

Moderation, Rationality, and Virtue

MICHAEL SLOTE

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MICHAEL SLOTE is Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Maryland, College Park. Until recently he was Professor of Philosophy at Trinity College, Dublin, where he was also a Fellow. Professor Slote took his A.B. and Ph.D. degrees from Harvard University and has also taught at Columbia University, the University of Pennsylvania, Swarthmore College, and New York State University. He has recently written *Goods and Virtues* (1983) and *Common-Sense Morality and Consequentialism* (1985), as well as a number of articles on practical rationality and utilitarian moral theory. Professor Slote is a member of the Royal Irish Academy.

I

In these lectures I shall be discussing some central features of practical rationality. The focus will largely be on extra-moral, or individualistic, practical rationality — though what I shall have to say about such rationality will frequently be supported by comparison with analogous claims that can be made about morality and about practical reason as swayed by moral, and not just individualistic, considerations.

It is usually assumed by philosophers (and of course by economists and others as well) that practical rationality is subject to a condition of maximization: that the rational egoist, or the average non-egoist under conditions where the welfare of or commitments to others are not at issue, will seek to maximize her own good, or well-being. Both utilitarians like Sidgwick and anti-utilitarians like Rawls seem to assume that it is egoistically, individualistically, irrational not to maximize one's satisfactions and seek one's own greatest good.¹ More recently, however, some explicitly non-maximizing conceptions of personal well-being over time have been suggested by Amartya Sen and Charles Fried, who have, with differing degrees of vehemence, defended the notion that considerations of equality in the intertemporal distribution of goods in a single life have some independent weight in the reckon-

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¹ See *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1907), pp., 119ff., 381f., 497ff., and elsewhere; and *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 23ff., 416ff., and elsewhere.

ing of the goodness of lives.² The rational individual will wish to consider how much good for himself given courses of action will produce but also how evenly or equally the resultant good or satisfaction will be distributed across different times of his life; and he will allow for trade-offs between total amount of satisfaction and equality of distribution of satisfaction in deciding what courses of action to follow.

But even in such non-maximizing conceptions of human good and the rational planning of lives, there is no suggestion that the egoistic individual, or the non-egoistic individual in situations where only his own well-being is at issue, should ever do anything but seek what is best for himself; what gives way in such conceptions is the idea that the course of action yielding the most good or satisfaction is always best for a given individual, but the assumption that the rational individual seeks what is best for himself remains unscathed. Fried and Sen in effect tell us that human well-being must be more complexly reckoned than simple maximizing accounts permit, but there is no suggestion that the rational egoistic individual, in sometimes seeking *less than the most* available good or satisfaction for herself, might also seek what is *less than best* for herself. It will, however, be my purpose in these lectures to argue for just this sort of possibility. This will not be the first time I have attempted to defend the notion that, both at an isolated given time and over a lifetime, a rational individual may seek what is less than best for herself. But I do hope to have an opportunity to expand on arguments and examples offered elsewhere in defense of views which must undoubtedly, in the light of unbroken philosophical tradition, at first seem bizarre and implausible. I think that a variety of examples drawn from ordinary life will help to clarify how we may rationally seek less than the best for ourselves and sometimes even reject what is better for

² See Sen's "Utilitarianism and Welfarism," *Journal of Philosophy* LXXVI (1979): 470f.; and Fried's *An Anatomy of Values* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 170–76.

ourselves for what is good enough. But a number of conceptual and other objections naturally arise in connection with these theses, objections that I have in fact not had a chance to consider and respond to elsewhere, and I hope that by providing answers to these objections I may persuade you that we are not going to fall into conceptual confusion or contradiction by rejecting the view that individualistic rationality requires doing the best one can for oneself. This first lecture will attempt to show that there is a space on our moral–psychological map, and a place in our lives, for a non-optimizing form of egoistic rationality. Lecture II will attempt to advance a step further and argue that optimization, while not itself irrational, can nonetheless be faulted on a number of other grounds.

1

The idea that a rational individual might seek less than the best for himself was originally developed, I believe, in the literature of economics. The term “satisficing” was coined for the discussion of such behavior, and I shall make use of the term here. What the economists have done, however, is point to an aspect of human behavior (both individually and in groups) that philosophers have traditionally ignored, and I shall be discussing and articulating the idea of satisficing from the perspective of an attempt to give an adequate philosophical account of this phenomenon. The emphasis will be on conceptual and moral–psychological issues, rather than on the sort of technical economic–theoretic development of the notion of satisficing that can be found in the literature of economics.

Consider an example borrowed from the economics literature.³ An individual planning to move to a new location and having to

³ For relevant discussions of satisficing in the economics literature, see, e.g., H. Simon, “A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 69 (1955): 99–118; Simon, “Theories of Decision Making in Economics and Behavioral Science,” *American Economic Review* XLIX (1959): 253–83;

sell his house may seek, not to maximize his profit on the house, not to get the best price for it he is likely to receive within some appropriate time period, but simply to obtain what he takes to be a good or satisfactory price. What he deems satisfactory may depend, among other things, on what he paid for the house, what houses cost in the place to which he is relocating, and on what houses like his normally sell at. But given some notion of what would be a good or satisfactory price to sell at, he may fix the price of his house at that point, rather than attempting, by setting it somewhat higher, to do better than that or to do the best he can. His reason for not setting the price higher will not, in that case, be some sort of anxiety about not being able to sell the house at all or some feeling that trying to do better would likely not be worth the effort of figuring out how to get a better price. Nor is he so rich that any extra money he received for the house would be practically meaningless in terms of marginal utility. Rather he is a “satisficer” content with good enough and does not seek to maximize (optimize) his expectations. His desires, his needs, are moderate, and perhaps knowing this about himself, he may not be particularly interested in doing better for himself than he is likely to do by selling at a merely satisfactory price. If someone pointed out that it would be better for him to get more money, he would reply not by disagreeing, but by pointing out that for him at least a good enough price is good enough.

Such a person apparently fails to exemplify the maximizing and optimizing model of individual rationality traditionally advocated by philosophers. But I think he nonetheless represents a possible idea of (one kind of) individual rationality, and much of the literature of economics treats such examples, regarding both individuals and economic units like the firm, as exemplifying a form of rational behavior. Though one might hold on to an opti-

Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1961); and R. Cyert and J. March, eds., *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

mizing or maximizing model of rationality and regard satisficing examples as indications of the enormous prevalence of irrational human behavior, this has typically not been done by economists, and I think philosophers would have even less reason to do so. For there are many other cases where satisficing seems rational, or at least not irrational, and although some of these are purely hypothetical, hypothetical examples are the stock-in-trade of ethical and moral–psychological theory even when they are of little or no interest to economists.

Imagine that it is mid-afternoon; you had a good lunch, and you are not now hungry; neither, on the other hand, are you sated. You would enjoy a candy bar or Coca Cola, if you had one, and there is in fact, right next to your desk, a refrigerator stocked with such snacks and provided gratis by the company for which you work. Realizing all this, do you, then, necessarily take and consume a snack? If you do not, is that necessarily because you are afraid to spoil your dinner, because you are on a diet, or because you are too busy? I think not. You may simply not feel the need for any such snack. You turn down a good thing, a sure enjoyment, because you are perfectly satisfied as you are. Most of us are often in situations of this sort, and many of us would often do the same thing. We are not boundless optimizers or maximizers, but are sometimes (more) modest in our desires and needs. But such modesty, such moderation, need not be irrational or unreasonable on our part.

Of course, moderation has been exalted as a prime virtue in many religious and philosophical traditions. But when, for example, the Epicureans emphasized the rationality of moderation in the pursuit of pleasure, they recommended modesty in one's desires only as a means to an overall more pleasurable, or less unpleasant, life, and in the example mentioned above, moderation is not functioning as a means to greater overall satisfaction. One is not worried about ruining one's figure or spoiling one's dinner, and the moderation exemplified is thus quite different from the

instrumental virtue recommended by the Epicureans. The sort of moderation I am talking about, then, is not for the sake of anything else. If one has the habit of not trying to eke out the last possible enjoyment from situations and of resting content with some reasonable quantity that is less than the most or best one can do, then one has a habit of moderation or modesty regarding one's desires and satisfactions, and it may not be irrational to have such habit, even if (one recognizes that) the contrary habit of maximizing may also not be irrational.

