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## Action for the Sake of ...: Caring and the Rationality of (Social) Action

*Abstract:* My aim is to understand at least some of the non-instrumental reasons we can have for action in a way that can provide a satisfying non-egoist account of ‘social actions’—actions undertaken for the sake of others. I do this in part by presenting, in terms of a discussion of the rationality of emotions, an account of what it is for something to have import to an agent (or, what amounts to the same thing, of what it is to care about that thing). I then extend this account to include our caring about others as agents, in part by revealing the way in which one’s emotional and desiderative responsiveness to another agent one cares about must be sensitive to her cares, so that one comes to share her cares. The upshot is substantial revision in our understanding of agency, both in terms of our understanding of the role emotions play in our agency and in terms of a careful extension of the scope of practical rationality to include what I call a ‘rationality of import’.

### 0. Introduction

In general, talk about that for the sake of which you do something is about one or another kind of reason for acting. One seemingly clearly understood kind of reason for acting for the sake of something else is *instrumental*: I buy groceries for the sake of eating—in order to eat. Yet instrumental reasons themselves presuppose a kind of non-instrumental reason for action, for they are always conditional: buying groceries is instrumentally good *if* eating is non-instrumentally good (and buying groceries is a necessary means to eat).<sup>1</sup> Such non-instrumental reasons, such as the goodness of a particular course of action, have typically been understood to be grounded in the ‘*pro*-attitudes’ of the agent, attitudes such as desire. However, in precisely what sense these attitudes are *pro*-attitudes—precisely in what sense these attitudes involve a kind of positive evaluation—is unclear and stands in need of careful explication and elucidation.<sup>2</sup>

The kind of non-instrumental reasons we have for action becomes particularly hard to understand when we consider cases in which we act for the sake of others,

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, it may be that eating is good only because it is instrumental to some further good. But the buck must stop somewhere.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as I have argued (Helm 2001), there is typically a disconnect between the kind of account of desire presupposed by philosophers working in metaethics, as being a full-blooded evaluative attitude, and the kind of account of desire offered by philosophers of mind concerned with the mind-body problem, as being merely a kind of goal-directedness not involving any evaluation at all. I shall return to this issue a bit in §1.

as when I bake a cake for my wife's birthday or play with blocks with my young daughter. Such actions I shall call, for want of a better descriptive phrase, '*social actions*'. Part of what makes understanding social action difficult is an implicit egoism that, together with an over-reliance on instrumental rationality, pervades our understanding of reasons for action. Thus: Why did I buy the groceries? Because I want to eat. Why do I want to eat? Because I'm hungry and want to avoid the displeasure associated with it. Or similarly: Why did I buy this computer? Because I want to write papers. Why do I want this? Because it brings me a sense of satisfaction—a kind of pleasure. In this way, the pro- (or con-) attitudes seem to devolve into *my* feelings of pleasure (or displeasure), the attainment (or avoidance) of which is a self-serving reason for action; such an account is in this sense *egoist*. However, such an egoist account of social action seems insufficient to explain the sense in which we act for the sake of others, for it seems incapable of understanding the idea that we act in such cases for someone else's sake, and not, or at least not merely, for any ulterior motive that supports our own aims. Yet attempts to offer non-egoist accounts of such actions never seem adequately to reveal how reasons for action that have their source in our cares and concerns can end up being non-egoistic.

My aim in this paper, therefore, is to provide an explicit account of at least some of the non-instrumental reasons we can have for action, including the reasons we can have for social action. I shall proceed by first (in §1) laying out an account of agency in general that makes sense of the kind of pro-attitude desires and other motivational states are. To do this, I argue, we need to understand desire, whether instrumental or non-instrumental, as a part of a broader evaluative attitude that is simultaneously responsive to and constitutive of the import things have to us—of our caring about them. In §2, I make explicit the way in which this account of caring is non-instrumental and so provides us with non-instrumental reasons for action, in part by carefully understanding the place instrumental rationality has within our caring. In §3 I sketch an account of caring about others, and fill this out in §4–5 in terms of an account for our sharing cares with others. This provides the basis for an account, in §6, of the rationality of action for the sake of others.

## 1. The Rationality of Agency and the Constitution of Import

I take as my starting point the Davidsonian idea that rationality is the constitutive ideal of the mental (Davidson 1980). The idea here is that what it is for something to be an agent, and so what it is for something to have mental states (belief, desire, etc.) in the first place, is to be so structured as to exhibit a pattern of rationality in its behavior. This idea has received its most prominent well worked-out expression in the work of Daniel Dennett (see, e.g., Dennett 1987), in which Dennett argues that the relevant kinds of rationality at issue here are epistemic and instrumental rationality. Thus, he argues, a chess-playing computer, in virtue of its displaying a pattern of instrumental rationality in the

moves it makes, is a *bona fide* agent, having beliefs and desires concerning the chess game and that rationally motivate its actions.

The trouble with this understanding of chess-playing computers as *bona fide* agents is that it fails to provide an adequate account of desire as a pro-attitude and so fails properly to draw the intuitively plausible distinction between the kind of quasi-agency characteristic of chess-playing computers and the more genuine agency of dogs. Although we might concede that such a computer has the end of winning the game in virtue of the way this end structures the computer's behavior via patterns of instrumental rationality, this falls short of an account of desire as a pro-attitude, in which the agent implicitly evaluates the relevant end as being *worth* pursuing—as having *import* of a certain sort. Unlike a dog, which *cares* about going on a walk, let alone a person, who *cares* about winning a chess game, the computer does not find its end worth pursuing. Thus, we ought carefully to distinguish the kind of rationally mediated goal-directedness exhibited by the computer from the sort of action, motivated by the evaluation of the worth of some end implicit in desire, characteristic of genuine agents. To be an *agent*, as I shall use the term, is to be a subject of import, to whom things can 'matter'. Understanding agency, therefore, requires understanding what it is to be a subject of import.

