

**Jan Bransen**

## **Anticipating Reasons of One's Own**

### **1. Introduction**

We sometimes are faced with difficult choices. When we are, we have to make up our minds, and we often do so successfully. In making up our mind we might be said to be engaging in a process of appropriating some of the reasons that figure in the situation in which we find ourselves. That is, making up one's mind is a matter of turning some of the reasons into *reasons of one's own*. I might be thinking, for example, about whether to accept a job offer, whether to turn in my son who has committed a crime and is now hiding from the police in my attic, whether to undergo psychoanalysis or – much more down to earth – whether to order a pizza or the lasagne, and what I shall be doing in making up my mind is determining which of the reasons that could motivate and/or justify my behaviour are *mine*, that is, are the ones I should like to commit myself to by acting on them. I shall be weighing the normative force of each reason against the others, and when my mind is made up, and wholeheartedly so, I shall be able to say which reasons I am happy to identify as *my own reasons*.

If this characterization of making up one's mind is on the right track, we might improve our understanding of the very idea of a reason of one's own by developing a philosophically plausible account of what happens in the process of making up one's mind. I intend to contribute to the development of such an account in this paper, but from an unexpected angle, one that allows me to highlight a crucial but easily neglected or misunderstood feature of making up one's mind. This angle is that of the philosophy of education. I shall be looking at the kind of problems parents face when they have to make up their own mind by making up their child's mind, that is, when they have to make a decision for their child that will affect the direction their child's life will take, and want to do so in

their child's best interest. The feature my approach allows me to highlight is that the process of making up one's mind is a process of *appropriating* reasons, a process that begins with a mind that *lacks* reasons of its own and ends with a mind that *has* reasons of its own. This feature of deliberation or practical reasoning is easily neglected or misunderstood, and therefore deserves dedicated attention.

In order to understand this characterization of making up one's mind as a process of appropriating reasons, it is important to emphasize the role played by the phrase 'of its own'. After all, I obviously do not mean to say that when faced with a difficult choice we engage in deliberation without any reasons whatsoever. In fact, most of the time we begin with far too many reasons, but contradicting ones, reasons pushing or pulling us in different directions. In an important sense, however, these reasons need not be *our* reasons. This may be so in two ways. In an extra-personal way, the reasons I'm aware of might be general reasons of various kinds (moral, economical, professional, rules of conduct, etc.), and with respect to them my deliberations are about whether *I* should act on them in this particular case. And in an intra-personal way, the reasons I'm aware of might be what Frankfurt would call first-order desires. These are motivational states, but precisely in the situation of having to make up one's mind these desires figure, in a way to be understood much more sophisticatedly, not only as motivational states, but also as internal objects of attention. With respect to them, my deliberations are about whether any one of them deserves my wholehearted support as a motivational state that moves me all the way to action.

Understanding deliberation as a matter of turning some of the reasons into reasons of one's own requires that we understand not only the ways in which we can begin such a process *without* reasons of one's own, but also what exactly we mean by saying that we terminate the process by identifying some of the reasons as *our own*. We could take this to be no more than a descriptive fact: by eventually acting on some of the reasons around I just show them to be mine. This could be a correct description in two different ways. Firstly, I might merely be interested in determining the *right* reason to act on, and I might accept as a mere consequence that determining this to be the right reason also turns it, emptily, into *my* reason. Thus, I might save a drowning child just because it is the right thing to do, without any thoughts about how this fits in my self-image. And secondly, whatever I think of myself and my motives, in acting as I do I simply display the reasons I act on, and display them, trivially, as mine.

But sometimes making up one's mind is a normative enterprise in which we take seriously our responsibility for our own motivational profile precisely because we care about

ourselves. Such cases are central to the argument of this paper. I shall be interested in the process of making up one's mind as a process exemplifying the values of autonomy and authenticity. That is, I shall be interested in deliberation not merely as a process directed at reaching the right conclusion *in general*, from nowhere and for no-one in particular, but as a process directed at reaching the right conclusion *for this person in this situation*. Such an understanding of deliberation is often relevant and important in daily life. After all, when I think about the job offer I think about whether *I* should accept it, because it is *me*, just as I might wonder about whether *I* should undergo psychoanalysis, for reasons having to do with *me*. Examples abound: it is *me* who will end up eating a pizza or the lasagne, not someone else or no-one in particular. And it is even true in an important sense that my choice about whether or not to turn in my son to the police is a choice about *me*.

Taking the perspective of the philosophy of education allows me to highlight the problems to be addressed in order to provide a plausible account of deliberation as a process of determining which of the reasons around are reasons of one's own. Taking the perspective of the philosophy of education introduces the following kind of examples: suppose your child turns out to have a really exceptional talent for gymnastics, tennis or the violin, and is absolutely delighted by an invitation from a renowned institution to devote her life to the study of what began as just a hobby. What should you do? What would be in her best interests? Or suppose, conversely, that your child hates to play the violin, but her teacher says she's just going through a phase of diminished interest that standardly belongs to the present level of her musical development, and that she will be most happy to have conquered once she gets over it. Again, what would be in her best interests? Or, suppose your child is torn between her friends who consider music and fashion much more important than chess, and her passion for this solitary mental game. Which side should you choose, if any? What would be in her best interests?

