Incommensurability and Agency

by

Joseph Raz

Incommensurability is the absence of a common measure. It has acquired currency as something of a philosophical term of art used in relation to a variety of topics and problems, depending on what is the measure whose alleged absence is of significance. The incommensurability that I will be concerned with is the incommensurability of value, i.e., the possibility that the value of two items, or that the goodness of two options is incommensurate, in that neither of them is better than the other nor are they of equal value.

When speaking of both items and options whose value is incommensurate I will be referring to specific options, or to specific objects. Occasionally I will refer to the value that possession of a certain property lends to an object or an option (e.g., that being sweet endows an apple with additional value). I will not be concerned, however, with the comparative goodness of abstract values, such as freedom, justice, beauty, fairness, and the like.

1 Balliol College, Oxford. I am grateful to Jonathan Dancy for very helpful comments on an early draft.

2 I will use "incommensurable" and "incommensurate" as stylistic variants, and if needed to alleviate monotony I will also use "incomparable" as meaning incommensurable. Strictly speaking of course incommensurability does not imply incomparability. Items whose value has no common measure may be comparable in a variety of ways: of two paintings whose value is incommensurate one may be more colourful than the other, or older, etc. Besides, the most common use of "incomparable" is to indicate great superiority of one of the items, i.e. it entails their commensurability. "How can you compare", one may say, "Mozart and Salieri? Clearly Mozart is incomparably the better composer." Which he is. Hence, incommensurability is not to be confused with incomparability.

3 I use "option" to refer to an action that an agent is both able to perform and has an opportunity to perform. E.g., going to Lincoln Plaza cinema for the late show on Sunday week is an option for me today. Their specificity does not entail that all their aspects are specified or decided upon. How to get there may be left undecided. Nor need a specific option be for a simple action like opening a window. It could be a complex course of action such as going on a skiing holiday next January.
The paper will suggest that a proper understanding of human agency, and in particular of the relations between the role of cognition and of volition in understanding human agency presupposes that there are widespread incommensurabilities of options.

1. Problems and Direction

An understanding of values is central both to our understanding of the world and to our understanding of human action. This dual aspect of our interest in values and valuables is of course not accidental: Paradigmatically human actions aim at achieving some good or averting some bad. The capacity for human action is – I join many in believing – the capacity to act knowing what one is doing, and doing so because something in one's situation makes this action a reasonable, or a good, or the right thing to do. In other words it is the capacity for intentional action, i.e. the capacity to act for reasons. Values "control" reasons in that one can have reasons for an action only if its performance is, or is likely to produce, or to contribute to producing, good or if it is likely to contribute towards averting something bad. Thus the concept of reason for action connects those of value and of agency. I will approach the issue of the incommensurability of values from the perspective of the explanation of action. From this vantage point the incommensurability of values is seen as leading to incommensurability of reasons for action.

I will contrast two conceptions of human agency, which I will call the rationalist and the classical. In broad outline the rationalist holds that paradigmatic human action is action taken because of all the options open to the agent it was, in the agent's view, supported by the strongest reason. The classical conception holds that the paradigmatic human action is one taken because of all the options the agent considers rationally eligible he chooses to perform it. There are, I shall argue, three crucial differences between the two conceptions. First, the rationalist conception regards reasons as requiring action whereas the classical conception

1 This essentially Aristotelian conception has been powerfully revived in recent times by G.E.M. Anscombe, INTENTION (Oxford, Blackwells 1957), a book which influenced many further constructive writings on the subject.

2 This is true of deontic reasons as well, for while what is deontically required may not be one's best option it is invariably an action which is good in some way, or which avoids some bad consequences.

3 The primary context in which we refer to reasons is when debating what to do. Secondarily we refer to them to explain what we or others think or thought they have reason to do. Reasons, in short, are considerations which bear on the desirability or otherwise on the case for or against options. Or, in the secondary usage, they are considerations believed by the people under discussion to bear on the case for or against options.
regards reasons as – for the most part – rendering options eligible. Second, the rationalist conception regards the agent's own desire as a reason, whereas the classical conception regards the will as an independent factor. Third, the classical conception presupposes the existence of widespread incommensurabilities of reasons for action, whereas the rationalist conception if not committed to complete commensurability is committed to the view that incommensurabilities are relatively rare anomalies. The three differences come down to a contrast between the rationalist view that generally speaking rational choices and rational actions are determined by one's reasons or one's belief in reasons and are explained by them, as against the classical conception which regards typical choices and actions as determined by a will which is informed and constrained by reason, but which plays an autonomous role in action.

The will is the ability to choose and to perform intentional actions. We exercise our will when we endorse the verdict of reason that we must perform an action, and we do so, whether willingly, reluctantly, or regretting the need, etc. By the same token we also exercise our will if we defy reason and act akratically against our better judgement. According to the classical conception, however, the most typical exercise or manifestation of the will is in choosing among options which reason merely renders eligible. Commonly when we so choose, we do what we want, and we choose what we want, from among the eligible options. Sometimes speaking of wanting one option (or its consequences) in preference to the other eligible ones is out of place. When I choose one tin of soup from a row of identical tins in the shop it would be wrong and misleading to say that I wanted that tin rather than, or in preference to, the others. Similarly when faced with unpalatable but unavoidable and incommensurate options (as when financial need forces me to give up one or another of incommensurate goods) it would be incorrect to say that I want to give up the one I choose to give up. I do not want to do so. I have to, and I would have equally regretted the loss of either good. I simply choose to give up one of them.¹ In the sequel I may on occasion refer to people deciding to do what they want from among eligible options. Such references should be qualified as meaning “what they want or what they choose without wanting”.

