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## GEWIRTHIAN PRUDENCE, GENERIC AGENCY, AND MORAL RIGHTS

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**Abstract:** Much critical attention has been given to Alan Gewirth’s argument concerning agents’ move from prudential to moral right-claims. Less ink has been spilled on the question of why prudent agents should claim rights to goods needed by agents *in general* rather than to goods needed for the realization of their individual and particular purposes. In this paper, I intend to show that Gewirth’s concept of prudence makes it necessary for agents to identify with the role of a *generic agent* and that this identification provides them with rationally valid reasons not only to claim prudential rights to freedom and well-being but also to recognize a moral principle stating that all agents have these rights. More generally, my argument points to the central role played by the concept of prudence in his theory.

**Keywords:** Gewirth; prudence; generic agent; right-claims

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Alan Gewirth famously argued that every agent must, *qua* agent, perceive her freedom and well-being as necessary goods, since every agent necessarily wants to be successful in the realization of her goals, and because freedom (the ability to control one’s behaviour by one’s unforced choice) and well-being (the ability to act as well as to maintain and develop one’s capacity for purpose-fulfilment) constitute the generally necessary conditions of successful action. Moreover, “[s]ince the agent regards as necessary goods the freedom and well-being that constitute the generic features of his successful action, he logically must also hold that he has rights to these generic features, and he implicitly makes a corresponding right-claim” (Gewirth 1978, 63). The criteria that justify this right-claim “are not moral but rather prudential: they refer to the agent’s own freedom and well-being as required for his pursuits of his own purposes, whatever they may be” (Gewirth 1978, 71).

At a later stage of Gewirth’s argument, the agent must accept that all agents, *qua* agents, are as entitled as she is to have freedom and well-being: “Since ... the agent must claim he has the rights of freedom and well-being for the sufficient reason that he is a prospective agent who has purposes he wants to fulfill, he logically must accept the generalization that all prospective agents who have purposes they want to fulfill have the rights of freedom and well-being” (Gewirth 1978, 112).

As a result, every agent must accept a moral principle of human rights, stating that all agents have rights to freedom and well-being, and that every agent should act in accord with the rights to

freedom and well-being of her recipients as well as of herself. Gewirth calls this the *Principle of Generic Consistency* (PGC), as it is derived from the generic features of agency combined with a requirement of consistency that makes it logically necessary for all agents to accept not only that they themselves have rights to freedom and well-being, but that *all* agents have these rights (Gewirth 1978, 135).

There are two critical steps in Gewirth's deduction of a principle of human rights from agents' evaluation of freedom and well-being and their corresponding right-claims. One of these steps, which has received much critical attention, has to do with Gewirth's move from prudential right-claims to moral right-claims. Another critical step, which has received much less attention, concerns his move from the needs and evaluations of particular agents to the needs and evaluations of a *generic* agent. The two steps are interrelated in that the prudential right-claims from which Gewirth derives his moral principle of human rights imply a claimant who perceives herself as an agent in the generic sense, that is, as an agent who wants to be successful in her actions generally and not only in the realization of this or that particular purpose of hers. According to Gewirth, "every agent logically must claim or accept that he has prudential rights to freedom and well-being as the necessary conditions of his action and successful action *in general*" (Gewirth 1985, 304; emphasis added). A generic agent hence wants to be successful *qua* agent and not just *qua* book collector or *qua* carpenter or *qua* philosopher or *qua* any other specific kind of agent.

My argument will proceed in two steps. First, I will argue that prudence, involving inductive as well as deductive rationality, makes it necessary for any particular kind of agent to identify with the role of a generic agent. Second, I will argue that prudence at the level of a generic agent indeed requires making (prudential as well as moral) right-claims, a thesis which has been questioned by several scholars critical of Gewirth's theory.

As is evident from the last paragraph, I intend to firmly entrench Gewirth's original argument that rational agents logically must recognize a moral principle of human rights to freedom and well-being in an analysis of the requirements of prudence. One implication of my argument will be that prudence should be thought of as intimately connected to morality not only in the sense that morality is the universalization of certain claims made by prudent agents, but also because prudence involves evaluations and a use of reason that makes it both rationally necessary and motivating for a fully prudent agent to accept the PGC. A detailed analysis of what is involved in prudence is hence the key not only to understand the logical move from the "is" of having purposes that one wants to realize to the "ought" involved in recognizing a moral principle of human rights, but also to understand the motivational power behind agents' prudential and moral right-claims.

