchner depicts Danton's choices as confounding to his friends. Why doesn't Danton *do anything* to stop Robespierre? They suspect Danton is weak. At the most basic level, this puzzlement about Danton, these suspicions about his character, are predicated on a mistake in judgment: Danton's friends see the possibility for effective action where Danton correctly recognizes that there is none. And this blinds them to the fact that Danton is not *enjoying* the pleasant activities that occupy his last days. His actions are shot through with irony and a sense of the absurd.

I think that Büchner's play purposely depicts Danton's sense of the absurdity of his situation, and this seems like an apt way for Danton to feel about the choices he faces. He is powerless to save the French Revolution – a cause to which he has devoted his life – and what is left to him? To decide whether to spend the afternoon reading the newspaper or playing cards. That seems absurd. How can one play cards while the French Revolution is going down the drain? Just playing cards seems absurd, even if there is nothing that Danton can do to get the Revolution back on course – even if there is nothing much left for him to do at all.

We can illuminate the absurdity of Danton's choice situation using the account that I've developed. Danton values the French Revolution; it is a cause to which he has devoted his life. He's serious about it, in the sense that it is a project that he values which plays a central role in his life. It is currently being greatly undermined, which is reason for Danton to have certain emotions and take certain actions, which we would describe as manifesting the fact that he takes the French Revolution seriously – extreme anger or great despair, devoting all of his time and energy to attempting to get the Revolution back on track. It is also natural to think that the seriousness with which he takes the French Revolution will be manifested in how he frames his choices at this point: getting the French Revolution back on track is what matters to him here. In these dire straits, the value of the Revolution is what should guide his thinking in whatever he is doing, in whatever choices he faces. He might express this sentiment – tell us about the general way in which he frames his choices – and

this would be taken as an expression of the fact that he takes the French Revolution seriously. But there is nothing that he can do. He is literally powerless to do anything that makes a difference to the French Revolution: the choices open to him are to play cards or read the newspaper.

Danton frames this choice in light of what seems most important to do in the circumstances that he finds himself in: save the French Revolution. We might put it this way: he thinks of his choice situation as deciding-what-to-do-while-the-French-Revolution-goes-down-the-drain. This may seem paradoxical: he's out of power, so his choices are happening *while* the French Revolution goes down the drain; he's not choosing what to do *about* the French Revolution going down the drain. Why should Danton think about his choice in this way? I think that the answer lies in the seriousness with which Danton takes the French Revolution: it is a manifestation of his seriousness that he frames the choice situation this way. If he did otherwise – if he regarded his choice simply as one between two pleasant activities, with a casual nod to the fact that his life's work was turning to ash in the background – we'd suspect that he didn't really take the French Revolution seriously. That is, we'd suspect that the French Revolution didn't really play the kind of central role in his life that we thought it did, that it wasn't as important to him as we had assumed.

A comparison with the case of grief mentioned above is illuminating here. If I valued my friendship, I will grieve when my friend dies. If I don't, we'll suspect that I didn't really take the friendship seriously, or that I have repressed my emotions. For some time after, I will naturally frame certain choice situations as "deciding-what-to-do-now-that-my-friend-is-dead." That I view my choices this way is a natural expression of my grief, and of the fact that I took the friendship seriously. If I didn't think like this for some time, we'd be puzzled. In the mysterious way of life, this way of thinking will eventually and appropriately subside. But while it persists, certain choices may very well seem absurd to me. How can I be deciding what to eat at this nice restaurant, I may think, while my friend is six feet under? These options all seem so unserious, compared to the serious thing

that is lost. That is: whatever is valuable about steak and fish, there's nothing of great importance to me about enjoying them here and now. And something of immense value is lost: my friend.

Here, then, is the view: taking my friendship with Greg seriously involves framing certain choice situations after Greg's death in terms of the fact that I cannot choose to do anything with Greg. Sometimes this will simply be the occasion for the kinds of negative emotions associated with the loss of a friend. But sometimes, the importance to me of the things that I can choose to do will diverge egregiously from the importance I accord to my friendship. And in such cases, my framing of my choice situation in terms of the fact that I cannot choose to do anything with Greg will make my choices seem absurd. It is precisely this divergence that I'm registering in saying that deciding what to eat in a nice restaurant seems absurd. And the very fact that we take things seriously at all – that we have values and value things – seems to make us inevitably vulnerable to these sorts of situations. Framing choice situations in terms of a lost value is a paradigmatic expression of our seriousness about that value. And framing choice situations in this way can and often will make salient egregious divergences between the importance of what we can do and the importance of what we cannot.

Now, I want to return to Danton. We can imagine Danton thinking: there's nothing of great value in playing cards or reading the newspaper. These are all so paltry compared to what has been lost: the French Revolution. This is an expression of the fact that he takes the French Revolution seriously. But the way in which Danton is blocked from attempting to save the French Revolution heightens the sense in which his choice situation seems absurd. For, given the importance of the French Revolution to Danton, this kind of thinking would happen however he might have been blocked. He might have been stuck in Budapest, through no one's fault, unable to do anything to affect the Revolution. Still, he might frame his choice situations in this way – as doing-things-while-the-French-Revolution-goes-down-the-drain – as an expression of the seriousness with which he

takes the French Revolution. There is no sense that he *should* be able to do something to affect the French Revolution. This is strictly parallel to the grief case. There, the importance of my friendship leads me to frame my choices in light of my friend's death. And I may think in terms of the reasons related to friendship that I wish that I could act on. But there is no sense in which I should be able to act on them. Death is a natural part of life.

But Danton *should* be able to act on reasons connected to the value of the French Revolution. The only reason that he cannot is that others in power are carrying out the Revolution unjustly and have unjustly pushed him out of power. His choice situation "aspires to seriousness" then in a very straightforward way. It is not just that the most important thing is something he cannot act on. It's what he *should* be acting on here – in the sense that he *should* be able to, and would be able to, had he not been wronged. His choices seem absurd, then, because they are so much less important than what he should be able to do here. To frame his choice in this way is an expression both of the fact that he takes the French Revolution seriously and his recognition that he has been seriously wronged.

5. Irony as a Response to Absurdity

I've now explained at a programmatic level how taking things seriously in the way that is connected with one's values leaves one vulnerable to finding one's choice situations absurd. This will amount to a manifestation of the fact that one takes seriously a loss or harm connected to what one values. Often, wrongdoing will be essentially connected to the loss or harm. I will say more about the kinds of losses and wrongs which are particularly apt to lead to absurd choice situations, both in concluding this chapter and in subsequent chapters. But the interestingness of this sort of choice situation is also manifested in the way that it makes appropriate a unique kind of motivation as a response. Here, at last, we come to irony.

How will Danton act? What will his motivation be like? This much seems clear: he won't be happy about whatever he does. He won't simply enjoy playing cards, if that is what he ultimately decides to do, or at least he shouldn't. Recognizing the absurdity of his situation was, in large part, recognizing the absurdity of enjoying playing cards in his situation. His action will, at the very least, be emotionally and motivationally colored by his recognition of absurdity, in the way that actions that stem from very difficult choices between incommensurable values may be colored by regret, regardless of which action one chooses. But Büchner depicts a much richer response from Danton. Danton's actions are not merely colored by negative feelings stemming from a recognition of the choice situations he's faced, although this phenomenon is certainly present. But Danton doesn't simply play cards in an upset or motivationally conflicted way. He appears to revel in the frivolity of what he is doing, as though having fun were the highest good, his primary aim in life. This is what puzzles his fellow Jacobins so much. But the audience is not supposed to be puzzled – Büchner clearly means Danton's embracing of frivolity to be ironic and means for the audience to recognize this. The audience will have an inchoate sense that this kind of ironic engagement in frivolity seems fitting. We are now in a position to make more explicit what this inchoate sense amounts to.

Here's a first pass, surface-level characterization of Danton's irony as a response to the absurdity of his choice situation: Danton decides that the only thing his choices are worthy of is mockery. What seems really important is what Danton cannot do, and in light of this fact, he simply wants to give expression to his sense of the absurdity of the situation, the sense that something must be taken seriously although nothing can be. And so, he decides to mock his choices, by engaging in pretense – he acts as if he really thought frivolity were the most important thing here, as a way of expressing his sense that it isn't. This seems like a natural response and it involves a recognizable form of irony.

I think that something like this is correct. But there are different ways of pretending and different motivations for doing so. We can spell out the nature of Danton's irony in a number of different ways, some of which are deeper and more morally interesting than others. I think that the most interesting form would show how irony allows Danton simultaneously to *do* what it seems he cannot and give expression to this impossibility. That is: what Danton wants to do is really only a mere wish in his circumstances. A deep form of irony would show how a kind of mockery could amount both to acting on this mere wish and giving expression to the fact that it is, after all, a mere wish. And I think that we can do this, by drawing on J. David Velleman's work on make-believe and motivation by imagination.[32]

In paradigmatic cases, when we face a choice situation and make a choice, we will be motivated by a belief or judgment about the balance of reasons – at least if we choose well. This falls in the category of what Velleman calls "realistic" motivation. But as he points out, we can also be "unrealistically" motivated – by cognitive attitudes like imaginings which are not directed at the truth of their contents and conative attitudes like wishes, the rationality of which does not presuppose the possibility of bringing about its object.[33]

Consider as a paradigm of unrealistic motivation childhood games of make-believe, using Velleman's example of imagining oneself to be an elephant. When one pretends to be an elephant, one thinks about things from an imagined elephant point of view and then acts on that basis. This involves acting on the basis *not* of one's own beliefs – one knows one isn't an elephant – but on elephant-beliefs: the beliefs that one imagines an elephant having, as well as elephant-desires. One may be motivated in the ordinary way to engage in make-believe – one may think that it is a good

[32] In what follows, I am primarily drawing on Velleman's "The Aim of Belief." See also his "Motivation by Ideal." Useful background is Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe*.

[33] See Velleman, "The Aim of Belief," pgs. 255-72.

idea to have some fun by pretending – but once one has begun the game of make-believe, one is motivated by imagining. This distinguishes make-believe from mere pretense. We can go through the motions of doing something on some ulterior motive or to make a point, but this is not make-believe, and if we tried to engage in make-believe in this fashion the results would be stilted. The difference is that in pretense, we aren't actually motivated by what Velleman calls "mock beliefs" – imagining that we had certain beliefs and being motivated on that basis.[34]

Velleman points to other good examples of motivation by imagination, which involve variations on the basic structure of make-believe. Sometimes we talk to ourselves, rehearsing out loud what we wish we had said in some circumstance or what we wish we could say to some person. Throughout an episode of talking to oneself, one is motivated by "mock beliefs" – by imagining talking to some person, and by what we wish to say in such circumstances. But unlike make-believe, we don't usually start talking to ourselves on the basis of a desire to do anything, reflected in the fact that we don't usually choose to talk to ourselves, even as a bit of fun. Our talking to ourselves is motivated by the very wishes that drive the episode throughout. Freudian psychoanalytic examples can be explained as having an almost identical structure, except that the wish is so repressed and disconnected from our overt behavior that we do not or cannot recognize what we are doing as motivated by imagining; our behavior simply appears strange or unintelligible to us. And expressive actions, like rattling the bars of a jail cell, can be given a similar gloss, motivated by the imagination of freedom and the wish to be free.[35]

We can now distinguish two different ways in which Danton might be engaged in ironically playing cards. He might be engaged in mere pretense, or he might be engaged in something closely analogous to a game of make-believe. In the pretense case, Danton is *merely* going through the

[34] See ibid., pgs. 256-63.

[35] See ibid., pgs. 263-72.

motions. His motivating thoughts would be of the form: "Here's how I'd behave if I thought that having some fun playing cards here were really important." In the make-believe case, Danton is more fully engaged. He doesn't merely mimic the behavior of someone having fun playing cards. He imagines himself as being someone who thought it was important to have fun playing cards here, and his motivations to have fun show up from this point of view.

I think that the second way of pretending to play cards – by engaging in make-believe rather than mere pretense – amounts to a deeper form of irony, connected to a deeper appreciation of the absurdity of Danton's choices. The first step in showing this is just to notice the ways in which make-believe is intuitively deeper than mere pretense. As Velleman puts it, describing a childhood game:

> An especially imaginative child may come up with his own way of pretending to be an elephant, but not by considering which behaviors would be most suitable to an elephant-act, as if he were an impressionist honing some zoological schtick. Rather, the child's method is to imagine being an elephant – weighing a ton, walking on stumpy legs, carrying floppy ears – and then to wait and see how he is disposed to behave.
>
> Similarly, this child's playmates do not appreciate his inventions by recognizing that they are especially similar to the behavior of real elephants, and hence good choices for an aspiring elephant-impersonator. On the contrary, success at pretending to be an elephant need not involve behavior that is realistically elephant-like at all. What it requires is rather behavior that is expressive of elephant-mindedness – expressive, that is, of vividly imagining that one is an elephant. (257)

Make-believe is deeper in the sense that it opens up more and more unpredictable expressive possibilities. With pretense, we are stuck with a stock of behaviors that we think will give off the impression that we are doing something that we are not actually doing. We then reason about how to perform the behaviors that will do this. But, in make-believe, we let ourselves imagine what it would be like to occupy a certain point of view and see what actions seem to occur to us as apt from that point of view. We look to give expression to what it is like to inhabit that point of view from the inside. And this allows the actions to express our sense of what it is like to be, say, an elephant in

a much deeper way than pretense ever could. If I acted as an elephant might as a pretense, my actions would in some way give expression to what I thought it was like to be an elephant in a limited sense: the actions would be motivated by and manifest my thoughts about the kinds of behavior typically associated with elephants. But in make-believe my actions are motivated not simply by – and as Velleman points out, sometimes not *even* by – a sense of what it looks like to observe an elephant, but rather by thinking from the elephant's point of view – imagining myself as an elephant.

This point is relevant for ironic action in the following way: if the point of irony is to express one's sense of the absurdity of things, there is a way of doing this that requires motivation by imagination. To express one's sense of the absurdity of taking fun seriously requires imagining oneself to be the sort of person who would think that having fun is the thing to do here and now. This claim has two components. The first has to do with the expression of a point of view. The second has to do with absurdity, and consequently irony. What I've said so far only purports to establish the first component: if you really want to express your sense of what it would be to be a fun-loving person, say, you do this not by mimicking the behaviors you take to be associated with fun-loving people, but by imagining yourself to be a fun-loving person and doing what seems natural from that point of view. But Danton doesn't want to express his sense of what it is to be a fun-loving person. He wants to express his sense of the absurdity of his situation. How would make-believe allow him to do that?

The answer turns, I think, on the way our inhibitions interact with practices of make-believe. Good childhood play is characteristically uninhibited. Children aren't inclined to let their knowledge that they are not in fact what they are imagining themselves to be to intrude on make-believe. And this is good: whatever is good about make-believe, it goes well when it is uninhibited, and that is when it is most fun – when the processes of spinning things out from the elephant's point of view is

not interrupted by knowledge of reality. And Velleman tells a plausible, semi-speculative story about why children are so good at make-believe, while adults are so bad it, often having to result to mere pretense. Being a grown-up requires that we be able to mark a distinction between "realistic" sources of motivation – on Velleman's view, beliefs and desires – and "unrealistic" sources of motivation – imaginings and wishes. Motivation by unrealistic sources is, in paradigm cases, bad and rationally defective, involving things like wishful thinking and, in extreme cases, dissociative mental illness. And in the process of maturing into full human agency, we learn to categorize potential sources of motivation and develop a natural inhibition against acting on the unrealistic ones. Adults are bad at make-believe, because it requires them to fight against a deeply ingrained inhibition against unrealistic motivation. Children are so free because they have not yet developed these inhibitions.[36]

These inhibitions do break down, however, and there are key cases of motivation by imagination that are characteristically adult: talking to oneself, psychoanalytic cases, and expressive actions. Velleman has a story to tell about each: in the case of talking to yourself, your wish that you could have said something to someone overwhelms you. But in this case the inhibition is never quite overwhelmed: we often remain aware of the fact that we are talking to ourselves, and when we are we feel some sense of shame or uneasiness – we talk quietly, under our breaths. In psychoanalytic cases, the inhibition disappears precisely because we do not yet recognize our behavior's root in unrealistic motivational forces. And the important role that expressive action plays in human life makes sense of why there would be a circumscribed space in which the inhibition disappears – when expressing one's feelings is important.[37]

What Velleman doesn't treat, but what seems to me to be an interesting and robust phenomenon, is cases in which we engage in imaginative activity knowing that our inhibitions will

[36] See ibid., 262-63.

[37] See ibid., 263-72.

kick in – and precisely because our inhibitions will kick in, because our judgments about reality will intrude on the imaginative process. The paradigm example of this, is, I think, making assumptions in the case of philosophical argument. Velleman classes assumption as a way of regarding some proposition as true, distinct from both belief and imagination. In assuming, we regard a proposition as true for the sake of argument, while in imagining we regard a proposition as true without any concern for its truth value.[38] But, drawing this sharp a distinction seems to me misguided. Often, making assumptions for the sake of argument involves trying to imagine one's way into a philosophical position. Or, to put the same point in a slightly different way, many of the things that we do in philosophy that fall under the heading of "assuming for the sake of argument" have all the characteristics of imagining things from a point of view that is not one's own. I'm trying to get my students to understand Spinoza. I want them to read him charitably, but I know that Spinoza will seem foreign and preposterous. If they can't get over this, they will not see what is of intellectual value in Spinoza's work. To help out, I don't just insist that they read Spinoza charitably. What I do is give a lecture in which I lay out the philosophical background of the 17th century and some metaphysical views that were common then. And then I say: "Let's not question these metaphysical views. Let's assume that they are true for the time being and think about how the different figures we are going to read deal with them." What I'm asking my students to do is broader than simply holding fixed the truth values of a clearly defined set of propositions, as one might in formal logic. I'm asking them to imagine what it would be like to be a person concerned with, say, issues of substance ontology, for whom these metaphysical views were seen as important and challenging. Imagine how you would react if this were what kept you up at night. Inviting students to do this leads to more charitable readings of texts not because certain views are taken off the table, their truth-values fixed, but because reading a text *as though* one had certain motivations – trying to

[38] See ibid., pg. 250-52.

imagine having certain motivations as vividly as possible – allows what is interesting about Spinoza to jump out, lets the real problems of interpretation emerge, and forces irrelevancies into the background.

In much of this process, we don't want our students' inhibitions to intrude. That is, we don't want their imaginative engagement with a text to be constantly stopped short by thoughts like "But not everything needs a causal explanation!" But we don't want these inhibitions to disappear entirely. Lying in between contemporary philosophical work and "mere" intellectual history, the history of philosophy walks a fine line. We want our students to understand the figures we read, but we also want them to see what is of enduring philosophical interest in them. This requires one's own views of reality to intrude at key points, so that one can size up what one has gained from imaginative reading.

But there is another imaginative philosophical practice where the intrusion of one's beliefs about reality is not only to be expected but to be prized: reductio ad absurdum. Here, again, I'm not thinking of the kind of strict reductio that we find in logic, where we start with a set of premises fixed as true and then show that a contradiction follows. But something analogous, although clearly involving imagination, shows up in the less easily formalized areas of philosophy.

Sometimes in criticizing a philosopher or a philosophical view, one simply tries to poke little holes in it here and there, registering one's worries and raising questions. But other times, we go in for high-level, programmatic critique. The thought here is not simply that a particular proposal has flaws, but that an entire way of framing some issue is misguided. I'm thinking here of examples like Saul Kripke's attack on the descriptive theory of names, Bernard Williams's criticisms of the "morality system" in his many works, and the recurring thought in the work of many philosophers

that a neo-Humean theory of practical reason fundamentally misconstrues the nature of rationality.[39] Sometimes, this sort of critique goes by way of a pessimistic induction: you line up a bunch of issues on which the theory bears along with a bunch of work by important philosophers defending the theory on those issues. You poke holes in their work. And then you say: look, maybe there's a way of fixing this, but I think the best inference is not that these philosophers simply happened to fail, but that the theory is wrong. A lot of work that aspires to sweeping critique looks like this.

But, in reality, I think that something else is more commonly in the background and more illuminating. The sense one gets reading Kripke and Williams for example is that they think the views they are attacking just *could not possibly* be correct. And the most natural way to get to this sort of conclusion – the kind that generates an almost infinite stock of localized criticisms – is to imagine yourself being someone who really believed the theory and think through what they'd be inclined to do philosophically on this basis. This is a kind of reductio ad absurdum, where we *want* our beliefs – not about theory, but about ordinary reality – to intrude. Want to see what's wrong with the descriptive theory of names? Imagine yourself as someone who really believed it and then start trying to work through some relevant philosophical issues. But be open to your ordinary beliefs about how a natural language works. Get ready for them to jolt you out of your imaginary activity, making the work you are trying to carry out seem fundamentally preposterous.

Here's my thesis: Danton's action performs a kind of reductio ad absurdum of his world. He imagines himself as someone who thought that it was perfectly fine to just have fun playing cards here. He acts from this imagination, doing what seems natural to do from the point of view of someone who actually thought this way. But he expects and wants his beliefs about what is really at

[39] For Kripke's criticisms, see *Naming and Necessity*. For a general statement of Williams's criticisms, see *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Two works that deal in different ways with the fact that neo-Humean theories of practical reason have had enduring appeal despite a long and influential tradition of programmatic critique, see Candace Vogler's *Reasonably Vicious* and Mark Schroeder's *Slaves of the Passions*.

stake to intrude – to experience his own imagining *as* absurd. It is in this way that his action will express a sense of the absurd: the point of view it manifests is point of view that is self-consciously aware of itself *as* absurd, as it is bombarded by Danton's own beliefs about reality. This is what makes it ironic.

Why go in for make-believe? As with my initial discussion of pretense, Danton may simply think that the only thing to do here is to express his sense of the absurd. And he may then go in for make-believe because he sees this as the best way of doing that. But Velleman mentions another option: imagining can be motivated by wish. This option is worth considering, because I believe it represents the most satisfying basis for make-believe in Danton's case. Our standard way of responding to the choices that we face is not on the basis of wishes; this looks like irrational "wishful thinking." But expressive actions are often motivated by wishes. As Velleman puts it:

> Why do you scratch your head when you're puzzled, hold your head when you're worried, or smack your head when you've made a dumb mistake? Are these gestures a kind of sign-language? And then, if no one else is in the room, are you talking in sign-language to yourself? No, you're acting out corporeal images of your own thinking – your mind's body image, so to speak. You're acting out the phantasy of your memory as a balky machine (or a balky child), your curiosity as an itch, or your worries as raising the pressure inside your skull. You wish that you could jar your memory (or punish it), scratch your curiosity, or contain your worries. Your behavior is thus motivated by wish and imagination rather than desire and belief. (270)

Consider the role that wish plays in Danton's framing of his choice situation as absurd, and how this might be understood to motivate reading the newspaper as make-believe. To recognize his choice situation as absurd is in part, to wish it were otherwise and recognize that the fact that he is merely wishing this is a result of a wrong. And the absurd courses of action open to him are in fact vehicles for expression of this wish, by way of make-believe. Ordinarily, it is a mistake to act on wishes because this motivates us to do what we know is impossible. But for Danton, what is really important here *is* impossible – that's just a description of the situation. But the materials available to

him are apt for the expression of a wish: making-believe that things are otherwise as an expression of his frustrated wish. Making-believe on the basis of a wish performs two simultaneous functions – it enables Danton to act on what he takes to be really important, while simultaneously acknowledging that he really cannot so act. What he expresses through make-believe is his own recognition that what he ought to be able to do here amounts to only a wish.

6. Coda: More Complex Cases

Finally, I want to consider a slightly more complex case of finding your own choice situation absurd, which will set up the rest of the dissertation. Imagine Mary, a servant in a large Edwardian household. One day her Mistress says, "Dearest Mary, I don't mean to trouble you, but can you help me find my handbag?" Mary doesn't think that she should have to be a servant, and specifically she doesn't think that she should have to play along with this charade of friendly concern. But she knows that she will – she's not going to lose her job over this.

It seems to me natural to imagine Mary finding her choice situation absurd. It is absurd to have to play along with this charade of friendliness, she might think. And it is absurd to have to live day in and day out simply following orders so that she can scrape together a meagre existence. But, although these seem to me to be natural thoughts, the case deviates from Danton's in a couple of ways that make it puzzling. First, it isn't as though there is something obviously important that Mary is blocked from doing. Second, it isn't as though there aren't important things that she can do: survival is important. So, the case resists straightforward application of the kind of analysis that I gave to Danton's case. But, for that reason it also is apt for showing how my account can be extended, and how it covers cases that don't involve someone *literally* being unable to do anything important.

I think that the key to understanding Mary's case lies in the Mistress's request, which should be understood as absurd itself, along the lines of the general account that I developed above. There are two ways in which the Mistress's request seems absurd. First, calling the Mistress's utterance a *request* takes the social world of the household too much at face value. It has the form of a request. It is asked as a question, as you might ask a stranger in the grocery store to help direct you to the frozen foods aisle. It is friendly and polite. And Mary is addressed in an intimate way – as you might address a friend or family member when in need of help. But this is all deceiving. The Mistress's utterance is really a command. Mary needs to do what the Mistress says or she will be fired. The surface features of the utterance, then, suggest that it is motivated by a concern with or relationship to Mary that involves taking certain things seriously – things like Mary's own interests and time. In saying "I don't mean to trouble you," the Mistress implies that she takes these things seriously. But this quite egregiously diverges from reality – Mary is wearing a uniform; the Mistress is dressed in fancy clothes. Everyone knows that Mary will be fired if she doesn't obey. Commands are issued without any concern about Mary's interests. The Mistress does not really take these things seriously.

The absurdity of the request makes Mary's own choice situation look absurd in the following way. First, it brings to mind a framing of her own situation in a way that parallels the request: as a situation in which the value of something like friendly mutual aid is being treated as important, such that she could act on this basis. This is the assumption behind the charade. But it is blindingly obvious to Mary that she shouldn't reason about her action on this basis. Doing so could very well get her fired, if she for instance told the Mistress: "Look, I'm really pressed with all this work I need to get done with the drapes, but I can definitely help you out next time." The egregious divergence here is between what is implied to be worth taking seriously here and what is in fact worth taking seriously – considerations about how to scrape by, day by day, without offending the Mistress. But second, the fact of this divergence leads to another, related way of framing the situation. As I said,

Mary would be making a mistake if she reasoned about how to act as if she stood in a free relationship of mutual aid to her Mistress. But she thinks that she *should* be able to reason in this way, because she *should* be in a free relationship of mutual aid with her Mistress. She thinks that she is wronged by being forced into servitude. These thoughts all seem to me to be correct. And they make sense of why Mary might think both that the charade is absurd and that having to follow orders to scrape by is absurd, by illuminating the intimate connection between the absurdity of the two.

As briefly as possible, let me give my diagnosis in the abstract, using the account that I've developed. Here are two things that Mary values: her own dignity and human beings standing in right relations to one another. In valuing these things, Mary recognizes certain reasons and has certain dispositions. She treats certain things seriously. There are also cases where she is inclined to frame choice situations in light of the absence of those values. In the case under consideration, she frames her choice as one in which she ought to be able to act for the reasons that stem from standing in right relations: the value of mutual aid. Framing her situation in this way is a manifestation of the fact that she takes dignity and standing in right relations seriously. But she recognizes that her actual options diverge egregiously: she can't act from this value, because she doesn't stand in right relations with the Mistress. In fact, the surface features of her options make this all the more salient – everything has the trappings of servitude, and she knows that her options are shaped by a power possessed by the Mistress which is the very antithesis of standing in right relations. And so, her options seem absurd. What triggers this way of framing the situation is the absurdity of the Mistress's request. But this framing is not merely seeing her situation through her Mistress's eyes, as it were, but recognizing a moral absurdity in her situation, which is the manifestation of the fact that she takes the value of dignity and standing in right relations seriously.