My case for the existence of widespread significant value incommensurabilities is connected to a way of understanding the role of the will in intentional action. This should not be surprising. If of the options available to agents in typical situations of choice and decision several are incommensurate then reason can neither determine nor completely explain their choices or actions. Nor can the action be predicted on the assumption that since the agents are well-informed and rational they would do what they have most reason to do. The bar to such

¹ Choices made by institutions form a special case. It is hardly ever appropriate to refer to the institution choosing to do what it wants. See on this my “On the Autonomy of Legal Reasoning” in Ethics in the Public Domain (Oxford: O.U.P. 1994).
predictions is not that people are not rational or well-informed. Even if they are this method of explaining and predicting action, which underlies so much work in the development and application of decision theory, is unavailable when the options agents face, or some of them, are incommensurate. The will comes into play at this stage (though, as has already been noted, that is not the only role it can play in action) and typically agents choose from incommensurate options one which they want to perform. In any case, whatever they do they do because they choose to, not because they ought to perform that action on the balance of reasons.

Rationalists would find this understanding of the relations between reason and the will distorted. They would gladly agree that the reasons for or against various options, the agents' own desires excluded, will often be incommensurate. But the agents' own desires are among their reasons for action. Some people think that ultimately the agents' desires are the only reasons there can be. Others may not go so far, but will insist that the agents' desires are among the reasons which should and do guide their actions. Once we see that, we readily see that there is no room for incommensurabilities among the options open to agents, for when push comes to shove the need to choose will concentrate the minds of the choosers who will realise (or will think that they do) that they want one of the options more than the others.

Rationalists have powerful arguments to support that view of desires. The most compelling is that if they are not reasons then the classical conception of action is right and there are widespread incommensurabilities. It is their abhorrence of incommensurabilities which makes rationalists what they are. They do not suffer this vacuum in the space of reason. And they have powerful arguments to deny its possibility. To rationalists the fact that intentional action is undertaken in the light of the agent's understanding of his situation suggests that the agent must always be capable of finding an answer to the question "what am I to do?" There are always factors, we call them reasons, which guide the agent's choices and decisions. If there were incommensurabilities then actions would be unintelligible to the agents who perform them. They will not be able to explain why they performed the action they did rather than one of the other options open to them. All they would be able to say is: "We saw that there is no reason to prefer A to B or the other way round and we did A". The obvious gap in this explanation will baffle not only the observer who is trying to explain or predict people's behaviour. It will defeat the agents themselves who would regard their choices as a mystery, as something that happens to them rather than something they do. According to the rationalist incommensurability is inconsistent with the fact that intentional actions are under the control of the agents, that they are determined by their choices.
2. Brute Wants

Practical reasoning, reasoning about what is to be done, has two aspects. It is concerned to establish how things are and how – given that that is how they are – one is to act. I will be concerned with its second aspect only. According to the belief/desire account of reasons for action that aspect of practical reasoning has to do with determining what, in the instant situation, one desires most, or what is, or is to be one's all things considered desire, given all one's desires and one's beliefs about how things are. As this account gives desires the most extensive role in practical reasoning I will take a simple version of it as the target for my argument. The simple version regards brute desires, i.e. desires which we have not because we see reason to have them, as the only kind of reason to perform an action, other than for instrumental reasons. In other words, according to the simple version of the belief/desire account the only reason an agent has is to do what will satisfy his brute desires. I will rely on two arguments against it.

---

1. What is to be done, either by the person deliberating or by someone else, and either now or at a later time, or if the opportunity arises – and one need not expect that it will, nor that it may arise – or at a time past, as when one examines one's own, or someone else's past action.

2. Without thereby implying that they can be neatly divided. The distinction is meant as a rough and ready working distinction, not one capable of bearing much theoretical weight.

3. Note, however, that the discussion will concern only the belief/desire account of reasons for action, and not belief/desire accounts of intention or of the explanation of action.

4. I will not discuss the most common charge against the belief/desire account, namely that it cannot explain the fact that we can reason about what goals we should have in a way which is not entirely dependent on the goals we already have. That is, people ask themselves what they should do and what they should desire in an unconditional way. They ask not what should I desire to do now given that I already have the following desires ..., but what should I desire now, tout court? Possibly they ask what should and what should I not desire in a way which is in principle open to the possibility that all my current desires are misguided or even morally wrong. But whether or not this last question is possible for anyone to entertain seriously, the unconditional question I mentioned is one which we do deliberate about and its consideration does not presuppose the feasibility of a complete overhaul of all our beliefs and desires. I believe that this charge is justified. But its consideration cannot be undertaken here.
The first argument concludes that the simple version assumes that people reason about what they should do, given that they have conflicting desires, i.e. desires which, the world being as it is, cannot all be completely satisfied, but that it is incapable of making sense of such reasoning. The simple version has to maintain that when facing conflicting desires people should do what they most want to do. There is - according to that account - nothing other than desires which can be a reason for action, let alone a reason capable of adjudicating between conflicting desires. So the question of what to do in the face of conflicting desires must be settled by reference to those desires themselves, and as there is nothing in their content which could be a reason to prefer one of them to the others it must be their strength to which agents must appeal when reasoning about what to do in the face of their conflicting desires. Their reasoning is in effect an attempt to establish what they want most.