### **The generic agent and the virtue of prudence**

According to Gewirth, a prudent agent must claim rights to freedom and well-being as the generally necessary conditions of successful agency. The prudent agent who makes such right-claims is a *generic agent*, that is, an agent who defines herself in terms of features typical of *agents in general*. She claims rights *qua* agent, not *qua* carpenter agent, teacher agent, politician agent, philosopher agent, or any other specific kind of agent. She is claiming rights to the goods that *each and every agent* would need in order for them to be successful in *any* action, regardless of its purpose. Accordingly, she claims rights to freedom and well-being, not, for instance, a right to have a personal trainer, although that might be needed in order for her to realize her goal of climbing the

Matterhorn, or a right to have a paid holiday in Italy, although that might be necessary to realize her goal of improving her knowledge of Italian language and culture. As a generic agent, she claims rights to the goods needed by all agents, not the goods needed only by some agents having certain specific purposes. She claims rights to the necessary conditions of successful agency *in general*, rather than the necessary conditions of the successful realization of certain specific purposes that only she might have.

Now this might seem surprising to some readers. Why would a prudent agent, aiming to protect *her* self-interest, claim rights to goods needed by *agents in general* instead of claiming rights to whatever goods she needs in order for *her* to be able to realize whatever particular purpose *she* might have? Why would she demand that other agents refrain from interfering with goods that *generically* pertain to successful agency rather than just demanding their non-interference with the specific goods that *she* needs to fulfil *her* specific purposes?

Gewirth is certainly aware that persons rarely think of themselves only as generic agents and that they “often identify their well-being with their possessing certain particular goods” which suggests that “in such cases the well-being characterizes them not simply as agents but in some more restricted capacity” (Gewirth 1978, 60). One reason why he wants to move beyond such particular conceptions of goods and instead focus on the generally necessary conditions of successful agency is, of course, that this enables him to transcend the subjectivity and idiosyncrasy of many conceptions of value and provide his moral theory with a rationally compelling foundation and justification: “Particular agents may ... claim all sorts of objects as their rights. But since these objects are not necessarily connected with their claimants’ being agents, they may have a kind of arbitrariness, as opposed to the rational necessity to which the argument must be confined if its content is itself to be rational” (Gewirth 1978, 78).

The generally necessary goods of successful agency, on the other hand, are equally needed by all agents, regardless of their more specific purposes. Hence, it would be true of any agent that “[s]ince his having freedom and well-being is tied to the general condition of his agency, it has an ineluctableness within the context of action that is not had by the objects of his particular, dispensable desires” (Gewirth 1978, 82). Accordingly, even if one particular agent has the specific purpose of swimming across the English Channel, while another particular agent has the specific purpose of writing a philosophical treatise, they will both need freedom and well-being in order for them to be successful in their respective endeavours. Hence, regardless of their different goals of action, they will both have a reason to claim rights to freedom and well-being as these goods will be needed by each and every agent.

Given his aim to provide human rights with a rational justification and moral theory with a non-arbitrary foundation, Gewirth needs the concept of the generic agent in order to overcome the many differences and particularities that characterize real-life empirical agents and to secure an Archimedean point from which he can derive a universally valid moral principle. In *Reason and Morality*, he develops this methodological argument in some detail:

The concrete historical circumstances that affect persons’ actual power relations, like the myriad other differences among persons, cannot be taken as ultimate independent variables for purposes of moral justificatory argument. A standpoint must hence be found that abstracts from these circumstances and the differences they generate, while at the same time it does not deny or ignore

the differences, and it must also be able to subject the differences or their alleged moral implications to moral evaluation. Such is the standpoint of the agent that has been adopted here ... For it sets up a morally neutral starting point that does not accept persons' actual power relations and other differences as a moral datum. It is necessary to go behind these relations and differences in order to attain a rationally justified principle for morally evaluating them (Gewirth 1978, 128).

Critics of Gewirth's theory have questioned the theoretical value of trying to derive right-claims from the judgements ascribed to the generic agent, as such an agent cannot represent the complexities and particularities of real-life agents. Bernard Williams, for instance, claimed that "there is no way of being a rational agent and no more" (Williams 1985, 63), while Virginia Held argued that "[i]f we require that in acting we are all so similar that we all claim the same thing, then Gewirth's theory is a theory of the ideal agent rather than of real agents" (Held 1985, 38).

