

## Choosing Ends

“Reason” has a perfectly clear and precise meaning. It signifies the choice of the right means to an end that you wish to achieve. It has nothing whatever to do with the choice of ends.

Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (1954)

**R**ational choice, on a means-end conception, involves seeking effective means to one’s ends. From this basic idea, the social sciences have developed an instrumental model of rationality. The instrumental model goes beyond a means-end conception by inferring from it not only that rational choice involves seeking effective means to one’s ends but also that rational choice involves nothing beyond this. Ends must be taken as given, as outside the purview of rational choice. All chains of justification eventually terminate in something unjustified.

Or so the story goes. This essay, though, shows how we can have a chain of means and ends whose final link is rationally justified. One might assume that justifying final ends requires a conception of justification foreign to rational choice theory. Not so. Admittedly, defenders and critics alike agree that “the theory of rational choice disclaims all concern with the ends of action.”<sup>1</sup> But such quietism about ends is not necessary. A means-end conception of rationality can be made consistent with our intuition that we can be rational in a more reflective sense, questioning ends we happen to have, revising them when they seem unfit.

One could define ends as items we *ought* to pursue, but I define ends descriptively, as items we do pursue. Human beings are capable of having ends in this descriptive sense. Are we also capable of having ends that we were rational to adopt as items to pursue? This essay tries to craft a philosophically and psychologically

1. Gauthier (1986) 26. Resnik puts it dramatically: “Individual decision theory recognizes no distinction—either moral or rational—between the goals of killing oneself, being a sadist, making a million dollars, or being a missionary” (1987, 5).

plausible account of how the answer could be yes, thus looking beyond a purely instrumental model to something more reflective, a model in which agents choose and criticize ends as well as means.

There is, of course, a problem. The instrumentalist model is standard equipment in the social sciences, in part because it is useful, but also because it is hard to imagine an alternative. Evaluating a proposed means to a given end seems straightforward. We ask whether it serves the given end. But when we talk about being reflectively rational, we are talking about evaluating ends as such. Now, we evidently can and do judge some ends as not worth pursuing—but how?

### 1. Three Kinds of Ends

My answer draws on distinctions between four kinds of ends, three of which are well known among philosophers. Suppose I wake one morning wanting to go for a 2-mile run.

1. Perhaps I have this goal as an end in itself; I want to run 2 miles just for the sake of being out there running. In this case, the goal of running 2 miles is a *final* end.
2. Or perhaps I want to run for the sake of some other goal. I run because I want to be healthy. In this case, running 2 miles is an *instrumental* end, instrumental to the further end of being healthy.
3. Or suppose I want to run 2 miles because I want some aerobic exercise. In this case, running 2 miles is not exactly a mere means to the further end of getting some exercise. Rather, running 2 miles constitutes getting some exercise. So, in this third case we can speak of going for a run as a *constitutive* end.<sup>2</sup>

A variety of subsidiary criteria often help us to assess the relative merits of alternative constitutive ends. For instance, if my further goal is to get some aerobic exercise, and it occurs to me that I could ride my stationary bicycle rather than run 2 miles, I could ask myself which is easier on my knees, which will use less time, whether the bicycle's noise will bother the neighbors at this hour, and so on. If subsidiary criteria do not tell the difference between alternative constitutive ends, then the best I can do is to pick a form of exercise and get on with it.

The three categories are not mutually exclusive. An end like running 2 miles could be both final and instrumental, pursued for its own sake and for the sake of further ends. Nevertheless, distinguishing among these three ends is useful. For one thing, the distinction makes it easy to see how we can rationally choose some of our ends. In particular, we can choose instrumental and constitutive ends as means to further ends, and so such ends can be rational in the sense that choosing to pursue

2. The distinction between instrumental and constitutive ends is formalized by Ackrill (1980, 19). I am also borrowing from MacDonald (1991).

them can serve further ends. By the same token, we criticize such choices by asking whether pursuing the chosen end really helps to secure the further end, or whether pursuing it truly constitutes pursuing the further end.

The final end that terminates a chain of justification, though, cannot be justified in the same way we justify the links leading up to it. Final ends as such are neither constituents of nor instrumental to further ends. They are pursued for their own sake. Thus, the justification of final ends will be a different kind of story, a story that cannot be told within the confines of an instrumentalist model.

## 2. A Fourth Kind of End

What sort of story? To give an example: suppose that, for Kate, becoming a surgeon is an end. Perhaps it is an end because Kate thinks becoming a surgeon will be prestigious, in which case becoming a surgeon is an instrumental end. Kate becomes a surgeon in order to do something else, namely, to secure prestige. But maybe, for Kate, becoming a surgeon is an end in itself. How could a career in medicine come to be a final end?

Maybe it happened like this. When Kate was a teenager, she had no idea what she wanted to do with her life, but she knew she wanted to do something. She wanted goals to pursue. In particular, she wanted to settle on a career and thus on the goal or set of goals that a career represents. At some point, she concluded that going to medical school and becoming a surgeon would give her the career she wanted. So she went to school to pursue a career in medicine. She has various reasons to pursue this goal, of course, but she also pursues it as an end in itself, much as I might run just for the sake of being out running.

The interesting point is that Kate's story introduces a fourth kind of end, an end of acquiring settled ends, an end of choosing a career in particular. The goal of choosing a career is what I shall call a *maieutic* end—an end achieved through a process of coming to have other ends. People sometimes describe Socrates as having taught by the maieutic method or method of midwifery. The idea: students already have great stores of inchoate knowledge, so a teacher's job is to help students give birth to this latent knowledge. I use the term "maieutic" to suggest that we give birth to our final ends in the process of achieving maieutic ends. In this case, Kate achieves a maieutic end by coming to have particular career goals. As I said, she settles on a career by deciding to pursue a career in medicine. Thus, just as final ends are further ends for the sake of which we pursue instrumental and constitutive ends, maieutic ends are further ends for the sake of which we choose final ends.

The immediate worry here is that there may appear to be an inconsistency in the way the terms are defined. I said we could choose a final end as a way of achieving a maieutic end. On the contrary, one might respond, if Kate chooses a career in medicine as a way of achieving a maieutic end, she must be pursuing that career not as a final end but rather as an instrumental end. This is a natural response. It may even seem indisputable.

But the natural response is a mistake. It overlooks the distinction between *pursuing* a final end (which by definition we do for its own sake) and *choosing* a final end (which we might do for various reasons). By definition, final ends are pursued for their own sake, not for the sake of maieutic ends. Yet, even if Kate pursues an end purely for its own sake, it can still be true that there was, in Kate's past, a process by which she acquired that end. It can also be true that going through the process (of acquiring the new goal) served ends she had at the time. The supposition that the choice process is a means to an existing end leaves open whether the outcome of the process, the chosen end, will be pursued as a means to the same end. The new end may well be something Kate subsequently pursues for its own sake. The distinction between reasons for choosing and reasons for pursuing an end thus lets us speak coherently of choosing a final end for the sake of further ends.

Against the distinction, however, one might object that when we choose an instrumental or a constitutive end, we *necessarily* pursue it for the same reason we originally chose it, namely, the further end to which we chose it as a means. Analogously, the objection continues, when we choose a final end we thereby take it to be good in itself. Consequently, our grounds for choosing X specifically as a final end must necessarily be the same as our grounds for pursuing X specifically as a final end—its being good in itself.<sup>3</sup>

This objection is more complicated than it looks. The alleged relation of identity between reasons for choosing and reasons for pursuing an end is by no means analytic. Even if it is true by definition that an instrumental end is both chosen and pursued as a means to a further end, it does not follow that the further end for which we chose it is identical to the further end for which we pursue it. Even if it were safe to assume that they will be identical, it is nevertheless an assumption, resting on further assumptions about human psychology. It is an empirical issue whether people tend to pursue ends for the same reasons they originally chose those ends as ends.

