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# WHAT ARE MORAL REASONS?

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STEPHEN DARWALL

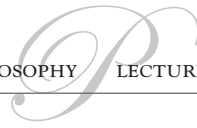
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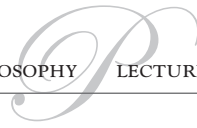
ABSTRACT

In *The Second-Person Standpoint* and subsequent essays, I argue that the deontic moral concepts of obligation, duty, right, wrong, and the like resist analysis in terms of moral reasons for acting. I claim that the “fully deontic” ought of moral obligation has a conceptual connection to accountability and culpability that being recommended by moral reasons, however weighty, does not. Since oughts and reasons are so closely connected generally, however, the thought can seem irresistible that moral oughts must be understood in terms of moral reasons also. Here I put additional pressure on this admittedly attractive idea by asking what makes a reason a moral reason. I argue that the most promising account of moral reasons is that they are (fully deontic) moral obligation-making considerations. This turns the otherwise attractive idea on its head.

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# What Are Moral Reasons?

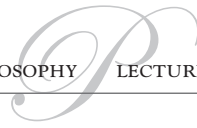
Stephen Darwall

Yale University

IN MY BOOK *The Second-Person Standpoint* and subsequent work, I argue that there is a conceptual connection between the deontic moral concepts of obligation, duty, right, and wrong, on the one hand, and accountability, on the other, which any attempt to understand moral obligation in terms of the balance of moral reasons cannot capture (Darwall 2006, 2013a, 2013b). In what follows, I put additional pressure on this latter, seemingly natural, idea. Any attempt to understand moral obligation in terms of moral reasons must be able to identify moral reasons independently of deontic ideas. I shall argue that this cannot be done in a satisfying way.

Of course, we can use the phrase ‘moral reason’ in any way we like, and use it simply to refer to some set of reasons, say, those concerning the interests of others or of people, or sentient beings, impersonally conceived. For any such attempt to be more than merely classificatory and successfully pick out our ordinary concept of moral reason, however, it must have the kind of normative upshot this concept is normally thought to have. I argue that non-deontic accounts of moral reasons cannot provide this. I shall suggest in their stead a deontic account of moral reasons that gives them such a normative upshot.

Moral reasons, I propose, are pro tanto moral obligation-making considerations. They are facts that tend to make an act morally obligatory in the fully deontic sense, that is, facts that tend to make an act something we are accountable for doing in the sense that failure to do it is *culpable*, lacking adequate excuse. This turns the seemingly attractive idea that moral



obligations can be understood in terms of moral reasons on its head. To begin, however, let us see what makes this idea attractive.

## Normative Reasons and Oughts

NORMATIVE REASONS AND OUGHTS seem intimately related. Whether, for example, someone ought to believe something seems a matter of whether the reasons in favor of believing it outweigh those against. Similarly, whether a person ought to care about something seems to depend on the reasons for and against caring about it. And similarly for reasons and oughts related to other attitudes.

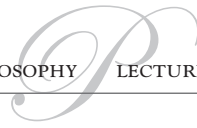
Reasons and oughts always concern some attitude or other, taking ‘attitude’ sufficiently broadly to include action (under intention or choice). It seems generally true that:

### *Ought/Reasons*

For any attitude  $x$ , agent  $y$ , and situation  $z$ , whether  $y$  ought, all things considered, to have  $x$  in  $z$  is a matter of whether the reasons in favor of  $y$ ’s having  $x$  in  $z$  outweigh those against, whether, that is, there is reason, on balance, to have  $x$  or not in  $z$ .

Reasons “in favor of” or “against” are normative reasons, reasons that exist, or that someone might have, to have an attitude. Normative reasons contrast with explanatory reasons, both with just anything that might explain someone’s actually having the attitude and also with the more specific kind of explanatory reasons called motivating reasons (often also called agents’ reasons) (see, e.g., Darwall 1983: 28–31). These last are the considerations on the basis of which the agent herself actually formed her attitude, and hence, that she took as normative reasons for her to have the attitude. Whether someone ought to have some attitude, then, apparently turns on whether on balance, there is, or they have, normative reason to have it.

