

1

Four Distinctions Concerning Rationality

As I pointed out in the introductory chapter, bioethicists and medical lawyers frequently invoke the language of rationality in their discussions of autonomy. However, they often do so without fully explicating the understanding of rationality they mean to invoke, or the nature of its relationship to autonomy. This is problematic because different understandings of rationality and its relationship to decisional autonomy can lead to contrasting conclusions about the sorts of decisions that qualify as autonomous in bioethical contexts.

To illustrate, consider the much-discussed question of whether a Jehovah's Witness who refuses a life-saving blood transfusion can be said to be making a 'rational decision'. It seems that a case can be made for both the interpretation that the decision is rational, and the interpretation that it is irrational, depending on the sense of rationality that one invokes. On the one hand, given that the Jehovah's Witness believes that they will be unable to enjoy eternal bliss in the afterlife if they receive a blood transfusion, it seems in one sense rational for them to refuse the life-saving transfusion; it is quite rational to prefer eternal bliss over living for the remainder of one's mortal lifespan. On the other hand, we might question whether the Jehovah's Witness can rationally believe that they will not receive eternal bliss in the afterlife if they receive the transfusion; on this reading, there seems to be a good case for claiming that their decision is irrational.

I will consider the autonomy of individuals who refuse life-saving treatment in greater detail in Chapter 8. However, I mention this example here to illustrate how different assumptions regarding the nature of rationality can easily creep into bioethical discussions. Crucially, these assumptions can have hugely important effects if one also holds that decisional autonomy requires that one makes rational decisions, or that one acts on the basis of rational desires. Indeed, similar questions about rationality and autonomy will arise in cases in which individuals either choose to act (i) in ways that others believe are contrary to their best interests (which might include, for example, individuals deciding to engage in unhealthy behaviours like smoking), or (ii) on the basis of dubious beliefs (such as certain anorexic patients who refuse food on the basis of a belief that they are overweight, despite the fact that they are really dangerously underweight).

Accordingly, in order to develop an adequate rationalist account of decisional autonomy, it is imperative to first be clear about the understanding of the nature of rationality that one is invoking, and its relationship to autonomy. My task in the

following two chapters is to delineate an understanding of the nature of rationality, and how it should be understood to relate to decisional autonomy. To begin to do so, in this chapter I shall elucidate four key distinctions concerning the nature of rationality. In doing so, I shall draw on Derek Parfit's recent work on the nature of rationality, and join him in endorsing an objectivist account of reasons.

Although the discussion of this chapter concerns somewhat technical philosophical distinctions, it is, I believe, impossible to begin a conversation about the role that rationality plays in autonomy without having an adequate grasp of the distinctions that I shall outline here. Indeed, I believe that a failure to grasp these distinctions, and the conflation of quite distinct concepts is responsible for a number of important confusions about the role of rationality in autonomy, as I shall go on to explain in later chapters. Once we are clear about the nature of what an objectivist account of reasons entails, I will be able to explain how it may be used to supplement existing rationalist theories of autonomy in bioethics and philosophy, so that they can overcome important criticisms. This shall be my task in Chapter 2.

With this motivation in mind, I shall outline four distinctions in this chapter. The first distinction, between theoretical and practical rationality, concerns the different norms of rationality governing beliefs and desires. The second, between real and apparent reasons, concerns whether our beliefs about our practical reasons map onto reason-giving facts that actually obtain in the world. The third, between objectivism and subjectivism about reasons, concerns the fundamental *source* of all of our practical reasons, that is, what it is that ultimately grounds our having a reason to want or do something. The fourth, between personal and impersonal reasons, concerns the different kinds of facts that ground practical reasons on objectivist theories. Accordingly, these distinctions focus on progressively narrower features of particular conceptions of rationality.

It should be noted that there is very little consensus in the philosophical literature regarding the precise terms that one should use to capture these distinctions about rationality. For instance, what I am calling theoretical rationality is sometimes called epistemic rationality, and the distinction I follow Parfit in drawing between objectivism and subjectivism about reasons significantly (although perhaps not completely) overlaps with some understandings of what has been called internalism and externalism about reasons. However, rather than get bogged down in questions of semantics and exegesis here, I shall instead have to be somewhat stipulative in my choice of terms, and simply choose to follow some philosophers rather than others in my framing of the discussion below. To be clear though, it is the distinctions that matter, and not the terms we use to describe them.