Framing the problem within the educational practice involves parents with paternalistic responsibilities and children with underdeveloped motivational profiles. Framing it thus has three advantages. First, it allows me to highlight the developmental character of making up one's mind. Secondly, it allows me to make a clear distinction between the important different roles of first-personal and third-personal perspectives on a person's own reasons.<sup>1</sup> And thirdly, it allows me to demonstrate the plausibility of a reversal of what is

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Scanlon (1998), pp. 126-135.

ordinarily assumed, namely that contrary to what we are used to thinking, we might gain a better understanding of self-interest through an understanding of (third-party) self-concern.<sup>2</sup>

The plan of the paper is as follows. I shall start from the assumption that seen from without, it makes a lot of sense to assume that reasons of one's own should be intimately connected to a person's best interest. That is, it seems right for the parents in my examples to try to determine what would be in their child's best interest. Determining this seems to come down to determining the child's reasons of her own. The advantage of starting from this assumption is that it provides me right from the start with a lot of philosophically sophisticated material. I shall use this material in Section 2 to present an apparently promising account of reasons of one's own based on the idea of a rational interest-defining desire. In Section 3, however, I develop two arguments designed to show this account to be seriously inadequate. In the final section of the paper, Section 4, I use these arguments to sketch the outlines of an alternative account of reasons of one's own based on the idea of the most valuable alternative *of oneself*.

## **2. The role of desires in determining a child's reasons of her own**

Contemporary philosophers standardly distinguish between three different types of theories about a person's best interest.<sup>3</sup> Hedonistic theories define a person's interest in terms of the amount of pleasure experienced by that person; desire-based theories define a person's interest in terms of the fulfilment of that person's desires; and objective list theories define a person's interest in terms of a set of goods that accrue to that person, of which at least some are independent of or prior to his desires.

Desire-based theories are the most popular and the most developed.<sup>4</sup> They are arguably better than hedonistic theories because they can account for what seems to make perfect sense: that persons might prefer other goods to their own happiness. Some might, for example, prefer being famous (even posthumously) to experiencing pleasure, or prefer being successful in activities that involve lots of pain (e.g. winning the marathon), or prefer the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Darwall, (1997).

<sup>3</sup> Contemporary writers typically refer to the distinctions made in Parfit (1984), Appendix I, pp. 493-502.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Griffin (1986)

flourishing of their children to their own happiness, or prefer knowing that their friends don't love them to enjoying their deceitful, pretended love. Taking a person's interest to be merely a matter of enjoying happiness is obviously much too narrow. This does not mean, however, that an adequate theory of a person's best interest could do without taking the quality of a person's experiences into account. After all, talking about a person's interest, rather than a person's worth, is talking about 'a value that *accrues to* a person and *exists in appreciation by* the person to whom it accrues', as Stephen Darwall notes.<sup>5</sup> And 'appreciation' is at least also an experiential quality, though obviously broader than enjoying happiness. Desire-based theories generally are capable of taking experiential quality into account precisely by being *desire-fulfilment* theories.

Although there are obvious problems for desire-based theories, on balance they seem to many philosophers to be not only more adequate than hedonistic theories, but also more promising than objective list theories. This follows from the fact that desire-based theories appear to be better at coping with the problems they give rise to than objective list theories. For consider one important class of problems for desire-based theories, viz. problems concerning their scope. Such problems arise from acknowledging that not all desires seem equally relevant to determining a person's best interest. Persons can have vicious, bizarre, insignificant, irrelevant and self-destructive desires that we certainly have reason to distrust as defining a person's best interest. Think, for instance, of a child's desire to tease the family pet, or to count the grains of sand on the beach or to touch a high-voltage electric cable. Objective list theories can be understood as attempts to prevent such problems by suggesting a list of goods a person's interest consists in, and 'knowing the number of grains of sand on the beach', for example, will not be on this list. However, an adequate desire-based reply to such problems is available as well. It requires the idea of 'informed' or 'rational' desires – desires a person would have, or would have reason to have, if she were fully informed about the desirability of the objects of those desires.<sup>6</sup> This idea leads to the informed desire account of interest, and such a theory would solve the scope problem. A person's best interest is a matter not of her desires but of her informed or rational desires.

