CHAPTER 2

Three men in a drought

Water was short in the torrid summer of 1976 and there were soon calls for restraint. Where I live, the Anglian Water Authority quickly threatened to ban garden hoses if the calls went unheeded. The sun blazed down in emphasis and the Authority made an ostentatious purchase of standpipes for the streets in case households had to be cut off. Philosophising amid my limp lettuces, I wondered how much notice it was rational for me to take. It was plainly in the general interest that water be saved and this premise will not be challenged. But was it rational for me to save water? This is the common or garden problem to be pondered here.

The question is one about collective goods, meaning goods which can be provided only by collective or central action. They benefit all yet it seems that, if contributions are voluntary and if everyone acts rationally, they will never be provided. Examples are parks, schools, trade unions, national defence and democracy, but I pick my own to save getting embrangled in a cluttered landscape. I shall rehearse two standard ways with collective goods, usually dubbed the economic and the sociological, and shall complain about both. This is the middleground of the essay. There is also a background in the nature of rational action and its bearing on method in the social sciences, and we shall

This essay first appeared under the title 'Rational Man and Social Science' in R. Harrison, ed., *Rational Action: Studies in the Philosophy of Social Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, with warm thanks to Amartya Sen, to Quentin Skinner and to those at the meeting of the Thyssen Philosphy Group, where it was first presented, for their criticisms of an earlier draft. But that version made *homo economicus* too selfish and *homo sociologicus* too much a puppet. So I have here made both more flexible (and changed the title), thus creating tensions which later essays will explore further.

have to touch some hard puzzles in epistemology and ethics. But let us start in the foreground with a lazy gardener growing his own lettuces during a drought. He is asked to save water. Is he to respond?

The Water Authority opened on a gentlemanly note of logic and ethics, with only an offhand gesture to my self-interest. All (good) citizens should save water, I was told; you are a (good) citizen; so you should save water. I granted the minor premise with smug alacrity. Undoubtedly I was a (good) citizen. But I disputed the major. Why should all (good) citizens save water? The aim was for enough water to be saved in sum now to see us through later. That was the collective good whose value to all citizens, including me, will not be challenged. But it did not depend on whether all citizens save water. Enough is enough; why should I help? Well, came the soft answer, very little is being asked of you. It would not hurt you to put half a brick in your cistern, for instance, and, if a million households do the same, the region will be a million gallons a day to the good. Nor would you really miss the odd bath and, if you showered with a friend, you might even enjoy it. At worst any marginal unpleasantness will be outweighed by your marginal self-satisfaction. Every little helps postpone the crisis and so benefits you too. Virtue brings its own reward, you see.

As a philosopher with lettuces at risk, I was unmoved. The question being initially not what was right but what was rational, it was too soon to appeal to virtue. My beautiful friendships might survive the odd bath skipped but my lettuces would die. Bluntly, my costs would outweigh my benefits and so, by an 'economic' definition of rationality, it was irrational to incur them. The reason was not that a dead lettuce now would outweigh my present joy in contemplating an uncertain future gallon of water. It was that the Authority's case involved a flaw akin to a fallacy of distribution. I stood to gain, only if a million others saved water too. Unless they did, my efforts would be vain. But, if they did, my efforts would be unnecessary. Hence my efforts would be either vain or unnecessary. Since they cost me something, however little, it was not rational for me to make them. It was fallacious for the Authority to argue that what all

would rationally want to have provided each would rationally help to provide.

Meanwhile a lady wrote in sorrow to the local paper to lament 'the odd person who thinks that washing his car or watering his garden cannot make all that difference'. Yes, but was he so odd? Taking the question numerically, the Authority found that he was not; and so doubled its exhortations and put a formal ban on hoses. The letter columns of the paper began to glow with the Dunkirk spirit, as citizens pooled tips on bathing in a bucket and boiling eggs in the tea pot. One man reported that his dahlias were blooming on dishwater as never before and was printed under the heading 'Virtue Rewarded'. But the figures told another story. Surveys showed that, while 10 per cent were saving like mad, 40 per cent were making only token economies and 50 per cent none at all. Let us invent a random citizen from each group, called, respectively, Lock, Stock and Barrel. Lock is one of the 10 per cent all but keeping their taps locked. Stock is one of the 40 per cent making a few stock gestures but no more. Barrel is one of the 50 per cent using water by the barrel. Let us suppose that all grow flowers and lettuces but none earns his living from his garden or has any other special claim to water. Also none is a magistrate, councillor or local bigwig, with a special need to set an example (or not to be caught out). Lock loses both flowers and lettuces, Stock loses his flowers but waters his lettuces by hand. Barrel hoses both impartially. Which is the rational man?