But if there is nothing irrational or unreasonable about maximizing, isn't the moderate individual who is content with less a kind of ascetic? Not necessarily. An ascetic is someone who, within certain limits, *minimizes* his enjoyments or satisfactions; he deliberately leaves himself with less, unsatisfied. The moderate individual, on the other hand, is someone content with (what he considers) a reasonable amount of enjoyment; he wants to be satisfied and up to a certain point he wants more satisfactions rather than fewer, to be better off rather than worse off; but there is a point beyond which he has no desire, and even refuses, to go. There is a space between asceticism and the attempt to maximize satisfactions, do the best one can for oneself, a space occupied by the habit of moderation. And because such moderation is not a form of asceticism, it is difficult to see why it should count as irrational from the standpoint of egoistic or extra-moral individual rationality.⁴

Now the kind of example just mentioned differs from the case of satisficing house-selling in being independent of any monetary transaction. But the example differs importantly in another way from examples of satisficing mentioned in the literature of eco-

⁴ *Rational* satisficing seems to involve not only a disinclination to optimize, but a reasonable sense of when one has enough. To be content with much less than one should be is (can be) one form of *bathos*. Moreover, as Peter Railton has pointed out, to be willing to satisfice only at some high level of desire satisfaction is to fail to be moderate in one's desires. In speaking of satisficing moderation, I shall assume the absence of these complicating conditions.

nomics. Economists who have advocated the model of rational satisficing for individuals, firms, or state bodies have pointed out that, quite independently of the costs of gaining further information or effecting new policies, an entrepreneur or firm may simply seek a satisfactory return on investment, a satisfactory share of the market, a satisfactory level of sales, rather than attempting to maximize or optimize under any of these headings. But this idea of rational satisficing implies only that individuals or firms *do not* always *seek* to optimize and are *satisfied* with attaining a certain “aspiration level” less than the best that might be envisaged. It does not imply that it could be rational actually to *reject* the better for the good enough in situations where both were available. In the example of house-selling, the individual accepts less than he might well be able to get, but he doesn’t accept a lower price when a higher bidder makes an equally firm offer. And writers on satisficing generally seem to hold that satisficing only makes sense as a habit of not seeking what is better or best, rather than as a habit of actually rejecting the better, when it is clearly available, for the good enough. Thus Herbert Simon, in his “Theories of Decision Making” (see note 3), develops the idea of aspiration level and of satisficing, but goes on to say that “when a firm has alternatives open to it that are at or above its aspiration level, it will choose the best of those known to be available.”

However, the example of the afternoon snack challenges the idea that the satisficing individual will never explicitly reject the better for the good enough. For the individual in question turns down an immediately available satisfaction, something he knows he will enjoy. He isn’t merely not trying for a maximum of satisfactions, but is explicitly rejecting such a maximum. (It may be easier *to* see the explicitness of the rejection if we change the example so that he is actually offered a snack by someone and replies: “No, thank you, I’m just fine as I am.”) And I think that most of us would argue that there is nothing irrational here. Many of us, most of us, occasionally reject afternoon snacks, second cups

of tea, etc., not out of (unconscious) asceticism, but because (to some degree) we have a habit of moderation with regard to certain pleasures. The hypothetical example of the afternoon snack thus takes the idea of rational satisficing a step beyond where economists, to the best of my knowledge, have been willing to go.

At this point, however, it may be objected that the example may be one of rational behavior but is less than clear as an example of satisficing. The individual in question prefers not to have a certain enjoyment and certainly deliberately rejects the maximization of his enjoyments. But it is not clear that the moderate individual must think of himself as missing out on anything *good* when he forgoes the afternoon snack. For although he knows he would enjoy the snack, the very fact that he rejects such enjoyment might easily be taken as evidence that he doesn't in the circumstances regard such enjoyment as a good thing. In that case, he may be satisficing in terms of some quantitative notion of satisfaction, but not with respect to some more refined or flexible notion of (his own) individual good, and the example would provide no counter-example to the idea that it is irrational to choose what is less good for oneself when something better is available.

However, even if the enjoyment of a snack does count as a rejected personal good for the individual of our example, that fact may be obscured, both for him and for us, by the very smallness or triviality of the good in question. And so in order to deal with our doubts, it may be useful at this point to consider other examples, more purely hypothetical than the present one, where the good forgone through satisficing is fairly obvious.

How do we react to fairy tales in which the hero or heroine, offered a single wish, asks for a pot of gold, for a million (1900) dollars, or, simply, for (enough money to enable) his family and himself to be comfortably well-off for the rest of their lives. In each case the person asks for less than he might have asked for, but we are not typically struck by the thought that he was irrational to ask for less than he could have, and neither, in general,

do the fairy tales themselves imply a criticism of this sort; so, given the tendency of such tales to be full of moralism about human folly, we have, I think, some evidence that such fairy-tale wishes need not be regarded as irrational. (In not regarding them as irrational, we need not be confusing what we know *about* fairy-tale wishes with what the individual *in* a given fairy tale ought to know. In some fairy tales, people who ask for too much fail to get their wish or have it realized in an unacceptable way. But there is no reason to suppose that we consider the person who in a given fairy tale asks for enough to be comfortable not to be irrational only because we mistakenly imagine him to have some evidence concerning the possible risks of asking for more than he does.)

Now the individual in the fairy tale who wishes for *less* than he could presumably exemplifies the sort of moderation discussed earlier. He may think that a pot of gold or enough money to live comfortably is all he needs to be satisfied, that anything more is of no particular importance to him. At the same time, however, he may realize (be willing to admit) that he could do better for himself by asking for more. He needn't imagine himself constitutionally incapable of benefiting from additional money or gold, for the idea that one will be happy, or satisfied, with a certain level of existence by no means precludes the thought (though it perhaps precludes *dwelling* on the thought) that one will not be as well off as one could be. It merely precludes the sense of wanting or needing more for oneself. Indeed the very fact that someone could actually explicitly wish for enough money to be comfortably well-off is itself sufficient evidence of what I am saying. Someone who makes such a wish clearly acknowledges the possibility of being better off and yet chooses —knowingly and in some sense deliberately chooses —a lesser, but personally satisfying degree of well-being. And it is precisely because the stakes are so large in such cases of wishing that they provide clearcut examples of presumably rational individual satisficing. But, again, the sort

of satisficing involved is not (merely) the kind familiar in the economics literature where an individual seeks something other than optimum results, but a kind of satisficing that actually rejects the available better for the available good enough. Although the individual with the wish would be better off if he wished for more, he asks for less (we may suppose that if the wish grantor prods him by asking "Are you sure you wouldn't like more money than that?" he sticks with his original request). And if we have any sympathy with the idea of moderation, of modesty, in one's desires, we shall have to grant that the satisficing individual who wishes, e.g., for less money is not irrational. Perhaps we ourselves would not be so easily satisfied in his circumstances, but that needn't make us think him irrational for being moderate in a way, or to a degree, that we are not.⁵

But at this point some doubt may remain about our description of the moderate individual's response to being granted a wish. It is not obvious that an individual who wishes for less than the most money (or comfort or well-being) he could ask for is satisficing in the strong sense defended earlier. He may make the seemingly modest wish he does because he is afraid of offending the wish grantor or in order to avoid being corrupted (or rendered blasé) by having too much wealth, and thus motivated, he will not exemplify the sort of satisficing moderation whose non-irrationality I have tried to defend: he *will* be seeking what is best for himself under a refined conception of personal good that goes beyond mere wealth or material comfort.⁶

With this I can absolutely agree. An individual who asks for less than she could may indeed be motivated by factors of the

⁵ In fact, it is hard to see how any specific monetary wish can be optimizing if the individual is unsure about his own marginal utility curve for the use of money. To that extent, we are *neressnrily* satisficers in situations where we can wish for whatever we want, unless, perhaps, we are allowed to wish for our own greatest future well-being in those very terms. If satisficing were irrational, would that mean that anything other than such an explicitly optimizing wish would be irrational?

⁶ Some of these points are made by Philip Pettit in reply to an earlier paper of mine. See his contribution to the symposium "Satisficing Consequentialism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (supplementary volume, 1984), p. 175.

above sort. My main point is, and has been, that there is no reason to insist or assume that such factors are always present when an individual asks for less than the most or best he can obtain. From the standpoint of the phenomenology of our own lives, it doesn't seem as if such factors are always present —we find it humanly understandable and not unreasonable that someone should choose the good enough when better was available. Why insist that some other factor(s) must always be present to turn putative cases of satisficing into cases, fundamentally, of optimization or maximization of the individual's (perceived) good?

The situation here resembles what is often said for and against psychological egoism. Many people —even philosophers —have argued as if it were practically a matter of definition that individuals seek their own greatest good, even when they appear to be sacrificing that good for the good of others. But nowadays philosophers at least seem to recognize that altruism and self-sacrifice cannot be ruled out a priori. Nonetheless, it in some sense remains empirically open that human altruism may turn out to be an illusion. It is conceivable, let us suppose, that a powerful enough psychological theory that entailed the universal selfishness (or non-unselfishness) of human behavior might eventually be adopted. But in the absence of such a theory, philosophers have been, I think, quite right to insist upon taking altruistic motivation seriously. Any moral psychology that wishes to remain true to our common or everyday understanding of things, to life as most of us seem to lead it, will assume that there is a phenomenon of altruistic motivation to explore and better understand, both conceptually and in its ethical ramifications.

And similar points can, I believe, be made about satisficing, or moderation in the sense delineated earlier. Perhaps it will someday be definitively shown by economists and/or psychologists that the best explanation of why humans act as they do requires us to assume that they are always maximizing or optimizing and thus that apparent examples of satisficing or moderation are illusory.