Objective list theories face problems of their own. Such problems concern the status of the list, with respect both to its origin (who will be authorized to put items on that list?) and to its domain (whose best interest will be defined by this list?). And if we were to come up

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<sup>5</sup> Darwall (1997), p. 161.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Griffin (1986), chapter II; Smith (1994), chapter 5.

with an objective list with an undisputed status, it is likely that it would be far too general to be of any specific use. For Derek Parfit might be right in proposing that ‘to have knowledge, to be engaged in rational activity, to experience mutual love, and to be aware of beauty’<sup>7</sup> will be on the objective list, but it seems obvious that by saying this he is not saying very much – especially not to parents faced with difficult choices in educational practices.<sup>8</sup>

It is precisely with respect to being able to say something specific about a particular person’s best interest that a desire-based account promises to be most fruitful for our purposes. An objective list account might be best to specify general reasons: it is in everyone’s interest to create and maintain social and material conditions that will allow any child to develop fully and harmoniously into a mature human being. But once the conditions of welfare are qualitatively favourable to any child’s maturation, we need to turn to the specific child’s particularities in order to determine what would be in her personal best interest. And for that, it seems we cannot turn anywhere else but to her particular *desires*.

There is, however, a further complication. Besides turning to the child’s desires, we apparently should also pay attention to her capacities. This is so because a person’s best interest is on a desire-based account not a matter of her desires alone, but a matter of the *fulfilment* of those desires. And a person’s limited capacities might frustrate the fulfilment of certain desires, namely those desires the fulfilment of which crucially depends on the quality of the person’s performance. Thus, for example, the fulfilment of the desire that my favourite soccer team wins the game does not depend on anything I do, but the fulfilment of my desire to score the winning goal does depend, at least partially, on what I am able to do. If I am not on the soccer team, the desire to score the winning goal will not survive as an informed desire, but if I am a younger member of a neighbouring amateur club I might have the desire to become a professional one day and to score a winning goal for my favourite soccer team. Whether this desire would survive as a rational desire now does not seem to depend only on being fully informed about the desirability of the object of this desire. After all, scoring the winning goal for your favourite team is obviously a most desirable object.

A possible solution to this problem in accordance with a desire-based account is to introduce the idea of second-order desires: desires which have as their object the fact of being

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<sup>7</sup> Parfit (1984), p. 502.

<sup>8</sup> It is for this reason that Scanlon (1998) and Raz (1999) don’t think that well-being (or personal interest) is an important consideration in deliberation.

moved by a particular first-order desire.<sup>9</sup> Being fully informed about this object – the object, for example, of my being moved by the desire to become a professional and score a winning goal for my favourite soccer team – might involve extensive stories about my becoming frustrated by my own lack of the talent required to become a professional soccer player. Such stories could therefore lead to the conclusion that my second-order desire to be moved by my first-order desire to become a professional and score a winning goal is not a rational desire that would survive critical scrutiny. Consequently, the second-order desire would not be an informed desire *of me*, that is, although the object of the first-order desire could be as desirable as any object could be, it might turn out to be that the object of my having this desire is not a desirable object.

In conclusion, the resulting picture seems to be that a rational desire-based account of a person's best interest could provide the best answer to what is in specifically your child's best interest. It would do so by telling a story about the desires your child would have if she were fully informed about the desirability of her first- and second-order desires, desires that it would be in your child's best interest to satisfy. In what follows I shall call these desires a person's *interest-defining desires*. The picture sketched in this section seems to suggest that we should refer parents to these desires of their child when they have to make up their mind by, as it were, making up their child's mind, and want to do so in the child's best interest. We should refer them to these because the child's interest-defining desires will determine which of the reasons around in the parents' deliberations are the child's reasons of its own.

### **3. Two arguments against a desire-based account of a child's reasons of its own**

Despite the promising story told so far, the central claim of this paper is that a desire-based account of a child's reasons of its own is seriously inadequate for two reasons: (1) it is impossible to determine the child's interest-defining desires without first making substantial assumptions about your child's best interest; and (2) even if it were possible to determine a child's interest-defining desires in a non-question-begging way, it would be impossible to use

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<sup>9</sup> Frankfurt (1971).

them to account for the child's best interest as constituting a reason of its own. Let me discuss these arguments in turn.

### *3.1. Determining your child's interest-defining desires*

Using desires to determine what is in someone's interest derives its plausibility from such daily choice situations in which you have, for example, one doughnut, one croissant and one sandwich that you can share with your child for breakfast. In such situations you probably just ask the child which of these items she wants, and if you are inclined, as parents often are, to choose the option that is in your child's interest you will give her whatever she wants. Choices to be made in such situations can be described as involving options, outcomes and preferences, and the underlying assumption is that we can tell these apart. Options are alternatives present in given choice situations, outcomes are states of affairs that result from choosing an option, and preferences are expressions of relative, subjective value. Not knowing the child's preferences presents you with a puzzle that is structurally similar to the task of having to make up your mind. You can transfer this task to the child by asking her what she wants. If she understands the puzzle well, she will follow a decision procedure technically well described by rational choice theory, viz. a procedure that will yield *utility numbers* that solve the puzzle. According to rational choice theory, making up your mind is a matter of determining the utility numbers of your options.<sup>10</sup>