Similarly, even though it is true by definition that final ends are pursued for their own sake, it remains an open question whether further purposes were served by the process of coming to have final ends. For example, I may write in part because I love to write, but that supposition leaves open a possibility that other purposes were served by the process of becoming so devoted to writing. Developing that kind of devotion may have been what made it possible for me to get a job at a research-oriented university in the first place. I may even have been aware that good things happen to people who love to write when I began doing the things that led me to develop my taste for writing. My point is that these are empirical matters. Some might insist that my reasons for choosing to pursue an end simply cannot—cannot *possibly*, cannot *conceivably*—differ from my subsequent reasons for pursuing that end. However, we just conceived of a difference between what drives me to write and what drove me to nurture my drive to write. Therefore, it is demonstrably false that we cannot conceive of them as distinct. If there is any truth in the idea that the two reasons cannot be distinct, it will be a truth grounded in human psychology rather

3. I thank Scott MacDonald for suggesting this objection.

than in analysis of terms. It will be a psychological truth that if ever I nurtured my desire to write because I thought it would further my career, then my ultimate reason to write must forever remain that I think it will further my career. (Think about it. Is it plausible that there is *no chance* of my still desiring to write after I retire?)

My own understanding is that an act of adopting something as an end often changes our attitude toward it. If so, then it is a mistake to assume that our future grounds for pursuing X will be like (and a bigger mistake to assume our future grounds *must* be like) our present grounds for adopting X as an end. My student may feel ambivalent about each of the subjects she might major in, but if she anticipates coming to view the study of philosophy as good in itself, then her anticipation of this new attitude can be grounds for choosing to study philosophy in the first place. Similarly, sometimes one of our core reasons to choose a career is that we want—and *do not yet have*—the attitude that goes with pursuing a given career in a wholehearted way. We might have reasons to choose an end in part because of reasons we expect to develop for pursuing that end.

Observe, then, how the relation between maieutic and final ends differs from the relation between final and constitutive ends. The end of getting some aerobic exercise is schematic; we cannot do what it tells us to do until we choose a specific way of getting exercise, such as a 2-mile run.<sup>4</sup> Choosing specifics is a necessary preface to achieving the end. This is not how it works, though, when the further end is a maieutic end. Choosing specifics is not merely a preface to achieving a maieutic end. On the contrary, a maieutic end just is a goal of settling on a specific end. In settling on a specific goal and thereby meeting the maieutic end's demand, one is achieving the maieutic end, not merely choosing a specific way of pursuing it.

For example, my attempt to jog 2 miles constitutes my attempt to get some exercise, but Kate's attempt to become a surgeon does not constitute her attempt to choose a career goal. On the contrary, when Kate goes to medical school in an attempt to become a surgeon, she is not just attempting to choose a career goal. At that point, she has chosen a career goal, namely, to be a surgeon. In the jogging case, I pursue goal A as a way of *pursuing* goal B. In the second case, Kate chooses goal A as a way of *achieving* goal B. Note that in the jogging case, A is the constitutive end, while in the other case, B is the maieutic end. Therefore, even if the relation between A and B were the same in both cases (which it isn't), constitutive ends and maieutic ends would still be different, for the two kinds of ends are found at opposite ends of the relation.

We also can see how the relation between maieutic and final ends differs from the relation between final and instrumental ends. When one end is pursued purely for the sake of another end, then the rationale for its pursuit depends on its ongoing relation as a means to the further end. For example, if pursuing a career in medicine is merely a means of securing prestige, and Kate one day loses her desire for prestige, then she also loses her grounds for becoming a surgeon. The rationale for her career depends on the persistence of the further end of securing prestige. In the other

4. Constitutive ends can be either specific ways of pursuing a more formal further end (putting on a suit can be constitutive of being well-dressed) or constituent parts of the further end (putting on a tie can be a constituent of putting on a suit).

scenario, though, the rationale for her career does not depend on the persistence of the teenage end of settling on a career. On the contrary, her evolving career goal *replaces* the teenage end with something quite different. As long as Kate is settled in her career as a surgeon, she has attained the goal (of settling on a career) that she had as a teenager, thus eliminating the earlier goal as an item to pursue. For Kate, the maieutic end of settling on a career reemerges (as an item to pursue) only if Kate at some point rejects her career as a surgeon and longs for something new.

Some readers might worry that a maieutic end is never really eliminated and that the new end it spawns is subsequently pursued, implicitly if not explicitly, as a means to the maieutic end. When Kate settles on a career, her subsequent pursuits might be motivated by the same concerns that drove her as a teenager to settle on a career. My response is, of course this will be true in some cases; some people, after settling on a career, subsequently pursue their careers instrumentally (instrumental to the further end of making money) or constitutively (constitutive of the further end of keeping busy). In other words, maieutic ends can give birth not only to final ends but to other kinds of ends as well.<sup>5</sup> But such cases are beside the point. If our task were to explain how instrumental or constitutive ends could be rationally chosen, such cases would be relevant. Our actual objective, though, is to explain how final ends can be rationally chosen, which means we need to focus on cases where the chosen ends are subsequently pursued as ends in themselves. Only in those cases are maieutic ends relevant to the puzzle of how final ends can be rationally chosen.

But, a critic might persist, how can we be sure that maieutic ends *ever* give birth to final ends? One could argue that, if the desire to have a career is what leads Kate to choose a career, then the same desire will be the further end for the sake of which she pursues her career. If she chooses a career as a mere means to the further end, then she will pursue the career for the same reason. In response, we need not deny that there can be a value Kate attaches to having a career that persists through her choice and pursuit of a particular career. To say Kate eliminates “settling on a career” as an end, that is, as an item to pursue, is not to say she ceases to value having a career. We need to distinguish between something being valuable and something being an item to pursue.

For example, my car is valuable to me. And if I leave it parked on a hill and the parking brake fails, then it also becomes an item to pursue. The car is valuable to me both before and after I secure it, but it ceases to be an item to pursue after I secure it. Similarly, if Kate already has a career, then having a career may be valuable to her, but it isn’t an item to pursue; it is an item she already has. Of course, Kate continues to value having a career even as she pursues one. (That is, she pursues the particular goals making up her particular career. Once she has a particular career, though, she does not pursue the generic goal of having a career.) But this is no reason to doubt that she now has goals, acquired in the course of settling on her particular career, that she pursues for their own sake.

Maieutic ends are not the only kind of end that can be eliminated as an item to pursue, but their elimination has a unique upshot. In the means-end relation between instrumental and final end, eliminating the further end renders the means pointless, robbing them of normative significance. In contrast, in the means-end relation

5. The issue came up in discussions with Lainie Ross.

between final and maieutic end, eliminating the further end is an essential part of the process by which final ends acquire their characteristic normative significance.

Maieutic ends are not merely a theoretical postulate. They are real. The drive to find a career or a spouse can be powerful, even painful, and such drives are drives to settle on a particular career or particular person. Recall what it was like to choose a major in college or to choose a career. One way or another, we had to choose something, and, for some of us, not having done so yet was an occasion for considerable anxiety. Some of us had hardly a clue of what we really wanted, but it felt better to settle on some end or other than to let that part of our lives remain a vacuum. Of course, there were institutional and parental pressures as well, and some of us felt only those, but many of us also felt pressure from within.

None of this denies that some people are simply gripped by particular final ends.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps such ends are not acquired by choice. If not, then questions about how they could be rationally chosen are moot. But that does not mean all questions are moot, for we can still ask whether further ends are served by the process of coming to have a final end. Regardless of whether ends are deliberately selected from a set of alternatives, my model has something to say. It addresses the question of whether an end's acquisition serves further ends.

That, then, is my theory about how an end, pursued as a genuinely final end, could have been rationally chosen. There are ends—maieutic ends—to which a final end could be chosen as a means. In passing, although the four categories of ends are conceptually distinct, they are not mutually exclusive. An end could be final, pursued for its own sake, and at the same time instrumental, pursued as a means to some further end. Moreover, section 4 presents three formal models of reflective rationality, the first of which models a maieutic end as a final end and the third of which models a maieutic end as an instrumental end. That an end falls into one category does not preclude it from falling into others.