1. Theoretical and Practical Rationality

Whilst beliefs and desires are both kinds of mental states, it is common for philosophers to distinguish them on the basis of what has been called their 'direction of fit'.¹ Since it is generally the case that the aim of a belief is for it to be true, a belief can

¹ Humberstone, 'Direction of Fit'.

be said to be successful if it fits the world as it is. If I hold a false belief, then I should seek to change my belief so that it better fits the world. In contrast, generally the aim of a desire is to realize the object of the desire. Like belief then, a desire is successful if it fits the world, but in the case of an unrealized desire the flaw does not lie in the desire. Rather, one should keep the desire and attempt to change the world to fit it; a desire's 'direction of fit' thus differs from that of a belief.²

Rationality can be partly construed as a set of norms that govern these different mental states. *Theoretical* rationality relates to the set of norms that govern how we come to form and sustain our beliefs.³ These norms may involve, among other things, being responsive to evidence in sustaining one's beliefs, drawing logical implications from matters of fact and probability, and holding broadly consistent and coherent sets of beliefs.⁴ To illustrate a failure of theoretical rationality in the medical context, consider the following example (from Savulescu and Momeyer) of a patient who is deciding whether to undergo an operation, and reasons as follows:

- (1) There is a risk of dying from anaesthesia. (true)
 - (2) I will require an anaesthetic if I am to have this operation. (true)
- Therefore, if I have this operation, I will probably die.⁵

This patient comes to hold an irrational belief because, due to a failure in logical reasoning, they have derived a false conclusion from the true beliefs in (1) and (2).

There is thus an important relationship between the theoretical rationality of our beliefs, and their truth. In following the norms of theoretical rationality, we come to form and sustain rational beliefs that are more likely to be successful, in the sense that they are more likely to be true; they are more likely to 'fit the world'. Conversely, failures of theoretical rationality will often lead to false beliefs. This is clearest in the case of many delusions and confabulations; whilst delusions and confabulations typically (but not necessarily) amount to false beliefs, they represent particularly pernicious kinds of false belief because they are typically based on underlying failures of theoretical rationality.⁶

However, it is important to notice the limits to this relationship. First, theoretical rationality does not *guarantee* the truth of our beliefs. In some cases, we can form a

² Platts, *Ways of Meaning*, 257.

³ I use the terminology of theoretical rationality in accordance with existing rationalist theories of autonomy that employ this terminology. Notably, Derek Parfit, whose work I will draw on substantially in this chapter, refers to what I am terming theoretical rationality as 'epistemic rationality' (Parfit, *On What Matters*). It is also worth noting that although Parfit claims it is possible to distinguish theoretical (epistemic) rationality and practical rationality by appealing to considerations pertaining to the different 'directions of fit' of these mental states, he believes that it is better to draw the distinction in another way. He claims that the deeper distinction between the two lies in the fact that we respond to practical reasons with voluntary acts, whilst our responses to theoretical (epistemic) reasons are non-voluntary (Parfit, *On What Matters*, 118). However, for my purposes, nothing of great significance turns on the way in which we draw this distinction.

⁴ For other discussions of norms of theoretical rationality in bioethics, see Walker, 'Respect for Rational Autonomy'; Savulescu and Momeyer, 'Should Informed Consent Be Based on Rational Beliefs?'

⁵ Savulescu and Momeyer, 'Should Informed Consent Be Based on Rational Beliefs?', 283.

⁶ Bortolotti, *Delusions and Other Irrational Beliefs*.

false belief in a manner that nonetheless meets the requirements of theoretical rationality. Suppose you go to your kitchen, turn the tap and collect the forthcoming liquid in a glass. It would be theoretically rational for you to believe the liquid in the glass is safe to drink, given your previous experience of drinking water from the tap, and the coherence of this belief with your various other beliefs. However, it might still be the case that the liquid is not safe to drink; perhaps, unbeknownst to you, the water supply has been contaminated today. In this example, your belief that the liquid in the glass is safe to drink is false, even though you formed it in a theoretically rational manner.

Second, theoretical irrationality does not preclude one's beliefs from being true. For instance, there can be cases in which delusions do not concern false beliefs. Fulford and Radilowska offer the example of an individual suffering from 'Othello' syndrome, which involves the persistent belief that one's spouse is being unfaithful. They note that it is quite possible for an individual to manifest this belief in a manner that fails to adhere to norms of theoretical irrationality, even if it happens to be true.⁷ This is an example in which an individual's doxastic justification (i.e. the agent's justification for believing his wife is being unfaithful) is divorced from propositional justification (i.e. that which actually provides a sufficient reason to believe the proposition in question).⁸ Whilst theoretical rationality does not guarantee the truth of our beliefs, abiding by norms of theoretical rationality helps to ensure that one's doxastic justification for a belief will align with its propositional justification, and make it more likely that one's beliefs will be true.