But until and unless that happens, we should recognize — something philosophers have not previously noticed or admitted — that the common-sense understanding of our own lives leaves a definite recognizable place for occasional, perhaps even frequent, satisficing moderation. For in fact the phenomenon of moderation is not limited to fairy-tale examples, though I believe such examples allow one to see certain issues large enough and in sufficient isolation as to make it easier to recognize the phenomenon of moderation in the more muddied waters of everyday life. Even the example of the person selling a house and moving to a new location need be altered only in minor ways in order to turn it from an example of not seeking the best for oneself into an example of actually rejecting the expectable better for the expectable good enough.

Imagine, for instance, that the person selling the house has an agent and that the agent has received a firm bid on the house that falls within the range the seller considers good enough. The agent tells the prospective buyer that it may take him three or four days to get in touch with the seller because he believes the latter is temporarily out of town; the buyer says he is in no hurry; but in fact the seller has not gone away and the agent conveys the bid to him on the same day it is made. The seller then tells the agent to let the prospective buyer know that his offer is acceptable, but the agent, who we may assume is no satisficer, tells the seller that he really ought to wait a few days before accepting the offer that has been made. After all, he says, the offer is firm, and if we wait a few days before telling the prospective buyer that you agree to his terms, a better offer may come in.

Now in the circumstances as I have described them, the seller's net expectable utility is greater if he waits — we are assuming that the offer already made is firm and that there is no reason to worry that the person who has made the offer may get cold feet, since the latter doesn't expect his offer to be received for a couple of days. Yet the seller may tell the real estate agent to convey his accep-

tance of the terms on offer without delay. Again, the reason may simply be that he considers the offer good enough and has no interest in seeing whether he can do better. His early agreement may not be due to undue anxiety about the firmness of the buyer's offer, or to a feeling that monetary transactions are unpleasant and to be got over as quickly as possible. He may simply be satisficing in the strong sense of the term we have been defending. He may be moderate or modest in what he wants or feels he needs.

And one cannot at this point reasonably reply that if he doesn't want the (chance of) extra money for his house then that cannot represent a good thing, a personal good, that he gives up by immediately accepting the offer that has been made. There is an important distinction to be made between what someone (most) wants and what advances his well-being (or represents a personal good for him). And, once again, a comparison with issues that arise in connection with altruism and moral behavior generally may help us to see the point. If altruism makes sense, then presumably so too does the notion of self-sacrifice. But the idea of deliberate self-sacrifice involves the assumption that what a person (most) wants need not be what advances his own personal well-being, what is (in one everyday sense) best for him. And this conceptual point carries over to discussions of moderation and satisficing. Just because the moderate individual asks for less wealth than he could doesn't, for example, mean that additional wealth wouldn't be a good thing for him. The wishing and house-selling examples —as well as the earlier example of the rejected afternoon snack —indicate, instead, that an individual who does not want or care about something and who chooses not to have it, need not automatically regard that thing as not a personal good.⁷

⁷ A quite similar point, that the virtuous individual who forgoes something that can only be obtained unjustly need not deny that he is forgoing a good thing, is made in my *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), ch. 5. On the present view, a person may reasonably turn down the chance of getting more money (say, \$90,000) for his house and simply accept what he takes to be a good price (say \$80,000). Does it follow (as Alan Donagan and Jonathan Glover have both

There is conceptual space for and human understandability in the idea of a personal good or element of one's own well-being that one simply doesn't care about or wish to have — and that one actually rejects — because one considers oneself well enough off without it. It is a mere confusion, therefore, to say (as I have heard it said) that the person who turns down a certain good is nonetheless inevitably seeking his own good in some more refined sense, because the person is maximizing the satisfaction of his preferences on the whole, among which, after all, is presumably the preference not to have that unnecessary good (and/or the general preference not to have much more than he needs). The same form of argument would be laughed out of court if applied in the area of morality and altruism: we all know by now that it would be absurd to argue that the individual who sacrifices his life for others must be seeking his own greatest good in doing so, because in doing so he is maximizing his weighted preferences, a very powerful one of which is the preference that he should die so that others should live.” The only reason why a similar move is not instantly rejected in the area of individualistic rationality in connection with putative examples of moderation is that moderation as described earlier is a much neglected moral-psychological phenomenon. But once we get our sea legs on this topic, I think the sorts of objections to the phenomenon that naturally arise will

suggested) that the moderate individual might (should) turn down a firm \$90,000 when \$80,000 is on offer? Certainly not. If \$80,000 really is a good and sufficient price, then holding out for and striving after a higher amount may seem a form of “grubbing” with little to recommend it (more on this in the second lecture). But no such grubbing is involved when the higher price is firmly on offer, and in such a situation nothing need stand in the way of accepting the higher price. Note too that in the normal course of events it will never be clear that one won't need the extra \$10,000, so the case where both \$80,000 and \$90,000 are firmly on offer is also different from the fairy-tale example, where one can wish for enough money to be moderately well-off for the rest of one's life and where it is assumed that there will definitely be no need for any more than one is actually wishing for. Once again, there may be reason to take the firm \$90,000, even if the moderate individual has no reason to ask for more than moderate wealth in an idealized fairy-tale situation.

8 Cf. Amartya Sen, “Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (1977): 322ff.

be seen (at least in the cases mentioned above) to be as groundless as the sorts of objections to psychological altruism that abounded in earlier periods of philosophy but are now largely discredited.

2

However, we are not yet finished with objections that cast doubt on moderation and satisficing as I have described it. We have examined and, I hope, answered some objections to the very possibility of moderation occurring in the way I have described it. But it is also possible, while not denying the existence of moderation, to hold that the rejection of the better for the good enough is, when it occurs, irrational. In response to my account of satisficing moderation, for example, Philip Pettit has argued that the person who rejects what is better for himself in favor of what he considers good enough may have a reason for choosing what he chooses—what he chooses is, after all, good enough—but has no reason to choose what he chooses in preference to what he rejects. There may be a reason to wish for or choose moderate wealth or well-being, but there is no reason for the moderate individual I have described to choose moderate wealth over great wealth, and for that reason, according to Pettit, his choice counts as irrational or unreasonable.⁹

This objection, however, is extremely problematic. It is not, to begin with, a general condition of rationality that in choosing between two options one has (a) reason to choose one of those options rather than the other — otherwise, we would sometimes really be in the position of Buridan's ass. When two equally good or self-beneficial options present themselves, it need not be irrational to choose one of them, even though one has no reason to prefer it to the other. (I have somewhere read that Arthur Balfour once spent twenty minutes trying to decide whether there was any reason for him to ascend via a staircase to the left or via one to the

⁹ See Pettit, "Satisficing Consequentialism," p. 172.

right in order to join a soirée to which he had been invited.) In the second place, reasons can be relative to an individual's concerns, her world view, or even her habits; and from the distinctive standpoint of the moderate individual, there may well be a reason to prefer moderate wealth (well-being) to great wealth (well-being). The fact that great wealth is much more than she needs (or cares about) can count, for such an individual, as a reason for rejecting great wealth and choosing moderate wealth, but of course such a reason will not motivate, or even occur to, someone who always seeks to optimize. The moderate individual will thus sometimes have a reason to prefer what is less good for herself, but a reason precisely of a kind to lack appeal to the maximizing temperament.¹⁰

But this is not to claim that the moderate individual *always* chooses less than the best for himself. Other things being equal he will prefer what is better for himself to what is less good for himself; but from his particular standpoint, other things are not equal when what is less good for himself is good and sufficient for his purposes and what is better for himself is much more than he needs or cares about. In such circumstances he can articulate a reason — a reason I think you and I can understand and empathize with — for choosing what is less good for himself. But faced, e.g., with the choice between great wealth and dire poverty, he would have reason to choose the former (the moderate individual is not an ascetic) and indeed with respect to most choices between

¹⁰ Similarly, the non-egoistic reasons there are for helping others or doing the honorable thing will not appeal to the egoistic temperament, but this hardly shows that such reasons are illusory. Cf. John McDowell, "The Role of *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's Ethics," in A. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 359–76.

The moderate individual's reasons for taking less for herself are non-consequentialist, non-moral, non-egoistic, but nonetheless self-regarding. Michael Bratman has pointed out that there may be other non-consequentialist, non-moral, non-egoistic, self-regarding reasons that have nothing (directly) to do with moderation: e.g., the desire not to vote for oneself in a club election. This whole class of reasons needs to be further explored.

better and worse for himself he would (be able to) prefer the better-for-himself to the less-good-for-himself.

However, we are not yet quite out of the woods. We must consider one final objection to the rationality of satisficing moderation based on Donald Davidson's recent influential discussion of the notion of weakness of will. In his essay "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?" Davidson characterizes weakness of will, or incontinence, as involving, roughly, the intentional doing of some action x , when the agent believes that there is some available alternative action y which it would be better for him to do than to do x .¹¹ Davidson points out that the Aristotelian account of incontinence (sometimes) makes reference to the idea of an agent's going against some (prior) decision or choice, but Davidson wishes to allow us to speak of incontinence even when the agent who performs some act other than the one he judges to be best never actually decided or intended to do that best act, and he mentions passages in Aristotle that lend support to such an understanding of the concept of incontinence or weakness.

