

## THE RATIONALITY OF PRUDENCE : A DISCUSSION ON NAGEL

MD. LUFTOR RAHMAN

### I

In *The Possibility of Altruism* (1978) Thomas Nagel is mainly concerned to provide answer to the following questions : (a) What is the basis or reason of altruistic motivation? and (b) Why altruism is a rational requirement of action? Before entering into the discussion of altruism, Nagel discusses prudentialism where he deals with similar questions, namely, (a) What is the basis of prudential motivation? and (b) Why prudence is a rational requirement of action? Nagel deals with prudence as a model for the treatment of altruism. He does so because both of them partly rely on the concept of a person.

Nagel says that prudence (an equal concern for all stages of a person's life) is a rational requirement of action. He derives prudentialism as a rational requirement of action from the concept of a person. The concept of a person underlying prudence is, Nagel holds, that a person is a temporarily extended being, that is a person persists over time as an identical person through out his life and all stages of present, past and future are equally real stages of his life. On the basis of his assumption that a person is a temporally extended being, Nagel holds that prudence is a rational requirement of action. "Failure to be susceptible to prudence", Nagel says, "entails radical dissociation from one's future, one's past, and from oneself as a whole, conceived as a temporally extended individual" (58). In other words, to reject prudence is to fail to conceive oneself as a continuous being and to fail to identify one's future self as a stage in that continuity. Dissociation from one's future self, that is, to neglect one's future interest simply because of a time gap is considered by Nagel as irrational.

Joyce Trebilcot (1974) dissents from Nagel's conclusion that to reject prudence is to fail to identify oneself as a continuous being. She argues that one

can be an a prudentialist even though one conceives oneself as a temporally extended being. She writes :

An aprudentialist who deliberately chooses the present well-being of the self over the future well-being of that same self is not adopting a non-standard view of the self, but only a non- prudential way of evaluating events (209).

Again, Richard Kraut (1972) claims that the rejection of prudence is not always irrational. For example, a bias against the past and a bias towards the future is not irrational. He argues that it is rational to prefer that a pain be in one's past rather than in one's future, even though one conceives the past equally real to his future. Kraut mentions the following example :

Suppose someone suffers a slight loss of memory, forgetting whether he saw the dentist recently but remembering that he has recently made an appointment. He ascertains today's date and searches through his appointment book to determine whether or not the appointment is for the past or the future. If it is in the past, he assumes he has met it. Such a person might ask himself, as he looks through his appointment book, whether he prefers discovering that the appointment is in the past to finding that it is in the future. Surely, if he is like most of us, he would prefer that the pain be in his past.... this would be a common attitude, and not an irrational one (354).

Like Kraut, Derek Parfit (1984) also argues, with the help of a similar example, that it is not irrational to care less about one's past and to care more about one's future. For instance, it is not irrational to prefer a longer suffering in one's past to a shorter suffering in the future (163-67).

Kraut and Parfit have argued that the bias against one's past and the bias towards the future is not irrational. In this paper we will argue that the bias against one's future and the bias towards the present is not irrational. To put it more specifically, we will argue that it is not irrational to care more about one's present interest and to care less about the future interest (especially the interest of the distant future).

## II

Like many other thinkers, Richard B. Brandt (1979) explains prudential conduct in terms of a person's present desire. He says, "a person must have a

present desire to satisfy future desires" (84). The implication of this view is that a person's future interest cannot itself provide reason for prudential motivation. Nagel rejects this view. He writes :

The hypothesis that all links to the future are made by present desires suggests that the agent at any specific time is insular, that he reaches outside himself to take an interest in his future as one may take an interest in the affairs of a distant country. The relation of a person to temporally distant stages of his life must be closer than that. His concern about his own future does not require an antecedent desire or interest to explain it. There must already be a connection which renders the interest intelligible, and which depends not on his present condition but on the future's being a part of his life. A life is not a momentary episode, nor a series of such episodes (38-39).