Whilst theoretical rationality pertains to the rationality of your beliefs, *practical* rationality pertains to the rationality of what we *do*, or the desires that move us to action.⁹ On one prominent approach, practical rationality might be understood to derive from theoretical rationality. On the view under consideration, a desire is understood to be rational if it is *causally dependent* upon beliefs that the individual has attained in a theoretically rational manner. Indeed, some discussions of rationality and autonomy seem to implicitly rely on this sort of view.¹⁰ However, although it is true that many of our desires causally depend on our beliefs, merging the two forms of rationality in this way is problematic. As Derek Parfit argues, an individual's theoretical irrationality need not transmit to her *practical* rationality in the way that the view I am considering here implies.

⁷ Fulford and Radilowska, 'Three Challenges from Delusion for Theories of Autonomy'.

⁸ Turri notes that it is widely claimed that if *p* is propositionally justified for *S* in virtue of *S*'s having reason(s) *R*, and *S* believes *p* on the basis of *R*, then *S*'s belief that *p* is doxastically justified. For a discussion and rejection of this view, see Turri, 'On the Relationship between Propositional and Doxastic Justification'.

⁹ This phrasing implicitly adopts the Humean view of motivation, according to which desires are necessary for motivation. Whilst this view is not universally accepted, the rationalist theories of autonomy I survey in the next chapter are phrased in terms of 'rational desires' rather than the rationality of other motivational states. Accordingly, I shall follow these theorists in adopting this Humean assumption regarding the role of desires in practical reasoning.

¹⁰ For example, Julian Savulescu claims that a necessary condition of autonomy is that one acts on the basis of a rational desire, which in turn is a desire that one holds on the basis of an evaluation that is grounded in theoretically rational beliefs. See Savulescu, 'Rational Desires and the Limitation of Life Sustaining Treatment'.

To see why, compare two cases. First, suppose that Alice holds the irrational belief that smoking will improve her health, and that she forms a desire to smoke on the basis of this belief. In light of my discussion above, we may say that Alice is theoretically irrational here because she holds the belief that smoking will improve her health, despite the overwhelming evidence she has against the veracity of this claim.¹¹ However, her desire to smoke *given that she has that belief* can plausibly be described as practically rational. One might explain this by claiming that Alice wants ‘what, if (her) beliefs were true, (she) would have strong reason to want’.¹²

Alice’s case is thus a counterexample to the claim that causal dependence on a rational belief is a *necessary* condition for the rationality of a desire. Consider now a case that suggests that causal dependence on rational beliefs is also not *sufficient* to establish the rationality of a desire. Suppose that Rosie holds the rational belief that smoking will damage her health, and that she forms the desire to smoke *on the basis* of this belief that it will damage her health.¹³

Some philosophers might deny the claim that Rosie is being practically irrational here. They might claim that desires for particular ends are not an appropriate target of rational assessment; we can only assess the rationality of the beliefs upon which these desires depend, and the rationality of acting in certain ways as a means to those ends. I shall consider this sort of view in the next section, where I discuss subjectivism about reasons.

In contrast to this view, I suggest that it is plausible to claim that Rosie is practically irrational here, despite the fact that her desire causally depends on a rational belief. The reason for this is that, *ceteris paribus*, Rosie’s belief that smoking will damage her health plausibly gives her a strong reason not to want to smoke. Of course, there may be other reasons that do count in favour of smoking (perhaps Rosie finds it pleasurable; perhaps she may even want to die prematurely). These other reasons might even outweigh the reasons against smoking. I will consider this point later. However, the more basic point about practical rationality that I am highlighting here is that, Rosie’s forming a desire to smoke *as a result of the belief that it will damage her health in isolation* can plausibly be understood to involve a breakdown in practical rationality, and one that is not attributable to an underlying irrational belief.

In order to fully support this interpretation, I need to explain what it is for a consideration to count as a practical reason. I shall elaborate on this over the course of this chapter. For now though, I shall make the more general observation that the problem in Rosie’s case is that her rational belief causes a desire that is not *justified* by the content of that belief; her desire to want to smoke is not a rational response to the belief that smoking is bad for her health. More generally, some of our desires can be aberrant in a sense that denotes irrationality because they causally depend on entirely irrelevant (yet rational) beliefs, or even (rational) beliefs that contra-indicate the desire in question, like Rosie’s desire to smoke. In short, the fact that a rational belief *causes* a desire does not entail that the belief *justifies* the desire in question, in the sense that it provides rational grounds for having the desire.¹⁴

¹¹ Parfit, *On What Matters*, 115.

