

## Proleptic Reasons<sup>1</sup>

Suppose that the teacher of a music appreciation class is frustrated with those students who are taking her class, as she puts it, “for the wrong reasons.” In her view, the class offers students access to the intrinsic value of music. Students who are taking it for “the right reason” will be taking it for this reason. But only those who already appreciate music appreciate musical appreciation. Or, at any rate, only they appreciate it correctly, for the reason for which (she believes) one should appreciate it, namely, intrinsic musical value. The problem is that if the intrinsic value of music is your reason for action, you don’t need to take her class. You already appreciate music.

She wants students in the class who care about music. But she’s supposed to be teaching them to care about music. Is she being unreasonable? The problem does not go away once we admit of ‘degrees’ or ‘kinds’ of caring—it does not help to characterize her job as that of getting people who care a little (or who care in this way) to care more (or in that way). So long as someone enters the class satisfied with his level or type of music appreciation, whatever that may be, the teacher will impugn his motives, whatever they may be. The teacher is looking for students who want to care about music more than, or in a different way than, they currently do. But, again, she doesn’t want them to want this for some extra-musical reason. So it seems that what she wants is for them to respond to musical value exactly to the extent that they’re not yet able to.

This is a paradoxical way of putting an ordinary demand for the kind of reason that is my topic. It is possible to have an inkling of a value that you do not fully grasp, to feel the defect in your valuation, and to work towards improvement. The reason for doing that work is provided by the value in question, but the defect in your grasp of that value also shapes the character of the activity it motivates. For consider what kind of thinking motivates a good student to force herself to listen to a symphony when she feels herself dozing off: she reminds herself that her grade, and the teacher’s opinion of her, depends on the essay she will write about this piece; or she promises herself a chocolate treat when she reaches the end; or she’s in a glass-walled listening room of the library, conscious of other students’ eyes on her; or perhaps she conjures up a romanticized image of her future, musical, self, such as that of entering the warm light of a concert hall on a snowy evening. Someone who already valued music wouldn’t need to motivate herself in any of these ways. She wouldn’t have to try so hard.

The paradox arises from a dilemma concerning two kinds of reasons a potential student of such a class could have for taking it. There is, first, the intra-musical reason, the having of which seems to mark the class’s having come to a successful *close*. There is, second any extra-musical reason, the recourse to which seems to condemn someone to subordinating the value of music to what the teacher would call “an ulterior motive.” In the first case, the reason is not the reason of a *student*, in the second case, it’s the reason

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Hille Paakkunainen for asking the question that prompted this paper, and Jason Bridges and the attendees of the 2014 Metaethics Workshop for offering their comments on an earlier draft.

of (what the teacher would call) a *bad* student. I will argue that this dilemma is specious, because there is an agent—the good student—who manages to combine extra- and intra-musical reasoning. Like the music-lover she will become, she is genuinely oriented towards the intrinsic value of music. For instance, if offered some way of attaining good grades, chocolate treats, etc. without coming to appreciate music, she would reject it. And yet grades and chocolates are integral to the rational explanation of her action of listening to music: she would be asleep without them. ‘Bad’ reasons are how she moves herself forwards, all the while seeing them *as* bad, which is to say, as placeholders for the ‘real’ reason. Chocolates and the grades represent what we might call the proximate face of her reason, that aspect of the reason which speaks directly to the person she is now. The intrinsic value of music stands as that same reason’s distal face, one fully visible only to the person she is trying to become.

One characteristic of someone motivated by these complex reasons, by contrast with the simpler reasons of the bad student, on the one hand, and the established music lover, on the other hand, is some form of embarrassment or dissatisfaction with oneself. She is pained to admit, to herself or others, that she can only ‘get herself’ to listen to music through those various stratagems. She sees her own motivational condition as in some way imperfectly responsive to the reasons that are out there. Nonetheless, her self-acknowledged rational imperfection does not amount to akrasia, wrongdoing, error or, more generally, any form of irrationality. Something can be imperfect in virtue of being undeveloped or immature, as distinct from wrong or bad or erroneous. (There is something wrong with a lion that cannot run fast, but there is nothing wrong with a baby lion that cannot run fast.) When the good student of music actively tries to listen, she exhibits not irrationality but a distinctive form of rationality.

Such rationality contrasts with the simpler and more standard kind of rationality whose very familiarity and prevalence in the philosophical literature make it hard to characterize; but we can shed some light on this form of rationality by considering a character who exemplifies it. The *informed consumer* does not go to the supermarket for milk and come home with magazines; she buys a car for its automotive properties, and not as a status symbol; the informed consumer has done her research, and she is also self-informed—she must know her own needs and desires in order to gauge which objects might serve her well. All this knowledge—of herself, of the world—crystallizes in her mind into a kind of schema that her purchase must fit, and she will not spend money until she can be fairly certain, in advance, that she has lit upon something that satisfies this schema. The schema may be more or less detailed, more or less schematic. The important point is that what is sought is an outcome that matches the schema in all the relevant valuational details. She knows the value of what she is getting before she gets it.

On an informed consumer model of rational agency, rationality means knowing in advance what good you expect from your action. If all goes well you experience satisfaction, a kind of match or fit between what you thought you were going to get and what you in fact ended up getting. I don’t think it’s wrong to associate rationality with the kind of self-command modeled by the informed consumer. But informed-consumer rationality presupposes a lot of ethical knowledge on the part of the agent—both self-

knowledge, that is, knowledge of what kinds of things she herself enjoys and finds meaningful, and knowledge of the world, that is, knowledge of what kind of value is out there on offer. And all that knowledge is practical knowledge. So how do you get it? I am interested in the species of practical rationality that governs the acquisition of some of that knowledge.