The very thought of people deliberating about what they want most (unless it means - as I will later claim that it does - deliberating about what they should want most) is peculiar. It suggests a picture of people's wants being out of their control. They are givens which people are landed with, as they might be with tiredness, or with a passing depression. Given that people have the desires they have, the simple version assumes, they are concerned to satisfy them, and if it is impossible to satisfy them all at least let the most powerful desires be satisfied. Were this a sensible view of people's wants there would be no room for reasoning about what one should most want to do, nor about what one does most want to do. Whatever one ends by doing one wants most to do. For in this picture of wants as powers somehow implanted in us, the winner is the want with the greatest motivational power. What else can "wanting most", meaning the want with the greatest motivational power, mean other than the want which we end up acting on, at least if the action is not a mishap, not an accidental slip, but the action we intended to take? Admittedly there can be a question as to whether the action one took is the one conducive to achieving what one wants most to have or to be, but that is because of the possibility of cognitive failure in identifying the action which is most conducive to those further goals. When we ask what of the different things we want to have we want most to have then, barring cognitive failure, bad luck or misfired action, it is just what we would have if the action we take bears its hoped-for fruit. Therefore, we can conclude that if the purpose of the part of practical reasoning we are discussing is to establish what we want most the simple version of the belief/desire account would lead to the conclusion that we should not reason but act. In our actions our strongest motivating desires reveal themselves.

This is, of course, no more than a caricature of the belief/desire account of practical reason. Its proponents do not think that the aspect of practical reasoning concerned with deciding what is to be done given that the agent has conflicting desires is an attempt to establish which desire is motivationally strongest. What we want most means to them something like: the satisfaction of which desire will give most pleasure, or avoid more
frustration, or maximise our happiness, or contentment; or satisfaction of which of our desires will lead to those of our desires which cohere best being satisfied; or they may have a different interpretation of what the phrase "what we want most" means, and they may not even use this phrase but some other to hold this pivotal position in their account of practical reasoning. All these suggestions, I readily admit, are much superior to the caricature I criticised above. The point is that all of them suggest reasons for satisfying desires. None of them take desires as inherently worthy of satisfaction. They are worthy of satisfaction to the extent that their satisfaction gives pleasure, or prevents frustration, or to the extent that it contributes to happiness, or to making a coherent whole of one's life. I do not wish to endorse the soundness of all these reasons, or of the others which are relied upon in various versions of belief/desire accounts. (Why should people have a coherent life? In order to be all good decent middle class folk?) Their soundness does not matter for the purpose of the argument at hand. What matters is that all of them transcend the self-imposed boundaries of the approach. All of them presuppose values whose normative force does not derive from the fact that people desire to pursue them. Were it to amount to no more than that we would be back at the strength-of-motivation style of reasoning at one remove, with the added disadvantage that we will have acquired an additional false premise, i.e. that in the relevant sense people desire pleasure, or the avoidance of frustration, or the coherence of their lives, or what not, more than they desire anything else. But if these values do not rest on desire alone, then there are values whose normative force is independent of being desired, and without them the belief/desire approach does not make sense, whereas with them it is no longer the belief/desire approach.

Notice that one cannot object that since such values are implicitly relied upon in some belief/desire accounts then their invocation must be understood as compatible with the approach once it is purged of incautious descriptions of its nature. For the moment we admit some desire-independent values we open the floodgates to others. Why should practical reasoning give the sole role to the values of pleasure, avoidance of frustration or the maximisation of coherence in one's life? Why should it not give equal weight to friendship, to loyalty, to magnanimity, to justice, and so on and so forth? And above all: Why should it be dominated by one value, and deny the independent force of all others?

So much for the first argument. The second argument helps explain why the simple version of the belief/desire approach fails to account for deliberation in the face of conflicting wants. It does so because it mistakes the nature of the will.¹ What we want to do, be or have we want for reasons. The questions "what should we want most?" and "what do we want

¹ I am here repeating and elaborating arguments I have put forward in The Morality of Freedom, and more specifically in “On the Moral Point of View”, in which some of these points are made verbatim.
most?" are, normally, one and the same question. When we reason about what we want most, we reason about what we have most reason to want. Since the value or the goodness of things and options constitutes the reasons for having them or for doing them their value or goodness is also the reason for wanting to have them or to do them. Normally, when we deliberate about what we want most we deliberate about what it would be best for us to want because it would be best for us to have or to do.¹

I will return to the qualification "normally" in the next paragraph but one. First let it be noted that these remarks become compelling once we see that our wants are ours not merely because they are inflicted on us but because we conceived them and, as it were, endorsed them. For the most part they are under our control, and that means that we have them only if we hold their objects to be worthwhile, and that the wants disappear once that belief disappears. This feature of wants is central to them. It explains the sense in which they are under our control, rather than being states of mind which are visited upon us, like being overwhelmed by a sense of loss when hearing of the death of a friend. It also explains the sense in which we endorse or fail to endorse our wants. A want is ours so long as we have it because of a belief in the value of its object, and it would disappear were we to abandon that belief. Wants are not "ours", they are compulsions, or addictions we suffer from, when we have them even though we do not believe in the value of their objects, or in the desirability of satisfying them.²

Our wants are, in this regard, like beliefs. Beliefs too are under our control in this way, that is we have them when we feel justified in holding them, and once that conviction evaporates, e.g., in the face of contrary evidence, we lose the belief. We cannot want what we see no reason to want any more than we can believe what we think is untrue or contrary to the evidence. Moreover, beliefs like wants can become irrational obsessions, thoughts which inflict themselves on us in spite of ourselves when they persist independently of the evidence.

These remarks bring out the difference between belief and desire, as well as their similarities. We want to do or to have something only if we believe that it has some aspect

---

¹ Exceptional cases need not be denied. One may want to want something to prove to oneself that one can want it or to win a bet, etc.