In so far as three men have resolved the same problem in different ways, logic suggests that at most one is rational. Nonetheless it can be argued that all are, since each had objectively good reasons for his response. Lock and his 10 per cent had the reasons considerately supplied by the Water Authority. Stock and his 40 per cent had the legal ban on hoses as a reason for abandoning the flowers and economic reasons for saving the lettuces. Barrel and his 50 per cent kept rather quiet (except for a man who announced that he had paid his water rates for unlimited water and meant to have what he had paid for) but there were reasons to hand. For instance the City Council was still visibly watering lawns, flowerbeds and even

hard tennis courts. Besides, domestic water consumption is trivial compared with what industry uses. Also the argument about the fallacy of distribution could itself be cited by Barrel as a reason.

But, I reply, even though all had their reasons, it does not follow that all were rational. We need to ask who had the best reasons. It can turn out that all had equally inconclusive reasons but not that all had sufficient reasons, when a sufficient reason for doing x is also sufficient for not doing y. Admittedly Buridan's ass, placed midway between two bushels of hay, has a sufficient reason for eating either. But it does not have one for preferring a named bushel; and, in any case, Lock, Stock and Barrel are not in the same fix. If they all face the same problem set by the drought and solve it differently, we need a way of arbitrating between them.

The reply depends on the problem's being the same for each and this can be doubted. Each had his own projects, desires and beliefs. Each did what appeared best to him and could report, like the legendary fellow who leapt naked into a bed of nettles, that it seemed a good idea at the time. Each had apparently scored 100 per cent in a private examination which he alone sat. Economists often give this answer and it taps one common interpretation of utility theory. Here each agent faces a situation defined by the subjective utilities of various combinations of services or goods and is blessed with a complete, reflexive and transitive scheme of preferences. In trading off the utility of plants saved against that of freedom from sanctions, Lock, Stock and Barrel all act differently and each consistently. Or so it may be said.

In simple form, this approach sounds vapid but I am not trying to poke fun. Even if the universal fact of ordered preferences in each agent is the merest of tautologies, it cannot be known *a priori* how much of what a particular agent would prefer to what at what prices, and empirical work is still needed. Also, like drones in a beehive, tautologies are nowadays seen to be useful on their own account as categorial axioms or statements introducing paradigmatic concepts and it need not be trite or vapid to say that explanation should be concerned with

individuals' preferences and their satisfaction. Nonetheless the circularity should not pass unnoticed. Indifference maps are drawn by taking actions as signs of pairwise comparisons and then projecting the comparisons on the assumption that the agent has a consistent scheme of transitive preferences and maximises expected utility accordingly. Any apparent discrepancy between the assumption and actual choices is removed by drawing distinctions among apparently similar occasions of choice. The distinctions are regulated by a principle of producing the simplest map consistent with the assumption. Yet, even if the process recalls a traditional culture preserving its belief in witchcraft, oracles and magic, that need not be to condemn it.

Nevertheless any purported explanation of action becomes a redescription, premised on making all agents not just equally rational but necessarily so. With more space I would argue that such redescriptions are not explanatory. As it is, I must be content to note that they cannot answer the original question. How much notice was it rational for me to take of the drought? I refuse to accept the answer that, however much or little notice I take, I shall always have acted rationally. Fortunately there is another way to read utility theory, which supports this refusal. Many economists, still subscribing to Edgeworth's dictum that 'the first principle of economics is that every agent is actuated only by self-interest',[1] would urge that Lock, Stock and Barrel could not all have succeeded in maximising their self-interest. They put a hard-headed gloss on 'self-interest' and the question is who gained the highest benefit at lowest cost. The hard-headed reply is clear. Since each individual saving of water is either vain or unnecessary and since it involves some cost, however small, Barrel is the outright winner, until hoses are banned. Thereafter the judges must decide whether there has been a change in the price of water. If penalties and risks of detection are low, then the price is still effectively zero and Barrel retains his title. If they are high, Stock moves into first place. A change of price does not affect the principle, however, which is that it is more rational to gain a fixed benefit at lower cost.

[1] *Mathematical Psychics*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1881, p. 16.