The kind of rationality I want to discuss does not involve accurate foreknowledge of the good your rational action will bring you. You can be rational even if your antecedent conception of the good for the sake of which you act is not quite on target—and you know that. You do not demand that the end result of your agency match a preconceived schema, for you hope, eventually, to get more out of what you are doing than you can yet conceive of. I'll call this kind of rationality, "proleptic." The word 'proleptic' refers, usually in a grammatical context, to something taken in advance of its rightful place. I appropriate it for moral psychology on the model of Margaret Little's phrase 'proleptic engagement,' (p.342) by which she refers to an interaction with a child in which we treat her as though she were the adult we want her to become. Proleptic reasons are provisional in a way that reflects the provisionality of the agent's own knowledge and development: her inchoate, anticipatory and indirect grasp of some good she is trying to know better. Proleptic reasons allow you to be rational even when you know that your reasons aren't exactly the right ones.

I will show, by generalizing the paradox described above, that it is not only the rarified context of music education that calls for a proleptic analysis. I argue that we must acknowledge the reality of proleptic reasons, else we be forced to classify as irrational a large swath of human agency—agency that is purposive, self-conscious, intelligent, truth-sensitive, and constitutes a kind of building block of or prelude to everything else that we do. I end by exploring one of the interesting implications of the existence of proleptic reasons for a theory of rationality: the traditional dichotomy, inaugurated by Bernard Williams, between 'internal' and 'external' reasons is thereby rendered non-exhaustive.

## **I. Large Scale Transformative Pursuits**

Consider the class of what I'll call large-scale transformative pursuits: attending college, moving to a foreign country, adopting a child, becoming a painter or a philosopher or a police officer, achieving distinction in athletics or chess or music, becoming a sports fan, an opera lover or a gourmet, befriending or marrying or mentoring someone, etc. The two features uniting this class of pursuits are that one cannot know beforehand all that one is to get out of them, and that they require years of sustained effort, both in the form of preparation and in the form of the work attending the completed state. They are both transformative and large in scale.

Some ends are transformative but not large in scale: riding a roller coaster for the first time or trying a new flavor of ice cream. In these cases, I don't know quite what I'm getting myself into. I ask the world to, as we say, 'surprise me.' When we seek to be surprised in this way, we are engaging in the transformative project of revising our tastes on the basis of new experiences. As a rule, we only understand the value of these

experiences after the fact and not while we pursue them. It is because the set of actions we do ‘for the thrill of it’ or ‘to see what that is like’ do not require years of intensive preparatory or consequential effort that our reason for engaging them can simply be to try something new. The value of novelty or surprise suffices to motivate and rationalize only small scale transformative pursuits. Becoming a police officer, or adopting a child, is also ‘something new,’ but we would not view that as a sufficient reason to adopt such an end. It would often be irresponsible to take up even a hobby, if one’s only grounds for doing so were the whim of a new experience. When it comes to the kind of reasons that might rationalize a transformative pursuit, scale matters.

Not many pursuits are large in scale without being transformative, but some may be. Under some circumstances, making a lot of money might qualify, especially if the motive were, e.g., to secure the financial future of one’s descendants. Craft-hobby activities such as assembling a huge puzzle or adding pieces to one’s handbuilt model railroad will also often qualify. I suspect that some of the appeal of the repetitiveness of such activities—restoring *another* classic car—is that they are virtually guaranteed to be non-transformative. The same holds for the effort people put into physical exercise done for the sake of maintaining fitness levels. The promise of a certain kind of ethical stasis can turn even intellectually or physically strenuous engagement into a source of relaxation.

Transformative ends are recognized as such not only by those who have succeeded in attaining them, but also by those who are on their way: one can see in advance that one cannot see in advance all of what is good about parenthood, or friendship, or scuba-diving, or immigrating to another country. Transformative pursuits aim at values, the appreciation of which is connected to the performance of the activity (or involvement in the relationship) in question. Indeed, this is because the pursuits themselves form a kind of value-education, gradually changing the agent into the kind of person who can appreciate the value of the activity or relationship or state of affairs that constitutes the end of the pursuit. In the course of becoming a teacher or a friend or a reader of ancient Greek, one learns to appreciate the values that are distinctive of teaching or friendship or reading ancient Greek.

But one does not fully appreciate them until one is at, or close to, the end of the process of transformation. For it is the end-state (teaching, parenting, translating) that offers up the actual engagement with the value on which any full appreciation of it must be conditioned. The joys of teaching are best known to teachers. Everyone goes to college “to become educated,” but until I am educated I do not really know what an education is, or why it is important. I may say I am studying chemistry in order to understand the ‘structure of matter,’ but only a chemist understands what it means for matter to have structure (or, indeed, what matter really is). For the rest of us, that phrase is likely to be backed by little more than an image of a tinker-toy “structure” to which a mental label such as ‘molecule’ is affixed.

The problem posed by large-scale transformative pursuits is this: they require us to act on reasons that reflect a grasp of the value we are working so hard and so long to come into contact with, but we can know that value only once we have come into contact with it.

And yet the cost of granting that such ends are pursued for no reason, or bad reasons, would be to very greatly restrict the scope of practical rationality. For most, if not all, of the experiences, forms of knowledge, ethical and intellectual traits, activities, achievements, and relationships that we value are such that the pursuit of them is both large in scale and transformative. It is true that even if we were forced to characterize the choices by which we move ourselves towards all of those ends as irrational, we could still rationalize engagement with the ends once achieved. But if this is all there is to practical rationality, we should be disappointed. For every rational choice to continue  $\phi$ -ing will be adventitiously predicated on a series of irrational choices to come to  $\phi$ . We should expect more from our reasons than maintenance of a mysteriously attained status-quo. Indeed, it is the central contention of this paper that we should go so far as to introduce a species of reasons to meet this expectation.

My music-appreciation example built in a demand, on the part of the teacher, that we not separate the rationalization of the pursuit from that of the end. This kind of demand is generally appropriate for large scale transformative pursuits. We do not want to understand them along the lines of someone who walks to the park for the exercise, but stays when she sees they're showing an outdoor movie. For in that case the agent was not, when walking, pursuing the end of seeing a movie. It is possible to rationalize both the walk and the movie-watching without rationalizing anything we could call the *pursuit* of the movie. Large scale transformational pursuits are characteristically aspirational: when the agent gets where she's going, she realizes that she has what she was after all along.