Section 3 explains how unchosen ends might serve as parts of a framework for judging a choice of ends. Section 4 then considers whether explaining the rational choice of one final end presupposes further ends. That is, we have seen how final ends could be rationally chosen, but are “loose ends” inevitable?

### 3. The Role of Unchosen Ends

Although some of our ends are chosen, some are not. For most of us, the goal of survival is a goal we simply find ourselves with. Likewise, we want to be good at what we do, and this goal also seems unchosen, something we simply have. We want to be competent.<sup>7</sup> We do not need reasons to choose our unchosen ends, since we do not

6. The issue came up in discussions with Ruth Marcus and Michael Della Rocca.

7. It is not a conceptual truth that human beings desire to be competent, but nor is that desire merely a local phenomenon. Probably it is conspicuously present in all societies. White (1971) says exploratory and playful behavior in children and even young animals serves to develop competence in dealing with the environment and that a sense of competence is a vital aspect of self-esteem. Broadie says the joy human beings take in doing things well “is so natural that people set up all sorts of trivial ends in order to have the satisfaction of achieving them correctly” (1991, 92).

choose them. We simply have them. Even unchosen ends can be rejected, of course, but to rationally reject them, one needs a reason to reject them. Unchosen final ends, therefore, have a certain normative inertia, which means they can form a relatively stable frame of reference in terms of which we evaluate ends we might acquire by choice. Not every pursuit, for instance, is conducive to survival.

Harry Frankfurt goes a bit farther, holding that fixed ends are a *necessary* part of a normative frame of reference. The problem of choosing ends presupposes a frame of reference against which one assesses one's options, and not all of this framework can be an endogenous product of choice. As Frankfurt puts it,

it is only if his volitional nature is in certain respects already fixed that a person can effectively consider what his final ends should be—what is to be important to him, or what to care about. He will not be in a position to inquire into the question of how he should live unless it is already the case that there are some things about which he cares.<sup>8</sup>

Frankfurt has a point. We need a fairly stable frame of reference to get started in assessing prospective ends.

At the same time, the stable foundation need not, as Frankfurt himself notes, “be fixed unalterably.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, although I accept a version of Frankfurt's point, three related complications bear mentioning. First, the stable foundation need not be permanently fixed. Indeed, it may be something needing to be left behind. Childhood is the foundation for adulthood, but childhood is something we outgrow. Second, in the long run the foundation might not be fixed independently of choice. Rather, some parts of the foundation (character traits, in particular) may arise and change through a process of habituation driven by ongoing patterns of choice. Third, even when an end is acquired by choice, the process of settling on that end often is not a simple act of will. On the contrary, often we settle on an end partly by habituating ourselves toward aiming at it. For instance, we want to have someone to love. This is a maieutic end that we achieve when we come to love particular people and accept spending time with them and making them happy as ends worth pursuing for their own sake. But coming to love and be devoted to a person obviously is not an act of will so much as growing into a commitment, step by step.

So, some items come to be pursued as final ends through a process of habituation. And although Kate's character is stable with respect to particular decisions, it is also a part of her that, over the long run, she shapes in incremental ways through her choices. If all goes well, she will grow into the career (and the husband) she has chosen, and the person she becomes will some day find that career (and that husband) intrinsically worthy of her ongoing commitment.

Of course, circumstances help determine whether a prospective end is appropriate. Indeed, circumstances determine whether a particular option even exists. A given activity counts as a prospective career, for example, only if there is a market for that kind of activity. (Does becoming a chess player count as settling on a career?) The

8. Frankfurt (1992) 17.

9. Frankfurt (1992) 18.

nature of maieutic ends also depends on circumstances. For example, settling on a spouse can be a maieutic end only if a certain kind of social structure exists to render that end intelligible. To a large extent, culture dictates both the range of maieutic ends one could have and also the range of final ends whose choice would achieve a given maieutic end.

Another part of a framework for assessing prospective ends is supplied by an aspect of maieutic ends that I have yet to discuss. A maieutic end is an end of bringing ends into existence, of giving oneself ends to pursue. To have ends to pursue is to have something to live for. If we have a single overarching and possibly unchosen maieutic end, I would say it is the end of finding things to live for.<sup>10</sup> The various maieutic ends (settling on a major in college and then a career, defining ideals, choosing a spouse, finding ways of contributing to the community, and so on) are all species of a generic and overarching maieutic end of finding things to live for, ends to which one can devote oneself. In different words, the end of finding something to live for is the end of acquiring ends in general, the end of having one's life be spent on something rather than nothing.

That does not mean we are always looking for things to live for. Sometimes our existing corpus of ends gives us plenty to do, leaving us with neither need nor opportunity to look for more. Sometimes feeding ourselves or our children is a challenge, keeping our hands so full that taking time to ask what we are living for is out of the question. To have no time for ends beyond survival is to have no need for ends beyond survival. But when daily survival becomes too easy to keep us busy, that is when we need something else to aim at, lest we find ourselves with too much time to ponder the fact that there is nothing for the sake of which we are surviving.

In effect, insofar as bare survival originally presents itself as a final end, we need to convert it into something else, a form of survival that has instrumental value as well. When we do this, we change survival from something we happen to seek as a matter of descriptive biological fact into something with normative weight—a goal we have reason to seek. In this way, we redeem survival as a goal. But to do this, we need to settle on further ends to which survival can serve as means.<sup>11</sup> The next section incorporates these ideas into a model of reflective rationality. After we have the model in front of us, I will consider how we compare prospective final ends.

#### 4. A Model of Rational Choice with No Loose ends

Means-end conceptions of rationality posit instrumental ends. Sophisticated versions also posit constitutive ends. A means-end conception also posits final ends, which rationally justify instrumental and constitutive ends. Instrumental or static rationality involves seeking effective means to given ends. The essence of reflective rationality

10. I speak interchangeably of having, finding, getting, or coming to have something to live for.

11. It seems that some people would rather die than live without goals they consider worth living for. Suicide often might be understood not as a repudiation of the unchosen end of survival but rather as the ultimate confirmation of the intolerability of failing to achieve the maieutic end of finding something to live for.

is that, although it involves means-end reasoning, it goes beyond instrumental rationality because it does not take ends as given. Reflectively rational choosers realize that their preference functions change over time and that some changes will serve their current ends better than others. To be reflectively rational is to manage one's changing preference function, to do what one can to become the sort of person one wants to become.

In figure 3.1, *F*, *c*, and *i* stand for final, constitutive, and instrumental ends. An arrow from *c* to *F* signifies that pursuing *c* is a means to *F*.

There will be as many chains of justification as there are final ends, and instrumental or constitutive ends pass as rational only if they are links within one or more chains, which is to say they serve as means to one or more final ends. The final ends that top the chains, though, are not justified within the instrumentalist model.

A model of reflective rationality adds the following elements to the means-end conception of rational choice. Keep in mind that the point is to complete the means-end conception rather than to supplant it, in the process showing how, without adding any new normative machinery to the standard instrumentalist model, we can construct a model where even final ends can be rationally chosen. First, the model posits particular maieutic ends. Insofar as settling on final ends is our way of achieving maieutic ends, the choice is rational if it serves the purpose. Second, we pursue particular maieutic ends (like choosing a career) as constitutive ends relative to the overarching maieutic end of finding something to live for. Getting a career is a way of getting something to live for (see fig. 3.2).

In figure 3.2, an arrow from *i* to *F* signifies that pursuing *i* is a means to *F*. An arrow from *F* to *m* signifies that choosing *F* is a means to a particular maieutic end *m*. An arrow from *m* to *M* signifies that pursuing *m* is a means to the overarching maieutic end *M*.