In addition to what there is reason, or someone has reason, to do, all things considered (where ‘reason’ functions as a mass noun), we can also speak of reasons pro tanto, or other things being equal, using ‘reason’ as a count noun. The fact that it will likely rain this afternoon is a reason for me to take an umbrella, and the fact that umbrellas are cumbersome to



carry is a reason for me not to. Both are pro tanto reasons, for and against taking the umbrella, respectively, and both exist whatever there is reason for me to do, all things considered.

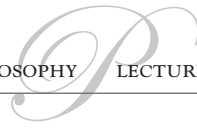
Both pro tanto reasons, moreover, give rise to pro tanto oughts. Because it will likely rain, I should take an umbrella, other things being equal. And because umbrellas are cumbersome, I ought not to take one, things other than that being equal. And similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, for pro tanto reasons and oughts for attitudes of other kinds: for belief, concern, esteem, desire, and so on.

### Kind Reasons and Kind Oughts

CONCENTRATE NOW ON NORMATIVE REASONS for *acting*: normative practical reasons. Sometimes it is useful to group pro tanto practical reasons and their associated pro tanto oughts into kinds. When considerations of different kinds are in play, it can be helpful to consider more specific reasons under these kinds first and then consider how to weigh the emergent kind reasons and oughts, all things considered. For example, the considerations for and against taking an umbrella so far mentioned are both reasons of personal comfort and convenience. These might be sufficient to determine what I should do in the presenting situation, all things considered.

But they may not be. The only available umbrella may be yours, and taking it might be theft. It might also make you sad, not to mention justifiably resentful. To determine what I should do, all things considered, we would need to weigh considerations of my comfort and convenience (or, perhaps my well-being more generally) against these further considerations. It is tempting, in such a case, to group these latter reasons together, as many philosophers do, as reasons of the same kind, as *moral reasons*. (We have not yet said what might make them moral reasons though.)

It can then seem natural to go on to say that in situations like this, prudential reasons of personal comfort and convenience might weigh in favor of taking the umbrella (suppose that taken together, they do), and that moral reasons weigh against. The former, it is often then said, is what the agent prudentially ought to do, whereas the latter is what they morally ought to do.



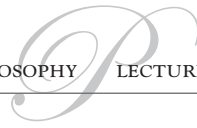
Any reason of a given kind (a *kind reason*) generates a pro tanto ought of its kind: a *kind ought*. Thus prudential reasons create prudential oughts, and moral reasons, if there be such a kind, generate moral oughts. We can weigh and balance reasons of a given kind to determine what the agent kind ought to do, all things considered, for example, what, all things considered, they prudentially ought to do, or what they morally ought to do.

However, all things considered kind oughts are really only all *kind* things considered oughts. To determine what I ought, all things considered do prudentially, I weigh and balance all, but also only, considerations concerning my own good. I take no stand on what considerations other than those of my own good recommend, or on how the former weigh against the latter. So an all things considered prudential ought is not truly an all things considered ought. And the same is true for any kind ought, including the moral ought, to the extent that we consider it to be grounded in moral reasons as a kind.

This brings us to our topic. What makes something a moral reason? We can hardly say anything about how moral reasons weigh against reasons of other kinds, unless we know something about what makes a consideration a moral reason.

Now I am skeptical that there actually is anything to be said in general about how moral reasons weigh against reasons of other kinds. I do accept that if someone is morally *obligated* to do something in the fully deontic sense, all things (relevant to her moral obligations) considered, then that will also be what there is most reason for her to do, all things considered. There is never sufficient reason to violate all things considered moral obligations and do what would be morally wrong. I shall say something about why this is so presently.