Now as we have seen, the moderate individual in a moment of moderate choice may choose an option that benefits him less, is less good for him, than some alternative available in the circumstances. But if he chooses the less good option, does he not in fact fall under Davidson's seemingly reasonable definition of incontinence and thus count as acting irrationally?

I believe we have a confusion here, one that turns in part, but not entirely, on an ambiguity in the notion of an option. When we speak of an individual's deciding between options, the options spoken of may be certain choices, acts of choosing, or the assured results (assuming an absence of uncertainty) of those choices. In the situation where someone chooses between (having) great wealth and (having) moderate wealth, we can think of her options either as choosing great wealth vs. choosing moderate

¹¹ Davidson's essay is reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 21-42.

wealth, or as having great wealth vs. having moderate wealth, and small as this difference appears to be and in most circumstances actually is, the distinction is crucial to the existence or non-existence of incontinence in cases of satisficing moderation. Davidson (rightly) characterizes incontinence in terms of actions, not results of actions; it is only when we perform the less good action that weakness of will is said to be involved. But when the moderate individual chooses the option that is less good for himself in the sense that it involves him being less well off than he would be under some other option, we are comparing the results of certain choices. We are saying that (the act of) choosing moderate wealth will result in his being less well off than if he had chosen great wealth. Nothing has yet been said about the comparative merits of the choices themselves, in the sense of the acts of choice that are involved here. It is a mistake, therefore, to slide, in the way I illustrated earlier, from the claim that a certain option is less good for someone than some other to the claim that the first option is less good, and thence to the claim that the individual who takes the first option has acted incontinently in Davidson's sense. And if we distinguish between options as states of affairs that result from certain choices and options as choices (or acts of choosing) we shall be less likely to imagine that moderation involves weakness of will. Of course, some philosophers —most notably G. E. Moore in *Principia Ethica* —have assumed as obvious and even as definitional that it is always best to produce the best consequences one can.¹² But deontological moral theories precisely deny this connection, and it gravely misconstrues the character of such theories to assume that they can be reformulated without alteration of content so as to advocate the production of best consequences suitably understood.¹³ Since de-

¹² Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959, p. 25.

¹³ Cf. Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

ontological theories are coherent, the connection between best action and action with best results is neither self-evident nor, presumably, definitional; and in any event, it is even less plausible to maintain a tight connection between the best action an individual can perform and the action that benefits *him* most. Just as the individual who sacrifices her well-being for the benefit of others may coherently claim to have done the best she could, to have performed the best act available to her in the circumstances, there is no reason why a moderate individual who rejects dazzling levels of well-being for moderate contentment must hold that it would have been better for him to act otherwise. He has his reasons for rejecting, e.g., great wealth and there seems to be no reason why he should not be willing to stand by what he has done and hold (though he need not proclaim it from the rooftops) that he has done the right thing in the circumstances (given his own tastes and interests). He has done (what he considers) the best thing for him to do, even though he has not acted to insure his own highest or best level of well-being. There seems nothing amiss in what he has done, and there is no reason to suspect him of incontinence once we distinguish the evaluation of results from the evaluation of actions (including choices) and notice that the term “option” is ambiguous as between actions and results.¹⁴

Now that I have defended satisficing moderation, let me conclude this first lecture by saying something about the directions in which our discussion of moderation can or will take us. The idea that self-seeking rationality may be moderate in its aims and intentions finds a notable parallel within the sphere of morality that I would like at this point to mention briefly. I have argued elsewhere for the existence and defensibility of a kind of “moral satisficing” that is in many ways analogous to the satisficing we dis-

¹⁴ A similar ambiguity in our usage of “alternative” can similarly lead to confusion and an unwarranted slide from the ascription of moderation to the accusation of incontinence. Cf. Sen, “Rational Fools . . .,” pp. 329, 336.

cover in the sphere of individualistic rationality.¹⁵ The individualistic rational satisficer does not seek the best for herself and may sometimes deliberately reject the better for the good enough, and I think common-sense morality permits something rather similar within its sphere. Consider an occasion when a moral agent can choose to do either more or less good for others and where the choice of greater good entails no (relative) personal sacrifice to the agent and no violation of deontological restrictions or side-constraints. In such a situation ordinary individuals sometimes do the lesser good for others and yet act in a way that ordinary morality would not condemn or find unacceptable. I have elsewhere provided lengthy illustrations of these sorts of situations, and I shall not repeat the descriptions here. The main point is that rational individualistic satisficing finds a parallel in common-sense moral satisficing, and the latter phenomenon, in turn, evokes the further possibility of satisficing forms of (act-) utilitarianism and (act-)consequentialism. A consistent consequentialist can hold, for example, that an act is morally right if and only if its consequences are good enough in comparison with the consequences of the other acts open to the agent. An act may be morally acceptable, even when there are alternatives whose consequences would be better, if its consequences are very good and close enough to the best that can be accomplished in the circumstances. And such a satisficing version of (utilitarian) act-consequentialism gains support not only from the prevalence and plausibility of moral satisficing within everyday morality, but also from any support we are able to give to the idea of rational individualistic satisficing. Satisficing act-consequentialism has distinct advantages that I have described elsewhere over prevalent optimizing forms of act-consequentialism, but there is no time here to pursue this purely moral-theoretic development of the idea of satisficing

¹⁵ In my own contribution to the symposium "Satisficing Consequentialism," and at greater length in chapter 3 of *Common-Sense Morality and Consequentialism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

moderation. I mention it so that we can see where the idea of moderation can take us, but for present purposes I think it will be best to focus primarily on satisficing and moderation as features of individualistic rationality.

In the second lecture there will be two aspects of such moderation occupying our attention. One emerges from our discussion just now of the reasons an individual may have for deliberately choosing what is less good for herself. I believe our examples of moderation illustrate two fundamentally different kinds of reasons that may lie behind and motivate individual satisficing, and at the beginning of the next lecture I would like to distinguish these two sorts of reasons and explain their significance. I shall then go on to examine another issue that has been almost palpably omitted from our previous discussion: the question whether moderation in our present sense represents any sort of virtue or admirable trait and the connected question whether the tendency, in extra-moral contexts, to optimize with regard to one's own well-being represents a desirable or an unfortunate habit of mind and action. In this first lecture I have defended the rationality of satisficing; but in the next, I shall argue that the optimizing mentality, while not necessarily representing any failure of practical *rationality*, can nonetheless be criticized for its failure to embody certain (other) deep-seated human ideals.

II

1

In the first lecture, I used the expression “satisficing moderation” to refer to a kind of moderation not engaged in for the sake of an overall greater balance of satisfactions, a moderation, therefore, that occupies a sort of conceptual middle ground between asceticism for its own sake and the instrumental virtue of moderation recommended by the Epicureans. But you will also recall

that satisficing moderation as I have understood it goes considerably beyond the satisficing that has been defended by Herbert Simon and others in the economics literature of the firm and elsewhere. The satisficing individual may not only fail to seek the best results for himself, but may in certain circumstances actually reject the better or best for the good enough; and I last time argued that there need be nothing irrational about such a choice.

Today, I would like to discuss two quite different reasons for satisficing moderation that can be elicited from our previous examples. To begin with, someone who rejects what is better for himself may feel, as I put it last time, that a certain option will give him much more than he needs, and from the standpoint of a genuinely moderate individual, that will be a reason to reject the option — at least when there is an alternative that provides him with what he feels he does need. A reluctance to go greatly beyond what one (feels one) needs is thus a mark of the moderate individual, the individual modest in her desires or wants, and, at the same time, a locus, for such an individual, of reasons for choosing less than the best for herself or failing to aim for such an optimum. Such reasons are familiar and understandable, though sometimes their expression is a bit more informal and colloquial than anything indicated earlier. If someone keeps pressing me to accept great wealth, lavish accommodation, or an extra dessert, and I, being a moderate individual, keep turning down these things, I may end up saying with some emphasis, in exasperation, “who needs it?” And that will be an expression of the kind of reason mentioned earlier, of the moderate individual’s desire not to go way beyond what he actually needs.

Of course, if a host is pressing one to accept an extra dessert, good manners — if not on the host’s part, then at least on the part of the guest — might dictate to the moderate individual that he simply accede and take the unwanted extra dessert, but if we imagine a situation where there is less reason to mask one’s feelings by forms of politeness, the expression “who needs it?” seems

precisely fitted to convey an exasperated reluctance to take much more than one needs, and a moderate individual will naturally express himself in this way either to himself or to others when such circumstances arise. But not just the moderate individual. We can, roughly, characterize the moderate individual as someone whose wants are more modest than those of others and who thus finds herself more frequently than most of us in a situation where she fails to seek or actually turns down good things. But the moderate individuals among us are not some moral-psychologically isolated though understandable subpopulation of our species. There are elements of moderation in most or almost all of us, and a full appreciation of the rational understandability of satisficing moderation requires us to see that this is so.¹ We all say things like “who needs it?” sometimes, and we all turn down afternoon snacks or second desserts or cups of tea on at least some occasions whose underlying circumstances are basically the same as those assumed in the examples mentioned earlier.²

In case, however, there are any lingering doubts about how an individual can have reason to reject something good on the grounds that he has no need for it, it may be helpful, at this point, to consider a case where lack of need counts as a reason quite independently of any effect upon the individual’s (or anyone else’s) well-being. Why is it that if offered a choice between having one copy and having two copies of the morning paper gratis, many of us would prefer to take just one copy? Need it be because we don’t want to deprive someone else of a copy or because it is harder to carry around and get rid of two copies of a newspaper?

