

## **On Rational Amoralists**

### *Abstract*

An influential tradition in moral philosophy attempts to explain an immoral action by reference to the defect in reasoning on the part of the immoral agent. On this view, the requirements of morality are not only sanctioned by the more general requirements of rationality, but the violations of the moral requirements would be indicative of rational failure. In this article I argue that ascription of irrationality to amoral individuals (e.g., clinical psychopaths) is either empirically false, or else, conceptually problematic. An interpretation of irrationality in its instrumental sense fails to do justice to the often higher-than-average intelligence of some amoralists, whereas the suggestion that the alleged cognitive deficiency lies at the level of final ends and ultimate values faces serious difficulties. All attempts to construe the notion of an external reason for action without reference to the agent's actual goals and values bespeak an objectivist's bias, rest on controversial assumptions, and tend to alienate the agent from the proposed set of reasons. The argument is partly based on the analysis of reasoning of Ted Bundy, a notorious serial murderer, who presents a rather sophisticated justification for his criminal behavior.

# On Rational Amoralists

## 1. Introduction

All good ethical rationalists wish to say that there is something wrong, *rationaly speaking*, with immoral behavior and an immoral agent. Immorality, on their view, implies a defect in thinking, and the task of the moral theorist is to identify this cognitive shortcoming. It will be convenient to refer to this general approach as the Cognitive Failure Theory.

‘Being immoral’, just as ‘being moral’, is a state that admits of degrees.<sup>1</sup> But as certain personality features are most discernable in extreme conditions, it will be helpful to look at the periphery of the moral continuum, namely, at an individual who exhibits the highest degree of disregard for moral considerations. To give such an individual a convenient label, and following the established tradition, I shall call him<sup>2</sup> an *amoralist*, and his general position (or, perhaps, his condition) with regard to morality will be referred to as *amoralism*.<sup>3</sup>

Leaving aside the literary characters and the constructs of the philosophers,<sup>4</sup> one might mention hardened criminals, sociopaths, psychopaths and persons diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder<sup>5</sup> as exemplifying the type. On a more theoretical note, we may define an amoralist as a competent adult agent for whom moral reasons play no motivating or restraining role. His actual thus behavior demonstrates (even if he verbally disagrees) that he does not in any real sense recognize the validity of moral principles, or their applicability to his own person. Furthermore, an amoralist lacks morality not in a sense that his morality is different from the morality of a society he lives in, but in a sense that whatever action-guiding principles he might adopt, they do not constitute a system of *moral* principles.<sup>6</sup>

If our rationalist is correct in his estimation, and each moral failure is a result of a rational failure at a certain level, we may be confident that rational deficiency (in some

appropriate sense of this phrase) will manifest itself most clearly in cases of extreme amoralists. Needless to say, the words in parenthesis from the previous sentence will be at the center of the whole discussion. In what follows, I shall explore several interpretative options, which could possibly make the charge of irrationality of amoralists meaningful, and argue that none of them is uniquely applicable to amoral agents.

## 2. Varieties of Rationality

‘Rationality’ is one of the many notoriously ambiguous philosophical terms that has several varied and even mutually exclusive interpretations. To begin with, we may observe that rationality (as well as irrationality) is commonly attributed, both to actions and to a process or result of purely theoretical reasoning about facts. The rationality of actions, however, seems to depend upon the practical deliberation that leads to actions.<sup>7</sup> The traditional distinction between practical and theoretical reasoning emphasizes the difference in goals. Whereas theoretical reasoning aims at understanding, its practical counterpart seeks to choose between any number of alternative actions, i.e., its goal is connected with the decision and behavior. Success of theoretical reasoning is often described in terms of presenting strong reasons for believing a certain proposition, while practical reasoning, if successful, should provide good reasons for acting in a certain way. Given the difference in goals, the criteria of evaluation for the two kinds of reasoning will also differ. Our main focus, however, will be on the criteria for practical reasoning and its corresponding behavior.

On the surface, the most obvious sense in which one may act in contrast to reason, thus exhibiting a level of irrationality, is when one’s voluntary actions are detrimental to one’s own chosen goal. Take the case of a person who wants to regain his health and knows that a pill X will cure his ailment (and has no ideological or religious scruples against modern medicine), but nonetheless refuses to take the pill. His behavior may rightfully be described

as irrational, and we may further analyze what caused his motivation to fail in this case (e.g., weakness of will). Let us refer to this kind of irrational behavior as *self-defeating irrationality*.

The ascription of irrationality becomes less straightforward once we complicate our example. Consider a person who wants to be cured, and who has the efficacious pill X in his possession, but is *not aware* of the pill's powers. As a result, he refuses to take the pill. Apparently, from the third-person perspective, his refusal to take the pill was detrimental to his own goal. But did he act irrationally in this case? We would normally say that the cause of his imprudent behavior was *ignorance* rather than irrationality, since this last term tends to have much stronger negative overtones. Ignorance, nonetheless, is a kind of cognitive deficiency; an ignorant person falls short from a certain level of intellectual excellence. We may agree that not all cases of ignorance are blameworthy, but, as a popular idea of a perfectly rational being suggests, all cases of ignorance manifest a degree of intellectual inadequacy. Let us label it then *irrationality due to ignorance*.

In both examples rationality of action (or inaction) was evaluated against the preset end (namely, health). In both cases, the end was perceived as something *good* for the agent. An irrational person, in this sense, is a person who fails to take the most adequate means for achieving his end. Irrationality is most noticeable when a person *knows* which steps must be taken, is capable of taking these steps, but fails to act accordingly. In the second example, the relevant knowledge is absent, but one's ignorance can still be construed as a failure of rationality in a weaker sense.

