Two Conceptions of Reasons for Action*

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In his rich and inventive book, *Morality: It’s Nature and Justification*, Bernard Gert offers the following “formal definition” of reasons for action: “Reasons for acting are conscious rational beliefs that can make some otherwise irrational actions rational” (56). As a definition of the subject matter of dispute, the account is inadequate because it presupposes a substantive view of what is at issue – anyone who thinks that reasons can be desires could not have a genuine quarrel with Gert because she would simply have the wrong concept. As a substantive view of reasons for action, however, Gert’s account has much more appeal. Suppose I am deciding whether to get root canal work done on my teeth. Getting a root canal for no reason at all or because I want to put off some trivial pain, such as grading papers, is irrational. But if I consciously, rationally believe that getting a root canal will save me from the excruciating pain of having my teeth fall out one by one, I have a reason to get the root canal. My rational belief that the root canal will save me from significantly worse future suffering is a reason because it makes the otherwise irrational act of getting a root canal, rational. Gert’s claim is that all reasons are beliefs of this sort.

In this note, I examine Gert’s claim that all reasons must be able to make some otherwise irrational actions rational. (I assume, for the sake of argument, that Gert is right in thinking that reasons must be conscious rational beliefs.) Gert’s claim involves what I will call the ‘toggle’ conception of reasons: considerations are reasons just in case they can toggle actions from being otherwise irrational to being rational. I will suggest that this conception is not faithful to our ordinary understanding of reasons, and that the deep view of rationality that seems to underwrite it is compatible with a more intuitive ‘comparative’ conception of reasons. On the comparative conception, considerations are

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* Bernard Gert was one of my first teachers in philosophy, and *The Moral Rules*, the original version of *Morality*, was one of the first philosophy books I ever read. If there is any interest in this note, I have Professor Gert to thank, not only for his writing, which provided the stimulus for these thoughts, but also for his outstanding teaching and infectious love of philosophy that I was fortunate enough to experience many years ago.
reasons if they can make actions *more rational*, though they may not have sufficient normativity to make an otherwise irrational action rational. Our question then is whether reasons are fundamentally ‘toggles’ or ‘weights.’

According to Gert, an action is irrational just in case every fully informed rational person would advocate that people she cares about, including herself, not do that act. (31) This formal account is then given substance as follows: an action is irrational if a fully informed person would believe that the action “involves significantly increased risk of his suffering death, nontrivial pain, loss of ability, loss of freedom, or loss of pleasure” and 2) would not have any reason that makes the action rational.\(^1\) (30-33, 83-85) Getting a root canal is irrational if a fully informed person would believe that getting one would involve his suffering nontrivial pain, and he has no reason that makes getting the root canal rational. Gert implicitly distinguishes an irrational action from what we might call a *prima facie irrational* action. A prima facie irrational action might or might not turn out to be irrational depending on whether there is a reason that can make it rational; it is an action that a fully informed person would believe involves his experiencing one of the listed harms. In asking whether a consideration toggles an “otherwise irrational” action, then, we are asking whether the consideration succeeds in making a prima facie irrational action, rational. Gert seems to think that all reasons are considerations that have this success. And just as he gives a list of the kinds of beliefs that can render an action prima facie irrational, he gives a list of the kinds of beliefs that can render a prima facie irrational action rational. These are “beliefs that one’s action will increase the probability of someone’s avoiding any of the harms listed above or gaining greater consciousness, ability, freedom, or pleasure.” (84) It is beliefs with this content – roughly, that the benefits of the action outweigh its harms – that can toggle an action, such as getting a root canal, from being prima facie irrational to being rational.