The moral for government is equally clear. The water campaign used the terse slogan 'Save It', borrowed from the campaign to save energy when oil prices doubled. In both cases each consumer could reason rightly that his saving would be either vain or unnecessary as a contribution to the total. In both cases the total benefit is shared among all, whether they have contributed or not. Yet the energy campaign had far more success. Why? Unlike water, energy is usually metered and we each pay for what we use. So there is a selective incentive, even if not one of quite the sort which confines a subscription concert to those who have paid the subscription. It could only weaken the energy campaign to extend the 'Save It' slogan to water or, for that matter, chastity. There has to be an effective spur, like a real risk of a huge fine or an outbreak of VD among teenagers. Without one, it is merely irrational to work for charity, pay bills, vote in elections, take litter home from picnics or volunteer in a national emergency. In all such matters Reason stands like a proverbial sergeant-major, inviting those who can play the violin to step forward and marching them off to scrub the latrines.

In fact, of course, people do vote in safe seats on wet nights without Australian-style fines. They do demonstrate amid hostile crowds, collect money for spastics, speak out against tyrants and bathe in five inches of water. But they are being stupid, given the hard-headed economic argument. While they are stupid, the moral does not apply and there is no need for selective incentives. Yet the moral is still there, only waiting for the spread of education and enlightened self-interest. Theories of the social contract sometimes fancy that human beings need law because they are irrational. On the contrary, by the economic account they need law because they are too often rational.

Before exploring the social implications, however, we need to be clear about the assumptions of this economic account. Three are especially significant. First, rationality is taken as *Zweckrationalität*, a matter strictly of the means to a given end. The rationality of ends does not arise, except in so far as ends can be means to further ends. The criterion for what is a better means needs not be in crude cash. For instance, the value of a lovingly

tended lettuce may be more than the few pence the greengrocer would charge for an apparent substitute. Anyone whose ends are better served by saving his lettuces is irrational to do as the Water Authority wants.

Secondly, an egoism has been assumed. There is no fallacy in arguing, 'The public will need water later; there will be none later, unless the public saves it now; so it is rational for the public to save water now.' The same holds, although with diminishing force, as we substitute smaller units, like industries, still large enough to affect their own future supply. The flaw emerges, when we argue, 'Each person will need water later; so it is rational for each to save it now.' Egoism exposes the flaw by pointing out that it is irrational to contribute to a desired result, unless the result depends on one's contribution. This is not to say that I have no interest in the interests of others, since I often have goals which I can attain only by cooperation. Also the fact that I love my mother, for instance, may both condition my goals and act as a selective incentive. But the crux is that other people's concerns affect *me* only in so far as they bear on *my* concerns. This makes the central puzzle one of identifying conditions under which the interests of each will coincide with the interests of all. To seek its solution by means of selective incentives, is to assume that we are self-regarding in a philosophical sense, whether or not we are selfish in an everyday sense.

There is also, thirdly, a social atomism. Lock, Stock and Barrel have featured throughout as abstract atoms or individuals. They could be picked at random from their groups, because it made no difference who they were. Each was simply a member of the set comprising all like him, and the sets differed merely in the skill with which they tackled the same problem. This is not the only way to conceive human beings. For instance, had Lock been made a social atom but not an egoist or an egoist but not a social atom, other solutions might have emerged. We get the 'economic' solution only if he is both an atom and an egoist and therefore stupid. But with these three assumptions it truly follows, I submit. It is irrational to contribute to a collective good at positive cost, even though the good benefits each and will not be provided for anyone if all act rationally. The secret of

harnessing the General Will is then to find the selective incentives which force men to be free.

Those who dislike the solution must challenge the assumptions. Let us start with the third by making more of the thought that Lock, Stock and Barrel are citizens. Could it be that Lock is not a stupid atom but a rational citizen? Certainly the fact that he is a citizen helps explain why he saves water. There are norms of citizenship, exploited in the original appeal to all (good) citizens to economise and evidenced by the indignant tone of letters to the paper. So far a citizen has been merely a member of the set of individuals attached to the national water supply; but, if the idea of norms is introduced into the argument, a fresh inference emerges:

1 Citizens are required to do their 'duty'.
2 Their 'duty' at present is to save water.
3 So each citizen 'should' save water.

Previously there was no valid step from: 'It is in the interest of all that water be saved' to 'It is in the interest of each to save it'. Now it looks as if we might pass validly from 'It is the duty of all' to 'It is the duty of each'.