Finally, we can imagine a person who consciously sets a goal that is detrimental to his own good (however this good is specified). For argument's sake, we may assume that it is conceivable that a person desires, for instance, to ruin his health for the sake of ruining his

health and for no further reason.<sup>8</sup> He may also agree that being healthy is in all senses *better* than being sick, and yet stick to his goal. Furthermore, he also knows that taking some other pill *Y* is the most direct route to his self-destructive goal. And so he takes the pill. Is there anything irrational about this person's behavior?

Apparently, there is no failure of rationality in the first two senses mentioned above. A person's action of taking the pill *Y* is perfectly rational insofar as it promotes his goal – he knows of the effects of the pill, and he does not falter in taking it. If anything, it is rationality of the final goal itself that might be questioned. But against what standard shall we determine the rational status of one's goals? What could serve as the non-arbitrary criterion of rationality for final goals?

Answering these questions is crucial for further discussion of the amoralists' alleged failure of rationality. Arguing that one's goals are subject to rational evaluation from some objective standpoint amounts to saying that there is one point of view of reason *sans phrase*, and that this unique standpoint, once fully specified, is the ultimate reference for all normative claims about the ends of action. If, on the other hand, the universal test of rationality cannot be applied to the chosen end, but only to the means to this end, then we can properly speak only of what is rational to do from a particular point of view, i.e., the point of view of a certain system of values. But the original act of *adoption* (or *non-adoption*) of this value system itself would remain beyond rational assessment.

I shall explore in greater details the interpretative options illustrated by the three examples above. First, one might wonder whether an amoralist's behavior fits the pattern of self-defeating irrationality, i.e., whether his voluntary actions are knowingly detrimental to his own *goal*. It will be argued that such behavior is better described as weakness of will, and cannot be taken as distinctive of the extreme cases under consideration. Secondly, we will

examine whether an amoralist typically frustrates his long term goals by choosing the wrong means, i.e., whether he exhibits irrationality due to ignorance. It will be argued that cases of ignorance of the proper means to one's goal are no more common among the amoralists than among ordinary agents. Finally, we will explore the possibility of the amoralist consciously setting a goal that is detrimental to his own *real* good. An argument will be made showing that an attempt to impose an objectivist standard of the final human good, without reference to the particular agents' actual desires and preferences, is either overly patronizing or straightforwardly incoherent.

### 3. Self-defeating Irrationality

One way to apply the Cognitive Failure Theory to amoralists is to suggest that every time these individuals commit an immoral act, they knowingly frustrate their own long-term goals. Suppose that I want to be a respectable member of the community; I am quite aware that an illicit liaison with my neighbor's wife will inevitably damage my reputation; yet, I get involved with the woman anyways. There is little doubt that my behavior in this situation can be properly described not only as immoral but also irrational, and the source of irrationality is the apparent contradiction between the requirements of my final goal and the predictable effects of my current actions.

'But why would anyone *knowingly* frustrate one's own goals?' – a perfectly rational creature, coming from a distant planet, might wonder. Indeed, why? We might not be able to explain it to his full satisfaction, but here, on Earth, these things happen, and they happen often enough to deserve a separate label – 'weakness of will'. On the classical interpretation, in cases of weakness of will or incontinence, a person acts against his better judgment due to the overwhelming passion, desire, craving, or the like, that somehow clouds the recognition of a particular situation as falling under a general practical rule, or simply outweighs the

motivational efficacy of a conclusion of a practical syllogism. It is assumed that the required action would ensue in the absence of such non-cognitive interference.<sup>9</sup>

A weak-willed person is irrational in a straightforward sense.<sup>10</sup> His reason, weakened by emotive factors, fails him at the moment of decision, and he chooses to act against what he himself believes best in the situation. The distinguishing marks of a weak-willed decision is the presence of guilt or remorse after the act, *and* the fact that such cognitive and motivational lapses are relatively rare. Moreover, weakness of will, unlike, say, out-of-body experience, is not something that happens only to a select few – all of us are quite familiar with the situation. This, of course, simply underscores the fact that we all fall short from the ideal of a perfectly rational agent. But, as long as becoming such an agent is not on the list of one's ultimate goals, weakness of will, as an occasional cognitive failure, is not itself an irrational occurrence in one's life.

It seems reasonably clear that self-defeating irrationality is not applicable to amoralists; or, more precisely, it is applicable to them in no greater degree than to the rest of us. It is true that, *ex hypothesi*, an amoralist never sets welfare of others, general happiness or any other specifically moral goal, as his own final end. But whatever ends he sets for himself, there are no reasons to believe that he, on average, is less consistent or less determined in achieving these ends than an ordinary law-abiding citizen, even allowing for occasional strayings due to competing interests, strong desires, unresolved inner conflicts or inattentiveness. We might then look elsewhere for the source of the amoralist's alleged irrationality.

#### 4. Irrationality Due to Ignorance

Earlier we mentioned a case of a person who sets out to achieve his goal, but chooses the wrong means due to ignorance. Once again, there is nothing unusual about the situation,

and all of us could testify to similar failures in our practical reasoning. The question is, though, whether a consistent ‘rule-breaker’, an amoralist, can be realistically construed as a person suffering from chronic ignorance of the efficient means to realize his deepest desires. To put it simply, the question is whether an amoralist is that much dumber than the rest of us.

Bertrand Russell once defined rationality as “a scientific habit of mind in forecasting the effects of our actions” (2004, p. 45). This is precisely the sense of rationality with which we are operating in this section. ‘Forecasting the effects of one’s actions’ demands from an agent a degree of general intelligence, as well as competence in basic theoretical reasoning skills. ‘Intelligence’ connotes a number of different abilities, such as the ability to reason logically, solve problems, think abstractly, adapt to novel situations quickly, grasp complex relationships, and profit from past experience in predicting the future. It is a common place that some people are much more successful at this kind of reasoning than others. But the issue is whether there is any evidence that shows, say, psychopaths, hardened criminals and other amoralists as being *in general* less competent at these cognitive tasks than the average person.