What is it for something to have import to a subject? Intuitively, at least part of what it is to have import is to be worthy of attention and action. That something is worthy of attention means not merely that it is permissible or a good thing to pay attention to it; rather, it means that paying attention to it is, by and large, required on pain of giving up or at least undermining the idea that it really has import to one. After all, it is hard (though, perhaps, not impossible) to credit someone with caring about, say, having a clean house even though he never or rarely notices when it gets dirty. This is not to deny that someone who genuinely cares may in some cases be distracted by other things that are more important and so not occasionally notice that it is getting dirty. What is required, however, is a consistent pattern of attending to the relevant object: in short, a kind of *vigilance* for what happens or might well happen to it. Similarly, that something is worthy of action means that acting on its behalf is, other things being equal, required if its continued import is to be intelligible: to care about a clean house requires not only vigilance for cleanliness but also a *preparedness* to act so as to maintain it.

The relevant modes of vigilance and preparedness necessary for understanding import are primarily emotional, desiderative, and judgmental, and I shall argue that we can understand the sense in which objects of import are *worthy* of attention and action in terms of the rational interconnections among these modes. Of particular importance are the emotions, which just are feelings of various kinds of import; consequently, being vigilant for import means feeling emotions when appropriate and not otherwise. To understand this more fully it is necessary first to establish some vocabulary.

The *formal object* of an emotion is the kind of import that defines that emotion as the kind of emotion it is. Thus, fear of something is to be distinguished from anger at the same thing insofar as in fear you feel it to be dangerous,

whereas in anger you feel it to be offensive; these implicit evaluations of something as dangerous or offensive are what make fear be fear and anger be anger and so are their respective formal objects. The *target* of an emotion is intuitively that at which the emotion is directed; more formally, it is that which gets presented in the emotion as having the evaluative property defined by the formal object. In this way, emotions involve implicit evaluations of their targets as having a kind of import. The *focus* of an emotion is the background object having import to which the target is related in such a way as to make intelligible the target's having the property defined by the formal object. For example, I might be afraid as the neighbor kid throws a ball that comes perilously close to smashing a vase. Here the target of my fear is the ball, which the emotion presents as having the formal object—as being dangerous; the focus of my fear is the vase, for it is in virtue of both the import the vase has for me and the relation the ball has to it (as potentially smashing it) that the ball is intelligible as a danger. Consequently, we can make sense of emotions as being *warranted* or not in terms of the implicit evaluation of its target, where such warrant has two conditions. First, the focus must really have import to the subject: my fear would be inappropriate if the vase were not something I care about. Second, the target must be, or intelligibly seem to be, appropriately related to the focus: my fear would be unwarranted if the ball had no real potential to damage the vase (because, say, it is made of light-weight styrofoam). Given these conditions of warrant, we can understand emotions to be a kind of sensitivity or responsiveness to the import of one's situation: emotions are essentially *intentional feelings of import*.

Emotions are often treated as if they were isolated states of feeling, but it is important not to overlook the complex rational connections they have to other mental states. In part, these connections are among the emotions themselves: to experience one emotion is in effect to *commit* oneself to feeling other emotions with the same focus in the relevant actual and counterfactual situations because of the import of that focus. Thus, if you are hopeful that some end can be achieved, then you normally ought also to be afraid when its accomplishment is threatened, relieved when the threat does not materialize, angry at those who intentionally obstruct progress toward it, and satisfied when you finally achieve it (or disappointed when you fail); moreover it would be inconsistent with these emotions to be afraid of achieving the goal, grateful toward those who sabotage it, etc. In this way, emotions normally come in broader patterns of other emotions sharing a common focus.

This talk of emotional commitments needs further explanation in terms of the kinds of patterns they normally involve, patterns that I shall now argue are both rational and projectible. Such a pattern is *rational* in that belonging to it is partly constitutive of the warrant of particular emotions. Thus, my feeling of fear focused on the vase as the baseball hurls toward it would be unwarranted unless I would also feel relief if the vase were to emerge unscathed, disappointment, sadness, or grief if it were destroyed, anger at the neighbor kid for his casual disregard of it, etc. (Precisely why this is so will be discussed shortly.)

In saying that the patterns are rational, I am not claiming that emotions be-

longing to the pattern are merely permitted by the import of their common focus. Rather, other things being equal, the failure to experience emotions that fit into the pattern when otherwise appropriate is a rational failure. Consequently, being such as to have these emotions in the relevant actual and counterfactual situations is rationally required, and the resulting pattern of emotions ought therefore to be *projectible*. This is not to say that one must feel emotions every time they are warranted in order for the relevant pattern to be in place; isolated failures to feel particular emotions, though rationally inappropriate, do not undermine the rational coherence of the broader pattern so long as these failures remain isolated. Nonetheless, particular emotions are *beholden* to the broader patterns of which they are a part in the sense that, by virtue of the projectibility and rationality of these patterns, there is a rational requirement to feel these emotions in the relevant circumstances and not otherwise.

At this point we can see that there is a two-way conceptual connection between something's having import and its being the focus of such a projectible, rational pattern of emotions. First, these patterns of emotions depend on import. As argued above, it is a necessary condition of the warrant of particular emotions, as intentional feelings of import, that their focus have import. This means in part that the commitment implicit in these emotions is intelligible as rational only in terms of that import: by feeling the focus to have import, I am in essence feeling it to be worthy of attention and so as calling for other emotions in the relevant actual and counterfactual situations. Particular emotions, therefore, presuppose import as their proper object.

It may now seem that import is conceptually prior to the projectible, rational patterns of emotions, but that would be to ignore the second conceptual connection between them. Insofar as something is the focus of such a pattern of emotions, the projectibility of that pattern ensures that one will typically respond with the relevant emotions whenever that focus is affected favorably or adversely. In effect, the projectibility of the pattern of emotions is an attunement of one's sensibilities to that focus, and this just is the sort of vigilance normally required for import. Yet these patterns of emotions make intelligible not only that one has a disposition to respond to the focus of the pattern. Insofar as the pattern itself is rational, one ought to have these subsequent emotions, and so one ought to pay attention to the focus of the pattern, precisely because the past pattern of one's emotions rationally commits one to feel these subsequent emotions when otherwise warranted. Consequently, the rationality of the pattern makes intelligible the idea that the focus of that pattern is worthy of attention. In this way, such a pattern of emotions is presupposed by import, at least insofar as to have import is to be *worthy* of attention: it is hard to make sense of someone as caring about something if he does not respond emotionally no matter what when it is affected favorably or adversely.