Here is a very short description of the rational choice theoretic procedure to make up your mind. (1) Determine the set of available options. In the example there might seem to be only three options, but clever children will easily discern as many as eight (getting none, either one, either two, or all three items). (2) Determine the outcomes. The outcomes involve more than merely the child's receiving a particular item for breakfast. Outcomes are states of affairs, and in the example these also involve such possible outcomes as upsetting the parent and being scolded for asking for all three items, worrying the parent by choosing none, getting sticky fingers by choosing the doughnut, etc. Determining outcomes will generally require the introduction of probabilities and the idea of ultimate descriptions of possible worlds.<sup>11</sup> (3) Determine the preferences for each outcome. This will be a matter of

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Schick (1997).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the discussion of Superia in Morton (1991), pp. 38-40.



determining the relative subjective value each possible outcome has for the person in question. It will help here to distinguish between ‘option desires’ and ‘property desires’<sup>12</sup>, the latter being desires for a possible world’s having a particular property. Rational choice theory assumes that this third step gives each option a *utility number* – an arithmetic expression of a person’s option desire that is reached by calculating that person’s property desires (how many and how strongly desired properties are realized in this possible world) that will be fulfilled by choosing this option. Once these utility numbers are in place, the child has made up its mind and the puzzle is solved: the highest utility number expresses what just *is* its actual option desire.

The attractiveness of this formal procedure to determine a person’s desires, and thereby that person’s interest, derives not only from its success in such simple cases, nor only from the promise that its arithmetic character will facilitate extensions to much more complex choices, but also from its explanatory and predictive power that seems to make it useful for determining a person’s interest from a third-person perspective. That is, the history of a person’s choices might be said to reveal that person’s preferences (i.e. his property desires), and anyone informed about this history might use these property desires to calculate this person’s utility numbers for any option available. Most parents are familiar with this feature of rational choice theory: most parents won’t feel the need to ask what the child wants for breakfast – it’s bound to be the doughnut, say, as usual.

The story about the role of your child’s desires in determining her best interest told in the previous section does not speak about your child’s desires *simpliciter* but about her interest-defining desires, those rational first-order desires that are backed up by the child’s rational second-order desires. This means that not just any property desire is to be taken into account in calculating your child’s utility numbers, but only those the child would have, or would have reason to have, were she fully informed, for each property, about the possible worlds that instantiate the property. Apart from the obvious practical impossibility to handle full information for any possible property about any possible world instantiating it, there is a theoretical problem here that is crucial for my argument. The problem concerns the implausibility of the underlying assumption that it is possible to distinguish between options, outcomes and preferences when engaged in a project of determining someone’s interest-defining desires.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Pettit (1993), pp. 20-23.

A quick way to highlight the problem is to see how the procedure would force us to think about the child who dreams about becoming a professional soccer player and scoring a crucial winning goal for his favourite soccer team. Having this dream means starting with step (3), which is as such not a problem (people often invent or discover options because of their preferences), but requires us to reason back to step (2) and then to step (1) in order to be able to make some first choice to help realize this ideal possible world. The dream requires us to imagine a possible world in which the child is a professional soccer player who scores that winning goal. Can we imagine this world? Is it a naturally (and not merely logically) possible world? The question forces us to say something about the identity of the child in the present, actual world; something that allows us to make sense of the assertion that *this* child could live in *that* possible world as the professional soccer player scoring that winning goal. Suppose we succeed in this; suppose we can imagine such a naturally possible world as close enough to our actual world. Suppose it requires a surgical operation merging the child with Ruud van Nistelrooy as part of the history of this possible world. Admittedly, this is on (beyond?) the edge of the naturally possible, but let's assume that certain amazing developments in surgery have created such opportunities.

Whatever would be needed to realize the imagined possible world would by definition count as preserving the child's identity. *This* child will score *that* goal. But assuming this *ex hypothesi* obviously does not rule out that the drastic changes required will involve major developments of the child's personality. And this, I should like to argue, will be fatal to a desire-based account of the child's best interest! This is why. Suppose, as seems common-sensical, that the development of the child's personality involves changes in his preferences. Suppose, to enlarge the difficulties I want to draw attention to, the events required to turn this child into a professional soccer player change his actual preferences to such a degree that he no longer cares much about whether or not he scores that winning goal for what used to be his favourite team. Before these events took place (that is, in our present world), he preferred above everything else that particular possible world in which he does score that winning goal for his favourite soccer team. But the person he turns out to become in that allegedly ideal possible world has a different set of preferences. This is by no means a forced, unrealistic or questionable assumption: people's preferences do change over time.<sup>13</sup> And the dramatic

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Parfit's Russian landlord (Parfit, 1984, p. 327), and Schechtman's serious matron (Schechtman, 2001, pp. 97 ff.).

changes assumed in this example merely allow me to magnify the difficulties for the desire-based account of personal interest; they don't create the difficulties.

The account requires us to determine the preferences the child would have, or would have reason to have, if he were fully informed about all relevant possible worlds – preferences concerning not only the properties of these worlds, but also the properties of his will. These are his second-order preferences with respect to his being moved by particular first-order preferences. How could we – or, for that matter, the child himself – determine these rational desires? Where should we start? What decisions should we make about the child's identity and the identity-defining role of which of his preferences? The impossibility of a desire-based account of personal interest follows from our need to answer these questions before we can answer these questions. Let me explain.