There is credible empirical evidence that individuals suffering<sup>11</sup> from the antisocial personality disorder do not stand out when it comes to their average level of intelligence. A common stereotype of a ‘bright sociopath’ is indeed widely exploited in popular fiction and film,<sup>12</sup> but, as Blair *et al.* suggest, the belief in the superior intellect of these individuals is more likely to be one of the “urban myths”, born out of observation of psychopaths’ confidence, manipulative behavior and superficial charm (2005, p. 23). The recent findings suggest a more balanced picture. On the one hand, the psychopathic personalities score low on the “crystallized intelligence” tests (Hare, 2003), which is a measure of accumulated knowledge. This suggests a correlation between amoral behavior and lower level of education. On the other hand, the studies in moral reasoning of various subjects using the

Kohlberg-type moral dilemmas (e.g., the ‘Heinz dilemma’), indicate that “there is no difference in level of moral reasoning between psychopathic and non-psychopathic offenders” (Blair, Mitchell, & Blair, 2005, p. 57). In general, the empirical results suggest that a typical psychopath, while unencumbered by moral imperatives, retain an otherwise “intact intellect” (Kiehl, 2008, p. 120).<sup>13</sup> The following example should suffice to illustrate this point.

A dramatic case, undermining the claim about the essential connection between morality and general intelligence, is described by Daniel Tranel in his discussion of a condition known as “acquired sociopathy” (Tranel, 1994).<sup>14</sup> This condition develops after lesions to the frontal lobe of the brain in individuals whose personalities were entirely normal prior to the operation. Patient, known in literature by his initials EVR, was a successful hard-working professional, happily married and the father of two well-adjusted children. He led an impeccable social life, was considered a leader in his community and a role model for his younger siblings. At age 35 EVR underwent an operation to remove a brain tumor, which involved bilateral excision of orbital frontal cortices. Even though the operation was a success, and the threat of brain cancer was eliminated, the effect the operation had on EVR’s personality stunned everyone who knew him. Entering several disastrous business ventures, divorcing his first wife, remarrying and divorcing again soon after, being unable to plan his future activities or to hold any job due to continuous irresponsibility on his side, and ultimately ending up in a sheltered environment – such biographical entries are indicative of a typical path of a clinical sociopath. Tranel further observes that EVR’s moral sense has been affected as well and in a peculiar way:

His ability to decide which persons are good and which are bad, which was previously superb, is now virtually absent. Similarly, he lacks a sense of what is socially appropriate, although it is obvious from his premorbid life and achievement that he once had a keen sense of social appropriateness (1994, p.

287).

The symptoms described allowed the psychiatrists to diagnose him with the antisocial personality disorder that was acquired as a result of a surgical brain damage. What seems most significant in this context is the fact that the brain lesion that resulted in such radical personality changes left the patient's intellectual abilities apparently intact:

The change is made the more dramatic by the fact that his basic intellectual and cognitive skills were unaltered by the operation. He continues to perform in the superior range on conventional tests of intellect [...], it is abundantly clear that he can distinguish with great subtlety among highly ambiguous concepts, use deduction and induction fluently [...]. His speech and language processing are fully preserved, and conventional learning and memory capacities are also intact (1994, p. 287).

How can we possibly account for cases like this? After all, EVR seems to retain not only his general intelligence, but, more specifically, there is no reason to think he had suddenly lost his mastery of the psychological concepts or lost the capacity to represent the mental states of other people (role-taking capacity). Yet, both the quality of his moral judgment ("deciding which persons are good and which are bad"), his ability to cope effectively with social situations, and his external behavior have deteriorated dramatically.<sup>15</sup>

It might be objected that EVR's failure to make acceptable moral judgments is precisely the cognitive failure we are trying to detect. This goes in line with the well-documented difficulty, exhibited by adult psychopathic individuals, when making distinctions between moral and merely conventional transgressions (Turiel, 1983). While this is not the place for a detailed analysis of these findings, I find the argument of a number of researchers, which explains these apparent cognitive shortcomings by reference to the underlying emotional deficit due to impairments in the paralymbic system of the brain, quite convincing (Blair, Mitchell, & Blair, 2005), (Kiehl, 2008). If that is the case, then the resultant cognitive

impairment, as manifested in *some* aspects of moral reasoning, cannot be among the fundamental causes of amoral behavior.

Evidently, then, the condition of amoralists is unlikely to be linked to the essential failure of instrumental reasoning due to poor general intelligence, which, to be sure, does not imply that all psychopaths are brilliant. Given the evidence, we can dismiss the view that impaired reasoning ability is in all cases directly responsible for one's failure to assume the moral point of view, or one's inability to take moral reasons seriously enough, that is, as long as we are talking about generally competent adults, not suffering from any serious psychological disorder.<sup>16</sup> This, however, does not preclude the possibility that amoralists are *irrational* in some other, non-instrumental sense of rationality. The following sections will explore this option.

#### 5. A Case Study: Ted Bundy

Lest one feels that we are dealing with purely hypothetical cases of amoralism, it would be opportune to cite at this juncture at least one real-life case of the extreme disregard for morality.