This diagnosis requires explication and defense, and now I want to do this in the course of contrasting the features of Mary's case with Danton's. Danton's case was limited and extreme. Danton's valuing of the French Revolution makes it particularly important to him to do something to save it, given that it is going down the drain. This intuitive importance makes the fact Danton can do nothing apt to analogize with cases of grief; just as the loss of a friend makes it apt to frame one's choice situations in light of being unable to do anything with the friend, the central importance that the Revolution plays in Danton's life and the severe downward spiral that it is currently in makes it apt to frame his choice situation in light of being unable to do anything about the Revolution. Doing this is a manifestation of taking a friendship and the Revolution seriously, respectively. But Mary's case is quite different. It is true that she values dignity and standing in right relations with others. Taking these seriously will be manifested in how Mary frames certain choice situations. But these values are trampled on all the time, and Mary faces a life full of choice situations where she *should* be able to act on the basis of these values but cannot. Yet, although Mary might experience large swaths of her life as being absurd on this basis, I didn't mean my account to entail this. I don't think that Mary would *fail* to take these values seriously if she didn't always frame her choice situations in this way. Doing so might, in fact, manifest a naïve failure to come to terms with just how messed up the real world is. And I was imagining Mary's case as one which, in virtue of special features, made this kind of framing particularly salient and appropriate.

This is the role that the absurdity of the request plays. Mary needs to be able to recognize the request as a veiled command in order to be able to survive. But her valuing of dignity and standing in right relations also give her reason to be upset by the nature of such requests. The ideological system of false nicety papering over the system of servitude makes a mockery of dignity and standing in right relations, analogous to the way that falsifying scientific results in order to rise to prominence in the field makes a mockery of science. Just as someone who values science would

have reason to be upset by plagiarism, Mary has reason to be upset by the system of false nicety. But we don't always have the negative attitudes made rational by what we value, and there's nothing wrong with this fact. When we do, it is usually because there is something particularly striking or salient about the object of our attitude. And this is the role that the absurdity of the request plays. The particularly striking way in which the request's surface form deviates from the reality underneath hits Mary and makes her upset. Because she takes dignity and standing in right relations seriously, this particularly egregious deviation strikes Mary as a mockery. And a perfectly natural extension of this reaction is to think of the choices that one faces in response to the request in terms of how they *should* be able to be made on the basis of the values that are being made a mockery of. The particular absurdity of the request explains why Mary frames her choices as she does and finds them to be absurd.

Danton's case was unique and extreme, too, in that nothing of much value seemed to be at stake in choosing between playing cards and reading the newspaper. Mary's situation is different: surviving is important. And, whether she survives hinges on what she chooses to do. But this is just to say that Danton's case is a limiting one. What Mary finds absurd about her choice is not that all of her options seem unimportant compared to dignity and right relations. What she finds absurd is the gap between what her choices would look like if she could choose on this basis and what they actually look like.

There is a familiar genre of comedy in which servants or people in the service industry subtly or not-so-subtly mock the pretensions of their social world. (I'm thinking here primarily of British comedies: *You Rang, M'Lord* or *Are You Being Served?*) And it is easy to imagine Mary wanting to vent her frustration by subtly parodying her Mistress's request. "Of course," she might say with careful irony, "You know how much I love you." But the account that I've given of the nature of the absurdity, coupled with the account of make-believe I developed, shows how something much

deeper may be under the surface. Mary's ironic parodying of the norms of servitude may amount to the simultaneous expression of a wish that she lived in a world where dignity and right relations were taken seriously and her own recognition that this is a *mere* wish.

7. Conclusion: The Road Ahead

In this chapter, I gave an account of absurd choice situations and an account of a kind of irony as a response to those choice situations, as well as articulating the moral importance of the relevant kind of absurdity and irony. In the rest of the dissertation, I'm going to show the fruitfulness of these accounts. In the next chapter, I'm going to take a slight detour through the topic of akrasia. Here I'm going to argue for the moral importance of a kind of self-awareness in akrasia which has been overlooked. In doing this, I'm going to articulate the importance of taking oneself seriously in a way that will make akrasia apt to lead to absurdity. In chapter three, I'm going to argue that contentment and affirmation play a wide-ranging role in our practical thinking, in light of their ubiquitous connection to what we value, and this makes us apt to encounter absurd choice situations. In chapter four, I'm going to consider a common but puzzling phenomenon: the way in which the thought that some emotion is "not worth it" shows the emotion not to be fitting. My explanation of this phenomenon will appeal to the discussion of seriousness developed in this chapter and will show how we can end up in emotionally absurd situations.

CHAPTER TWO: The Virtues of Transparent Akrasia

1. Introduction

Philosophers have been interested in "lucid" or "clear-eyed" akrasia primarily as a phenomenon that calls into question the guise-of-the-good thesis. An agent is lucidly akratic, roughly, if they are fully cognizant while they are acting that their action is bad. This causes trouble for those philosophers who hold the guise-of-the-good thesis, which, roughly, is the view that agents always perform actions that they regard as in some way good. Debate centers on the very possibility of lucid cases of akrasia. I think, however that an important feature of purported cases of lucid akrasia has been overlooked. Close attention to such cases reveals that, whether or not the guise-of-the-good thesis is true, an agent can be more or less cognizant of the fact that they are doing something bad while they are acting. Such cases, then, raise an interesting question that floats free of the debates in which they have been discussed: is there any sense in which it is better to be more rather than less cognizant of the fact that one is acting badly in being akratic? The core claim of this chapter is: yes. I develop my case for this claim as follows: in §2, I introduce and explain a phenomenon that I label "transparency" in akrasia. Then I compare transparency with lucidity as it has been discussed in the literature. I argue that although an agent's being transparent in their akrasia bears some of the hallmarks of lucid akrasia, being transparently akratic does not entail being lucidly akratic in any philosophically controversial sense. Everyone has good reason to accept the actuality of transparent akrasia regardless of their position in debates over the possibility of lucid akrasia. In §3, I begin my case for thinking that the phenomenon of transparent akrasia is philosophically interesting in its own right. To frame my view, I consider a recent paper by Alison McIntyre which argues that sometimes agents do the best that they can by being lucidly akratic. I argue that the case McIntyre makes to establish this conclusion intuitively supports the wisdom of transparency in

akrasia, not lucidity in any controversial sense. However, although her case is compelling, McIntyre fails to offer insight into why transparent akrasia should be preferable to mere akrasia. This motivates my own positive account of the virtues of transparent akrasia which I give in §4. In brief, I argue that we have reason to value our own agency, and that valuing one's agency often involves responding to akrasia in ways that render it transparent; a lack of transparency in akrasia, then, is often a mark of a failure to take oneself seriously. In §5, I conclude by discussing the implications that my view has for absurdity and irony.

2. Transparency Versus Lucidity

To start, I want to introduce an example and two broad definitions to frame the discussion in this section. Imagine that you think that you should clean out your garage today. Your judgment is based on good reasons: you need to pack tomorrow for a trip that you are taking, and you won't be able to do that unless you make some room in the garage to get your camping gear into the trunk of your car, and a lot of the camping gear itself is lost in the mess of junk that takes up most of the space in the garage. But you get a text from your friend inviting you to take a walk in Griffith Park, and you decide to do that instead. It seems more fun than cleaning the garage. You don't, however, change your mind about what you *should* do. It is not as if you think that you have stronger reasons to spend time with your friend than you have to clean the garage. You don't. But, nevertheless, you decide to do – and *do* do – what you think you shouldn't.

This example describes a paradigmatic case of akrasia. Akrasia is standardly taken to refer to cases in which an agent acts against their better judgment.[40] And this is exactly what I have done in the example: I judge that I should clean my garage, but I don't do that – I go to Griffith Park instead.

[40] See Sarah Stroud's entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on "Weakness of Will."

My akrasia may also be more or less – to coin a term – "transparent" to me. Here's the phenomenon I have in mind: I might get my friend's text and, while typing back "see you at 3!" be all the while thinking about the fact that going to Griffith Park is a bad idea. While taking the walk, I might also feel upset about the fact that I'm not cleaning the garage and be preoccupied with thoughts about how I'm messing up my plans to take a camping trip. In contrast, I might not be so preoccupied at all. I might simply be excited by the prospect of spending time with my friend and engrossed in our conversations while we are taking the walk. Both cases are akratic. In the first case, my akrasia is (painfully) present to mind in a way that it isn't in the second case. But in the second case, I'm still akratic; if you asked me during my walk whether I was doing what I thought I should be doing, I'd tell you "No." In the first case, then, my akrasia is transparent, while in the second it is not.

Two caveats. First, I don't mean to indicate that cases of akrasia should be sharply divided into transparent and non-transparent cases. The phenomenon occupies a spectrum from cases in which one's akrasia is markedly present to one's mind and markedly absent from one's mind. When I speak of cases of transparent akrasia, regard this as shorthand for cases of akrasia which are more, rather than less, transparent. Second, my example describes this presence of mind in terms of occurrent thoughts and feelings about my acting against my better judgment. I don't mean these features to be exhaustive. I want to give a flavor of the phenomenon I want in view, and the presence of certain thoughts and feelings seems to me the most easily identifiable and salient features of the phenomenon. That we can be more or less preoccupied with our own akrasia seems to me a familiar phenomenon from ordinary life (at least for the anxiety-ridden non-virtuous), and at this point we can proceed with this rough-and-ready gloss on the phenomenon.

Readers familiar with the literature on akrasia may already be puzzled. I have introduced a new term – "transparent" – to pick out the phenomenon I just described. But the literature already

includes discussions of "lucid" or "clear-eyed" akrasia, and these labels are applied to phenomena which might seem indistinguishable from the phenomenon I've labeled "transparent." Here's the problem: discussions of "lucid" or "clear-eyed" akrasia are often concerned to defend the bare existence of the phenomenon. A defense is necessary, because the claim that lucid akrasia exists is controversial. The claim is controversial, in turn, because it is inconsistent with the "guise of the good." Philosophers who want to defend the guise of the good need to maintain that lucid akrasia is impossible, and so must explain away apparent cases of lucid akrasia.[41] The upshot is that, for many philosophers, calling an instance of akrasia "lucid" or "clear-eyed" suggests that a controversial theoretical apparatus is already being deployed. My point in this section will be: there's a sense in which one's akrasia can be more, rather than less, present to one's mind that floats free of controversial theoretical commitments. Akrasia's being "transparent" in my sense doesn't entail its being "lucid" or "clear-eyed" in the philosophically controversial senses. This is my reason for coining a new label. The rest of this section aims to defend the thesis that transparency does not entail lucidity.[42]

Some philosophers affirm the "guise of the good" – roughly the view that we are always motivated to act by our judgment that the act is in some way good, or by the apprehension of some goodness in the act. Such philosophers, then, interpret the phenomenon of akrasia – acting against one's better judgment – as a matter of being moved by a judgment that one's action is good in some regard, although not all things considered. Proponents of this sort of view face a question: in cases of akrasia, why does a judgment of good in some regard – rather than good all things considered –

[41] See Sergio Tenenbaum, *Appearances of the Good*, chapter 7.

[42] Another way of putting the point is: there is a kind of lucidity or aspects of lucidity in akrasia that can be articulated in terms that do not beg the question or take sides in debates over the guise of the good. Some readers have found such a presentation more confusing, while others have found coining a new term more confusing. Apologies to readers of this chapter who fall into the latter camp.

motivate? A metaphorical way of putting the answer is to say that that one's better judgment is "clouded" by the temptation of a more proximate good. Whatever this amounts to philosophically, it is supported by the phenomenology of many familiar cases of akrasia. I've made a resolution to stop eating dessert, but in the presence of a piece of cake, the goodness of the cake seems overwhelming, blocking the force of my better judgment.

One might contest such a picture in two ways. First, one might deny that we always do act for some apparent good. Akrasia might be "lucid," then, by involving an agent who is perfectly well aware, while acting against their better judgment, that what they are doing is in no way good.[43] This is not a tempting move in the cake example. But the issue is whether the cake example is the template on which all cases of akrasia are to be explained; the "guise of the good" requires that they must. Consider one of the examples from Michael Stocker's classic paper "Desiring the Bad," the case of desiring to harm others. Stocker claims that it is commonplace and commonsensical to think that one might desire to harm other human beings while at the same time thinking that it isn't good to harm human beings. We may be attracted or motivated, furthermore, by such a desire. And, Stocker thinks, there is no good reason to suppose that this desire is connected to any sort of evaluation of the bad thing we're attracted to as in any way good. Sometimes we want to do bad things and we're attracted to them *simply* by what makes them bad. If one is actually motivated in such a case, one acts akratically insofar as one does what one thinks is bad or what one shouldn't do. But one is not moved to act out of the appreciation of any good at all. The upshot here is that in

[43] In *Reasons without Rationalism*, Kieran Setiya puts the view in terms of seeing one's *reason* for action, as opposed to the action itself, as in some way good. (See pgs. 36-38.) This thesis *sounds* weaker and its denial perhaps might be more plausible for some cake-like examples. But we don't need to pause over these subtleties for my purposes – Setiya's general arguments against the view are in the same vein as Stocker's.

cases like those Stocker is imagining, "lucidity" is an apt label, because the agent displays a kind of sober clarity about the badness of their actions.[44]

Second, one might deny the picture by denying that "clouding" is involved in all cases of akrasia. One may, in the moment, perfectly well appreciate the force of one's all-things-considered judgment – the force that would move one to act under better circumstances – and the comparative paltriness of the good to be had in alternative courses of action. Nevertheless, one may opt for the lesser good. Again, this doesn't seem to me an attractive thing to say about cake examples. But it is more tempting in other cases. Kieran Setiya gives the following as an example of "clear-eyed" akrasia:

> Smoking is pleasant, and so I have a reason to do it—though on the whole, I know that I had better not. Suppose, then, that I decide to smoke, knowing that I need to buy cigarettes in order to do so. Perhaps it is true that my intention adds a further reason, along with the pleasure of smoking, for me to buy them. But these reasons are not conclusive: in the sense of "should" which reports what there is most or decisive reason to do, I know that I should not buy a pack of cigarettes. Doing so would be *akratic*. ("Cognitivism about Instrumental Reason," 654)

Here, we can imagine the smoker perfectly well appreciates the force of their all-things-considered judgment. Although smoking may be pleasant, they may not be overwhelmed by the attractiveness of smoking as I am by the attractiveness of cake. Sometimes addiction looks like getting swamped by ordinary temptations; in other cases, it looks more like frighteningly lucid compulsion. The label "lucid" seems appropriate here, because the agent is in no way unclear about the force of their judgment that the good of smoking is trumped by the bad of smoking. They are simply unmoved by it.[45]

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[44] See Stocker's "Desiring the Bad," *passim*. Of course, this description of the case is question-begging. If the "guise of the good" theorist is correct, it will not be sober – or perhaps even coherent – to think of oneself as acting without being attracted by something good. But that's to reiterate my point: the language of "lucidity" is fraught.

[45] It is actually unclear in context what Setiya regards as distinctively lucid about this case – he doesn't say what is supposed to be "lucid" about the case beyond the paragraph quoted. And, as noted in footnote 43, when Setiya

Of course, the claims that akrasia can be "lucid" in the two senses just laid out are controversial. If it is really possible to imagine someone lucid – in the sense that they regard themselves soberly as attracted by the bad – then the view that all actions go by way of judgments of the good is false. And, if it is really possible to imagine someone lucid – in the sense that they fully appreciate the force of their all-things-considered judgment – then the view that judgments of the lesser good cloud all-things-considered judgments is false. So, there is impetus for philosophers attempting to defend such theses to come up with plausible redescriptions of the cases so that they do not involve the relevant sort of "lucidity."

Here's my point: what I've called "transparency" above is a commonsense phenomenon. Everyone should believe in it. This is perhaps not convincing. Some philosophers claim that "lucidity" is a commonsense phenomenon; everyone should the deny guise of the good. But most importantly, transparency does not entail lucidity in either of the controversial senses laid out. Consider: the fact of my akrasia being present to mind – in thought and feeling – throughout my walk in Griffith Park may be because I think my reasons are not good. Or it may be because I can feel the force of my all-things-considered judgment and am upset that I am not moved by it. But it might just as easily go the other way: I might be preoccupied with the fact that I am moved by a lesser good or the fact that I cannot feel the ordinary force of my all-things considered judgment. Or my akrasia might be particularly present to mind for other reasons. Now, let's see why transparent akrasia is interesting.

discusses lucid akrasia in *Reasons without Rationalism*, it is to a establish a point analogous to Stocker's. Whatever Setiya intends, the example as explicated serves my purposes; what I say should not be regarded as an interpretation of Setiya.

3. The Importance of Transparent Akrasia

Work in moral psychology often focuses on articulating an ideal of well-functioning agency. However, important work has focused attention on the fertile middle ground between perfection and complete failure.[46] I want to focus on an argument that practical defect is sometimes unavoidable given by Alison McIntyre. McIntyre motivates her argument for this conclusion by reflection on the character of Jim Dixon, a half-hearted university lecturer floating at the peripheries of the academy, in Kingsley Amis's novel *Lucky Jim*. In a memorable scene, Dixon finds himself having left burn marks in the bedclothes and rugs in a room where he is staying. He thinks that he ought to tell his hostess that he's left these burn marks. But Dixon doesn't think that he can bring himself to do this, and so he doesn't think that he will end up telling his hostess. What should Dixon do?

This sort of situation is utterly commonplace, familiar from fiction and life. We often know what we should do but are self-conscious enough about our foibles to know that we aren't going to do what we know we should do. McIntyre introduces the case because, despite its familiarity, it has structural features which cause some real trouble for popular (and attractive) views about the nature of practical rationality.[47] To see this, let's get the views on the table.

First, there is a purported rational requirement connecting practical judgment and intention: If you believe that you ought to φ, then you should intend to φ. Suppose, as John Broome argues, that this requirement should be understood as having wide-scope. That is, the requirement tells you about a package of attitudes that need to go together for Dixon to count as practically rational: [(Belief: I ought to φ), (Intention: to φ)]. Dixon also has two further beliefs that are relevant: he

[46] In addition to the work by McIntyre discussed, see Nomy Arpaly, "On Acting Rationally Against One's Better Judgment" and *Unprincipled Virtue*, and Jonathan Bennett, "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn."

[47] For a related discussion, see Berislav Marušić, "Promising against the Evidence."

believes that there are very good reasons that he ought to tell the hostess what he has done. But he also believes that he will be unable to tell her, and so that he won't, whatever he intends to do now. These further beliefs create real trouble, because they make perfectly rational resolution of attitudes in Dixon's case impossible. Given that Dixon believes that he has good reasons to φ, he thinks that he ought to believe that he ought to φ. He'd be irrational, then, not to believe this. But he also thinks that he won't φ. So, he'd be irrational to intend to φ. All of Dixon's options, then, indict him as irrational: (1) He attempts to rationalize himself out of his belief about what he ought to do; (2) He intends to do something that he knows he won't do; or (3) He believes that he ought to do something, but fails to intend to do it.[48]

McIntyre's diagnosis of the case is a wise one, I think: she remarks that the correct response to Dixon's dilemma is to say that he should be a better person, but that, given the situation, it is probably best to opt for a lucid form of akrasia, sticking to (3), while keeping his practical judgment clearly in mind as he fails to act on it.[49] I'll return to why I take this to be a wise diagnosis soon. But first I want to pull back and discuss what is at stake in McIntyre's discussion of this case.

Following Richard Holton, McIntryre distinguishes between weakness of will and akrasia, where these are supposed to be two distinct failures of practical rationality. Akrasia involves acting against one's better judgment. Weakness of will involves failing to carry out one's intentions.[50] These can pull apart. Akrasia is standardly characterized in purely formal terms. (I.e., one can fail to do what one judges one has most reason to do but end up in some sense better off in substantive terms, if one made a mistake in judgment.) Whether the "irrationality" of akrasia is particularly

[48] See especially §VII of McIntyre, pgs. 304-11. For Broome on this rational requirement see "Normative Requirements," which is cited by McIntyre.

[49] McIntyre, pgs. 306-8.

[50] Ibid., §II, pgs. 290-92. See also Richard Holton, "Intention and Weakness of Will."

troubling independent of substantive ethical considerations is an interesting issue. This is the source of Nomy Arpaly's insightful discussion of Huck Finn cases, and it is notable that Aristotle seems only interested in the akratic whose judgment is correct.[51]

McIntyre, however, is interested in a related, but distinct worry about the overemphasis on the formal structure of akrasia. McIntyre's point is that akrasia is not the only defect of practical reason which can be described in roughly formal or procedural terms, and although it is in some sense the most *glaring* formal problem — in the paradigm case, the agent is aware of themselves as having a problematic mismatch in attitudes — it is not always the most important one. McIntrye introduces the idea of a "resolution" as a way of articulating another roughly procedural error that may occur in practical rationality. Resolutions are intentions formed in order to counter anticipated temptations. Giving up a resolution for good reasons involves a certain minor defect in techniques of self-management. (One hasn't mastered the art of the resolution.) Giving up a resolution for bad reasons — fixed by *the* reasons that there actually are — amounts to what McIntyre calls weakness of will.[52]

Here's why this matters for McIntyre's diagnosis of Dixon's case. The importance of resolutions, as conceived by McIntyre, adds weight to the intuitive considerations against Dixon's either revising his judgment or forming the resolution. If we take a broader view of what is involved in practical rationality, even if construed fairly formally, we'll see that although incoherent attitudes perhaps are always symptoms of some problem, they are not always the primary thing that needs fixing. To form the intention against the future temptation, even when one knows it will fail at that

[51] See Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII; and Stephen Brock's survey article "Weakness of Will," which argues that Aristotle is primarily interested in a distinctive appetitive phenomenon.

[52] McIntyre, §§V-VI, pgs. 299-304. Notice: the first minor defect is purely procedural. The second defect is substantial, but McIntyre gives reasons for thinking that, from the agent's point of view, there are good reasons to hold that there is a presumption in favor of carrying through on resolutions. This doesn't affect the use I want to make of McIntyre's work, so I won't discuss it further.

job, is a misuse of a power of self-management which is important to preserve, and which can be sapped by inapt usage. To revise one's judgment not only requires one to willfully ignore evidence, but it obscures to oneself the nature of the key problem in one's agency — that something has led one into a position in which one can't act on one's best judgment. So, McIntyre concludes: "Lucid akrasia may well be Dixon's best move in the circumstances" (307). This is why lucid akrasia is the best bet: it avoids these pitfalls. And the injunction to be a better person is not practically applicable in this situation, but that's the point: one needs to figure out what's gone wrong in one's life such that one finds oneself in these situations.

Now, I want to raise a puzzle about McIntyre's conclusion: why is it supposed to be that advising Dixon to be *lucidly* akratic seems particularly wise? Here is something that Dixon shouldn't do: revise his moral judgment. Why shouldn't he do that? Well, because the evidence supports his judgment. If he revised his judgment, he'd end up with one that wasn't supported by the evidence. More specifically, Dixon shouldn't change his judgment by rationalization. That is, roughly: the mismatch would be worse if it were the product of a particularly common and pernicious defect of human rationality, in which evidence is misconstrued because it is in one's interest to misconstrue it. Notice: these are two accounts of what would be bad about revising the judgment, or, perhaps, one account and a species of defect that is particularly relevant to McIntyre's cases. However, notice: one could avoid both of these errors without being lucidly akratic. McIntyre simply gives Dixon reasons *not to change the judgment*. Perhaps this entails that the best Dixon can do is akrasia, if akrasia is supposed to be the only other option. However, I take it that McIntyre intends there to be something special about the kind of akrasia she refers to, in virtue of specifying its being *lucid*.

McIntyre's intuition here seems to be correct to me. It is not just that Dixon would do better if he were akratic rather than rationalizing. His akrasia would be less bad if it were present to mind at important junctures throughout his action – if he were aware of his akratic action *as* akratic. I think

that McIntyre's label of "lucid" points in this direction, but notice that – in light of my arguments in §2 – we don't need to establish the possibility of lucid akrasia in any controversial sense to see the force of McIntyre's point. It would be better for Dixon to be transparently akratic in my sense.

So why be transparently akratic? One option is to think that any failure in transparency throughout akrasia amounts to rationalizing away one's judgment. To maintain the judgment that one is acting for bad reasons is just what it is to be aware of one's action as bad as one is performing it. This thought is attractive. But, so starkly stated, it is false. My description of different degrees of transparency in akrasia in §2 show that it is false.

To reinforce this point, consider the following two ways that Dixon might be akratic. (A) Dixon keeps the judgment in his mind as leaves his room, noticing that the fear of his hostess that he experiences is no good reason to think that he shouldn't tell her what he's done, even as he consciously goes about avoiding her. (B) Dixon jots down in his notebook "You should tell your hostess about the burn marks in your room" and "Fear is no reason not to tell your hostess about the burn marks in your room." This is a notebook in which Dixon frequently jots down his thoughts about the day, and he always reflects on them at night, so he knows that these judgments will not be forgotten. Then he preoccupies himself with the other plans he has for the day. He doesn't rationalize his bad action away, but he avoids thinking about it until later that night when he sits down to reflect on what he's written in his notebook.

I think that (A) is better than (B) in Dixon's case, and that would be my advice to Dixon. But the point at hand is this: the reasons against rationalization don't obviously decide between the two, because Dixon doesn't rationalize or even approach rationalizing in either case. If we are to prefer (A) to (B), it cannot be on the grounds that (B) involves rationalization, because it doesn't.

Here's another reason for preferring (A) over (B): (A) is more valuable instrumentally insofar as it is a better way of bringing it about that one will not rationalize. I take this idea to be hinted at in

McIntyre's claim that "the lucidly akratic agent's resistance to the temptation to rationalize a change of mind seems to be just the kind of thing that generally produces strength of will" (304). Focusing on the ways in which fear is *not* a reason in the moment is just more likely to stave off rationalization. Relying on checking a notebook later is a more complex process that introduces many more points at which failure could occur. Furthermore, McIntyre has not considered my alternative (B) which is a little bit odd or at least relies on Dixon having a practice which is not widely shared. (A) certainly seems like the most efficient, generally available, widely known method of promoting the avoidance of rationalization which someone who was not intimately familiar with Dixon could recommend. It is of course an empirical claim that (A) is a more efficient method, but we can't help but getting by in life without a bit of empirical guesswork about the way that other human beings work.

But I don't find this rationale for preferring (A) compelling for a couple of reasons. First, it isn't actually obvious that focusing on, e.g., one's fear in the moment *is* a more efficient method to avoid rationalization. Fear might overwhelm Dixon to the point where it did start to seem to him like a good reason to avoid telling the hostess. Perhaps the notebook method is a better way to maintain one's judgments in light of the distorting effect that things like emotions sometimes have. It might require some kind of limited courage even to be able to look at one's own badness head on, courage that someone like Dixon might lack in the exact same way that he lacks the character traits necessary to do what he thinks he should. But, more importantly, even if my claim here is false – it does seem true that in many cases *really paying attention* to what we're doing makes it harder to tell fanciful stories about ourselves – it is in general true that this rationale is based on empirical guesswork, and so hostage to the fortunes of contingency. If it turned out that (B) or some unthought of method were more efficient at staving off rationalization, then McIntyre on this rationale ought to recommend that. Perhaps McIntyre would be satisfied with outsourcing "lucidity"

to an app. I am not. While it seems likely that there are some good character-building effects associated with (A) which make it preferable to (B), these strike me as downstream from a more fundamental way in which (A) involves an intrinsically better use of agency in Dixon's case. Now I want to make my own positive case for this claim.