The total set of the child's preferences, seen from a timeless angle, is quite large and incoherent. The child wants to score that winning goal (because of his preferences in the actual world), but he also does not want to score that winning goal (because of his preferences in the possible world in which he can score that goal). One of these, or perhaps even both, should be removed. But which one? Seen from within a temporal perspective, we could imagine that the child's actual preferences are important and strong enough to cause additional preferences, and relatedly additional intentions, designed to resist the changes predicted by the information about the resulting possible world. People may be strong in this sense, and it isn't clear whether being motivated by an ideal in this way should always be counted as irrational.<sup>14</sup> Lacking omniscience (being a limited creature, like we are), the child might wish for the conceivability and attainability of some highly unlikely possible world neglected by the information used to critically scrutinize his preferences: a possible world in which he both *can* score that winning goal and *enjoys* scoring it.

But a story that goes the other way around is equally plausible. That is, we could well imagine that the child's belief that he would not prefer to score that winning goal once he can, causes his actual preferences to change in anticipation.<sup>15</sup>

The problem, however, is not only that we do not know how to decide the issue framed in this way, but also – and much more disturbingly – that any attempt to solve this issue has a retrospective effect on the issue as not arising in the framed way in the first place. That is, assuming that the initial, actual preferences of the child are strong enough to cause

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Velleman (2002).

<sup>15</sup> This resembles what happens in cases described by Elster's sour grapes mechanism, Elster (1983).

additional preferences leads to another possible world, one not yet used to identify the total set of the child's preferences. In retrospect, this gives us another set of preferences from which to start the process of determining the child's rational desires. But assuming, the other way around, that his actual belief about some future preference causes his preferences to change in anticipation also leads to yet another possible world, removing the anticipated future preference from the initial total set of preferences (because the world in which the child will have that preference won't ever be realized as a world in which the child exists). That falsifies the responsible belief, exploding the very intelligibility of the executed process.

The argument developed so far is independent of the peculiarities of the example discussed. Similar difficulties would arise in each of the difficult choices mentioned in the introduction: parents worrying about what to do for their exceptionally talented children, or worrying about what to do with their child who (temporarily?) hates to play the piano, or worrying about what to do with their child who is torn between her friends and her passion. What the argument shows is that a desire-based account of a person's best interest does not work in situations in which the choices to be made affect that person's set of preferences. This is a consequence of the assumption underlying rational choice theory, that is, that we can identify options, outcomes and preferences independently of one another. We can do this in many local and small-scale choice situations, but not in situations involving identity-forming decisions. Such situations are not rare, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> And they are especially common in educational practices, often involving children's long-term individual projects that give the parents a paternalistic responsibility with respect to determining the development of aims and preferences that might have a lasting effect on the character and quality of the life the child will be able to live.

### *3.2. Desires and normative constraints*

The argument so far does not challenge the idea that a rational choice theoretic desire-based account of a person's interest might be plausible in certain situations. And I shall not challenge this idea. Examples abound where the account works well, such as the example of asking your child what she wants for breakfast in order to choose in her interest. Accepting

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<sup>16</sup> Bransen (2000).

that the account works well provided it is not applied to situations where choices will affect a person's set of preferences, might be understood as defending a limited desire-based account of a person's best interest. The idea here is, basically, that the account might work well in situations in which one can make up one's mind without changing it in any relevant way. And once we accept such a limited account, and appreciate it as at least a plausible account of a person's best interest within clearly demarcated circumstances, we might develop a new optimism and might try to explore ways to expand the set of situations in which the account would work well. This would be possible if we could develop ways to ensure that the choices to be made will not affect a person's set of preferences. Or, stated differently, this would be possible if we could improve our understanding of the set of a person's interest-defining desires in such a way that it would be a stable and unchanging set whatever deliberations that person were to engage in.

I can think of three general strategies to make progress along this road: (1) determine a subset of a person's actual preferences that will be a subset of that person's set of preferences in *any* situation in which she might be able to choose; (2) define the person by her present set of preferences; and (3) replace all possible future preferences of the person by functionally equivalent actual desires. Only the last of these strategies seems to be promising enough to take seriously. The first strategy, if it leads to anything at all, is not likely to lead to anything more specific than something as trivial and idle as 'always prefer pleasure to pain'. And the second strategy can only be taken seriously by giving up our commonsensical understanding of the concept of a person, since it would require us to replace persons by temporal person-slices. The third strategy might be thought of as a time-oriented extension of the project executed to delimit the person's informed or rational desires. The idea here is that the argument developed above in Section 3.1. can perhaps be pre-empted by developing a way to determine a person's *interest-defining desires* on the basis of the desires a person *now* would have reason to have if she were fully informed about the desirability of the objects of her first- and second-order desires as well as fully informed about the desirability of the objects of the first- and second-order desires of all her possible future counterparts. We could think of something along the lines of Parfit's Critical Present-aim Theory as a possible result of this third strategy.<sup>17</sup>