Gert also distinguishes “reasons” from “adequate reasons”: He writes,

The beliefs that count as reasons for acting can simply be listed, but what counts as an adequate reason depends on the context. A reason adequate to make one otherwise irrational action rational may not be adequate to make some other irrational action rational….An adequate reason for acting is a conscious rational

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\(^1\) Throughout I use ‘irrational’ to refer to what Gert calls “irrational in the basic sense.” I ignore various potential problems with Gert’s “definition” (such as circularity), some of which he discusses briefly in the pages cited.
belief that makes the otherwise irrational action for which it is a reason, rational. (57)

This distinction between reasons and adequate reasons seems to track the distinction between reasons for action *simpliciter*, what we might call ‘nonrelative reasons,’ and reasons for a particular action y, what we might call ‘relative reasons.’ A nonrelative reason for action is a reason for some or other possible action; a relative reason for action is a reason for a particular action. Gert seems to use “reason” to mean ‘reason for some or other possible action’ and “adequate reason” to mean ‘reason for a particular action.’

What makes something an adequate reason for y is its ability to make y, which is prima facie irrational, rational. What makes something a reason for action simpliciter is its ability to make some or other otherwise irrational action rational. Thus Gert adopts the toggle conception of reasons: he thinks that a reason for action must be able to toggle an otherwise irrational action – some action or other in the nonrelative case and a particular action y.  

There is a genuine difficulty in interpreting Gert on this point. It is conceivable that Gert means by “adequate reasons” not simply reasons for particular actions but reasons for particular actions that toggle those particular actions from being prima facie irrational to being rational. In this case, he could allow that there might be nontoggling reasons for a particular action. But there are strong reasons to doubt this alternative interpretation.

First, if he admits there could be nontoggling reasons for a particular action y, he would owe us an account of when something counts as a reason for a particular action, even though it may not have sufficient normativity to toggle the action from being prima facie irrational to being rational, but Gert does not provide such an account. Now he does say as part of his “final definition” of a rational action that “[a] reason for acting is a conscious rational belief that one’s action will increase the probability of someone’s avoiding [any harm] or gaining [any benefit].” (84). This might be thought to be his account of the relative notion of reasons. But it is clear from the context in which the passage is presented – namely as a substantive version of the “formal definition” of the nonrelative notion of reasons given earlier – that this should be understood as Gert’s view of *which* beliefs can toggle some or other otherwise irrational action to being rational. As such, it is a claim about the nonrelative, not the relative, notion of reasons for action. He also says that some reasons can be “inadequate,” but this is naturally read as the claim that although some considerations are nonrelative reasons, they are not relative reasons for y because they cannot not toggle y.

Second, the alternative interpretation would leave Gert with a strange ‘disconnect’ between the nonrelative and relative notions of reasons for action. It is most natural to understand an account of reasons for a particular action in terms of the account of reasons for action *simpliciter* instantiated to the particular action. So, for example, on the comparative conception of reasons, a reason for action simpliciter is a consideration that can make some or other action more rational. Instantiated to a particular action y, a reason for action y is a consideration that can make y more rational. On the alternative interpretation of Gert, the account of a reason for y is not an instantiated version of the account of a reason for action simpliciter. This ‘disconnect’ between the two notions makes it especially mysterious as to why Gert takes great pains to express his conception of reasons in terms of the strong rationalizing capacity to render otherwise irrational actions rational.

Third, and perhaps most telling, is that the deep view of rationality that seems to underwrite Gert’s discussion would no longer have much significance in his theory of reasons. I discuss this deep view in the text below. On the alternative interpretation, Gert’s view about reasons would become a motely mish-mash of differently motivated claims rather than a coherent view undergirded by one powerful underlying idea.
action in the relative case – from being prima facie irrational to being rational.