Responding in a later work to these objections, Gewirth defended his concept of a generic agent (although he does not use that term), arguing that such a theoretical construct is consistent with the existence of real-life empirical agents:

It must be admitted that there is a sense in which the conception of the self that enters into the principle of human rights is indeed abstract. This abstractness, however, as part of the conclusion that all humans have equal rights, is not based ... on an arbitrary or artificial stripping away of all particularizing properties of human selves (...). The argument for the PGC does not involve any denial of the rich communal attachments and diversities of actual human beings. On the contrary, the argument takes humans as they actually are, but with a focus on the generic features that constitute all humans as actual, prospective, or potential agents (Gewirth 1996, 96).

Now, while we can see Gewirth's point here, that the idea of a generic agent is theoretically valuable, we might still wonder why a real-life agent would identify with this abstraction. Without such an identification an empirical agent, having her specific goals and purposes, would have no reason to make the prudential right-claims that are needed to get the Gewirthian justificatory argument started.

I believe a deeper understanding of what is involved in being a *prudent* agent can explain why such an agent indeed must identify with the generic agent and claim (prudential) rights to freedom and well-being. Such a deeper understanding can be found in Aristotle's remark that it is "the mark of a prudent man to be able to deliberate rightly about what is good and advantageous for himself; not in particular respects, e.g. what is good for health and physical strength, but what is conducive to the good life generally" (Aristotle 1976, 209 [1140a]). Consequently, a prudent agent would look for the conditions of successful agency in general and not only for the conditions of the successful realization of this or that particular goal of action that she might want to realize. This also fits with the Aristotelian idea that the good of man is about functioning well "in a complete lifetime. One swallow does not make a summer; neither does one day. Similarly neither can one day, or a brief space of time, make a man blessed and happy" (Aristotle 1976, 76 [1098a]).

Moreover, on an Aristotelian account, a prudent agent's focus on having a good life would involve an acknowledgement of the social conditions of such a life, as it would be inseparable from her belonging to a political community. Hence, although prudence is concerned with the individual agent's self-interest, Aristotelian *enlightened* self-interest has a social and communal aspect,

derived from the assumptions that “while the state came about as a means of securing life itself, it continues in being to secure the *good* life” and that “man is by nature a political animal” (Aristotle 1981, 59 [1252b–1253a]; emphasis in original).

This is also how prudence functions within Gewirth’s moral philosophy. The question that one should ask oneself as a prudential Gewirthian agent is “which of one’s possible ends are most worth pursuing in the light of one’s overall capacities and deepest aspirations” (Gewirth 1978, 243). This is what the virtue of prudence is about. As Gewirth himself points out, to answer this question the agent needs not only self-knowledge, but also knowledge of her natural and social environment. That is, the agent must make use of her inductive rationality to find out what kinds of pursuits are best suited for her in the particular circumstances she finds herself. We can also safely assume that the prudent agent possesses a deductive rationality, at least in the minimal sense that she will recognize the principle of non-contradiction and hence reject conclusions based on premises or propositions that contradict each other.

As part of her inductive rationality, the prudent agent will take at least some interest in other human beings, realizing that they too are purposive agents, and that their pursuit of their goals might either promote or impede her realization of her goals, just as her pursuit of her goals might either promote or impede their realization of their goals. Hence, it should come as no surprise that prudence might also involve that capacity for “groupish” thinking highlighted by the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt. According to Haidt, while “human nature is mostly selfish”, it also includes a “groupish overlay” which supports not only “strategic cooperation” among individuals but also the existence of group loyalties and “true team players ... who are willing to cooperate and work for the group, even when they could do better by slacking, cheating, or leaving the group” (Haidt 2012, 222).

Now this interest in the pursuits of other agents would not be sufficient to bring about a willingness on the prudent agent’s part to embrace a moral principle of human rights. She could just as well take an instrumentalist view of the pursuits of other agents, trying to manipulate or coerce them to act in a way that benefits her purposes with no regard for their goals and projects. However, the inductive rationality of a prudent agent will also motivate her to identify with the role of a generic agent, as she would want to be successful in her actions in general and not only in the realization of the purposes she has here and now. A prudent agent is aware of the possibility that she might have different purposes in the future, and she would want to be able to realize them as well. Hence, she would identify with the role of a generic agent and with the capabilities needed for successful agency in general. And as a generic agent who also possesses deductive rationality, she must (logically) embrace a moral principle of human rights, stating that *all* agents have rights to freedom and well-being.