² It is a mistake to think, as was first suggested by Frankfurt, that endorsement by second-order desires is part of the explanation of the sense in which some desires are ours and some are forces which seize us. Second-order desires may be ours, or be inflicted on us just like first-order desires. We can have a second-order desire which is not "ours" in the relevant sense, not to have a first-order desire which is authentically ours. More to the point, we need not have a second-order desire endorsing each of our first-order desires for them to be ours.
which makes it worthwhile, makes it good or valuable. We want what we want in as much as it has that good aspect. We may at the same time want not to do the action or not to have the object in as much as they have other properties which make them worthless, or bad. In this respect beliefs differ from wants. We cannot literally believe that p and that not p. But there is no contradiction in both wanting to perform an action or to have an object, and wanting not to do the action, or not to have the object. This asymmetry, resulting from the aspect-dependent character of wants, should not blind us to the basic similarity between beliefs and wants, which results from the way both depend on judgement - about justification of the belief, and about the worthwhile character of the object of the want. As was noted, in both cases we are familiar with pathological abnormalities: Sometimes people cannot help believing what they know to be false. Sometimes people cannot help wanting what they know to be worthless and entirely without merit. In those cases deliberation about what we want most diverges from deliberation about what we have most reason to want. But while the pathology of the will, like the pathology of belief, is important and revealing, the first and most important fact about it is that it involves pathological cases, whose understanding depends on understanding the factors which caused the deviation from normality. The pathological character of these cases accounts for the fact - to be commented on below - that in such cases the agent concerned may well deny that he wants to perform the worthless or pointless action. Rather, he will say, he is driven towards it by a force which grips him and which he cannot control. And this too has its parallel in the cognitive case.

Some people reject the whole line of reasoning which I have been pursuing. They believe that one can want anything, and not only what appears to one to be good or of value. This equates wanting something with an urge for it which attacks one. Urges, impulses, cravings, and their like are real enough, but it is wrong to take them as the basis for an analysis of wants and desires. (I am using "desires" in the way customary in philosophical writings. Its common use make it far closer to urges and passions. But when so understood its proper use is far too restricted for it to do its philosophical duty, i.e. in its common use it is false that whenever one acts intentionally one acts because of a desire to do what one does). Unlike urges, most ("philosophical") desires do not have a felt quality. My desire to get in time to a meeting on European democracy starting in an hour's time is typical of instrumental desires, and my desire to read Ivan Klima's new novel is typical of non-instrumental ones. Neither is a felt desire; they arose because of my belief that I have good reasons for both actions, and because something in me responded to these reasons and made me want to act on them.¹ If I do not get to act on them that is most likely to be either because the opportunity

It could have been that I realised, or believed that the reasons for the action are such that even when the reasons against performing it are taken into account it would be irrational not to perform it. At the other extreme I may conceive the desire to perform it because of
did not arise or because when it arose I preferred to act for another reason. Either way I am unlikely to feel frustration or any sense of loss. Naturally, if I tried to satisfy my desires and failed I may well feel frustrated. But that feeling of frustration is not a result of an unfulfilled desire but of a failed action, and is likely to be acute only if it is due to my clumsiness, thoughtlessness, incompetence, etc.

Not all urges are pathological. Many of our desires are, if you like, endorsed urges. But normally we do not endorse them, i.e. they do not become our desires, unless we find them (and it may be no more than a rationalisation) to be backed by reasons. If a force beyond my control propels me to take an action which I see no reason to take then, regardless of whether I actually take the action or not, it would be misleading to say that I want to take that action. Not infrequently we prefer to satisfy an urge or a craving as a way of ridding ourselves of it. In those cases our reason is that the craving is troublesome and the action which satisfies it will rid us of it. Acting for such reasons is sometimes akratic, but it need not be. Either way it is action for a (good, albeit not necessarily sufficient) reason.¹

So if I want to count the blades of grass in my garden I do so because I think that this will take my mind off some upsetting event, or because the action has some other good-making property. If I find myself drawn to count blades of grass, but cannot think of any reason for doing so, I would certainly deny that this is a desire of mine. It is a force which seizes me in spite of myself. If I am overcome by it and perform the action I would be right to say that I could not help it, though in a way it would be an intentional action. All I say, to repeat the point made above, is that anyone will recognise this as a pathological case.² In the normal case if I want to have a drink because I think that it tastes good, and am then convinced that it does not then I no longer want to have the drink. No loss, or regret, etc., is involved. The desire - as it were - disappears with the loss of belief in the reason.

¹its good points, even if, given the reasons against it, performing it would be irrational. But most commonly it is neither of these. The reasons which make me desire to perform an action are simply those reasons for it which I respond to, whereas others leave me relatively cold.

²Some expressive actions are an interesting borderline case. I kick the table in frustration, or walk up and down. Do I do so to relieve tension (conforming to the pattern I described of satisfying an urge to get rid of it)? Perhaps, but I am also expressing my exasperation, anger, or what not, and the fact that an action has expressive meaning is a reason to perform it when such expression is appropriate.

The best analysis of such cases is provided by H. Frankfurt in THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT WE CARE ABOUT.
There is always a reason for any desire. The statement that one wants to paint potatoes green is incomprehensible, not least to the agent himself, unless there is something in the way he sees the action, in his beliefs about it, its circumstances and consequences which makes it appear a sensible action to him. Not everything can be desired. Only what is seen under some aspect of the good can be.