## II. Vagueness, Testimony, Competition, Pretense, Approximation, Self-Management

We ought to demand a rational account of how someone can work her way to the valuation characteristic of the various end-states to which we aspire. Satisfying this demand, I claim, means introducing a set of reasons—I've called them "proleptic reasons"—tailor-made to rationalize exactly these sorts of pursuits. By way of argument for this claim, let us survey alternate contenders, reviewing the kinds of factors we typically cite in explaining such behavior: a vague grasp of the value in question, a precise grasp of a value in close proximity to the value in question, reliance on the ethical testimony of a mentor or advisor figure, imaginative engagement in a pretense of being as one aspires to be, casting success at some activity as a locus of social competition, recourse to self-management techniques of (dis)incentivization. I'll argue, case by case, that vague reasons, approximating reasons, testimonial reasons, reasons of pretense, competitive reasons, and reasons of self-management rationalize in the right way only insofar as we help ourselves to a dedicated subset of each genus of reasons. It turns out that in order to rationalize aspirational agency, we must invoke not vague reasons but *proleptically vague* reasons, not testimonial reasons but *proleptically testimonial* reasons, etc. Trying to avoid proleptic rationality, we end up ushering it in piecemeal, through the backdoor.

### VAGUE REASONS

Someone who has a ‘vague reason’ for  $\phi$ -ing  $\phi$ -es with only a vague idea of the value of  $\phi$ -ing. It is certainly true that I have a vague idea of the value of all sorts of pursuits in which I am not currently engaged. For instance, I think there are many valuable careers I did not choose, many valuable hobbies I don’t pursue, many valuable books I’m not reading. One problem with such ideas is that they are often not very motivating. I don’t plan to read most of those books. Consider a *bad* student of music appreciation, one intent on merely going through the motions necessary for fulfilling a distribution requirement. He might happily grant that music-appreciation is “good and valuable end.” He has a vague idea that music-appreciation is good. But that’s not enough to get him to do the homework, show up to class on time, study for the exam etc. A vague idea does not entail willingness to put in effort. So let us suppose that the vague idea is not *so* vague—in fact, let us posit that it suffices for motivation. It is not implausible that in many situations I can say I have only a vague idea of the value I am motivated to get. I buy tickets to an opera I know I love, not knowing exactly what I will love about it this time. Such an activity is not aspirational, because I’m satisfied with my vague idea. I don’t feel now, the need to work to make up the difference between the vague idea I have now and the sharp one I will have later; I don’t experience that difference as a defect in my current state. I need only wait for the world and my interests to line up in such a way as to make it possible for me to do the enjoying or appreciating that I’m already fully capable of.

The aspirant’s idea of the goodness of her end is characterized by a distinctive kind of vagueness, one she experiences as defective and in need of remedy. She is not satisfied with her own conception of the end, and does not feel that arriving at the correct conception is simply a matter of time. She understands her aspirational activity as work she is doing towards grasping this end. So, while vague conceptions of value do help explain how aspiration is possible, it is equally true that the phenomenon of aspiration helps us understand a distinctive form of vagueness—a kind of ever-sharpening vagueness. Large scale transformation pursuits are done for those vague reasons that are *proleptically* vague.

#### SELF-MANAGEMENT REASONS

My music student plans to reward herself with chocolate for getting through the symphony. I might make plans with a buddy to go running in the morning, so that she can ‘hold me accountable’ for my plan. Reasons of self-management show up whenever I am trying to ‘get myself’ to do something that I think I should do but may feel insufficiently motivated to do. Some forms of self-management can be very mild, such as simply resolving to (not) do something. In all these cases, I find some way to add motivational backing to a given course of action. Notice, however, that such self-manipulation comes in two forms.

Suppose that I worry that I’ll be tempted to buy expensive holiday presents<sup>2</sup> for my friends, despite my lack of funds. So I adopt one or more of such self-managing tactics as: choosing a thrifty friend as my shopping partner, leaving my credit-card at home,

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Kate Manne for the example, and for helping me to see its importance.

resolving not to enter a certain expensive store. I want to specify that in the case I'm imagining, I do not see my temperamental generosity as problematic. I don't have a systemic problem, I just happen to be very short of funds at the moment. Reasons of self-management are, in this kind of case, directed only at *behavior* on a given (or even a series) of occasions.

In the other kind of case, my self-management is directed primarily at changing how I think, value, and feel. So, in the example of the music class, I would see it as quite problematic if, years hence, I were *still* motivating myself to listen with chocolate. Or consider moving to a new country. I may, at first, have to 'force' myself into social situations. My hope is to thereby come to inhabit the new culture, language etc. in such a way as to become disposed to jump at the chance to engage in such socializing. I aspire to make this new place my home. This second kind of self-management often goes along with a characteristically aspirational form of *practice*. In some cases, doing something over and over again changes the way I do it. And so by doing it, I hope to change my attitude towards it. Sometimes I manage myself precisely with the aim of managing myself less and less. And that is just to say: reasons of self-management, too, come in a proleptic variety.

#### TESTIMONIAL REASONS

We often invoke testimony to explain how someone's rationally held beliefs can outstrip the cognitive resources that can strictly be called his own. There is some controversy over whether such testimony is possible in a moral context<sup>3</sup>, but it certainly seems possible to heed the practical advice of your elders and betters—even against your own instincts and inclinations. It is also true that advisors or mentors often, even typically, figure in large scale transformative pursuits. But the place of such a person's advice or instruction in the course of aspiration cannot be unproblematically presented as offering the agent reasons for action. Unlike in other testimonial contexts, the aspirant's goal is nothing other than coming to see the value for herself. The fact that your role-model knows so much more than you that you are inclined to defer to her advice is as much a problem as a boon. You don't aspire to do what she does, you aspire to do what she does in just the way she does it—namely, independently.