Again, Nagel holds that if present desire provides reason for prudential conduct then prudence may not be rational because :

I may have reason now to do precisely what will ensure the failure of my future rational attempts; I may have reason to do what I know I will later have reason to try to undo, and will therefore have to be especially careful to lay traps and insurmountable obstacles in the way of my future self. A system with consequences such as this not only fails to require the most elementary consistency in conduct over time, but in fact sharpens the possibilities of conflict by grounding an individual's plotting against his future self in the apparatus of rationality (40).

The above passages suggest that Nagel derives prudentialism as a rational requirement of action and its motivational basis from his concept of a person. He believes that a person's ability to conceive himself as a temporally neutral being enables him to be motivated by his future interests. The implication of perceiving oneself as a temporally extended being is that he will not distinguish among the different stages of his life and will not bestow any special emphasis on the present stage simply because of time factor and consequently will be equally concerned to promote all of his interests : past, present and future. Hence, we do not need a present desire to explain the prudential motivation. If a person is a temporally extended being and all the stages of a person's future are equally real stages of his life then it is, according to Nagel, irrational not to care or to

care less about one's future. For example, it is irrational not to learn Italian when one knows that he will be in Italy six weeks from now. Why is it irrational? The reason is that if the person does not learn Italian before arriving at Italy, he himself will be worse off. If one cares for one's well-being, it is irrational not to care or to care less about one's future interest.

### III

We are challenging Nagel's view that it is irrational not to care or even to care less about one's future interest. We know that Nagel's claim is based on the assumption that a person remains identical over time and that all stages are equally real stages of his life. In this section, we shall argue that Nagel's concept of a person and personal identity fails to establish the claim that it is irrational to care less about one's future interest, especially the interest of the distant future.

Nagel develops his notion of a person (self) in *The View from Nowhere* (1986). Here he identifies a self with something that underlies the psychological state. What is it that underlies or is the source of psychological states? Regarding this matter there is disagreement among philosophers and psychologists. Many believe that a simple, permanent, thinking spiritual substance, namely, Cartesian ego or soul which is a separately existing entity from both physical and mental entities underlies our psychological states. According to this view, the relation among the different stages of a person's life is numerically identical. If so then it is irrational not to care or even to care less about one's future, since there is no difference among the different stages of a person life.

But the notion of Cartesian ego is generally rejected on empirical ground. It is argued that there is no empirical evidence that the Cartesian ego exists. Nagel also rejects the notion of Cartesian ego. He denies the existence of soul and believes that the brain is the source of all mental states. Consequently he identifies a self or a person with his functioning brain and the identity over time in terms of the continuity of the brain. He says, "... the brain is the only part of me whose destruction I could not possibly survive"(40).

Nagel's claim that a person is his functioning brain and the continuity of the brain makes a person identical seems to be convincing. Parfit cites an imaginary example where he shows that if a person's brain continues to exist,

and to support consciousness, this person will continue to exist as an identical person, however great the breaks are in psychological continuity of this person's mental life. The following is a summary of the imaginary case :

Suppose I am undergoing an experimental operation. The doctor tells me that he will disrupt my psychological continuity by tampering with my brain. But I shall remain conscious while he operates. I shall also feel pain. I am therefore afraid of what is coming because even though my psychological continuity is disrupted, the resulting person will be myself. Next, the doctor tells me that while I am in pain, he will do something that will cause the loss of all of my memories. Still I am afraid of what is coming because even though I shall lose all the memories, the coming pain is nobody's pain but mine. It means that I shall remain the same person. The doctor then tells me that while I am in pain he will cause me to believe that I am Napoleon and I shall receive all of the memories of Napoleon's life. There is still reason for me to be afraid of coming pain. The memory of Napoleon's life will not cease my pain. Again, my pain will prevent me from noticing that I have the memories of Napoleon's life. Hence, I have no reason to expect the memories of Napoleon to end my pain.

In the above imaginary case, nothing that I am told seems to provide a reason to believe that I shall cease to exist during the operation. Besides, I have good reason to be afraid of the pain. My fear of pain does not seem to be removed by the other things, for example, losing my memories or receiving Napoleon's memory. This case shows that I have reason to fear future pain whatever mental changes precede this pain because even after all these changes, it will be I who feels this pain.