A toggle conception of relative reasons, however, does not sit well with our ordinary intuitive notion of a reason for a particular action. Intuitively, it seems clear that something can be a reason for y, even though it does not make y, which is otherwise irrational, rational. My (conscious rational) belief that getting a root canal will save me from significantly worse future pain toggles getting a root canal from being irrational to being rational. But I might also have a reason for getting a root canal that does not toggle getting a root canal. I might, for example, (consciously, rationally) believe that getting a root canal will involve inhaling nitrous oxide which will, as it did for William James, enable me to “understand better than ever before both the strength and weakness of Hegel’s philosophy.” The belief that I will, as a result of getting a root canal, be able to understand Hegel better does not have enough normativity to make getting a root canal, which would be otherwise irrational, rational, but it nevertheless counts in favor, however slightly, of getting the root canal. If I have only the first belief, I have less reason to get the root canal than I do if I have both beliefs. Thus, my belief that getting a root canal will help me to understand Hegel better is a nontoggling reason for getting a root canal. Of course, to be a reason for acting at all, perhaps the belief must be able to toggle some other action from being irrational to being rational – perhaps it must be able to make the otherwise irrational act of volunteering to inhale nitrous oxide in quantities that pose a small risk of harm, rational – but it is intuitively clear that it can be a reason for getting a root canal without toggling getting a root canal. In general, for any action y, there is a (conscious rational) belief that one will get some or other benefit from y, a small pleasure say, that cannot make y, which would otherwise be irrational, rational, but nevertheless is intuitively a reason for y.

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4 Although relative reasons are not plausibly toggles, perhaps nonrelative reasons always are. In this case, we would have a restricted version of the toggling conception of reasons, one which held that only reasons for action simpliciter are toggles but relative reasons for a particular y could fail to be able to toggle y and still be reasons for y because they are able to toggle some other prima facie irrational action. But the ordinary intuitive notion of relative reasons suggests a nontoggle conception of nonrelative reasons. For take the least irrational prima facie irrational action possible. Intuitively, there a very small benefit, a tingle of pleasure say, that would count in favor of that action, however slightly, and yet by hypothesis could not toggle that action or any other prima facie irrational action. Thus, if the idea of a least irrational prima facie irrational action makes sense, a toggle conception of nonrelative reasons is open to doubt.
Gert might respond in one of two ways. He might admit that although the ordinary intuitive notion of a reason allows for nontoggling relative reasons, he is not interested in the ordinary notion but rather has some special notion of reasons in mind. But there is no textual evidence to support this response – indeed, the emphasis of the book is on describing morality as it is ordinarily understood – and such a response would reduce significantly the interest of what Gert has to say about reasons. There is, however, ample evidence for a different sort of response, one in which Gert would ‘bite the bullet’ and deny that the ordinary notion of reasons, correctly understood, allows for nontoggling relative reasons. This response involves appeal to a deep view about rationality and is what, I believe, leads Gert to adopt the toggle conception. So although the toggle conception is saddled with the counterintuitive result of not being able to make sense of nontoggling reasons for y, it is underwritten by a deep view about rationality that seems to show that the toggle conception is correct.

The deep view is the crown jewel of Gert’s discussion of reasons and rationality, what he calls the “hybrid” conception of rational action. According to Gert’s understanding of this conception, “[r]easons can make it rational to act in ways that would be irrational if one did not have those reasons; yet reasons need not be egocentric in any way, and [prima facie] irrational actions are determined egocentrically.” (59) In other words, what we have called prima facie irrational actions are “determined egocentrically,” – by considerations of avoiding harm and gaining benefit for oneself – while reasons are not – whether one has a reason does not depend on whether one would avoid harm or gain benefit for oneself; rather reasons are beliefs about someone, not necessarily oneself, avoiding harm and gaining benefit. Since irrationality and reasons are both relevant to determining whether an act is rational, the determination of a rational action is part egocentric and part ‘nonegocentric,’ i.e., not necessarily egocentric.