There is, admittedly, a doubt about the meaning and truth of the premises. 'Duty' in the first two and 'should' in the conclusion bear a special sense deriving from the concept of a norm. Whether this is a proper sense is too long a story to unravel here. To set the sociologist off, I shall simply assume that there is a social position of citizen with normative expectations attached, which every citizen has a 'duty' (in quotes) to discharge. I shall also assert that citizens did truly have a 'duty' to save water. Someone may protest that this is preposterous, when half the population was taking no notice and another 40 per cent very little. But in that case why should the Locks be so smug and the Barrels so silent? At any rate, assuming that talk of 'duties' (in quotes) is licit, we can see the difference between economist and sociologist by citing the fate of Lord Finchley as immortalised by Hilaire Belloc:

> Lord Finchley tried to mend the electric light
> Himself. It struck him dead and serve him right.
> It is the business of the wealthy man
> To give employment to the artisan.

To the economist, Lord Finchley's fault was that of a wealthy man who forgets in a situation of choice under uncertainty that the hire of an electrician would be worth the opportunity cost. To the sociologist, his lordship erred in transgressing the bounds of his station and found that *noblesse oblige* was reinforced by lethal electric sanctions.

At first sight there is nothing here to embarrass economists. They can grant that each citizen has a 'duty' to save water and simply ask why that makes it rational to do so. The prize still goes to Barrel, who has calculated that the costs of doing his 'duty' outweigh the benefits and has therefore rationally shirked the 'duty'. But sociologists have a fresh answer. It is that each citizen has the goal of doing his 'duty' and saving water is the only means to this end. Rationality being taken as *Zweckrationalität*, of course it is rational for a citizen to save water. Similarly, citizens may or may not have a duty to vote; but, if they do, then it is rational for them to trundle to the poll, whatever the weather.

Economists are now awkwardly placed. In so far as they have disclaimed all interest in the source and rationality of goals, it seems that they must concur. To do so does not put them out of a job, since it not always so plain what 'duty' demands of citizens. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, for instance, has a duty to combine a high level of GNP with high employment and will need the best economists in the Treasury to divine how. Equally, with a looser test for what counts as an economic problem, most social policy offers scope for cost-benefit analysis in implementing it. But, on the other hand, economists have now forfeited their claim to judge between Lock, Stock and Barrel. Instead of ruling clearly in favour of Barrel, they must suspend judgement until told what goal is being sought and what sociological constraints there are on the rational economic choice of means. For the particular case of a typical householder in a drought, there is then nothing further to do, since it does not take a degree in

economics to decide what to do about a few buckets of water.

This raises a hard question about rationality assumptions in neo-classical economics. They are usually claimed to specify what makes an allocation of resources rational, without reference to whether the goal thus pursued is worth pursuing. But it is not plain that questions of rationality reduce to those of efficiency. For instance the theory assumes that producers aim to maximise profit and consumers to maximise consumer surplus, and it then shows how to assess alternative actions by the test of whether they achieve these aims. When experience suggests, as it does, that few agents are successful maximisers, theory has various options. It might admit to being descriptively false but insist that it is still normatively valid: would-be maximisers should pay more attention to its prescriptions. Or it might maintain that it is indeed descriptively accurate, when account is taken of particular circumstances as perceived by the agents themselves. Or it might settle for the suggestion that economic agents are usually 'satisficers', rather than maximisers, and are content with 'good enough' solutions to problems of choice. This last alternative subdivides into satisficing because it is not worth the time, effort or expense of acquiring better information, and satisficing because the agent has plural goals or roles and would not care to pursue one, for example profit, at the exclusion of others, for example social esteem.

These options are indeed various. The first makes us ponder the relevance and merit of maximising advice given to agents who seem not to have the maximising urge. The second creates a suspicion that the theory is vacuous or, at any rate, so well equipped to redescribe all contrary evidence that it is unfalsifiable. The third allows a trade-off between imperfect information and plural goals which leaves it unclear whether satisficing and maximising are rival or complementary ideas. That in turn makes us ask whether 'utility' can possibly serve as a universal goal or universal currency for comparing goals or, indeed, what work exactly it is doing at all. With all these balls in the air, it ceases to be plain both when an allocation is efficient and whether an efficient allocation is always a rational one.