The reasoning of Ted Bundy, one of the most notorious serial murderers in American history, may perhaps help us to discern traces of cognitive failure in a personality of this type. Bundy was an well-educated (B.A. in Psychology) and charming young sociopath who killed (by bludgeoning or strangulation) and raped at least 30 women and girls, the youngest victim being just 12 years old.<sup>17</sup> In a tape-recorded conversation between Ted Bundy and one of his female victims, Bundy presents a rather sophisticated justification of his criminal behavior, which deserves quoting in full:

Then I learned that all moral judgments are 'value judgments,' that all value judgments are subjective, and that none can be proved to be either 'right' or 'wrong.' [...] Believe

it or not but I figured out for myself that if the rationality of one value judgment was zero, multiplying it by millions would not make it one whit more rational. Nor is there any ‘reason’ to obey the law for anyone, like myself, who has the boldness and daring – the strength of character – to throw off its shackles. [...] I discovered that to become truly free, truly unfettered, I had to become truly uninhibited. And I quickly discovered that the greatest obstacle to my freedom, the greatest block and limitation to it, consists in the insupportable ‘value judgment’ that I was bound to respect the rights of others. I asked myself, who were these ‘others’? Why is it more wrong to kill a human animal than any other animal, a pig or a sheep or a steer? Is your life more to you than a hog’s life to a hog? Why should I be willing to sacrifice my pleasure more for the one than for the other? Surely, you would not, in this age of scientific enlightenment, declare that God or nature has marked some pleasures as ‘moral’ or ‘good’ and others as ‘immoral’ or ‘bad’? In any case, let me assure you, my dear lady, that there is absolutely no comparison between the pleasure I might take in eating ham and the pleasure I anticipate in raping and murdering you. That is the honest conclusion to which my education has led me – after the most conscientious examination of my spontaneous and uninhibited self.<sup>18</sup>

We may disregard for now the question to what extent the above reasoning process was the *actual* cause of Bundy’s life-style as a serial murderer, or whether it was a subsequent *ad hoc* rationalization of his already immoral attitude and behavior. But it seems at least possible that the kind of moral nihilism advocated by Bundy in this passage *was* among the motivating causes of his actions.

There are several points in the passage quoted that merit a detailed second look. First, Bundy presents his thoughts on the rational status of moral judgment as something he *learned* at one point, suggesting that this intellectual discovery led to all the subsequent criminal actions. More specifically, he claims to have learned that “rationality of one value judgment was zero,” that it was “insupportable,” and that there was no reason “to obey the law for anyone, like myself, who has the boldness and daring – the strength of character – to throw off its shackles.” We can best understand this claim as the denial that one’s final goals and ultimate values are subject to rational appraisal. This is a familiar Humean point which

recognizes only instrumental or means-end rationality, but denies that one's desires as such can be rational or irrational. What Bundy discovered, then, was that (roughly) Hume's account of practical reasoning was correct.<sup>19</sup>

The rest follows with admirable logical consistency. If a moral normative judgment posits a certain value (e.g., respect for the rights of others), which itself cannot be rationally grounded, then the given valuation is in the final analysis *arbitrary* ("insupportable"), and one has no reason to honor this value unless he chooses it as one's own end. Next, as a middle step, if one morally *ought* to do X, then one has a reason for X-ing.<sup>20</sup> Since Bundy has no reason to respect the rights of others (it is not one of *his* values), it follows that the prescriptive judgment to the effect that he ought to do so would simply not be applicable to his case.

Bundy's hedonistic ethical egoism (if we may put a label on his worldview) led to a lifestyle that may be properly described as amoral (as well as immoral). His system of values and the adopted hierarchy of (non-moral) normative principles fail to give any significant weight to the feelings and interests of others even if he might still be able to recognize those feelings and interests as quite real. But what *are* Bundy's own values? He mentions at least two in this passage: "true freedom" and "pleasure."<sup>21</sup> Once accepted as the normative ground of his actions, these values determine the rationality of each particular choice. Roughly, a choice is rational to the extent it promotes one of these final ends. He further argues that becoming "truly uninhibited" and "throwing off the shackles of the insupportable [moral] value judgment" are the most efficient means for becoming 'truly free' and experiencing as much pleasure as possible. The constraints of morality, thus, are in conflict with his goals; indeed, the impression is conveyed that the requirements of the moral value-system and those of the pleasure-based system are contradictory.

We should pause here for a second. Assuming, for the argument's sake, the restriction of rationality to means-end domain, one might still question whether Bundy's chosen means (namely, criminal actions) are indeed conducive to his end (say, pleasure). Might he not be able to achieve a greater degree of satisfaction (in the long run) by pursuing a more socially acceptable life-style? If we answer the last question in the affirmative, we can then properly charge Bundy with a version of instrumental irrationality.

My contention is that there is no reason for supposing Bundy being less than fully competent at instrumental reasoning that determined his specific choices. The above objection presupposes that 'pleasure' is a univocal term that denotes the experience essentially the same in kind in all pleasure-giving activities. However, when Bundy claims that "there is absolutely no comparison" between the pleasure of eating ham and the pleasure of raping and murdering a woman, he is, in effect, endorsing something close to an Aristotelian account of pleasures, according to which pleasures differ 'in species' depending on activities that they crown (1175a25ff). It would be odd to suppose that the intensity of pleasure Bundy feels at, say, murdering a woman, might be eventually 'outweighed' by increasing the amount of ham that he can eat for free. Hence, it is not pleasure *sans phrase* that he pursued as his goal, but pleasure of a *certain kind* – the one, which, presumably, could only be experienced by performing criminal actions.<sup>22</sup> Granted that a person himself is the best judge of which activities are most pleasant (given his tastes)<sup>23</sup>, it seems desperate attributing to him some obvious blunders in instrumental reasoning. Indeed, his actions are in many respects the paradigm examples of rationality and efficiency. His logical skills are impeccable, his abilities to reason abstractly and learn from experience are admirable, and the level of his general reflective intelligence seems to be higher than average. Ted Bundy is an example of a perfectly *rational* amoralist, as long as we limit our conception of rationality to the first two varieties.