4. The Virtues of Transparent Akrasia

In this section, I'm going to make the case for the importance of transparency in akrasia in the following way. First, I'm going to introduce an intuitive notion of "taking oneself seriously." Then, I'm going to argue that we should explicate core features of this notion in terms of valuing one's own agency, something I'll argue we have good reasons to do. My account of valuing one's agency entails that we have reasons to be emotionally vulnerable to defects and failures in our agency. Next, I argue that akrasia involves the kind of defect or failure in agency that, in important cases, we have good reason to experience negative emotions about. I argue that the kind of threat akrasia poses in these cases calls for a response that constitutively involves more, rather than less, transparency. So, insofar as we have good reason to value our own agency, we have reason for a certain kind of transparency in akrasia. And, insofar as it would constitute a failure to properly value one's agency if such transparency were absent, transparent akrasia is better. I conclude my case by considering some objections and upshots of my account. Finally, in the next section, I move on to argue that my account gives us the materials to make sense of a phenomenon that I dub "absurd" akrasia and why a kind of irony in akrasia would amount to taking oneself seriously.

I want to start with the following claim: most of us take ourselves seriously to one degree or another, and we are correct to do so. What do I mean by "taking oneself seriously"? Sometimes we talk about people who are *self-serious*, and this is usually used as a pejorative: the person in question has an inflated sense of their own importance. Other times we speak of people taking themselves

seriously *qua* some particular role that they play: "They take being a teacher seriously." But there is, I think, a sensible way of speaking of people taking themselves seriously which is not pejorative and which is not associated with any contingent role they happen to inhabit, but with the most general role they by necessity inhabit: that of a human agent. There are certain generally important things that go with being a human agent, that outstrip any particular role one may happen to play: deliberating carefully, making use of one's talents, taking responsibility, owning up to one's mistakes, acting from a mature conception of what is really valuable. These aspects of being a human agent all have a certain gravity, and a good human agent accords them this gravity – both in doing these things in the appropriate way and in having appropriate attitudes towards them and to the successes and failures connected with them. We do and should take these things seriously, in the sense that we should accord these things a certain gravity. Often, though, it would not seem particularly suitable to speak of an agent who was, say, careful in deliberating as "taking themselves seriously" in doing so. If they are taking anything seriously, it would seem to be the decision or the aspects of the world the decision concerns. (If I were carefully deliberating about my will, we might say that I took my children's future welfare seriously.)

But sometimes these important aspects of being an agent become salient in a general way, and our judgments and attitudes turn inward. This is most easily seen in cases of failure. Imagine a parent, frustrated at a child who is squandering their intellectual and social talents and living a generally frivolous life. When confronted by these facts, the child laughs it off with a self-deprecating remark. "They aren't taking themselves seriously!" the parent might think in exasperation. The thought here is that the child isn't properly appreciating what is important about themselves as a human agent, quite generally, independent of any particular application of agency or valuable project that their agency is involved in.

Here's another example: my best friend Greg remarked to me about how humorous the obviously false answers on the multiple-choice portion of the New York State driver's permit test were. To fill in "I should be cautious on the road…" the test offered as an option: "never. Other drivers will compensate for my mistakes." The thing is, it's all too easy to drive as if this were true. And it is all too easy to live as if it were true in a more general sense. We often act without properly appreciating the impact of what we say and do. A cutting remark in an argument can bring one to the realization that one is generally cavalier in one's actions in a way that one finds shameful upon a moment's reflection. This revelation is often not about particular failures, but about more general aspects of one's character. Part of this is outward-looking: I can't believe I act like *that*, I might think. I don't really take the impact I have on other people seriously. But part of it is inward-looking: I can't believe I'm that type of person. I don't take *myself* seriously – in the sense that I'm not properly responsive to the importance that I have as agent that has the power to change and shape a world that I share with other agents. My failure to take others seriously is rooted in failures to take seriously the kind of importance that I actually have in the grand scheme of things.

In the first chapter, I argued that we can illuminate judgments of seriousness by appeal to judgments about what an agent values. Here, I want to argue that taking oneself seriously is connected to valuing one's own agency. What is it to value one's own agency in the sense I'm after? Here I want to draw on Niko Kolodny's account of love as valuing a relationship to provide a template for giving an account of a particular kind of valuing. On my account, X's valuing X's own agency involves at least the following:

> (i) believing that X has an instance, a, of a finally valuable type of agency, A (first-personally, where X identifies themselves as X);
>
> (ii) being emotionally vulnerable to a (in ways that are appropriate to A), and believing that a is a noninstrumental reason for being so; and

(iii) believing that a is a noninstrumental reason for A to act in a's interest (in ways that are appropriate to A), and having, on that basis, a standing intention to do so.[53]

These conditions make more explicit what is taken to be involved in the general phenomenon of valuing one's own agency. What is necessary at this point is to make plausible the thought that the kind of relation to one's own agency marked out by conditions (i)-(iii) is in fact a familiar phenomenon, and it is a phenomenon that is worth endorsing. For, as my discussion of taking oneself seriously suggested, it might be thought that we do not typically think about our own agency in this way. If we think about our agency at all, it is in terms of what our agency can bring about in the world. Further, this kind of reflexive valuing, not merely of particular things that involve our agential input, but of our own agency itself, can look problematically self-regarding – perhaps narcissistic. The initial discussion of taking oneself seriously was intended to dispel some of these worries, but I want to take each of the conditions in turn and defend them by describing them as plausibly as I can, against problematic misinterpretations.

Put plainly, condition (i) simply involves believing that a core aspect of oneself is valuable in its own right: one's own agency. The truth of this condition should not be controversial to anyone who thinks people are intrinsically valuable. For all it does is to focus on one aspect of what is

[53] See Kolodny "Love as Valuing a Relationship," pgs. 150-51. My conditions (i), (ii), and (iii) correspond almost word for word to Kolodny's conditions (i), (iii), and (v) respectively, changing the wording to reflect the change in subject matter. In this way I am treating Kolodny's account of love as providing an abstract schema for analyzing different topics in terms of valuing. This move can be seen in the work of R. Jay Wallace and Agnes Callard, all drawing on the general schema provided by Samuel Scheffler in his essay "Valuing." Scheffler himself goes on to apply this general schema to the topics of relationships, projects, and communities in subsequent essays. I use Kolodny's version specifically because the way he lays out the conditions offers a helpful model of precision in working with the concept of valuing. In addition to the three conditions laid out here, we might also add a fourth condition, parallel to Kolodny's (vi): "(iv) believing that an instance, a*, of type A provides (a) anyone who has a* with similar reasons for emotion and action toward a*, and (b) anyone who doesn't have a* with different reasons for action and emotion regarding a*." It's not important to discuss this condition for two reasons. First, as noted, my (i)-(iii) are not meant to be sufficient conditions, only necessary ones. As such, I only want the conditions on the table that are pertinent to the heart of the argument I will go on to make. Second, Kolodny's discussion of his (vi) (parallel to my (iv)) is important because he wants to treat the sense in which the reasons for love are in some ways universal and in other ways agent-relative. This topic is central to discussions of love. There are interesting things to say about parallels here with reasons for being upset about akrasia, but it would distract from the main argument of this chapter.

involved in the general claim that people are intrinsically valuable. People are, amongst other things, both receptive intellects and spontaneous agents. To think that people are valuable intrinsically is to think of them as valuable in both these aspects. This is a belief that we should have about ourselves, and about every other person.

Condition (ii) treats the emotional dimensions of valuing one's own agency. Often, we are emotionally vulnerable to things involving our agency. But this doesn't look like an emotional vulnerability to our agency as such. Consider the case of friendship. If my friend betrays me, I am emotionally vulnerable to anger. To put things in the terminology of valuing: the betrayal is a harm to the valued relationship. By transgressing a constitutive norm of friendship, my friend has become a threat to the valued relationship. This impacts my agency in a salient way: the threatened relationship is something that involves a history of active involvement on both sides. In some sense, then, the harm and threat can be construed as a harm and threat to my agency. But the reason for anger is not the value of my agency as such. It is the value of the relationship that constitutively involves my agency.

This would only be a problem, however, if all harms and threats to my agency – all of the bad things regarding my agency that merit emotional response – were to be analyzed along the lines just discussed. But they aren't, as my discussion of seriousness suggested. The easiest way to see this is to consider harms and threats to my person more generally. Consider a friend insulting me. I would feel especially upset if my friend insulted me. And, on the account in question, we'd trace the rationale for feeling especially upset to the value of the friendship. In insulting me, my friend has transgressed the norms of friendship. I take this as a special kind of harm and threat, because I value our relationship. But it is not as if I would feel fine if a stranger insulted me. In the context of friendship, insults are more fraught, but this is because friendship layers an additional stratum of valuing on top of the baseline. I'd feel upset if a stranger insulted me, because I have a basic kind of

self-esteem – that is I care about or value my person as such. I think that others owe me basic respect – that they should care about me to the extent that they see my bare existence as a reason to respect me. This is the minimal kind of valuing involved in people standing in right relations to one another.[54]

In line with the points made about (i), we should think of emotional vulnerability to my own agency as falling out of the kind of emotional vulnerability it is appropriate to have to my person as such. This can be obscured by the following two important but contingent features of life: often threats to my person as such are not specifically threats to its active dimension. (Think insults.) And threats that do specifically involve the active dimension in some intuitive respects are almost always inevitably in the context of particular projects of valuing where the value of that project is to be cited as the source of the appropriateness of regarding something as a harm or threat.

The easiest way to get the idea in view is to think of cases in which I interact with someone across a range of valued projects and relationships. Consider someone who is at once my friend, colleague, and bridge partner. They are patronizing and paternalistic across a whole range of contexts variably associated with these three differently valued relationships. They don't care about me being able to act from my sense of what is important – as a friend, as a colleague, or as a bridge partner. This may violate the particular norms of all of these relationships, and I may be upset in a distinctive way tied to all of these contexts. But it seems natural to think of me as having – in addition, or as analytically distinguishable – an anger at being disrespected simply *qua* agent.

This chapter is primarily about self-regarding cases, but this is helpful, because we are – to put things crudely – always interacting with ourselves. Excitement at our triumphs and frustration at our failures is often tied up with the particular nature of the valued projects we are triumphing or

[54] For a structurally similar thought, see J. David Velleman, "Love as a Moral Emotion."

failing at. But we are aware of our own general character across the range of such cases. And failures like akrasia often occur – as with Dixon – in entirely mundane cases of daily living.

One final point. I want to follow Kolodny in noting that the focal point of one's valuing and the reason for one's valuing need not coincide.[55] And in fact, the richly textured nature of the phenomenon of valuing – if Samuel Scheffler's general project is on target, which I'm assuming it is – almost guarantees that they won't always coincide. When I am upset about being akratic, my thoughts will not most obviously be about having messed up in the project of being an agent. They will be about the particular nature of the failure in question. But the reason that such failures are salient to me is because I value my own agency. Put another way: caring about my own integrity doesn't often involve thoughts about the intrinsic value of my own agency. But such thoughts make sense against the background of taking my agency to valuable and caring about it in a particular way.

Condition (iii) treats the components of action and intention with regard to my own agency. Here things become particularly reflexive, because valuing involves turning the very thing valued back on itself. But it seems to me that any worries can be dispelled in a manner parallel to that employed in discussing (ii). Further, an impetus to go meta shouldn't be surprising here at all. In the general case, proper self-esteem makes appropriate certain strategies of self-care. If we have self-esteem, we will react in certain ways to things like insults. We will see certain considerations to be reasons to stand up for ourselves. But we will also take there to be certain reasons to go meta and to manage ourselves. We will become attentive to self-destructive patterns of thought and try to meditate. We will make sure to eat well and get enough sleep, so as to ensure a healthy outlook. This is what is involved in caring about yourself. The same goes in the more specific case for the active aspect of one's person: agency. We have reasons to ensure that we can live up to our ideals in action.

[55] See Kolodny, pgs. 154-61.

Some of those reasons stem from the value of those ideals themselves. But we have independent reason, stemming from caring about ourselves in our specifically active dimension: as agents.

As a final point, I want to elucidate a core feature of what we care about in valuing our own agency by appeal to some conceptual tools in Aristotle. Aristotle employs a distinctive notion of "choice": *prohairesis*. Following Gavin Lawrence, I'll call this "preferential choice."[56] Not all intentional or voluntary actions count as preferentially chosen for Aristotle. Preferentially chosen actions are those that stem from an agent's sense of what it would be to live well – stemming from the agent's values. The chosen action, then, amounts to what the agent thinks constitutes living well in this instance. In this sense of "choice," the good person and the bad person both choose, but the akratic does not, even if her action is voluntary or intentional. The good person's action stems from the correct conception of what it is to live well. The bad person's action stems from an incorrect conception of what it is to live well. The akratic's action, however, is at odds with her conception of what it is to live well.

The concept of preferential choice is at the heart of Aristotle's discussion of action, because this discussion is embedded in a broader picture of practical reason that has living well as its formal object. Under normal conditions, a mature human agent develops a picture of what it is to live well. And, their actions, insofar as they are practically reasoning well, will be based on preferential choice – will be full human actions. I find this picture attractive, although it is controversial. But whatever we think about the more controversial claims about the nature of practical rationality, Aristotle articulates something that we do typically value and value as a core part of valuing our own agency. In being invested in our own agency, we care that our actions spring from what we take to be really valuable. This explains negative emotions directed at ourselves when we fail to do this.

[56] See Lawrence, "Reason, Intention, and Choice: An Essay in Practical Philosophy."

With this general account of valuing one's own agency in mind, I want to return to the topic of akrasia. Akrasia is, by definition, a defect in rational agency. And we are often emotionally vulnerable to this defect when we are self-conscious of it. "I can't believe I'm screwing this up," I might think, expressing my frustration as I ruin my diet by eating another piece of cake. But often, akrasia is a more or less expected, if not welcomed, part of human life, of no more threat to what we value in valuing our agency than a dogeared page is a threat to our valued personal library. And, when akrasia it particularly upsetting, it is often so not primarily on its own, but in light of the other good things that it prevents us from getting. (In the diet case, I'm primarily upset that I won't get the human health I'm after.) But sometimes, akrasia is a manifestation of the more general defects in agency that amount to failures to take oneself seriously or properly value one's own agency on the account that I've developed, and it may be explicitly or implicitly recognized as such. I find myself scrolling Twitter instead of going to bed like I promised myself I would do. And I recognize this as not a mere isolated incident, but as part of a broader pattern of avoiding doing the things I told myself I would do. And I think: you're wasting your talents! You are spending your time doing all sorts of things that you know are not really worthwhile and aren't intellectually satisfying. The instance of akrasia is a particular manifestation of what is a more general failing on my part: a failure to properly value my own agency, to take myself seriously. Or I find myself blurting out my negative thoughts about an acquaintance at a party, even though I promised myself I wouldn't do this. I recognize this as more than an isolated incident: I tend to be cavalier in my remarks about other people. I take this to be a failure to properly respect other people, but also a failure to properly appreciate the importance of the power that I have as an agent. The instance of akrasia, again, is recognized as a manifestation of a failing to properly value my own agency, to take myself seriously.

When akrasia is recognized as manifesting these kinds of failures, it will be the appropriate target of the kinds of negative emotions made appropriate by valuing my own agency. Not to be

upset upon recognizing akrasia as manifesting such failures would constitute a further failure to properly value myself. These negative emotions are paradigmatically self-conscious. And akrasia extends beyond the point of mere decision: it continues throughout the entire episode of action. Here, then, we have the basic ingredients for an argument that transparent akrasia has a distinctive virtue: taking oneself seriously sometimes involves having paradigmatically self-conscious negative emotions regarding akrasia, which involve being aware of the akrasia *as* akrasia. These emotions aptly target not simply the point of the decision, but the entire episode. Taking oneself seriously, then, involves having negative emotions about the episode as it happens which render it transparent. So, there are crucial cases where akrasia's being transparent manifests the fact that one takes oneself seriously; an absence of transparency would manifest a failure to take oneself seriously.

I think that there is something fundamentally correct in the argument that I just sketched. Being aware of one's akrasia as it happens and being upset by it does seem to manifest a kind of seriousness about oneself. But the argument is too quick. First, the claim that the relevant emotions are "paradigmatically self-conscious" requires some subtly. If, when made aware of it, I weren't upset about the kind of agential failure that is manifested by akrasia in the cases under consideration, I would be failing to properly care about my own agency. And being upset about something is often self-conscious; the self-conscious cases are usually those that we consider when giving a philosophical account of an emotion or attitude. I notice my akrasia, am upset by it, and in this moment, I'm aware of myself as being upset with the akrasia *as* akrasia. But our emotions often do drift under the surface and there is nothing wrong about this. There would be something wrong if I were indifferent to my akrasia. But this does not entail that there would be something wrong with me if these emotions drifted under the surface, away from conscious awareness much of the time. Insisting otherwise involves an unrealistic and inhuman picture of the emotions generally and the way they are involved in valuing particularly. Second, the fact that akrasia continues throughout the

action makes it apt to have self-conscious negative emotions throughout the action. One can become self-consciously upset about one's akrasia throughout being akratic, and this will involve being aware of one's akrasia as akrasia. But, once we notice that the kinds of emotions involved in taking oneself seriously may be perfectly alright drifting below the surface, it's not clear that particularly transparent akrasia has distinctive virtues.

To make a stronger case for my thesis, then, I want to consider some particular features of the way that akrasia manifests itself throughout an akratic action. This topic has not received much discussion: it is more common to frame discussions of practical rationality in terms of the norms of decision. We think of a particular choice point and describe the agent as trying to figure out how best to weigh up reasons in order to pick the best course of action. Then the action itself is an afterthought. Many ideas about the virtues of a good practical reasoner can be explicated in terms of the point of decision. A good agent is sensitive to salient features of their environment and filters out the noise. We can put this point in terms of decision: for a good agent, only some options will show up as decisions that are on the table, and only some considerations will appear as reasons to deliberate with. It is part of a good human life to value some things rather than others, and this can be put partially in terms of deliberative dispositions: a good human practical reasoner will see the things that they value show up in appropriate contexts as giving them reasons for action that must be grappled with. And a mature human typically has a more or less developed picture of their own values. This too can be put in deliberative terms and described in terms of a choice situation. If it is an ideal for human practical reasoning to operate from this sort of mature understanding of value, good decision-making will involve an agent's being sensitive to how the choice they now face relates to their schema of values.

But practical reasoning does not end at decision. It is not even primarily present there: we rarely run through practical syllogisms in occurrent thoughts, and the kind of regimenting of

patterns of good practical thought that philosophers attempt while ostensibly talking about "decision-making" are ways of making explicit patterns of thought that paradigmatically occur throughout an action, as an agent is attempting to work their way towards their end.[57] The kind of practical reasoning present in action may be both instrumental and non-instrumental in character, but to make my point most clearly, I want to focus on the way that instrumental reasoning shows up in action. Consider: I want to go to the grocery store to restock the pantry, but I've locked myself inside my bathroom. I think about how I'm going to get out. I remember that I used to have a key, so I search the cabinet under the sink, but nothing is there. I remember having watched a documentary last year on lockpicking and wonder if I can replicate a trick I learned using the paperclip I have in my pocket. I try it, but it doesn't work. In desperation, I simply start jiggling the doorknob in the hopes its shoddy construction will eventually allow me to loosen the bolt. After about ten minutes, this works. I leave the bathroom, get in my car, and go to the store.

In the scenario just described, I'm trying to leave my bathroom so that I can go to the store. Getting to the store in this case involves a lot more occurrent practical reasoning throughout than the typical instances of getting to the store. (Usually, I'm not locked in a room, so I just leave my apartment while daydreaming, and drive to Trader Joe's, almost on autopilot.) But the character of the reasoning is instrumental: I encounter some problems that I must solve in order to realize my end of buying some food, and those problems don't admit of an obvious solution. And so, I need to think about them. Notably, the reasoning that I do in the course of my action seems entirely detached from the goodness of my end. Fixed in the background is my end. Nothing interesting occurs in my thought regarding this end. My thought is simply about how to achieve the end – assumed as fixed – given the unusual problems that I encounter.

[57] See, for example, Anscombe's thoroughly non-psychologistic discussion of the practical syllogism in §§32-42 of *Intention*.

But, although practical reasoning in action often wears its purely instrumental or "problem-solving" character on its sleeve, ends should and do show up. Sometimes problem solving can throw the contextual goodness of my end into question. In normal conditions, it is perfectly fine for me to treat as settled the goodness of going to buy food, and then simply proceed with that end in the background, solving problems that arise along the way. But, if I find that I cannot – for some reason – get access to the grocery store without killing someone, I will drop my end. And the virtuous dispositions discussed above will come into play, setting the framework for possible reassessment of my end. If a friend starts to engage me in a pointless debate via text, I shouldn't and won't treat this as a reason to stop what I'm doing. If I do get a call from an old friend who is only in town for a day inviting me to lunch, I may think this is a good reason to alter my plans, even as I am *en route* to the grocery store. And if I cross paths with someone in distress, I should drop what I am doing and help. Dispositions to treat certain things as reasons in planning are also dispositions to alter plans in certain circumstances, and a good practical reasoner will be sensitive to features of the environment which may be relevant to altering plans as they are acting.

These thoughts have bearing on how we should think about akratic practical reasoning in action. Akratic practical reasoning is by hypothesis defective in a certain respect. An agent is pursuing an end that they think they should not be pursuing. Akratic action of course also involves instrumental reasoning, and this can show up in the kind of problem-solving thoughts I've described. We could simply imagine that my case of going to the grocery store is an akratic one: I don't think that going to the grocery store is what I should be doing. Even as my action is generally defective in virtue of being akratic, my attempts at problem-solving can be more or less good in their own terms: I may or may not solve the problems. Characterizing the rationality of mean-ends reasoning inside of an akratic action is controversial: should we think of the clever akratic as being

more practically rational than the sloppy akratic? I'm interested in a connected but distinct issue: the akratic's sensitivity to what has gone wrong with her reasoning throughout her action.

Here's how all of this bears on my argument for the virtues of transparent akrasia: recognizing one's akratic action as akratic throughout requires more transparency than is paradigmatically present in action. To see one's action as akratic involves having present to mind the end that one is acting for, regarded as an end that one should not pursue here, not letting it retreat into the background as it usually does. Or, put another way, recognizing the way in which one's akratic practical reasoning manifests a failure to take oneself seriously involves a degree of self-consciousness about the full structure of that practical reasoning that is atypical of action, even if intentional action is to some degree essentially self-conscious. Now, I want to give two complementary arguments for why being transparent about one's akrasia in the way that I've just articulated is virtuous when the akrasia is regarded as a manifestation of a failure to take oneself seriously.

The first argument goes by way of analogy. Consider what is involved in taking a friendship seriously and in taking one's failures in friendship seriously in the way that genuinely valuing a friendship requires. I wrong my friend. If I take the friendship seriously, and recognize the wrongdoing, this will upset me – it will be the source of negative emotions. But part of my reaction if I really do take my failure seriously will be to be present to the wrongdoing – not to turn away from it. This paradigmatically occurs in the context of friendship when my friend tells me how the wrongdoing made them feel – the way that they register the violation. I should be open to listen to them telling me how they feel. Doing this amounts to my taking the wrong seriously. I do not take the wrong seriously, or my relationship seriously, if I try to turn away from their voicing their upset. And the importance of my doing this doesn't seem to hinge on the instrumental value of hearing what my friend has to say. Of course, I learn from listening. I may not fully appreciate the gravity of

what I've done until I hear my friend describe the way that it made them feel. But this doesn't exhaust the importance of being present or fully explain why being present manifests my seriousness or my sensitivity to the seriousness of the failure. Something would be off with me if I thought that, because I did understand the gravity of the failure, I didn't need to listen to my friend. Hearing them out would make no difference instrumentally to my ability to do better in the future. Someone who thought like this would not really understand what is valuable about friendship, and their inclination to turn away would manifest a lack of seriousness about the friendship. It certainly would be inappropriate to explain to my friend that I didn't need to listen to them, because I already understood what I had done wrong and nothing that they could tell me would make any difference in helping me to be better in the future. I also might realize that this presence is called for but be weak and want to turn away. This is not a failure in understanding what is needed to take the relationship seriously, but a failure nonetheless, because it is a failure to bring oneself to be able to do what it is to take the relationship seriously.

I think that this illustrates a quite general point about a kind of presence of mind involved in the typical manifestations of taking wrongs or harms to the things we value seriously. The wrong or harm is typically in the past, so there is nothing that we can do to change it. But we can do something in the present that amounts to an expression of the seriousness with which we take the wrong: be present for its current manifestations. Being present is a natural manifestation of concern for something that has gone wrong with something that we value. It seems to me, then, that keeping the flawed structure of akratic action in view can similarly be a manifestation of taking a failure with regard to one's own agency seriously. One doesn't want to turn away from the failure, because one takes it seriously. And so, one doesn't let the end one is really acting towards slip into the background as it does in normal cases.

The second argument I want to make regards the way in which letting one's end slip into the background may amount to a vice and a failure to take oneself seriously. As I said, usually letting the end slip into the background is simply the way things go as a natural matter of course. But, when one is akratic, letting the end slip into the background is a natural way of avoiding conflict in oneself. Don't think about your ultimate motivations in eating the cake, which you reject as bad; focus on the pleasant forkfuls that you are currently putting in your mouth and enjoying. When you think that your akrasia amounts to a failure to properly value yourself, such tendencies will naturally seem to amount to manifestations that same failure. That you are inclined to be engrossed in what is enticing about what you regard as, all things considering, something you shouldn't be doing looks like a manifestation of the same kind of disposition responsible for the akrasia in the first place. Attempting to keep your end clearly in mind, to recognize your akrasia as akrasia can, then, amount to an expression of your rejection of these impulses, even as you were unable to overcome them in being akratic in the first place.

Now, I want to return to a discussion of Dixon. Dixon decides to leave the building without telling the hostess. This is akratic. Dixon thinks that he should tell the hostess, and so leaving the building without telling the hostess goes against his better judgment. To perform this akratic action, Dixon will need to navigate the hallways of the building to get out to his car. If he's trying to avoid the hostess, he'll be sensitive in his navigating to potential signs of the hostess and places that the hostess might be likely to turn up. Dixon might very well perform this task on auto-pilot, or he might occupy his mind with other topics so as not to get himself worked up about potentially running into the person he's trying to avoid.

If we were to focus on Dixon's practical reasoning throughout it might look a lot like the problem solving that I described when I was stuck in the bathroom. He would be sensitive to potential hurdles to getting out of the building and be disposed to episodes of occurrent practical

reasoning to the extent that he needed to think through ways to carry out his plan. The end itself would not show up in this thought. This is how things tend to go when everything is alright. But Dixon's case is different: everything is not alright. If he gets out of the building alright, we can say that his practical reason was operating well in a narrow sense: Dixon succeeded in achieving his goal. And his practical reasoning would be operating well throughout *if* Dixon correctly thought that he had good reason to avoid the hostess. But his reasoning counting as operating well in this way is dependent on the assumption that the end is one he should pursue. That is: the reason that he shouldn't be disposed to reflect on the connection between the means he is taking and the end in the background in order to reassess his end is that his end is taken to be good in the circumstances, and nothing new has happened to call that into question. In Dixon's case, the same dispositions that operated to make Dixon see that he shouldn't avoid the hostess ought to make him sensitive to the fact that his choosing to take the hallway furthest from the hostess's room is not good, even if it is efficient, because it is in the service of a bad end. And he can harness these dispositions to make his akrasia present to mind.

Why would it be good for Dixon to keep his end in view? Why would it amount to a manifestation of the fact that he takes his agency seriously? I think that Dixon's case intuitively falls into the kind of category I'm discussing because of the way that he recognizes his akrasia as the result of a systematic flaw in his character: he cannot bring himself to do things he thinks he should when they are painful or awkward.