¹² *Ibid.*, 113.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

Rather than claim that the rationality of a desire is conditional on the rationality of the belief upon which it depends, we should instead claim that it is the *content* of these beliefs that matters when we are thinking about whether a desire is rational.¹⁵ That is to say, the relevant question for practical rationality is whether we have a reason to want the object of a particular desire, given our beliefs. Naturally, this raises the question of what kinds of beliefs are relevant to establishing that we have a reason to want the object of a particular desire. This question concerns a distinction between what Parfit calls subjectivism and objectivism about reasons. Prior to turning to that distinction, it is first important to be clear about the difference between real and apparent practical reasons.

2. Apparent and Real Practical Reasons

When we are deciding what to do, we typically tend to lack epistemic access to a number of important facts. In such scenarios, we have to decide how to act on the basis of the reasons that we understand ourselves as having *given* our beliefs. However, when our beliefs are false, our understanding of what we have reason to do may not map onto reality. As such, in assessing our practical reasons, and in thinking about the relationship between autonomy and practical rationality, it is essential to distinguish what we have ‘real’ reasons to do (notwithstanding our beliefs), from what we have ‘apparent’ reasons to do, given our beliefs. In some cases, the two can come apart, and we can have very strong ‘real’ reasons to refrain from some course of action, despite the fact that we may have very good *apparent* reasons to do that thing.

This is best illustrated by way of example. Recall my earlier example of turning on the tap in your kitchen, and setting about to drink the liquid in your glass. Suppose that the liquid that you believe to be potable water, is (unbeknownst to you) actually acid.¹⁶ Here, you have a strong reason to *not* drink the liquid in the glass; it will kill you. We may say that you have a *real* reason here, one that is not dependent on what you believe. However, because you lack epistemic access to facts about what is in the glass (the contaminated liquid looks exactly the same as water, and you have no other cause to doubt that it is safe), and because you believe that drinking the liquid will serve as a means to an end that you value (quenching your thirst), we may say that you have an ‘apparent reason’ to drink the liquid. Whether or not an agent’s apparent reasons amount to ‘real’ reasons (that is, the reasons that do, as a matter of fact obtain) depend on the truth status of the beliefs upon which the apparent reason causally depends. If the beliefs are *true*, the apparent reason will also be a real reason; if not, the apparent reason is ‘merely apparent’.¹⁷

Since we typically make our decisions without complete information about our decision-making context, questions about the role that practical rationality plays in

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁶ I adapt this from Williams, *Moral Luck*, 102. Notice that Williams uses this example in defence of a subjectivist view about reasons. For Parfit’s specific comments on Williams’ view, see Parfit, *On What Matters*, 65 and 77.

¹⁷ Parfit, *On What Matters*, 35.

autonomous decision-making should be understood to pertain to apparent rather than real reasons. Drawing this distinction can enable a rationalist theory of autonomy to avoid some important confusions, as I shall explore in the next chapter.

3. Subjectivism and Objectivism about Reasons

The two theories about reasons that I consider in this section are theories about the *source* of our practical reasons, that is, what gives us reasons to do or to want certain things.

According to Parfit's conception of subjectivism about reasons, our practical reasons are always grounded by some set of our (perhaps hypothetical) present desires and aims. There are of course more complex versions of this basic view. For instance, some subjective theories might stipulate that only some of our desires can ground reasons; for instance, it might be claimed that our desires can only ground reasons if they are based on true beliefs, or perhaps if they are the desires that we would have if we were aware of all the relevant available information. These details about different subjective theories need not concern us here; what matters for my purposes is the fundamental thought underlying subjective theories, namely, the claim that all of our practical reasons are grounded by our desires. The relative strength of one's practical reasons on this view will thus be a function of the strength of the desire upon which the reason depends.

