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# INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 A CHANGE OF HEART

RITING about his experiences in the Spanish Civil War, George Orwell tells this story. He had gone out to a spot near the Fascist trenches from which he thought he might snipe at someone. He waited a long time without any luck. None of the enemy made an appearance. Then, at last, some disturbance took place, much shouting and blowing of whistles followed, and a man

... jumped out of the trench and ran along the parapet in full view. He was half-dressed and was holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran. I refrained from shooting at him. ... I did not shoot partly because of that detail about the trousers. I had come here to shoot at "Fascists"; but a man holding up his trousers isn't a "Fascist," he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don't feel like shooting at him.

Why did Orwell put down his gun? We have a general theory of action that ought to be of use to us here. The theory says that people's actions issue from their beliefs and desires, that to explain what someone did we need to know only what he believed and what he wanted. Suppose that some person wanted this and believed that to get it he had to do that. The belief and the desire together were his reason, and the reasons a person has lead him to do what he does.

<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, "Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War," in *A Collection of Essays* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), p. 199.



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Orwell's story doesn't fit this mold. As Orwell tells it, he was ready to shoot. What he believed and what he wanted prompted him to do it, and he would in fact have fired if the man's trousers hadn't been down. Yet seeing the man half naked changed no beliefs that Orwell had. He had known all along that, under their pants, Fascists were like himself, that they were "fellow creatures." Nor did it change what he wanted. He had not wanted to shoot fellow creatures and he didn't now cease to want to shoot Fascists. But if his beliefs and desires were such as to lead him to shoot if it weren't for those pants, some other factor, neither a belief nor a desire, must be brought in to explain why he didn't. His reason for refraining from shooting can't just have been some belief and desire.

Orwell admits that his behavior may be puzzling, and so he comments on it. It wasn't the detail about the dropped trousers that stopped him but what that detail revealed. He says he had wanted to bring down a Fascist but that "a man holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist.' " This would make no sense at all but for those inside quotes – these are seen-in-this-way markers and they tell the story. Of course the man up ahead was a Fascist, but with his buttocks flapping as he ran, he couldn't be seen as a Fascist. At least he couldn't be seen as a Fascist by Orwell, so Orwell reports. Flushed from his trench without any warning, the man was caught with his ideology down and was "visibly" a fellow creature. The Fascist half naked was "visibly" human. His personhood trumped his politics.

The question is, what stayed Orwell's hand? A part of the answer may be clear enough. He had formed a new understanding of what he would have been doing. He now saw his shooting that soldier as firing a gun at a fellow human. Yes, but how did that new understanding connect with the beliefs and desires he had? And how did it block the action he says he had been waiting to take?

We will put these matters off. Let me here say only that Orwell's story is not unique. Many other wartime memoirs



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speak of similar experiences.<sup>2</sup> Nor does this sort of thing happen only in war and on battlefields. The new understanding or "seeing" needn't even be of any other person. Here are some lines from a recollection of village life in Victorian England. The author is speaking of his boyhood days:

We loved to go down into that . . . [sawpit]. It was always moist and cool; there was a perpetual odor of sawdust, and large yellow frogs often peered out at us from chinks in its slab-lined walls. Once . . . I saw a large frog, seated on its haunches, staring at me. . . . With the thoughtlessness common to boys, I raised a stick to strike it, when instantly it covered its eyes with its hands, as though dreading to see the blow that it was powerless to avert. The act was so unexpected and surprising, so truly human in character, that I was at once ashamed, and dropped my stick.<sup>3</sup>

The boy had wanted to hit a target and it may be he still wanted this. But a frog hiding its face in fear can't be seen as just a target. It is "visibly a fellow creature, similar to yourself," and you don't feel like hitting it.

### 1.2 A DIFFICULT CHOICE

These stories speak of self-restraint. They speak of a person being deflected from a harsh purpose he had. The person involved is shown to be turning from coldness of heart to compassion. It sometimes happens the opposite way. Say that the soldier in Orwell's report, not knowing he was seen, stopped to pull up his pants. Suppose he went on to button his tunic. This had the Fascist insignia on it, and that brought Orwell, hidden and watching, back to the fact that the man was an enemy. It called him back to the duties of war, and he took aim and fired.

- 2 Michael Walzer discusses some cases; see his *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 138–43.
- 3 Walter Rose, *The Village Carpenter* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1988), p. 3.



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The motive factor in this hypothetical story is of the same sort as that above: a sudden recall to a neglected truth, a reminder of something known all along, a refocusing of attention.