3. Wants and Reasons

Still, the question remains: Given that there are things one has reason to do and does not particularly want to do, or feel like doing, is it not the case that if there are other things which one has reason to do and wants to do one has greater reason to do them, other things being equal? If so would it not show that wanting to do something is in and of itself a reason to do it, additional to the reason for doing it which is one's reason for wanting to do it?

When put in this way the answer seems to be yes both times, and yet the case is not so clear. First let us note that only desires which they currently have can be thought of as reasons for the people who have them. Consider the following case: I want to take up playing the piano after I retire. I want to do that because it would help pass the time in an enjoyable and rewarding way. I will enjoy facing new challenges, encountering music not merely as a listener, etc. All these are reasons for taking up the piano, and they are also reasons for wanting to do so. I am aware of them and they are my reasons for wanting to do so after I retire. (I wish I could do so right away. It would be good to do it right away, but I cannot afford the time, and therefore do not want to do it now). Is the fact that I now want to take up the piano in 13 years time an additional reason for doing so? Suppose that in the intervening years I lose that desire, and forget about it. At the time of my retirement a friend advises me to take up the piano. Would he be missing one reason for doing so if he does not mention among others the fact that 13 years earlier I wanted to do so? This example tilts the other way. My friend might mention my long forgotten desire, but not as a reason for taking up the piano, not as a consideration which shows the good in doing so, but as proof that once upon a time I agreed with him that there are good reasons for doing so, and also to show that the thought is not alien to me, that I can - or could - see myself doing it.

To suggest that an abandoned want is a reason is to put irrational obstacles to agents' changing their minds. As we know our past conduct may bind us in the future. We may have entered into commitments from which we cannot now escape, except, perhaps, for good reasons. Or we may have built our life around certain goals and ambitions which it is silly to abandon, or worse, it may be a betrayal of all we ever cared about, of what our life was about. But these are special cases. They are not mere desires which we conceived for a while and then abandoned. If a desire is abandoned because we no longer believe that the reasons we saw for having it are good ones it would be irrational to hold that even though we are right to abandon it we cannot do so altogether, that it leaves a shadow, in the form of a reason to
perform any action which will fulfil any of our now defunct desires. But even if we did not change our mind about the reasons for the action, and even if the reasons themselves did not change, even if all that happens is that we no longer want to do what we felt like doing before, we are - as it were - within our rights to change our mind or our will like that. There can be no rationale for holding us bound to pursue dead desires, not even when this is subject to the "other things being equal" proviso.

But if dead desires are not reasons nor are future desires. That is, the fact that I now want to take up the piano when I retire is no reason for me to take up the piano when I retire, nor to prepare for taking it up at that time. For, as we saw, if when I retire I no longer desire to take up the piano the fact that once (i.e. now) I had such a desire will be no reason to do so. Therefore the belief that the fact that I now have the desire to take up the piano in the future is a reason for doing so (in the future) and therefore for preparing for doing so (now) can be sustained only if we have reason against changing our desires. To hold that there is such a reason is to put arbitrary obstacles to possible changes of mind. Why should my current desire commit me to its perpetuation unless I have a good reason for a change of mind? What is wrong with losing a desire to do something just because one no longer feels like doing it, even though one's judgement of the merit of the action has not changed? Of course, if my desire results from a belief that it is supported by reasons which defeat any alternative I should not abandon the desire unless I come to believe that it is no longer supported by such reasons, or that it never was so supported. But when it is merely a desire to do one of many things one could rationally do there is no reason why I should not change my mind or inclination. The presumption in favour of continuing with one's existing desire cannot be more plausible than its opposite, i.e. the presumption in favour of periodically changing all one's (non-rationally compelled) desires. Each of these presumptions will appeal to people of a certain temperament, neither of them is sanctioned by general principles of rationality.

It is still possible that while I have a desire it is a reason for the action which will satisfy it.¹ One way in which this, if true, may be thought to be significant is in clarifying the way we think of resolving conflicts between our various desires. Wants and desires are to be distinguished from wishes. They indicate a disposition to perform the action, given appropriate circumstances. At the same time one may have conflicting desires. If desires are reasons a rational agent should, other things being equal, follow that desire (or combination of desires) which is the most stringent reason. But in what sense can one desire be more stringent than another? Presumably the desire that is backed by the weightier reasons (i.e. those whose satisfaction would be best), or whose satisfaction will give most pleasure, or whose non-satisfaction would be felt most acutely, or the desire which is supported by some combination

And therefore that if I believe that I will have a desire to take up the piano when I retire I now have reason to prepare for that event.
of these factors, is the most stringent one. But if that is the measure of the stringency of a
desire then its stringency is determined by reasons other than itself. This is obvious in the case
of the reasons which back it, and the same is true for securing pleasure and avoiding
frustration. Pleasure is not a universal concomitant of satisfaction nor is frustration a general
concomitant of non-satisfaction of desires. We may be unaware that something we strove to
achieve was realised. But that does not mean that our desire was not satisfied, nor does it -
generally speaking - diminish the good done by its satisfaction. We campaigned for a cause
and - unbeknown to us - as a direct result of our campaign our cause has won. The good thus
done is unaffected by our ignorance of it.¹

The case of frustration is even clearer. For the most part frustration is the result of
failure in an attempt to satisfy the desire, but many desires remain unsatisfied because the
opportunity for their satisfaction does not arise, or because when it does one has better
reasons, or one just chooses to do something else instead. One can feel frustrated in such
circumstances, but this is not an inevitable concomitant of the desire, and I believe that it is in
fact not at all common. For example, I want to spend a summer in Chamonix. This may be
quite a strong desire if by that one means a desire I would not let pass unsatisfied given a
decent opportunity to satisfy it. But if I never have the opportunity I will not feel frustrated. I
am aware that I have many desires of this kind, there are many things I want to do or to
experience and I am aware that many, indeed most of them will remain unfulfilled (even too
many places where I want to spend a summer). It would be silly of me to feel frustrated every
time I realise that all hope of satisfying one of them has passed for ever.