What would the music-appreciation teacher think of a student who takes her class on the advice of his music-loving mentor? I think the teacher would be satisfied with this reason to the extent that she felt the student wasn't. I'm happy to take someone else's word on the truth of many of my historical or scientific beliefs. I'm not, similarly, *happy* with my reliance on my mentor. The species of testimonial reasons that figure in aspiration are special in just the way that the vagueness of an aspirant's conception of her end is special. The testimonial element in aspiration is of a distinctively 'degenerative' kind: the present legitimacy and authority of the mentor's voice is conditioned on, indeed, anticipates, its gradual evanescence. But in characterizing this curious species of testimony we have, once again, helped ourselves to a dedicated aspirational use of testimony.

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<sup>3</sup> See Wiland and McGrath.

## REASONS OF COMPETITION

Many large scale transformative pursuits are, at some point or other, fueled by a desire to position oneself at the top of some group of people engaged in a similar pursuit. Wanting to be better than others at something is a very powerful motive. The mathematician G.H. Hardy writes that he initially “thought of mathematics in terms of examinations and scholarships: I wanted to beat other boys, and this seemed to be the way in which I could do so most decisively.” (*A Mathematician’s Apology*, p.46) We frequently encounter such competitiveness in athletic, musical, intellectual and artistic pursuits. People even get competitive about their hobbies. But there are—again—two kinds of competitiveness.

In the standard kind of case, I compete in order to display my excellence or submit it for assessment. So: I would like my excellence to be praised, celebrated, renowned to others. Or I would like to know how good I am, perhaps to be reassured that I really am as good as people say I am. Competition can be a way of gauging one’s excellence, by measuring it against the excellence of others, or flaunting it, by demonstrating its superiority to the excellence of others. Such flaunting can itself spring from a variety of motives—for instance, I might want to flaunt my excellence as a physicist in order to inspire other young women to become physicists. Whatever the ultimate motive, competition of this kind is characterized by a desire to make known to others or to myself a virtue that I *already* have.

In another kind of case, the point of competition is to allow me to strive for excellence in an open-ended way. The thought of being better than the people around me is a powerful motivator for making something of myself when I don’t know exactly *what* it is I want to make of myself. Hardy recounts:

“I found at once, when I came to Cambridge, that a Fellowship implied ‘original work’, but it was a long time before I formed any definite idea of research. I had of course found at school, as every future mathematician does, that I could often do things much better than my teachers; and even at Cambridge, I found, though naturally much less frequently, that I could sometimes do things better than the College lecturers. But I was really quite ignorant, even when I took the Tripos, of the subjects on which I have spent the rest of my life; and I still thought of mathematics as essentially a ‘competitive’ subject.” (p.47)

If the motivations driving Hardy to become one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s greatest mathematicians were competitive in nature, this competitiveness must have been of a singularly hungry kind. As he goes on to observe, reflecting back over the course of his life, “Judged by all practical standards, the value of my mathematical life is nil.” (p.49) And yet he doesn’t, at the time of writing, see this value as nil; nor does he claim that he ended up devoted to it *by accident*. In this kind of case, competitiveness is a way of holding open a door for the person I’m trying to become. I’m competing *in order to become* excellent, rather than in order to show that I already am. When the prize arrives it turns out to be not what I really wanted; I am already preparing for the next competition. But then the value for the sake of which I compete is not one on which I have a good grip. I compete for the sake of a future or anticipated value that I, as of now,



only incompletely understand. This nonstandard form of competitiveness is *proleptic* competitiveness.

#### REASONS OF PRETENSE

David Velleman has proposed that we emulate ideals by *pretending* to satisfy them. He offers as an example of pretense his own experiences of mock-aggression in his martial arts class. He then analyzes a case of quitting smoking as one in which the subject pretends to be a non-smoker and then gets “carried away” (p.100 *et passim*) with the pretense. Velleman acknowledges that, on his conception of it, such behavior is somewhat irrational: “when a smoker draws on an ideal for motivation to quit, his behavior is in some respects irrational.” (p.101) He characterizes such agents as “hav[ing] reasons to make themselves temporarily irrational.” Velleman seems to think that the irrationality in question is only of a harmless, temporary kind. I find it to be neither harmless or temporary. The whole idea of such an account is to sever someone’s ‘outer’ reasons for adopting the pretense from the reasons as they appear to him once he’s inside it. Velleman’s thought is that the agent thereby makes a new set of reasons available to himself, which he can leverage into personal change. But once one adopts an account of this kind, one cannot rely on the rationality of the outer reasons to vouchsafe that of the inner ones. Consider that one can have all sorts of reasons for ‘pretending’ to be some way—someone can pay me money, I can do it on a lark, I can be an actor in a play. If I get “carried away” and fail to snap out of it, I seem to be subject to some kind of mental illness. I’ve become trapped inside my own game. Velleman offers no principled reason why we should not understand the smoker, and emulation in general, as (possibly<sup>4</sup>) luckier victims of the same deep and permanent irrationality.

In aspirational cases, the failure to shed the pretense is salutary rather than pathological. But this is connected to the fact that it is not mere pretense. When I pretend or engage in make-believe, I close my eyes to the world around me, sometimes literally, the better to imagine a world that isn’t actually there. It is crucial to my willingness to engage in such activity that I see it as temporary. Large scale transformative projects—including that of quitting smoking—are not like this. I am not pretending to already be a nonsmoker. Rather, I want to become a nonsmoker, to come to see the world in the way in which a nonsmoker does, because I think that is the right way to see things. I’m not closing my eyes, I’m fighting to open them and to *keep* them open. Velleman’s conception of aspiration corresponds to Iris Murdoch’s description of humanity in general: “man is the creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture.” (p.252) I think the aspirant makes pictures of himself *in order to* resemble the picture.