This example suggests that a person can be identified with his brain and a person continues to exist if his brain survives. This case supports Nagel's view. Now let us suppose that a person is his brain and the person continues to exist if his brain continues to exist. But does it follow from this that it is irrational, as Nagel holds, to treat unequally the different stages of a person's future life or to care less about one's future interest? We think that it does not.

We believe that Nagel's view that a person should care about his future interest is convincing because there is a continuity of the brain of a person. But it is not right to say that a person should pay equal concern for all stages

of his future interest. The reason we will offer to defend our position is as follows :

We know that the brain is changing constantly. But it does not change all of a sudden. There is an overlapping between the old and the new elements of the brain. When the new elements take place in the brain, the old dying elements are still there and have an influence on the new elements. Consequently, there is a continuity between the present and the future brain. But this continuity cannot provide numerical identity of the brain. As the brain is constantly changing hence, though a person's brain continues to exist, his brain today and fifty years later is not one and the same brain, since his brain will have many elements or cells common tomorrow but will have few elements common fifty years later. If brain is identified with person and the survival of the brain as personal identity then a person is more identical with the present and less identical with the future. So the fact that the brain is changing from time to time suggests that a person is not one and the same person at every stage of his life. There is a difference among various stages and "as long as there is a difference between a future self and a present self", Richard Fummerton argues, "then that difference can differentiate a desire for one's present self's well-being and desire for one's future self's well-being" (1990, 168). Hence, it is not irrational to treat present and future stages or interests of a person's life differently such as, if one cares more about his present interest and cares less about his future interest.

#### IV

In the preceding section we have argued that even though we take Nagel's view for granted that a person is his brain and a person continues to exist if his brain survives, yet it fails to support Nagel's claim that it is irrational not to treat equally all the stages and future interests of a person's life. In this section we will introduce another concept of a person and personal identity which also seems to be convincing; and on the basis of this concept of a person and personal identity we will argue that it is rational for a person to care more about his present interest and to care less about future interest.

Parfit cites an imaginary case which convincingly shows that a person can be identified with his psychological state or memory and a person continues

to exist if there is a continuity of his memory. In this imaginary case, Parfit shows that a person continues to exist even though his brain continuity is totally disrupted. The following is a summary of the imaginary case :

Suppose a person is undergoing operation. At the beginning of the operation the doctor replaces 5% of the cells in his brain and body with new materials. In the middle, he replaces 50%. At the end, he replaces 100%. The psychological condition of the person will not be affected at any stage. What this implies is that at the end of the operation the person will possess the same memory, though there is no physical continuity. Under this situation most person will agree that at the end of operation the resulting person will be identical with the person at the beginning of the operation.

The above imaginary case suggests that a person can be identified with his psychological state or memory. This view is also supported by David Hume (1978) and William James (1918). As James says :

If a man wakes up some fine day unable to recall any of his experiences, so that he has to learn his biography afresh, or if, he only recalls the facts of it in a cold abstract way as things that he is sure once happened; ... he feels, and he says, that he is a different person. He disowns his former me, gives himself a new name, identifies his present life with nothing from out of the older time (336).

We have seen that a person can be identified with his memory. Now Parfit holds that here are two features of memory of a person's life. These are a) connectedness of memory and b) continuity of memory. A person have connectedness of memory when he can recall most of his experiences vividly. On the other hand, a person have continuity of memory when he cannot recall most of his experiences vividly, but there is only the overlapping of his memories. These two kinds of relation (what Parfit calls relation R : Psychological connectedness and/or continuity) provides a person reason to be concerned about his future interest. But connectedness, according to Parfit, can hold to any degree. For example, I am very strongly connected with yesterday but less strongly connected with five years ago, since I have many memories of experiences that I had in the previous day but I have few memories of experiences that I had five years ago. On the basis of his conviction that

connectedness provides one reason to care about his future and that connectedness is a matter of degree, Parfit rightly says :

My concern for my future may correspond to the degree of connectedness between me now and myself in the future. Connectedness is one of the two relations that give me reasons to be specially concerned about my own future. It can be rational to care less, when one of the grounds of caring will hold to a lesser degree. Since connectedness is nearly always weaker over longer periods, I can rationally care less about my further future (313).