We might imagine a rejoinder from McIntyre at precisely this point: of course, Dixon *shouldn't* be akratic. This was the starting point. We are in a different domain now: thinking about better or worse ways of going wrong, taking it as a background assumption that something will go wrong. Pointing to the dispositions of a good practical reasoner doesn't help at this point, because we've already accepted that Dixon is not a good practical reasoner. But it is precisely in order to

better understand the space of better or worse failures that considering Dixon's dispositions is important. We've granted that Dixon is going to fail. Moreover, we're accepting that some form of akrasia is better than the alternatives. In thinking about giving Dixon advice, we're thinking about how he should proceed on the basis of this situation. It would be true to tell Dixon that he should act on the reason that he knows he should act on, but also knows he is not going to act on. But it wouldn't be helpful advice. But notice: that is different than telling Dixon that he *shouldn't notice* the reasons that make avoiding the hostess a bad idea. We already established that he has noticed them. Further, McIntyre argues, decisively in my view, that it would be worse for Dixon to rationalize his action than it would to be akratic. One may rationalize by motivated reasoning. But one may also do something close to rationalizing by distracting oneself from noticing reasons in the first place.

We're assuming, though, that Dixon has noticed the reasons and doesn't attempt to rationalize. There is a clear – if not entirely tight and obvious – connection between the dispositions to notice that certain considerations are bad reasons and dispositions to notice and be aware of the fact that what one is doing is bad while one is doing it when one acts on the basis of those bad reasons. Consider the parallel fact about the good case. Suppose that I'm correctly sensitive to what's good about going to the grocery store. This sensitivity will lead me to see going to the grocery store as on the table when I'm trying to figure out what to do with my afternoon when nothing more serious is on my radar. And it will lead me to see going to the grocery store as an acceptable choice in the circumstances. But the same sensitivity – if I'm really tracking the value of the going to the grocery store – should also lead me to be aware of my car ride as good *qua* going to the grocery store, if a pedestrian should happen to be in distress, and so open to – in fact demanding – revision.

An interesting feature of our nature, however, is that there can be a disconnect between sensitivity in choice situations and in action. On cool reflection, I may be unable to look away from the real importance of going to the grocery store. But in action, I may be easily distractable. I may

also endeavor to distract myself because I don't want to alter my plans. Similar points apply to Dixon's case. Sensitivity to what is bad about avoiding the hostess is manifested both in his recognition of reasons in deliberation and to what is going wrong with action as it unfolds. Dixon may know ahead of time that this sensitivity will not get him to revise his decision. This is reason to prefer akrasia. But it is not reason to attempt to suppress this sensitivity.

A potential worry with the idea that transparent akrasia is better than akrasia simpliciter is that it seems to paint an ideal of us as constantly tracking what is going wrong with ourselves which looks neurotic at best – not obviously better than mere akrasia. But my account doesn't have this conclusion, in two ways. First: it is not the mere tracking that is good. It is the tracking when motivated by taking oneself seriously – as a way of taking oneself seriously. This explains why some forms of tracking are genuinely neurotic, and why mere akrasia may, all things considered, be better than tracking. Also, my account doesn't entail that being aware is always the best thing – just when a sense of seriousness about oneself calls for it, which will be in the particular cases I've described. Similarly, my account does not entail an obsessive focus on one's flaws, but rather just being present to failure; this is no more obsessive than being present for a friend's giving you a piece of their mind when you've wronged them.

5. Conclusion: Absurdity and Irony

So far, I've argued that a kind of transparency in akrasia can manifest taking seriously one's failure to properly value one's own agency, such that it makes the episode of akrasia better than it would be otherwise. In conclusion, I want to draw connections between this account and the accounts of absurdity and irony that I gave in the introduction.

If it is possible, the kind of situation we've been imagining – the kind of situation that McIntyre depicts Dixon as being in – involves a defect in agency. I've been assuming that such

situations are possible, and, so far in this chapter, I've primarily been discussing one aspect of that defect: the failure involved in doing what you think you shouldn't be doing. But there is another aspect of the defect worth discussing, one that is tied to worries about the very possibility of the kind of situation McIntyre describes. The ordinary way of thinking about one's choice situations is by posing the question: what should I do? This question inevitably presupposes some background facts as fixed as the basis of choice. But, with those facts in the background, the question doesn't presuppose that one's own actions are fixed. When things go well, answering the question "what should I do?" *amounts* to the fixing of the action; one forms an intention and acts on the basis of answering that very question.[58] This is what makes an intention different from a prediction, although we may express both with the exact same words: "I will go to the store." When those words express a prediction, they are the answer to a different question: what am I going to do? And the way that I would answer that question would be different, although not unrelated to, how I would answer: what should I do? In the latter case, I try to figure out what would be good to do or what there is most reason to do. In the former case, I try to figure out how I am disposed to act. Figuring this out may involve reflection on what I think is good, but in a different way than when I am answering the former question. My interest is not in the mere fact that some route of action is good, but in the fact that I happen to think that some route of action is good and that such thoughts often move me to act. To use a pair of fraught but I think helpful contrasts: reflection directed towards intention is paradigmatically agential and outward-directed: I'm not thinking about myself, but I am thinking as an agent, about the world as something I have the power to shape. Reflection directed towards self-prediction is paradigmatically observatorial and inward-directed: I'm thinking about myself explicitly – as I might about any other person – and trying to see if I can figure out how the world will be changed by some person who happens to be me.

[58] See Pamela Hieronymi, "The Wrong Kind of Reason."

Our self-predictions have a complex relation to our attempts to give good and honest answers to the question: what should I do? In many cases, "predictions" are given in bad faith. They are offered as attempts to eschew responsibility for doing what we should; they are lame attempts to claim that certain courses of action are impossible, when they are quite possible but undesired. In other cases, predictions are the upshots of or guides to judgments about what I can reasonably take to be my options in a situation. (If I'm trying to have some fun swimming, and I predict that I will just end up giving up if I attempt a difficult backstroke, this seems like a good enough reason to pare my options down to a doggy paddle or sidestroke. I shouldn't do a backstroke.) A sense of uneasiness about the mere coherence of Dixon's case as it is presented stems, I think, from the thought that Dixon must be engaging in one of these two maneuvers. McIntyre claims that Dixon knows that he cannot bring himself to tell the hostess what has happened. Dixon predicts that he will not be able to tell the hostess. We suspect that he can in fact do this, but that he predicts he won't, and so thinks he cannot, as a way of avoiding doing what he should. And, we think, were his prediction correct, it would be good reason to think that he shouldn't in fact tell the hostess. (Our sense that he should leads us to think that the prediction just cannot be one that bears on his figuring out what he should do.) But supposing that the case is coherent, the way that Dixon thinks about his choices still involves a defect, even if it is recognized as a defect in Dixon's own thought: the option of telling the hostess *should* show up in Dixon's choice situation as an option that he can deliberate about the goodness of, not as a fixed fact about what he won't do, on the outside of the choice situation. This is because, as McIntyre says, Dixon *should* be a better person, and if he were a better person, telling the hostess would be an option.

One way of putting what Dixon recognizes in recognizing these facts is that his choice situation is defectively factive. It involves treating certain aspects of himself as fixed facts in an improper way. It is generally fine to treat, say, the laws of physics as fixed facts, grounding what

counts as a good action. It is generally not fine to treat one's defects of character as fixed facts, grounding what counts as a good action. It may be the case that one ends up in situations in which one cannot avoid treating one's defects of character as fixed in this way: this is Dixon's case; he knows he should not have these character defects, but he also knows that he cannot, through the choices available here and now, magically become a better person. This doesn't mean that there are not better or worse ways to act. But it does mean that Dixon is defectively if inevitably treating certain considerations as not bearing on his answer to that question. The answer to the question "what should I do?", asked full stop, is: tell the hostess. Dixon knows the answer to this question. But he doesn't form an intention on the basis of answering this question. He's acting on the basis of answering the question: "what should I do, if we hold fixed certain facts?" That would be redundant if the facts held fixed were things like the laws of physics. But the facts that Dixon is holding fixed are ones that shouldn't be held fixed in figuring out what to do.

This means that Dixon is alienated from his choice situation in an important way. When we are acting on the basis of what we think we should do, facts about ourselves do not appear as alien forces. When we act as Dixon does, they do: facts about his own character are regarded as at once irrelevant to figuring out what to do, because they do not bear on what would really be good here, and as relevant in the way that the laws of physics are in answering the only question that can motivate him to act here at all. Thinking of one's options for choice as being evaluable in light of answering some less-than-full-stop "what should I do?" question involves thinking of them as stemming from oneself regarded as an alien force, on par with the laws of physics.

I want to tie this kind of alienation in choice back to absurdity and irony. Often, my own akratic failures seem to me to be merely frustrating or unfortunate. But sometimes they seem genuinely absurd. "I can't believe I'm doing this again," I think, "this is really ridiculous." We can make sense of this kind of thought using the account of absurdity that I developed in the

introduction. Let's start with the choice situation. I think that I shouldn't eat any of this pie because I am on a diet. But the pie is too attractive, and I find myself swamped by inclination. I recognize that I'm not going to be able to do what I think I should do and refuse the pie altogether. So, I think about the best way to carve off a small piece of pie. My reasoning strikes me as absurd as I'm doing it: "Why are you doing this? You are supposed to be on a diet!" Here's the root of the sense of absurdity: I frame the situation as one in which it is important to me that I'm motivated by taking myself seriously. But the way that I'm thinking about my choices is egregiously out of line with that. I'm wrongfully treating myself as an alien force. This sense often occurs to me throughout episodes of akrasia: that what I am doing is completely absurd, in light of what I know I should be doing. This is a manifestation of how I take myself seriously: I'm aware of the gap between the person I wish I were and the person that I actually am.

Consider how an episode of akrasia might be carried out as a bit of ironic make-believe and how this might be motivated by my wish to be a better person. The motivational problem that renders me alien to myself is that I know that my desire for pie will win out over my better judgment, blocking certain options. This is why I am treating it as a given in my deliberation about eating the pie, even as I recognize that I should not do this. So, I'm blocked from refusing the pie, but there are many ways of accepting the pie consistent with my desires. It appears, then, that it is perfectly open to me to engage in pie-eating as a bit of make-believe, as doing so is compatible with the desires that I know will motivate me. In fact, some cases of akrasia that involve rationalization or wishful thinking look to be plausibly explained on close analogy to make-believe. I really wish that I could eat some pie consistent with staying on my diet. Sometimes this wish motivates rationalization: I revise my judgment that these two aims are actually incompatible. But sometimes what looks like rationalization seems better captured by imaginative motivation. In many such cases, it isn't that I really change my beliefs about the incompatibility of my aims. If you forced me to

soberly reflect, I'd affirm the incompatibility. I affirm the incompatibility later in the evening, regretting my akrasia. But, in the moment, the power of a wish wins out, and – like someone afflicted with a Freudian psychopathology they do not recognize – I imagine myself to be someone for whom these aims do not conflict and act on this basis.

But make-believe can also be engaged in ironically, as I argued in the first chapter, and if the akratic engages in make-believe this way, it will amount to the opposite of rationalization or wishful thinking. I wish that I were the kind of person who could bring themselves to refuse the pie. I know that eating the pie is not really important to me here. What I really want is to be a better person and act as a better person would. And I can express this wish in my action, even as it is akratic, by imagining myself to be the person that I wish I were who also thought it were a good idea to eat the pie. I imagine myself this way, eating the pie, pretending that my desires are not alien forces but attractions that I endorse. But – as with Danton – I want reality to intrude on me as I do this. I want the absurdity of thinking about those desires as anything other than alien forces to hit me as I engage in this game of make-believe. In doing this, I manage to express my wish to be a better person along with my recognition that this is, after all, a mere wish. And, crucially, this kind of make-believe will essentially involve the kind of transparency I've articulated in this chapter. What I want, for the make-believe to be properly ironic, is for my beliefs about reality – about the badness of my desires, the fact that a better person would not act like this – to become present to mind and intrude.

CHAPTER THREE: The Burdens of Contentment and Affirmation

1. Introduction

In the first chapter, I gave an account of a kind of absurdity and an associated kind of irony in action that I argued was morally significant. I considered some paradigm cases in order to illustrate the view and motivate the idea that the phenomenon is morally significant. But my sense of the importance of the phenomenon articulated there stems from the hunch that the phenomenon is in fact quite deeply intertwined with our fundamental practical commitments, in ways that those paradigm cases do not themselves elucidate. On a line of thought that predates Hegel but finds canonical expression in his social thought, one central task of practical philosophy is to show how our world can be understood as a home for us, despite its manifest hostility to our deepest yearnings. Philosophers in this tradition have differed greatly in their assessment of the plausibility of carrying out this task for the actual social world that we find ourselves in.[59] But there is agreement about this much: finding a home is difficult. Philosophy should not settle for glib satisfaction with its ideals. To take things really seriously is at once to see how unserious the world appears to be and to recognize the need, nonetheless, to take the world seriously. My hunch is that fully articulating the phenomenon I'm interested in is a way of spelling out a central aspect of this strand of social thought.

In this chapter, I attempt this task in a down-to-earth way, without – for better or worse – engaging the high dramatics of Hegel or Adorno. I do this by considering the roles that the concepts of contentment and affirmation play in our practical thought, spelling out their connection to what

[59] The tradition I'm thinking of here might plausibly include the following major figures: Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, and members of the Frankfurt School. For secondary literature discussing this idea, see Frederick Neuhouser's *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* and Michael Hardimon's *Hegel's Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation*.

we take to be valuable and what we value. These concepts play a deep and pervasive role in our practical thought in general. They have also been the subject of recent, illuminating work in Anglophone ethics by Cheshire Calhoun (contentment) and R. Jay Wallace (affirmation). But for all the genuine insight of Calhoun and Wallace, their work suffers from problems that, I will argue, stem from a failure to come to terms with the fact that our values at once demand contentment and affirmation and foreclose their possibility. To see this is to see how fundamental aspects of recognizing value and valuing make us prone to finding the choices that confront us to be absurd, motivating the associated kind of irony.

The structure of this chapter is straightforward. In §2, I introduce Calhoun's account of contentment. In §3, I criticize Calhoun's account along the lines just sketched. In §§4-5, I do the same for Wallace's account of affirmation. In §6, I conclude by sketching out some implications of the chapter for the moral importance of irony.

2. Calhoun on Contentment

In her article "On Being Content with Imperfection," Cheshire Calhoun aims to characterize a pair of attitudes – contentment and discontentment – as a preliminary to arguing that contentment is a kind of virtue. We all have thoughts about the ways in which our lives may unfold. We believe that certain things may or may not happen. We want some things to happen – sometimes the very same things we believe may happen. We plan to make things happen – often the things that we want to happen but believe will not happen on their own. But we also can and do get invested in a more profound way in the way that things transpire. Imagine that I arrive at the airport to find that my flight has been cancelled, and that to make it to my destination on time I'll need to wait for hours in the airport to catch the redeye on which I've been rebooked. How might I react to such news? Here's an understandable, perhaps common human reaction: I dwell on the negative. My thoughts

immediately run through all the ways in which my day is worse than it could be. Now I'll have to sit in the airport for hours, which will cause my back pain to flare up. I'll also lose a night of sleep, since I can never really fall asleep on airplanes – which is why I avoid red eye flights! This is just unacceptable, I think, as I dwell on the terrible aspects of my day, progressively feeling worse and worse. What I've just described is Cheshire Calhoun's picture of discontentment: an affectively unpleasant attitude involving patterns of counterfactual thought about the ways in which events are unfolding around me in a worse way than they might, patterns of focusing on and investing imaginatively in the bad things that jump out at me when I run through these counterfactuals, and a judgment that what's happening to me is not good enough.[60]

In what sense "good enough"? And, what knits this cluster of mental states together to make a distinctive attitude? We can answer these two questions together. What unites these patterns of thought and feeling is their connection to a certain *normative* conception and an associated standard accepted by the agent.[61] The explanation of *why* the certain patterns of thought and feeling occur as they do will appeal to a certain (not necessarily explicit) conception of what it would be like for the events in question – my trip, or perhaps just my day more generally – to go well, along with the agent's acceptance of this conception. Notice, though, that "acceptance" by the agent cannot be mere belief. Someone might understand a certain way of conceiving of events as going well or poorly and might believe that, on such a conception, events went poorly. She might give voice to this by assenting to the claim that events were not "good enough" on that standard. But merely

[60] This and what follows are my gloss on §II of Calhoun's paper, pgs. 331-39.

[61] "Normative" is an especially murky and contested term. I prefer "conception of goodness," where Calhoun uses "expectation frame," where the expectation in question is tied to a sense of entitlement that appears to be connected to a cluster of attitudes like the reactive attitudes. I use "normative" to be as ecumenical as possible, and I hope that nothing hinges on this.

believing all of this would not explain discontentment. What we need is a kind of investment in the conceptualization that outstrips belief – a kind of commitment to its importance.[62]

In Calhoun's language, she calls the normative conception an "expectation frame" and the kind of commitment to its importance an "entitlement to expect."[63] This language, along with Calhoun's examples, suggests the kind of commitment that Calhoun is interested in, and so too the sorts of contentment and discontentment her account targets. The idea that we are, at our core, planning creatures, plays a role in a number of works in action theory and practical rationality, most notably the work of Michael Bratman.[64] Calhoun portrays us as planning creatures with a human face. She recognizes that planning is not just a very important structural feature of practical reasoning, but something that matters to us in a much more red-blooded way, as reflected in a very natural human tendency to become invested in the ways in which events unfold. The term "entitlement" perhaps suggests that the agent in question takes herself to be in a position to make a moral claim against an agent who has wronged her. (Think: "I'm entitled to better treatment than this!") But our investment in how events unfold is clearly broader than this, as the example of my delayed flight suggests. I have a moral investment in being treated in certain ways, but I have a much broader investment, simply by being a planning agent, in how things unfold generally. We may usefully analogize such reactions to distinctively moral senses of entitlement – and such an analogy seems useful, insofar as my reaction to my delayed flight has an almost interpersonal aspect to it, as

[62] You can appeal here, if it helps you, to the distinction between judging something to be valuable and actually valuing it, discussed in the first chapter.

[63] Calhoun doesn't sharply distinguish these aspects of her view; she talks about agents with a certain entitlement to expect as deploying an expectation frame. But there are natural senses in which a "frame" can be deployed without the associated entitlement; one might dispassionately entertain what it would be like to evaluate events according to a certain conception of what it would be like for them to go well. For this reason, I separate the elements as I have.

[64] For the locus classicus, see Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason.*

though I wished to register a complaint against the Fates – but Calhoun seems right to identify how much more broadly this kind of investment ranges.[65]

Contentment mirrors discontentment: my counterfactual thinking focuses on the ways in which things might have gone worse, I engage in imagining scenarios that drive home to myself how lucky I really am, I focus on what's nice about my current circumstances, and I feel good. This is fine, I think. Again: such a syndrome involves not mere beliefs. Rather, I have a different sort of conception of what it would be for my day to go well, and I invest this conception with a different sort of importance. For instance, not only do I have a conception of days going well that's lax enough to count more days as going well – things are good so long as I don't catch on fire! – but I'm invested in this conception not for the purposes of critique but for appreciation. Not only will days more readily meet my standard, but they'll be enjoyed.

Is it better to be contented rather than discontented? According to Calhoun, this cannot be settled by appeal to the normative conceptions in and of themselves. I might, for instance, conceive of a day's going well so long as I'm not inconvenienced. Or I might conceive of a day's going well so long as I'm not set on fire. These are both totally coherent normative conceptions.[66] A third party might entertain both conceptions, and judge that things are going well according to one and not so well according to the other. Likewise, there's nothing incoherent in investing in either of the different ways described above – or in any of a number of other ways. But, as I said at the outset, Calhoun's account of contentment and discontentment as attitudes is presented as the first step in an argument that contentment is a virtue. Calhoun gives a two-pronged argument in favor of developing dispositions to invest oneself in the sorts of normative conceptions – in Calhoun's terms

[65] Although, as Pamela Hieronymi pointed out to me, flight delays quite often are the result of injustices throughout the airline industry. It is often hard to get a purely "non-moral" case!

[66] I think that this is actually contestable; see §3.

to develop dispositions to deploy expectation frames – of the sort that lead to or constitute contentment, rather than discontentment.

First, many expectation frames which promote discontentment stem from a morally vicious character. So, for example, being discontent can stem from a disposition to frame things as worse than they should be in virtue of tacitly egoistic assumptions – that only I really matter. These frames should be ruled out on the basis of involving such assumptions. Next, Calhoun points out that being discontent can also stem from a disposition to frame things as worse than they should be in virtue of certain biases which, if not morally vicious, are nevertheless open to criticism – frames that don't take into account enough of the social world, or which ignore luck, or which are intolerant of imperfection.

On the second prong, Calhoun argues we should think of contentment as a virtue of appreciation – a disposition to frame things so as to appreciate those goods in life that might very well have been absent. There's a standard idea, which appears in Philippa Foot's work on the virtues, but goes back to Aquinas and Aristotle, that the virtues are habits that correct for certain natural human tendencies. There are clearly tendencies to frame things in ways that highlight what is bad – the need to plan around problems, consumer society, and impulses to achieve social standing.[67]

3. The Burdens of Contentment

For the sake of my argument, I'm going to accept Calhoun's picture of the nature of contentment and discontentment.[68] What I want to criticize about Calhoun's account, in order to motivate my ultimate conclusions, is the way that Calhoun articulates the reasons for and against

[67] See Calhoun, pgs. 340-47.

[68] I could raise worries, but I think that Calhoun captures the basic contours of an attitude that is central to our practical thought, and my interest here is in drawing out the implications of that fact.

contentment. Two immediate problems jump out. First, Calhoun doesn't give us an account of when discontentment is appropriate. She gives us a quite general account of the way in which contentment is a virtue. This speaks in favor of developing an overall set of dispositions towards life that will lead to contentment. And perhaps it gives us reason to think that, all things being equal, we have good general reasons to accentuate the positive whenever this is possible. But it would be a wildly strong view to hold that we should *always* be contented. And Calhoun doesn't think this. She claims, for instance, that we should be discontented when others violate our rights; it is important not to take wrongful treatment of ourselves to be "good enough."[69] This is entirely consistent with holding that, in general, we have good reason to strive for contentment. The problem is that lots of the philosophically interesting parts of our moral lives occur when all things aren't equal. We'd like some tools to begin to make sense of when the reasons for discontentment are especially salient. But Calhoun's account of the reasons for discontentment are entirely negative: she gives a case against discontentment as a general orientation towards life by appeal to the problematic presuppositions that such an orientation often takes. This doesn't tell us why discontentment would be appropriate when it is appropriate. In the case of rights violations – where Calhoun takes discontentment to be appropriate – her case seems to go by way of the idea that being contented would involve morally false presuppositions. It is not obvious to me that this kind of argument will work in all cases in which discontentment seems appropriate. But, more fundamentally, it isn't explanatory: in being told why contentment is inappropriate, we haven't yet been told why it is appropriate to be discontented, rather than merely neutral.

Second, and more briefly, Calhoun's account of the appropriateness of contentment threatens to make it look glib and naïve. On Calhoun's account, it seems that we have good reason to go around always looking for something to see the good in. This is not exactly to say that

[69] See Calhoun, pgs. 347-52.

Calhoun holds out Pollyanna as a kind of moral ideal; Pollyanna wasn't simply pathologically cheerful – her cheer depended on a denial of reality, which is something that Calhoun is manifestly not advocating. But consider the novel's famous quote: "When you look for the bad, expecting it, you will get it" (175). Read earnestly, this is the thesis of Calhoun's paper, in slogan form. But calling someone a Pollyanna is a *criticism*, and in this light the quote invites an ironic reading: if you always look for the good, hoping for it, you will never get it. There's something wrong with a person who is disposed to try and find a silver lining always; they seem numb to the real stakes of things, in a way that blocks them from appreciating what is *really* good about the good things. Given her high-level, non-contextual defense of contentment, it is unclear how Calhoun can escape this charge.

The problems targeted by these criticisms have a common source in a bigger problem with Calhoun's argumentative strategy on the whole. Calhoun thinks that arguments for the claim that contentment or discontentment is intrinsically fitting will need to go by way of appeal to facts about the goods or the bads that the agent is responding to. She thinks that this strategy will not work, because agents can be aware of all the relevant facts, and yet frame them differently. She takes the only alternative argumentative strategy to be justification of the disposition itself, on what looks like broadly instrumental grounds. This move is puzzling on its face, if we think that contentment and discontentment do sometimes seem to "fit" their circumstances, regardless of the general importance of having the disposition itself. But, mostly importantly, Calhoun overlooks some alternative argumentative resources. It may be true that it is good to have a disposition to contentment for the reasons that Calhoun provides. It may be true that two agents can differ in contentment and discontentment while knowing the relevant facts about goods and bads. Nevertheless, consistent with these two claims, we can still make out an argument for the conclusion that there are other reasons to think that, e.g., sometimes contentment is inappropriate in its own right.

To see this, I want to return to some ideas about the commitments involved in judging valuable and valuing that I developed in the first chapter. Judgments of value involve the recognition of reasons for actions and attitudes. Valuing involves emotional vulnerability and dispositions to treat certain considerations as special reasons. Returning to one of Scanlon's examples, judging science to be valuable involves taking there to be reasons to admire and respect scientific achievement. This is, as such, to take there to be reasons not to disrespect and disparage scientific achievement. We explain the appropriateness of these attitudes by appeal to the value of science. This does not involve assessing the benefits or harms of being disposed generally to admire or respect things in general or science in particular. It does, however, involve appeal to what is involved in judging science to be valuable. Calhoun's argument that contentment floats free of the facts about good and bad may be taken to indicate that she thinks that contentment is different from, say, respect in this regard.

Here, we should make three points. First, on one reading of Calhoun's claim, this point about judgments of value is entirely consistent with the claim, but in fact undermines her strategy. It is certainly true that people can accurately judge certain facts about value without recognizing all of the reasons involved in that value. Given this, were a value to involve reasons for contentment, two people could agree in their judgments of value and disagree over reasons for contentment. But this is just to say that one of the two would have failed to fully understand the value. So, we can still explain the appropriateness or inappropriateness of contentment by appeal to the value. Second, though, Calhoun may intend her claim to be inconsistent with this maneuver; the thought is that two individuals can fully grasp all of the reasons generated by the value while disagreeing about reasons for contentment. I suspect that this is in fact Calhoun's considered view. But it strikes me as an implausible, albeit understandable position. As I will argue in the course of this section, there are cases where it seems that fully understanding or appreciating a value does involve taking there to be

reasons for contentment in some cases and against contentment in other cases. There are cases, though, where this is not true: judgments of value don't decide the issue. But these can be captured in a different way. This brings me to my third point: the phenomenon of valuing.

Valuing something constitutively involves certain dispositions to have attitudes and emotions, and to experience those attitudes and emotions as merited and appropriate in certain circumstances, given by the object of the valuing. Consider friendship. We can, do, and should value our friendships. And when a friendship goes well, it involves the friends valuing one another and valuing the friendship. It is not just that a friendship going well involves some sort of valuing or other. We specify the kinds of valuing appropriate to a friendship by appeal to what it would be for a friendship to go well.

Consider a particular emotional disposition appropriate to friendship: a disposition to experience joy. A friendship's going well constitutively involves valuing. Valuing a friend and a friendship in the right way will involve a disposition to joy. More specifically: Imagine I am friends with Greg. I will be disposed to feel joy at Greg's accomplishments and at the opportunity to spend time with Greg after a we've spent a long time apart. I will take the fact that Greg accomplishes something and the fact that I'm spending time with Greg after a long time apart as reasons to feel joy. In these cases, I will regard my joy as merited or appropriate.