It is her understanding of herself as a long-term agent that makes it rational for any particular prudent agent to identify with the role of a generic agent. Thinking of herself in a long-term perspective, she will be motivated to protect her capacity to control her behaviour not only here and now, but for the rest of her life. She would like to ensure that she is never enslaved, coerced, or manipulated by others. That is, she would want to protect her agential freedom not only occurrently, but also dispositionally. Moreover, she would want to protect not only her capacity to act here and now, but also the conditions and capacities needed to maintain what she has already achieved by her past agency and to realize new purposes in the future. That is, she would want to

protect her agential well-being not only occurrently, but also dispositionally. Accordingly, any particular prudent agent would be motivated to identify with the role of the generic agent.

### **Prudence, motivation, and right-claims**

As the above argument suggests, prudence is not only about calculating the most efficient means to one's most desired ends. In relation to agency, it is also about being motivated to identify with the role of a generic agent. With this identification comes a positive evaluative attitude regarding the goods needed for successful action in general. Just as any particular prudent agent would take a positive view of having the goods needed to realize her particular purposes, so the generic agent would take a positive view of having the goods needed for successful agency in general. That this evaluative and motivational aspect of being a generic agent plays a role in Gewirth's justification of prudential rights was well understood by James Scheuermann a long time ago:

Gewirth must mean something like what we might call 'psychological' justification. That is, the agent necessarily holds that his enforcement of his claims to freedom and well-being is justified because of the supreme importance these goods have for him; for him not to claim a right to enforce his claims to these goods would be for him to deny his conception of himself as an agent (Scheuermann 1987, 302).

Perhaps Gewirth's rationalist method, with its emphasis on deductive rationality, non-contradiction, and objectivity, has blinded commentators to the role played within his theory of emotive factors. However, Gewirth never denied the importance of emotions to morality; he only pointed out that they are not sufficient on their own to justify a valid moral principle. In fact, in an early work Gewirth made his position on the importance of emotions to morality very clear: "Reason of itself moves nothing, and without passion even moral evaluation may perhaps be impossible" (Gewirth 1956, xxix). Here we should of course read Gewirth with care – holding that reason *of itself* moves nothing is not to deny that reason *combined* with certain emotions can be causally effective.

More than forty years later, after having pointed out that "[t]he grounding of universalist morality in reason is not antithetical to its having an important emotional component" (Gewirth 1998, 87), he goes on to describe the kind of self that is envisaged by his moral principle, namely, the *reasonable self*:

Such a self ... is aware of its own agency needs and rights, but it also takes due account of the agency needs of other persons, respecting their rights as well as one's own and maintaining a certain equitableness or mutuality of consideration between oneself and others, as required by the universality of human rights (Gewirth 1998, 88–89).

The reasonable self not only recognizes the rational validity of the PGC as the principle of human rights but is also motivated to act in accordance with that principle. To be rational, on Gewirth's account, is indeed to be motivated to act in accordance as reason requires; to this extent he subscribes to "the 'internalist' point that motivation is internal to reason" (Gewirth 1998, 226).

Now the emotional and motivational attitude of a prudent agent regarding the necessary goods of successful agency comes out most strongly in her claim to have *rights* to freedom and well-being. As Gewirth points out, the prudent agent's claim that other agents should not interfere with her possession of freedom and well-being "is made from within the agent's own standpoint in purposive action: what grounds his judgment is his own agency-needs, not those of the persons about whom he makes the judgment" (Gewirth 1978, 71). However, as we have already seen, the prudent agent makes her claim as a *generic* agent. Hence, she identifies with the interests not only of herself as a particular kind of agent having certain specific purposes, but rather with the interests of an agent *qua* agent – that is, someone who wants to be successful in her realization of her purposes *in general*. Being motivated by prudence to identify with the role of a generic agent, it should not be too big a step for a prudent agent, who is also a reasonable self, to recognize that all agents have (moral) rights to freedom and well-being. The motivation to embrace a moral principle of human rights is already there, implicit in prudence and in the inductive and deductive powers of reasoning that are part of prudence.

The above argument has consequences for how we should understand morality. It would turn out that the distance between prudence and morality is much shorter than is commonly believed. Prudence should not be identified with intelligent selfishness, as in the case of Kant's "prudent merchant" who does not overcharge his customers not because it would be morally wrong to do so, or because he has friendly feelings for them, but simply because "his own advantage required him to do it" (Kant 1993, 10 [Ak. 4: 397]). On the contrary, by requiring of the agent that she identifies with the role of a generic agent, prudence paves the way for morality.