If the stringency of the reasons which desires (allegedly) constitute is determined by
other considerations which are reasons in their own right, and would count anyway, that is
would count even if we deny that the desire itself is a reason, what sort of reasons are desires?
Perhaps the answer is that prima facie desires are not reasons, but that one's all out desire is a
reason. That would seem to fit with the only reason we have seen so far to think that desires
are reasons, namely that if of a range of acceptable options one wants - and this must refer to
one's overall want - to pursue one it would be irrational to choose one of the others. But the
thought that while prima facie desires are not reasons for action overall desires are is riddled
with difficulties. First, an overall desire is just a prima facie desire which encounters no
opposition from conflicting desires, or which defeats the opposition. How can its being a
reason depend on whether or not it is opposed by other desires? I am offered a pear and a
banana. I want to eat, but I cannot have both. I want to eat a pear. That fact is a reason for

⁰¹

We should of course distinguish the anodyne sense in which "I am pleased to meet you"
- said as part of a formal introduction to a stranger - indicates pleasure and pleasure in
the sense in which one can take pleasure in wine, or in dancing, or enjoy a good read. It
is pleasure in the non-anodyne sense which is the subject of my remarks.
eating a pear if I do not want to eat a banana more than a pear. But if while wanting a pear I want a banana more, then wanting the pear is not a reason. Not merely is it a weaker reason than my desire for the banana. It is no reason at all.

Second, what I want most to do may conflict with what I know that, but for the fact that I have a conflicting desire, I ought to do. The situation of a person who wants to do something which he ought not to do, all things considered, is familiar and unproblematic. In that case one will, on pain of irrationality, do what one has a conclusive reason to do, perhaps reluctantly or with regret that one's want remains unfulfilled. The question is: is it possible that an action which, barring one's desire to perform it, one ought not to perform (one has a conclusive reason to avoid) is a permissible action just because one wants to perform it? Can one's desire for an action, or for the consequences of an action, change the balance of reasons from conclusively against to that action being as well supported by reason as any alternative?

A variety of will-related factors may indeed have that effect. That one does not want to do what one otherwise has to do may mean that one will not do it well, and therefore it may be better not to do it at all. One's disappointment and frustration at having one's desire remain unsatisfied may tip the balance the other way.\(^1\) Naturally, the fact that doing what one wants to do will be enjoyable or pleasurable is a reason for doing it which may tip the balance. We are familiar with these and with other ways in which factors sometimes connected with the agent's desire may affect the balance of reasons. But none of them can be equated with the fact of his having a certain desire, nor is any of them a necessary concomitant of having an overall desire.

I suspect that desire in itself cannot tip the balance of reasons and that to the extent that we are inclined to think otherwise this is because we think of other factors which are (contingently) related to desires. "Proving" this point is, however, difficult. All one can do is analyse examples and rely on a shared understanding. Consider the following case. I want to do something. I know that unless my desire tips the balance I should not engage in the action for it will hurt the feelings of someone, call him George, whose feelings I should not hurt. That factor is no more than a prima facie consideration against the action. It can be overridden or defeated by other considerations. The action may be necessary for my health, or for my prospects of promotion, etc. In all such cases I am called upon to compare the stringency of the reason I have not to hurt George's feelings (how much will he be hurt, the nature of my relations with him, etc.) as against the stringency of the conflicting reason (what damage to my health will ensue, how certain it is, etc.). We often call such comparisons "weighing the reasons against each other". But if the only "reason" I have for doing the

\(^1\) Especially with children. We expect grown ups to be in control of their will and of emotions and not to pander to them. But on rare occasions the disappointment will be so great that it is right to avoid it.
hurtful act is that I want to do it, is such "weighing" appropriate or even possible? It is not just
that wanting it seems an inappropriate consideration even to mention as weighing against the
hurt it will cause George.¹ The problem is that it is not clear what, in the circumstances, could
count as weighing my desire against the reason I have not to hurt him. I can, of course, take
account of the strength of my desire. But that merely sends me back to how much frustration
or inner disruption its non-satisfaction will cause, how much effort (and what will be the costs
of the effort) overcoming the desire will require, etc. These - I have allowed earlier - are
reasons for action, but they are not to be identified with the desire itself, and they do not
accompany all desires.

I have argued above, that in the normal case a desire disappears² when the reason for
it seems insufficient. Formally I cannot rely on that conclusion at the present juncture. It begs
the question we are considering, i.e. whether the desire can tip the balance and thus not be
insufficiently supported by reason. But the point is nevertheless relevant. The thought that my
overall want can both be a reason in its own right as well as dependent for its continued
existence on the balance of reasons is paradoxical. It requires too much by way of mental
gymnastics.

The following objection may be raised: The way to assess the weight which having a
certain desire has is simple. As I rightly argued earlier - the objector would say - it is
determined neither by the strength of the felt force propelling one to satisfy the desire, nor by
the frustration caused by its non-satisfaction, nor by the pleasure its satisfaction gives. It is
determined by how much one is willing to forgo in order to have it satisfied. A desire one
would give up one’s career for is greater than a desire one would only give up a week’s
holiday for, and so on.