We should look finally at that provocative question he poses: “Why is it more wrong to kill a human animal than any other animal, a pig or a sheep or a steer?” If wrongness is defined against the background of means-end normativity, then it follows that a wrong act is the one that fails to lead to the chosen goal, just like a wrong road is the one leads away from the desired destination. Since Bundy’s ‘destination’, as we have seen, is a certain kind of pleasurable experience,<sup>24</sup> which (presumably) can only be achieved by doing criminal action, including murder and rape, then there is literally nothing wrong, *rationaly speaking*, for Ted Bundy to kill ‘a human animal.’

## 6. Rationality of Goals

The results of the preceding sections suggest that the source of the alleged irrationality of amoralists must be sought outside the spheres of failed instrumental reasoning, moral ignorance or incompetence at the level of moral concepts. But in what other sense one’s practical reasoning (as well as actions based on it) can be rationally deficient? Presumably, the only option left for the partisan of the Cognitive Failure Theory is to suggest that the deficiency lies at the level of final ends or ultimate values. An amoralist might be bright and cunning when it comes to reaching his goals, but the goals he sets for himself are self-destructive. And, the rationalist continues, it is clearly irrational to set an end which results in self-ruin. An amoralist, in short, is frustrating his own *real* good by adopting a wrong life-style and a wrong set of values.

The suggested implication that a serial killer Ted Bundy can be classified as a fully rational person seems disturbing, and most ethical rationalists tried to avoid it at all costs. It would be impossible here to mention in details all the historical attempts to tie down one’s final goals by the requirements of reason, but a short overview of the general strategy of all

such attempts is in order. This, in turn, will allow us to detect a common problem, which runs as a red thread through all such attempts.

A moralist of the Kantian mold may see it as an obvious fact that rational human nature has unconditional worth which demands respect and restricts the range of possible behaviors toward other humans, whereas Ted Bundy prizes above all his own pleasure and freedom from constraints, and apparently finds nothing especially valuable in human rationality or autonomy. The two sides differ in their conceptions of what is valuable, of what is good and evil, and from the rationalist's perspective this difference may best be explained by postulating that the conclusions of Ted Bundy, however 'honest' and 'conscientious', rest on a mistaken premise. The key, however, is to explain why such a premise as (say) "My pleasure and my unrestricted freedom are of the ultimate value to me" is irrational, without begging the question in favor of the Cognitive Failure theorist.

The explanation typically proceeds along the following lines: when we, the rationalists, claim that everybody *should* assign significance to the interests of other humans, and that one's failure to do so is indicative of a *mistaken* or *irrational* judgment about the hierarchy of values, we *mean* that such a disregard for the interests of other participants of social life contradicts or potentially contradicts with one's own deeper desires, interests or concerns. The next step is to make this alleged contradiction explicit. Here the details differ significantly depending of the account we consider, but all of them heavily rely on our faculty of imagination. We are prompted to imagine an alternative situation described in a particular way, and then to ask ourselves, what would we prefer in terms of general behavioral rules *if* we found ourselves in those imaginary circumstances. Once the thought-experiment is completed, and we are forced to admit that in *those* circumstances we could not possibly want the maxim *X* to be the rule of the day, the rationalist celebrates his triumph by transferring our admission to the actual world as well: "A-ha, Ted Bundy, you admitted, that you

wouldn't want to be in place of a victim, who is tortured and killed by some maniac for sheer pleasure! This proves it – your placing of your own sensual pleasure on the top of the hierarchy of values is irrational.”

This quasi-Kantian procedure is familiar to most children, whose parents ever reprimanded them, saying: “And how would you like if your brother did this to *you*?” Philosophers have added some details to this simple question, but its essence remained the same: the existence of the objective, normative reason for action is justified by reference to a hypothetical scenario, expressed as a contrary-to-fact conditional, and one's likely preferences in that scenario. With various (often important) modifications since Kant, the story has been repeated by modern philosophers, e.g., William Frankena, Roderick Firth, John Rawls, Robert Audi and Michael Smith.

Roderick Firth's well-known analysis of statements of the form “X is right” suggests a substitution of this straightforward ethical affirmation by a dispositional claim of the form “An Ideal Observer would react to X in such and such a way” (1952, p. 320). The reaction of an ideal observer is seen by Firth as the absolute criterion of moral rightness and wrongness, being the ultimate guarantor of the rational status of morality. The point of view of the ideal observer is the point of view of Reason itself. Having these powers, the ideal observer must be a special character indeed. The characteristics of the ideal observer include omniscience with respect to non-ethical facts as well as extraordinary powers of imagination (omnipercipience). Furthermore, the ideal observer is disinterested, dispassionate and fully consistent in his judgments. But before the reader hastily concludes that what is offered is a version of the old Divine Command Theory, Firth famously adds in the last section of his article: “in all other respects he is normal” (1952, p. 344).

Michael Smith's more recent version of this strategy in "The Moral Problem" (1994) suggests a way of preserving the rational status of moral rules (and the irrational status of amoralists) by appealing to mental states of a properly described rational version of the same agent. According to his view, the best way to construe the objective status of normative reasons is in terms of the agent's *own* potential desires and motivating states when the agent is considered in an epistemologically privileged situation (e.g., as fully rational with all and only relevant beliefs). Unlike the purely Kantian view, the 'Veil of Ignorance' scenarios or the 'Ideal Observer' account of moral reasons, Smith's position tries to avoid the danger of *alienating* the agent from the normative reasons that make demand on his actions. After all, it is what the 'improved version' of the agent *himself* that would have those desires.<sup>25</sup> With enough imagination, Smith could then describe a version of Ted Bundy's personality, appropriately equipped with all the right beliefs, in which his desires and values would be different from the ones he actually has, and thus accuse Bundy of failure to heed the call of reason, his protestations notwithstanding.