Conversely, if the economist is to give the clear initial ruling in

favour of Barrel as the individual who has responded most rationally to the drought, it can only be by making specific assumptions which reduce the options in ways open to challenge. These assumptions did not obtrude earlier because they were dressed as universal propositions about human nature. Rational economic man is *homo sapiens* at large, an egoistic social atom who answers an appeal to save water only if it is in his own self-interest. But, in that case, the judges cannot award the prize to Barrel without knowing the real interests of egoistic social atoms. Lock, saving every spoonful, is utterly efficient in pursuing the goal set by the Water Authority and either he is mistaken about where his self-interest lies or the judges are mistaken. Either way, awkward questions spring up. But we shall be better placed to pursue them, when we have said more about a sociological perspective.

Whereas *homo economicus* is an abstract, individual, yet universal, homunculus, *homo sociologicus* is a social being, essentially located in a scheme of positions and roles. It is important to see how very strong the accompanying postulates must be, if sociology is to bid successfully for the explanatory trumps. At first sight positions are merely abodes and roles merely trappings: if someone dislikes being a nun she can change her job or not pray so hard, rather as others can move house or wear new clothes. But so detached a role-player will also find herself wondering whether it is rational for her to do what is expected of a nun. Yet a fully and finally sociological solution depends on an inference from 'It is her "duty" to do what her order expects' to 'It is rational for her to obey.' The inference is invalid if the goal internal to her way of life is a means to an external goal which could be better served in some other way. Hence pre-social atoms are replaced *essentially* by role-bearers, *constituted* by the social positions to which the roles belong. Otherwise the economist springs back with utility calculations about when it is rational to do one's 'duty'. Ultimately, failure to perform must be failure to be oneself.

I stress the word 'ultimately'. The point is not that a nun cannot rationally resign but that she cannot escape all positions and roles and remain human. A rational nun need not be a

totally obsessive nun. Being perhaps also a doctor, daughter, historian and second trombone, she may rationally consider how best to combine these roles. A sociological scheme has room for doubt within it and, witness the Chancellor of the Exchequer, scope for economists to resolve the doubt. But, ultimately, there can be no extra-social goals to judge the return on role-playing against. For the solution to work uncompromisingly, *homo sociologicus* must lay a very strong claim to encapsulate our identity as persons.

Nor can *homo sociologicus* be an egoist. The economic solution assumed *Zweckrationalität*, egoism and atomism. The sociologist cannot be content to reject the atomism, in so far as egoism implies a substantive thesis about real interests and the rationality of self-regarding action. In disputing that real interests are independent of social institutions, the sociologist rejects both egoism as an external measure of interests and the claim that action is rational in so far as it is instrumental in pursuing them. The problem which arose in the drought, because the self-interest of each does not sum to a collective self-interest, is supposed to be solved by working back from the collective, socially defined interest to what each person therefore has a duty to contribute. Admittedly this is no magic resolution. We may well distrust the idea of a collectivity set above individuals' own independent aspirations; and, on a practical note, centralised states which govern by fiat are notoriously incompetent at devising rules which, when obeyed by all, realise the collective aim. This version of *homo sociologicus* may turn out to be no improvement on the previous *homo economicus*.

Nevertheless, we now have two schematic answers to the hose-pipe problem. One makes it rational for Barrel to use as much water as he can get away with. The other makes it rational for Lock to use as little as an obedient citizen is permitted. I myself like Lock no better than Barrel and, even as he receives his embossed scroll from the Lord Mayor, I shall try to strike him down. It is tempting to challenge this version of *homo sociologicus* directly, by denying flatly that all questions of rationality arise within a role and are settled by working out the demands of the role. But that would be to counter dogma with

dogma; and there is more virtue in a fresh look at the idea of rationality itself.

Both answers started by assuming that rationality is an instrumental notion, relating means to ends but neutral among ends. Yet both make assumptions about human nature, which, in stating what we essentially are, imply a thesis about where our real interests lie. Having postulated a substantive view of our proper ends, both turn out to imply that action directed to the wrong end is irrational, if the alternative was action which would serve the correct end. This suggests that there is more to *Zweckrationalität* than the instrumentality that meets the eye. I shall suggest that *Zweckrationalität*, as standardly defined is neither the sole nor even the primary notion of rationality.

What, then, are the conditions for an action to be *zweckrational*? They are often said to be that the agent must believe, after deliberation among alternatives, that he is doing what is likeliest to achieve whatever he happens to want. Let us start by spelling these conditions out too weakly and then tighten them, until we reach a defensible answer. Too weakly, then, *S* acts rationally in doing *a*, if and only if:

1 *S* wants to achieve *g*.
2 *S* has a choice among alternative ways of achieving *g*.
3 *S* believes that *a* is the best way to achieve *g*.