Of course, to have import is to be worthy of action as well. This is intelligible once again in terms of projectible, rational patterns, though we must extend our conception of these patterns in light of the rational interconnections among emotions and desires. On the one hand, if something is the focus of a projectible, rational pattern of emotions, it rationally ought to be a focus of desire as well,

both as something one is motivated to pursue or maintain and as the source of instrumental reasons for one's pursuit of means to such an end. This is because to display a projectible, rational pattern of emotions focused on a vase, for example, is to be committed to the import of that vase. Insofar as to have import is to be worthy of action, such a commitment must therefore be to have the relevant desires and so act on its behalf—such as for a display case to protect it from dust and errant baseballs. Consequently, a failure to have the relevant desires focused on the vase and so be motivated by these desires when otherwise warranted would be a rational failure. Moreover, a consistent failure to have these desires would mean that one is not prepared to act on its behalf, thereby undermining its import and so the rationality of the pattern of emotions. On the other hand, desire also involves a commitment to feel the relevant emotions. For to desire something is not merely to be disposed to pursue it as an end; it rather involves the sense that this end is *worthy* of pursuit. Consequently, if one did not in general feel fear when a desired end is threatened, relief when the threat does not pan out, etc., it would be hard to make sense of that end as having import and so as being an appropriate object of desire.

The upshot of these interconnections between desires and emotions is that the projectible, rational pattern in one's emotions must include one's desires as well. The projectibility of this pattern, therefore, makes possible not only one's vigilance for import but also one's preparedness to act on its behalf, and the rationality of this pattern makes intelligible its focus being not only worthy of attention but also worthy of action. This means that to have import just is to be the focus of such a projectible, rational pattern of emotions and desires.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, insofar as import is in this way constituted by such patterns of emotions and desires, we can properly understand something's having import to a subject to be a matter of her having a certain evaluative attitude toward it—of her *caring* about it.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that our evaluative attitude here is conceptually prior to import, for that would be to ignore the first conceptual connection I articulated between something's having import and the relevant projectible, rational pattern of emotions and desires. Rather, as we might say in a somewhat Heideggerian vein, import is *disclosed* by such patterns of emotions and desires; we might emphasize the first conceptual connection by talking about 'import' (as a kind of object to which our emotions and desires must be attuned as a condition of their warrant), and we might emphasize the second conceptual

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<sup>3</sup> Actually, things are a bit more complicated than I've indicated here in a couple respects. First, desires aren't the only mental state that can motivate action. Indeed, as I have presented it here, desires motivate action by virtue of their commitment to import. Insofar as emotions essentially involve the same commitment to import, they too can motivate action directly (including action not for the sake of any end): it is my fear itself that moves me to avoid the danger, and it is my joy itself that moves me to celebrate. Second, evaluative judgment itself has a place in the broader pattern of evaluations that are simultaneously co-constitutive of and responsive to import, and it is important in a full account to articulate the rational interconnections among evaluative judgments, emotions, and desires. Indeed, I have argued, these rational *interconnections* are a central part of what makes intelligible both an internalist conception of motivation and how deliberation about value is possible. For details on both these points, see Helm 2001; nonetheless, I shall ignore them here.

connection by talking about our 'caring' (as an evaluative attitude constitutive of the import things have). Indeed, for the rest of this paper, I shall use "import" and "caring" interchangeably.

I have claimed, following Davidson and Dennett, that to be an agent is to exhibit a pattern of rationality in your behavior. I have now understood the relevant kinds of rationality at issue in genuine agency to include not only epistemic and instrumental rationality, but also the sort of rationality characteristic of these patterns of emotions and desires: a *rationality of import*. Consequently, to be an agent is to have and exercise the capacities not only to believe and desire but also to have emotions and so be a subject of import.

## 2. Caring About Something for Its Own Sake

The account just given of what it is for things to have import to an agent—of what it is to care about them—is intended to be an account of caring about them for their own sakes, and not for the sake of something else. To make this plausible, I need to complicate the picture in two ways: first by articulating more clearly the role instrumental rationality has in the rational structure defining agency and second by specifying in more detail precisely how the relevant pattern of emotions and desires gets delineated, in part in virtue of the subject's understanding of the kind of thing the object of her concern is. Such a clarification of what it is to care about something for its own sake, in part through a contrast with caring about something for the sake of something else, will provide the needed background for understanding what it is to care about another agent as such, which I address in §3–6.

First, consider instrumental caring. One way to care about something for the sake of something else is instrumentally, as when I care about making oboe reeds for the sake of playing the oboe. This idea can be cashed out in terms of the following *instrumental principle*: if you care about some end, then you ought also to care for the sake of that end about what you believe to be the necessary means to that end, other things being equal. How should we cash out this 'for the sake of that end'?

The answer lies in the structure of the overall pattern of rationality at issue. Given that I believe that making oboe reeds is a necessary means to playing the oboe well, and given that I care about playing the oboe well, I ought to care about making reeds. This does not mean, however, that I ought to have a pattern of emotions and desires focused on making reeds. For to say that this is their focus is, I have claimed, to say that I am committed to the import this has for me for its own sake, in a way that is not contingent on my caring about playing oboe, and this is false: making oboe reeds is tedious, frustrating work that I would not want to do were it not for its instrumental connection to the import playing oboe has for me. Hence, my caring about reeds is a part of my caring about playing oboe, and I would not care about making them were I to stop caring about playing oboe. What is needed, therefore, is a way of making sense of this instrumental connection.

As I have argued elsewhere Helm (2001, especially §4.4), we can make sense of instrumental rationality by understanding my desire to make a reed, my frustration at splitting the cane while tying it onto the tube, my hope that this reed will enable me to play low notes softly, my disappointment that it does not, etc. to be focused not on making reeds per se but rather on playing oboe: it is my commitment to the import of playing oboe well that commits me, given the demands of instrumental rationality, to having this desire and to feeling these emotions and not my commitment to the import of making reeds (for I have no such commitment). Thus, we might say, such emotions and desires are ‘clustered’ around making reeds, but focused on playing oboe. This makes intelligible how I can care about making reeds not for its own sake but rather for the sake of playing oboe: the demands of instrumental rationality make this cluster of emotions and desires a part of the larger pattern of emotions focused on playing oboe and constitutive of import.