Again, Nagel says that as all parts are equally real parts, it is irrational not to care equally about all the parts of a person's life. Parfit rejects this view too. He rightly says that it is not irrational to care more about pains that are more intense even though all pains are equally real pains. Similarly, it can be argued that it is not irrational for a person to care more about the parts with which he is more connected even though all parts are equally real parts of his life. So Parfit's arguments convincingly suggest that a person can rationally care most about his present interest, since he is most strongly connected with his present self; and he can rationally care less about his future interest, since he is less strongly connected with his future self.

## V

We have seen that it is rational to care less about one's distant future interest because the connectedness of psychological states, or more specifically connectedness of memory (as well as of the brain), is a matter of degree and we are generally less connected with our distant future.

But a defender of Nagel can reply that there is a continuity of a person's brain and memory. This continuity makes a person identical over time. And as continuity is not a matter of degree, it is irrational for a person to care more about his present interest and to care less about his future interest.

We have argued earlier that even though the continuity of the brain (or memory) makes a person identical over time, yet it cannot make a person numerically identical, and hence it is not irrational if a person treats the different stages of his life differently. In this section we will see that the claim that the continuity of brain (or memory) makes a person identical over time is convincing.



but not conclusive; since the opposite view is equally convincing. And on the basis of this finding we will suggest that the thesis that it is rational to care more about ones present interest and to care less about his future interest is convincing.

Buddhists hold that there is a continuity of consciousness in human life. In reply to the question of whether a person remain identical over time Buddhists' hold that it is both right and wrong to say that a person remains identical over time. Like Heraclitus, Buddhists believe that everything is in constant flux. If so then, according to the Buddhists, it is wrong to call two stages of a person identical. But it is also right to call two stages of a person identical because there is a continuity (a current or process) of consciousness which makes different parts of a human life identical.

The question as to whether different parts of a human life are identical was put forth by king Milinda to Nagasena, to which the reply was, "neither the same, nor different". Nagasena compared the life of a man with a lamp and his consciousness with the flame of the light. His reply to king Milinda was as follows :

"Suppose a man, O king, were to light a lamp. Would it burn the night through"?

"Yes, the lamp might burn all night long."

"Now, is the flame that burns in the first watch of the night, the same that burns in the second"?

"No, not the same flame."

"Or, is the flame that burns in the second watch of the night, the same that burns in the third?"

"No, not the same flame."

"Then, is there one lamp in the first watch, and another in the second and another in the third?"

"No, the light comes from the same lamp all the night through."

"Just so, O King, is the continuity of person or thing maintained. One comes into being, another passes away. Thus, neither as the same nor as

another does a man on to the last phase of his self consciousness" (Kashyap J. Bhikku, 1949, 18-20).

Thus, according to the Buddhists, a person today and tomorrow is different in the sense that every moment he is undergoing change. Again, a person today and tomorrow is identical in the sense that there is a continuity of consciousness.

With a parallel argument it can be said that the continuity of the brain (or memory) makes a person identical over time is convincing. But the opposite view that the continuity of the brain (or memory) does not make a person identical over time is equally convincing. So the notion that a person remains a single person over time, as Nagel holds, is convincing but not conclusive; since the opposite view that a person does not remain a single person over time is equally convincing.

If the above view is right, and we believe it is, then our thesis that it is rational for a person to care more about his present interest and to care less about his future interest is convincing. Since the reason (that a person remains a single person over time) on which Nagel based his claim that it is irrational not to care or to care less about one's future is not conclusive, and as we have been able to argue that Nagel's opposite view is also convincing, hence our thesis that prudence is rational does stand.

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