Think about a failure to feel joy in the context of a friendship, in the paradigmatic circumstances that I've just mentioned. Something would be going wrong with me if I didn't feel joy. How would we explain this? It is not by appeal to the fact that the goodness of Greg's accomplishments or of our spending time together require this response on behalf of everyone, or that the goodness cannot be recognized without such a response. Everyone can recognize the goodness without having a disposition to joy or it being inappropriate for them not to experience joy, so long as they are not friends with Greg, or in the second case, so long as they are not me. My

relation to Greg gives me special reasons to feel this way, reasons that I'm not properly responsive to if I don't feel joy. If we were to give reasons to cultivate such a disposition, we would most naturally say that my reason is that it's appropriate to friendship to have such a disposition. If we were to answer why we should go in for valuing at all, we might cite the role that valuing plays in a good human life. But the answer to the question in the context of a particular kind of valuing will just be the appropriateness of such a disposition to that kind of valuing.

The relevance of the discussion of friendship is this: we can assess the appropriateness or inappropriateness of dispositions that are constitutive parts of valuing without appealing *either* to cognitive failures to recognize certain goods or bads *or* to general reasons that it would be good to have such dispositions. My failure to be joyful is not inappropriate in virtue of the fact that properly appreciating the goodness of Greg's accomplishments mandates joy. It doesn't. If you read about Greg's accomplishments in the paper, nothing is wrong with you if you don't feel joy. But neither is it explained by appeal to the fact that, say, it is in general good for me to have a disposition to take joy in the good things in life. This may well be true, in broad brushstrokes. Nevertheless, this general truth must be consistent with the fact that there's nothing wrong with your not experiencing joy when you read about Greg's accomplishments in the paper. And this general truth does not explain what is particularly inappropriate about my not experiencing joy. If you criticized me for failing to experience joy on the grounds that I had failed to cultivate a disposition that is good for humans to have, what you say may very well be true, but it would fail to address the subject at hand. My failure to be joyful is inappropriate because my valuing of Greg and my relationship with him call for joy. They give me reason to be joyful. If I am not joyful, I'm valuing poorly, because I'm failing to respond to these reasons. It is this sort of failure that any criticism would properly target, not a failure to develop a disposition that is good for humans to have in general.

The upshot of this discussion is as follows: in the case of valuing, we can defend the appropriateness of certain attitudes in terms of valuing, which involves appeal neither to judgment alone nor to the general instrumental benefits of the disposition to hold the attitude. In addition, judgments of value in general involve recognizing reasons for certain attitudes, such that the appropriateness of the attitude will be explained by appeal to a full understanding of the value; this is consistent with the fact that one can judge something to be of value without recognizing all of the reasons involved in its being valuable. If reasons for contentment were connected to judgments of value and valuing in this way, then we could account for contentment's appropriateness in a way that Calhoun overlooks.

And, in fact, this seems to be the case; that it is the case explains what is dissatisfying and puzzling about Calhoun's blanket strategy. As a comparison, one might give a blanket argument against a disposition to regret things: regret is painful and the disposition to regret is not motivationally helpful, since we cannot change the past. These facts may be true. Further, we may think that something must have gone wrong with a person who is consumed and crippled by regrets to the point of complete self-destruction; nothing about the past makes *that* kind of life of regret worth it. Nevertheless, the problems with such a person don't seem to be explained by the general reasons that a disposition to regret is harmful. And reality seems much more complex: the reasons to regret crop up in all sorts of different contexts, such that a blanket account of the reasons for regret seems too crude an explanatory strategy. The explanation for this is obvious: regret shows up all over human life, but our reasons for regret are connected to different objects that we judge to be valuable and value. As such, the explanations for the appropriateness of particular regrets will be various, keyed to the different objects of value to which they are connected.

It seems to me that something similar is true with the reasons for contentment. Many of our various values give us reason to be contented, in different ways and in different circumstances.

Here's a summary of where we are: I criticized Calhoun's argumentative strategy in defending contentment as a virtue by showing that she has an impoverished conception of the theoretical options available to her. I just suggested an alternative: contentment is connected in a general way to the things that we value. And, once we see this alternative explanation of the rationality of contentment, we are able to rescue Calhoun's insight that contentment is a generally positive thing, while still being able to explain why a constant focus on contentment looks Pollyannaish. The things that we value generally give us reasons to focus on the good things about the objects that we value and to enjoy them. To fail to do this generally would be to have a distorted conception of things that we value. But, when something goes significantly wrong with what we value, trying to find the good and enjoy it looks unserious – it manifests a shallow conception of the value, and in turn of the importance of contentment.

To see the plausibility of this idea, I want to offer three examples: science, friendship, and morality. First, science. In the first chapter, I presented Scanlon's example of science as a paradigmatic instance of something that is valuable in its own right, with his sketch of the kinds of reasons that we recognize in taking science to be valuable. It also seems to me that the value of science gives us reasons to be contented by certain aspects of scientific practice – to be disposed to see and focus on what is good in current scientific practice and take pleasure in it. Not to enjoy the wonders that current scientific practice makes available to us – to focus only on the ways in which our current practices fall short of providing us with a complete picture of reality – seems to manifest a distorted understanding of what is valuable about science, at least for finite creatures like us.

But the converse is true as well: sometimes being disposed to focus on and enjoy what is good in current scientific practice seems to manifest an equally distorted conception, a lack of taking science seriously. This is most obviously true when something significant has gone wrong with scientific practice, the kind of thing that should matter to us if we really do value science. Consider a

significant plagiarism case in a major scientific journal. This is the kind of thing that should upset us if we really value science, and our negative emotions in response manifest the seriousness with which we take science. In addition, being disposed to look for something to see as worth enjoying – as "good enough" – in the plagiarism case looks out of place, a failure to take science really seriously. Of course, we shouldn't be contented *that* there was plagiarism – that feature of the case is not good at all. But we might find a silver lining if we search hard enough: we can find all sorts of creative ways in which the plagiarism case might have been worse. But it seems strange, and out of keeping with valuing science, to see the value of science as giving one reasons to do this, or as being disposed to do this in virtue of valuing science.

One might attempt to find the source of this intuition in the idea that being upset at the plagiarism and being contented are incompatible. Insofar as valuing science involves being upset, it involves not being contented. This would be a neat explanation of the cases in which contentment is made inappropriate by valuing. But it strikes me as implausible and as obscuring the main insight. We are perfectly capable of mixed feelings. And some cases of plagiarism might merit a mix of upset and contentment: if, say, the plagiarism's being caught shows the vigilance of the community of scientists reading each other's work. Rather, the reason that contentment sometimes seems out of place is, well, just this: to everything there is a season; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing. Our intuitive sense of what it is to properly value things seems to incorporate this primal truth. Sometimes, when things have gone bad, it is time to refrain from embracing, and being disposed to look for the silver lining seems like a failure to fully grasp this.

Second, consider friendship. I value my friendship with my best friend Greg. This seems to give me reasons to be contented with many aspects of my relationship. If I'm always focused on the ways that my friendship fails to meet the ideal from Books VIII-IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I have a distorted conception not, perhaps, of the ideal of friendship, but of the value friendship has in

actual human lives. I have reason to focus on all the good things that Greg brings into my life, and enjoy them, even if our friendship is less than perfect. But this is not always the case: if Greg breaks the bonds of trust distinctive of friendship, I have reason to be upset. And something would be off with me in most cases if I was disposed to look for a silver lining. Properly valuing friendship involves understanding that there is a season for focusing exclusively on the wrongdoing.

Finally, the same point can be made about the attachment we have to distinctively "moral" values more generally. I regard others as having a certain dignity. If I were always focused on how people failed to be morally perfect, I'd have a distorted conception of the importance of dignity in actual human lives. If I care about morality in this way, I should be disposed to appreciate the way in which people try to improve themselves morally. But this is not always the case. Reading about the war in Yemen, I am sickened by the atrocities. I could think about ways that the atrocities might have been worse and take pleasure in the fact that they were not. But something would be off with me if I did. Properly caring about human dignity seems to involve recognizing that this is the time for being sickened and nothing else.

The examples that I've just sketched appear to reflect a deep fact about the rationale behind our practices of valuing things at all, although I can't mount a full-bore defense of this claim here. One of the things that makes human life go well – that makes human life worth living at all – is integrating the multifarious good things that the world provides for us and enjoying them. Valuing particular things is how we do this – how we integrate objects of value into our lives. Any realistic conception of valuing, then, will involve in it dispositions to enjoy where we can – that is, dispositions to be contented. But realistic valuing also seems to involve recognizing the importance of refraining from doing this when something important has gone wrong.

Now, I want to apply these ideas to contentment about choice situations. We can be contented about our choice situations, seeing the good both in our opportunity to choose and the

options available to us. And it seems to me that the things that we value give us reasons for (and against) at least two subtly different things: (1) actually being contented with aspects of our choices and (2) thinking of our choice situation as a "time for contentment." This shows up, I think, in all three of my examples, but I just want to work through the science example so as not to belabor the point. Imagine I am a scientist, thinking about which of two projects to dedicate my future research to. The value of science gives me reason to focus on what is potentially exciting and interesting about the possible projects and take joy in those aspects, rather than to focus on how the two projects will inevitably fall short of their goals. And, reflecting on my situation, I might affirm: this is a time for contentment. It's appropriate here to focus on what is good about these potential projects. Conversely, imagine I am a scientist who must serve on a board to decide how to handle a serious plagiarism case. In this case it would be perverse to try to find the silver lining in my options. This is the meaning of the expression: "I take no pleasure in this." And, reflecting on my situation, I might affirm: this is not a time for contentment. It's not appropriate here to try to find something about my options to enjoy.

The interestingness of this phenomenon for my ultimate purposes in this chapter is that, although these subtly different things often travel together, they can in fact pull apart, and when they do, our choice situations will seem absurd. That is, we can correctly think that we have decisive reasons not to be contented with our choices, but also think that our choice situation is "time for contentment." The gap between our framing of our choice situation and our actual options will then make the choice situation seem absurd. To see this, I want to work through an example.

Imagine Dan. Dan arrived in New York as an immigrant from Ireland in the late 19th century. He finds himself in a better place than the bleak Ireland that he left behind. But better does not mean good. In figuring out what to make of himself, Dan finds that due to his class status and widespread anti-Irish sentiment, a specific cluster of jobs are open to him – those made available by

the patronage networks of the Tammany Hall political machine. He winds up with the opportunity to become a sandhog, working digging tunnels beneath the city, or as a longshoreman, unloading and loading ships. Digging tunnels is a highly dangerous occupation, but it pays more. And it isn't as if being a longshoreman is particularly easy work. So, Dan begins to work digging tunnels. But Dan sees his choices in the light of injustice, and so he finds them, and ultimately the work he chooses, upsetting. He thinks that the British treatment of the Irish that made his flight to America necessary was a great injustice. This upsets him. And he is upset about the way that these facts—in addition to anti-Irish prejudice in America—shape the opportunities available to him.[70]

Imagine Dan reflecting upon his choice situation. There are many reasons why it may be the object of negative attitudes and emotions. He may be upset at the prospect of having to do an unpleasant job no matter what he chooses. He may see his choices as a manifestation of unjust treatment by the British, insofar as he can draw a fairly direct causal connection between past injustice and his current choices, and be angry about this. But it seems to me that he may also find his choices *absurd*. "This is ridiculous," he thinks to himself, "having to choose between a life as a longshoreman and a sandhog." If this is his thought, it will be explained using the model I developed in the first chapter, by a conspicuous divergence between the seriousness that the choice situation aspires to and the reasons that actually can be acted upon in the situation.

[70] I don't mean to imply that the Irish were more or less slaves. I am fully aware of the mythology surrounding the idea of "Irish Need Not Apply" signs. I know that the Irish in New York had plentiful opportunities for work through political patronage networks. This doesn't mean that the opportunities that they had were particularly good, or that their options were not fundamentally shaped by injustice. That's the only thing that I want to get from this case. I wanted to flag this, because I know that focusing on prejudice against the Irish is often used in popular debate, e.g., to call into question the uniqueness of the African American experience of injustice in chattel slavery, in order to, say, make a case against reparations. Focusing on the Irish experience, then, can carry the implication that such views are in the background, or that I have an analogous agenda. I don't hold these views and I don't have this agenda. The reason that I use the experience of an Irish immigrant as the basis of my example, rather than, say, the African American experience is in fact precisely because I have these sorts of concerns in mind. The Irish American experience of prejudice is the best case I can appeal to without appropriating an identity that I have no claim to.

I think that this is a fruitful explanatory strategy here – in fact, it produces a cornucopia; there is a multitude of reasons that should be applicable to such a situation but cannot be. The reasons of contentment are one case, and an illuminating one. I'm going to pursue this strategy in the following way: in the next paragraph, I will give a very brief explanation of the absurdity of Dan's situation, in terms of contentment. Then, as a means of explicating and defending the account, I will pose a series of three critical or clarificatory questions and answer them at length.

Looking for the silver lining in his work looks wrong to Dan here – like he didn't take seriously the way in which his terrible choices are the manifestation of injustice. But what the wrong does is to rob him of a situation in which he could take contentment in his work. Taking this aspect of the wrong seriously involves thinking of his situation as "time for contentment": a choice situation in which he *should* be able to focus on and enjoy what is good about his work. The egregious divergence between what real "time for contentment" looks like and his actual situation looks like makes his choices seem absurd.

Questions:

(i) Why would it be reasonable for Dan to think it is inappropriate to be contented with his choices?

I've suggested that Dan might think that it is inappropriate to be contented here – that he thinks that something would be wrong with trying to see the silver lining in his options. This is akin to the scientist who thought that it would be inappropriate to look for the silver lining in a plagiarism case. But why would Dan think this? The model I've developed suggests that we look for the answer in something that Dan values, which he thinks would make being contented inappropriate here, a failure to take what he values seriously. Because the reasons for contentment are tightly connected to many of our values, we could unpack this example in a number of different

ways. I want to articulate, then, one plausible way the account could go, using the value of work. Work is valuable for humans, and Dan thinks that work is valuable. Constructively shaping the world is a way that we express ourselves imaginatively and a primary way in which we help one another. The value of work gives us lots of general reasons to be contented. We should appreciate the ways in which our work allows us to manifest our creativity and to help others. To fail to focus on these aspects of our work would appear to manifest a distorted conception of the role that work plays in a human life – perhaps an inhuman conception of what can be achieved, or perhaps a narcissistic fixation on oneself alone.

But what is valuable about work also gives us reasons to support institutions by which opportunities for meaningful work – the kind of work that allows the expression of creativity and the meeting of human needs – can be fairly distributed. Taking work seriously involves being sensitive to failures to meet this ideal. For instance, it bothers me that millions of people are forced to work in sweatshops simply to survive. What bothers me about this is overdetermined: I care about justice, and these people are wronged; I care about human wellbeing, and these people are deprived. But I also care about work and the role it plays in a fulfilling human life, and it upsets me that people are denied opportunities for this. And it seems to me that being disposed to look for the silver lining in their choices – to focus on the ways in which, say, the sweatshop might have been even more brutal – is off, numb to what is really important precisely because I think that work is valuable.

There are of course cases in which looking for the silver lining in sweatshop work does not seem callous or insulated from concern with what's valuable about work: it may be that the sweatshop workers have found ways to repurpose the machines in their limited free time to make crafts for their families. Here it seems perfectly in line with my concern for the value of work both to be upset by the opportunities denied to the workers and also to appreciate and take pleasure in

what they've made out of the limited opportunities given to them. The intuitive difference seems to be this: in the case where taking some kind of contentment does not seem out of place, it is because what I focus on and take pleasure in is the way in which the bad conditions have at least opened the possibility for a kind of *response* to the badness of the conditions. The way that I take joy in the ingeniousness of the workers is not best expressed by the thought, "Well, it could have been worse: they could have been in a situation in which they couldn't have even made crafts for their families." That still looks numb to what is important about work, a failure to take work seriously. Rather the relevant thought is: "There is something good worth focusing on and taking joy in here: the way in which the bad conditions can be exploited in various ways and reconfigured to allow for the kind of bursting forth of human creativity in mutual concern – in spite of the fact that the conditions put up heavy barriers against this." It is when I cannot draw this kind of connection between what upsets me and what I'm contented about that contentment looks Pollyannaish and unserious. I'll return to this point in question (iii).

I imagine Dan reasonably thinking about his choices in an analogous way. It is not just that his choices are unpleasant and unfulfilling. That they are is symptomatic of the fact that he's been denied the kinds of opportunities for meaningful work that he should get, because of an enduring history of colonialism and prejudice. This upsets him. To try to look for the bright side in his options feels like a failure to take this seriously – a failure to give the upset the center-stage role it deserves – unless he can see in his options some way of allowing the space for the kind of creativity and concern with human need that his options would, in a just world, straightforwardly provide. But Dan sees no way of performing this maneuver without deluding himself: neither job is pleasant nor particularly suited to exercise his skills, and they are designed to provide excessive wealth to the very people who oppress him.

(ii) Why is it reasonable for Dan to think it is "time for contentment"?

Above, I treated cases where the idea that actual contentment was inappropriate and the idea that it was "not contentment time" traveled together. It's natural to connect these two facts: when actually being contented seems inappropriate, this is because it is not the season for contentment. Why would these pull apart in Dan's case? The plagiarism example provides a useful contrast. As I said, if I'm on a committee tasked with figuring out how to deal with a plagiarism case, it seems perverse to look for a silver lining in my options. Perhaps a silver lining emerges by happenstance, but this is incidental to what matters to me here: properly dealing with the plagiarism. If I really do value the scientific enterprise, that is what will be important to me. It is also not "time for contentment": valuing science involves recognizing that what is important here is trying to deal with the case justly and in a way the preserves the integrity of the scholarly community, not trying to find my options to be better than they could be. But this is because valuing science also involves recognizing that there's nothing wrong with my choices in virtue of contentment's being beside the point. Of course, something bad has happened: I need to spend time dealing with plagiarism. And someone has done something wrong: they have plagiarized. But there's nothing wrong with my situation, with its being the case that I have to deal with plagiarism *and* that it would be off to look for something to be contented about. Valuing science involves recognizing the reasons we have to try to respond to problems with science and the attitudes that are appropriate in such circumstances. It is unfortunate that I have to deal with plagiarism, but there is nothing defective about a situation *qua* dealing with plagiarism in virtue of the fact that contentment would be inappropriate there.

Things are different in Dan's case. Choosing how to work is a situation in which contentment would generally be appropriate. Recognizing the value of work involves recognizing this. And the reason that it is not appropriate in Dan's case is not because some special circumstances obtain, but because he's been wronged: he's wrongfully been given terrible options in

a choice situation where it is generally appropriate to look for contentment. The wronging doesn't transport him into a different choice situation, as the wrongdoing of the plagiarist might force me to stop doing my research and start figuring out how to preserve scientific integrity. Rather the wrongdoing deforms Dan's choice situation: he's still choosing work, but with terrible options, whose terribleness is explained by the wrongdoing. Properly registering the nature of the wrong involves recognizing these two facts together: that this is the kind of situation in which he should be able to be contented, but that it would be inappropriate actually to be contented.

These two facts are what accounts for Dan's choices seeming absurd to him. There is an egregious gap between the kind of pleasure in the good aspects that ought to be available to him here and what his choices actually render appropriate. We can expand on this sense of absurdity in two ways, tying it to the notion of seriousness and to the way that Dan might naturally express his sense of the absurd. First, a kind of expression of seriousness about work ought to be available to Dan here: focusing on and taking pleasure in the way that his work is able to manifest creativity and respond to human need. But this diverges egregiously from what it actually amounts to to take work seriously in this situation – which is precisely to refrain from doing this. Second, Dan might express his sense of the absurd by saying: "This choice is absurd. Imagine taking either of these jobs seriously as work?" What is behind such a thought is this: the egregiousness of the gap becomes particularly vivid if one imagines trying to find the contentment that ought to be available here in the actual options that one has. Taking work seriously ought to involve finding some way of being contented in one's options. But imagine doing that with the jobs provided: that would not be to take work seriously at all; it would look numb or oblivious to the wrongful source of one's options that taking work seriously gives one reason to care about.

(iii) Is this over-general?

The absurdity of Dan's choices hinges on the thought, which I developed in my answer to (i) that there would be something inappropriate in Dan's looking to be contented in his situation, because this would in some way fail to give the wrongdoing its proper attention – something that Dan also takes to be important because he values work. I also argued above that it seems implausible to insist that contentment is straightforwardly incompatible with noticing and being upset by the wrong. There would be no straight inconsistency in having mixed attitudes, and the defect involved seems best expressed by simply stating the intuition: if you're disposed to find contentment here, you aren't taking the wrong seriously enough. But, without a deeper explanation of the problem, my account may not be persuasive to readers who don't immediately feel the force of the phenomenon I'm describing and who may worry that the account is problematically over-general. For, we constantly face choice situations that are less than ideal, where we ought to have options for better work. We don't find such situations generally absurd. And if it were always inappropriate to be disposed to be contented with wrongful choice situations, this looks like a recipe for a life lived with crippling depression. Part of the answer lies in how far the wrong causes one's options to diverge from the sort of options one is entitled to. I was imagining Dan's case to involve a very great divergence: his options are not simply less creatively interesting and useful to others than they might be in an ideal world. They seem positively creatively deadening and useless.

But the most significant factor lies in a feature of choice situations that I discussed briefly in (i): the possibility for contentment to target aspects of one's choices that amount to their being good *in spite of* or *in response to* their badness – taking pleasure in a way that one can manage to achieve what is really valuable about work, despite having wrongful barriers thrown in the way. It seems to me that this resolves the felt tension between contentment and acknowledgement of wrongdoing by focusing on the way in which important kinds of human creativity and mutual aid can find new and

ingenious ways to overcome the barriers set up by the choice situation. Merely focusing on how one's choice situation is better than it could be looks like a kind of acceptance of the wrongdoing that is uncomfortable, even if it is not strictly speaking incompatible. But this felt sense of inappropriate acceptance is removed if the object of contentment is the way in which what is really important about work can manifest itself in creative ways precisely in light of the terrible options that make this difficult. It seems to me that we have good reason to try to find these possibilities in our choices: valuing work involves caring about ideals, but also about the way that its value can be realized in the actual world, in spite of the barriers. And to some extent, finding these possibilities for contentment is a creative, hermeneutical process – interpreting our options so that contentment does not look like Pollyannaish acceptance. But there are limits to this: sometimes there is just no realistic way of engaging in genuine creative work or meeting human needs given our bad options, or of construing our options as presenting that possibility. Telling such a story would look like bad faith. And this is the situation that I take Dan to be in: there is just no version of creativity or meeting the real needs of others here. And so, his choices seem absurd.

As a contrast, imagine a parallel case, identical to Dan's except that he remains in Ireland. In this case, Dan still has the same choices, and their unpleasantness is still explained by wrongdoing: Ireland needs so many sandhogs and longshoreman, because it has been wrongfully economically underdeveloped. Here, Dan can realistically construe his work as good in light of contributing to building a world in Republican Ireland where the kinds of choice situations he faces no longer exist and take pleasure in this fact. But Dan in New York finds no possibility of drawing such connections without bad faith.

4. Wallace on Affirmation

One the tasks that R. Jay Wallace sets himself in *The View from Here* is to articulate a familiar, if somewhat hazy, notion of "affirmation." We affirm many things about our lives, and we aspire to affirm our lives as a whole. These sorts of thoughts are a recognizable part of our practical thinking. Consider a moment of painful recognition: "I *just can't* stand behind this!" Or consider a central plot point in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*: George Bailey, in the depths of despair, thinks it would be better had he never been born, beginning the film's fantastical portrayal of an alternate history in which Bailey had never been born. Bailey's thought in that moment of despair is in part about an inability to affirm his own life. What do such thoughts amount to?

Wallace articulates the attitude of affirming X as involving the following two elements: (a) a judgment that X is valuable and (b) an on-balance preference that X not be otherwise. So, I affirm my friendship with my best friend Greg insofar as I judge that friendship to be valuable and have an on-balance preference that I have that friendship with Greg. For Wallace, an on-balance preference is to be understood as analogous to a conditional intention – that is, an intention to φ if certain conditions obtain. Appealing to this analogy is supposed to help us to get a grip on and make explicit two central aspects of affirmation that are features of conditional intentions. Intentions, unlike mere desires, are *committal*. In intending, we are committed to a course of action in a way that we are not if we merely want to do something or think that it would be a good idea to do something. Conditional intentions specifically commit us to performing an action *were* certain conditions to be met. This is helpful for articulating what's involved in affirmation, because Wallace thinks that the role that affirmation plays in our practical thought is as a kind of commitment in light of counterfactuals.[71]

[71] See Wallace, *The View from Here*, pgs. 65-77.

These aspects of affirmation are particularly important because of the role that affirmation plays in valuing things. Valuing my friendship with Greg involves a cluster of judgments, attitudes, and dispositions towards the friendship and towards Greg. Wallace observes that it also seems to give us strong reasons to affirm both the friendship and Greg – that is, to be committed to it under a range of counterfactuals. As Wallace puts it:

> The deeper significance of the attitudes through which we settle such questions, I believe, is underwritten by our attachments. When a situation in the past has harmed or damaged an individual, institution, or ideal that we are attached to, this is typically a matter of great concern to us. We naturally entertain counterfactual reflections about how things might have been otherwise in circumstances of this kind, reflections that (as we have seen) do not leave us completely indifferent. On the contrary, a resolution that the harm or damage should have been avoided, if it had been at all possible for us to bring this outcome about, can be considered a spontaneous expression of our concern about the object to which we are attached. It is our capacity to entertain counterfactual thoughts that makes it possible for us to form on-balance preferences of this kind regarding past states of affairs. And it is our attachment to the things that have suffered damage or harm that leads to us to exploit this possibility. We take a stand on the question of whether things should have been otherwise as soon as we form a clear picture in our minds of the alternatives, and this reflects the basic fact that we care about the individual or cause that has been visited with misfortune in the actual course of events. (60)

Different instances of affirmation will take into account different ranges of counterfactual questions as bearing on the appropriateness of the on-balance preference, and the reasons we have for affirmation in different cases will count in favor of taking different ranges of counterfactual questions to be relevant. Wallace contrasts an extreme form of affirmation, which he calls "unconditional affirmation" with paradigm examples of a more limited form of affirmation, which he calls "conditional affirmation." In unconditionally affirming X, one has an on-balance preference that X not be otherwise, treating as relevant *all* of the necessary conditions for X's not being otherwise. In conditionally affirming X, one has an on-balance preference that X not be otherwise, holding fixed and taking for granted some of the necessary conditions for X's not being otherwise.[72]

[72] Ibid., pgs. 69-76.

The distinction is intuitive if we look to common reasons for attachment. The attachments that we value, Wallace suggests, frequently give us strong reasons for unconditional affirmation.[73] In the context of my valued friendship, it is natural and rational to affirm Greg. And this sort of affirmation is typically quite expansive, and its expansiveness is taken to be appropriate: I prefer on-balance a world in which Greg exists, with all the necessary conditions I understand that to entail. (To prefer anything less would seem not to capture the kind of care about others that is distinctive of intimate relationships.) By contrast, we also typically affirm virtuous actions, and we have good reason to do so. We prefer on-balance that, e.g., a firefighter courageously rush into a burning building. But the kind of commitment we have to such actions is more constrained. We do not prefer on balance that all the necessary conditions of courageous action – i.e., conditions that include the house's being on fire – not be otherwise. Rather, we affirm the action, treating some features of the world and of the past as fixed. This is typically the case with virtuous actions because such actions are often responses to unfortunate or morally defective aspects of the world. We are committed to them, given that the world is the way it is, but we are not committed to the world having the bad features to which virtuous actions respond.

5. The Burdens of Affirmation

Wallace's account may seem to have some quite obvious affinities with and connections to the general thrust of this dissertation; while not focusing on the absurd, a good portion of his monograph is given over to the discrepancy between aspiration and reality. Wallace thinks that we aspire to unconditionally affirm our lives and that doing so presupposes unconditionally affirming the "ground projects" that give our lives meaning. It is perhaps psychologically impossible not to affirm our lives in this way and we have good reasons to affirm our lives. But, by the logic of

[73] Ibid., pgs. 75-76.