This has three important consequences. First, it confirms my claim that for something to be cared about for its own sake just is for it to be the focus of a projectible, rational pattern of emotions and desires. Second, it enables us to understand one way to care about something for the sake of something else in terms of the way instrumental rationality structures the pattern of emotions and desires constitutive of caring about that something else—of its import. Finally, caring about the means to some end is partially constitutive of caring about that end: generally to fail to care for the sake of an end about the necessary means to that end is, other things being equal, to erode the relevant rational pattern and so to fail to care about that end. This is because, given the very concept of an end as something to be achieved (by taking certain means), instrumental rationality must be a central part of the rational structure of the relevant pattern constitutive of caring.

Although instrumental rationality figures into the rational structure of the emotions and desires constitutive of caring about anything because of the way in which desire, and activity motivated by desire, must normally be an element of the relevant pattern, it is particularly important in defining the rational structure of emotions and desires constitutive of our caring about ends as such. Nonetheless, it should not be assumed that we only care about ends as such. This brings me to the second complication to my account of caring and agency: the way in which an understanding of the focus of your care informs your caring about it and is, indeed, central to that caring. For to care about something is to be concerned with its well being, and yet the idea of something’s well being makes sense only in light of an understanding of the kind of thing it is. This needs further explanation.

Consider, for example, my caring about my favorite water pitcher. On the one hand, I might understand it simply to be a functional item, a tool I care about because it enables me to get the job done particularly well. Thus, it might be just the right size, have a spout that pours well, be well balanced around the handle, etc., so that I prize it because of its usefulness: I care about it as a tool. In understanding the pitcher in this way, I delimit a conception of its well being with which I am concerned and to which my emotions and desires ought to be



responsive. So, as you carelessly swing the pitcher around I might be afraid that you will bang it on the counter top and damage the spout, for this is central to its functioning as the tool it is and in virtue of which I care about it; however, I may be wholly unconcerned if you scratch the finish, for in understanding it merely as a tool, I do not care about its appearance, so long as this does not affect its integrity as the tool it is.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, I might in caring about the pitcher understand it to be simply a work of art. Thus, its proportions, its color, the design etched into it, etc. all might make it an item of beauty, and I care about it as such. In this case, its appearance is everything. So, whether or not its handle is beginning to loosen, or whether or not it has developed a leak, may be irrelevant to me so long as its appearance is unaffected. Consequently, a person might care about the same object in different ways, or in only one of these ways, depending on her understanding of the kind of object it is. Caring is always caring about something as something.

It should not be presupposed that the relevant understanding of the focus of your care must always be explicitly articulated in judgment (though it may be). Rather, such an understanding may be *tacit* in the existing rational structure of emotions and desires constitutive of your caring about it. Thus, it may be that I come to discover that I care about the water pitcher merely as a tool by virtue of the fact that I am unconcerned by its becoming tarnished or scratched or dented. Indeed, such a discovery may even force me to revise my explicit judgments about how I care about it.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, as the name suggests, a tacit understanding is not one the subject needs to have explicitly articulated, nor need she be able to articulate it clearly when asked. At issue is not a discursive understanding, but a practical one, something like the way in which ordinary people understand what numbers are in being able to make use of arithmetic in their everyday lives: such an understanding is revealed in the way they generally conform their responses in particular circumstances to certain norms of rationality as when, for example, giving correct change or correcting mistakes when they are called to one's attention. Likewise, a tacit understanding of a pitcher as a tool is revealed in the way in which a subject generally conforms his emotions and desires to a certain rational pattern constitutive of caring about it as such.

One might object that this is viciously circular, for I have said both that one has an understanding because of the way in which the pattern of one's emotions and desires constitutive of caring about something as something is rationally structured, and that such rationality structures this pattern because one's understanding of something as something informs one's caring about it. Thus,

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that I care merely about having a thing—anything—with certain of its properties: that I care merely about having a good pitcher, or that I care about having a good pitcher merely as instrumental to my end of serving drinks. Rather, I might care about this particular thing itself, as is revealed in the fact that it is not fungible: not just any object with these properties will likewise be an object of my concern, as this is revealed in the way in which the pattern of emotions and desires projects into the relevant counterfactual or future cases.

<sup>5</sup> For more details on the rational interconnections among emotions, desires, and judgments and the ways in which our emotional feelings of import can correct our evaluative judgments, see Helm 2001; 2000.

one might ask, which comes first—the rational structure or the understanding? The answer is: neither. The account is circular, but not viciously so, for such circularity is a feature of any holistic account that takes seriously the idea that rationality is the constitutive ideal of the mental.

### 3. Caring About Other Agents

Thus far I have provided an account of caring in general: to care about something is for it to be the focus of a projectible, rational pattern of emotions and desires, such that one is motivated not only to feel and judge, but also to act accordingly. Indeed, I have argued, having the capacity to care in this way—being a subject of import—really is definitive of our agency. However, such an account of agency may seem egoistic insofar as it is the agent's own feelings that determine the imports things have; indeed, given that I have offered an account of emotions and desires as essentially pleasures and pains of a certain sort (cf. Helm 2002), it may seem that the account I have offered of import itself just devolves into pleasure and pain—as egoistic as you can get, it might seem. If this is right, then I have not, contrary to what I have claimed, offered an account of what it is to care about something for its own sake, or even of what it is to act for the sake of something that has import to one: one's cares, one's actions, it might seem, are always ultimately for the sake of oneself.

This is, however, a too hasty conclusion. Just because the account of what it is for something to have import to an agent is given in terms of that agent's own subjective responses does not mean that the actions motivated by such import are ultimately for the sake of the subject. In part that would be to ignore the first conceptual connection I articulated between something's having import and its being the focus of a projectible, rational pattern of emotions and desires (§1): import is that to which an agent's emotions and desires must be responsive as a condition of their warrant, and so something's having import is, in effect, for it to demand a certain response from her—whether that response serves to promote her own well being or not. Nonetheless, to rebut fully this charge of egoism, I shall now consider the way in which my account of caring can be extended to include caring about others, so that we can come to understand at least some actions motivated by such caring as performed for their sakes, not for the agent's own. That will be my aim in this section.