The reader might feel at this point that these moral philosophers of rationalist persuasion are playing a trick, similar to the one a compatibilist is said to play on his opponents, when he argues that all it takes to prove that an agent was free when he acted is to show that the statement "the agent *could* have acted differently" is true. But, as Chisholm rightly observes (1997), the truth of the last statement does not help us in establishing free will, since the same can be said about the projectile of a stone, thrown by a sling: "the stone *could* have had a different trajectory." The stone, indeed, *could* have flown differently, if the force applied was different from what it actually was. Likewise, a person could have acted differently, *if* both the external and internal causes of his action were slightly different (e.g., he were in a different mood, or the smell of fresh bread did not distract his mind). But this by

itself does not show that the action performed was anything but inevitable in those specific circumstances.

I would like to suggest that a similar line of criticism can be applied to rationalists' attempts to impute overarching rationality to moral demands. If it is never rational to ignore moral reasons (or, at least, never rational to ignore them on a *regular basis* as amoralists tend to do<sup>26</sup>), as the Cognitive Failure theory suggests, then the sense of this categorical claim should be clearly elucidated. We have seen that a common and time-honored strategy attempts supporting the rational status of moral values by appeals to a hypothetical construct. The amoralist may well admit that should the circumstances or his personal situation be different, he would have different priorities and a different set of reasons for action. But he might still fail to see how that ingenious exercise in imagination is relevant to his actual situation, and why he should in the least care for those imaginary scenarios. "Ted Bundy has an overriding reason not to kill" is a *non sequitor* from "Ted Bundy would not want to kill if he were such and such (e.g., in place of a victim, more informed, more compassionate, etc.)".

This is not to say that appeals to imaginary situations are useless. There is no need to deny that one can derive a strong *motivating* (or *internal*) reason for action by considering a hypothetical scenario. I might vividly imagine what it would feel like if my spouse cheated on me, and as a result of this mental exercise refrain from cheating. Or, when deliberating whether I should vote, I might imagine a world where no one bothers voting, get appalled by the consequences, and thus decide to fulfill my civil duty. But in neither case have I discovered an objective external reason for action, which can make claim on me regardless of my current values and preferences, and which could legitimately threaten me with a change of irrationality, should I decide to ignore it (on the assumption that ignoring it does not frustrate my personal goals). Asserting otherwise leads to a risky alienation of reasons for

action from the agent, ending up either in an overly patronizing theory of normative reasons, or else, in ascribing to them certain occult qualities, which are hard to swallow.<sup>27</sup>

A claim that a person has a standing, external reason to do X, even if doing X in no way furthers his own projects and goals is brought up to ground the charge of irrationality against an agent who ignores this reason. The approach seems to confuse the strong preferences of a third-person party (e.g., the one who *is* committed to a moral lifestyle) with some overarching, universal point of view, identified with the reason's point of view itself. But why suppose, that such a point of view, even if it exists, coincides with the normative system of a certain person or a group of people and how could that possibly be established? As Bernard Williams aptly observes, the loud proclamation of reality of such agent-independent reasons might function as an effective psychological device, or as a rhetorical trick aimed at change of attitudes, but as such it is no different than the trick of bluffing. In memorable words of the same author,

[The] external reason statements, when definitely isolated as such, are false, or incoherent, or really something else misleadingly expressed. Sometimes it is little more than that things would be better if the agent so acted. But the formulation in terms of reasons does have an effect, particularly in its suggestion that the agent is being irrational, and this suggestion [...] is bluff. If this is so, the only real claims about reasons for action will be internal claims. The only rationality of action is the rationality of internal reasons (1997, p. 320).

Internal reasons for action, as we recall, refer to considerations that can actually motivate an agent to act, once he realizes that the proposed course of action furthers his own goals. Failure to act on these reasons, despite such a realization, is indeed a good ground for the charge of irrationality. It was suggested earlier, however, that persistent amoralists are not particularly susceptible to this kind of irrationality, or, on average, no more susceptible than the general population. If the above considerations have been convincing and we agree with

Williams that the only rationality of actions is the rationality of internal reasons, we must admit that there is nothing particularly wrong with amoralists, *rationality speaking*.

### 7. An Aristotelian Rejoinder

It became almost part of the collective professional subconsciousness to have this nagging anxiety in the back of one's mind whatever philosophical topic is being discussed, an anxiety which can be formulated as a perennial question 'What would Aristotle say?' Knowing the dangers of suppressing for long the unpleasant and uncomfortable thoughts, we might as well face it in this last section of the paper.

The objection that one might most likely raise at this point would deal with the existence of alternative, broader conceptions of rationality, which exclude, *ex hypothesi*, the very possibility of severing rationality from morality, at least in the manner we attempted to do so in the earlier sections. The alternative conception relies heavily on the idea of human happiness or human flourishing and suggests a much closer tie between rationality and morality by identifying the main function of moral virtues (as well as those normative rules which can be derived from the virtues) as contributing to overall personal welfare, broadly understood. Pursuing a course of action or adopting a lifestyle which would be antithetical to the idea of human flourishing (properly defined, with objective criteria specified) is seen then as obviously irrational. One of the earliest versions of this view is found in Plato, but Aristotle's rendering of it in the "Nicomachean Ethics" is probably more familiar. Hence, I will refer to it as the 'Aristotelian conception of rationality', recognizing that it received much support and was the subject of many further elaborations by the more recent authors (MacIntyre, 2007) (Foot, 1978) (Hursthouse, 1999) (Putnam, 1992).