The claim here is not the classical one, presented by Plato, that a prudent person has every reason to choose to be moral as "the just man is happy, and the unjust man miserable" (Plato 1987, 42 [354a]). Rather it is the argument that the rationality inherent in prudence would motivate any agent to identify with the role of a generic agent and that such a generic agent in turn must (logically) accept a moral principle of human rights. Nor is it the claim here that there are prudential reasons to be moral because of the way social life works, rewarding those who act honestly and punishing those who act dishonestly. This is the argument outlined by Richard Hare, that "[m]ankind has found it possible to make life a great deal more tolerable by bringing it about that on the whole morality pays" (Hare 1981, 196). However, the rewards and punishments in relation to moral and immoral behaviour should be understood as the effects rather than the causes of moral behaviour. It is first when sufficiently many agents have identified with the role of a generic agent that their community will reward moral behaviour and punish immoral behaviour.

The argument I am making here has two parts. First, a prudent agent, making use of her *inductive* rationality, must identify with the role of a generic agent. Second, a generic agent, making use of her *deductive* rationality, must move from a claim that she has rights to freedom and well-being to the universalization that all agents have rights to freedom and well-being. What is being universalized here is the agent's claim to possess rights to freedom and well-being; accordingly, Gewirth has called this move "possessive universalization" (Gewirth 1988, 253).

It is by means of such a possessive universalization of prudential right-claims that we get moral rights. By first identifying with the role of a generic agent and then generalizing the justification of her own right-claims *qua* generic agent, every agent must accept the normative conclusion that all agents have rights to freedom and well-being. Here, then, is an important meta-ethical result:



*Morality is the possessive universalization of agential prudence.* However, the move from prudential to moral right-claims has been one of the most contested features of Gewirth's moral theory.

Already in the early reviews of *Reason and Morality*, it was argued that Gewirth's move from prudential to moral rights was illicit, as the universalization of a prudential right-claim could only generate universal prudential rights. That is, every agent must recognize that just as she is entitled to protect and promote her freedom and well-being, so is every other agent entitled to protect and promote his or her freedom and well-being. However, this would only amount to a justification of universalized self-interest, not of any moral principle, and, accordingly, nothing would follow about agents being morally obliged to respect each other's freedom and well-being. The universalization of prudential rights only means that I have a prudential right to look after my freedom and well-being, and you have a prudential right to look after your freedom and well-being, and so on for all other agents; however, I am under no moral duty to respect your freedom and well-being, nor are you under any moral duty to respect my freedom and well-being.

Hence, Adina Schwartz objected to Gewirth's theory that "an agent can coherently assert that he/she does not want others to achieve their goals. Therefore, he/she can argue, while it is prudent for each of them to demand rights to freedom and well-being, it is rational for him/her to refuse to grant such rights to any other purposive agent" (Schwartz 1979, 656). Likewise, R. M. Hare argued that "when I say that *other persons* prudentially ought to do something, I must mean that they ought to do it in *their* own interest; I cannot mean that they ought to do it in *my* interest" (Hare 1984, 54; emphasis in original). Both Schwartz and Hare misconstrue Gewirth's argument, however.

Schwartz fails to see the significance of why the prudent agent claims rights. The prudent agent claims that she has rights to freedom and well-being because she has identified with the role of a generic agent and because she is thereby motivated to look for protection of the goods generally needed for all successful action. And from the point of view of a generic agent, she must (logically) also recognize that everyone who satisfy the criteria for being an agent should have the same rights.

R. M. Hare, on the other hand, fails to see that Gewirth's argument is about what *the agent* must prudentially require of others. Gewirth's agent does *not* say what Hare claims she is saying, namely, that "other agents prudentially ought to do something". Instead Gewirth's agent prudentially demands of other agents that they ought to do something (namely, refrain from interfering with her possession of freedom and well-being). That is, Gewirth's agent refers to her own self-interest, not to the self-interest of the persons she is addressing. As Gewirth himself noted in his reply to Hare's criticism, "Hare puts the word 'prudentially' in the wrong place. The agent ... does not say that 'other persons prudentially ought to do something'; rather, the agent prudentially – i.e. with a view to his own interests or purposes – says that other persons ought to do something" (Gewirth 1984, 208). Moreover, if one allows for an understanding of prudence along the lines I have outlined here, the self-interest of an agent who takes a prudential view of her own agency will be identical with the self-interest of a generic agent, and that kind of self-interest will not deny other agents their freedom and well-being.