The model that emerges from this has several variations; we will look at three of them. In the first version, this is where we stop. We take the overarching maieutic end as a final end that is simply given. This first model is noteworthy in two ways. First, it explains how an end, pursued for its own sake, could nevertheless be rationally chosen. Second, this model identifies and characterizes further ends to which the choice of final ends could be a means. The model takes at least one final end as given, though, so from a theoretical standpoint is not entirely satisfying. It goes beyond the instrumentalist model by showing how even final ends (most of them) could be rationally chosen, but shares with instrumentalist models the property of necessarily leaving us with loose ends—terminal ends not justifiable within the model.

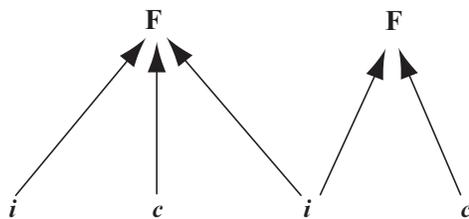


FIGURE 3.1. The means-end conception.

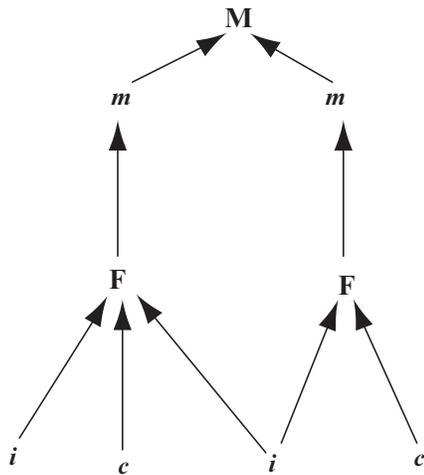


FIGURE 3.2. The reflective model, taking the overarching end as given.

Judging from the first model, then, it still seems reasonable to suppose that, as Bernard Williams writes, “there will have to be at least one reason for which no further reason is given and which holds itself up.”<sup>12</sup> The second model, however, goes further. Instead of taking the overarching maieutic end as given, we note that finding reasons to live improves our survival prospects. To whatever extent we care about survival, and to whatever extent finding things to live for strengthens our will to survive and thereby improves our survival prospects, we have a rationale for the overarching end. Finding things to live for is instrumental to the further end of survival. In the second model, we stop here. We take survival as a given final end. (See fig. 3.3.)

In figure 3.3, an arrow from *M* to *s* signifies that pursuing the overarching end *M* (finding things to live for) is a means to the end of survival.

Should we take the end of survival as given? Since we are given the end of survival as a matter of biological fact, why not? One problem is that we would still be left with a theoretical loose end, an end accounted for in descriptive biological terms but not in normative terms. There is also a practical reason why we cannot take survival as given. We cannot take it as given because, as a matter of fact, our commitment to the biologically given end of survival is not an all-or-nothing matter. Our commitment is a matter of degree, variable even within the stages of a particular life. The point is not that some people lack the end of survival. (Even if some people lack the end of survival, this need not affect its normative force for the rest of us.) The more crucial fact is that, even for those of us who have the end of survival, the

12. Williams (1985) 113. Williams expresses skepticism about the “linear model” of reason-giving at issue in the cited passage, yet his belief that it is impossible for rationales to go “all the way down” is unwavering.

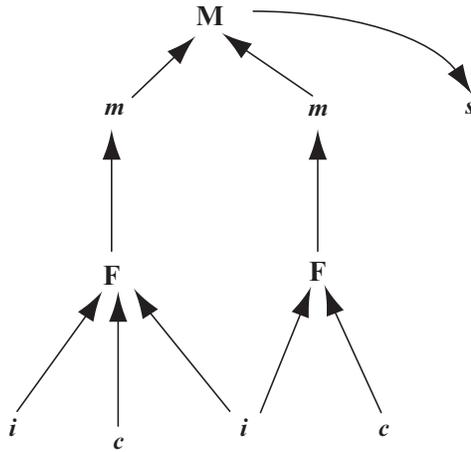


FIGURE 3.3. The reflective model, taking survival as given.

strength of our will to survive can change. Further, the strength of our will to survive is in part a consequence of our choices.

Accordingly, the third and final model of reflective rationality goes one more step. Survival is a final end with which we begin as a matter of biological fact, but it will be subverted as an end unless we find something that survival is *for*, that is, unless we find reasons to live. With some ends, of course, a threat of subversion would not matter. Thus, if Ulysses expects the Sirens to subvert his desire for broccoli, he shrugs his shoulders and plans to eat something else. By contrast, if Ulysses expects the Sirens to subvert his desire to survive, he binds himself to the mast. He wants to survive his encounter with the Sirens no matter how he will feel about survival when the time comes.

Therefore, broccoli and survival are different. Unlike a desire for broccoli, the biologically given desire for survival has a certain intransigence. It resists its own extinction. It drives us to find things to live for, as proof against its own subversion.

As we find things to live for, the goal of survival with which we begin as a biological instinct becomes something more than that. It becomes a means to final ends acquired in the process of achieving maieutic ends. And as those new goals insert themselves into our corpus of ends, the goal of bare survival evolves into something else. There comes a time when bare survival is no longer what we are after. By acquiring the final ends that make life instrumentally valuable, we convert bare survival from something we happen to pursue into something we have reason to pursue as part of an increasingly complex hierarchy of ends.<sup>13</sup>

This suggests a circular chain of reasoning (a nonvicious circle, since the links have empirical content). Constitutive and instrumental ends are justified as means to

13. For those with no desire to live in the first place, this argument does not get off the ground unless they have some other desire that can play a similar role in the model. But we are not concerned here with the likelihood that some people's ends cannot be rationally justified in this way. Perhaps some ends cannot be rationally justified at all. Be that as it may, the objective is to show how a final end could be rationally chosen. We need not argue that *all* ends are rationally chosen.

final ends. We pursue final ends for their own sake, while the *choice* of final ends is justified as a means of achieving particular maieutic ends. Particular maieutic ends are then justified as constitutive means to the overarching maieutic end of finding something to live for. Finding something to live for is instrumentally justified to the extent that, given our psychology, achieving the overarching maieutic end (thus producing reasons to live) helps us survive. And closing the circle, survival and the consequent preservation of our ability to pursue goals has come to be instrumentally justified as a means to the pursuit of final ends. (See fig. 3.4.)

In this model, survival is a means in the sense of being needed for the sake of other goals. To be an instrumental end, and thus an item to pursue, there must also be something one needs to do to secure it. So, as I use the terms, being an instrumental end entails being a means, but not vice versa. Survival is not unique in this respect. For example, suppose Bob needs a car in order to attend a concert. If Bob already has a car, though, then having a car is not an item to pursue and thus not an end and thus not an instrumental end, even though it is a means of attending the concert.

We might think there is an easier way to close the circle. That is, we could eliminate maieutic ends from the picture and suppose more simply that survival is justified as a means to our final ends, while our final ends are justified by the fact that acquiring those ends gives us reason to live and thereby improves our survival prospects. But how could acquiring final ends improve our survival prospects? Acquiring final ends could improve our survival prospects by giving us reasons to live, but that way of closing the circle presupposes maieutic ends. Maieutic ends enter the picture even if the name I gave them does not.

Another way of closing the circle involves standard instrumental reasons for wanting some of our ends to be final ends. For example, one might be healthier eating broccoli as an end in itself—just for the taste—rather than for the sake of one’s health.<sup>14</sup> In this way, we can rationalize intermediate links in a chain of ends, and

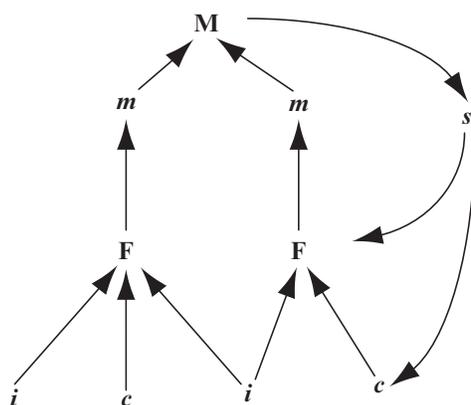


FIGURE 3.4. The reflective model, with no loose ends.