Pretending is different from trying, but I don’t want to deny that trying can involve pretense of a special kind. Imagination does not function only as momentary escape from reality; I can, perhaps, imagine my way into becoming someone. Here the function of the imagination is not to fashion a substitute world, but to help us move ourselves closer to some reality we already have some grip on. I might, for instance, adopt the mannerisms of the kind of person I’m trying to be. If this were an act of aspiration, it would pain me somewhat to do so. Because it is not enough for me to act like that person when what I

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<sup>4</sup> Only possibly luckier, because there are both bad ideals and (morally) good roles for actors.

want is to be that person. We cannot analyze aspiration in terms of pretense because the kind of pretense we would need to invoke is an aspirational kind.

#### APPROXIMATING REASONS

Perhaps the value under which the pursuit is conducted is close to though not identical to the value of the end. It's plausible that at the end stages of a transformative pursuit, I have access to something like the final value, and maybe what I have access to is close enough to justify pursuit. So, for instance, I might appreciate Mozart's light operas, and this gives me reason to listen to his symphonies, and this leads me to Bach. We might try to make up a kind of series of progressively approximating values to lead the music student from music she likes to the music the class is designed to get her to appreciate. Highlights of such a series might look like this: Taylor Swift, the Beatles, Rogers and Hammerstein, Gilbert and Sullivan, Puccini, Mozart, Bach. The question is: does this series represent a subtle shift in value over time, or does it represent one single value getting progressively clarified and approximated to? Does she say, at the end, "now I see what I was after all along?"

In the first case—subtle shift—we should imagine the value transition as analogous to a move from yellow to blue along the color spectrum by imperceptibly different shades. But this is a variant of the "go for the exercise, stay for the movie" scenario. For the reason grounding the aspirant's activity when she's in the yellow region diverges from the reason in the blue region in such a way as to break up her pursuit into a series of rationally disconnected activities. From the fact that it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins, it does not follow that there is no difference between the two. If it's a progressive clarification, there's no such worry: the gradual shift in value would be guided throughout by the agent's sense that some target value is being approximated, like an image gradually coming into focus. But this is just what we mean in speaking of proleptic reasons. For a proleptic reason just is a reason by which an agent grasps, in an incomplete and anticipatory way, the reason that she will act on once her pursuit is successful.

We have, then, shown that recourse to other reasons, be they approximating or vague or testimonial reasons, or reasons of pretense or self-management or competition, does not obviate the need for introducing a distinctive proleptic species of reason. I don't claim that my list exhausts all possible alternatives, but I do think it covers much of the rational territory. Moreover, there is a certain pattern that repeats itself, indicating a general strategy which the champion of proleptic reason should adopt in the face of some additional contender. If someone says, large-scale transformative pursuits can be rationalized by familiar, X-ish reasons, the proleptic reasons theorist will try to demonstrate that only a (proleptic) subspecies of those reasons can hope to rationalize a distinctively aspirational pursuit.

Proleptic reasons are—I conclude—*the* reasons that rationalize large-scale transformative pursuits. A proleptic reason is an acknowledgedly immature variant of a standard reason. It has the built-in structural complexity of that which is, in essence, parasitic. A proleptic reasoner is moved to  $\phi$  by some consideration that, taken by itself, would (in her view)

provide inadequate reason for  $\phi$ -ing. But she is not moved by that consideration taken by itself; rather, she is moved by that consideration (be it competitive, testimonial, approximating, etc.) as a stand-in for another one. The proleptic reasoner uses the only valuational resources she has at her disposal, namely her current desires, attachments etc. both to mark the inadequacy of those very resources and to move herself towards a better valuational condition.

Before moving on to the implications of the existence of proleptic reasons, I want to address a question: why not speak of a proleptic grasp of a (standard) reason rather than invoking a new species of reason? I do not think that much hangs on whether we attach the property of being proleptic to a reason itself, as opposed to the quality of someone's apprehension of that reason. My interest is in a set of thoughts, actions, desires, choices, and projects that neither exhibit a standard form of rationality, nor are to be discounted as irrational. The distinctiveness of proleptic rationality is my topic, whether we spell this out as a distinctive way of grasping reasons, or a grasp of a distinctive kind of reason. But there are considerations that speak in favor of the latter formulation. One context in which we might speak of proleptic reasons is to explain why someone did what he did. In this kind of case, a proleptic reason is a motivating reason lending intelligibility to some bit of behavior. If we choose to speak of a "proleptic grasp" of a reason, then it will turn out that in proleptic cases, reasons do not explain behavior—rather, grasps do. For, e.g., the intrinsic value of music can't by itself explain me paying myself in chocolate for listening to it. It is awkward to speak of actions as being explained by grasps, especially given that we invoke motivating reasons for the sole purpose of action-explanation. "A reason rationalizes an action only if it leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action..." (Davidson, p.685) When he saw things proleptically, it seems appropriate to invoke a proleptic reason.

Now let us turn to normative reasons. Suppose a mentor tells her student to  $\phi$  in such a way as to be making a proleptic reasons statement: she can see, on the basis of what she knows about him, and her expertise in  $\phi$ -ing, that he ought to aspire to  $\phi$ . (I will give a detailed example of such a case in the next section.) She cannot be read as saying that he *has* a proleptic grasp, for her point is to inform him about something he is missing. Nor is she confessing to such a grasp—for presumably, she grasps that same reason non-proleptically. We could say that she is saying that he ought to have a kind of grasp that he doesn't yet have; but that is a strange way of talking. The more natural thing to say is that she is alerting him to the presence of a special kind of reason.

### III. Internal Reasons

If I have an 'internal reason' to  $\phi$ , then I see  $\phi$ -ing as satisfying at least one of my current desires<sup>5</sup>; or I would see it in that way, were I to deliberate in an informed and procedurally rational way. One might think that all practical reasons are internal reasons, because: a reason will only be a reason for me to  $\phi$ , if it is my reason to  $\phi$ ; and it will

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<sup>5</sup> 'Desire' should be construed broadly to include interests, commitments, attachments, preferences etc.

only be my reason to  $\phi$  if it belongs to me; and it will only belong to me if I have rational access to it; and I only have access to those reasons I could come to acknowledge as my own by deliberating; but I have to deliberate from some starting point; and the only starting point from which I could possibly begin to deliberate is my current set of desires. It is along some such route that Bernard Williams (1981) moves from the idea that all reasons to act are reasons for someone to act to the conclusion that a practical reason is always relativized to some set of motivations.