This objection may have occurred to the reader in connection with my dismissal of
the simple version of the belief/desire account. There I took motivational strength to be the
only meaning a supporter of that account can assign to the notion of a strong desire. The
reason that was so, the reason why the simple version cannot avail itself of the “option value”
of a desire as a measure of its strength (as I will call the objector’s suggestion that the
strength is determined by how much the agent is willing to forgo for the satisfaction of the
desire) was that according to the simple version options have no value except in as much as
being desired endows them with value. The person who would not sacrifice a chance for

¹ I do not mean that it is inappropriate to want to hurt him. I mean that it is inappropriate
to consider my wanting to perform an action (when the want is based on an
unobjectionable reason) as a consideration for performing it when I know that it will hurt
him.

² Or recedes to become a desire to do the relevant act if an appropriate opportunity arose.
promotion at work to save the life of his child is simply a person for whom the value of his child is less than the value of his career. It does not show that he is giving up more when he sacrifices his child for his child has little value for him. Therefore, that he sacrifices his child to earn an extra a year does not show that he wants money very much for he is giving up something very valuable to get it. So long as we regard wants as the only determinant of value we cannot resort to some independent source of value by which to measure how much one wants one thing or another.

At the present stage of the argument, however, we have left the simple version behind. We allow that value and reasons do not derive entirely from desires. Does not the objection succeed at this stage in the argument? One’s first response is that the same problem is still with us. In the preceding paragraph I assumed that if desires determine the value of options they determine not their value tout court, but their value to those who have the desires. This assumption is necessary to avoid contradiction since the same option can be open to various agents, of whom some want it and some want to avoid it. Some may say that even though we are admitting that value is not determined by desires, value for an agent is. That is if a person would rather give up his child than forgo an extra $1000 a year earnings then the child has less value for his life than the money. If this is so it is still impossible to use value to determine strength of desire. But if this is so nor is it ever possible to criticise a person for wanting something which is bad for him. In the next section I will suggest that what is good for someone is not determined by that person’s desires. This allows for the objection to stand. It allows for a desire-independent value of what is good for an agent, which enables us to measure the strength of the agent’s desire by its option value to him.

So far we can go along with the objection. We can agree that the strength of a desire can be measured in this way. This is not to accept this as the sole measure of its strength. We do assess the strength of desires in a variety of ways, and we have already encountered several of them. Their motivational force and the frustration that their non-satisfaction will cause are both among the determinants of the strength of desires. The problem we encounter in taking desires as reasons is not that we cannot make sense of the notion that desires have strength but that we have no reason to take their strength as desires as indicating their weight as reasons. This remains the case with the “option value” measure of desires. It leaves untouched the basic point that since desires are reason dependent their persistence depends on persistence of belief in the reason and that necessarily those who have them want the strength of their desires to reflect the weight of the reasons for them, and accept criticism if it does not. This implies that they do not want desires to be counted independently of the reasons which they see as backing them, and they do not want them to count at all if those reasons do not exist. You may question why I suddenly attribute importance to what people want, when my aim is to discount the importance of wants. I rely not on what people contingently want, but on what is necessarily implied by whatever they want since it is an implication of the very
notion of a desire, an implication of the way it is based on belief in reasons. There is, therefore, nothing to the objection.

All the considerations canvassed over the last few pages suggest that a bare desire is not a reason for the action that will satisfy it. But they do not altogether dispose of the argument. There remains the simple point that if of two acceptable options one wants one thing and does the other one is acting irrationally. If when offered a pear or a banana, I have reason to take one and it does not matter which one, then if I want the banana but take the pear I have acted irrationally. Moreover, in situations of the kind just described one can explain and justify taking the banana by pointing out that one wanted the banana, and not the pear. In such contexts we refer to what we want as we do to reasons. Here they function as reasons. In these circumstances wants are reasons, though in being limited to this case they are very peculiar reasons.

4. Values and Reasons

Wants, I have argued, are not reasons for action, not in the normal sense of the word. They are neither independent reasons in the sense of being by themselves a consideration in favour of the action which satisfies them, for we cannot have wants except where we believe there is a reason for it, nor do they carry any weight in themselves, independently of the reasons which support them. A want can never tip the balance of reasons in and of itself. Rather, our wants become relevant when reasons have run their course. Once the verdict of reason is that one option should be pursued we can do so willingly or unwillingly, and of course we can defy reason and follow a different option through either the impetuosity or the weakness of our will. Likewise, once reason has failed to adjudicate between a range of options we normally choose one for no further reason, simply because we want to. Sometimes, however, we choose what we do not want. This usually manifests an unconscious desire for punishment, or self-hate, self-contempt, pathological self-doubt, etc. And such manifestations are irrational. In that sense, and in those circumstances doing what one wants is the rational thing to do. Of course in such cases the question "what should I do?" does not normally arise for an agent aware of the nature of his situation. Yet it makes sense for an agent in that situation to ask: Given that that is how things are would it be all right for me to do what I want? And the affirmative answer suggests that wants are here reasons. But given the concerns of this essay we can put such cases aside and accept the conclusion that wanting something is no reason for the action that satisfies it.