It might seem that the application of my account of caring to others—to other persons and to other agents more generally—would be straightforward: to care about someone is for him to be the focus of a projectible, rational pattern of emotions and desires. Thus, one ought to feel joy when things are going well for him, fear when he is threatened, relief when he emerges unscathed, etc.; moreover, one ought to be prepared to act on his behalf when this is called for by the circumstances.

However, this is surely inadequate as an account of caring about others insofar as what is at issue here is not simply the physical well being of the one you care about. For insofar as it is the agent I care about, at issue as well is how things

fare for him, and, as an agent, he will fare as the things he cares about fare: his cares are partly constitutive of his well being as an agent. This notion of someone's well being as an agent should not be interpreted merely to be his 'psychological well being', for that phrase suggests a scale of psychological health as a counterpart of physical health, as if all I am concerned with in my caring for him is his meeting a certain minimum standard of psychological health. Rather, what is at issue in caring about an agent as such is something like his 'happiness' as utilitarians use the term. Thus, if someone I care about cares about raising prize-winning Malamutes, he fares in part as his dogs fare, and so in caring about him I ought to attend to and act on behalf of his successes and failures in this aspect of his life. In particular, I ought to feel joyful when he (and his dogs) win a competition, sad or disappointed<sup>6</sup> when he loses, frustrated with and angry at the judge who rates his dogs much lower than they deserve because of internal politics of the American Kennel Association, etc. In this way, his frustrations, joys, fears, hopes, desires, etc. are in an important sense mine as well, for I care about his raising prize-winning Malamutes as a part of caring about him. Caring about other agents, therefore, requires sharing their cares, at least in a certain sense.

Of course, it is possible to care about agents without sharing their cares. Thus, someone might care about his dogs simply as showpieces, as items to be groomed (and, potentially, to be rented out for stud services), and so merely care for their physical well being and appearance. Such caring, however, is focused on what is only incidentally an agent, and is not the kind of caring I have in mind. It is also possible to care that something be an agent, to care about its status as an agent, in a way that is not focused only incidentally on its agency. Thus, a psychologist might care that in performing brain surgery on rats she does not destroy the rat's status as an agent and so make it useless to her experiments. However, this kind of caring about an agent is still too distant, too 'impersonal' (to stretch the use of that term), for my purposes here. For the kind of caring I aim to explicate involves a concern for the well being of the agent *for its own sake*, and not merely for the sake of something else, such as a psychology experiment or prizes from the kennel club. My vague talk of 'sharing another's cares' is intended to characterize this distinctive kind of caring about agents.

Nonetheless, this is still rather metaphorical and intuitive, and the account needs to be spelled out in much greater detail. In line with my earlier account of caring generally, providing this account will require articulating the precise rational interconnections of the patterns of emotions and desires constitutive of such caring. In particular, how is it that I can share the cares of an agent I care about (and, indeed, be rationally committed to sharing them by virtue of my caring about the agent) and not simply take them over for my own? And how does this amount to caring about the agent *for its sake* rather than for my sake?

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<sup>6</sup> This is disappointment in that failure, which should not be confused with disappointment in the person who fails. The latter emotion is what I call a 'person-focused emotion', insofar as it essentially takes persons as such as its focus; other examples of person-focused emotions include pride and shame. For more details on this distinction, see Helm unpublished.

One caveat before I begin. The account I shall offer of caring about others will be of caring about them *as agents*, not as persons. It should be clear that we persons can care about each other in a much deeper, more intimate way than merely caring about others as agents. For a person is not merely an agent but a moral agent and as such is subject to the norms of distinctive kinds of practical and theoretical rationality; as I have argued elsewhere (Helm unpublished), this means that caring about persons as such will be distinct in kind in a way that can properly be called *loving*. Consequently, in order to make clear that it is merely caring about agents as such that is at issue here, I shall for the most part use dogs as my central example. Nonetheless, this should not obscure the fact that when we care about another agent as such, she very often happens to be a person.

#### 4. The Rationality of the Import of Agents

To make sense of how in caring about agents as such we must 'share' their cares, it will be helpful to clarify the role an understanding of the focus of your care as an agent has in structuring the rational pattern of emotions and desires constitutive of your caring about her.

Compare the owner who cares about her dog simply as a showpiece with the owner who cares about his dog as 'a member of the family'.<sup>7</sup> In the former case, let us assume, the owner cares about the dog merely as an object of aesthetic appreciation: other things being equal, she is strongly motivated to groom him, admires him when he looks good, gets angry at the kid who puts bubblegum in his hair (and worries whether it will come out), etc. Here is a pattern of emotions and desires focused on the dog and constituting his import for her in such a way as to reveal her understanding of the dog merely as an aesthetic object. Thus, she does not care at all about his being an agent except insofar as this bears on her concern with his appearance. Although she might hope that this time her dog does not get nervous around the buzz of the hair trimmer and although she might be glad that he readily devours the egg she gives him daily for a shiny coat, her concern with the dog's well being is limited by this understanding of him as an aesthetic object and does not extend to the dog's happiness. So, in a sense she cares about the dog for his own sake, albeit merely as an aesthetic object.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> I have used scare quotes here because no one in her right mind would literally treat a dog as a member of the family—as a full-blooded person or as having the potential to be a full-blooded person. As I indicated above, caring about persons as such is distinct in kind from merely caring about agents as such, and my concern here is merely with the latter. (To see how this account can be extended to make sense of caring about persons as such—of *loving* persons—see Helm unpublished.)