14. I thank Sara Worley for this point.

thus can rationalize ends that have final as well as instrumental aspects. We cannot explain terminal links in this way, though. The rationale for the end of eating broccoli presupposes a *persisting* further end of being healthy. By contrast, maieutic ends are achieved, not merely furthered, by a process of acquiring final ends. Their persistence is not presupposed. Maieutic ends can drop away while leaving intact the chosen end's rationale, which is what we need if we are to explain how even a link that terminates a chain of ends could have been rationally chosen.

Does this mechanism drive the emergence of everyone's corpus of ends? It is hard to say. In any event, the models are not meant to be depict an invariant feature of human nature. They are meant to depict a possibility, how a human being could be what (at least some) human beings seem to be; that is, they show how someone, starting from something as mundane as the survival instinct, could have reason to develop the complicated set of ends that beings like us actually have. The models also show how each element of an emerging corpus of ends can come to have its own normative force without any end's normative force being simply taken as given. Survival enters the second model as a biological given, but the third model depicts a process by which this biological given eventually becomes something more than that. The third model thus exhibits a striking completeness, since within it there are no loose ends.

One might be tempted to ask for a justification of the chain as a whole, but to justify every link is to justify the whole chain. The chain metaphorically represents a series of choices wanting justification in rational choice terms, together with inter-relationships that help them justify each other. When we forge a chain in such a way that no link is without justification (that is, no choice is without justification, including basic existentialist choices such as to seek survival or to cultivate ends beyond survival), then no issue of rational choice remains to be represented by the metaphorical chain as a whole.

Even as astute a critic of foundationalism as Bernard Williams joins foundationalists in embracing the least plausible implication of the foundationalist metaphor, namely the idea that starting points are what subsequently erected edifices must rest upon.<sup>15</sup> We should not be fooled by the metaphor. We should realize that our starting points can be—and in fact are—more like launching pads than like architectural foundations. A launching pad serves its purpose by being left behind. Even if we inevitably start by taking some end as given, it remains open whether a corpus of ends will always include ends taken as given.

Further, survival is not the only descriptively given end capable of launching the normative rocket. If the primeval desire for survival does not drive a person to develop a corpus of ends, something else might. A desire for happiness also can drive us to find things to live for, because we secure happiness by pursuing ends we care about for their own sake. (If we did not independently care about achieving those ends, then there would be nothing in the achievement to be happy about.) A primeval desire to avoid boredom might have similar consequences.<sup>16</sup> To launch the normative rocket, all we need is some sort of given desire that gives us reasons

15. Williams (1985) 113–17.

16. I thank Harry Frankfurt for this suggestion. See also Frankfurt (1992) 12.

to find things to live for. I used survival as an example of such a primeval desire, partly because it is in fact biologically given, partly because we can see how bare survival could start out as a biologically given final end only to drive the process by which survival evolves into a complex instrumental end, thereby leaving us with no loose (i.e., simply given) ends.

Perhaps it is curious that organisms would have a survival instinct in the first place. The reason they have it, presumably, is this. Organisms having no instincts other than an instinct to replicate would not be good at replicating and thus would have declining representation in successive generations. The goal of replicating, the ultimate biological given, is better served in organisms that combine or replace that goal with other goals: to survive, to have sex, to eat, and so on. Organisms are not guaranteed to have more offspring in virtue of having a complex corpus of ends, but whether the rule has exceptions is not the issue. The issue is whether the probability of replication goes up or down as a corpus of ends becomes complex.

Sociobiological speculation aside, it remains the case that, having posited an initial goal of bare survival, we can see why this goal would fall away as a driving force in just the way launching pads are supposed to fall away, to be replaced by a set of ends that add up to a commitment to survive in a particular way, as a being with a particular hierarchy of ends. In circumstances like ours, to have the thinner goal is to have reason to try to replace it with its thicker analog. (The reason is that the end of bare survival is too thin to sustain itself as a corpus of ends. Unless survival acquires instrumental value, our commitment to it will decay.) It would have been simpler to posit a thicker goal (of surviving in a humanly dignified way, for example, or of having a life filled with happiness) as a biologically given final end, but that would have made the model much less interesting and its premises much more controversial.

One might find it odd to model final ends as ends we acquire by conscious choice. But these models do not presume we acquire final ends only by conscious choice. We sometimes make choices unintentionally, habituating ourselves toward aiming at an end without realizing it. Some of our ends simply captivate us. Nor is anything necessarily wrong with acquiring ends unintentionally. When we find ourselves simply gripped by an end, we have no practical need to formulate a rationale for our ends. (There is a saying: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it.") Nevertheless, there might be a rationale for one's final ends regardless of whether one has reason to identify it. Final ends can give us something to live for regardless of whether we view them as serving that purpose.

Thus, the three models have a normative force pertaining not only to ends we acquire by deliberate choice but also to ends by which we are simply gripped. They explain not just how we could come to have final ends but how we could come to have *rationally chosen* final ends, and such an explanation can have justificatory force even when not descriptively accurate.<sup>17</sup> For example, if Kate is simply gripped by the end of learning to play jazz guitar, and did not choose it at all, then she did not rationally choose it either. Nevertheless, we can say her end is in some sense rational if the process of adopting it served an end she had at the time, and in particular if

17. Nelson (1986) discusses the relation between explanation and justification.

adopting the end gave her something to live for. And we can say this even when she neither chooses nor pursues the end with that further purpose in mind.

We have seen how final ends could be rationally chosen. In addition, the third model shows that a chain of ends need not terminate in an end that is simply given rather than rationally chosen. Note that these models rely only on the ordinary means-end conception of rational choice. The choice of instrumental, constitutive, final, and maieutic ends are all explained as means to further ends. (By definition, the *pursuit* of final ends cannot be so explained, but even so, the *choice* of final ends can be.) This shows that the means-end conception of rational choice has resources to go beyond the instrumentalist model. I do not assume means-end reasoning is the only kind of rationality there is. Rather, the point of the exercise is to show how even this narrowest of conceptions of rational choice has resources to explain the rational choice of ends, and further, to do so without leaving loose ends.

Aristotle said we deliberate not about ends but about ways and means.<sup>18</sup> But I believe we have maieutic ends. And if we deliberate about means to maieutic ends, then we deliberate about ends. It is through means-end deliberation with respect to maieutic ends that final ends are brought within the purview of rational choice. To belabor the obvious, though, only choices can fall within the purview of rational choice. Therefore, my aim here has been to show how final ends can be rational as choices, not as ends per se. Even when there is nothing to say about the rationality of ends per se, we saw, one can rationally choose final ends in the sense that choosing them can serve further ends.

This completes the formal description of my model, leaving us with practical questions about how to compare ends. The remaining sections (1) look at what can make one end better than another; (2) discuss the process by which we become devoted to our chosen ends—how they acquire independent normative force in our lives; and finally (3) consider whether it can be rational to organize our lives around purely self-regarding ends.

## 5. Comparing Ends

Having chosen to become a surgeon, Kate now has ends she can pursue. Still, she had alternatives. She could have tried for a career as an astronaut or a jazz guitarist, which raises a question. Did she make the right choice?

The funny thing is, few people are totally satisfied with their ends. Within an instrumentalist framework, that would be inexplicable, but it is true. People often are dissatisfied not only with the effectiveness of the means at their disposal; they have reservations about their ends as well. Maieutic ends (like choosing a career)

18. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1112b11–12. Aristotle believed we deliberate about constitutive as well as instrumental means, and some commentators (e.g., Irwin in the notes to *Nicomachean Ethics* [Aristotle 1999, 318]) suggest that if we deliberate about a constitutive means to a final end, we thereby deliberate about the final end. On the contrary, we may deliberate about whether to run 2 miles without deliberating about whether to get some exercise. We may deliberate about whether to wear a maroon tie without deliberating about whether to wear a suit. And so on. We do not get to a perspective from which to assess final ends merely by deliberating about constitutive means.

can be achieved in various ways (e.g., by various career paths) and many people easily can imagine how the process of choosing ends could have gone better. There is a purpose served by the choice of final ends. Some choices serve this purpose better than others.