Wallace's position, affirming our lives in this way involves preferring on balance that all the necessary conditions of our lives obtain. But these necessary conditions are inevitably deeply morally unjust, giving us strong reasons against unconditional affirmation.[74] Such a situation looks absurd.

But the aspect of Wallace's account that gets the issues I'm most interested in directly on the table is actually his concept of conditional affirmation. Conditional affirmation is connected to action. Wallace focuses primarily on conditional affirmation as a contrast to the much stronger unconditional affirmation, which generates most of the problems he wants to tackle. But it seems to me that Wallace does not fully realize the importance of conditional affirmation – its pervasiveness in our lives and the distinctive sorts of problems that it generates.

To make this case, I want to return to Dan. In §3, I explained a source of Dan's sense that his choice situation is absurd in terms of contentment, although I noted that I took the absurdity to be overdetermined. Here I want to show how the reasons for conditional affirmation provide another key source. Dan might very well express his sense of the absurd with the thought: "It would be absurd to *really* commit to any of these actions here." As before, I'm going to give a very brief account of how reasons for conditional affirmation may be behind this thought and then expand and defend my account in responses to a series of questions.

Conditionally affirming his choice looks wrong to Dan here – like he didn't take seriously the way in which his terrible choices are the manifestation of injustice. But what the wrong does is to rob him of a situation in which he could conditionally affirm his choice. Taking this aspect of the wrong seriously involves thinking of his situation as "time for conditional affirmation": a choice situation in which he *should* be able to conditionally affirm his choice. The egregious divergence between what real "time for conditional affirmation" looks like and his actual situation looks like makes his choices seem absurd.

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[74] See ibid., chapters 5 and 6, *passim*.

Questions:

(i) Why would it be reasonable for Dan to think it is "time for conditional affirmation"?

As Wallace points out, virtuous actions are paradigmatic targets for conditional affirmation. And it seems that a stronger case should actually be made: we should always aspire to act in ways that merit conditional affirmation. *Distinctively* virtuous actions are simply useful examples, both because there are obviously good moral reasons to have on-balance preferences in favor of virtue and because virtuous actions are frequently responses to bad things which should not themselves be affirmed. But it is a platitude of work on practical rationality that we should do what we have most reason to do.[75] If we do end up doing what we have most reason to do, there should be good reason, in light of counterfactuals, to stand behind what we have done. So, it's almost always "time for conditional affirmation": except in some odd corner cases, we should always regard our choice situations as ones in which, if we choose well, we should have good reason to conditionally affirm our actions; the choices themselves are properly regarded as potential objects of conditional affirmation. Nothing about Dan's case is extraordinary – he's choosing a line of work.

Further, not to regard your choice situation as "time for conditional affirmation" – a situation in which you should be able to conditionally affirm your choice if you choose well – looks like a practical failing. What is the practical failing? As with contentment, it seems to me that reasons for conditional affirmation are connected to most of our values. Really caring about the scientific enterprise involves taking one's choices inside of the scientific enterprise to be ones that one should be able to conditionally affirm, if one chooses well. But, in order to highlight the ubiquity of the reasons for conditional affirmation, I want to use here a value that stands behind all of our more

[75] See, for example, Kieran Setiya, *Reasons without Rationalism*, pg. 1.

particular values, discussed at length in the second chapter: the value of one's own agency. What is distinctive and significant about the kind of agents that we are is the power that we have, through self-conscious practical reasoning, to shape ourselves and the world that we share with other agents. Appreciating this aspect of ourselves involves not being indifferent to the successful exercise of our agency, just as appreciating what is distinctive and significant about science involves not being indifferent to important scientific discoveries. Not to care about standing behind one's actions in the way that is constitutive of conditional affirmation – or to fail to regard one's choices as calling for conditional affirmation if they are made well – looks like an indifference towards one's own agency which amounts to a failure to properly appreciate the value of that agency.

(ii) Why would it be reasonable for Dan to think it is inappropriate to conditionally affirm his choices?

If Dan thinks that he can act for better or worse reasons here, and he does think that it's "time for conditional affirmation," then why would he think that none of his actual choices are appropriate objects for conditional affirmation?

One answer that I want to set aside would be to deny the assumption that Dan *can* act for better or worse reasons here. If this were the case, then it would seem that conditional affirmation would be off the table. But, although I do not think that the assumption that all choice situations admit of acting for the best is unquestionable, this move will not help us here for three reasons. First, I want to assume that Dan can, so that my argument does not rely on a contentious denial of a seeming truism. Second, it *does* seem to me that Dan can act for better or worse reasons here. He might decide to become a sand hog because it will bring in more money. This seems like a sensible way for Dan to make the best of a bad situation in some sense. Dan may be criticized in the familiar ways if this is not the best reason by his own lights, or if it is not in fact the best reason and Dan is

culpable in some way for a failure in judgment. Third, even if we denied the assumption, this doesn't seem to help; were it the case that Dan could not act for better or worse reasons in this situation, then it is not clear why he should take the reasons for conditional affirmation to be salient. At the very least, I'd need to make a stronger and more contentious case that they are than I have to this point.[76]

Rather, the answer seems to me to lie in the way that the reasons for conditional affirmation pull apart from or outstrip the grounds for more familiar assessments of and attitudes towards practical reasoning, like blame and praise. In being *conditional*, conditional affirmation has two distinct aspects: what it rules in and what it rules out. We commit ourselves to a portion the world being a certain way, given that a different portion of the world is treated as off the table. Wallace elaborates on this aspect of conditional affirmation and its particular appropriateness in the case of action in the following passage:

> [A]ctions are themselves responses to a set of circumstances that confront the agent as a matter of facticity. At the moment of action, certain things have to be taken as given, insofar as they are no longer under the agent's power to affect one way or another: the fact that the house is on fire or that a promise has been made. The deliberative task is to select among the options that it is now open to the agent to perform, given the fixed circumstances that constitute the deliberative context. We therefore screen off those fixed circumstances in retrospective assessment of the action, focusing on the question of whether the action was or was not worthy of affirmation, *given* the circumstances that define its immediate context. (75)

The points that Wallace makes here about facticity are generally plausible. Implicit in the passage is acknowledgment of the rationale of the truism about practical reasoning: it is a matter of coping with a fixed set of facts – which may be good or bad – and standard varieties of criticism

[76] In fact, it does seem to me a compelling thought that sometimes we can be wronged in such a way that it doesn't make sense to think of our situation as one in which we can do what there is most reason to do, while at the same the reasons of conditional affirmation are properly taken to be salient in the way this account describes. But making this case would be much harder – it would require as strong argument against a seeming truism and a more detailed appeal to the specific nature of the defect involved in not taking the reasons of conditional affirmation to be salient. Dan's case on its own doesn't seem well positioned to motivate these thoughts.

involve assessing people on how well they coped with this fixed set of facts. These points also make sense of why there are reasons for conditional affirmation in the case of action but not reasons for unconditional affirmation. We do think it right to have on-balance preferences with regard to actions, but it is hard to see how these on-balance preferences could ever been anything other than conditional, given very general features of decision-making as such. It is stronger, however, to claim that it is never inappropriate to regard the past as factive, in the way that one must in conditionally affirming an action. And such a view is mistaken.

This point is not unique to action. Consider Wallace's own claim that we have reason to unconditionally affirm the people that we care about. As Wallace puts it, we are not indifferent to the existence of the people we love. We don't merely prefer on-balance that they be the people that they are – the people whom we love – given the fact that they happen to exist. We don't treat their existence as a fixed fact, irrelevant to what we prefer. Rather, we treat the past as open – not in the sense of changeable by us, but in the sense that a broader range of counterfactuals are relevant to our affirmation. We take a stand on counterfactuals involving the existence of the beloved and commit ourselves to those worlds in which the beloved exists.

In making this point, Wallace is mainly concerned to motivate the idea that certain kinds of valued relationships give us reason for very strong types of commitment. But Wallace's point shows not just that such relationships make unconditional affirmation appropriate; it also shows that they make merely conditional affirmation inappropriate. Suppose that I conditionally affirmed my friend Greg, treating his existence as fixed. This would be inappropriate. It would not be inappropriate because I got anything wrong about Greg – the features targeted by conditional affirmation are a subset of the features targeted by unconditional affirmation. Rather, it would be like earnestly expressing my care for him by saying "I think you are interesting." This is not a good enough expression of care: it is not a manifestation of the kind of care that a valued friendship makes

appropriate. But something even stronger is true: it is not simply that I have good enough reason to unconditionally affirm, but I am risk-averse and so go in for a more conservative option. Despite its role in Wallace's account, conditional affirmation is not strictly a weaker version of unconditional affirmation. Both involve taking a stand on the relevance of the past to what we prefer about the world. In unconditionally affirming, we not only take a stand behind certain counterfactuals – we take a stand that certain counterfactuals matter. In conditionally affirming, we take the alternate stand: that those counterfactuals don't matter. It's inappropriate to conditionally affirm a friend, then, not because it would be better to go in for something stronger. Rather, in doing so we implicitly commit ourselves to regarding certain facts about the past as irrelevant to the way our friend matters to us – facts which are *quite* relevant. It's like thinking that your friend's own tastes don't matter, except as instrumental roadblocks, in deciding what to get them as a gift. If you do that, you are doing friendship wrong.

I think that we should understand Dan's situation along similar lines. Conditionally affirming his action given the circumstances involves forming a certain attitude that, as such, involves holding them fixed. We need to regard them as fixed in order to decide how to respond. And there are good reasons to hold them as fixed in a variety of different practices of criticism. But there is no reason to think that we *must* hold them as fixed, because we *must* go on to form attitudes of conditional affirmation towards our own actions, even when they are good actions. We don't need to form on-balance preferences at all. This is entirely consistent with the claim that it is correct to regard the choice situation as one in which the reasons of conditional affirmation are salient – that it is "time for conditional affirmation" – because Dan's situation is one in which he *should* be able to conditionally affirm. And the force of this *should* explains Dan's reasons not to have on-balance preferences that implicitly treat the past as factive. Dan properly regards his choices as a manifestation of a wrong. To conditionally affirm the action involves an implicit commitment to the

irrelevance of this past. And to do this, Dan thinks, would be to fail to take the wrong that shapes his choice situation seriously.

Why should Dan think this? To register a wrong involves, in part, treating counterfactuals as live – seeing that others *could* have treated you differently You didn't have to harm me, and yet you did. And registering the wrong in Dan's case involves seeing that his choices could have been different, since he could have been treated differently. This is what he is upset about. These counterfactuals do not seem irrelevant to how he feels about what he chooses to do, because his recognizing himself as having been wronged precisely involves emphasizing their importance. He doesn't want to form an attitude that amounts to standing behind his action, even in the limited way involved in conditional affirmation, because this involves committing to the irrelevance of counterfactuals that are in fact one of the most relevant things about his circumstances. This tension – between properly appreciating wrongdoing in one's choice situation and standing behind one's actions – seems to be an intuitive phenomenon. It is easy to imagine a firefighter feeling fully committed to what they are doing, because their work meets real human needs, even if it is made necessary by lamentable conditions which we would not want to affirm. But it is easy to imagine Dan being uneasy with any sort of affirmation of his action, other than admitting that he tried to reason as best as he could and he stands behind that. He has no on-balance preference about his action. This is precisely because recognizing the wrong at issue involves seeing the past as inextricably linked with and explaining the fact that he can't, e.g., meet real human needs here. Dan correctly thinks that he should be able to conditionally affirm his choices, but practical rationality as such does not make this required, and Dan quite reasonably is not disposed to do so, because doing so involves treating as irrelevant precisely the things that seem most relevant about his situation. This is the source of his finding his choice situation absurd.

(iii) Is this account over-general?

As with the account of contentment, one may worry that my account here generalizes in a problematic way. Just as our choices generally aspire to conditional affirmation, our choice situations are generally shaped by past wrongdoing. Valuing our own agency should be responsive to this fact. To take conditional affirmation to be inappropriate simply because one was wronged in the choices that one faces looks like it will make conditional affirmation rare or impossible. And insofar as conditional affirmation is tied to valuing one's own agency or taking oneself seriously in the way that I sketched above, treating wrongdoing in this way looks like it involves a warped conception of agency's importance – as though one's agency must be completely free from the messiness of the world before it merits affirmation. Why should bracketing off facts about the kind of wrongdoing that Dan faces be any different than bracketing off facts about other lamentable features of the world?

I think that the answer to this question is two-fold. First, due to the generality of conditional affirmation, and the intimate connection that the value of our agency has to our other values, the answer to this question will most usually go by way of the other values that are at stake in the situation. Consider the account that I gave of contentment and its connection to the value of work. I suggested that without some way of construing our actions as manifesting the kind of valuable nature of work in spite of the barrier put up by the conditions, contentment looks inappropriate. Similarly, without some way of finding our options as leading to something that we do value, without bad faith, it will remain appropriate to refuse to simply accept the wrongdoing as a matter of fact, irrelevant to standing behind our choices.

Second, the appropriateness of conditional affirmation can shift over time. In light of future developments, it may no longer seem like a failure to give the wrong its due in looking back and conditionally affirming our choices, where this once seemed inappropriate. We should aspire to this.

But once again, this will turn on the possibilities for things of value that open up in the future *in spite of* the choice situation.

6. Conclusion

I opened this chapter by invoking a tradition of European social thought that places heavy emphasis on the difficulty of finding a home in this world. I hope that focusing on the difficulties thrown up by aspiring to be contented and to conditionally affirm our choices throws some light on this thought, without domesticating it too much. Many of our values give us reasons to look to be contented and to conditionally affirm our choices. This is to say: many of our values give us reason to try to find a home in the world – to find the world to be a place in which we can take joy and to act in the world in ways we can stand behind. But those same values give us reasons not to be contented and not to conditionally affirm our actions when things have gone wrong in certain ways: when we cannot see any good faith way of pulling the good out of the bad. And this fact makes us vulnerable to finding our choice situations to be absurd.

We can easily imagine Dan expressing his frustration at the absurdity of his choices by engaging in his work in an ironic form of parody, pretending that he really does think it is great work. As I mentioned in the first chapter when discussing the Edwardian servant Mary, there is a tradition of ironic parody amongst workers in servile positions. But, if the account of ironic make-believe that I gave in the first chapter is convincing, a deeper explanation is available. As in Danton's and Mary's cases, the absurdity of Dan's situation can be articulated in terms of a wish. Dan *wishes* that he could be contented in his choices. He *wishes* that he could conditionally affirm the decision that he makes. This is part and parcel of the kind of seriousness with which Dan takes what he values and what makes his choices seem absurd. And, if the account of ironic make-believe motivated by a wish that I gave in the first chapter is plausible, ironic parody on his part can be

understood as expressing something deeper than mere frustration. It amounts to acting on the basis of what he regards as truly important, while simultaneously expressing his recognition that this is not really available to him. But the account given in this chapter also gives shape to the worry, voiced in the first chapter, that irony is potentially dangerous and corrosive. Dan should try to be contented and should try to conditionally affirm his actions; he should try to find a home in his world. Seeing the way that the bad can be exploited in favor of the good requires creativity and hermeneutical ingenuity. An easy readiness to engage in ironic make-believe can close off those options too quickly. Between bad faith and irony is a terrain that must by navigated with caution if one really is serious about finding a home in the world.

CHAPTER FOUR: On Not Being "Worth It"

1. Introduction

I'm standing in line at the grocery store, waiting to check out. It's the express lane, and I have a microwave burrito and a jug of milk. I'm following the rules. But I notice that the person in front of me has brought their whole week's shopping to the line and is checking out as though that were a completely acceptable thing to do, even though there's a giant sign at the register: "10 Items or Fewer." I feel rage start to bubble up inside of me. I hate people who do things like this. But I catch myself. "Andrew," I think, "this just isn't worth getting angry about." I calm down and go back to thinking about my lunch.

This chapter is about the thought: "This just isn't worth getting angry about." It's a common thought. I have it all the time, in situations like the one just described. I'm sure that you've had it too. But, on reflection, it's a difficult thought to make sense of. I take it that when I think this thought, I'm thinking about a reason not to get angry. The fact that it isn't worth it is a reason not to get angry. What sort of reason is it? "Well," I might think to myself, "look Andrew, you can't just go around getting angry all the time that people are jerks. You'd be miserable." That's a common thought too, and it looks like it expresses an instrumental reason not to be angry. The reason not to get angry at petty jerks is that it would have bad consequences for me: I'd be miserable.

But that is not quite right. That I would bear considerable costs from being angry may very well be a reason not to be angry and perhaps a good one. But it doesn't bear on the fittingness of anger. It might simply be that the world is so messed up that fitting anger is indeed very costly. My thought that anger isn't worth it, though, seems to me to be about fittingness. The fact that anger wouldn't be worth it shows that it isn't fitting. And my responses seem to manifest this fact. If you told me you'd give me a million bucks if I ceased to be angry, that seems like a pretty good deal to

me. But I couldn't cease to be angry simply on that basis, and even if I could, it would need to be by some external process, alien to my emotions themselves – perhaps the trick of some future technology. Of course, attempting to get our emotions in line with our considered judgments is often like herding cats. The mere fact that I take my anger to present the world in a way that I do not endorse upon reflection will not always immediately make the anger dissipate. I'm very afraid of heights and repeating my considered judgments about the safety of bridges like a mantra does little to change things. But sometimes our emotions are entirely responsive to judgments about their appropriateness, in a way that seems completely natural – that is, in a way that our emotions are not responsive to judgments about instrumental reasons, and never could be. And this appears to me to be exactly what is happening when I notice that I'm getting angry, think "It's not worth it," and then calm down.[77]

OK, then, let's say my thought is about a reason that it is not fitting to be angry. In what sense is anger's not being "worth it" a reason that anger would not be fitting? Here we flounder. There is an obvious way in which anger is quite fitting: the jerk ahead of me in line has wronged me – and everyone else who follows the rules! – and anger is a fitting response to wrongdoing. If we try to elaborate on "worth it," however, we're back where we started, with a metaphor that invites unpacking in instrumental terms and with some obvious considerations – like the misery of being angry – that are natural to construe in instrumental terms and hard to even begin to make sense of as bearing on fittingness.

So, we've got a puzzle: an ordinary thought about anger seems to be about its fittingness, but it is not clear how this could be. The task of this chapter is to explain "not worth it" thoughts about anger, and to show how understanding them leads to some interesting philosophical conclusions

[77] For this distinction between kinds of reasons, see Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy" and Pamela Hieronymi "The Wrong Kind of Reason."

more generally. In §2, I'll survey the literature on anger. One might have thought that prominent philosophical accounts of anger would provide the resources – either explicitly or implicitly – to make sense of familiar but puzzling "not worth it" thoughts. But, as I'll show, they don't. In §3, I argue that the thought that anger is "not worth it" has to do with the sort of seriousness that anger accords its object. That anger might accord its object an unmerited seriousness shows it to be inappropriate, but also – I argue – shows why seemingly instrumental considerations bear on appropriateness, insofar as they bear on seriousness. In §4, I consider a possible objection to my account: the fitting but very costly anger of oppressed groups. I argue that not only is my account consistent with the idea that the anger of the oppressed is generally fitting, although very costly, but it allows us to articulate a familiar, but overlooked emotional dilemma that oppressed groups face – a dilemma I call "absurd anger." In §5, I turn to a literary example – J.F. Powers's novel *Wheat that Springeth Green* – in order to develop my account of "absurd anger" in more detail, showing how a kind of irony can be a fitting response to the problem it poses. In §6, I conclude by briefly discussing several broader implications of my account.

2. Anger: Some Representative Views

Aristotle's account of anger in the *Rhetoric* is the locus classicus for philosophical accounts of anger. In broad brushstrokes, Aristotle claims that anger involves a kind of negative affect in response to the recognition that things are not as they should be, connected with a desire for revenge.[78] Although contemporary philosophers have been mixed in their response to the claim that anger and revenge are conceptually connected, they have generally adopted the core of Aristotle's account. So, Amia Srinivasan writes: "What makes anger intelligible as anger, and distinct from mere

[78] See Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, 1378a–1378b. Also, in this chapter I'm assuming, with the prominent tradition following Aristotle, that there are sometimes good reasons for anger. For voices from dissenting Stoic, Buddhist, and psychological traditions see respectively Seneca, "On Anger"; Robert Thurman, *Anger*; and Paul Bloom, "Choosing Violence."

disappointment, is that anger presents its object as involving a *moral violation*: not just a violation of how one wishes things were, but a violation of how things *ought* to be" (128). Macalester Bell articulates what she takes to be a morally important species of anger as what "we experience when we judge that we have been blocked or constrained by being *wronged* by another" (167). Glen Pettigrove notes that anger is standardly understood to involve judging that its object "(*a*) has wrongfully harmed someone or something of value or (*b*) has failed to care about someone or something in the appropriate way. It involves some level of felt hostility or antipathy toward its object" (357-58). And, on Agnes Callard's picture, anger is a kind of caring about norm violations.[79]

That moral anger targets wrongdoing, however, is only a necessary condition for anger's fittingness.[80] We don't get angry at all wrongdoing, and that's perfectly rational. Further, this necessary condition doesn't help us understand "not worth it" thoughts. My thought that anger was not "worth it" was the thought that anger would not be fitting even though a wrong had taken place.

Accounts of anger also often explain anger's nature in ways that illuminate its fittingness. Here, there is much disagreement, but a general taxonomy emerges, with accounts falling into the following categories: (1) epistemic, (2) evaluative, (3) communicative, and (4) motivational.[81] On (1), anger is valuable because it gives its subject special insight into wrongdoing. On (2), anger is required by some evaluative practice we are engaged in. On (3), anger is an important way of transmitting

[79] See Amia Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger"; Macalester Bell, "Anger, Virtue, and Oppression"; Glen Pettigrove, "Meekness and 'Moral' Anger"; and Agnes Callard, "The Reason to Be Angry Forever" and "On Anger."

[80] Many philosophers assume that anger is essentially a "moral" emotion – that it only aptly targets wrongdoing. (This assumption is reflected in the quote from Srinivasan.) Other philosophers allow that "non-moral" anger is possible. (So, for instance, Bell specifies that her account is of a morally interesting kind of anger.) I'm not sure that there is a deep philosophical debate here; I strongly suspect that a subtle taxonomy of the concepts that we use to express frustration would reveal strong family resemblances between the paradigmatically "moral" and paradigmatically "non-moral" cases. The reasons for seeking to stress the relation or the difference between the cases may turn on our interests in particular contexts, not on any deep philosophical truths. In any case, this chapter is concerned with wrongdoing and anger in response to wrongdoing. I will remain officially agnostic on whether anger is essentially "moral."

[81] These labels come from Pettigrove, pgs. 358-59. Bell, pgs. 168-69, also notes a very similar taxonomy.

moral messages about wrongdoing. And on (4), anger is helpful in moving agents to remedy wrongdoing.

Some versions of these strategies seem not to explain the fittingness of anger, insofar as they give merely instrumental reasons. That anger might motivate political change, for instance, explains why anger is good, but not why it is fitting. Such accounts are not helpful, because I'm trying to understand the hunch that "not worth it" thoughts are about reasons of fittingness. So, I want to consider three representative discussions of anger that do bear on fittingness: (A) Bell's alternative to the taxonomy, (B) Callard's version of (2), and (C) Srinivasan's combination of (1) and (3).

(A) Bell holds that virtue is loving the good and hating the bad and articulates anger as a form of hating the bad.[82] Insofar as virtues are intrinsically good, so is anger. Anger is fitting as a manifestation of virtue in the right circumstances. But this account is almost primitive, in merely identifying anger as a form of hating the bad; acknowledging that anger involves hating the bad does not shed light on why "not worth it" thoughts bear on fittingness.

(B) Strategy (2) involves holding that anger plays a constitutive role in a practice in which we are engaged. Drawing on the work of Samuel Scheffler, Callard argues that this practice is "valuing." Callard argues that anger is a kind of caring that is a necessary constituent of valuing some good in non-ideal conditions. A paradigmatic fitting reason for anger is "that you betrayed me." This is only a reason for me against a background of assumed valuing. Because I value our relationship, the fact that you betrayed me is a fitting reason to be angry. Anger is fitting, then, in response to wrongdoing, when that wrongdoing occurs in the context of a valued relationship.[83]

We have, then, a reason to think that anger is sometimes not a fitting response to wrongdoing: when that wrongdoing does not occur in the context of a valued relationship. But this

[82] Here she is drawing on a non-Aristotelian conception of virtue defended by Thomas Hurka and Robert Adams.

[83] See Callard's "The Reason to be Angry Forever," pgs. 126-28.

will not help with my puzzle. First, it seems to me that anger's not being "worth it" may be a reason that anger is not fitting even in the context of obviously valued relationships, like friendships. Second, on Callard's account the relations of "co-valuing" that leave us vulnerable to anger are absolutely general. This is necessary in order to capture the fact that we have reason to be angry with complete strangers. On Callard's account I *am* in a relationship with the jerk at the grocery store.

(C) Amia Srinivasan argues that anger is important, because it is a distinctive way of appreciating and communicating one's appreciation of wrongdoing. I take her account to be an explication of the fittingness of anger – rather than an appeal to instrumental reasons to be angry – because Srinivasan argues that anger is a sui generis mental state, with both representational and phenomenological properties.[84] As such, reasons for the sort of appreciation anger is are not instrumental, as the appreciation could not be achieved in any way other than being angry. On the idea that anger is fitting, because it is a distinctive kind of appreciation, Srinivasan writes:

> I want to suggest that getting angry is a means of affectively registering or appreciating the injustice of the world, and that our capacity to get aptly angry is best compared with our capacity for aesthetic appreciation. Just as appreciating the beautiful or the sublime has a value distinct from the value of knowing that something is beautiful or sublime, there might well be a value to appreciating the injustice of the world through one's apt anger—a value that is distinct from that of simply knowing that the world is unjust. (132)

This observation strikes me as both basically correct and fruitful material for further reflection. But it is not clear from what Srinivasan says why "not worth it" thoughts would be about reasons not to appreciate wrongdoing.

In summary, here's where we are: I'd like to understand why anger's not being "worth it" is a reason that anger is not fitting. All the representative accounts agree that anger targets wrongdoing, but this is insufficient. But representative accounts of anger don't seem well placed to resolve my

[84] Along these lines, see also Talbot Brewer, "On Alienated Emotions."

puzzle. On some accounts, anger is primarily interesting for its contingently good effects; such accounts were set aside. Other accounts do unpack anger in ways that illuminate its fittingness, but they aren't illuminating as to how "not worth it" thoughts might be about fittingness. So, we are still in the dark.

3. How "Misery" Bears on Fittingness

3.1. Preliminary Remarks: Proportionality and the Distinction between "Insistent" and "Noninsistent" Reasons

I want to begin my resolution of the puzzle by introducing two topics: proportionality and the distinction between "insistent" and "noninsistent" reasons. These will not on their own present an obvious way of making sense of "not worth it" thoughts, but they will be crucial elements in articulating my resolution.

3.1.1. Proportionality

Anger comes in degrees. I can get ticked off or I can fly into a rage. These degrees are rationally assessable, in connection to their proportionality to the wrong at issue, and disproportionate anger will not be fitting. Srinivasan explicitly notes this, and it appears to be presupposed by both Bell's and Callard's accounts.[85] There is a further property, then, in virtue of which some degrees of anger will not be fitting because disproportionate.

At first glance, we might think that this feature is an intrinsic property of the wrongdoing: rage is appropriate for betrayal and getting ticked off is appropriate for pettiness, but not the other way around, because betrayal is an intrinsically worse wrong. But upon reflection, it seems that, at

[85] See Srinivasan, pg. 130.

least in many cases, the property will be relational: rage at my friend's betrayal seems appropriate; rage at Brutus's betrayal of Caesar does not.