Such an account says too much and too little. It includes too much by specifying a conscious choice among alternatives. The minor objection is that there need not be alternatives. Whether drinking water is the rational way to stay alive in the desert does not depend on whether there is an inferior way to stay alive, nor on whether there is anything else to drink. The major objection is that to insist on conscious deliberation is to miss the place of habit in rational action. The rational way to drive a car is precisely not to deliberate each change of gear but to master the skill so well that no deliberation is needed. There are rational habits and, were there not, we could not talk, plan, associate, build, reason or perform many other tasks which make social life possible. Rational action is a skill requiring habit and, if the

point is missed, large areas of social action are wrongly classed as non-rational, with great harm to the social sciences.

The conditions include too little by resting content with the agent's wants and beliefs. The lesser objection is that mere belief that *a* is the best way is not enough to make the doing of *a* rational. Since knowledge would be too strong a condition, what is required to distinguish subjectively from objectively rational action is rational belief. Much hangs on the definition. During the 1970s a Labour government passed a law requiring local authorities to introduce comprehensive education in their schools, to replace the existing selective scheme of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools. The Labour council in the borough of Tameside duly set about it but lost control to the Conservatives just before the new scheme was to start. The new council began unscrambling the scheme, whereupon the Minister tried to stop them on the grounds that they were interfering unreasonably with children's education. The matter went to court, where the Minister's case was not that selective schooling is unreasonable (although he thought it was) but that it was too late to organise it before the school year started. He won, but the Law Lords overruled him on appeal, not because the new council did have a viable scheme and time enough but because, they said, the law recognises that a man may be reasonable, although wrong. The only limit to reasonable error, in the eyes of the law, is that a man cannot be 'so wrong that no reasonable person could sensibly take that view'. Blatant circularity aside, the judgement is surely mistaken. It holds people to act reasonably, provided that they have some warrant for their view, even though they have ignored or not bothered to check for better warrant against. The Tameside council indisputably had the weight of expert evidence against them and so resembled someone who shuts one ear and protests that he is doing his best with the other. Objectively rational belief is belief justified by the balance not of evidence actually taken into account but of evidence which should be taken into account. Otherwise irrational actions are wrongly classed as rational, with harm to, for example, the study of mental illness.

The larger objection is to treating what the agent wants as given *desideranda*. It is tempting to do so, since it seems to explain why what is sauce for the goose is not automatically sauce for the gander – why, for instance, one person will rationally holiday in Spain while another climbs Mount Everest. Indeed, if rationality were a purely instrumental notion, it should be possible to infer straight from '*S* wants to achieve *g*' and '*a* is the most effective means' to '*S* would act rationally in doing *a*.' The temptation may also make us doubt whether Lock, Stock and Barrel are in competition. Nonetheless the inference is to be resisted. The most effective way for me to get rapturously high, let us suppose, is taking heroin. Does that make it rational to do so? Well, I must first realise that addiction is likely and an early death. But, provided I want this result, or at least accept it as the price of the kicks, am I not rational to go ahead?

An instrumental notion of rationality does not imply an unqualified Yes. I act irrationally in seeking to satisfy a desire which I shall foreseeably regret having acted upon. For example, addiction will frustrate the satisfaction of other desires, which will matter more later than they do now. Economists can distinguish between immediately urgent preferences and preferences ordered consistently over time, and thus between what is merely desired and what is rationally desired. But 'rationally desired' here turns solely on what is achievable and any set of consistently satisfiable desires will do. Utility maps have an engagingly named 'bliss point' in the top right corner, where satisfaction is maximised and, one imagines, the bloated consumer puts paws in the air with a stupefied sigh. Desires which can achieve this equilibrium can be deemed more rational than others.

Admittedly bliss points are purely notional, especially in a social system which depends on our always wanting more than we get. As Hobbes observes;

> *Continual success* in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth, that is to say, continual prospering, is that men call FELICITY; I mean the felicity of this life. For there is no such thing as perpetual tranquillity of mind, while we live here; because life itself is but motion, and can never be without desire, nor without fear, no more than without sense. (*Leviathan*, ch. VII)

This restless kind of felicity, whether due to human nature or to

capitalism, is unsettling for the notion that a rational desire is a satisfiable desire. Indeed it invites the sociological comment that economically rational egoists are doomed to alienation from their fellows and themselves. But, in principle, frustration is the measure of irrationality. The most attainable set of goals is the rational set; and the most efficient way to close the gap between what is desired and what is achieved is the rational way. The implication is squarely that rational individuals adjust their goals to what the system delivers, if that is easier than changing the system.