But thinking that (fully deontic) moral *obligations* are always overriding is different from thinking that moral reasons always override other reasons, either pro tanto or that what someone morally ought to do, all moral things considered, always determines what a person ought to do, all things (that is, really *all* things) considered. We could say anything we like about the general weight of moral reasons, or indeed, say nothing at all, and still make and defend the claim that it is never in accord with reason not to discharge all things considered moral obligations.



## Moral Obligation

MORAL OBLIGATION IS A DEONTIC MORAL IDEA. The notions of moral obligation, duty, requirement, demand, permission, right, wrong, and the like constitute an interdefinable network of deontic moral ideas. Something is wrong, for example, if it violates a moral duty or requirement. Something is morally permissible if it does not violate a duty or requirement. And so on.

As I said at the outset, I maintain that deontic moral ideas are tied conceptually to moral accountability (Darwall 2006, 2013a, 2013b, 2016). The following, I claim, is a conceptual truth.

### *Obligation/Accountability*

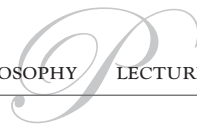
Necessarily, an act is wrong (violates a moral obligation) if, and only, if it is an act of a kind that it would be blameworthy to perform, were the agent to do so without adequate excuse.

This does not reduce wrongness to blameworthiness, since an action can be wrong without being blameworthy if the agent has some excuse.<sup>1</sup> But it does make a conceptual tie to culpability central to moral obligation in a way that it is not to the existence of reasons for acting, pure and simple, even moral reasons.

This can easily be missed unless we are careful to note the precise character of blame as it figures in the idea of culpability that is conceptually related to deontic moral ideas. Blame, in this context at least, is not just any faultfinding criticism, whether critical attitude or expressed criticism. It is a Strawsonian *reactive attitude* through which we hold the object of blame accountable and implicitly address a demand to them to take responsibility for their action and hold themselves accountable, for example, through self-addressed blame in feeling guilt (Strawson 1968: 92-93; Darwall 2006, 2016). It is the implicitly addressing feature of reactive attitudes like moral blame that requires what Strawson calls a “participant,” “inter-personal,” or as I call it, “second-person” standpoint. For this reason, I hold that moral

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Parfit on the “blameworthiness” and “reactive attitude” senses of ‘morally wrong’ (Parfit 2011 I: 165).



accountability and the deontic moral ideas that implicate it are second-personal notions and that the reasons that flow from them are second-personal reasons (Darwall 2006).

Nothing like this is necessarily involved in faulting someone's action as less well supported by normative reasons than something else they could have done, even, indeed, when the relevant reasons are moral reasons. As I shall show presently, we can think that there were weightier moral reasons for doing something other than what the agent did without thinking this amounts to a justification for blaming them in the distinctive Strawsonian sense, or thinking that the agent should feel guilt, unless their action was covered by some excuse.

### Moral Obligation and the Moral Ought

Sometimes, I suspect normally, when we say that someone morally ought to act, we mean something distinctively deontic, which is different from a kind ought grounded in normative reasons of a distinctively moral kind. We mean that they are under a moral duty or obligation and that it would be wrong in the fully deontic sense for them not to do it. We do not mean just that they would be acting against the balance of moral reasons.

In the past, I have used the following open-question-style argument to show that the fully deontic sense of moral ought – moral duty or obligation – cannot be understood as a kind ought, as what moral reasons most support (see e.g., Darwall 2016: 265–266). We can imagine two people agreeing that moral reasons most highly favor a given action, but also coherently disagreeing about whether that action is morally obligatory or wrong to omit. Imagine, for example, a disagreement between an act consequentialist and someone like Scheffler in *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Scheffler 1982). Both reject agent-relative deontological constraints, and both agree that morality always most recommends the optimific act. But they disagree about whether especially burdensome costs to the agent can render an action that would otherwise be morally obligatory morally permissible. The act consequentialist thinks that non-optimific acts are always morally wrong, whereas the Schefflerian holds that non-optimific acts are sometimes not wrong when they are covered by an agent-relative prerogative or permission that defeats the claim of moral wrong when the personal costs are sufficiently high in relation to the impartial benefits.