The fact that options have a certain value, that performing them is a good thing to do because of the intrinsic merit of the action or of its consequences, are the paradigmatic reasons for actions. My wanting something does not make it good or valuable and is therefore not a reason for action. But does not the fact that I want something make it good for me?
As before, we have to avoid confusing wanting something with other features, sometimes associated with some desires. We have to distinguish what I will call "goals" from desires. Typical examples of goals are success in one's career, success in one's relationships, possessing the entire set of 19th century French stamps, qualifying as an International Master in chess. For those who have these goals they are, of course, things they want to do or to accomplish. But they are not mere desires. Goals are our goals because in our actions we have set on pursuing them, because they play an important role in our emotional and imaginative life, because our success or failure in pursuing them is going to affect the quality of our life.1 The fact that goals are integrated with central aspects of our lives, that they represent what matters to us in life, makes them constitutive of our well-being. We have reason to do whatever will facilitate the pursuit of our worthwhile goals, and often we would also want to perform actions which we believe facilitate pursuit of our goals. But not everything we want does contribute to the pursuit of our goals - sometimes what we want will retard and hinder their pursuit, and not always do we want to do what would in fact facilitate pursuit of our goals, even when we know that it would. While we adopt goals through our actions, and mostly through our willing actions, we do not always feel like doing what would serve our goals any more than we always feel like doing our duty, even when we know that it is our duty.

Some goals are reasons, but the fact that achieving a high level of competence on the piano is John's goal does not make it a more valuable achievement or accomplishment than it would have been had it not been John's goal. Does not that show that the value or goodness of options is not the only fact which can be a reason for action, that goals - some goals - are reasons as well? While the fact that competence on the piano is John's goal does not affect the value of such competence it does affect its value to John. It makes that competence something the achievement of which is good for him. In general the achievement of a goal is good for the person whose goal it is only if the goal is worthwhile.2 In this respect goals are like desires: Having them implies belief that there is value in them, that there is a reason to pursue them independently of the fact that one does, or wants to pursue them. To take up stamp collecting, or playing the piano, or being a lawyer, etc., implies believing that these are worthwhile activities or pursuits. Yet once a person has made something his goal it acquires special importance for him. He has a reason to pursue it that he did not have before. I believe that writing poetry and teaching are both valuable activities. But as a teacher who has never taken up poetry I have reasons for teaching which arise out of my commitment to teaching, and I do not have similar reasons for writing poetry.

1 Cf. the discussion of goals and well-being in THE MORALITY OF FREEDOM.
2 See on the relation between goals and well-being THE MORALITY OF FREEDOM, chapter 12, and ETHICS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN, First essay.
This suggests a certain complexity in the relations between value and reason which cannot be explored here. For present purposes I have to confine myself to the suggestion that the difference between the value of an option and its value to the agent covers the point we are concerned with, and lends further support to the supposition that the value of options (in general or to the agent) is a reason for performing them whereas desires are not reasons for the actions which satisfy them.

5. Reason and The Will

Most of the argument of this essay was designed to show that the fact that a person wants something is no reason for that person to perform the action which is most likely to facilitate the satisfaction of the want. My suggestion was that the fact that wants are not reasons for action makes it most plausible that typical reasons are facts about the value or good of options.

Given that the fact that an action satisfies the agent's desires does not endow it with value, it seems inevitable that in typical situations in which an agent faces various options the value of some of them will be incommensurable. This is certainly not always the case. Even in typical cases there will be options which are inferior to others. But typically once they are eliminated agents are still left with a number of options which are incommensurate in value. If this is so then reasons for actions are better characterised as making actions eligible rather than requiring their performance on pain of irrationality. In typical situations reason does not determine what is to be done. Rather it sets a range of eligible options before agents, who choose among them as they feel inclined, who do what they want to do, or what they feel like doing. Much work needs to be done to analyse the different ways in which our will leads us to do one thing rather than another. My only concern was to suggest that in all of them the will plays a role in human agency which is separate from that of reason, a role which neither kowtows to reason by endorsing its conclusions nor irrationally rebels against it by refusing to endorse them.

This leads to a vindication of the classical conception of human action. If reason leaves room for an independent role of the will this is because reasons merely render actions intelligible. And that is so only if normally choice situations include a number of undefeated incommensurate options. If desires are not reasons it is much more likely that that is indeed
so. There are few credible sources of commensurating value left.\footnote{Two popular ideas are: (1) as what we do affects our well-being the contribution of various options to our well-being provides a basis for commensurating them. (2) A rational constraint of coherence provides such a basis. I attempted to refute the first in "Facing Up", and in ETHICS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN, \textit{ibid.} and to at least partly refute the second in "The Relevance of Coherence", Boston University Law Review (1991).} To be sure much further argument is needed to make this conclusion secure. But we should by now be immune to the fear of vacuum in the space of reason which, I have suggested at the outset, is the strongest argument for rejecting the possibility of widespread incommensurabilities of options, and the classical conception of reason of which it is a part. That phobia was fuelled by the thought that wants are intelligible to those who have them. The argument of the essay embraced this point and showed that the intelligibility of our wants is secured by the fact that they are based on reasons. That does not fully explain why we want one thing rather than another. Explanations by reference to reasons do not explain everything. Our chemistry rather than our rationality explains why some like it hot. That variability between people, like variations between what people want at different times is not fully accounted for by reason. The intelligibility of our desires does not require that. It does, however, require that we have reasons for our desires and that is inconsistent with the rationalist account of the will which is itself prey to the objection it raised against the classical conception.

The argument of this essay for the classical conception of human agency with its reliance on widespread incommensurabilities gains support from ordinary human experience, which teaches us that quite commonly people do not survey all the options open to them before choosing what to do. Rather they find an option which they believe not to be excluded by reason and which appeals to them and pursue it. At the very least the case for this conception of practical rationality is to be taken seriously. That suggests that incommensurability of the value of options is a pervasive feature with far-reaching theoretical consequences.