Externalists challenge this conclusion wholesale, holding that reasons are ascribed irrespective of facts about motivation. An externalist such as Derek Parfit ascribes to someone a reason to do whatever it would, in fact, be good for him to do. Externalist reasons are based not in desires, but in objective facts about value which may leave the person question cold. So Williams offers the example of a man told that he “has reason to be nicer to his wife” (1995, p.39) despite the fact that there is no way for someone with his nasty and selfish character to come to see this. In another example, a young man’s family insists that he has a reason to join the army despite his complete lack of interest in military matters (1981, pp.110-11). Williams’ response to these examples is simply to say that the subject has no such reason.

I am interested here in discussing a different, and somewhat friendlier, objection to internalism. Even if we were to take the falsity of externalism for granted, proleptic reasons offer up another kind of counterexample to the claim that all reasons are internal reasons. The internalist could, of course respond to the proleptic reasons theorist in just the way he responds to the external reasons theorist, with a simple denial of the existence of the reasons in question. But such a response comes at a cost that the internalist himself is, in this case, likely to recognize as considerable. Unlike external reasons, proleptic reasons are (or purport to be) not only normative but also motivating reasons. Proleptic reasons get acted on. By denying that proleptic reasons exist, the internalist would be classifying large scale transformative pursuits as irrational. The internalist’s best response is to count proleptic reasons as internal; but, as I will argue, they cannot do so without a serious modification to internalism.<sup>6</sup>

The core thoughts behind internalism are that

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<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I use proleptic reasons to criticise internalism on its own terms. Though I do not have space to explore both routes in this paper, I believe a parallel move is available with respect to externalism. Externalists have an easy way with reasons whose existence depends, causally or epistemically, on the presence of desires. For instance, Parfit (p.68) offers an example in which my reason to cut my fingernails is not the fact that I desire to do so, but the fact that that desire is interrupting my work. In proleptic cases, the answer to whether you have reason to do it—become a mother or a philosopher, take up knitting or piano, etc.—is more deeply tied to the question of whether you are motivated to do it. The fact that you can come to enjoy the end-state *makes* it a good thing for you to pursue. Your enjoyment of the end is not just a nice side-bonus, or a value tie-breaker, or instrumental in achieving some other end. For it is by enjoying the end that you derive meaning from the activity in question, and, at least some of the time, what makes a project valuable is the meaning that the agent derives from it. But this a sketch of an argument rather than the argument itself. I cannot, in the space of a footnote, hope to establish that the meaning which someone sees in some project (or activity, relationship) is not causally but rather constitutively related to her motivational disposition. I intend here only to observe that this would be the point of contention between the externalist and the proleptic reasons theorist.

- (a) If R is a reason for S to  $\phi$ , S must be able to appreciate this fact  
 (b) The set of reasons one can appreciate are arrived at by deliberative extension from one's motivational condition<sup>7</sup>.

Internalists want to deny that someone could be in the condition of being barred from rational access to his own reasons. Thus Williams emphasizes that in order to claim that S has a reason to  $\phi$ , one must be able to map out a rational path between the point of view on his reasons dictated by his current set of motivations, and the point of view from which he would appreciate the value of  $\phi$ -ing. This path constitutes a line of sight between the agent and the end specified in his internal reason, or, in Williams' terminology, a "sound deliberative route." The agent has the reason only if he either is, or could be, looking down that line of sight to the value specified in the reason. If being nice to his wife or fighting for his country does not strike someone as something he has a reason to do, even after he has thoroughly deliberated from his current set of motivations, then we should not insist that he has reason to do either.

Unlike external reasons, proleptic reasons are assigned on the basis of some facts about the subject's motivational condition. Unlike internal reasons, the proleptic reasoner lacks a 'line of sight' to the end she pursues. The failure of the internal/external dichotomy is easiest to see by way of example:

A philosophy professor, meeting with a student to discuss his paper on the *Protagoras*, tells him, "you really ought to read Plato in Greek." For a graduate student with some knowledge of Greek, her words might constitute an "internal reasons statement." On reflection, he recognizes that there are places where his argument could have been strengthened with reference to the Greek; acknowledges that he passed over confusing sections of the text that the Greek might have helped him sort out; and, finally, realizes that reading Plato in Greek is enjoyable. For another kind of student, her words represent an "external reasons statement." He's a graduating senior fulfilling his final requirement before moving on to the professional school to which he has already been accepted. He's polite, but dismissive. He is sure he has no such reason. Williams would agree. But these two characters are not the only two kinds of student one encounters. Consider the eager freshman, thrilled with the newly discovered possibilities of college and the life of the mind. He is not inclined to dismiss what the Professor is saying, but he doesn't quite grasp it, either. Leaving the Professor's office, he conjures up the image of himself in a coffee shop, oblivious to the chatter around him as he pores over a Greek text; or he imagines himself in a classroom correcting the translation on which his fellow students must rely; or opening the door of *his* office to *his* student, advising *her* to read Greek.

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<sup>7</sup> There are, of course, a variety of disagreements as to what, precisely, internalism consists in. Christine Korsgaard, for instance, disagrees with Williams's assumption that all one's desires are contingent and idiosyncratic (p.22). She follows Kant in suggesting, that a moral motive might be posited as residing, by necessity, in all of us. This kind of difference does not matter for our purposes, since it leaves (a) and (b) in place. By contrast, Michael Smith's version of internalism, which does not involve essential reference to the idea of the deliberation of the subject in question *is* relevantly different. I argue below (see fn. 8) that Smith's variant has its own problems accounting for proleptic reasons; and that it loses hold of the central insight of internalism.