<sup>8</sup> It might be tempting to say that she cares about the dog merely as a part of her caring about appreciating beauty, so that the focus of the pattern of emotions and desires here is not the dog himself but rather beauty or the activity of aesthetic appreciation. Although this may be true in some cases, it need not be true in all. For if the focus were merely beauty or the subject's aesthetic appreciation, then we would expect instances of beauty or objects of that appreciation to be more or less fungible: if another dog is just as beautiful as your own, then

By contrast, the second owner, who cares about his dog 'as a member of the family', has a very different set of concerns and so cares about her in a very different way that is informed by his understanding of her as an agent. For given this understanding, both his conception of the dog's well being, of how things fare with her, and so the way in which he in caring about his dog is responsive to what happens to her will be very different from that of the first owner. Of course, the first owner will likely also have an understanding of her dog as an agent; after all, she is not blind to his agency. However, her understanding does not inform the way in which she cares about his dog, whereas his does. What does this mean?

As I argued in §1, what it is to be an agent is to have and exercise the capacities not only to believe and desire but also to care about things, and how a particular agent fares depends in large part on how the things she cares about fare. This means that the well being of an agent as such is determined in large part by that agent through her exercise of the very capacities in virtue of which she is an agent.<sup>9</sup> Because to care about something is to be committed to its import and thereby to its well being, to have one's caring informed by an understanding of its focus as an agent is to be committed to the well being of that agent as such and, therefore, to be committed, other things being equal, to caring about what she cares about as a part of caring about her. This does not mean that in caring about my dog, for example, I must normally care about the very things he cares about for *their* sakes, such that I must normally exhibit a pattern of emotions and desires focused on these things. Rather, in caring about them as a *part* of caring about him, I care about them only because I care about him: I care about them for *his* sake. In general, the pattern of emotions and desires constitutive of caring about the agent as such must normally include emotions and desires 'clustered' around the things she cares about; to fail in general to exhibit such clustering in one's emotions and desires—to fail in general to care about what she cares about for her sake—is to fail to care about her as an agent.

Notice that, in spite of the different ways in which I have described them, there is a close analogy between (a) the connection between caring about the agent as such for her sake and caring about the things she cares about as a part of caring about her, and (b) the connection between caring about an end and caring about the means for the sake of that end. In the former case, I described the connection in terms of the way in which one's (possibly tacit) understanding of the focus of one's care structures the pattern of emotions and desires constitutive of one's caring and thereby one's commitment to her well

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you ought to care about it just as much as yours, other things being equal. Yet this need not be the case: the owner might develop a special attachment to her dog and so care about *him* in a way she does not care about other, equally beautiful dogs, even though she cares about his dog predominately as an aesthetic object. Here it is most perspicuous to say, as I do in the text, that the owner cares about the dog himself, for his own sake, albeit as an aesthetic object.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, how an agent fares depends as well on its physical and psychological health, but these in turn depend to a large degree on what it cares about, both because agents normally care about their own health and because being healthy is instrumental to achieving ends they care about.

being. In the latter case, I described the connection in terms of the role a certain kind of rationality has in structuring the pattern of one's emotions and desires constitutive of caring about something. We can now see that these just are two different ways of describing the same phenomenon. Thus on the one hand, to have instrumental rationality thus structure the pattern of one's emotions and desires constitutive of one's caring about something just is for one to understand it as an end to be achieved and so to care about it as an end. Likewise, for instrumental rationality to fail to structure this pattern is, other things being equal, to fail to care about it in a way that is informed by an understanding of it as an end. On the other hand, to understand something as an agent in a way that informs one's caring about it just is for the pattern of emotions and desires constitutive of that caring to be structured by a distinctive kind of rationality in addition to the bare rationality of import described in §1. This is because of the way in which any understanding involves rational commitments to subsequent thoughts, feelings, and actions; in particular, for an understanding of something to inform one's caring is for these rational commitments to structure the pattern of thoughts, feelings, and actions constitutive of one's caring.

If caring about an agent as such—caring about someone or something in a way that is informed by a (possibly tacit) understanding of her as an agent—involves a 'distinctive kind of rationality' connecting one's caring about the agent for her sake to one's caring about what she cares about as a part of caring about her, what sort of rationality is this? It is a kind of rationality arising from the commitments one undertakes to something's import as an agent, commitments which call for and make warranted the relevant subsequent emotions and desires and which make the absence of these subsequent thoughts and feelings irrational, other things being equal.<sup>10</sup> In effect, it is a kind of rationality defining a distinctive kind of import things can have—an import of agents: it is a *rationality of the import of agents*.

So far, I have not done much more than to name this distinctive kind of rationality and to locate its place within a broader rationality of import as a necessary part of caring about something as an agent, for were such a rationality of the import of agents to fail to structure the projectible, rational pattern of emotions and desires constitutive of one's caring about something, one would not care about it *as an agent*. This is analogous to locating the place instrumental rationality has within a broader rationality of import as a necessary part of caring about something as an end. Of course, I have sketched some of what is required for caring about something as an agent in terms of the idea that one must share her cares in the sense that one cares about the things she cares about as a part of caring about her.

Nonetheless, the following objection might be raised at this point. It may seem as though my account requires that in caring about an agent one cares about everything she cares about—blindly and uncritically. Thus, if someone you care about cares about smoking, then even though you may find this abhorrent,

<sup>10</sup> Of course, more work needs to be done to cash out just which subsequent emotions and desires are relevant here and so to cash out more precisely what kind of rationality this is; this will be my aim in §5.

in order to care about her you must care about (her) smoking and so share her frustration at not being able to find her cigarettes, her dismay at rising prices, etc. My account, however, is not committed to this implausible claim, for my claim is that in caring about an agent as such, you ought generally to care about what she cares about, other things being equal. In cases in which caring about something she cares about conflicts with something else you care about (including, for example, her physical well being), so that you cannot coherently care about them both, then other things are not equal, and you ought to give up one or the other. On its own, this need not mean that you give up caring about her, for isolated failures to have your emotions and desires cluster in the right way need not destroy the pattern constitutive of your caring about her; however, if your not caring about what she cares about becomes the norm, then that pattern may be undermined precisely because it fails to be structured by the rationality of the import of agents, and it can be hard to sustain the idea that you genuinely care about her as an agent.

Clearly, however, this does not mean that in caring about my winning a race, I cannot also care, as a part of caring about someone else, about his winning it too. Although it is inconsistent that both he and I win the race, it is not inconsistent for me to care about both, and I may end up both glad that I won and disappointed that he lost—a kind of ambivalence that nonetheless does not involve any rational incoherence because these two emotions have different foci. By contrast, in the smoking case, my finding smoking abhorrent, so long as this is not simply confined to myself—my smoking—but rather extends at least to his smoking, cannot coherently coexist with my caring about his smoking as a part of caring about him.