¹ It is also possible, I suppose, for there to be isolated areas of satisficing (optimizing) tendency within a predominantly optimizing (satisficing) personality.

² The notion of need at work in satisficing moderation is not basic human need, the requirements of life itself, but some more flexible notion. If someone offers us dinner, we would not ordinarily refuse on the grounds that (given that we have already had two meals that day) dinner is much more than we need (to stay alive and keep functioning). What we take to exceed what we need may therefore be relative to social circumstances and individual background.

Surely there are circumstances where neither of these considerations, or anything similar, is relevant, but where, nonetheless, we would be inclined to take one copy rather than two. But why should this be so? The obvious answer, not only in the light of what has already been said but also on grounds of sheer common sense, is that some of us are quite naturally reluctant to take more than we need, when we can have everything we need without doing so. One takes the single paper because it answers one's need for information; one has no need for two newspapers. (I am assuming that one is not worried about losing the single newspaper and/or that the difference between the chance of losing two and the chance of losing one is negligible.) But in the circumstances I have described one is equally well off whether one has one newspaper or two, so if the absence of need moves one to reject the offer of two newspapers it does so quite independently of any consideration of well-being and of the whole issue of optimizing or satisficing. This may help us to see that the fact that something is absolutely unnecessary or much more than one needs really is a reason for action and choice that has force and validity with most human beings — even people who are initially dubious about satisficing will presumably see the point of rejecting the offer of two copies of the morning paper.

However, it might be possible to grant total lack of need a rational status in cases of the sort I have just mentioned, while denying the rationality of satisficing as described earlier. One might say that considerations of well-being are always lexically prior to considerations of non-need, so that the fact of non-need can be used to break ties in situations, like that of the morning newspaper, where one is (by hypothesis) equally well-off whichever way one chooses, but cannot overcome differences of well-being. The fact that a certain level of well-being or enjoyment is much more than one needs would then fail to justify rejecting such well-being or enjoyment in favor of what was (merely) good enough, and satisficing moderation as we have described it would

remain an irrational phenomenon, despite the fact that the appeal to a lack of need can *sometimes* justify rejecting an alternative.

Such a move is highly reminiscent of the treatment of considerations of equality in Sidgwick's utilitarianism. As Rawls and others have noted, Sidgwick allows considerations of equality to have an influence on moral choices only to break ties among choices with equally good (pleasant) consequences.³ Considerations of aggregate well-being are lexically prior to reasons of equality, and this in effect gives equality a minimal role in Sidgwick's theory, a role far less than defenders of the moral importance of equality would be willing to accept. It has always struck me, however, and I am sure this will also have occurred to others, that Sidgwick's compromise theory represents a somewhat unstable solution to the problem of giving adequate weight to considerations of aggregate welfare and to considerations of equality within an acceptable total moral theory. Sidgwick's idea that equality has enough weight only to break ties seems to be an extraneous imposition, in the name of reconciliation with common-sense intuitions, upon an underlying utilitarian moral conception. Utilitarianism itself and what motivates utilitarianism according to traditional conceptions can provide no source of support for an independent factor of equality even as a means of breaking ties. Consistent with the motivation underlying utilitarianism, then, it would seem more appropriate to say that equally felicitous (optimific) acts are both entirely permissible and right, even if one of them tends towards more equality than the other, and indeed more recent versions of act-utilitarianism have tended to drop any suggestion that equality ought to be used to break ties. Either equality counts for nothing intrinsically in the moral assessment of actions, or it should have a weight far greater than that allowed it by Sidgwick.

³ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 77; Sen, "Utilitarianism and Welfarism," pp. 469f.; and Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, pp. 417, 447.

My own feeling, for what it is worth, is that the situation with regard to lack of need is quite similar. If one really grants that the fact one doesn't need two newspapers can represent a sensible reason to take a single paper, then considerations of non-need have and must be admitted to have a force independent of considerations of greater or less well-being. But if they do, then in those numerous satisficing cases where those considerations at least *seem* to have force sufficient to overcome certain kinds of considerations of well-being, we have, I think, no reason to doubt that such force exists. If we grant the independent existence of reasons of non-need, it seems implausible and untrue to our own best sense of things to hold that such considerations have force enough only to break ties and can never stand up against considerations of well-being. So once it becomes clear that non-need can function as a reason *independently* of well-being, as with our newspaper example, it should become easier to accept the idea that non-need can have force *against* the idea of well-being, and satisficing moderation may seem less perplexing and outré as a phenomenon.

We have, so far, been concentrating on a single kind of rationale that can lie behind and motivate satisficing moderation. But our examples in fact reveal another quite different kind of consideration that can motivate the moderate individual and each and every one of us in her more moderate moments. In the first lecture, in discussing the standpoint of someone who turns down an afternoon snack or an extra slice of cake, I characterized such an individual not only as feeling no need for some additional good thing, but also as feeling perfectly satisfied as she is. Lack of need, of course, is the sort of reason for satisficing we have just been describing in some detail, but the idea that someone is perfectly satisfied as she is invokes a new sort of satisficing consideration that is worth examining. In the situation where one is being asked to choose between one and two newspapers, or between great and moderate wealth, there is no issue of retaining the status

quo, either newspaperless or lacking wealth altogether; but in the case where one is offered an afternoon snack or a second dessert, retaining the status quo is a considered option and is actually preferred to a good-yielding change. And I believe such cases contain a distinctive reason for satisficing precisely in virtue of the fact that the status quo is involved as an option. The very fact that some satisfactory or satisfying state is the one actually enjoyed at a given time may at that time yield a reason for preferring to remain in that state rather than make some transition to a satisfactory alternative state; and a certain primacy of the actual may thus be part of what lies behind the rejection of a second dessert or afternoon snack. Part, I want to suggest, not all, because such examples also gain support from the fact that the individual involved feels no need for the dessert or snack. But the absence of need cannot, I think, be all that is involved in making the examples plausible. An individual turning down a second dessert might idiomatically express himself by saying “No, thank you, I’m fine as I am,” and such a remark implicitly refers not only to the absence of any felt need for an additional dessert but also to the acceptability of the status quo. However, there are other cases where the same idiomatic remark would be made, but where there was nothing either to be gained or lost by abandoning the status quo, and I believe such cases give the clearest indication of the independent status, as a reason, of the sheer fact of actual (present) satisfactoriness.

Consider another harmless example concerning newspapers. Imagine that you are staying at a hotel and are one morning reading one of the newspapers the hotel provides gratis to its guests. Imagine further that one of the hotel’s employees, newly arrived on the job, is so nervous and so eager to please that he offers you a different copy of the same paper in exchange for the one you have. “Perhaps you’d rather have this copy of the paper instead, sir,” he says. Let us imagine that it is perfectly clear that this other copy is in no way superior to the one you have, and also that

there is no issue of your keeping both copies —every available copy is needed for the use of the guests. We have a clear example of misplaced attentiveness and recognizing this, but not wanting to hurt the feelings of the overeager employee, you simply say: “No, thank you, I’m doing just fine with the copy I have.”⁴

What will be the motivation for rejecting the offered paper? Surely not the energy it takes to switch papers —it also takes energy to turn the offer down and a quick comparison of energies expended is highly unlikely to lie behind the rejection. But neither, as in so many of our other examples, can the motivation derive from the fact that the newspaper offered in exchange is seen as much more than one really needs or cares about. We are supposing one does really want to have a paper. In the circumstances mentioned there can only be one reason for turning down the exchange, the fact that one is fine, or doing fine, *as one is*, and I believe that the motivating force of the status quo is clearly evidenced in the just-mentioned example. But if the satisfactoriness of the status quo is a motivating factor in cases where the issue of going beyond what one needs is irrelevant, I see no reason to deny it a (reinforcing) role in those cases where the issue of need or lack of need is also present. The person who turns down an afternoon snack would seem to have two sorts of motivation for doing so: the fact that he doesn’t particularly need or care about the snack in question; and the entirely satisfactory nature of his present state, of the status quo; and when someone uses an expression like “I am perfectly satisfied as I am” to turn down such a snack, he invokes both of these factors.