Or take a very different situation. Here neither restraint nor letting go is at issue, nor any grasp of the fellow-personhood of some other. The report is by Jean-Paul Sartre and is about a young man Sartre knew during the German occupation of France:

His father was quarreling with his mother and was also inclined to be a "collaborator"; his elder brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940 and this young man, with a sentiment somewhat primitive but generous, burned to avenge him. His mother was living alone with him, deeply afflicted by the semi-treason of his father and by the death of her eldest son, and her only consolation was in this young man. But he, at this moment, had the choice between going to England to join the Free French Forces or of staying near his mother and helping her to live. . . . Consequently, he found himself confronted by two very different modes of action. . . . He had to choose between these two.4

What course the man took Sartre does not say. Nor does he say what prompted that choice, what led him to do what he did. It could have been some new information, some change in the man's beliefs. He might have learned about the generals' squabbles or about their defeats in the field. That might have led him to lose faith in their army and so to look elsewhere to avenge his brother. Or he might have learned that his father was not a collaborator but a double agent, working at great risk for the Allies, and that his mother knew it and only pretended to be in despair in order to shield her husband, that indeed she was devoted to him and did not depend on her son at all. Learning this would have freed the young man and allowed him to leave with an easy conscience. Perhaps it did happen in such a way,

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism (London: Eyre Methuen, 1948), pp. 35-6.



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but it needn't have happened so. What this person did in the end needn't have issued from any change in his beliefs.

Nor need there have been any change in his interests, in what the young man wanted. He wanted to join the army and also to stay with his mother, and it may be that this remained firm. Even after he did what he did, he may still have wished he could have also done the other. Again we can make up stories, but again too, they needn't be true; nothing like that need have happened. Still, what sense could we make of this? If neither his beliefs nor his desires had changed, how did he come to decide what to do? How did he shift into action?

It may have happened like this. He woke up one morning to the sound of marching and of unfamiliar music. Some German soldiers were tramping by in the street, singing a German song. It struck him that while his country's enemies were parading their triumph, he was lying in bed. He then saw his staying at home as a sort of spinelessness. How different this shameful life of his was from that of his friends in the army! He resolved at that moment to join them.

Or perhaps this happened instead. He spoke to his mother one day of leaving. She said not a word, but her face went blank. She looked like a frightened child. He saw that his leaving her as she then was would be an act of abandonment. That jolted him, and it made up his mind.

In both scenarios, what eases the quandary is a sort of conversion. No new belief or desire enters but rather a new understanding of the situation. We may assume, in our sleeping-late story, that the man always knew he was passive. He had known it from the start but had never faced up to it. He had known too that joining the army was a patriotic obligation for him, but never before had that sunk in either, never before had he *seen* it that way.

Likewise in the second story. The man had of course known all along that joining the army meant leaving his mother, but never before had he seen his departure as an act of abandon-



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ment. Never before had he seen his staying as his filial duty. When he finally did see it so, his problem of what he should do was settled. It was the way he then saw things that did it, or his coming to have this new view — his conversion to it.

So it had been for Orwell. The sight of the soldier's nakedness awakened in Orwell a sense of his kinship. It led him to understand shooting the man as a kind of betrayal. Here the conversion had been to a new understanding of his shooting that man. But my point goes beyond Orwell's case, and beyond Sartre's too. It is meant to be general. The point is that a person's conduct doesn't derive from his beliefs and desires only. Sometimes a basic factor is how he understands some event or situation, how he has come to *see* it. In such a case, to explain what he does, we must bring out this factor.

#### 1.3 WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

A person may come to understand that he himself is a human being – or even that he is naked. The news may hit home with a jolt. After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, "the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons." The medieval commentator Rashi exclaims, "Even a blind person knows when he is naked! What then does 'and they knew that they were naked' signify?" This is just the sort of question we will be asking here.

Their coming to see that they were naked led Adam and Eve to make a big change; it led them to put on clothes. But the factor of understanding plays a role too where all stays the same. Orwell had often fired at Fascists — that had long ceased to be something new. On none of these many other occasions had he

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 3:7.

<sup>6</sup> Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary, Vol. 1 (London: Shapiro and Vallentine, 1929), p. 13.



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wanted to kill human beings, and of course he believed (he *knew*) that Fascists were human beings. He put their humanity out of mind. He focused on their being Fascists, and it was this that let him shoot. Without a grasp of how he then saw things, we can't account for his life as a soldier. We can't explain his usual conduct untroubled by qualms about killing people any more than we can explain his special restraint on that day.

So the cases above may mislead. We need to bring out the seeings factor not only where someone's habits give way or where he is moved to some change. We need to find it also in his reasons for staying the course, for persisting. It figures not only in explanations of the collapse of a marriage but also where we try to explain why a husband or wife stuck it out. Indeed, it figures fully as much where the marriage in question was happy, though how it figures there is obvious. No need to remark that a person sees *not* walking out as preserving the marriage. The obvious goes without saying, but it is there nonetheless.