Thus Gert understands the hybrid character of rationality in terms of the egocentricity and nonegocentricity of considerations that determine actions as rational. Some rational acts are egocentric – they are rational just in case they do not involve harm to oneself. Other rational acts are nonegocentric – they are rational just in case they involve harm to oneself but that harm is compensated by benefits to oneself or to someone else. Actions of the former kind are “rationally allowed” – they can be
performed for “no reason at all but simply on a whim or because one feels like doing so.” (60) So, to take some of Gert’s examples, wearing pink, cheering for one’s team, and refusing to give to charity are all rationally allowed actions. Actions of the latter kind require reasons in order to be rational, for without a reason they are irrational. So, getting a root canal, committing suicide, and giving up the ability to wiggle one’s ears, might all be rational acts, but only if there is a reason that makes them rational. It is worth pointing out that we need not share Gert’s substantive views about the egocentricity of prima facie irrational actions and the nonnegocentricity of reasons in order to appreciate his insight that rational actions come in essentially two flavors: those that do not require reasons to be rational, and those that do.\(^5\) The “hybrid” character of rational actions, then, is most fundamentally understood as recognizing two kinds of rational action – those that do not require a reason to be rational and those that do. As Gert says, these two kinds of rational action “share no positive feature or even any significant similarity other than simply being not irrational.” (61)

Given the hybrid character of rational action, it is easy to see why Gert adopts the toggle conception of reasons. There is only one kind of rational action for which reasons are needed: those which are prima facie irrational. Without a reason that can toggle a prima facie irrational action to being rational, the prima facie irrational action is irrational. Reasons are needed only in the face of prima facie irrational actions, and the role of reasons is to make such actions rational. As Gert says, his toggle view of reasons “makes clear what it means to say that one needs a reason for acting, namely, that it would be irrational to act in that way without a reason.” (60) Since the only required role of a reason in action is to toggle an otherwise irrational action into a rational one, a reason just is a consideration capable of this toggling.

But it would be a mistake to think that the hybrid character of rational action forces one to adopt the toggle conception of reasons. For there is a critical assumption in the move from the former to the latter which can be rejected. This is the assumption that what reasons are is given by the role they are required to play in making an action.

\(^5\) One might object, for instance, to Gert’s substantive claim that any act that involves harm to oneself is prima facie irrational; one might think that doing anything one likes, so long as it concerns only oneself and not others, is rational since rationality is just the procedural virtue of having autonomy over oneself.
rational. Even if a reason is what is required to make a prima facie irrational action rational, it does not follow that a reason simply is a consideration that plays this role. Put another way, although some rational actions do not require reasons, it does not follow that one cannot have a reason for such an action. I do not, for example, need a reason to drum my fingers on the table, but I nevertheless could have a reason – I might believe that by doing so I will unnerve my chess opponent. The role this reason plays in the action of drumming my fingers is to add ‘weight’ in favor of the drumming, not to toggle the drumming (the action is not even prima facie irrational to begin with). Reasons are required to play a toggling role, but why assume that that is the only role they can play?

If reasons can play a different role – if they can add rational weight to an action – then reasons should be understood as weights, not toggles. This is not to say that reasons cannot fulfil their required role in making an action rational; on the comparative conception, reasons either together or on their own have sufficient weight to toggle a prima facie irrational action to being rational. In this way, reasons for action are like reasons for belief; there are reasons for believing that p do not make it rational to believe that p. What it means to say we need a reason for action is simply that the action is not of the sort that can be rationally done for no reason. This does not imply a single reason can make that action rational; it only implies that the action requires a reason if it is to be rational.

The toggle conception of reasons leads to the counterintuitive result that we cannot have a nontoggling reason for a particular action y. Why would anyone then hold such a view? My suggestion is that Gert, and perhaps others, find the toggle conception of reasons attractive because they mistakenly think that recognition of the hybrid character of rational action entails the toggle conception of reasons. But as we have seen, we can accept the hybrid character of rationality, recognizing that some rational actions do not require reasons, without accepting the toggle view of reasons. The comparative conception of reasons as weights, not toggles, fits naturally with the hybrid view and can

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6 The comparative conception of reasons is compatible not only with the fundamental “hybrid” character of rationality but also with Gert’s view that rationality is nonmaximizing. One action might be supported by reasons with greater weight and thus be more rational than the other. But it may nevertheless be the case that rationality does not require doing what is most rational.
moreover account for our ordinary intuitive understanding of reasons for action.\footnote{Thanks to Kit Fine for helpful comments on an early version of this note.}