We have thus discovered two different sorts of reasons for moderate choice within the array of examples I have been using to defend the non-irrationality of satisficing moderation. There

⁴ Of course, if one wanted to humor the employee, one might accept the exchange. But it seems perfectly reasonable to reject the exchange and in that case the reason will be as I have said. Also, I am not denying that we sometimes go against the status quo in the name of variety. But where variety is not an issue, as with the present example, the status quo can play a role in motivating our choices.

may well be other sorts of considerations that are capable of motivating moderation, but for the moment, at least, I am unable to detect them. It is at any rate worth mentioning that the two factors we *have* pointed out bear a rather surprising, and even eerie, analogy to considerations that are thought to influence scientists in the selection and evaluation of hypotheses. Simplicity as methodological desideratum involves a preference for explanations that minimize assumed principles or posits, that do not multiply entities or assumptions beyond necessity. But this tendency in scientific theorizing clearly resembles the moderate individual's rejection of options that bring her much more than she needs or cares about.⁵ By the same token, methodological conservatism, the theoretical preference for already-familiar satisfactory theories or hypotheses, is strongly reminiscent of the preference for the satisfactory status quo that seems to animate a good deal of ordinary practical rationality.

I do not, however, want to place too great an emphasis on these parallels or to attempt to derive the validity of reasons for satisficing moderation from the acceptability of parallel reasons within the theoretical or scientific sphere. For one thing, the analogy is quite limited, and there are actually some striking disanalogies between scientific methodology and satisficing moderation. Not everyone is a satisficer, is moderate in his wants, and people differ greatly in regard to the frequency with which they act in ways deemed to be moderate; but it is not clear that there are any parallel differences among scientists in regard to the emphasis on theoretical simplicity or the conservation of principles and hypotheses. Perhaps there are; quite possibly there are not; and in any event discussion of that issue lies outside the main focus of these talks and is well beyond my competence. But the partial analogy between satisficing practical rationality and two important aspects of scientific methodology is nonetheless worth noting.

⁵ An individual who preferred moderate wealth could be said to have a preference for simplicity in his life.

Having done so, I would like now to focus on the main question to be considered in this second lecture, whether there is anything particularly praiseworthy about satisficing moderation. I think, however, that we shall be in a position to make a proper evaluation of moderation only if, we put the opposing tendency towards optimizing into proper perspective. The widespread tendency to treat optimization as the only mode of practical rationality has blinded us, I think, to some negative features of the tendency to optimize, and once we recognize the non-irrationality of satisficing, it becomes easier to see how unfortunate the tendency to optimize really is and to place a proper evaluation on the contrary tendency towards moderation.

2

It has sometimes been pointed out that the optimizing tendency may be in some measure self-defeating. A person bent on eking out the most good he can in any given situation will take pains and suffer anxieties that a more casual individual will avoid, and it is hardly clear that the pains and anxieties will (on average) be compensated for by goods garnered through optimizing alertness and energy. Moreover, it may be a psychological truth that an optimizing individual, someone who always seeks to make the best of the situations she is in, will tend to be unhappy when things are not going well, i.e., when she has to make the best of a bad situation; and the more moderate individual might, as a matter of empirical fact, be more likely to remain contented when things were not going well. But the above points turn on psychological assumptions and contingencies which, though plausible, do not reflect our deepest reasons for questioning, and even deprecating, the optimizing temperament. The habit of optimizing has intrinsic, essential features in the light of which I think we shall inevitably think less well of those who have that habit. It is no accident — though the matter has been obscured by the univocal

preference for an optimizing form of practical rationality — that optimizing cannot be regarded either as a desirable or as an admirable trait.

Consider, first, how much more planful and self-conscious the continual optimizer must be in comparison with the satisficer who does not always aim for the best and who sometimes rejects the best or better for the good enough. The satisficer need not consider and compare as many possibilities as the optimizer — indeed, quite typically, the satisficer will pursue the first option he notices; if it seems reasonably satisfactory, he will not bother even to consider other possibilities. Now the optimizer will see such a failure to consider alternatives as an irrational, perhaps even a wilful, refusal to consider one's own best interests; and from the standpoint of such interests, as they define the perspective of the optimizing individual, the satisficer does seem irrational. But we are not restricted, in considering the merits of optimization and satisficing, to the internal standpoint of the optimizer. Nothing dictates its preference or preferable status as a reference point for evaluation. We should also be interested, perhaps even be primarily interested, in how optimization can be seen and understood from a more impersonal perspective, most particularly, in how the optimizer *looks to others*.

Planfulness, self-consciousness, circumspection are all (non-contingent) enemies of spontaneity and of a plucky adventurousness that most of us think well of, even admire. Prudence and the possession of a long-range life plan, for example, have sometimes been granted the status of virtues in almost grudging, and certainly in lukewarm, terms, and the reason has typically been a countervailing sense of the spontaneity and boldness that on purely conceptual grounds must be missing from the life governed by prudence and life-planfulness.⁶ Optimizing at given different times need not, I suppose, involve any sort of spelled-out life-plan

⁶ See my *Goods and Virtues*, ch. 2 *passim* and p. 118.

nor even the playing-it-safe so characteristic of prudence in the ordinary sense. But the habit of optimizing does share the aspect of unspontaneous and constrained living that is characteristic of these other traits, and it is in all these cases a conceptual fact, not an accidental psychological generalization, that these negative features should attach to what are sometimes presumed to be virtues. We, to some extent, feel sorry for, think less well of, someone lacking in spontaneity, and the optimizing individual, who lacks spontaneity in a very high degree, can hardly seem admirable when regarded under that aspect. But that is not all.

The optimizing person is possessed of other negative features that further serve to undercut our antecedent sense that optimizing rationality is a desirable or admirable human trait. The optimizing individual —again, as a matter of conceptual necessity, not of accidental psychology —seems lacking in self-sufficiency. Now self-sufficiency as I shall be describing it is a much-ignored trait, partly, I think, because the claims of self-sufficiency were so thoroughly overemphasized and exaggerated by philosophers in the ancient world. The Stoics in particular exalted self-sufficiency, *autarkeia*, to the status of an absolute and practically exclusive standard for evaluating human good and virtue, and we have every reason to shy away from their excesses. For the Stoic, the wise man or sage would be absolutely self-sufficient in his well-being, depending neither on loved ones nor on the fortunes of this world for his ultimate happiness. Nothing subject to loss or risk can feature in such a conception of happiness. But the Stoic ideal is not ours, and we have grown wary, and more than wary, of attempts to seal off human excellence or well-being from the risks and taints of the world, and of our less-than-ideal human nature.⁷ We are very much in danger, as a result, of throwing out the baby with the bathwater and failing to recognize elements in the Stoic ideal that touch us very deeply and cannot be characterized as

⁷ On this topic, see *Goods and Virtues*, ch. 6

some sort of neurotic attempt to make human life absolutely safe. The ideal of self-sufficiency need not be carried to Stoic extremes, and indeed the notion has great currency in ordinary thinking about the world. We value, we admire self-sufficiency in the ordinary sense of the term, and a soberer ideal of such self-sufficiency can in fact be used as a touchstone for the criticism of optimization. Consider, again, how the optimizer appears to others. Will not his tendency to eke out the most or best he can in every situation strike someone who witnesses or hears about it as lacking in self-sufficiency? Will not the optimizer appear needy and grasping and his persistent efforts a form, practically, of desperation, by contrast with the satisficer who accepts the good enough when he gets it. Modesty in one's desires and/or needs is, and is as a matter of conceptual fact, an expression of self-sufficiency as ordinarily understood. A person eager for and intent upon the best (for himself) automatically appears (other things equal) less self-sufficient than a satisficer satisfied with less than the best, and so I am saying, among other things, that there is an inherent connection between aiming for what one takes to be sufficient, rather than for what is best, and a kind of personal self-sufficiency that most of us think well of.⁸ To the extent the optimizer thus seems needy and somewhat desperate, as well as cramped and unspontaneous, we shall feel sorry for him and find it difficult, if not impossible, to think well of him. If anything, the habit of optimization will have to be taken as an anti-virtue, an unfortunate and lamentable human character trait. And the habit of moderation would then naturally take its place as a desirable trait, a (non-moral) virtue — a minor virtue perhaps, not the most admirable trait known to man, but a trait, nonetheless, in whose absence a human being becomes somewhat unfortunate and pitiable.

⁸ In emphasizing appearances here and elsewhere, I am not raising epistemological doubts, but rather conveying the assumption that personal traits need to be evaluated at least in part from a social perspective (and from a perspective at least partly external to that imposed by the traits themselves).

It is worth going back and considering how we have managed to arrive at this conclusion — I am sure those initially in favor of optimizing will suspect some sleight of hand or fallacy in the argument. We have arrived at the above (re)evaluation of the merits of optimization and satisficing moderation by deliberately refusing to judge the issue from the standpoint of the optimizing rational (and I have not questioned his rationality) individual. From such a standpoint optimizing choice must invariably seem not only rational, but ideal, and the “strategy” (as the optimizer might put it) of the satisficer irrational, pathetic, absurd. After all, from the optimizer’s standpoint (and barring all moral issues for the limited purposes of this discussion) the whole point of action is to serve one’s own interests and well-being, and for the optimizer it must seem self-evident that such an aim involves serving those interests, that well-being, to the greatest extent possible. It is only when one gets outside the optimizer’s way of seeing things and tries to empathize with the satisficing temperament — seeing things from the satisficer’s standpoint — that one may begin to recognize that optimizing is not an inevitable or inescapable rational tendency. Once satisficing is understood sympathetically, we have the wherewithal to take a disinterested or objective look at the underlying personality structure or character of both the optimizing and the satisficing individual. And, as we have seen, a comparison of these two ideal types enables us to recognize some desirable features the satisficer possesses but the optimizer lacks.