Unfortunately, as the phenomenon of dissatisfaction suggests, there is no sure way to anticipate how well a given choice will serve its purpose. Even if there were a fail-safe recipe for choosing ends, that is not what we are looking for here. What we seek is not a recipe for choosing ends so much as a characterization of well-chosen ends. Asking what makes some ends better than others is like asking what makes some cakes better than others. It is not like asking for a cake recipe. I have ideas about what to look for when assessing ends, and those ideas can guide action, but the guidance is by heuristic rather than by recipe.

It may be an oversimplification, though, to think of recipes as analogous to algorithms. When a recipe tells us to bake something until it is golden brown, it is not giving us an algorithm.<sup>19</sup> We need to interpret the instruction in light of previous experience, and may need to repeat the procedure a few times before we fully grasp what the recipe is telling us to do. Conditions supporting rational endorsement can be like recipes so construed, telling us what to look for without being necessary or sufficient conditions.<sup>20</sup> And just as there can be more than one way to bake a cake, there can sometimes be other grounds for endorsement.

Consider another analogy.<sup>21</sup> When a stockbroker tells us to buy low and sell high, she has not given us an algorithm for portfolio management. Nevertheless, she still has stated a criterion of successful portfolio management. This section seeks to identify analogs of the dictum “Buy low, sell high.” Such things can guide action, insofar as they give a person a rough idea of what to look for, but do not add up to a decision procedure.

When comparing prospective career paths, settling on any one of them might fully satisfy one’s maieutic end of settling on a career. So this in itself is no reason to choose one career path over another. Still, there is the overarching end of finding something to live for, and this end is achievable in degrees. Accordingly, we might assess prospective ends in terms of *how much* they would give us to live for. This is a central question when assessing ends. We answer it (if we can answer it at all) in terms that are unavoidably subjective. An end gives us something to live for to the extent that pursuing it makes us feel we are doing something important.

The importance of our pursuits is partly a matter of opinion, of course. But so long as our goals grip us, making us feel our pursuits are worthy, it won’t be merely a matter of opinion that our goals give us something to live for; it will be a matter of fact. Although the conviction that our pursuits are important is subjective, it remains a fact that when we have such a conviction, we have something to live for. The sense of importance, or the possibility of developing it, is one thing to look for when assessing prospective ends.

19. The example comes from Irwin (1993) 327.

20. See chapter 8 for discussion of *supporting* conditions as alternatives to necessary and sufficient conditions as the goals of philosophical analysis.

21. This one is borrowed from Pettit (1991) 166.

The sense of having something to live for is not a simple function of the importance of the goals being pursued. For example, we might believe ending world hunger is more important than coaching Little League football. Yet, we might feel a sense of responsibility and achievement (adding up to a sense of having something to live for) when teaching Little Leaguers to punt, while feeling overwhelmed and frustrated when trying to end world hunger. Coaching Little Leaguers, therefore, might give us more to live for. I do not think one should try to literally maximize the importance of one's pursuits. When one's pursuits become overwhelmingly important, they swallow one's life rather than give it meaning. The sense of importance that best sustains our sense of having reason to live need not be the same as a sense of maximum importance.<sup>22</sup> Nor is the sense of having something to live for a straightforwardly quantitative notion. Sheer multiplication of ends gives us more to live for if we have time for them. But when we take on so many projects that they begin to detract from each other, forcing us to race from one halfhearted pursuit to another, we end up with less to live for rather than more. How much we have to live for has more to do with the wholehearted intensity we bring to our pursuits than with their number.

On the heels of that, we must acknowledge that the sense of importance can be misleading. A grand master may feel chess is important, while others see that his devotion to chess is stunting his capacity to find things important. He finds chess supremely important partly because his capacity to find anything else important is withering away. His choices shape him in such a way that he becomes someone who is maximally satisfied by the choices he has made. Even so, had he chosen differently, his capacity for satisfaction might have been greater. Therefore, we can question the choices of even a maximally satisfied chess champion if we have reason to think he has less to live for than he could have had.<sup>23</sup> He still has something to live for so long as he believes his pursuits are important, but he may have less than he could have had. Perhaps even worse is the thought that if he ever gets tired of chess, he will then have nothing.

We should, no doubt, be cautious about judging the goals of a chess grand master, for the risks associated with single-mindedness need not materialize.<sup>24</sup> Nor can we assume he would become capable of a more profound satisfaction if we forced him to give up chess. We should not expect people to be shaped in so intimate a way by other people's choices as by their own. We do not have the same psychological push to grow into choices others make for us as we have to grow into choices we make for ourselves. Force of habit and the drive to resolve cognitive dissonance do not attach in the same way to choices others make for us. So, some cases are hard to judge, and even well-grounded judgments generally do not weigh in favor of using force.

22. I owe this point to Harry Frankfurt. In his words, "A human life may be full of meaning for the person who lives it, even though it has no significant impact upon history or upon the world, and is therefore in that sense quite unimportant" (1992, 7).

23. Chapter 4 levels the same criticism against those, like Thrasymachus, who profess no reason to be moral. Being someone who has no reason to be moral can be a great misfortune.

24. Paul Hoffman wrote of a mathematician named Paul Erdős having "no wife or children, no job, no hobbies, not even a home, to tie him down. He lives out of a shabby suitcase and a drab orange plastic bag" (1987, 60). But Erdős lived to be eighty-three, and published around fifteen hundred papers. I owe this example to Walter Glannon.

Nevertheless, we do have grounds for judging alternatives, and some cases are easy. Suppose Bob wants to be high on drugs, and views being high as a good in itself. Even so, Bob might reject intoxication as an item to pursue. For one thing, it would compromise his capacities for pursuing goals in general. Bob would have less to live for in part because he would have less to live with. Not only would Bob be less capable of pursuing goals; he predictably would be less committed to pursuing goals. So, this is a clear case of a prospective end the pursuit of which would undermine Bob's sense of importance, thereby giving him less to live for.<sup>25</sup> Another point is that we feel our pursuits are important when we believe something or someone depends on us. When others depend on us, we are important to them. That, perhaps more than anything else, confirms that what we do is worth doing (especially when people appreciate our efforts). So, when Bob's drug habit makes it impossible for others to depend on him, it poisons a primary source of his sense of importance.

Thus, our chosen pursuits predictably affect our capacities, both for pursuing goals and, more fundamentally, for caring about goals. Further, an end may be incompatible (under actual or expected circumstances) with our other ends, and specifically with our unchosen end of being good at what we do. Playing jazz guitar is something Kate does for its own sake. However, since her friends all describe her playing as intolerable, she realizes the activity will never draw on her talents in a satisfying way. It will never give her a sense of competence, and so it cannot give her the unequivocal sense of importance she can get from practicing medicine. As a surgeon, Kate finds it important not only that her ends be pursued but that she in particular is pursuing them. Her particular talents make her well suited for a career in medicine, and so she finds it fitting to have the ends she has.

Combined with the question of how a prospective end would mesh with one's desire to be competent is a question about whether a pursuit will be sufficiently demanding. Kate wants ends she will not be able to meet too easily, for if she meets them too easily, maximal satisfaction will not really be satisfactory. She will not have lived for her goals in a sufficiently intense way. Consider builders of model ships. The end products are things of beauty to the builders. Otherwise, the activity would not be rewarding. Yet, the beauty of the end product is only part of what is rewarding in the activity, for the builders also want the activity to be a delicate and intricate challenge. If such ships took only a moment to assemble, then the point of building them would be lost. The nature of the activity is part of the point of aiming to create the final product.<sup>26</sup> Metaphorically, we want a cup that will not run over too easily, something it takes work to fill. On the other hand, we do not want a cup so big that we find it overwhelming. Challenges can be too small or too big. They have an optimal size (which by a different route brings us to the conclusion of chapter 2 that we can have reason to cultivate moderate desires). When an end is a real challenge, but one we are competent to meet, the end has key ingredients of a recipe for giving us a sense of having reason to live.