Despite this sophisticated attempt to save a desire-based account of a person's best interest, the suggestion does not work. This is because of a more general weakness of the

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<sup>17</sup> Parfit (1984), pp. 120-126.

attempt to derive normative constraints from a person's informed or rational desires. The general weakness is perhaps best characterized as a 'redundancy complaint': once we have all the evidence we need to be able to determine a person's informed or rational desires, we have everything needed to determine that person's best interest, which means that we don't need his informed or rational desires themselves in order to determine his best interest. A stronger interpretation of the complaint would be that a desire-based account of a person's interest is viciously question-begging, because we would need to know that person's best interest in order to be able to identify the relevant interest-defining desires. The stronger interpretation of the complaint assumes that a desire-based account is a *reductive* account of personal interest. This is possibly right, but for our present purposes it will suffice to present the weakness as a redundancy complaint.

In order to explain this complaint, we need to understand that the parent who wants to know his child's best interest is in need of *normative* knowledge, viz. knowledge of the child's reasons that will function for the parent as his reasons. The desire-based account of a person's interest claims that the parent can get this normative knowledge by acquiring knowledge about the child's interest-defining desires. Two serious reservations should be made with respect to this claim. The first is that although knowing the desires of a person provides one with *prima facie* reasons for action, these reasons are in an important sense *incomplete* reasons. They are incomplete as reasons because they only hint at their possible normative force without making it explicit. That is, it always makes sense to ask *why* a person has the particular desires she has, and the kind of answer that seems appropriate to this kind of question will always involve mentioning the alleged value of the object of that desire.<sup>18</sup> The mere fact that a person P has a particular desire gives P at most a *motivating* reason for action, but certainly not a *justifying* reason for action.<sup>19</sup> The fact, however, that P has a particular desire does not give another person Q even a motivating reason, unless Q has reasons to believe that there are justifying reasons for P to have the particular desire. The fact that my child wants to play the violin doesn't give me any reasons for action at all. But if I believe that there are justifying reasons for my child to want to play the violin, we could say that her desire gives me reasons for action.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Warren Quinn's argument that it is the judgement that a desire is directed at something good that gives the desire its normative import. Quinn (1995).

<sup>19</sup> On this distinction, see Smith (1994).

Something important should be noted, however. Is it indeed the case that in the situation in which there are justifying reasons for my child to want to play the violin, I have reasons for action *in virtue of my child's desire* to play the violin? Suppose she actually doesn't want to play the violin, despite the fact that there are justifying reasons for her to want to play the violin. It seems that in that case I have reasons for action anyway, merely in virtue of the fact that there are justifying reasons for my child to want to play the violin. These reasons for action are quite independent of my child's desires.<sup>20</sup> Quite the contrary: the fact that there are justifying reasons for my child to want to play the violin, gives me sufficient reason to try to point out to my child that she *should* want to play the violin. The reasons that would make a desire of my child a reason for action for me (that is, the reasons that would give her desire a normative import) are in themselves reasons for me to paternalistically influence my child to acquire the appropriate desire. That is, the normative knowledge I need to be able to decide what to do in the best interest of my child, need not be knowledge about her desires, but will be knowledge about the value of the objects of what might, or should, be her desires.

This connects with the second reservation to be made. The most plausible desire-based account of a person's interest, as we have seen, doesn't mention any desire this person actually happens to have, but mentions a small subset of *informed, rational, interest-defining* desires. Even were I to grant (contrary to the argument developed in Section 3.1) that it would be possible, for instance along the lines of Parfit's Critical Present-aim Theory, to determine this subset, this would require, according to the present argument, substantive normative knowledge about the value of the objects of those desires. And, strikingly enough, it is in virtue of the value of these objects that the subset of interest-defining desires has its normative force. But if that is so, it is redundant to want to know these interest-defining desires, for we only should like to know them in order to know the person's best interest. But we will already know the justifying reasons that allow these desires to define the person's interest in a normatively significant way *before* knowing these desires themselves. We will therefore know the relevant reasons for action concerning the person's best interest *before*

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<sup>20</sup> Important refinements will be needed here, even though this is not the place to elaborate on that. Of course parents need an open eye for their children's desires, since these are often their main access to the appreciation of the value of the objects of those desires. But the fact that desires and their intentional objects can be thought apart, allows me to make the present claim. I might have access to the value of a particular object and may, thanks to that, know that there are justifying reasons for my child to develop a desire for that object.

knowing her interest-defining desires. This explains why I speak of a redundancy complaint. We know already everything we should want to know about the reasons that will be a person's *own reasons* before we will be able to know the normative import of that person's interest-defining desires.

This concludes my argument for the claim that a desire-based account of a child's reasons of its own is seriously inadequate. In the light of the result of Section 2 – that is, that the most promising account of a child's reasons of its own available in the literature seemed to be a desire-based account – the conclusion of this section seems to be very disappointing. It seems we are left empty-handed. In the following section, however, I shall argue that this impression is far too pessimistic. I shall introduce the idea of *alternatives of* a child, and shall use this idea to tie together some promising insights we came across in arguing against a desire-based account.