To illustrate, on a subjectivist account, if I harbour only one desire, which is to engage in a boring and meaningless activity, such as counting the blades of grass on my lawn every day, I thereby have a reason to do this; it is practically rational for me to count the blades of grass every day. Simply wanting to do something can create practical reasons. On more basic subjectivist accounts, simply desiring a very bad outcome, perhaps one that involves you suffering severe harm unnecessarily, can create a practical reason for one to act in ways that will bring about this outcome. If these desires are also adequately informed, or if they are the desires that we would have if we were aware of all the relevant information, then these desires would also create practical reasons on more complex subjective theories. David Hume famously captured the essence of the subjectivist view of practical reason in his claim that, 'tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger'.¹⁸

On subjectivist accounts then, our beliefs have a somewhat limited role in practical rationality. The beliefs that are relevant to establishing that I have a reason to do something (or to want something) are my beliefs about the means that are necessary to realize my more fundamental desires. I do not need to have any evaluative *beliefs* about the value of the object of my desires in order to be rational in pursuing them. The subjectivist can of course claim that I may need to have some kind of pro-attitude towards them; but that is not the same as believing that the object is good. Notice then that the subjectivist will have difficulty in explaining why Rosie

¹⁸ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. I am not claiming here that the subjectivist is committed to a Humean conception of desires, as is sometimes thought to be the case. See Persson, *The Retreat of Reason*, 125 for discussion.

(in the example from the previous section) is in any sense practically irrational if she starts smoking.

In contrast, objectivism about reasons denies that an individual's desires fundamentally ground her practical reasons; rather it is evaluative facts about the *object* of the agent's desire that provide her with reasons to act. In outlining his objectivist account, Parfit claims that there are facts that make certain outcomes worth pursuing that '... give us reasons both to have certain desires or aims, and to do whatever we can to fulfil them'.¹⁹ More specifically, an outcome may be understood as worth pursuing for a particular person if '... there are certain facts that give this person self-interested reasons to want this event to occur'.²⁰ We may also note that outcomes can be worth pursuing for reasons other than prudential ones concerning what is in our own interest. For instance our reasons may be moral or aesthetic; alternatively, they might concern the well-being of others. For the sake of brevity and simplicity, I shall frame my discussion of practical rationality in the majority of this book in terms of prudential reasons. However, we should not overlook the possibility of other rational grounds; in particular, our other-regarding reasons are a corollary of the relational nature of autonomy, a point to which I shall return in the next chapter.

On the objectivist account then, it would only be rational for me to count the blades of grass in the above example if there were facts about performing that activity that make it *worth* my pursuing it; does it, for instance, give me pleasure? Further, I would have no reason to cause myself harm (like Rosie) that did not serve as a means²¹ to some further end that I *did* have reason to care about. This is true *even if* (like Rosie) I harboured a desire to cause myself such harm.

Unlike the subjectivist account then, the mere fact that I harbour a desire for some outcome does not itself render behaviour aimed at achieving the object of the desire rational. Rather my actions to realize a desire (and indeed the desire *itself*) are rational when there are facts about the object of the desire that make it worth pursuing. I shall say more about what it is for an object of a desire to be worth pursuing below.

Despite this considerable difference between subjectivism and objectivism, there is some overlap between the two. Most saliently, the objectivist account is compatible with the thought that some of our reasons can be grounded by our desires in a *derivative* sense. Let us suppose that being healthy is something that I believe to be worth pursuing, and that I form a desire to be healthy in response to this belief about the value of health. This is a rational desire on the objectivist account. We might say that this rational desire to be healthy now gives me a reason to do a number of other things that are instrumental to remaining healthy, such as exercising and eating well. However, the fact that this desire to be healthy is grounding my reasons to exercise and eat well does not mean that the desire is grounding a practical reason in the same way that subjectivism about reasons claims. The difference here is that for the objectivist, the normative force of these reasons is not fundamentally derived from the desire to be healthy itself (as the subjective account would claim); rather, on the

¹⁹ Parfit, *On What Matters*, 45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

²¹ Or that did not constitute a foreseeable side-effect.

objectivist view, the normative force of these reasons is fundamentally derived from the facts that gave me the reason to desire being healthy in the first place.

The subjectivist and the objectivist can thus agree that a fundamental norm of practical reasoning is that we have reasons to do things that are necessary to realizing our desire for a certain end to obtain. However, they disagree about what fundamentally grounds these reasons. For the subjectivist, the mere fact that I desire the end in question is sufficient; for the objectivist, I only have a reason to do the things that are necessary to realizing my desire if the desire is *itself* rationally grounded by facts about the value of the object of my desire. I only have a reason to exercise if it is rational to want the end to which exercising serves as a means, in this case, being healthy (let us suppose). Crucially, on this view, if objectivism is true, it must apply fundamentally to *all* of our practical reasons.²²

This may seem a somewhat technical distinction about the nature of practical rationality. However, it can have important practical upshots in medical ethics. Consider, for example, an individual who is suffering from severe and enduring anorexia nervosa. Many sufferers of this disease hold theoretically irrational beliefs about their weight, but they need not; some sufferers understand that they are dangerously underweight, yet harbour a desire to maintain a low weight, a desire that trumps all others. If such a patient refuses food, then it seems that the subjectivist is committed to the claim that such a patient is being practically rational; refusing food is a necessary means to achieving the end of maintaining low weight, the end that the patient most strongly desires (and one that she may hold whilst being aware of relevant information, having deliberated, and despite knowing that this desire is threatening her life). In contrast, on the objectivist approach, the rationality of the patient's desire to refuse food depends on whether the patient's desire to maintain low weight is a response to a belief that there are facts about low weight that make it valuable, or worth pursuing. I shall consider this objectivist interpretation further later in this chapter, and also in Chapter 8.