The Aristotelian take on morality and rationality is attractive for a number of reasons. For one, it identifies the well-being or *eudaimonia* of an agent himself as the final goal of

one's pursuits and efforts, which appears to be close enough to the phenomenological reports of actual human motivation. Secondly, going beyond a purely descriptive claim, it properly *legitimizes* those pursuits by defining the purpose of moral virtues in terms of their long-term contribution to this final end. This, again, seems to be subjectively more attractive when compared to the more 'idealistic' varieties of moral theories, which conceive of the function of morality in terms of its contribution to the *overall* human happiness, cohesion of a society, offsetting the disadvantages of the weaker members of a group, etc. Finally, the Aristotelian alternative apparently has an upper hand on the simplicity criterion as well, since the complete theory of morality would *eo ipso* incorporate a theory of practical rationality as its special case, with the implication that certain actions are irrational *because* they are immoral.

I dare to say it would make me a happier person, if I could wholeheartedly accept the Aristotelian conception of morality sketched above, and, perhaps, as time goes by, the force of reasons would pave the way for the change of heart. As of now, though, I remain skeptical as to whether we could tie the notion of rationality to the idea of human *eudaimonia* in the required sense precisely because of the notorious ambiguity of the latter concept. 'What is human flourishing (happiness)?' is a question only slightly less celebrated than the question 'What is truth?' Consider Hilary Putnam's claim, who works in the context of that ancient tradition when he writes:

We should recognize that all values, including the cognitive ones, derive their authority from our idea of human flourishing and our idea of reason. These two ideas are interconnected: our image of an ideal theoretical intelligence is simply a part of our ideal of total human flourishing, and makes no sense wrenched out of the total ideal, as Plato and Aristotle saw (1992, p. 141).

But what is the proper reference of the pronoun 'our' in the passage quoted? Whose idea of human flourishing and human happiness should be taken as definitive? Who are those

“competent judges” who can correct the mistaken conceptions of *eudaimonia*? In fact, I suspect Ted Bundy would have no problem agreeing with Putnam’s quote above, as long as he is allowed to bring *his* idea of human flourishing as determining rationality of *his* actions.

I suppose it is tempting to dismiss these concerns by responding that, surely, *we* know very well what *real* happiness is and what kind of lifestyle is conducive to genuine human flourishing, so why should we even consider those highly idiosyncratic conceptions of human good which some amoralists adopt. And, perhaps, we are right. For purely pragmatic reasons, we may indeed assume a patronizing stance in this case, simply imposing the mainstream view of *eudaimonia* on Ted Bundy and his likes by the right of the majority. But (let us not flatter ourselves) this is not because we have proven them wrong or discovered some fundamental mistakes in their reasoning. As always, re-reading Aristotle is a sobering experience in this case too – some of the virtues he mentions as well as his famous list of the conditions necessary for having a chance at *eudaimonia*, which includes noble birth, goodly children, and a certain degree of beauty,<sup>28</sup> show the obvious dependence of the mainstream conception of happiness on cultural and historical contingencies. Without going deep into history, one may simply compare the respective takes on true *eudaimonia* by an Indian Jain, an old-fashioned Japanese Samurai and a CEO of a large Western company to substantiate the point. But, how then, one wonders, be morality and rationality grounded in something as varied and impermanent as *our* conceptions of human good?

## 8. Concluding Remarks

Attempts to accuse amoralists of irrationality have at least two proximate goals: (1) to substantiate the claim that requirements of morality are requirements of reason, i.e., to ground morality in what is traditionally considered the core human faculty, and thus to increase its authority; (2) to provide a plausible answer to the question ‘why be moral?’ Regarding the

first claim, it may be argued that even if we accept the rational status of moral values and moral requirements, it does not yet follow that acting immorally is always irrational. At best, it follows that it is never irrational to act morally.<sup>29</sup> If our criticism of the Cognitive Failure theory is sound, there is no obvious sense in which one's systematic violation of moral requirements can be interpreted as a violation of the requirements of reason. But admitting full rational competence even of the most conspicuous violators of the moral rules does not yet threaten the fundamental rational status of those rules.

Regarding the second point, it is doubtful that whoever earnestly asks the question about the point of being moral will be satisfied with a simple "...because otherwise you would be irrational." If we understand the notorious question as attempting to discover a *motivation* for being moral (and this is the only plausible meaning of this question), then, whatever the answer would be, the *suggested* motivating reason for moral action must be of greater motivational appeal than the original non-moral reason, which prompted the question in the first place. Imagine the following dialogue: "You ought to do X." – "But why?" – "Because it would be immoral not to do X." – "But why should I care in the least about morality? It does not serve any of my short or long term goals to be moral." – "Because it would be irrational not to care about it." We have lost our interlocutor after the second question – if appeals to morality fail to motivate, why would appeals to some abstract rationality (or reasonableness) do the job? If anything, appeals to the fact that my behavior is immoral might have a greater motivational force than appeals to the fact that my behavior is less than perfect from the standpoint of reason. It might well be the case, as Plato thought, that a question "why should I care about my own good" is inadmissible, yet the wondering "why be reasonable?" is from a different category, and there are no conceptual obstacles for continuing the dialogue with this particular wondering.

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<sup>1</sup> See (Zavaliy, 2009) for a model of the scalar three-dimensional structure of morality.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout, and merely for convenience, I use the masculine pronoun in referring to amoralist.

<sup>3</sup> The terms ‘amoral’ and ‘amoralist’ are used here instead of ‘immoral’ and ‘immoralist’ for a number of reasons, most of which, however, are pragmatic and purely conventional. To some (but not all) ears, the term ‘amoral’ connotes a relatively greater distance between an agent and the domain of moral reasons, than the term ‘immoral’. My intuitions coincide in this case with those of Bernard Williams, who presents an amoralist as a person wholly devoid of moral considerations, and explicitly identifies such a character with a psychopath (1972, p. 10). For alternative classification see (Milo, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of amoralists in fiction see (McGinn, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> The categories mentioned overlap in many cases. Many scholars who work in this area use the terms ‘sociopath’, ‘psychopath’, and ‘person with antisocial personality disorder’ interchangeably. Indeed, the latter phrase is usually preferred as the more comprehensive one, and the former two terms are somewhat fading away in the recent literature. Samenow (1984) explicitly identifies all persistent criminals with psychopaths.