For such a disagreement to be so much as possible, the parties must distinguish the distinctively deontic concept of moral obligation (‘morally ought’ in the fully deontic sense) from the ‘moral ought’ of moral reasons, that is, from a kind ought grounded in reasons of a moral kind. Deontic terms like ‘required’, ‘obligatory’, ‘prohibited’, ‘wrong’, ‘permissible’, and the like, occupy a different conceptual space than do those concerning what reasons favor, support, or justify, since they distinctively concern accountability (Darwall 2006, see also Pink 2007). That does not mean that deontic claims do not hook up with normative reasons claims. On any plausible account of moral reasons, it should turn out that that what is morally obligatory, all things considered, is also what there is most moral reason to do. And even if the contrary were to be true as a substantive normative proposition, the thought experiment just mentioned shows that it is not a conceptual truth.

That this is so is a consequence of a distinction first made by Francisco Suarez in the early seventeenth century between “law” and “counsel,” which was carried forward in early modern moral philosophy, especially in Grotius, Hobbes, and Kant, and that is now enshrined, I believe, in moral common sense (Schneewind 1990: 1, 74–75; discussed in Darwall 2012). Suarez noticed that deontic concepts of (moral) law and obligation have distinctive entailments that are not shared by the concept of a normative reason. No matter how weighty the reasons, the claim that moral reasons recommend or counsel an action is a claim of a different kind than the deontic claim that an action is morally obligatory, required, or demanded. Similarly, the claim that an action is morally permissible, not obligatory not to do, cannot be seamlessly translated into the language of moral reasons.

My diagnosis of why this is so, again, is that fully deontic moral concepts are conceptually tied to accountability in a way that normative reasons, even moral reasons, and therefore moral kind oughts, seem not to be. What is morally obligatory is what we are accountable for doing in the sense that we would be blameworthy for failing to do it without excuse. What the disagreement between the Schefflerian and the act-consequentialist is about, as I analyze it, is whether non-optimific actions are always culpable when done without excuse.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Note that I am assuming also a distinction between *excuses*, which tend to defeat blameworthiness though *not* the wrongfulness of the action, and *justifications*, that count against the action’s being wrong. What would be in question between the Schefflerian and his consequentialist opponent is whether an agent’s personal costs can figure in a justification out of proportion to their impersonal weight.

To mark the conceptual distinction between moral obligation and the balance of moral reasons, we might speak of two senses of the moral ‘ought’: the fully deontic sense and the “moral reasons” sense. Or alternatively, we might distinguish between what a person morally *must* do, and what they morally ought to do, confining ‘morally ought’ to the moral reasons sense.<sup>3</sup>

## The Ethical, the Moral, and Categorical vs. Hypothetical Oughts

HAVING ARGUED THAT THE FULLY DEONTIC SENSE of ‘moral ought’ cannot be understood as a moral kind ought, I turn now to the question of what makes a reason a moral reason. Ultimately, my object will be to show that not only can the deontic moral ought not be understood in terms of moral reasons, but also that something like the reverse is true. The most plausible way of demarcating moral reasons is to say that they are considerations that generate pro tanto moral obligations in the fully deontic sense; they are pro tanto right- and wrong-making considerations.

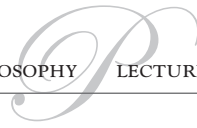
To begin, we should note that there is a broad sense of ‘ethical’ in which any normative reason for action is an ethical reason. In this sense, ethical reasons are not a kind of normative reason for acting; they are normative practical reasons pure and simple. For moral reasons to be a kind of normative practical reason, therefore, ‘moral’ must be understood as having narrower scope. Only some reasons for acting, it must be thought, are moral reasons. How are we to mark out this narrower scope?