A slightly different objection to Gewirth's argument about prudential right-claims has been put forward by Christopher McMahon. He finds it "mysterious how an agent's judgment that his freedom and well-being are necessarily good could justify him in concluding that other agents have

a nonprudential reason to contribute to the maintenance of these conditions” (McMahon 1986, 276).

While he accepts the idea that the individual agent has a prudential reason to require of other agents that they should not interfere with her possession of freedom and well-being, McMahon cannot see what reason these other agents would have to go along with her prudential right-claim. Thus he argues that “one cannot in general infer from the fact that there is good reason for some agent to bring about a certain state of affairs that there is good reason for others to assist him” (McMahon 1986, 279).

With this latter statement one can of course agree, but it does not affect the validity of Gewirth’s argument. Gewirth’s argument is not that the individual agent’s prudential reason for claiming rights to freedom and well-being provides these other agents with a reason to support her right-claim. Instead his argument is that every individual agent must identify with the role of a generic agent and as such she must recognize that she has duties as well as rights in relation to the freedom and the well-being that are needed by all agents. That is, every agent must accept the conclusion that all agents have rights to freedom and well-being and that she should act accordingly.

Other criticisms of Gewirth’s move from prudential to moral rights have focused on an alleged gap between the prudential and the moral that would make it impossible to move from premises of one kind to a conclusion of the other kind. In the words of E. J. Bond, “[i]f we generalize a prudential statement, the result must be a prudential principle” (Bond 1980, 50). James Sterba developed this argument in greater detail:

What a prudential right to freedom and well-being implies is an asymmetrically action-guiding ‘ought’. This means that when an agent says that every prospective, purposive agent has a prudential right to freedom and well-being, the action-guiding implications are that the agent ought to take the steps necessary to secure or to retain the agent’s own freedom and well-being, but not that the agent ought to take steps to secure or even steps not to interfere with the freedom and well-being of any other agent, except insofar as it is necessary for securing or retaining the agent’s own freedom and well-being. And similarly for every other agent (Sterba 1987, 55–56).

Now, as Deryck Beyleveld has pointed out (Beyleveld 1991, 262–264), Sterba misconstrues Gewirth’s idea of prudential rights. Sterba appears to believe that the only result that can emanate from Gewirth’s universalization of prudential rights is that each individual agent is accorded a right to look after her own freedom and well-being, while no agent is under any obligation not to interfere with the freedom and well-being of other agents. Hence, the universalization of prudential rights would be consistent with a Hobbesian war of all against all – an outcome very different from the one envisaged by Gewirth.

What Sterba and many other critics of Gewirth’s theory seem to misunderstand is the importance of the prudent agent’s identification with the role of a generic agent. Once a particular agent has identified with the role of being an agent in the generic sense, she must also recognize the moral principle that all agents have rights to freedom and well-being. This would follow from her application of her deductive rationality to her justification of her own claim to have rights to freedom and well-being. Here we should also note that the deductive rationality in question is not something that has been introduced first now, at the level of generic agency. A prudent agent

possesses inductive as well as deductive rationality already before she identifies with the role of a generic agent. Indeed, prudence requires of the agent that she possesses both inductive and deductive rationality, as she is expected to be able to make valid and reliable inferences from facts about herself and about her natural and social environment. This ability requires of the agent that she can make at least simple inductive calculations of probability (for instance, about whether or not a certain kind of career would suit her preferences and skills) and that she has the deductive capability of detecting and avoiding obvious contradictions in her reasoning (for instance, not committing herself to support two mutually inconsistent political viewpoints).

## Conclusion

My argument is now complete. I have introduced the concept of the generic agent and pointed to its significance in understanding the Gewirthian transition from prudential to moral right-claims. Moreover, I have shown how the Gewirthian conception of prudence makes it necessary for any particular agent who is also prudent to identify with the role of a generic agent.

By implication, this also points to the richness of the Gewirthian concept of prudence. Similar to the corresponding Aristotelian concept, Gewirth's concept of prudence involves a commitment to one's long-term agential well-being that goes beyond narrow self-interest. It also involves taking a critical view of one's purposes in the light of one's deepest aspirations and overall capacities. Indeed, much of the argumentative force of Gewirth's theory can be traced back to his conception of prudence and of the prudent agent. Unfortunately, the role of prudence in Gewirth's theory has been overlooked by many of his critics. My paper has been an attempt to rectify this oversight.

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