<sup>6</sup> Young children, persons suffering from narcissism and certain (but not all) autistic individuals would (trivially) fit the description of an amoralist as well. In these cases, however, their amoral status is best seen as the result of *moral incompetence*, including inability to grasp moral concepts, emotive deficiency, and failure of imaginative faculty. See, for instance, (Kennett, 2002) and (Grant & Boucher, 2005) for a discussion of the challenges of moral development in autistic individuals.

<sup>7</sup> This follows from the claim that each action can be correlated with an appropriate form of practical reasoning, and the assumption that rationality is transitive. Robert Audi expresses this claim as the *correspondence thesis*, (“the view that to every intentional action there corresponds at least one practical argument whose premises express motivation and belief jointly sufficient to explain the action” (2006, p. 28), and argues that it can be traced back to at least Aristotle. On the other hand, I recognize that it remains a highly contentious issue.

<sup>8</sup> For the argument that tries to establish this possibility see (Stocker, 1979). Dostoyevsky in his “Notes from Underground” shows a literary character that epitomizes this kind of self-destructive consciousness (1988).

<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of how weakness of will is possible see (Davidson, 1980).

<sup>10</sup> Audi (1990) makes a case that in special circumstances weak-willed action *may* be rational, but agrees that in general such an action tends to count against rationality.

<sup>11</sup> The use of the word ‘suffering’ in this context is idiomatic rather than literal. As Martha Stout rightly observes, “sociopathy stands alone as a ‘disease’ that causes no *dis-ease* for the person who has it, no subjective discomfort. Sociopaths are often quite satisfied with their lives” (2005, p. 12).

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Stanley Kubrick’s film “A Clockwork Orange” (1971) based on Anthony Burgess’ novel.

<sup>13</sup> As Kent Kiehl has put it, after years of investigations in the field: “I have yet to meet a psychopath who is incapable of telling right from wrong – at least verbally” (2008, p. 120).

<sup>14</sup> This condition is correlated with the more common cases of the *developmental* sociopathy.

<sup>15</sup> EVR’s case is not unique. See (Greene, 2005) for a similar account of a patient named Elliot.

<sup>16</sup> None of the above implies that the level of cognitive development is irrelevant for social and moral competence. Developmental psychologists have long pointed to the gradual development of ‘moral sense’ with age. According to Lawrence Kohlberg (1976), there exists a direct relation between advances in general intelligence and moral progress in most normal individuals – e.g., children are expected to develop higher-level moral reasoning as they become capable of cognitive skills required for understanding such reasoning. Correspondingly, a failure to advance to a higher moral stage might be accounted by a failure in cognitive progress, including the failure to grasp the meaning of moral terms.

<sup>17</sup> (Michaund & Aynesworth, 2005)

<sup>18</sup> This is a statement of Ted Bundy quoted in (Jaffa, 1990, pp. 3-4).

<sup>19</sup> Hume (1739) famously denies that there are any substantive criteria for the rationality of desires (the ends), which means that we cannot rationally evaluate the *motivational* (major) premise in a standard practical syllogism.

<sup>20</sup> This is what Richard Joyce calls “Mackie’s Platitude” (2002, p. 46).

<sup>21</sup> It might be argued that Bundy’s *final* end is pleasure, and ‘freedom’ (in his sense) has only instrumental value, in so far as it is conducive to pleasure. But nothing important hinges on this point. In any case, there is no incongruity in postulating two or more final ends.

<sup>22</sup> For brevity sake, I shall omit the discussion whether *freedom* (Bundy’s other value) could be achieved through alternative, non-criminal life-style. It appears that his conception of freedom is close to Hobbes’ notion of natural liberty (*jus naturale*) that humans would have in the state of nature. If that is so, then, indeed, preserving this unrestricted freedom is incompatible with any normative constraints.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle’s ‘objectivist’ account of pleasures notwithstanding (*N. Ethics*, 1176a ff.). My main reason for rejecting Aristotle’s contention that pleasures of a vicious man are not *really* pleasures, and that it is only the virtuous person’s experiences that should be taken as the criterion in identifying something as pleasant have to

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do with the obvious problems of applying the same ‘objectivist’ reasoning to the experience opposite of pleasure, namely *pain*.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Wolman’s claim that “the ‘pleasure principle,’ that is, the principle of immediate gratification of needs, is the main motive in the life of sociopaths” (1987, p. 44).

<sup>25</sup> It is by no means clear, however, at what point our gradual hypothetical alteration of a person’s beliefs and attitudes crosses the line, resulting in ‘different person’, rather than resulting in the same person with different beliefs and attitudes. See Mackie’s (1977) description of the ‘three levels of universalization’ for a helpful discussion of this problem.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. (Audi, 2006) who argues that *the thesis of moral supremacy*, i.e., the thesis that there is *always* better overall reason to do what morality requires is implausible, and opts for a weaker *thesis of moral priority* – a view that a moral reason for action might *on occasion* be overridden by a coalition of incompatible non-moral reasons (pp. 182-84). Yet even Audi certainly would not concede that moral reasons may be habitually overridden.

<sup>27</sup> See (Mackie, 1977), (Williams, 1997) and (Joyce, 2002) for the discussion of ‘queerness’ of external moral reasons. On the other hand, a solid attempt to defend a version of Moral Realism, which would create logical space for the notion of a binding external moral reason has been suggested by Dan Robinson (2002). Its analysis, though, has to be postponed until another occasion.

<sup>28</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099b1-10.

<sup>29</sup> The point that it is never *irrational* to act morally is specifically argued for by Bernard Gert (1998). But it is also accepted by Robert Audi (2006).

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