25. Particular pursuits also can regenerate one's capacity to find things to live for. Undertaking an exercise program, for example, often reinforces or restores a sense of overall purpose.

26. Suppose a person could do much good merely by pressing a button. Frankfurt observes: "A life devoted to bringing about that benefit, in which the only meaningful activity was pressing the button, would be less meaningful than one devoted to a final end that was of smaller value but that could be pursued only by complex and varied activity" (1992, 9n).

If none of Kate's alternatives leaps out as the final end whose adoption would give her something to live for, then she must proceed in a more deliberate fashion, asking herself which alternatives are truly feasible, which of them draw well on her particular talents and positional advantages, and so on. If we have a procedure for saying which prospective end will give us the healthiest, most intense, or most enduring sense of having reason to live—so much the better. Suppose, though, that there is no algorithm, and that none of Kate's alternatives grips her. This is not to say the choice does not matter. On the contrary, it may matter a great deal. Kate might be acutely conscious of how different her life will be if she chooses one alternative rather than the other, but the differences between the alternatives may not help her to rank them. Suppose she looks for a decisive reason to choose one end in preference to alternatives, and fails. Even in that case, something eventually emerges as the best she can do. If she cannot afford to wait, or if waiting does not resolve her ambivalence, then at some point the best she can do is pick something and get on with her life, hoping she will grow into that pursuit and become a person on whom that end acquires a grip. Therefore, it can be rational for Kate to choose an end even when she lacks decisive reasons for choosing that end in preference to alternatives.

This may seem to leave the choice of ends peculiarly underdetermined, but in fact, the same thing happens when we choose mere means to given ends. Suppose Bob wants to buy a car, but none of his prospective purchases emerges as the best means to his ends. Still, he sees that it is rational to pick an alternative and get on with it, because even if none of his prospective purchases is clearly best, he eventually reaches a stage when choosing an alternative becomes clearly better than not choosing one. Eventually, it becomes clear that staying on the fence is costing too much, at which point choosing something or other becomes unequivocally rational. There is no general algorithm for rationally choosing final ends. But there is no general algorithm for choosing means to given ends, either, at least not for beings like us. We have no recipe for rational choice.<sup>27</sup>

People sometimes pursue maieutic ends as if they expect to find uniquely suitable means to those ends. People once spoke, for example, of "looking for Mr. Right." What often is called for, though, is underdetermined choice. When given ends like survival first begin pressing us to find something to live for, that new end is too vague to guide us in ranking alternatives. When we realize this, we begin to understand one of the roles that underdetermined choice plays in a thoroughly rational life plan. Underdetermined choice launches the process of coming to have a thoroughly rational life plan.

It is in the process of choosing ends that our lives and thus our corpus of ends becomes a particular framework for ranking alternatives in a nonarbitrary way. As one develops increasingly well-defined images of oneself and one's goals, one develops increasingly concrete criteria for judging whether a prospective end is really something for oneself in particular to live for. But we do not start our lives with such criteria. Nor are they revealed by reflection. We know only so much about ourselves. And in the beginning, there is only so much to know. As we become too reflective to be sustained by a goal of bare survival, we become reflective enough to choose goals

27. In chapter 2, I offered an analogous argument for the rationality of underdetermined choices of means to given ends.

that go beyond bare survival. In time, our corpus of ends conceivably may come to be thoroughly justified, but it cannot start out that way. The process by which a circle of ends completes itself is a process that takes time.

That is one reason why, in abstraction from the context provided by a particular agent's corpus of ends, it is so difficult to say anything concrete about which ends the agent should choose. Still, this section discussed several ways in which we compare prospective ends. It explained why we would be wrong to interpret the question of how to compare prospective ends as a question that can be answered only by giving a recipe for rational choice. I considered examples of the elements of reasoned judgment about prospective ends. I also showed how rational agents might proceed when reasoned judgment is inconclusive, as I think it often is.

## 6. The Possibility of Devotion

I explained how, when we achieve a maieutic end by choosing a final end as an item to pursue, the maieutic end does not persist. Having been achieved, it no longer exists as an item to pursue. If this is right, then one cannot be pursuing a chosen end as a means to the maieutic end, for one no longer has the maieutic end. Final ends are chosen as, but not pursued as, means to maieutic ends. They really do take on a life of their own.

Here is the problem. Although particular maieutic ends do not persist, the overarching maieutic end could.<sup>28</sup> For example, Kate does not keep trying to settle on a career when she has already settled on one, but she may well continue to seek things to live for even though she already has things to live for. The overarching end of finding things to live for cannot be satiated in the way particular maieutic ends can be.

This seems to cut against my argument that so-called final ends cannot have an ongoing means-end relation to maieutic ends. Final ends replace particular maieutic ends as items to pursue, but they do not replace the overarching maieutic end. And if the overarching maieutic end persists, then we could be pursuing our allegedly final ends not so much for their own sake as for the sake of the one maieutic end that endures. Accordingly, there is some doubt here about whether my model's positing of an overarching maieutic end, intended to explain the choice of final ends, leaves room for final ends at all.<sup>29</sup>

In response, we can admit that the overarching end persists, but it persists only in the sense that, unlike more particular maieutic ends, its satisfaction is a matter of degree. And if this is the sense in which the overarching maieutic end endures, there are two things to say. First, even an overarching maieutic end conceivably could be attained and thus not persist as a further end to which purported final ends could serve as mere means. We can envision reaching a point where we already have so much to live for that, if we had an opportunity to take on a new project that would give us

28. I thank David Kelley for noticing this.

29. One might suppose this argument does not get off the ground because Kate's career, say, cannot plausibly be construed as a means to the further end of finding more to live for. She lives for her career, but it is not part of her search for things to live for beyond her career. I am not so sure. The day-to-day activities that make up her career might well be part of a search for things to live for—a search for patients to help, for puzzles to solve in her research, and so on.

a great deal to live for, we should regretfully decline, for our hands are already full. (Unfortunately, it is possible to go beyond this point without knowing it. Fear of not being sufficiently busy drives some people to overload themselves with projects, and the consequent dilution of time and energy leaves them unable to do anything in a wholehearted way. In the end, they have less to live for rather than more.)

I do not want to lean too heavily on this point, however, for although such satiation may actually occur, I want to say that even when satiation does not occur, and thus even when the overarching maieutic end persists, an end initially chosen as a means to a maieutic end can still become a final end. Accordingly, the second thing we should say is that even when the overarching end remains unsatiated and thus persists in degrees, an end whose choice gives us something to live for can still take on a life of its own. Consider how people become devoted to their chosen ends. When Kate settles on a particular spouse, she can become devoted to him for his sake—devoted to him as a particular person, not just as a convenient occasion for goal-directed activity on her part. If Kate's devotion persisted merely as a means of having something or someone to live for, then her devotion should cease as soon as it no longer serves the purpose of giving her something to live for.

So when Kate loses her spouse in a car accident, her devotion to him no longer serves its alleged purpose, which suggests she should erase her devotion and go back to where she started, with a clean slate and a once-familiar maieutic end of settling on a spouse—on someone to whom she can devote herself. But Kate does not do this. She can't. Devotion does not work that way. Kate may remember a time when she liked to say there are "lots of fish in the sea," but having lost her spouse, the breadth of choice she once perceived will never again present itself in the same way. That part of her life is now empty, but it is not the same emptiness that once could have been filled by a process of choosing someone or other as a spouse.

The point of the story is that we can reach a stage when we are heavily invested in the particular ends we have chosen, so heavily invested that the corresponding maieutic ends cannot easily be resurrected as items to pursue. If we cannot live for the sake of the particular ends we have already chosen, we may not be able to live for the sake of substitutes, either. We cannot always wipe the slate clean and seek to choose a final end as if we had not already chosen one. This is part of what underlies the thought that our attitude toward a prospective end typically changes after we adopt it as an end, and thus our grounds for choosing it will not be the same as our subsequent grounds for pursuing it.