#### **4. Reasons of one's own and alternatives *of* one's own**

Let me recapitulate. I have been drawing attention to a type of difficult choice not uncommon in educational situations in which parents have to determine which of the reasons around are their child's reasons of its own. I have argued that the most promising account of those reasons available in the literature is a desire-based account. But I have also argued that such a type of account is seriously inadequate, because on the one hand it cannot handle the most important cases – namely, those in which parents and children will have to make identity-forming decisions – and on the other hand it misapprehends the child's desires as the locus of the relevant normative force.

Fortunately, the arguments developed in the previous section provide excellent stepping-stones for an alternative account of a child's reasons of its own based on the idea of the most valuable *alternative of* the child.<sup>21</sup> These stepping-stones are, first, the recognition that there are situations in which people have to make identity-forming decisions and cannot make these merely on the grounds of their actual or future pro-attitudes, and second, the recognition that desires, or pro-attitudes, have no normative import in themselves, but only make explicit the value of the objects the person has these pro-attitudes towards.

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<sup>21</sup> I have developed the outlines of the idea in Bransen (1996, 2000, 2002).



The first stepping-stone helps us to understand that in situations in which parents and children have to make identity-forming decisions, they are not faced with alternatives *for* the child but alternatives *of* the child. This distinction is one between alternatives that can be described and individuated without saying anything about the person for whom they are options to choose between, and alternatives that can be described and individuated only by referring to what the defining characteristics are of the person who could realize them. The distinction is not as simple and clear-cut as might seem, or as one might wish, mainly because one can hold different views about what it means to refer to the defining characteristics of a particular person. In what follows I shall simply hold to the view that the relevant defining characteristics of a person are characteristics of his motivational profile, viz. the point of view of the person as an agent involved in living a life he understands narratively, rationally and morally as his life.<sup>22</sup>

Trivial examples of alternatives *for* a person abound, but convincing examples of alternatives *of* a person must be explained and argued for.<sup>23</sup> An example of the first type of alternative would be to buy a doughnut or a croissant, an example of the last might be to buy a doughnut or to steal one. The idea here is that in the first case the alternatives differ only in terms of involving either a doughnut or a croissant (in order to understand the choice between the alternatives it involves, there is no need whatsoever to say anything about the agent who is facing the choice and who deliberates over these alternatives), whereas in the second case the alternatives differ essentially in terms of involving defining characteristics of the motivational profile of the agent. The point is not that you can steal a doughnut only if you are essentially a thief, but that you can steal<sup>24</sup> a doughnut only if the capacity to steal is somehow a developed characteristic of your motivational profile. Compare this with what happens to the motivational profile of a child who learns to buy things in a store. The first time the child might well feel alienated, involved in an act of mimicking adults, pretending to have a motivational profile not yet really his. But after a while, 'buying' becomes part of his repertoire, and disappears, so to say, into the intentional background of being the person he is.

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<sup>22</sup> This view figures more or less explicitly in Korsgaard (1989) and Frankfurt (1999).

<sup>23</sup> It is my contention that this difference is a consequence of our contemporary emphasis in matters of practical reasoning on the question 'What should I do?', rather than on the question 'Who am I?'.

<sup>24</sup> We might need some contrastive specification here, so as to make sure that the best description of what the agent does is to steal *rather than* 'to borrow without asking', 'to pick up something found', etc.

We don't feel much need to justify becoming someone able to buy, but we do feel such a need, and tend to find it wanting, with respect to becoming someone able to steal. Facing a choice between buying or stealing is very unlike facing a choice between a doughnut or a croissant, because the choice between buying or stealing is a choice between alternatives that can only be described and individuated by referring to what are defining characteristics of the motivational profile of the person who could realize them – viz. a choice between alternatives *of* that person, and such a choice always involves an evaluation of the quality of this person's alternative motivational profiles. There is no need to think of such an evaluation as being primarily a moral affair (as seems so obvious in the case of stealing). Facing a choice, for example, between your child becoming a violinist or a soccer player is not, or only in a very remote sense<sup>25</sup>, a moral affair, but it will nevertheless require you to evaluate the quality of your child's alternative motivational profiles. That is, it will require you to evaluate the kind of person your child will turn out to be.

It is important to emphasize that we should not think of this evaluation as an invitation to consider the relative value of a number of alternatives *for* your child. We should not try to rephrase a choice between alternatives *of* a person as though it were a choice between alternatives *for* that person. That is, we should not think of the choice between becoming a violinist or a soccer player as a choice similar to deciding whether to buy a doughnut or a croissant, because that would force us to think of the violinist and the soccer player as abstract alternative courses of life merely externally related to your child's capacity to choose, and we would fail to address the choice as involving an identity-forming decision. And that is precisely what a choice between becoming a violinist or a soccer player is, or so I should like to emphasize. It is a choice that requires us to evaluate alternative determinations of a particular person's motivational profile, and not a choice between options with respect to which we could simply take for granted a particular well-determined motivational profile (i.e. the child's preferences).