What is this special sort of understanding to which we are calling attention? What is a cognitive *seeing* of a situation? ("What does 'they saw that x' signify?") How is it related to believing and wanting and through them to actual conduct? These are not mainstream philosophical questions, but there are people who have written about them, or about others that are closely related. Aristotle spoke of the role of a person's view (his "grasp") of his options of conduct. Kant did the same in his ethics, and so did some lesser historical figures. In his theory of knowledge, Kant held that seeing or understanding ("judgment") must enter to tell us how to apply what we know – he spoke of the "faculty of subsuming under rules" – and this idea finds an echo in our own century in the writings of Wittgenstein. We will want to consider some of these different ideas and approaches.

Other questions will then come up. The point to be made is that people's understandings are a major factor of what it is



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that moves them, that how they see their options and prospects plays a central causal role. How does this bear on the usual theory, that of belief-and-desire reasons? Would allowing for understandings avoid the problems that trouble that theory? Could it account for the results obtained in the experiments that have been run? And is the way things are seen or understood subject to any standards: can we see things rightly or wrongly, are there *improper* understandings? These questions will be taken up in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

What follows is about the motivation of action, about the reasons that people have. The study of human motivation is known as the study of *practical reason*. It has a very long history, and the next chapter will survey that. This will be done rather briskly, with no pretension to scholarship. The purpose will be to get some perspective on the subject as we now have it so that we can later remark on how our theory departs from the usual. Since the history we want to lay out has largely ignored the questions just raised, in this next chapter these questions are shelved. Toward the end of Chapter 2, we will consider how what preceded can be defended against certain critics and also what formal structure it has. In Chapter 3, we then get down to business. There we consider what might be done to expand on the current theory: we ask how that theory might be revised to allow for people's seeings or understandings.



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# PRACTICAL REASON

#### 2.1 IN THE BEGINNING

THE history of the theory of practical reason begins with some questions by Aristotle. How does it happen that "sometimes thinking is accompanied by action and sometimes not?" Aristotle notes that this question is similar to one we might ask about pure speculation, speculation about what things are like. In that, we draw a new belief from some others we have – that is, we do this where we conclude. Why do we sometimes conclude a reasoning and sometimes come to no conclusion? He suggests that this has to do with the pattern of the reasoning involved. It has to do with whether the reasoning reflects a proper argument form, the logic of speculative-argument forms being worked out in his theory of the syllogism. In a practical context too, all depends on the pattern of the argument, though there is the fundamental difference that

... [what] results from the ... premises is ... [an] action. For example, whenever someone thinks that every man should take walks, and that he is a man, at once he takes a walk. Or if he thinks that no man should take a walk now, and that he is a man, at once he remains at rest. And he does both of these things if nothing prevents or compels him. I should make something good; a house is something good. At once he makes a house. I need covering; a cloak is a covering. I need a cloak. What I need, I have to make; I need a cloak. I have to make a cloak. And the conclusion, the "I have to make a cloak," is an action.<sup>2</sup>

1 Aristotle, De Motu Animalium, 701a. 2 Ibid.



#### Practical Reason

As examples of reasoning, these are certainly odd. Still, there is a plausible thesis being presented in them. The passage proposes an answer to Aristotle's question about thinking and action. When does thinking lead to action? Thinking makes for action where the thinking is of a certain sort and connects with the agent's desires. More fully, the agent takes a certain action where he believes it is open to him and that his acting this way is required for something else, and he wants that other thing.

The passage sketches some practical inferences, reasonings leading to action, and it suggests that the premises of such inferences always are of two sorts. The premises bring out the agent's reasons, and so we might say that a person's reasons always have two sorts of components. I shall be speaking of beliefs and desires. Aristotle describes the first component (the belief part) as *thinking* or *knowing*. The second (desire) component he describes as *wanting* or *needing* or as what *should* be done—"I should make something good." (He sometimes speaks of *thinking* here too; "thinking" is then a catch-all for him.)

The inference or reasoning to which this refers needn't extend over time. There need be no lengthy deliberation, no nervous pacing of the soul. I want a certain something, I think this requires my doing *that*, and I now do it, all in a flash. No pause for reflection here. Where my believing and wanting move me, they may move me slowly or quickly. I may reflect on the movement or not. It may be conscious and fully monitored or impulsive or even unaware.

Suppose I now act on some reason or other. I will later search out that reason if I ask why I acted as I did. If I am asking about someone else, I will look for just this about him - I will look for the reason he had. So we have in a theory of reasons a part of a model of the explanation of action. For Aristotle, it comes to this, that to explain what someone did, we need to point out what this person wanted and what he thought he could do about it. Putting the theory formally: where a person wants x to be true and believes that x requires y (or presupposes it or is in