I wish to contend that, on the contrary, it is not always rational to lower one's ceiling, rather than raising one's floor. This possibility is not allowed in the previous answers. The economists who gave Barrel the prize must maintain that action which brings about a lasting match between desire and reward is *eo ipso* rational. They are squarely committed to a thesis about real human interests, one which, because no question of the essential identity of social atoms arises, cannot object to turning a discontented man into a pig satisfied. What is rational for me cannot depend in principle on who I am, while my identity is in principle a variable open to social or psychic engineering. Sociologists, however, seem at first more resistant, since they take identity as something closer to a constant. If I am defined in terms of positions and roles, then to dislocate me is to destroy me. (Admittedly identity is not quite a constant since the nun could rationally change position; yet neither is it quite a variable, since the nun survives only if her new position is somehow concordant with the old.) But, although sociologists thus have a fresh view of human nature and, with it, of human interests, it is still more rational to be a happy slave than a frustrated citizen. The transition is still advantageous, even if it can only be made gradually. No sense yet attaches to the idea that rational persons need an identity in which they can be fully themselves.

The contentious issue is thus whether there can be desires which a person could act on without regretting the result and yet be irrational to act on. There is a science fiction story where human civilisation comes finally to rest with what seem to be bunches of shimmering grapes. On closer inspection, the

time traveller sees that each grape is a cosy, iridescent envelope and inside it there lies a happy, slug-like human forever stroked by a mechanical arm. These creatures would never regret their terminal state, if only because they had programmed themselves not to regret it. Yet it is not obvious that a human being would act rationally in choosing this irreversible happiness. That depends on where our real interests lie; and real interests, I submit, are bound up not with what we want but with what we are.

This line is appealing but ambiguous. Does it claim that each of us has our own identity and destroys it at our own peril? Or does it claim more grandly that everyone, in virtue of being human, has the same real interests? Fortunately we need not establish the latter in order to show that *Zweckrationalität* is not the primary kind of rationality. We need only show that it might be in our interests to change our desires, our projects, our character, or whatever it is that tempts us to say there is no single criterion for Lock, Stock and Barrel. Nonetheless the weaker claim is too weak, since it makes us into monads, all essentially different and each entitled to rejoice in our uniqueness. When Barrel is found with his hand on the tap, we have already refused to let him settle the argument by saying 'I would not be me if I did not turn it on.' Yet we cannot just give Lock's reason that orders are orders, since an analogous argument would make it rational for a member of the Gestapo to torture obediently and with enthusiasm, provided that he is happy in his work, has a proper career structure and enjoys the esteem of his peers. Rationality has to consist in identifying with some set of principles neither merely because one wants to nor merely because they are the going norms of one's station but because, whatever it may mean to say so, they are in one's real interest.

We are not far from the idea that action is rational when it is expressive. Is it rational to climb Mount Everest? Instrumentally it is, for someone who wants to get to the top and has no more efficient way up. But that answer sees action as a way of achieving. An expressive view sees it as a way of being and becoming, of expressing and developing the self. Cost-effectiveness is no longer crucial and people can act rationally from, for

instance, honour, respect or gratitude without having to be found a goal rationally thus achieved.

The idea is attractive enough to have invaded political sociology, where exponents of an 'economic' theory of democracy sometimes invoke it to deal with the puzzle of the determined voter. This is the stubborn citizen, who turns out to vote regardless of discomfort or prospect of affecting the result. Since such persons make up most of the electorate, they are an embarrassment to a theory premised on the postulate that individuals are instrumentally rational. But that, it is often said, is solely because voting is often not an instrumental act; hence all is resolved when we see that determined voters are acting rationally by acting expressively.

Yet mere labelling explains nothing, and we may still ask what is rational about the voters' gesture. If the answer is either that they merely feel moved by a desire to record their true preference or are mere creatures of the electoral norms, we are still just where we were. There has to be a reason to explain why it is rational to act on the desire or to accept the norm. I do not mean that it is never rational to do what one desires because one wants to or to follow a rule because it is the rule. But, in acting expressively, we affirm the value both of the desire which constitutes us what we are and of the rule which constitutes the action what it is. To deem the gesture rational, we need good reason for the affirmation. Otherwise it is the idlest sleight of hand to classify determined voters as *wertrational* economic agents. So far Barrel is merely consistently selfish and Lock merely oversocialised. Neither is made more intelligible by dubbing his actions expressive.