## 5. Sharing Cares

I have argued that caring about an agent as such requires caring about the things she cares about as a part of caring about her. In effect, this is a kind of sharing of her cares, though it should be clear that such sharing need not last beyond my caring about her. Thus, were she to stop caring about something, or were I to stop caring about her, I would (other things being equal) have no reason to continue caring about it. This is a consequence of the sketch of an account I have given of such shared cares in terms of a rationality of the import of agents. Nonetheless, more needs to be said about exactly what is shared and how.

In sharing the cares of an agent I care about, I ought, other things being equal, to display a pattern of emotions and desires clustered around the things she cares about. This means that I ought generally to share her emotions and desires, as when I come to feel the disappointment of a colleague whose paper was just rejected. Such sharing of emotions and desires is, we might say, a kind of sympathy; nonetheless, it is a kind of sympathy that needs to be distinguished from other kinds of sympathy.

One kind of sympathy, one way in which we share emotions with others, is something akin to infection. For example, when you walk into a crowd of angry

people, you can find yourself being infected by their anger and so coming to be angry yourself, even though you may not know exactly what they're angry at or why.<sup>11</sup> A similar case involves the infectiousness of laughter, as when walking up on a conversation and hearing only the punch line of a joke, you find yourself genuinely laughing along with the others, even though you do not understand what is so funny. As the metaphor of 'infection' suggests, these are cases in which your coming to feel what others do is *arational*, a sort of reflexive response we find ourselves making and which we can prevent only with effort. By contrast, the kind of sharing of emotions and desires at issue in caring about an agent can be evaluated for its rationality, precisely because of the kind of commitment to the import of that agent one undertakes in caring about her. Thus, when the colleague I care about gets a paper rejected, I ought to feel her disappointment, other things being equal, and in the absence of compelling excuses I can be criticized for failing to do so. Moreover, unlike the infection cases, I ought to feel her disappointment even when, for whatever reason, she does not, as when, for example, she is too busy preparing for class to let the news 'sink in'.

What makes intelligible this idea that the sharing of emotions and desires as a part of caring about another can be evaluated for its rationality is that, unlike the infection cases, these emotions and desires have determinate foci. For the warrant of emotions and desires is intelligible only in terms of the import of their foci and the connection between these foci and the targets of the emotions and desires. It should be clear, however, that there is a subtle difference in the focus of my emotions and desires and those of the agent about whom I care. For she is disappointed about not getting her paper accepted because she cares about the paper (or advancing her career, or ...) for its own sake; hence the focus of her emotion will be the paper itself. By contrast, my disappointment need not be because I care about the paper for its own sake, but rather because I care about the paper for *her* sake—because I care about her. Thus, *she* is the focus of my emotion. In short, my disappointment is rationally connected to my caring about her in a way that her disappointment is not. Nonetheless, such emotions and desires are nonetheless shared insofar as, given the way my emotions and desires track hers, the coincidence both of the kind of emotion (as anger or fear, for example) and of its target is far from accidental; indeed, it is rationally required.

Another kind of sympathy to be distinguished from that which is central to caring about an agent as such stems from a distinct kind of caring. Thus, you may care about dogs quite generally, and so care about this particular dog by,

<sup>11</sup> One might think that the phenomenon I have just described concerns not emotions but moods: you become infected by the crowd's angry mood. However, moods are not simply objectless emotions, or even emotions that have relatively less determinate targets than emotions; rather, moods persist longer than occurrent emotions (but not as long as the evaluative attitudes, such as caring or loving), and they affect the ways in which we feel emotions and desires in ways that emotions do not. Thus, in being in the sort of sad or depressed mood characteristic of mourning, one's emotions and desires focused on other things are, other things being equal, dampened or suppressed in a way that can explain the phenomenology of things seeming generally 'gray'. For more on this notion of the dampening of emotions, see Helm, 2001, especially Chapter 4; for more on how this contributes to an understanding of moods, see Helm/Babych/Markovic unpublished.



for example, feeling her pain or distress and being thus motivated to act on her behalf, or by sharing her joy as you meet and greet each other. This sort of caring, which is directed at particular individuals only insofar as they are instances of a certain kind, is focused not on those individuals but rather on the kind. Although such caring about the kind must involve sharing emotions and desires with particular instances of that kind, the motivation for that sharing and so its intimacy are very different from the kind of caring about a particular individual that is my focus in this paper. For, as this identification of the object of caring indicates, the focus of these emotions and desires will be different in the two cases—the kind (dogs in general) in the one case, and the individual (this dog, Fifi) in the other.

This means that in caring about the kind my concern is with the well being of dogs as such, and so with the physical and psychological capacities and characteristics shared in common among all dogs. Thus, when a dog—any dog—is injured and so has a physical impairment, my caring about dogs generally ought to be expressed, other things being equal, in my sympathetic feelings directed at this dog: I ought to be pained by her injuries as a part of my caring about dogs generally, and so I ought to be motivated to act on her behalf. This will be true whether or not I have encountered this dog before, and so my concern for her well being is delimited by my understanding of the well being of dogs quite generally. By contrast, unlike my caring about the kind, in caring about this dog I do not in any way commit myself to caring about all dogs (let alone all agents). Rather, my caring about this dog gains increased intimacy through my commitment to what she cares about, for in caring about this dog as an agent, my concern for her well being is delimited largely by the dog herself through the exercise of those very capacities in virtue of which she is an agent. The increased intimacy therefore stems not merely from the increased knowledge I must have of this dog in order to respond to circumstances that affect her well being as thus defined, but, more significantly, from the history of interactions I must have with this dog rather than with dogs generally, in virtue of which I can be said to be truly committed to her import and so truly to care about her. This needs further elaboration in light of an explicit account of the kind of interaction at issue here.