One promising thought might seem to be Philippa Foot’s gloss on the Kantian doctrine that moral oughts are categorical imperatives. This is the idea that, as she puts it, “moral considerations necessarily give reasons for acting,” irrespectively of the agent’s “desires or interests” (Foot 1972: 309). Perhaps moral reasons are distinguished from other normative reasons by being (if only putatively) categorical in this sense.

However, there seem to be many kinds of reasons for acting that are independent of agents’ desires and interests, and so categorical in this sense, that we might hesitate to classify as moral. Suppose we think that the pursuit of knowledge is a good thing, not just in the

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3 I am indebted here to Paul McNamara. See, e.g., McNamara 1996.



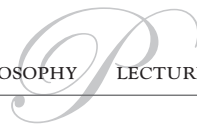
sense that it benefits or is good for us, but that it is a good thing intrinsically, something that, as G.E. Moore would have put it “ought to exist for its own sake” (Moore 1993: 33). If so, we think that there is reason for anyone to promote the pursuit of knowledge, whether they actually desire or take an interest in it or not. Does that commit us to thinking that everyone has a moral reason to promote the pursuit of knowledge? It is hard to see that it does. It certainly does not seem that it would be morally wrong to fail to do so, even other things equal.

Moorean intrinsic values – alternatively, “impersonal” or “impartial-reason-implying” goods, as Parfit calls them – are intrinsically desirable states that there is reason for anyone to desire and promote, whether they actually desire them or not (Parfit 2011: I, 41–42). If any such values exist, consequently, they support pro tanto categorical oughts. But is any reason to promote intrinsic impersonal good thereby a moral reason?

According to Parfit, Sidgwick’s claim that we should promote what is good “from the point of view . . . of the Universe,” “may be better regarded, not as a moral view, but as being, like Rational Egoism, an external rival to morality” (Parfit 2011: I, 168). Normative reasons provided by facts of impersonal value or good, if any there be, are, however categorical, only questionably regarded as moral reasons.

Nor are reasons of impersonal good the only categorical reasons that are doubtfully classified as moral. What about prudential considerations of the agent’s own good? Prudential reasons are not hypothetical in the sense of being conditional on what the agent desires or takes an interest in either. Of course, what is for an agent’s good may itself partly depend on her desires or interests. But we generally think that something can be for someone’s good even if it is contrary to her current desires and that this can give prudential reason for acting even so. That some subjects in Mischel’s famous “marshmallow” experiments, for example, did not want to delay gratification for a greater benefit later does not show that there was not prudential reason for them to do so (Mischel, Shoda, and Rodriguez 1989).

Even if, therefore, moral oughts are categorical rather than hypothetical, they are hardly the only ones. So we cannot plausibly identify moral reasons by their categorical character.



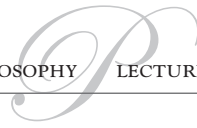
## The Moral Point of View

A NATURAL WAY to try to delimit moral reasons within the general set of categorical reasons is to say that moral reasons are distinctively connected to the moral point of view, where this is conceived of as a fundamentally impartial perspective that differs both from any partial, agent-relative standpoint, such as self-interest, and from a wholly impersonal perspective. This may enable us to distinguish between moral and prudential reasons, since considerations of the agent's own good provide agent-relative reasons that are grounded, depending on one's view, either in agent-relative value or in some other notion of benefit for the agent.

Analogously, that something is good impersonally in the sense in play in Moore and other ideal consequentialists is a fact of a different kind from the fact that it would be good from a perspective that is impartial between different beings, whether persons or sentient or living beings of all kinds. Even if an impartial perspective is neutral as between the beings with respect to which it is impartial, that does not mean that it takes no evaluative attitude on these beings in comparison with other constituents of reality. So delimiting moral reasons via an impartial moral point of view might enable us to distinguish moral reasons from impersonal reasons also.