Metaphorically speaking, particular compartments in our lives initially are given shape by maieutic ends. These compartments wait to be filled by a choice of final ends. As we choose, the compartments are reshaped by what fills them—by the process of growing into our choices. In time, a once-amorphous shape conforms to a particular chosen end, so that alternative ends that once could have fit into that compartment no longer can. Thus, if the chosen end that once filled a compartment is somehow lost, one might simply be stuck with an empty compartment.<sup>30</sup>

30. Extending the metaphor, we might say compartments have a certain elasticity. A compartment contoured to a particular lost end can return to an approximation of its more loosely defined original shape. Kate can recover the motivation she once had to pursue the maieutic end of settling on a spouse. But it takes time.

At that stage, it rings false to say one's ongoing devotion to the particular end was a mere means of having or getting something to live for. The truth is that one came to live for the particular end, period. The end acquired a genuinely independent status, and its status as a final end is not affected by the fact that, in other compartments of one's life, one is still trying to settle on goals to pursue so that one will have more to live for.

We might wonder why would Kate let herself grow into a commitment so deep that it becomes independent of the end she originally achieved by choosing the particular object of devotion? Why risk becoming so devoted to an end that it takes on a life of its own and becomes a final end? Presumably because that kind of devotion gives Kate more to live for. Kate's career and her spouse give her so very much to live for partly because the depth of her commitment to them has gone beyond considerations of how much they give her to live for.<sup>31</sup>

We also might wonder whether the overarching maieutic end itself is a final end. It could be; the categories are not mutually exclusive. Even so, it is importantly unlike other final ends. Kate's other final ends guide her choice of means. Although her need to find things to live for pushes her to make choices, that need does not guide her choices in the way her decision to pursue a career as a surgeon guides her subsequent choices. Nor does her end of finding things to live for make her feel she has things to live for in the way her final ends do.

For a similar reason, there is a problem with thinking of happiness as an end. If my student says she wants to be a professional philosopher, it sounds like she has something to live for. But if she says all she wants is to be happy, it sounds like finding something to live for is exactly what she needs. Happiness is something she hopes for, but not something to live for. She values happiness, yet the fact remains that she will become happy not by adopting happiness as an end, an item to pursue, but only by adopting, pursuing, and achieving other ends, items worth pursuing for their own sake.<sup>32</sup>

For the sake of argument, though, suppose we say the overarching maieutic end is itself a final end, an unchosen final end. Would that threaten my theory? No. The real threat—the threat discussed in this section—consists of the argument that my model leaves no room at all for final ends, and thus cannot begin to explain how final ends could be rationally chosen. I responded to this threat by showing that the model allows for, and even gives reasons for, the process of coming to view ends as worth pursuing for their own sake.

## 7. The Inhuman Rationality of *Homo Economicus*

I argued that although final ends are pursued for their own sake, their choice can be a means to what I call maieutic ends. Moreover, a corpus of ends need not have loose ends, ends we must take as given. On the contrary, a corpus of ends can evolve into something of which every member has a rationale. Later sections asked two

31. On the instrumental value of noninstrumental emotional commitment, see Frank (1988).

32. I thank Carol Rovane for suggesting both the example and the point it exemplifies.

further questions. First, is there a procedure for choosing among prospective ends? Probably not, but even if there is no such procedure, people still have various common-sense criteria by which they often (if not always) manage to sort out which of their options will give them something to live for—which of their options will grip them with a sense of life’s instrumental value. Second, when an agent cannot sort out which prospective end best meets common-sense criteria for choosing among ends, is it nevertheless possible for the agent to make a recognizably rational choice? Yes, because even then, agents can see that their corpus of ends is better served by picking something than by picking nothing. When the best one can do is pick something, hoping to grow into the choice, then choosing to pick something and get on with one’s life is eminently rational.

Finally, a comment on how this model of rationality bears on the task of developing a conception of characteristically human self-regard, a conception that can help us make sense of our lives as moral agents. The conventional instrumentalist conception of rational choice sometimes is combined with a substantive assumption of mutual unconcern (i.e., that rational agents are immediately concerned with no one’s welfare but their own). This combination produces a model of rational agency that has become notorious in the social sciences: *Homo economicus*. By hypothesis, *Homo economicus* is purely self-regarding.<sup>33</sup>

It is commonplace to note that the *Homo economicus* model, so defined, does not accurately describe human agents. Like *Homo economicus*, we have preferences. Unlike *Homo economicus*, we have preferences directly relating to the welfare of others. Some may regard this as controversial. Psychological egoism is the thesis that all human behavior is purely self-regarding. Responding to obvious counterexamples, defenders of psychological egoism sometimes say we act in apparently other-regarding ways only because we reap “psychic” rewards from helping others. As philosophers well know, psychological egoism thus embellished becomes airtight at a cost of becoming literally inconsequential. It does not tell us that soldiers will never give their lives for their countries or that people will never make anonymous donations to charity. It does not predict that Ebenezer Scrooge will never buy Bob Cratchit a Christmas turkey. It offers no testable predictions. Instead, it avoids having false implications by having no implications whatsoever. It merely expresses a determination to stretch the concept of self-regard as far as necessary to fit all behavior, no matter how diverse observed behavior actually turns out to be.<sup>34</sup>

Insofar as there is any real content to the claim that we get psychic rewards from helping others, we can admit that, of course, we tend to feel good about helping others. But this fact does not begin to suggest that our real objective is psychic benefit rather than other people’s welfare. On the contrary, there can be no psychic reward

33. This is the *Homo economicus* model as it enters into the fundamental theorems of welfare economics. Models incorporating (or claiming to incorporate) other-regarding preferences also are referred to sometimes as *Homo economicus*, but the term is used here in its narrower sense.

34. Most of the professional economists I know do not make this mistake. They construe psychological egoism not as true but rather as a useful working hypothesis. Not all human action is driven by self-interest; nevertheless, we often arrive at a better understanding of observed behavior by looking for motives of self-interest.

for helping others unless we care about others. Imagine Bob helping someone across the street and then saying to her, “Other things equal, I would rather you had been hit by a bus. Unfortunately, helping you is the price I have to pay in order to reap psychic rewards.” The fact that we get psychic rewards from helping others *proves* we are directly concerned with the welfare of others. The mark of a purely self-regarding person is not that he really wants to help others but rather that he really doesn’t.<sup>35</sup> That is the obvious and much celebrated difference between *Homo economicus* and us.

The less obvious and more interesting difference is this: *Homo economicus* does not have *maieutic ends*. *Homo economicus* wants to maximize profit; the question of how *Homo economicus* developed or settled on such an end does not arise. (The end did not develop; it was stipulated.) But whereas *Homo economicus* deliberates only about alternative means of achieving stipulated ends, we deliberate about ends themselves. We sometimes stop to wonder whether an end like maximizing profit is worth having. We have self-regarding ends, to be sure, but they are not given to us in the same way they are given to *Homo economicus*. On the contrary, we shape ourselves and our ends as we go. We are the outcomes as well as the makers of our choices.

Admittedly, *Homo economicus* is a useful model in the social sciences. But we are not *Homo economicus*, and what is good for us is not the same as what would be good for *Homo economicus*. Thus, *Homo economicus* is a poor model of rational choice even when self-interest is all that matters, for even then there is a crucial difference between *Homo economicus* and beings like us. The difference is this: we need to worry about our goals in a way *Homo economicus* does not. *Homo economicus* does not have to work at maintaining an attitude that his goals are worth living for, but we do.

This essay revises “Choosing Ends,” *Ethics* 104 (1994): 226–51. Reprinted by permission of the University of Chicago Press.

35. For a classic critique of psychological egoism/hedonism, see Feinberg (1981).