There is a considerable debate in philosophy about whether we should endorse subjectivism or objectivism about reasons. On the one hand, objectivists argue that there are clearly some things that we have reasons to want or do, irrespective of either our actual inclinations, or even what our fully informed inclinations might hypothetically be. For example, one of Parfit's own main arguments in defence of an objectivist account is that on subjectivist theories, we have no basis for explaining why an agent who has no desire to avoid a period of agony in the future after ideal deliberation is being practically irrational; this, Parfit claims, is surely implausible, terming this objection to subjectivist theories 'The Agony Argument'.²³ In response, the subjectivist may be sceptical of the claim that the objectivist can succeed in providing justifiable criteria for explaining why we have a reason to want or avoid certain things (such as agony) that do not appeal to the agent's desires.²⁴

²² This is the conclusion of Parfit's All or Nothing Argument. Parfit, *On What Matters*, 102–8.

²³ Parfit, *On What Matters*. The Agony Argument against subjectivism is also supplemented by Parfit's Incoherence Argument (Parfit, *On What Matters*, 108–15).

²⁴ For the classic defence of subjectivism, see Williams, *Moral Luck*, 101–13. For further discussions, Velleman, 'The Possibility of Practical Reason'; Brewer, 'The Real Problem with Internalism About

I cannot hope to resolve this long-standing dispute here. However, I believe that the objectivist view that Parfit has developed can provide rationalist theories of autonomy with the conceptual apparatus to respond to problems facing existing rationalist accounts of autonomy. I shall spell out further details of Parfit's objectivist account over the course of this chapter, though I shall not provide a detailed defence of objectivism over subjectivism about reasons. I direct the interested reader to Parfit's own powerful and to my mind persuasive arguments in this regard.²⁵ In the next chapter I shall also suggest that subjectivism about reasons is ill-suited to serve as the basis for a rationality criterion of autonomy.

Having assumed that objectivism is true, and before turning to a final distinction between different kinds of reason that objectivism about reasons can accommodate, let me conclude this discussion with some comments about the relative strength of our reasons on the objectivist account. The relative strength of our practical reasons on the objectivist account depends on the relative value of the objects of our desires, rather than the strength of the desires themselves (as per the subjectivist account). If we believe that the object of one desire is more valuable than the object of another desire, then we have stronger reason to realize the former. Parfit also offers some further terminology that is useful for comparing the relative strength of reasons on the objectivist account. He writes:

If our reasons to act in some way are stronger than our reasons to act in any of the other possible ways, these reasons are *decisive*, and acting in this way is what we have *most reason* to do. If such reasons are much stronger than any set of conflicting reasons, we can call them *strongly decisive*.²⁶

Accordingly, some possible act of ours would be:

rational if we have beliefs about the relevant facts whose truth would give us sufficient reasons to act in this way,
 what we *ought rationally* to do if these reasons would be decisive,
less than fully rational if we have beliefs whose truth would give us clear and decisive reasons not to act in this way,
 and
irrational if these reasons would be strongly decisive.²⁷

I believe we should also add the following definition to Parfit's list, for reasons that shall become clear in the following chapter. We may say that an act is *arational*, if we choose to perform it without believing that there are any particular facts that speak in favour of or against the act in question; our mere whims on this definition would be arational, rather than irrational.

Reasons'; Goldman, 'Desire Based Reasons and Reasons for Desires'; Sobel, 'Parfit's Case Against Subjectivism'; Sobel, 'Subjective Accounts of Reasons for Action'; Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*; Manne, 'Internalism about Reasons'.

²⁵ Parfit, *On What Matters*, Part One. For criticism, see Smith, 'Parfit's Mistaken Meta-Ethics'.

²⁶ Parfit, *On What Matters*, 32. ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

With these comments about the relative strength of different reasons on the objectivist account, I now want to consider a final distinction about different kinds of reason that might obtain on the objectivist account.