Trying to identify moral reasons by their relation to the moral point of view conceived in terms of impartiality raises questions of two different kinds. First, which are the beings between which the moral point of view is impartial? And second, what are the impartial valuing attitudes towards those beings that define the moral standpoint? These questions are obviously connected. Historically, the two main rival conceptions of the moral point of view have been in terms of universal benevolence, on the one hand, and universal respect, on the other.

Suppose that, for starters, we identify the moral point of view in Kantian fashion with equal respect for persons. Does this give us a way of identifying moral reasons independently of fully deontic moral obligation? It is hard to see how it could. The Kantian idea of respect for persons as ends in themselves just is the idea that there are fully deontic constraints on how we relate to others (and ourselves) by virtue of fact that (we and) they are moral agents or rational persons. It gives us no grip on reasons coming from the nature of persons that might have weight independently of moral obligation from which an independent moral (kind) ought might be constructed.

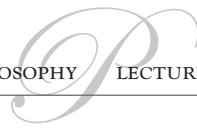


Take for example, the thought that when we involve other persons in our plans and projects, we may not simply use them as a means, but that these others must be able to share our ends, in some sense. This is already a fully deontic idea. It is not simply the thought that there is always a weighty, or even a conclusive, reason against treating people otherwise. Once we have respect for persons in play, fully deontic normative ideas necessarily come in their train. We can find no materials here for duty-independent moral reasons out of which a moral kind ought might be composed.

That this would be so on a Kantian view of the moral should not be surprising. After all, Kant holds that actions with genuine moral worth must be done from duty, so the idea that moral reasons (by which, morally good actions might be motivated) can be specified non-deontically will seem a non-starter. A more promising possibility for identifying moral reasons without a deontic lens is the idea we find in the utilitarian tradition that the moral point of view is one of universal benevolence, or equal care or concern. But again: Which are the beings between which universal moral concern is impartial?

Suppose we use Singer's "expanding circle" idea and take the view that the moral perspective is one of equal universal concern either for all sentient beings or all beings that have a good (Singer 2011). When we care about a being for its own sake, we take considerations of that being's good or well-being as reasons for us to act. If what defines the moral point of view is equal concern for any being that can be benefited or harmed, it will follow, on the current suggestion, that moral reasons are considerations about the good of all. Facts about the good of particular beings as such, whether, say, Jane Goodall, or David Greybird, the first chimpanzee she befriended, would not count as moral reasons, if it is universal and not particularistic concern that defines the moral point of view. But these particularistic facts will nonetheless entail facts that are moral reasons, namely, facts about the good of beings sufficiently generically specified.

If we define the moral point of view in this way, such that moral concern focuses on facts about generic benefit that can be specified non-deontically, we can indeed fashion a notion of moral reasons as "kind reasons" that will enable us to construct an associated kind ought. The moral ought would then just follow from facts about moral reasons so reckoned, as an all things of that kind considered ought.

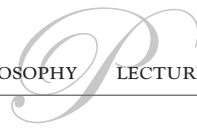


Such a view would effectively be some version of scalar utilitarianism, holding that there is more or less moral reason to perform actions depending on the overall net utility of their consequences, but rejecting fully deontic moral duties, and so any (nonscalar) duty to maximize utility that characterizes orthodox act utilitarianism (Norcross 2006). Once we have a fully deontic duty to promote impartial good, considerations of impartial good become moral reasons thanks to that duty. If we reject the fully deontic duty, as scalar utilitarians often do, then we are left with moral reasons that can weigh more or less in favor of actions, from an impartial moral point of view, as morally better or worse.

Perhaps needless to say, this is a contentious view of morality that would be rejected by many, including many utilitarians. It would have to be rejected, of course, by any view that holds that there exist even any non-utilitarian “prima facie” or pro tanto duties in the fully deontic sense. It would be rejected also by the most common forms of rule utilitarianism, which reckon right and wrong by the consequences of accepting candidates rules as fully deontic, obligating norms that mediate both interpersonal and intrapersonal forms of accountability (Brandt 1979; Hooker 2000). But it is important to see that it must also be rejected also by proponents of orthodox act utilitarianism as a theory of fully deontic moral right.