When the Professor speaks to the graduating senior, her words fall on deaf ears; for the other two students, her words have resonance. The Professor cites a reason—to read Plato in Greek—whose reality the freshman and the graduate student, by contrast with the senior, are moved to acknowledge. But they acknowledge it in very different ways. The freshman thinks about the value of Greek by way of a pleasant fantasy of life as an intellectual, and embeds the study of Greek in a competitive struggle with his peers. The graduate student, by contrast, is directly responsive to that reason’s reason-giving force. Nonetheless, they cannot be understood as responding to different reasons. The runner who runs in order to escape the police and the one who runs for fitness might each dismiss the other’s reasons for running as, in one way or another, alien to themselves. The two students, by contrast, do not disagree as to the reason to read Greek, but they differ in respect of their grasp of this reason. The graduate student might nostalgically acknowledge the freshman as the person he used to be; the freshman, conversely, admires the graduate student as the person he would like to be.

If asked, “why study Greek?” the freshman is likely to mimic a form of words that belongs more properly to the graduate student, and say that he wants to “respond to the linguistic nuances in the text that are covered over by translation.” No one wants to admit to being motivated by a fantasy about coffee shops, or competitiveness. The embarrassment attaching to these motivations stems, I think, from one’s own sense that these are inadequate ways of grasping a reason. The student knows that fantasy and competition are not good reasons to learn Greek. But the ‘high class’ reason about textual nuances is inadequate in another way: unlike the genuine pleasure he gets from fantasy or the powerful drive he feels to distinguish himself amongst his peers, it amounts to little more than empty words. For it is by reading Plato in Greek that we learn what it means for Plato’s text to have the ‘nuances’ that we were previously missing out on.

Williams offers us a choice: if someone has an internal reason to act, then either he already grasps this reason, or he can attain such a grasp by deliberating. Proleptic reasoners can attain a grasp of the reason in question, but not by deliberating. The aspirant does not have a line of sight to his end; but he is not indifferent to it, either. The end that the aspirant has a reason to pursue—for instance, the intrinsic value of listening to music—is one that he cannot currently envision in such a way as to reason himself towards it. It speaks to his current set of motivations only by taking on the altered form of peer-competitiveness, fantasies of success, chocolate rewards, etc. And yet he sees this *as* an altered form, an imperfect way of grasping something further. As I put it earlier, a proleptic reason has a proximate, and a distal face—it faces inward, toward the agent’s current set of motivations, and also outward, beyond them. If we could reduce a proleptic reason to its proximate face, we could identify his reason to learn Greek as the properly ‘internal’ reason represented by fantasy-indulgence or competitiveness. If we could give the proleptic reasoner unfettered access to the distal face, we could likewise assimilate his reason to the ‘internal’ reason of the graduate student.

Williams<sup>8</sup> sometimes writes as though he would like to adopt this second tactic: “practical reasoning is a heuristic process, and an imaginative one, and there are no fixed boundaries on the continuum from rational thought to inspiration and conversion.” (1981, p.110) He warns against an overly narrow conception of what a ‘sound deliberative route’ may consist in, reminding us: “the imagination can create new possibilities and new desires,” (1981, pp.104-5) But no matter how loosely we hold the reins, deliberation will not plot a course to what I have called the distal face. We cannot attribute to the freshman imaginative or heuristic resources that so far outstrip his current motivational condition that he would be able to imagine his way into the intrinsic value of reading Plato in Greek. What he can do, imaginatively, is use fantasy or competition (or any of the other devices discussed in part II) as an anticipatory placeholder for grasping the value that eludes him.

A proleptic reason to  $\phi$  sits, then, somewhat outside the subject’s ken: the road to  $\phi$ -ing is paved not only by deliberation but also by substantive changes in the subject’s ethical, intellectual or emotional character. She *becomes* able to appreciate the reason, after studying, practicing, emulating, pretending, trying and failing, waiting. All of this, even the waiting, is work. And work takes time. Williams would be wrong to think that it can be pre-empted by a sufficiently creative thought process. Her proleptic reason is not, in the internalist’s sense, “hers”—not fully, not yet. And yet it is the reason on which she acts.

Recall what I labeled as the two core thoughts behind internalism.

- (a) If R is a reason for S to  $\phi$ , S must be able to appreciate this fact
- (b) The set of reasons one can appreciate are arrived at by deliberative extension from one’s motivational condition.

The champion of proleptic reasons needn’t disagree with the internalist’s contention that the subject’s reasons be derivable, by a rational process, from his current motivational condition. She thus agrees with (a); and she can agree with (b), as well, if we substitute

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<sup>8</sup> On this point, Michael Smith parts company with Williams. Smith, though a self-described internalist, is deeply suspicious of handing over the deliberative reins to the imagination, given that “the imagination is liable to all sorts of distorting influences, influences that it is the role of systematic reasoning to sort out.” (p.116) However, Smith’s own conception of internal reasons does not fare better with respect to proleptic rationality. He thinks that I have an internal reason to do what my ideally rational counterpart would advise me to do, where that counterpart is constituted by the set of desires and beliefs etc., that we would all converge upon under conditions of full rationality. Setting aside the implausibility of the claim that there could be such a person (Would she pick tennis over opera? Would she be a philosopher, a scientist or a ballerina? David Sobel has argued that “the notion of a fully informed self is a chimera.” p.794), there is no reason to think that I can tap into her thinking. Such a person is at a very great ethical and cognitive distance from the person I am, now. One thing we have seen from our reflections on proleptic rationality is that another person’s point of view on reasons isn’t something you can simply put on, like a hat. Getting to see things the way an opera lover sees them is hard work; it might take years. By making the ideally rational agent the arbiter of internal reasons, Smith robs internalism of its most fundamental insight: the demand that the agent to whom we attribute a reason have some access to that reason. The centrality, for his theory, of the concept of *advice* should already be a red flag: usually, I seek advice from someone precisely when I don’t have any way of figuring out, by unaided reason, what a person like him would tell someone in my position to do.