Hence I prefer to keep to the notion of real interests, with the suggestion that it may be in one's real interest to affirm an identity. The case is the minimal one, that '*a* is the best means to *g*' does not entail '*a* is a rational action', since the inference requires that *g* be in one's real interest, which in turn is a matter of who one is. Since I shall not be more specific here, a formal statement must suffice. Catching up the earlier points, I propose that *S* acts rationally in doing *a* if and only if:

1 *a* is likeliest to realise *g*.
2 It is in *S*'s overall real interest to realise *g*.
3 Conditions (1) and (2) are *S*'s reasons for doing *a*.

Those willing to support me can now pass judgement on the lettuce problem. The economist's strategy is sound enough, since it seeks the candidate who best advances his real interests, whereas the sociologist affects not to judge the norms in terms of the interests of the citizens. But the economist ascribes rationality to a notional sort of atom who cannot have real interests, whereas the sociologist has at least the makings of a connection between the rationality of ends and the identity of the agent. Yet, for a *homo sociologicus* of the sort considered so far, the connection is that it is always rational to conform to the norms of one's culture, just because they are the norms. Those disliking both Lock and Barrel can therefore award the prize to Stock, on the grounds that he alone is a rational citizen. He is detached enough from the norms to make place for economic calculation but not so detached that he ceases to be essentially a citizen. Unlike Barrel, he heeds the public good. Unlike Lock, he leaves a distance between himself and the role the Water Authority has scripted for him. He alone emerges as a rational person with an essential social identity and his prizewinning solution is to take as little notice of the Water Authority as a rational citizen should.

There is one further ambiguity to resolve, however, before Stock can claim his prize. Although the trio were picked at random from actual groups of people, they are not yet flesh and blood. In the abstract I prefer persons conceived as citizens distanced from the norms. But it does not follow that Stock will always abandon his flowers and save his lettuces. Sometimes he will act like Barrel, on the un-Barrelish grounds that the government needs to be provoked into enforcing a norm properly in the interests of all. Thus fervent humanitarians will sometimes refuse to give money to charity, because charities do just enough good to let the state shirk its responsibility to do more. Conversely Stock will act like Lock, when he finds the norms excellent or deems the national crisis urgent enough to

forgo his distance. Indeed the doctrine of collective responsibility depends on getting mutinous Stocks to act like Locks for the larger good. In the abstract, we conclude that the rationality of the ends justifies the means; that ends are rational in so far as they serve the real interests of the agent; that real interests are to be gauged by making a true model of human nature; and that social science must take note in explaining no less than social ethics in justifying. But the model is one question and the rational way for Stock to act in a drought another.

Nonetheless I submit also that Stock was right to abandon his flowers and save his lettuces. Unlike Barrel, he is essentially a citizen and so party in principle to the enterprise of providing collective goods. Whereas Barrel thinks of himself as a shopper in a supermarket, free to spurn the amazing offers on the shelves and the appeal of the Spastics' box at the door, Stock sees a duty not to let the side down. Consequently Barrel cannot urge directly that it is rational for Stock to pay less for everything. Instead he must argue either that it would be rational for Stock to think of himself like Barrel or that even a citizen, who is essentially a citizen, is a fool to save water. Stock can then reply that he is essentially a citizen and so can find it rational to act expressively at small inconvenience. Against Lock, however, he contends that blind obedience is no virtue. It is indeed foolish to let used bath water drain into the sea, when it could be siphoned into the garden, thus reducing the need for foreign imports. As an unsentimental contributor to the pluralist state, he offers up his thirsty flowers and keeps his lettuces. And so I picture the three of them riding into the sunset at the end of the debate, Barrel in the middle of the road in his well-washed Mercedes, Stock with a dusty saloon and a tankful of unleaded petrol, Lock about to be knocked off his bicycle into the ditch as a reward for saving energy too. But notice that it is not Stock on the bicycle. In the old dispute between herbivores and carnivores, Stock is temperately carnivorous.

Meanwhile the seasons advanced, the rains came, the reservoirs filled and England enjoyed the wettest autumn for years. The Water Authority could still be heard shouting through the cascade that the drought was as serious as ever. But the Dunkirk

spirit had gone from the papers, washed out by sight of the collective good being provided from on high. Lock felt cheated of his virtue, Stock mourned his lost chrysanthemums and Barrel reached for the salad cream. The saving of water had turned out both vain and unnecessary. But that was merely a quirk of fate, whereas our task is to deliver the judgement of Reason.