The insistence on going outside a given point of view in evaluating those who have that point of view is hardly a new thing in philosophy. We all know that we cannot hope in most cases to justify an attribution of insanity by appeal to, or while remaining within the perspective of, the insane individual, yet most of us believe some people are and can be known to be insane — the man, for example, who thinks he is Catherine the Great. However, we have not always gone beyond the recognition of such

extreme cases, beyond the idea that the evaluation of certain traits must transcend the perspective of those who have the traits, to apply this notion in other cases where it cries out for application.

Consider, for example, the long history of the “subjective turn” in post-Cartesian epistemology. Sceptical doubt has a much-honored place in such epistemology, and from the standpoint of someone who wishes to answer but finds it difficult to answer such doubts, it may naturally seem as if all further philosophizing, all other areas of philosophy, must be held in abeyance until skeptical doubt has been answered. Moreover, since epistemological doubt calls into question the whole external world and all our ordinary assumptions about that world, it may seem reasonable, to someone in the grip of such doubt, to suspend or consider questionable those daily activities which play down or ignore (the validity of) such doubts. An ordinary person will not usually display doubts about whether his home will still be there when he returns from work, for example, but from the perspective of unanswered epistemological doubt, such doubts are in some sense more reasonable, deeper, and more admirable, than the ordinary unquestioning confidence that one’s house is still there, or that some other fact relevant to practical thinking and action is as we normally would assume it to be. The epistemological perspective from which the difficulty of answering skepticism is of paramount importance thus defines a point of view from which a certain sort of hesitancy in practical affairs is some sort of (intellectual or rational) virtue, but when we leave epistemological skepticism behind, such hesitancy or doubt in practical affairs appears, as it would ordinarily appear to most of us, as an undesirable trait, a failure of efficiency or adaptation, a neurotic lack of self-confidence, or whatever.⁹

Recently, of course, epistemology has been increasingly naturalized. And one crucial aspect of the naturalization has been the tendency to stop seeing epistemological problems and con-

⁹ Cf. the title essay in John Wisdom’s *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957).

cepts from the traditional internal, or subjective, perspective of someone trying to overcome skepticism and (so to speak) reestablish contact with the world, and rather to view them as arising or not arising for an individual inextricably and essentially tied to his environment—an individual who registers an environment through sensation and perception and who affects that environment through deliberation, choice, and volition. The naturalized epistemologist is thus encouraged to evaluate traits of thinking and acting in terms of their likelihood of enabling successful representation of or action upon an individual's (or a group's) environment, and judged from this new standpoint, it should be clear why epistemological doubt, however valid and admirable from the standpoint of traditional epistemological concerns, should appear less desirable and more questionable than it does from that other perspective. Again, once we assume an environment with people interacting in it, the tendency to doubt such an environment and the people in it may easily begin to appear undesirable and, even, absurd. And the reevaluation of epistemological doubting and of the philosopher's sense, deep down, that there is something quite admirable about the person who hesitates or doubts about whether his house is still there requires us to leave the internal perspective of skepticism and view matters more externally or environmentally, in much the same way that a more objective approach calls the value of optimization into question.¹⁰

Something similar to what happens in the case of optimizing also occurs within moral philosophy. Conscientiousness in the

¹⁰ For examples of the naturalizing approach, see D. M. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth, and Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973); W. V. Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," reprinted in R. M. Chisholm and R. Swartz, eds., *Empirical Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 59–74; and E. Sosa, "The Raft and the Pyramid," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy V* (1980, *Studies in Epistemology*), esp. p. 23, where Sosa states: "In epistemology, there is reason to think that the most useful and illuminating notion of intellectual virtue will prove broader than our tradition would suggest and must give due weight not only to the subject and his intrinsic nature but also to his environment and to his epistemic community."

ordinary sense —meticulous attention to whether one is doing the right thing and to questions about what would be the right thing to do —is a trait that has sometimes been singled out for praise by ethical theorists.¹¹ And from the standpoint of someone who is highly conscientious, it can seem that since one wants to do the right thing, the more time spent carefully considering what is right the better. Any diminution of attention to the rightness or wrongness of one's actions will then seem morally slapdash or sluggish, proof of a deplorable lack of seriousness about morality. However, when we consider how meticulous conscientiousness looks in comparison with a less pervasive attention to the rightness and wrongness of one's actions, its justification and admirability can easily come into question. Conscientiousness can seem anxiety-ridden and compulsive in comparison with a less pervasive (more satisficing) concern with how morally well one is acting, and such a comparison essentially depends on leaving conscientiousness's own perspective and attempting to find a more objective or environmental perspective on that phenomenon. But having discussed at some length the general usefulness of getting outside the perspective generated by a certain trait when that trait is itself the subject of evaluation, let me return to the issue of optimizing vs. satisficing and clarify our previous conclusions in that area by means of a comparison, yet again, with similar conclusions that can be reached about morality and concern for others.

3

Our previous discussion has tended toward the conclusion that we should think less well of the (purely) optimizing temperament than of the disposition towards satisficing moderation. (Of course, I am not assuming that the moderate individual will never seek the best —I am speaking of moderation as a tendency, as a

¹¹ See James Wallace, *Virtues and Vices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 91.

major element in personality, and contrasting this disposition with the disposition to optimize whenever there is an issue for rational deliberation and choice.) However, in comparing satisficing and optimizing to the detriment of the latter, I have said nothing against the rationality of optimizing. I have treated both satisficing and optimizing as forms of practical rationality. We shall perhaps be less surprised by this set of conclusions if we consider the rather parallel set of conclusions that can be reached on the subject of altruism, the concern for others. Those who would defend altruism often seek to show that egoism, exclusive devotion to one's well-being, is self-stultifying and that one is likely to be better off, happier, if one devotes oneself to others. But such arguments are not always convincing and, in any case, usually depend on empirical assumptions that may be denied or fail to hold for a given individual. But independently of the possible benefits, to an agent, of an altruistic attitude and altruistic deeds, we non-egoists (and even perhaps many egoists) find something attractive and admirable in an attitude of concern for others, and pure egoism, by contrast, seems repellent and inhumane. Most of us tend to think less well of someone who is incapable of concern for others, and this opinion in no way depends, I think, on a belief that an egoist's egoism prevents him from doing as well as he can for himself. There is something inherently unattractive, even pathetic, about total egoistic self-concern, but in reacting thus to the image of the egoistic individual, I do not think we are necessarily imagining that there is anything irrational about the egoist. We may deplore the limitation of his practical concerns, but that failure does not typically strike us as a failure of practical rationality — we have other words, and we have just used some of them, for describing what we object to in such an individual — and of course in the actual pursuit of his limited objectives, there need be no failure of practical rationality on the part of the egoist.¹² On the other hand, it is difficult to show that there is

¹² It is traditionally assumed that the egoist must be an optimizer, but our discussion should make clear the possibility of a satisficing form of egoism. On this

anything irrational about altruism either. Altruism seemingly requires a willingness to sacrifice one's own well-being for that of others, but unless the moral point of view is itself a form of irrationality, an illusion, it is difficult to see why self-sacrifice should not be a rational option for an individual with genuine concern for others.¹³ So the area of morality yields, in connection with the opposition between altruism and egoism,¹⁴ a situation rather similar to what we have uncovered in the opposition between individualistic satisficing and individualistic optimizing. Although neither individualistic satisficing nor individualistic optimizing can be faulted on grounds of rationality, we have a better opinion of the satisficing tendency; and by the same token, although we have no reason to hold that either egoism or altruism is a form of practical irrationality, we do have reason for thinking more highly of the altruistic tendency —and in fact our higher regard for altruism is at least partly based on considerations paralleling those that actuate our better opinion of satisficing moderation.

There is something cramped and constrained not only, as we have seen, about the tendency to optimize, but also about an exclusive concern with one's own interests and well-being. And like the optimizing individual, the egoist will appear lacking in self-sufficiency —as Nietzsche reminds us, benevolence towards others is a characteristic expression of a sense of satisfaction with oneself or with what one has; the ungenerous individual conveys an unavoidable appearance (relative, at least, to any recognizably hu-

see my *Common-Sense Morality and Consequentialism*, ch. 3, sec. 4. Incidentally, I have tried to simplify the discussion by focusing on egoistic reasons to promote one's own well-being and on altruistic or moral reasons for action, to the exclusion of certain desires for achievement, e.g., the desire to solve certain problems in mathematics. But even our desires/reasons for achievement can be realized in a satisficing manner. On the relation between desires for achievement and egoism, see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), Part Two.