“rational” for “deliberative.” But this correction is not just a matter of understanding deliberation broadly enough to include, as Williams insists, inspiration, imagination and conversion. From the fact that there is a rational route from where an aspirant currently stands to the appreciation of the reason she aspires to appreciate it does not follow that she is, now, in a position to map it. Her inability to see to the finish line is what makes her reason ‘proleptic.’ For earlier parts of the route contain the subtle changes of character, desire and interest that make later parts visible. In retrospect, perhaps, she can see “this is what I was after all along”; in retrospect, she can apprehend that her current pursuits satisfy desires she had back then. But could not have known, back then, that her current pursuits would satisfy her old desires in *just this way*.

It is a commonplace to insist, in characterizing the plans or intentions or resolutions that are hallmarks of voluntary agency, that we leave room for the fact that people do a lot of instrumental reasoning on the fly. No preconceived course of action can anticipate every obstacle I might encounter. Plans and prior intentions share with commands, laws, instructions, recipes and directions a schematic quality made possible because the one enacting the schema is a thinking thing. Proleptic reasons show us that such ‘filling in’ is not relegated to the *means* we use to achieve predetermined ends. One of the things that we can be figuring out as we go is *why* we are after the thing we’re after. This kind of open-endedness might, however, raise its own kind of worry: if it is right to characterize the aspirant, now, as engaged in the process of figuring out what she wants, is there, now, a fact of the matter as to whether what she does in the service of this indeterminate goal is, or is not, practically rational? There is no knowing whether an agent’s course of action *will* end in  $\phi$ -ing until the course has, in fact, ended. Are we to ascribe proleptic reasons only retrospectively, on the basis of successful  $\phi$ -ing? Williams is keen to insist that his relativization of internal reasons to desires doesn’t prevent them from being normative reasons. As such, they must be amenable to rational criticism: it must be possible for someone to take herself to have a reason when she doesn’t, and vice versa. Is such criticism possible in proleptic cases?

If proleptic reasons are normative reasons, aspiration-in-process will need to be susceptible to rational critique. I want to end with a brief argument that it is. I grant that in the early stages, proleptic rationality may indeed be tenuous enough to be immune to rational critique. Aspiration begins as something like wish or hope, and we would tend not to tell someone she ‘shouldn’t’ have such and such a long-term wish, or that her cherished hopes for her future self are ‘irrational.’ Rational criticism does, however, eventually become appropriate. At some point on the way to her goal, the agent enters a space in which it becomes fitting for someone—though perhaps, not just anyone—to say either ‘try harder, you can do this’ or ‘give up, this isn’t working for you.’ These are the kinds of locutions by which we key someone in to the presence or absence of proleptic reasons. We can see the direction someone is heading, assessing her trajectory on the basis of the work she has done so far. We gauge whether she has it in her to make it to the endpoint, whether its reasonable for her to proceed, or more reasonable for her to try something else. Or, rather, those of us with the relevant expertise and the relevant familiarity with the aspirant do this.



So: the freshman might have had reason to embark upon his studies even if they did not end in his becoming a fluent reader of Greek. For his failure to reach his terminus might have been due to, e.g., untimely death, loss of financial resources, an illness in the family imposing unexpected demands on his time. Or it might be through fault of his own: by not studying hard enough, he failed to attend to his reason and can be faulted for practical irrationality. Whether or not he failed culpably, the teacher can say he *had it in him* to succeed. This example also shows that when the teacher says that her student has a proleptic reason, she is not making a prediction that he will succeed. A prediction would be falsified by untimely death, whereas the reasons-claim is not. Is she, perhaps, making a loose prediction as to what will probably happen? No, given her willingness to *blame* the student for his irrationality in the event that his failure to attain the end is due to insufficient effort. We would never blame someone for not doing what we merely predicted he would (probably) do.

Williams needn't worry that by replacing a 'deliberative' route with a 'rational' route, we are admitting a set of reasons without normative force. What we are doing, however, is narrowing the group of people who would be in a position to adjudicate the normative issue in question. Philosophers discussing practical rationality or irrationality tend, quite reasonably, to gravitate towards examples that provide immediate spectatorial access. Just about anyone can determine without wanting anything, doing anything, or having any special expertise that breaking an egg is a rational means to the end of making an omelet, and that painting the egg is not a rational means to the same end. Those facts make the example a nice and clear illustration of the rationality/irrationality distinction in a discussion in which one should not assume any special practical competence on the part of one's audience. But we should guard against taking such armchair assessability to be a feature of practical rationality itself. For instance, consider the difficulty of determining whether it is the intensive summer course, the yearlong regular course, or evenings studying on one's own that represent the rational means, for the freshman, of learning Greek.

At least some forms of practical rationality or irrationality may only be evident to those whose sensibilities—desires, emotions, intellects—have been shaped by the practice in question. In addition, such judgments often call for personal acquaintance with the subject whose proleptic rationality is being called into question. And even when an expert is assessing a subject she knows well, she will often be unable to judge whether the aspiration is rational or not until she has some actual extent of practice before her. Thinking about whether or not something will work out is not always a reasonable substitute for trying to work it out. It does not tell against the rationality of aspiration that a judgment as to whether someone has a proleptic reason is likely to be made on the basis of something like a trial period, or evidence of similar past attempts, and that it is likely to call for personal acquaintance with both the subject in question and her aspirational target. It should not come as a surprise that judgments of practical (ir)rationality might call for practical experience.

We acquire most, perhaps all, of our practical knowledge by responding to past experience. My interest has been in those cases in which the experience that we respond

to is one that we ourselves have sought out; moreover, we sought it ought for the (proleptic) reason that it produce this response. In those cases, we have guided ourselves to the new values or desires or commitments that our experience engenders. That process of self-guidance must be a rational process, because it is nothing other than a kind of learning.

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