Suppose we were to accept, however, a scalar utilitarian view grounded in universal benevolence as the moral point of view. We could then call considerations of overall utility “moral reasons.” So we could define a moral kind ought in terms of moral “kind” reasons. What, however, would we have accomplished? On the assumption that moral reasons so defined are a kind of genuine normative reason, we would simply have drawn a line around a set of normative reasons. But that would not give that set any distinctive normative significance. It would not mean it is a normative kind, in the sense that anything distinctively normative would turn on being a member of it. Moral reasons would simply be pro tanto reasons for acting, just like any other. We would have satisfied no more than a purely classificatory interest.

Indeed, in one way this route to defining moral reasons might leave us worse off. Understanding moral reasons in terms of what is good from the point of view of universal impartial concern or benevolence might leave open whether moral reasons are necessarily even pro tanto normative reasons. Whether something is good from some point of view is consistent with its not entailing any genuinely normative reasons at all. That, after all, was Foot’s point about etiquette and her reason for thinking that morality is best understood in



terms of hypothetical rather than categorical imperatives (Foot 1972). It can be uncontroversial, even tautologous, that we ought, from the point of view of etiquette, to act according to its rules. But it is consistent with that that there might be no genuine normative reason whatsoever to act *comme il faut*. If consequently, we define moral reasons, like reasons of etiquette, relatively to an assumed point of view, then not only do we not end up with a distinctive normative kind, moral reasons so defined might not even be genuine normative reasons.

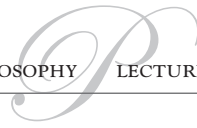
### What Is at Stake in Whether Something Is a Moral Reason?

AT THIS POINT IS WORTH ASKING what, if anything, is at issue in the question of whether a normative practical reason is a moral reason? How might that matter (independently of its relation to fully deontic moral obligation)?

I have claimed that something does turn on the question of whether a normative reason for acting tends to make that action morally obligatory. That is because something normative follows from an action's being a moral duty, whether *pro tanto* or all things considered, that does not follow from its being supported by normative reasons of whatever kind, even moral reasons. If an action is obligatory (in the fully deontic sense), all things considered, then it is an action of a kind that it would be blameworthy (in the Strawsonian sense) for the agent to fail to perform without excuse. Since the latter concerns what, all things considered, *there would be normative reason to blame*, it is a straightforwardly normative fact. Similarly, if it is obligatory *pro tanto*, then it is an action that, other things being equal, it would be blameworthy for the agent to fail to perform without excuse. Since these further accountability consequences follow from deontic moral facts conceptually, whether a normative reason for acting is a duty- or wrong-making consideration, that is, whether it grounds a *pro tanto* moral duty, makes a further normative difference.

I am not saying, of course, that the fact that there is normative reason to do something is not a normative fact. My point concerns whether the fact that certain reasons are *moral reasons* is *itself* a further normative fact. If the question whether a practical reason is a moral reason is to be more than a purely classificatory question, it must be. Since moral obligations conceptually entail propositions about what there is normative reason to blame, whether we





are morally obligated to do something is a normative question that concerns a normative fact.

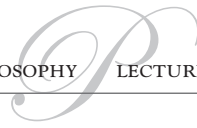
Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, what follows from the fact that an action violates an all things considered moral *obligation* is not just the normative fact that there is normative reason to blame the action, lacking adequate excuse, but also the further normative *practical* fact, that there was not sufficient normative reason, all things considered, to have done it. This further normative consequence follows because of the connection between the attitude of blame and taking there to have been insufficient reason to have done the blameworthy act. The reason there can never be sufficient reason, all things considered, to do what is morally wrong is that the latter cannot be true unless it would be blameworthy to do it (lacking excuse), and it is incoherent to blame someone for doing what one accepts they had sufficient reason to do (Darwall 2016: 267–69). So nothing could possibly justify blame (and be wrong in the fully deontic sense) without its also being true that there was, on balance, normative reason for them not to have done it. Not only does the fully deontic question of whether an action is morally obligatory necessarily raise the normative question of accountability, therefore, that brings with it the further issue of what there is normative reason for the person to do, even indeed, all things considered.<sup>4</sup>