4. Personal and Impersonal Reasons

Subjectivism and objectivism about reasons have different implications for the kinds of practical reasons that are possible. Since the subjectivist claims that desires fundamentally ground our practical reasons, and we only have practical reason to act in ways that serve as a means to achieving the outcomes we desire, a practical reason would only ever be universally applicable if every existing person held a desire for the same outcome. Only then would everyone have the same practical reason to do what it takes to bring about that outcome. However, it is not clear that this would often be the case;²⁸ to slightly improvise on Hume's remark above, some people might prefer the destruction of worlds to finger-scratching.

In contrast, the claim that there are some universally applicable practical reasons is readily compatible with the objectivist account. Recall that the objectivist claims that our practical reasons are grounded by the value of the objects of our desires. It is now time to consider what it is for a consideration to count as a practical reason in this sense. One important way in which an outcome may be understood as worth pursuing for a particular person is if '... there are certain facts that give this person self-interested reasons to want this event to occur'.²⁹ In turn, 'self-interested reasons' are reasons provided by facts concerning the person's well-being.³⁰

Whilst there are a number of different kinds of facts and considerations that can ground practical reasons, the kind that is most salient for a discussion of personal autonomy are these facts about well-being.³¹ Naturally, this raises the question of what sort of facts might concern a person's well-being. Again following Parfit, theories of well-being are commonly classified into one of the following three types, as schematized below:

Hedonistic Theories—What would be best for someone is what would make their life happiest.

Desire-Fulfilment Theories—What would be best for someone is what, throughout their life, would best fulfil their desires.

Objective List Theories—Certain things are good or bad for us, whether or not we want to have the good things, or to avoid the bad things.³²

²⁸ Such reasons would be grounded by what Ingmar Persson terms intersubjective values, values that as an empirical matter of fact are shared by all persons. Persson argues that there are evolutionary reasons for thinking that there may be some significant intersubjective values, such as concern for one's future well-being. See Persson, *The Retreat of Reason*, 102–3. Michael Smith notably defends a view that fully informed individuals would hold the same set of desires if they were formed in that (counterfactual) condition. Smith, *The Moral Problem*. For criticism, see Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*.

²⁹ Parfit, *On What Matters*, 41.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

³¹ Recall that moral and aesthetic facts might also plausibly ground practical reasons.

³² Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Appendix I.

I mentioned above that Parfit's Agony argument is taken to offer strong support to objectivism about reasons. However, in accepting this argument, we are accepting the claim that well-being incorporates objective elements. Even if we do not want to avoid some period of future agony despite having full awareness of the relevant facts, we still have a reason to avoid future agony.³³ The thought implicit in this argument is that we all have some self-interested reason to avoid agony because it is simply bad for us (in the prudential sense associated with well-being) to be in the conscious state of having a sensation that we dislike, regardless of our desires.

The terminology of 'objective elements' to describe this feature of well-being is widespread; however, in the context of a discussion concerning objectivism about reasons in the broader context of rationalist theories of autonomy, it is somewhat unfortunate. The reason for this is that this terminology lends itself to an important confusion between objective elements of well-being, and objectivism about reasons. However, the two are quite distinct; although objectivism about reasons allows for the possibility that practical reasons can be grounded by so-called 'objective values', it also allows for the possibility of reasons that are grounded by *other* facts about well-being. Moreover, contrary to what is commonly assumed, objectivism about reasons is compatible with the claim that reasons grounded by so-called 'objective values' need not trump all others.

I believe this confusion is rife in discussions of rationality and autonomy, and undergirds some prominent objections to rationalist theories of autonomy. In order to avoid this confusion as far as possible, I shall abandon the terminology of 'objective values' to describe the things that are postulated to be good for us, whether or not we want to have them. For want of a better term, I shall instead use the term 'impersonal goods' to refer to these goods, and call the practical reasons they ground our 'impersonal reasons'.³⁴

The first thing to note about impersonal reasons is that they have somewhat limited scope. The sorts of goods that are typically postulated as impersonal goods are often quite abstract; for instance, one might claim that pleasure is an impersonal good. Yet, even on a theory of well-being that incorporates *only* impersonally good ends, agents may differ with regards to what they have self-interested *instrumental* reasons to want. Suppose our theory of well-being suggests that we all have a reason to pursue a certain final outcome, let us say pleasure; I shall follow Parfit in terming this latter form of reason a 'telic reason', that is a reason to pursue a particular end. Even on the assumption that agents have a self-interested telic reason to want to be in the conscious state of having a pleasurable experience, agents will achieve this same goal in very different ways. For example, if the sensation of eating ice-cream were pleasurable for Ben, then this fact would give Ben a self-interested reason to want to

³³ Parfit, *On What Matters*, 73–82.