One might think that my thought that anger is "not worth it" because it would make my life miserable is a thought about some further property in virtue of which my anger is disproportionate to the jerk's wrongdoing. But it still isn't clear what this property would be, such that the thought would be about fittingness. We should expect the property to have something to do with the nature of the wrong – the extent of my anger is too great because being a jerk isn't that bad – or with the nature of our relationship – extensive anger is too great, because the jerk isn't my friend. But my thought was about whether it would be worth it for me to be miserable all the time. And this is a feature not of the wrongdoing, nor the wrongdoing's relation to me, but a feature of my own life.

3.1.2. The Distinction between "Insistent" and "Noninsistent" Reasons

Niko Kolodny draws a distinction between what he terms "insistent" and "noninsistent" reasons for some attitude or emotion.[86] An insistent reason renders the presence of an attitude rational and the absence of that attitude irrational. Noninsistent reasons render the presence of an attitude rational, but do not render the absence of that attitude irrational. In other words, insistent reasons require the attitude; noninsistent reasons permit but do not require the attitude.

Although this point has not to my knowledge been made before, it seems to me that this distinction is closely tied to a different way in which attitudes may lack fit. There are both insistent reasons and noninsistent reasons for anger, and these vary by context. I think there are insistent reasons for me to get angry if you – my friend – betrayed me. It is rational to get angry and it would be irrational not to get angry. I think that there are noninsistent reasons for me to get angry about Brutus's betrayal of Caesar. It would be entirely reasonable if I identified to some extent with Caesar

[86] See Kolody, "Love as Valuing a Relationship," pg. 163.

and felt some anger over his betrayal by Brutus. It would also be entirely reasonable, however, if I did not. Here's the crucial thing that has not been noticed: it seems to me that the character of anger is transformed when it is implicitly taken to be a response to insistent rather than noninsistent reasons. That is, there is not one self-same anger, showing up in some cases as responsive to insistent reasons and in other cases as responsive to noninsistent reasons. Rather, the two kinds of anger differ in character.

The two cases will differ in phenomenology, but isolating the phenomenological markers seems to me to be subsequent upon recognizing two different ways in which we may regard our anger. We may find that our anger flows out of us and feels like a response to a *demand*. If we were to describe our anger, we could make reference to how our feelings seem like responses to a demand made by the wrongdoing. On the other hand, our anger may seem to have the character of accurately reflecting the wrong, but not as being called out of us, as by a demand. Of course, this in part describes the two kinds of anger in terms of insistent and noninsistent reasons. This is just to say that it seems that anger may in some way implicitly represent its object not simply as wrong, and not simply as involving a certain degree of wrongdoing, but also as being demanded by the wrongdoing. If this is so, anger may lack fit by representing its object as demanding a response, when it does not in fact demand a response. Notice that this distinction is different than the distinction between degrees of anger. It is true that there is something wrong with flying into a rage at Brutus's betrayal of Caesar and it is true that there is something wrong with feeling as though one *must* get angry at this betrayal, but these pick out two different things that may have gone wrong in the case, and which may in principle pull apart.

Again, though, marking the distinction between insistent and noninsistent reasons for anger doesn't immediately shed light on my puzzle. I might recognize that my anger seemed to be treating the wrong as demanding a response from me, think that the wrong didn't demand a response from

me, and so think that my anger was unfitting. But, as with proportionality, it looks like this realization should go by way of some feature of the wrongdoing – noticing that Brutus's betrayal isn't something that I think demands a response from me, say, because I'm not friends with Brutus. But the fact that the anger I'm inclined to would make my life miserable isn't about the wrong or its relation to me.

3.2. Seriousness and Effects

3.2.1. The Basic Idea

Even though proportionality and the distinction between insistent and noninsistent reasons do not present an immediate resolution to my puzzle, I introduced these topics because they are both connected to a topic that I introduced in the first chapter: seriousness. Seriousness, in turn, is connected to emotional investment, which is reflected in the effects that emotions like anger have in our lives. My resolution to the puzzle, in outline, is this: reflection upon the effects of anger can amount to reflection upon the seriousness with which we take the wrong. The effects of the emotions on our lives can show us that we are taking the wrong too seriously, and so that our anger is not fitting. This is how effects can bear on the fittingness of anger.

Now, I will spell this out in detail. In the first chapter, I noted the connection between value and reasons for actions, attitudes, and emotions. Particularly saliant for this section is the fact that valuing something involves recognizing reasons for emotional responses like anger. Further, our conception of what is valuable about the object in question involves taking certain harms to be greater than others, and so there being reason for greater degrees of anger. And it involves some conception of whether and when these reasons are insistent or noninsistent. As I argued, these facts illuminate ordinary thoughts about someone's taking something seriously. If your anger was very great, I might say, "You are taking this very seriously." You take there to have been some very great

harm to something you value. Or if you indicated that your anger felt like a response to a demand, I might say "You are taking this very seriously." You take there to be a harm significant enough to something you value that you *must* respond to it.

The seriousness with which we take things is manifested in our "emotional investment" in them. We have great emotional vulnerabilities to the things that we value very highly. And we expend much emotional energy in response to great harms to things that we value. But, as Thomas Nagel notes in passing, these facts are reflected in the effects that our emotions have in our lives. That we are being torn up inside with rage is an indication that we take the wrong in question very seriously. If I recognize that the kind of anger I'm experiencing is liable to make me miserable because it is pervasive, this may be an indication that my anger is treating the wrongdoing as *demanding* a response from me, and so that I'm treating it seriously in the sense of a wrong important enough to demand response. Yet, the wrong may seem to me not to be something worth taking that seriously. And so, I conclude that the anger is unfitting.[87]

The plausibility of this account is best seen in its diagnosis of what is going on with "not worth it" thoughts in particular cases. So, I'll now turn to these.

[87] We might back up this intuitive correlation by making an in-principle case for a close-to-isometric mapping of effects onto degrees of proportionality. And it seems to me that there are some good reasons – perhaps a priori reasons – to think that effects will be *constitutive* of proportionality. Broadly speaking, our emotions register the good and bad things about the world. Good and bad come in degrees, and registrations will be proportionate to the extent that they correspond to those degrees. Where else would we look for the corresponding degrees but in the extent of the effects the emotions have in changing us and our lives? Agnes Callard gestures in this general direction in "The Reason to Be Angry Forever" when she theorizes that fitting anger mirrors the wrong in the wronged. (See pgs. 132-34.) But making this case in general would be difficult, if not impossible. Proportionality is subtle and varied, as are the effects of the emotions, and not all of the effects of the emotions are relevant to proportionality. Further, although the sort of "not worth it" thoughts that I pointed to are clearly about effects of anger on me, even if the extent of effects were isomorphic to the proportionality of anger, I still haven't made clear how the relevant thoughts are intuitively about the kinds of effects in question. That is: I've given a proof of concept. I've shown that it is not impossible for "not worth it" thoughts to be about fittingness.

3.2.2. The Basic Idea Explained and Defended Through Application to Cases

Let's start by returning to my reaction to the jerk in the grocery store. My thought that anger would not be worth it was explained in terms of the fact that I'd be miserable if I got angry at jerks all of the time. I want now to explain three different ways that this can be understood as a thought about fittingness.

3.2.2.1. Mere Expression

There's a way of explaining this thought, in light of the account that I've introduced, which resolves the puzzle but also renders it superficial. I want to treat this first in order to set it aside. It may be that I've recognized that my anger is disproportionate or inappropriately assumes that I have insistent reasons to get angry at the jerk on other grounds – some feature of the wrong or my relationship to the jerk – but I'm expressing this fact by appeal to the natural correlation between the extent of the emotional effects on me and these other facts. The puzzle then would be a merely superficial one in the sense that I am not reasoning from effects to fittingness, but rather merely expressing an independent judgment about fittingness by way of effects.

Of course, why this would be an expression of a judgment of fittingness *at all* is mysterious until we have my account on hand, so I've already shed some light the phenomenon. But I want to set this kind of explanation aside, because it seems to me that the natural elaboration of "not worth it" thoughts – that anger is not worth it because it would make my life miserable – can express a genuine form of reasoning, from the fact that I'd be miserable to the conclusion that I'm taking the wrong too seriously, and so that my anger must not be fitting. In fact, it seems to me that this is often what is going on when we have "not worth it" thoughts: we don't think that our anger is unfitting independent of the recognition that it would make us miserable. Rather, we simply balk at the idea that the wrong in question could merit our misery and conclude on that basis that our anger

is unfitting. If there is a connection between effects and the seriousness with which we accord the wrong in our anger, then this pattern of reasoning can be perfectly rational, given that what I am balking at is *not* the mere prospect of being miserable – something I wish to avoid – but the idea that the wrong in question could possibly be one that would merit the kind of emotional investment on my part involved in being miserable. There are two broadly different ways in which this sort of reasoning could go, and I want to consider both in order to bolster the plausibility of my account.

3.2.2.2. Implicit Comparison

In many cases the reasoning behind the thought that my anger is "not worth it" because it would make my life miserable seems to have some particular point of comparison implicitly in mind. When I'm standing in line at the grocery store, it is not as if I think that the pattern of inference from my own misery to the conclusion that anger would not be fitting is a good one to employ on all occasions. You might ask me: what are some wrongs worth making yourself miserable over? With a little thought, I could supply you a list: if a family member were murdered, if I lived in a war-torn country, if I found out that I'd been duped by an elaborate Ponzi scheme by the person I thought was my best friend – in all of those cases I could see that it would be worth the kind of emotional investment in anger that would make me miserable. It's not that I think, instrumentally, that I'm comfortable spending a substantial portion of my emotion credits in these cases. Rather, I recognize that such cases make emotions that involve substantial negative effects on my life fitting, such that citing the fact that I'd be made miserable by my anger would be neither here nor there. Misery seems to be like an unfortunate, but perfectly predictable and understandable aspect of the kind of seriousness with which I would treat all of these wrongs.

Standing in line at the grocery store, I might think: *this* is not *that*. That is: I might think that a jerk's not following the rules is nothing like, say, being duped in an elaborate Ponzi scheme by the

person I thought was my best friend. It is nothing like that. And so, I conclude that misery is not worth it. Note: this is genuine reasoning. It isn't that I think, on some other grounds, that the anger that would make me miserable is unfitting. Rather, I recognize that it would make me miserable, notice the gap between the sort of wrong at issue and some case where misery would be expected and think: I must be overreacting. I'm taking this too seriously. This reasoning can go wrong if I'm incorrect about the gap. But if I'm correct, it seems perfectly in place.

And this kind of reasoning by comparison seems widespread and perfectly natural. Consider just two examples, one from psychology and the other from philosophy. In cognitive behavioral therapy, the patient is directed to reflect on the implicit judgments behind the negative feelings and emotions that are troubling them.[88] Often what comes out in this process are judgments that the patient recognizes are patently absurd: one is panicking over a deadline, and when one tries to explain why, one starts to make explicit the story about what they think will happen to them if they miss the deadline. And this story inevitably contains massive distortions that the patient recognizes as ridiculous upon a moment's reflection: that if one misses the deadline, they will be hated by everyone that they ever met; that they will be judged a failure in all dimensions of life; that they will die penniless. The panic starts to subside, because the patient recognizes that it is not a fitting response to the situation that they are actually in. But this method works not by identifying any particular feature of the situation that the patient is in that makes panic lack fit. Rather, it simply involves making clear the obvious distance between whatever bad thing is happening now and kinds of situations – like dying penniless – that would actually merit panic.

Second, Talbot Brewer makes the case that reflection on our emotions and their rationality is directed outward towards the world in much the way the reflection on beliefs is. Often, we are overcome with inchoate emotional reactions that are not easy to articulate. In trying to understand

[88] For classic examples, see *Feeling Good* and *When Panic Attacks*, both by David D. Burns.

how I feel, I try to figure out *what* is bothering me. I try to articulate relevant features of the apparent object of my upset and say what it is about it that is bothering me, how it makes sense to describe the features of the world my reaction seems to be picking up on.[89] In doing this, I may come to better articulate my emotions themselves. But I may also come to find that particular emotional reactions are analogous to perceptual illusions. I might start, say, with the fact that anger was making me miserable and try to articulate some aspect of the wrong in virtue of which misery would make sense. And here, my attempts to articulate what I am feeling will inevitably work from points of comparison, which may lead to the conclusion that my current anger is unfitting without my ever being able to articulate quite what it is about the wrong that makes anger unfitting. I find myself being made miserable by the jerk. I try to make sense of this. I have some stock of comparison points, where I take misery in the face of wrongdoing to be perfectly appropriate. I try to draw connections between the wrongs in those cases and the case at hand. And I find that I just can't do it —the wrongs are so distant. So, I conclude that my anger must not be fitting.

3.2.2.3. Balking at Demands

There is another way of spelling out the reasoning behind "not worth it" thoughts that articulates a common phenomenon, but which is much more puzzling. I might think that my anger is a response that I'm apt to have whenever a jerk does something wrong. And I might notice that jerks are apt to do bad things all of the time, such that I will be miserable if I always get angry at them. And I might think: "I can't live like that. There's just no way that I have to live in misery simply because there are jerks." This way of thinking seems to be about recognizing my anger as motivated by insistent reasons – I notice that the way that I'm feeling is a way I'd be inclined to feel whenever jerks show up; I recognize my anger manifesting the sense that jerks *require* a response

[89] Brewer, "On Alienated Emotions," pgs.14-15.

from me. Now, if I thought, on independent grounds, that there weren't insistent reasons to get angry at jerks, then I might then conclude that my anger was not fitting. But it seems to me that the reasoning commonly goes in the other direction. I recognize my response as taking there to be insistent reasons. I realize that if there were insistent reasons, then my life would be miserable. I balk at this. I think: jerks just can't make my life miserable. I can't be required to take jerks *that* seriously. I *conclude* on this basis that there are not insistent reasons to get angry at jerks. And so, I calm down.

This pattern of reasoning is puzzling, because it is puzzling why the effects of anger on one's life would show that there are not insistent reasons for anger in the case at hand. There are, after all, many cases in which in which anger might make one's life miserable *and* there are also insistent reasons to be angry. It is plausible that there are insistent reasons to be angry at one's wrongdoer when one is very gravely wronged. But one may live in a context in which one is regularly very gravely wronged. And one may be aware of this fact and recognize that getting angry in this context will make one's life miserable, because the opportunities for anger are near constant. In such a case, the fact that anger would make my life miserable does not show that there are not insistent reasons for anger. There are.

I want to argue, though, that this inference is sometimes a good one. To show how, I need to make a few general observations about the role of the emotions in human life. We all have rough expectations of how much emotional energy we will expend in life, as well as connected senses of how much emotional energy it seems appropriate to expend in certain contexts. Growing into mature moral agents, we come to see how different situations will merit different degrees of anger. And, on this basis, we come to form certain expectations about how emotionally demanding life is – what kinds of effects it will have on us. These kinds of expectations can be about life in general, but they will also inevitably be about the contexts of different relationships. We learn, for instance, that the emotions that we have towards friends are liable, in general, to have much greater effects on our

lives than the emotions that we have towards strangers. We also come to regard this as appropriate: it is fine that people we are more closely attached to affect us in much more costly ways. Indeed, as Samuel Scheffler has argued, this is constitutive of valuing, which is a core part of human flourishing.[90]

The world in general can appropriately have wide ranging emotional effects upon us. But there are limits to our capacities. To live a recognizably human life, we need to choose where to direct our emotional resources. Particular relationships that we value are the areas in which we expend the bulk of these resources. And this fact is reflected in the constitutive norms of the relationships that we value. Valuing a friendship involves, in part, being emotionally vulnerable to friends in a way that I am not to other people – which involves the emotions I have towards friends having much greater, often costly, effects on my life. Connected to this, the emotions that are fitting in the context of friendship are likely to have much greater effects on me than the emotions that are fitting in less intimate contexts. Finally, the way that the limits to our emotional capacities shape the kind of emotional investment that is appropriate is predictably reflected in the range of cases in which it seems plausible to hold that there are insistent reasons for anger and the cases in which it is not plausible. It is plausible that I have insistent reasons to get angry over wrongs in the context of intimate relationships and when I'm confronted with very grave wrongs. It is not plausible that I have insistent reasons to get angry over all wrongdoing, or over the wrongdoing of figures from the distant past I hardly know at all. This is sensible, given the limits of our emotional capacities, and the way that the channeling of our emotional energy is what makes possible the kind of valued relationships that make life worth living in the first place.

What follows from this is that an inference from the effects of anger on one's life to the conclusion that the anger is not fitting can be quite rational, tracking the limits on our emotional

[90] See Scheffler, "Valuing," *passim*.

capacities which shape the rationality of the emotions. I notice that if jerks genuinely demanded this kind of emotional investment from me, my life would be miserable. I think: this cannot possibly be right – there's nothing special about my relationship with jerks that could possibly demand this sort of emotional investment from me. So, I conclude that the anger I feel bubbling up inside of me – the anger that feels like a response to a demand from jerks – is not fitting. If I'm correct in my assumption that there is nothing special about my relationship with jerks or the wrong at issue, this inference seems like a good one.

There are, however, many cases in which "not worth it" thoughts – or thoughts that look like "not worth it" thoughts – show up, but where this inference would be a very bad one. I want to work through a representative set of these cases to bolster my account. To start, I want to imagine someone living in a war-torn region, confronted with atrocities, reflecting on their anger and thinking: "It's not worth it. I just can't live like this anymore." There are at least two different ways of spelling out what this thought amounts to. On one, it expresses the inference I've been discussing, but it is manifestly a bad inference. On the other, it isn't the kind of "not worth it" thought I've aspired to give an account of at all. First, imagine a naïve foreign correspondent, living in the midst of war for the first time in their life. They might implicitly have the assumption that *life* simply cannot be as emotionally demanding as it seems to be here, and so they are taking things too seriously in being angry all the time. But this is a bad assumption, and it leads to a bad inference. Life can in fact be that emotionally demanding – stretching one's emotional capacities to the breaking point – if one is constantly confronted with grave wrongdoing. Of course, the foreign correspondent may simply be unable to be angry all the time; limits of our emotional capacities give shape to the kinds of responses which are fitting, but the fact of those limits does not make it the case that the world will never push us past the breaking point. This is how the citizens living in a war-torn region may feel: completely overwhelmed, no longer able to feel anger at what is going on.

One might express this feeling of emotional deadening by saying "It's not even worth it to get angry anymore." But this is not the kind of thought I'm interested in – it is a way of expressing emotional deadening, not the conclusion that anger is out of place, and this is reflected in the fact that no one who uttered such words would doubt that rage would fit the devastation they find themselves living in.

Next, I want to consider how some "not worth it" thoughts may occur in the context of intimate relationships. I might think in the context of a friendship, "I just cannot get filled with rage over my friend's ignoring me on weekends. I'll be miserable." I have a sense of how emotionally demanding friendships are, the kind of effects they will have on my life, and the appropriateness of this. There are some natural ways that "not worth it" thoughts may occur in these contexts which are not about the fittingness of the anger in question. I might think that the kind of negative effects that Greg is having on me go beyond what a good friendship can require, and so conclude that it is a bad friendship. I might think, then, that the friendship itself is "not worth it": the negative effects are grounds for the conclusion that the relationship is abusive to the point where it isn't worth it anymore. My emotional resources are better spent elsewhere. This "not worth it" thought is grounds for the judgment that the relationship is a bad one – a good relationship would not have these sorts of effects on me – but it isn't grounds for thinking that my anger is unfitting. To reason from the effects to a lack of fit here would require the assumption that the relationship isn't a bad one, and that would be a mistaken assumption. (I might reason in this way, but I'd be making an error.) We can also imagine a more crudely self-interested version of the "not worth it" thought: I might think that the emotional effects of a relationship are not worth it because I'd just rather have peace of mind. I like being a loner. This kind of "not worth it" thought isn't about the fittingness of my anger, nor about the badness of the relationship itself, but rather about how I'd like to spend my emotional energy: elsewhere. Sometimes, though, "not worth it" thoughts can be about fittingness in

the context of intimate relationships. I might find that the extent of the emotional effects that the relationship is having on me is way out of step with what I take to be appropriate for the relationship. But I also may think that nothing out of the ordinary has gone wrong with the relationship – the things that upset me in the other are not guides to something deeply wrong with the relationship. On this tacit assumption, I may conclude that my anger is not fitting – that I *must* be overreacting somehow.

3.3. Summary

To conclude, let's return to my thought in the grocery store. It seems to me that thoughts like mine might plausibly be explained by any of the strategies I've just given. I know that the wrong is small. I might take this to be reason that my anger is not fitting, and simply express my judgment with reference to misery. Or I might notice that the effects of rage that I'm experiencing are sort of like what I'd experience if someone slashed the tires on my car. And so, I think: this sort of wrong *cannot* be worth these effects. Or I might recognize that the other person is just a stranger, take my anger to be a response to a felt demand, notice that a demand would involve me being miserable all the time, and think that it cannot possibly be the case that jerks could demand this kind of emotional investment from me. So, I calm down.

So, I calm down. I want to dwell on that thought for a moment. It might mean several things. I might stop being angry. Or I might simply get "less" angry. Both of these responses can be explained by the strategies that I've developed. If I stop being angry, it may be because I recognize that anger is not demanded of me here. If I get less angry, this may be explained either by the fact that I recognize my anger as disproportionate – so I start being ticked off instead of flying into a rage – or because I see that anger is not demanded from me here. (The anger associated with

demands is often more intense than anger which is motivated by the recognition of noninsistent reasons.)

In the next section, I'm going to turn to a case that might at first glance seem difficult for my account: the very demanding but entirely fitting anger of oppressed groups. I'm going to argue that my account is actually *uniquely* situated to articulate a kind of dilemma that oppressed groups face with regard to their anger, a dilemma that is widespread and intuitive, but which has not received philosophical attention.

4. Recognition and the Anger Dilemma

The anger of the oppressed is often very costly, precisely because the wrongs it responds to are very great. And, it has often been taken to be important, although costly, for precisely this reason. Amia Srinivasan notes a trend in which conservative commentators have argued against the anger of African Americans on the grounds that it simply makes their lives go poorly. As she rightly notes, understood as offering instrumental considerations not to be angry, these arguments do not show the anger not to be fitting.[91] But some of these arguments might in fact be read as arguing that such anger is not fitting, because it just cannot be worth living in misery because of injustice. My account offers a diagnosis of the mistake involved here: the inference is a bad one, premised on the assumption that emotional investment in injustice cannot possibly be so costly.

Things get tricky, though, when we use my account to think about the way in which the oppressed may find their rage to be unfitting. My account explains in the abstract how this is possible – the oppressed, like anyone, might find the amount of emotional investment inappropriate given the relationship, and so conclude that they are overreacting. It would be common to suppose, then, that "not worth it" thoughts of my kind will not show up or at least not be rational amongst

[91] See Srinivasan, pgs. 125-27.

the oppressed; thoughts about anger's not being "worth it" will be about instrumental reasons not to be angry, or they will give expression to a kind of emotional deadening under the weight of oppression.

However, this is not quite right. It seems to me that oppressed people *do* have the kind of "not worth it" thoughts I've been discussing, particularly the kind that are best explained as balking at the thought that there can be insistent reasons to be filled with rage at their own oppression. Imagine a colonial subject of an empire, filled with rage over their treatment by the viceroy. They reflect on the way that the rage is destroying them inside and think: this just isn't worth it. The viceroy doesn't deserve this much emotional investment. This seems to me to be the kind of "not worth it" thought that I've articulated. But, at the same time, the subject may feel that they *must* respond to the wrongdoing somehow. Their anger may dissipate to some extent, but not in the way that mine does in the grocery store. The situation feels like a bind: anger seems at once fitting and not fitting.

How could these two thoughts be true? The answer here lies, I think, not in attempting to resolve the tension between these two thoughts, but in admitting that it is a genuine dilemma that agents may face, a dilemma that my account has the resources to articulate. There is something natural in the thought that the anger of the oppressed has a paradoxical character: getting worked up into a rage seems to grant the oppressor the power to ruin one's life further; not getting worked up into a rage lets the oppressor off the hook. A Catch-22. And the fact that oppressed groups can face something like emotional dilemmas has been remarked upon in the philosophical literature – by Amia Srinivasan on African American anger and by Talbot Brewer on the "emotional labor" of those working in the service industry. But they look for the source of emotional problems in the conflicts between instrumental reasons and reasons of fittingness for emotions, and so the examples that they hold up as exemplars have a different shape from the one that I'm pointing to.

For example, Srinivasan presents the case of James Baldwin, considering whether to express his anger over the unjust treatment of African Americans. Srinivasan holds that to fully embody his anger – to fully achieve the kind of appreciation she takes to be constitutive of anger – Baldwin must express it. But the expression of anger would also be counterproductive to the cause of Civil Rights. White Americans are frightened when African Americans express their rage, and so expressing his anger would make many in his audience less sympathetic to his cause. So, Baldwin's reasons cut in different directions. He has instrumental reasons not to express his anger. He has reasons of fittingness to express his anger – the fact that such anger, and its expression, is merited by injustice. According to Srinivasan, the choice situation that Baldwin faces is a manifestation of what she calls "affective injustice," in virtue of the causes of the dilemma he faces. The reason that his anger would be counterproductive is because of the attitudes of many Americans toward African American rage – attitudes which stem from the very thing that makes anger appropriate in the first place; an ideology which casts the anger of African Americans as frightening or illegitimate springs from and feeds off of the historical and enduring injustices perpetrated against African Americans. In light of this fact, Srinivasan argues that the difficulty of the choice that Baldwin faces is in fact wrongful: Baldwin is wronged in having to make this choice, because the reasons that expression of anger is counterproductive stem from the very wrong that it targets.[92]

Second, and more briefly, Brewer articulates what is wrong with "emotional labor" – the kind of emotional manipulation that workers in the service industry need to perform on themselves in order to meet job expectations – in terms of the conflict between an instrumental attitude towards one's own motives for the sake of the company's bottom line, to be contrasted with a morally

[92] See ibid., pgs. 131-36.

proper attitude towards one's emotions, attempting to better articulate one's gut reactions as part of the process of developing a mature scheme of values.[93]

In both cases, the agents may feel a kind of upsetting tension in reflecting on their emotions, and the tension stems from the fact that the instrumental reasons the agent has not to get angry or explore their emotions on their own terms stem from wrongful treatment. In neither case is there any thought that the emotion might not be fitting. But I think that we can just as easily imagine the kind of puzzling "not worth it" thoughts as cropping up in these sorts of cases, as a distinct phenomenon. We might imagine James Baldwin sitting across the stage from William F. Buckley during their debate, filling with rage at the smirk on Buckley's face. He might think: "My rage isn't worth it. Bill Buckley doesn't deserve it." This seems to me to invite interpretation in terms of fittingness: Bill Buckley isn't the sort of person for whom this kind of anger is appropriate. But at the same time, Baldwin's rage seems supremely fitting: Buckley's smirk is infuriating. A server may fill with rage serving extremely rude customers and engage in a similar pattern of thought. In both cases, a tension remains, but it is not a tension between instrumental reasons and reasons of fittingness.

It seems to me, then, that there is an important kind of emotional dilemma or bind that is missed by Srinivasan and Brewer, and which is not amenable to interpretation by the kinds of strategies they pursue. The kind of dilemma I've pointed to involves it seeming that anger is at once demanded and forbidden – that it is fitting and not fitting. And the recognition that it is not fitting primarily goes by way of effects – of the kind of misery that the anger generates in oneself. I think that we can see how this is possible by reflecting on the role that failures of recognition play in wrongdoing. I'm sympathetic with the idea that wrongdoing *as such* involves or manifests a failure to properly recognize the other as an agent of equal worth, although we don't need to insist on this

[93] See Brewer, pgs. 293-96.

here. Some instances of wrongdoing wear this aspect on their sleeves: when we have our point of view disregarded, when our desires are swept aside, when we are condescended to. Such wrongs merit anger. But anger at failures of recognition frequently have a unique feature: the state of anger is one more manifestation of its own content. The wrongdoer will wrongfully fail to recognize the anger as what it is. The misery of anger will seem like the misery of participating in one's own ongoing wrongdoing.