But if I am right in this, then how could we go about making a well-considered evaluation of alternative determinations of our child's motivational profile? And how could we do that *in our child's best interest*, with an eye to the normative import of the child's reasons of its own? It is with respect to this question that the second stepping-stone proves to be useful.

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<sup>25</sup> If, for instance, one of these alternatives involves supporting institutions that harm people's entitlement to fundamental conditions of well-being and respect.

As we have seen above, I argue that desires have no normative import of themselves, but only make explicit the value of the objects at which they are directed. It is these values that have normative force, which means that it is the recognition of a valuable object (e.g. my child playing the violin) that provides us with relevant reasons for our choice. Understanding this claim means understanding that the valuable objects under consideration are themselves the *alternatives of the child*: *my child playing the violin* or *my child playing soccer*. That is, when I try to determine whether or not it would be in the best interest of my child to let her learn to play the violin, I am not investigating the value of some abstract course of life that might or might not suit my child. The problem is very unlike looking for a coat to suit my child, as though we could have the child with its motivational profile on the one hand and the coat or the life of a violinist on the other hand – as though the problem were a matter of fit. No. What I should do is determine what my child would be like, and that also means what it would be like for her, given the life she has lived so far, and given the drives, anxieties, volitions, approvals, endorsements, commitments and entitlements made explicit in this life she has lived so far, were her motivational profile structured around the ability and inclination to play the violin.

A number of consequences deserve a much more comprehensive discussion than I can offer here. I shall only point them out, suggesting ways in which I should like to elaborate on them.

A first issue concerns the problem of how to determine the quality of an alternative *of* a child, and of how to do that in the child's best interest. As argued so far, we should not think of such an evaluation in terms of a fit, even though we are quite used to doing so. That is, we tend to think of evaluations as involving on the one hand the object to be evaluated and on the other hand a measure or standard (an aesthetic value, a moral principle, a normative constraint, a set of preferences, etc.). I'd rather take the doughnut, say, because of my preference for something soft and sweet. But a child's best interest is not something available independently of the alternatives *of* the child. That was the very point of the argument in Section 3.1 about the character of identity-forming decisions.

Fortunately, however, the fact that alternatives never come alone combined with the fact that each alternative *of* a person presents a normatively significant picture of the identity of that person's motivational profile, allows us to evaluate alternatives *of* a person in terms of the contrast between the relative explanatory power and relative peace of mind each of them

provides.<sup>26</sup> In this context I hold explanatory power to be a matter of how good a particular determined motivational profile would be in explaining the narrative, rational and moral sense of the life lived by the person whose motivational profile it is, and I hold peace of mind to be the related matter of the absence in this life of factors that disturb the person's agential self-understanding.

This leads to a second issue that is of crucial importance to the educationally framed problem of how to think clearly about a child's reasons of its own. What parents do in evaluating alternatives *of* their child is a matter of determining the quality of both 'what the child would be like' and 'what it would be like for the child' if she were, say, a violinist or a soccer player. These are not separate issues, of course; they are deeply intertwined. But they differ in so far as they involve different perspectives. The first characterization of the object to be evaluated involves the third-personal perspective of, in this case, a concerned and caring parent, whereas the second characterization involves the first-personal perspective of the person who is herself the object to be evaluated. The presence of both perspectives highlights the fact that explanatory power and peace of mind are subjective (in the sense of response-dependent<sup>27</sup>) qualities that need not come in as one and unified precisely because of the relevance of both perspectives. The child's peace of mind need not be the parent's, and vice versa. And conceiving the child's life as structured around, say, being a soccer player might have a very different explanatory power for the parent than it does for the child.

I am unsure whether there will be much we can say in general about the ways in which to address the problem of unifying these various subjective qualities into one plausible and convincing determination of a child's reasons of its own. Making up a child's mind will in each individual case be an extended process of anticipation, requiring the dedicated exercise of such virtues as empathy, trust and self-trust, imagination, conversation, dialogue, acumen and practical wisdom. Interestingly enough, it will essentially be the very same process as making up one's own mind when faced with really difficult choices. In facing such choices, we won't be able to fall back on available reasons of our own. What we shall have to do in those cases, and in the educational cases investigated in this paper, is evaluate determinable

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<sup>26</sup> I argue for this in Bransen (2002).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. McDowell (1985).

alternatives *of* ourselves. In such a process of anticipating reasons of one's own, we can only hope to be guided by anticipating reasons of one's own.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I read an earlier version of this paper at the Fourth European Congress for Analytic Philosophy in Lund, June 2002, under the title 'In the Interest of your Child'. I am grateful for comments made by the audience on that occasion, particularly Stefaan Cuypers, Philippa Foot, and Wojtek Zelaniec. I came to the idea of using the ambiguous phrase 'anticipating' in my title thanks to Victoria McGeer's explicit use of the ambiguity of the title of her paper 'Developing Trust' (McGeer, 2002).

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