³⁴ This choice of terminology is also not ideal, since Parfit himself uses the term 'impersonal' to describe a type of goodness that contrasts with goodness for a *particular* person. Parfit, *On What Matters*, 41. However, a somewhat confusing choice of terminology is unavoidable, since Parfit also uses other terms that one could plausibly use to clearly make the distinction that I draw above for other purposes. For example, he uses the term 'impartial reasons' to refer to reasons that we have to care for *anyone's* well-being. *Ibid.*, 40. Furthermore, he uses the term 'objective' to refer to the theory that facts concerning the objects of our desires give us reasons. *Ibid.*, 45.

eat ice-cream; however, if the sensation of eating ice-cream were painful for Chris (say because he has toothache), Chris would have a self-interested reason not to eat ice-cream. They would have different instrumental reasons that are grounded by the same sort of telic, impersonal, reason.

However, as I shall discuss in greater detail in Chapter 9, objectivism about reasons is also compatible with accounts of well-being that incorporate *subjective* elements. I shall call those reasons that are understood to depend on facts concerning subjective elements of well-being, including those contingent facts about what particular individuals have *instrumental* reasons to want in order to achieve impersonal goods, their '*personal* self-interested reasons'. Notice though, that what I call both impersonal and personal practical reasons are still objectivist reasons; they are grounded by claims about the *value* of their objects, and not by the mere fact that the objects are desired (as *per* subjectivism about reasons).

This distinction has important implications for how we assess the relative strength of our practical reasons. Accepting the claim that there are impersonal goods does not entail that there is also an impersonal *ranking* of such goods. Such a claim would have the unpalatable implication that the strength of our practical reasons would be determined by where the object of a particular telic desire appears on this hypothetical impersonal ranking of goods. Although this view is sometimes implicitly assumed to be an implication of objectivist theories, they need not have this implication. In addition to the fact that individuals can have personal reasons of the sort that I described above, rational agents can disagree to a significant extent about the *weight* they assign to different impersonal goods.

Indeed, Parfit himself is absolutely clear on this point. Although he is a champion of what I have called impersonal reasons, he also claims that, '[t]hough there are truths about the relative strength of different reasons, these truths are often very imprecise',³⁵ and that:

... there are many intrinsically good ends, but no ends have supreme value. Nor are there precise truths about which ends are most worth achieving. We often have to choose between many good ends or aims, none of which is clearly better than the other, and in such cases there is no end that reason requires us to choose.³⁶

To be clear then, objectivism about reasons is quite distinct from, and does not imply the claim that rationality demands acting in accordance with what is 'objectively most valuable', or what I would rather term is of 'highest impersonal value'.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this particular distinction when talking about the relevance of rationality to autonomy. A failure to adequately distinguish objectivism about reasons from impersonal reasons, and/or an impersonal ranking of such goods and reasons can lead to three related objections to rationalist accounts of autonomy. First, the strongest objection that this conflation might lead to is that a rationalist approach to autonomy will essentially collapse into a substantive theory of autonomy. After all, if rationality requires choosing in accordance with one's strongest reasons, and the strength of one's reasons can be determined impersonally, then

³⁵ Parfit, *On What Matters*, 33.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

the claim that autonomous choice must be practically rational would amount to the claim that we must choose in accordance with this impersonal ranking of goods. To illustrate, suppose that we believe that on an impersonal ranking of goods, the pleasure that one gets from smoking and/or drinking will be outranked by the goods associated with health that these activities might jeopardize. On this view, one might easily draw the conclusion that someone who knows the relevant risks and benefits at stake cannot rationally and autonomously choose to smoke and/or drink. Yet this sounds suspiciously like a substantive account of autonomy.

The conflation between objectivism about reasons and the claim that rationality demands acting in accordance with what is 'objectively most valuable' might lead one to think that a rationalist account of autonomy will be doomed to fail for another reason. It might lead one to think that such a theory cannot accommodate the possibility that agents can be alienated from impersonal judgements about what they have most reason to do, and that such alienation undermines their autonomy. Third, and finally, one might take these so-called 'implications' of objectivism about reasons to lend support to a theory of rationalist autonomy grounded instead by subjectivism about reasons, and the problems that may be associated with these theories.

Fortunately, these problems can be circumvented by carefully drawing the distinctions I have outlined in this chapter. In the next chapter, I shall show how objectivism about reasons can be used to supplement existing discussions of rational autonomy in bioethics, so that they are able to overcome some prominent objections.