¹³ See Sen, "Rational Fools . . ." esp. pp. 241ff.; and Parfit, *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ But also in connection with the opposition between egoism and moral ideas/imperatives not particularly tied to altruism.

man psychology) of dissatisfaction and insufficiency. So at least some of the reasons for our low opinion of egoistic individuals — the reasons deriving less from our moral and altruistic feelings and more from our sense of what is properly and self-respectingly human — mirror our earlier criticisms of the optimizing temperament, and I believe the interplay and analogy between what philosophers find it natural to say about the opposition between egoism and altruism and what I have here suggested about the opposition between moderation and optimization may help to clarify and support the picture I have been offering.

Both altruism and moderation are traits requiring cultivation within the individual. In some sense they do not come naturally, and parents, teachers, and others have a difficult task on their hands when they attempt to overcome or mitigate children's insatiable selfishness and greed. The typical simplified picture of how a child develops intrinsic concern for others involves the assumption that children need to go through an intermediate stage where they see a concern for others as furthering their own interests; and a similarly simplified picture of the attenuation of childhood demandingness and greediness might well depict the child as having to go through a stage where moderation was seen (in the Epicurean manner) merely as a means to greater overall satisfaction (the cake will spoil your dinner or give you a tummy ache). But just as the development of some degree of intrinsic concern for others is typically regarded as a form of moral progress, I believe that the development of some degree of non-instrumental moderation is also a good thing, a kind of human progress.

This is not, of course, to deny that moderation for its own sake can be overdone or that instrumental moderation is useful and sometimes admirable. Asceticism, certain forms of puritanism, and the Stoic indifference to the goods of this world all seem examples of moderation gone haywire; and what I have been recommending, or at least commending, is something soberer that

sticks closer to the facts of human psychology. The Stoics elevated self-sufficiency to the be-all and end-all of virtue and assumed a capacity within our nature to remain genuinely unconcerned with all those this-worldly things which might compromise the highest degree of self-sufficiency; but a life free of need and risk seems in fact to be impossible for us; and total self-sufficiency, the Stoic *autarkeia*, appears to be an illusory ideal for us to strive after: the purported Stoic sage who claims indifference to all people and things is nowadays naturally suspect, if not worse, in our eyes.¹⁵

On the other hand, the merely instrumental moderation recommended by the Epicureans, although it may constitute some sort of practical virtue, contains none of those elements of self-sufficiency that make *autarkeia* initially so appealing. By contrast, the non-instrumental satisficing moderation I have been describing does embody an ideal, part of the Stoic ideal, of self-sufficiency, and if, as I believe, such moderation is a typical product of normal individual psychological development, then we may have succeeded here in characterizing a soberer ideal of self-sufficiency than anything to be found in Stoicism.¹⁶ Moreover, just as it is possible to overdo moderation, altruism too can be overdone and distorted. There is perhaps nothing immoral about total selflessness, about giving one's own well-being no weight at all in deciding what to do, but it is difficult, e.g., to admire a Père Goriot who compul-

¹⁵ Cf. *Goods and Virtues*, ch. 6.

¹⁶ According to Aristotle and many, many others, a (morally) virtuous individual may feel pleasure or satisfaction at having done what virtue requires, even if she was not aiming at such pleasure in acting virtuously. Aristotle sometimes implies that the satisfaction of acting virtuously will always exceed the satisfactions one has to forgo in the name of virtue (see, e.g., the *Nirhomnrhenn Ethics*, 1169a 2-25). But there is absolutely no reason to make this assumption or the more general assumption that the virtuous individual is never required to sacrifice her own well-being or self-interest. (On this see my *Goods and Virtues*, ch. 5.) Similar points apply to satisficing moderation. If what has been said in the text above is on the right track, then a moderate individual may derive a pleased sense of self-sufficiency from satisficing; but in satisficing he is not aiming at this satisfaction, nor is there any reason to assume that the satisfaction involved is always greater than those forgone through satisficing. Satisficing need be no more illusory than self-sacrifice.

sively sacrifices everything to the advancement of his daughters. And so we have yet another interesting parallel between altruism and satisficing moderation.

To complete our discussion of the virtue of moderation, we must say something, finally, about how satisficing moderation as described here relates to the Aristotelian virtue of moderation or temperance. Aristotle actually uses two terms that can be translated as “moderate.” One of them, *sōphrōn*, designates one of Aristotle’s main moral virtues and represents a habit of “medial” choice and desire with respect to bodily pleasures. The temperate or moderate individual, in this sense, desires and chooses the right or reasonable amount of food or sex in the various changing circumstances of his life, where this right amount lies in a mean between extremes. This concept of moderation is part of Aristotle’s general *theory* of the virtues, but in canvassing received opinion and common-sense ethical views, Aristotle sometimes uses another term, *metrios*, which also can be translated as “moderate.” In his discussion of justice, for example, he points out that those who take less than they deserve and give others more than they strictly deserve are sometimes praised for their moderation or modesty (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1136b 15–24). Here, and in a few other places in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses the term *metrios*; the more frequent term for moderation (or temperance) is *sōphrōn*, and the latter conveys Aristotle’s theoretical view about the virtues. *Metrios*, by contrast, is used to express an ordinary Greek idea of moderation, and as such I believe it comes very close to the concept of moderation delineated in these lectures.

It is easy enough to confuse, or be confused about the relation between, these two notions, not only because in English one and the same term can be used to convey either of them, but also because there is at least some common conceptual basis for the identical translation. Both notions strongly convey the idea of a mean between extremes. But the notions diverge in other respects, and by pointing out how, we shall be in a position to see that the

account of moderation offered here is not just some variant upon or inchoate version of Aristotle's theory of moderation. The two are essentially alternative and possibly incommensurate pictures of what is admirable, or virtuous, in human character.

If we restrict our attention to the pursuit of bodily pleasures — an area to which Aristotle explicitly limits the term *sōphrōn* and to which the present account of moderation is in the first instance most naturally applied, then two related salient differences arise with respect to these two conceptions of moderation. For Aristotle, moderation entails the taking of the *right* amount, let us say, of food (for the moderate individual to take in various different circumstances); and the perception or recognition of what is the right amount on a given occasion involves, for such an individual, a display of practical wisdom. So the right amount is the one and only amount it is *rational* for the individual to take.

To that extent, Aristotle's view of moderation as a virtue differs essentially from the account offered here. The present view involves no concept of the right amount of food or whatever for an individual to desire or take, and if we look into the phenomenology of the ordinary moderation I have discussed it is easy to see why. The individual who refuses a second cup of tea or a snack (or an extra pot of gold) may support what she is doing by saying she is fine as she is, but we would not expect such an individual to have the further thought that there is a right amount of tea, snacks, or money (for her) and that taking anything more (or less) would push her beyond (leave her short of) that right amount. Ordinary moderate satisficing is typically less rationalistic (or moralistic) than that, and that fact leads us to the second feature of difference between the Aristotelian view and that offered here. Just as our ordinary sense that moral individuals are more admirable than egoists need not lead us to say that the former are inherently more or less rational than the latter, so too our ordinary sense of the greater admirability, or virtue, of the moderate individual, as contrasted with the optimizer, involves no assump-

tion that either sort of individual is essentially more rational. Even if the exercise of moderation in our sense involves choosing somewhere between extremes, some level that counts as good enough short of the best possible, it should not be concluded that our sense of what is good enough involves the perception of what level of good is uniquely dictated by reason. It may involve a sense of what is good enough that cannot be codified by principles and that may thus require something naturally called perception, and, like Aristotle's notion, it may involve essential variability from individual to individual and from situation to situation; but it will be different from the perception Aristotle requires for temperance in being focused specifically on what is good enough and fine rather than on what it is right or rational for an individual to choose. Thus for Aristotle what is admirable about moderation is that it is a unique exercise and expression of rationality, but the present view bases its high regard for moderation on its characteristic lack of constraint and its characteristic self-sufficiency, although it has been essential to the view presented that there at least be nothing irrational in what we ordinarily call moderation.

We began these lectures by considering whether philosophers, economists, game-theorists, and others may not traditionally have had too narrow a conception of rational choice and action. I attempted to argue that satisficing (both in forms familiar to economists and in forms that go well beyond what the economists have been willing to allow) is in fact a prevalent, even a pervasive, phenomenon of human life; but I attempted to argue that such satisficing should not be considered a form of human irrationality, but rather an exception, a widespread exception, to the received view that practical rationality involves some sort of optimization. Certainly there are many egregious, and frightening, examples of pervasive human irrationality to be cited, but it seems to me, and I have argued, that in the present instance the accusation of irrationality does not fit; what must be adjusted, rather, is our antecedent theoretical notions about what rationality is.

In some sense, the optimizing model of rationality is already somewhat attenuated by the admission that moral and, in particular, altruistic considerations can limit someone's rational pursuit of his own well-being. For the implication is that egoism —the pursuit of one's own well-being —may be rationally limited from without, i.e., by considerations extrinsic to egoism. What has not been realized —though it might have been expected to present itself at least as a purely formal possibility —is that the pursuit of one's well-being may also be rationally limited from within. Egoism, individualistic extra-moral rationality, may be inherently *self-limiting*, and our entire discussion of satisficing moderation as rational and as a virtue has been intended to show that this formal possibility can be fleshed out to enrich and correct distortions in our moral-psychological understanding of human beings.