Here is what I have in mind: return to Baldwin and Bill Buckley. Imagine Baldwin thinking that Buckley's smugness isn't worth making himself miserable over, although his smugness is, nevertheless infuriating. This is a disorienting thought. There's something wrong with letting *Bill Buckley* make you miserable; but there's also something wrong with letting *Bill Buckley* off the hook. What makes this disorienting thought possible, and fundamentally correct, is the following: Buckley wrongs Baldwin by condescending to him. He fails to recognize his point of view or take it seriously. But for this very reason, Buckley will not recognize Baldwin's anger for what it is. As Srinivasan points out, Baldwin will come off to Buckley as just another angry African American. And it is natural and illuminating to explain what is particularly upsetting in experiencing this kind of anger by appeal to the special kind of misery it involves. It's the misery of being forced at gunpoint to dig your own grave. To get angry at Buckley's condescension in the recognition that the anger will be met with more condescension leads to the anger seeming not merely passively miserable, in the way the grief at a death can be passively miserable, but actively miserable: the misery of not merely reliving a traumatic experience, but reliving it by reenacting it. And if the anger seems like the response to a demand, then the metaphor of gunpoint is quite apt: the misery is the misery of being forced by your wrongdoer to reenact your own wrongdoing. Metaphors of power are apt here: one feels that in one's anger one is granting the wrongdoer power to compel one to participate in one's own wrongdoing.

It seems to me often quite rational to conclude that enduring this kind of misery is not worth it. It is not that this kind of misery is completely off the table. We endure it in relationships that are very special for us – until they become unsalvageable – those special relationships in which coming to mutual understanding has a prized place. But these are those relationships where it is perfectly acceptable and good to experience a blurring of the boundaries between self and other. It may be distinctively miserable to be angry in the way described, but it need not feel like wrongfully granting the other power to make you miserable. Such relationships appropriately involve a lot of living in each other's heads. But in other cases, doing this can feel like a failure of self-respect, and that thought seems apt. We're not friends or romantic partners. I don't need to let you rake me over the emotional coals like this. I can just open the door and walk out. Doing so is a healthy manifestation of my recognition of my own self-worth, as independent of you.

This, it seems to me, is a natural thought for my imagined Baldwin to have about Buckley. Buckley can't demand this kind of misery from him. The thought involves balking at the idea that there could be insistent reasons to experience this distinctively degrading kind of misery in response to someone like Buckley, a mere political opponent. Baldwin need not have in mind any particular point of comparison; it may simply seem that feeling demanded to endure this misery from someone like Buckley – without some special explanation – is a failure of self-respect, a granting of too much control to the wrongdoer. And, if there is no special explanation, this seems to me correct: we aren't required to submit to being raked over the coals by our wrongdoers, and healthy self-respect involves acknowledging this.

But here's the dilemma: this inference may be a perfectly good one, and yet there still may seem to be insistent reasons to respond in some way emotionally to the wrongdoing. The alternative would be to condone the wrongdoing or let the wrongdoer off the hook. And yet, the only obvious emotional response is the very anger that would involve a failure of self-respect. A contrast with my

case of the jerk in the grocery store is instructive here. I suggested that I might reflect on my misery and find that it feels like I am responding to a demand, think that jerks can't possible demand this much emotional investment from me, and so think that there aren't insistent reasons to be angry at jerks in the grocery store. I didn't emphasize the failure of recognition involved in the wrong, but it is clearly present. Being a jerk involves thinking that the rules don't apply to you, treating yourself as having a special status.[94] In breaking the rules, the jerk manifests a lack of recognition of others as deserving of the same treatment. And I might expect that, if I got angry at the jerk, they wouldn't recognize that either. They'd think I was just another sucker. So, my anger might have the same miserable quality I've just articulated. And it seems to me that I might reasonably conclude from this that it is not worth it: there are not insistent reasons to be angry at jerks. And this a comfortable position: it doesn't seem to me that I've done anything wrong if fail to get angry at jerks, or if I experience the kind of anger that doesn't feel like a response to a demand. But sometimes the failure of recognition can be so great – Buckley's smirk is infuriating, but the kind of failures of recognition behind the depraved treatment of historically oppressed people are paradigm examples – that an anger which *does not* present its object as demanding a response feels completely insufficient. Reacting to your brutal treatment of me is not like reacting to Brutus's betrayal of Caesar when I read about it. It seems to *demand* an emotional reaction. Reacting in a way that didn't amount to feeling one's anger as a response to a demand looks like a failure to take the wrong seriously enough. But reacting in a way that does amount to feeling my anger as a response to a demand looks like a failure of self-respect. I'm in a bind.

One may balk at this thought. Surely if anger is called for, there must be some fitting kind of anger available. But this assumption seems to me unmotivated, called into question by the familiarity of the phenomenon that I've just tried to illuminate. And there doesn't seem to be any reason to

[94] For a similar thought, see Aaron James's *Assholes*.

think that our emotional resources are so fine-grained as to allow us always to be in a position to find a fitting response when one is called for. Our emotions are often inchoate and crude, presenting us with tools that are much duller than are needed. We refine them over time and with experience, finding ways of feeling subtle enough to meet the demands of particular situations. Perhaps the situation I've described admits of resolution by subtle reflection upon and honing of one's own anger. But until we find a way, we can be stuck in an absurd situation: to fail to be angry is to fail to take wrongdoing seriously enough. To be angry is to fail to take our own self-worth seriously enough. This is "absurd anger." In the next section, I want to elaborate on the nature of absurd anger and the way in which irony represents an apt path for resolution by a close consideration of some passages from a novel, J.F. Powers's *Wheat that Springeth Green*.

5. *Wheat that Springeth Green*

J.F. Powers's novel *Wheat that Springeth Green* tells the story of Joe Hackett in vignettes, from childhood to middle age. It is a story of disaffection, bordering on disillusionment. The disaffection has a proximal object: the Catholic priesthood. The reader encounters Joe in a period of austere religious practice as a seminarian – he wears a hair shirt and prays on his knees for hours; then as a stubborn, newly ordained priest, always running his mouth off about the lack of seriousness in the Church; then again, in a moment of painful epiphany, as he recognizes that he will never attain the spiritual powers of a true contemplative. Finally, in the scenes that make up the bulk of the novel, readers encounter Joe as priest assaulted by the inanities of priesthood-as-job in suburban America: the fundraising demands foisted upon him by the Church's middle managers; the phone calls and house calls from nosey and opinionated parishioners; the senility of his older colleagues and the naïveté of his younger ones. The tone – of Joe's reactions, of Powers's prose – is

predominantly one of bemused, ironic detachment from the affairs of parish life, as well as Joe's own foibles.

The character of and rationale for Joe's outlook on life is aptly summarized by Powers's daughter Katherine in her introduction to the novel's reissue:

> Written over an increasingly dark time, *Wheat that Springeth Green* was shaped by my father's growing conviction of the progressive and irredeemable absurdity of things. He was a connoisseur of the dull, the mediocre and the second-rate, and of the disingenuous and fraudulent, but now it seemed that their dominion was truly come. Stupidity, obliviousness, and credulousness had taken over. The quality of food, drink, tobacco, transportation, conversation, religious practice, and art was in sharp decline. And people die: they just check out, leaving a whole bunch of junk behind.
>
> Yet, in spite of everything, he did not despair. He possessed what G. K. Chesterton called "Christian optimism," a paradoxical optimism "based on the fact that we do not fit in the world," that every awful thing, every dismal victory of the moronic and specious, is just another confirmation that what happens under the sun is not reality, that we have here, as he took satisfaction in saying, no lasting home. In a contrarian assertion of hope, he transformed the dreck of modern existence, in which we are all bogged down, into a medium out of which springs beauty and new life. This is the view projected in *Wheat that Springeth Green*: "As for feeling thwarted and useless," Joe the novel's uncomfortable hero, reflects, "he knew what it meant. It meant that he was in touch with reality." (xii-xiii)

Joe's ironic detachment is not despair, but a way of attempting to take things really seriously without being able to take them seriously – a manifestation of a kind of hope. And this strategy is on display, I think, in an episode in which Joe is faced with the kind of absurd anger I described above. Things begin when Joe attempts to block a promotional group from having their photo taken outside his new rectory. In the following passage, Joe reacts to their request in the course of a conversation with his assistant:

> "That was about the Cheerleaders."
> "The what? Oh."
> The Cheerleaders, whose sole purpose it was to have their picture taken with the principals of new enterprises and construction in Inglenook, and who showed up in beanies and sweaters with "I" on them, with megaphones, pennants, pompons (if female), and a bass drum with a smile painted on it, were in reality Mall-based merchants and professional people, invariably described in the *Universe* (where the pictures ran when space permitted) as "that congratulatory group."

"They'd like to come here, Joe."

"What for?"

"Joe, you know what for."

Yes, to congratulate him on his new rectory. Either it hadn't occurred to them to do so before, or they'd known better before Lane came along. "Sorry, Bill, but the answer has to be no. Nothing doing."

Bill appeared to question his pastor's judgment. "All right, Joe. I didn't promise anything. But I didn't think you'd mind, actually."

Joe sniffed. "*Actually*," he said, reaching down for the phone, "I'd rather bite the head off a chicken. St Francis." (284-85)

Joe doesn't want to let the Cheerleaders come take a photo with his new rectory, so he refuses. Throughout the novel, Joe is constantly irritated by the infiltration of religious practice by corporate jargon and commercial goals. He regards the Cheerleaders as symptomatic of this trend. The tone of his response in this passage is one of, if not anger, the beginning stages of anger: irritation. The occasion for the irritation is the request, but its real object is the Cheerleaders. Joe thinks that the way that they cheapen genuine religious sentiment is wrong and he is bothered by it.

Powers's novel is comic, so the reader knows that the Cheerleaders will not disappear so easily, and they don't. Not long after the exchange in the previous passage, Joe is preparing for a visit from the Archbishop to bless his rectory, when he learns that – through some negligent or malicious miscommunication – the Cheerleaders have been invited to show up during the Archbishop's visit and have a picture taken by a different magazine. Here's the crucial passage:

"Some group he's supposed to have his picture taken with. Wait a minute. Here it is. 'Mr Lane, Cones, Casing,' it says here. 'Cheerleaders.' Cheerleaders?"

Joe was silent.

"That mean anything to you?"

Joe was silent.

"You don't know *anything* about this?"

"I didn't say that," Joe replied, and hung up.

Joe's first thought was to call the Arch right away and let him know what he'd be doing if he had his picture taken with the Cheerleaders: repudiating one of his best men ("You run a tight ship, Father"), who'd said no to the Cheerleaders for much the same reason that some aborigines, he'd read, refuse to be photographed, fearing loss or diminution of being.

> Joe's next thought was not to call the Arch right away, but to try to understand what was going on, and so he made a list:
>
> a) Arch doesn't know what he's doing, that I turned down Cheerleaders.
> b) Arch knows what he's doing, that I turned down Cheerleaders, but thinks I was wrong to do so.
> c) Arch, in either case, probably aware of my infamy (in eyes of Mall crowd) and hopes, by having his picture taken with me and mine with him and Cheerleaders, to improve my image (in eyes of entire community).
> d) Arch, in any case, doing business as usual—P.R.
>
> Joe decided to leave well (lousy) enough alone, not to call the Arch, and for the next few hours he tried to be himself, which, in the circumstances, was hard for him. In the evening, as usual, he visited dp's, forcing himself to do this, as he'd have to force himself in the morning, if by then he found the strength or the weakness—which would it be?—to do "the other." Could something like this, for all its absurdity, be of divine or diabolic origin, a trial of humility or a temptation to pride, meant to build him up or tear him down? Or was it just more of the same, just *nothing*—in that case perhaps diabolic?
> At last! A saint for today! Blessed Joseph of Inglenook, help of victims of P.R., pray for us! (300-1)

In this passage, Joe reflects on the reasons for the Archbishop's decision to invite the Cheerleaders and decides that it isn't worth doing anything about it. The text itself underdetermines our interpretation of the character of Joe's reasoning here. What I want to show is that we can plausibly read this passage as one in which Joe arrives at the conclusion that intervening with the Archbishop is not worth it, because anger is not worth it. Nevertheless, he faces a bind of the sort that I've articulated – a fact borne out in the subsequent chapters of the novel.

In the first instance, Joe is trying to figure out what to do: whether or not to intervene with the Archbishop. In an attempt to "understand" the situation, Joe makes a list of four considerations. Consideration (a) has to do with the Archbishop's potential ignorance – that perhaps the Archbishop did not know that Joe had already turned the Cheerleaders down and so did not know that inviting them involved usurping Joe's authority. If ignorance is the sole explanation of the Archbishop's action, then Joe has good instrumental reason to intervene by telling the Archbishop what has happened.

Consideration (b) has to do with the fact that the Archbishop potentially acted in full knowledge. And Joe surmises that if this is the case, the Archbishop will have usurped his authority because he disagrees with Joe about the wisdom of barring the Cheerleaders from appearing. If this is so, intervening is not likely to help.

Consideration (c) concerns the Archbishop's likely motives in inviting the Cheerleaders – motives which Joe takes to render irrelevant considerations of ignorance or knowledge. The Archbishop, Joe thinks, wants to give him a boost in reputation. Joe takes this to render the issue of ignorance irrelevant, because he thinks that the Archbishop would act from this motive regardless of whether he knew or not.

Consideration (d) seems to put the Archbishop's motives in a broader context. The Archbishop's motive springs from his general character as a PR man and inviting the Cheerleaders is part of a broader pattern of action stemming from that character: doing things that make the Archdiocese look good. In this sense the Archbishop's decision to invite the Cheerleaders is "business as usual."

On the basis of this reasoning, Joe decides not to intervene – to "leave well (lousy) enough alone." A very natural way of understanding this reasoning is as purely instrumental: intervention is not likely to change the Archbishop's mind, and so it would be wasted effort to intervene. But there are other familiar reasons that bear on whether or not to intervene in such situations, regardless of whether voicing one's objections is likely to change someone's mind. When we've been wronged, expressing to another our belief that we've been wronged can play two overlapping roles. It may aim to change the behavior of the other – perhaps because we think that the other is ignorant, or perhaps because we think they will be ashamed by confrontation, among other possible options. But we may be perfectly well aware that we will not alter the wronging by verbal confrontation, and yet it still may seem important to us to confront the other. It may simply seem important to us that – to

use a metaphor – we enter our recognition of having been wronged into the "public record." One natural version of this thought is that we might take ourselves to be cowards or lacking in self-worth if we don't at least give voice to our belief that we've been wronged. It is important to our self-esteem – an expression of the fact that we take ourselves to have a certain dignity – to express our belief to the person we regard as having wronged us, even if we have no expectation that verbal confrontation will make a difference. (In fact, it seems to me that verbal confrontation takes on a special salience precisely when we lack power to remedy the wrong. If we occupy a position of relative power, we might remedy the wrong in any number of ways, verbal confrontation being merely one among them. But we can always – or nearly always – give voice to our sense that we've been wronged by verbal confrontation.)

The thought that it is "not worth it" to intervene, then, might be the thought that the intervention is not likely to change the other person's mind, or it might be the thought that it is "not worth it" to treat the situation as one in which it is important to give voice to our objections to having been wronged. I want to suggest that we read Joe as coming to second conclusion. He knows, of course, that he isn't likely to change the Archbishop's mind. But that isn't primarily what interests Joe: he wants to give the Archbishop a piece of his mind, to tell him that he regards inviting the Cheerleaders as the Archbishop's "repudiating one of his best men." Much of the novel is devoted to describing situations in which Joe gives other people a piece of his mind, expressing his rage at the world. And this seems to be precisely what motivates Joe's desire to give the Archbishop a piece of his mind – a bubbling anger. Joe is inclined to anger not primarily at having his authority usurped – that's of little interest to him in the abstract – nor at the prospect of having to endure a visit from the Cheerleaders, although that will be unpleasant. What he is angry at – a constant throughout the novel – is not having his point of view recognized. The values that he holds dear – a kind of simple religiosity, untarnished by worldly ambition – are not taken seriously in the world that

he inhabits. Other people don't recognize what he is getting at when he points out what has gone wrong. They don't treat his objections seriously. And, when he gets angry about this, they don't understand him. He just looks like a curmudgeonly jerk.

In light of these facts, the final consideration (d) that Joe lists – that this is just business as usual for the PR man Archbishop – plays a dual role, articulating at once Joe's realization of why he really wants to intervene and why intervening would not be worth it. That the Archbishop is just a PR man is what infuriates Joe. But what is involved in being furious at business as usual from PR men? Joe learns this the hard way throughout the novel: a constant state of inner torment, the feeling that one is living with a demand to been seen that is one more instance of what will wrongfully not be seen. And Joe has come to conclude that living this way is just not worth it. This is not, I think, best read as a kind of emotional deadening, although to be sure Joe struggles with the sometimes overwhelming emotional demands of being a parish priest. Rather, it is the conclusion, voiced in the passage above, that Joe really needs "to be himself." Living in constant inner torment has come to appear to Joe as a lack of self-respect. He just can't be so invested in recognition by everyone; he can't treat these failures of recognition so seriously. He needs to take himself, and his ideals seriously, not what other people think of him.

But this is an unhappy, unstable conclusion, reflected in the fact that Joe *tries* to be himself, but is having trouble doing so. Even as self-respect makes it seem it is not worth it to get angry, the very ideals that Joe prizes make it seem that he *must* respond. Self-respect seems to mandate that Joe not take there to be insistent reasons for anger. The importance of true religiosity seems to mandate that Joe take there to be insistent reasons for anger. He's left in a bind. His situation seems absurd: he should take the Archbishop's wronging seriously. But there's no way of doing that without failing to take himself seriously.

Joe's emotional situation seems absurd in a way that is analogous to the kind of absurdity of choice situations that I gave an account of in the first chapter. Wrongdoing calls for a kind of seriousness in response, manifested in anger. But anger seems to take the wrong too seriously. Yet, what else is there? The other options seem irrelevant, or like they don't take the wrong seriously enough. What I want to do now is to show how this this kind of absurdity regarding anger connects up with choice situations, such that they may seem absurd and seem apt for ironic playacting. Powers's novel is particularly illuminating here, because the episode that begins in the passages I've already discussed culminates in a passage shot through with a kind of humorous irony. Here is Powers's description of the Archbishop's visit:

> He went out the front door and was warmly received by the Cheerleaders—Herb, however, not among them—and by the Arch, who called to Toohey (who stood apart, with Brad, in the shade of the rectory), "What'd I tell you, Monsignor?"
>
> "Thought we'd do it here on the steps," the *Universe* photographer said to Joe.
>
> "That so?"
>
> The *NS* photographer, coming out of the shade, said to Joe, "They say we can't shoot it, Father."
>
> "That so?"
>
> "Say they have your permission."
>
> "That so?"
>
> "And we don't."
>
> "O.K. You've got it."
>
> "Thanks, Father. You won't regret it. *We're* shootin' *color*."
>
> If the Cheerleaders and the man from the Universe (who, though, didn't seem to give a shit) had expected Joe's decision to be reversed by higher authority, they were mistaken, since there is no higher authority on earth than a pastor in his parish, and the Arch, knowing this and smiling away, was obviously pleased with Joe for being so masterful, so pastorful, as Joe was, while aware that all he'd done, in the interest of fair play, was assure that the task at hand be performed by both executioners.
>
> "Thought we'd do it here on the steps," said the one.
>
> "Where the hell else?" said the other."
>
> So—with the Arch in the middle, and next to him Joe and Bill, and next to them two females, with four males behind, and kneeling down in front, alongside the drum, two more, one of whom struck the drum before each take (three takes), making for smiles and merriment all around, with one grim exception—the deed was done. (306-7)

Joe was inclined to be filled with rage at the prospect of a visit from the Cheerleaders and the disregard with which the Archbishop treats him. But when the day comes, he acts the part of a model pastor – a model pastor in the Archbishop's eyes at least. He grants an additional magazine permission to shoot a photo with the Cheerleaders, a display that he knows pleases the Archbishop. Joe's own attitude, of course, is one of humorous defeat: once you've submitted to let the executioner do their work, what difference does it make if there are two? Joe's playacting here is clearly ironic, although the irony is complex. On the one hand, Joe is frustrated by the fact that there seems no fitting way to express how he feels about the situation which seems to require a response. He seems to be venting this frustration by parodying the role a good pastor should play in the Archbishop's eyes. On the other hand, the situation itself provides a bit of cosmic irony: by happenstance, he can playact the role of a good pastor by exercising the very sort of authority he was wrongfully denied, the original target of his anger.

But, complexity aside, why is Joe being ironic? Why does the scene – depicted from Joe's point of view – seem absurd? The starting point for interpretation is to reflect on what Joe's irony might – implicitly or explicitly – express. It is not clear from this passage that we should interpret Joe as engaging in what Velleman calls "make-believe." He appreciates the cosmic irony and acts on a whim. He has the kind of effect he wants to produce in the Archbishop – that of seeing him as a good pastor – clearly in view. On a natural reading, he is engaged in an ironic form of mere pretense, engaging in the behavior fit to mimic that of a good pastor. But I think that the easiest way to display a deep connection between Joe's irony here and the absurdity of his anger is to reflect on Joe's wishes first. We can connect Joe's relationship with his anger to the choice situation he faces on the day of the Archbishop's visit by asking: what does Joe wish that he could do, but can't?

With regard to his anger, there's something Joe wishes to do, but can't: he wishes he could be angry. He thinks that his commitment to certain religious ideals demands that he take the wrong

seriously. The obvious way to do that is to get angry. But getting angry at the Archbishop would involve a kind of misery that amounts to taking the Archbishop too seriously. He wishes there were some way to take the wrong seriously, that there were some way of getting out of this emotional dilemma. With regard to the visit itself, Joe certainly wishes that he didn't have to endure it. But his wish about anger also transfers to his decisions about how to act during the visit. He wishes that there were some way of appropriately expressing anger about or in what he is doing in allowing the Cheerleaders to take a picture. The whole event is, after all, just a manifestation of the original wrong. But of course here too his anger won't be recognized for what it is. He'd make himself miserable in the event in just the same way that he'd make himself miserable beforehand, and the Archbishop just isn't worth that. But, simply doing what the Archbishop wants him to do looks absurd. That would be failing to take his commitment to certain religious values seriously. He should express his seriousness here. And he would be able to if the Archbishop recognized him. But the way to take this seriously, given that the Archbishop doesn't recognize him, is anger, and that's not worth it. In sum: he wishes he could manifest the fact that he takes the wrong seriously in the way that he engages in the day's events, and thinks that he should be able to, but none of his options will let him do that, and so they seem absurd.

So why be ironic? Consider how a wish may motivate an expressive action more generally. Glossing expressive actions, J. David Velleman extends an example of Hume's, which involves a person suspended in a cage:

> When this person is lowered to the ground, he may rattle the bars of his cage in his impatience to get out. Does he believe that he can rattle his way out of the cage? Probably not. But his impatience will just consist in the wish that he could escape from the cage more quickly, and he will be imagining a quicker way out. ("The Aim of Belief," 270)

I'm not sure impatience *just* consists in a wish, and I'm not sure that Velleman's account captures all expressive behaviors.[95] But this account does illuminate the way in which certain paradigmatically "expressive" actions – actions which look like they lack the kind of goal-directedness characteristic of action as such – are manifestations of the importance to the agent of some goal that has been blocked, some desire that has been frustrated. Consider the man in the cage: the wish to escape does not pop into view ex nihilo. The man wants to escape, and if he thought he could escape, there would be no need for expressive action. He'd just open the cage door and leave. His impatience is connected with a wish to escape because his desire has been frustrated. Frustrated desires don't always work themselves up into to emotions or attitudes like impatience, and they don't always seem apt for manifesting in expressive action. Sometimes a frustrated desire just feels like it is bubbling up out of us. We are overwhelmed. If we can't act on it, we need to do something with it. Sometimes, though, the frustration of a desire seems important to express because its fulfillment was very important to us. We see the goal we'd act towards slipping away, our desire transforming into what is now self-consciously a mere wish. And this desire needs to find a way out, even if it cannot straightforwardly motivate action, because of the importance of its object.

The example that Velleman takes from Hume is perfectly understandable, but also a bit wooden divorced from further context. (Why is this man suspended in a cage? I mean, fair enough: I suppose I'd be pretty impatient regardless of the reason I was suspended in a cage.) But the rattling of cage bars is familiar to everyone as a paradigmatic example of expressive action, and for me, at least, the most familiar reference point is one from film – a scene so generic that it is difficult pinpoint a particular film: the prisoner, watching his loved one be escorted away, the prison door closing, is left alone, rattling the bars. This response is immediately intelligible. The prisoner is deeply frustrated, being separated from their loved one. This is clearly not brute frustration, bursting

[95] See, for example, Rosalind Hursthouse, "Arational Actions."

out like a flare of pain. What is frustrated is the prisoner's desire to be with their loved one. And this desire needs to come out, even if it is a mere wish, because its object is *so* important: being with the loved one. And so, the wish goes to work on what it can: the bars.

Joe's situation is more complex, but in basic outline analogous to the prisoner. He wants to manifest the seriousness with which he takes his values in emotion, and he wants that to show up in his action. But he sees no way of doing this. His desire is frustrated. It needs to come out because it is important to him. Why would ironic make-believe be a suitable way for the wish to come out? Consider how rattling the bars is a suitable way to manifest the frustrated desire to be with one's loved one. I'm not sure that Velleman is right that the most natural way to explain the suitability is in terms of imagination – as though the prisoner were engaged in a kind of fantasy. But this much seems true: the bars are what would need to give way for the desire not to be frustrated. Rattling the bars both allows the desire to go as far as it can towards its object and to show itself to be a mere wish as it is blocked. It seems to me that the expression of frustrated desires in action often has this dual aspect, even if it should not be overly intellectualized: when a very important desire is frustrated, the most important thing to do is: let it go as far as it can towards its object and take in its failure. The prisoner rattles the bars, because, were the bars not there, they could proceed towards their loved one and if the desire can't attain its object, they express the importance of this to them by manifesting the failure to attain the object.

It seems to me that, in Joe's case, ironic make-believe is a more highly intellectualized version of rattling the prison bars. His frustrated desire is to take things seriously. The prison bars are his options. To let the desire run as far is it can is to imagine himself taking his options seriously. The inevitable failure is manifested in and expressed by his recognition of how absurd this game of make-believe seems as he performs it.

6. Conclusion

I started this chapter with a puzzle: how could "not worth it" thoughts bear on the fittingness of anger? I argued that "not worth it" thoughts bore on the fittingness of anger when they were about effects indicative of a kind of emotional investment that was out of place. This account also allowed me to articulate a dilemma that agents can face regarding their anger, which I have just connected to absurd choice situations and irony through an extended discussion of J.F. Powers's novel *Wheat that Springeth Green*. In concluding, I just want to briefly note three implications of my account.

First, it is general enough that it will apply to different accounts of anger. If anger is essentially communicative, for instance, it will allow us to articulate how the effects of communication bear on fittingness. Second, the account also generalizes to other emotions. Wherever "not worth it" thoughts show up, my account will apply. Third, it can explain why "not worth it" thoughts only show up for some attitudes. With, e.g., belief we don't find cases of "not worth it" thoughts that seem to be about fittingness. My account gives a diagnosis: an analogous connection between effects and fittingness cannot be given in the case of belief.

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