## 6. Social Action

So far I have focused my attention mainly on the way in which caring about an agent as such commits one to having certain *emotions* focused on that agent but clustered around the things he cares about. It should be clear that this pattern of shared emotions is central to the history of interactions constitutive of such caring. Yet we must not forget that desires as well are central to our caring about others as agents, and these desires normally ought to be shared as well. Thus, when my dog, whom I care about, cares about a certain end, such as retrieving a bone that was knocked under the couch, I ought, other things being equal, to care about this for his sake, come to feel the desire to retrieve it,

and thereby be motivated to act accordingly. In being motivated to act, it need not be that I simply retrieve the bone for him, thereby taking over the activity from him; other things being equal, this will be appropriate as an expression of my caring about him only when what he cares about is simply that the end state obtain, rather than that it obtain through his agency.<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, I might merely offer him encouragement, saying, "That's right; go get it!" as he bats at it with his paw, or I might help him by moving the couch aside, so that his retrieval of the bone is achieved through our joint agency. In each of these cases, my sharing his concern with his bone as a part of caring about him leads not merely to shared emotions and desires but also to what I have called '*social action*'.<sup>13</sup>

To understand social action better, consider a case of shared social action. My dog likes playing tug-of-war for its own sake (and not because it furthers some other end of his, e.g.). Of course, this is something he can do on his own, as when he plays with large fallen tree branches, and I can help him play this way by rigging up something for him to pull on (by, for example, providing him with a thick rope securely staked to the ground, something I have reason to do by sharing his instrumental desire to have something to pull on). Yet this is also an activity we can share, each pulling on opposite ends of a rope or stick, and my engaging in this activity is motivated by my caring about him. Thus, I care about the things he cares about, including, in particular, engaging in this activity, as a part of caring about him. In caring about engaging in this activity I have a motivating reason actually to do so. It should be clear, however, that this is not an activity I am thus motivated to engage in all by myself, without my dog around. For in being motivated by my caring about him, my concern is ultimately with his well being as the agent he is, and so my engaging in this activity is motivated by the contribution it makes to his well being as such.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, my engagement in the activity must involve paying special attention to him and to the way my participation in this activity impacts his well being.

One might object that this account falls short of being an account of action for the sake of others. Thus, it may seem as if my action is motivated instrumentally—and so egoistically—in that I act this way because I desire to enhance or maintain his well being and believe that acting like this will do so. In reply, there is no doubt that it is possible to interpret particular actions in this way. However, such an interpretation would be implausible when placed within

<sup>12</sup> I suspect this fine-grained distinction in the content of the desire is not one that intelligibly applies to dogs, except, in a kind of case I shall discuss shortly, where the dog desires simply to engage in the activity for its own sake, as when it tears up a stick.

<sup>13</sup> It should be clear that the desires I share with another agent in this way need not motivate me all the way to action, though as desires—as this sort of response to import—they must motivate me to some degree by providing me with a reason to act. Whether or not I act on this desire depends in part on what other desires I have as well as my preferences and priorities, as these are reflected by my current circumstances. For more on this, see Helm 2001, especially Chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, it can be that in order fully to share some activity with an agent I care about, I must first practice that activity by myself; this practice will be motivated instrumentally in a way that, as I argue in the text, my sharing the activity is not.

the context of my overall interaction with my dog, for it fails to acknowledge the way in which this activity is essentially embedded within a broader pattern of response constitutive of my caring about him. Consequently, my motivation stems from the rationality of the import of agents that structures this pattern: acting this way just is a part of caring about him, not merely instrumental to satisfying a desire for his well being that may be motivated otherwise than by my caring about him, as when you pay me to look after him.

In short, in caring about an agent as such, it is this agent, as the focus of one's caring, that motivates both one's sympathy and social action. Such motivation, moreover, stems from the rationality of the import of agents—from the commitment one has to care about the things she cares about as a part of caring about her as an agent. In these respects, therefore, caring about an agent as such is much more intimate than caring about an agent as merely an instance of a particular kind.

## 7. Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to understand at least some of the ways in which we act for the sake of something else—some of the reasons we have for acting. Central to understanding such reasons, I have argued, is an account of agents as essentially subjects of import and so as simultaneously both responding to and constituting import by virtue of the projectible patterns of emotions and desires with a common focus delineated by a rationality of import. In this way, I have shown how import things have for us can be the source of non-instrumental reasons for action, in the process clarifying the place instrumental rationality has within this rationality of import. Moreover, I have extended the account of caring to include caring about other agents as such in light of a distinctive rationality of the import of agents. Such an account of how we can care about certain things for the sake of some agent as a part of our caring about that agent enables us to understand as well social action—action for the sake of another—as being non-egoistic.

The upshot is a substantial revision in our understanding of agency, in at least two ways. First, we must understand agents not merely as having capacities for belief and desire, with emotions tacked on, if at all, as an optional extra we might do just as well without. Rather, I have argued, to be an agent is essentially to have the capacity for emotions as well, for it is only as such that agents are intelligible as subjects of import. Second, we must broaden our conception of the scope of rationality, as encompassing not only epistemic and instrumental rationality but also a rationality of import; anything else would provide too thin a conception of that for the sake of which we act, especially in cases of social action.

Nonetheless, it is clear that more work needs to be done to flesh out the variety of ways in which we can act for the sake of something. In particular, the account of acting for the sake of others has been limited both by my focus on agents as such (rather than on persons) and by my use of dogs as my central

example. For by focusing in my examples primarily on our caring about dogs, I have obscured an important part of the phenomenon of caring about agents as such: reciprocal caring. As seems likely, dogs cannot recognize, let alone respond appropriately to, the beliefs, desires, and cares of another (since that would require that they have a deeper understanding of rationality and agency than they manifestly have); *ipso facto*, dogs cannot come to care about what you care about as a part of caring about you, and so they cannot care about you as an agent. This is not, of course, to deny that dogs can care about other agents, for they surely do in many cases care about their offspring and their owners, just that they cannot care about them as agents: although my dog has a concern for my well being, his understanding of my well being is not informed by an understanding of me as an agent having cares of my own. Nonetheless, reciprocal caring is not only possible but quite common at least among us persons, and it is distinguished by the increased intimacy it brings to the relationship between the two parties. This needs further explication, but that must wait for another time.

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