Nothing similar seems to be at stake in the question of whether a reason is a moral kind reason, considered independently of its relation to fully deontic moral obligations. Take for example, the question of whether the reason of impersonal value to promote the pursuit of knowledge is a moral reason. If the pursuit of knowledge is an intrinsically good thing, is anything normative really at issue in determining whether the reasons for bringing about this impersonal good are moral reasons (independently of their relation to fully deontic moral duty)? And ditto for whether prudential reasons of the agent's good are moral reasons also?

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4 See also Darwall 2010 for a defense of the claim that the fact that an action is wrong provides an additional reason not to do something in addition to the considerations that make the act wrong.





## Moral Reasons and Moral Esteem

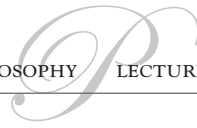
A non-deontic way of attempting to delimit moral reasons with normative upshot might be to understand them in relation to moral goodness understood as what there is normative reason *to esteem* morally (the morally esteemable). Perhaps moral reasons are reasons by which a morally esteemable or good person would be motivated.

Of course, Kantians will hold that morally good agents and actions are motivated by (independently grounded) moral duties. But this can be, and frequently is, denied. Denying this Kantian thesis does not necessarily help in the current context, however. If, like many philosophers, we deny it because we hold that a morally good person is moved by moral reasons, rather than by the (*de dicto*) fact that they are moral reasons, or that they make an act morally obligatory, then we cannot use the idea of moral goodness to identify moral reasons without circularity (see, e.g., Smith 1994, Arpaly 2002, Markovits 2010).

Still, we might try to reverse the strategy in the spirit of Francis Hutcheson. Hutcheson held that morally good motives (character, or agents) are those the contemplation of which causes (we might more plausibly say “merits” or justifies) moral “approbation” or esteem (Hutcheson 2002: 85). Now Hutcheson also held that the only morally esteemable motive is benevolence and that the most esteemable is universal benevolence. So Hutcheson’s substantive theory of moral goodness would yield, on the current proposal, a theory of moral reasons we already canvassed.

But Hutcheson’s metaethics of moral goodness could be combined with the current proposal to support other substantive theories of moral reasons, and, importantly, it introduces a further normative element that the theories canvassed before could not. If moral reasons are reasons by which a morally good person would be moved and moral goodness consists in there being normative reason to have the attitude of approbation or moral esteem, then whether a reason is a moral reason for acting will be a normative question. It will be the question of whether the consideration is such that being moved by it is something there is normative reason to morally esteem.

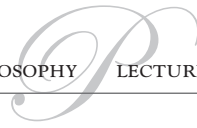
But although that is so, it is not a normative *practical* question. Nothing normative for *action* follows from the fact that a consideration is a moral reason on the current proposal. That we have reason morally to esteem someone who acts on a given consideration entails nothing about the normative weight of the consideration as a reason *for acting*.



The morally esteemable is different from the morally obligatory in this respect. The morally esteemable and the morally obligatory are indeed similar in that both conceptually entail, in the first instance, normative reasons for attitudes rather than for action (or even to have the esteemable motives that may be moral esteem's direct object). If something is morally esteemable, then there is normative reason to esteem it, and if something is morally obligatory, then it is something there would be normative reason to blame failing to do, lacking excuse. *But blame carries presuppositions about normative reasons for action that moral esteem and disesteem do not.* We cannot coherently have the attitude of blame toward someone and think they had sufficient reason *to do* what they did. Nothing similar is true with moral esteem and disesteem. We can coherently esteem someone morally for acting on some consideration without thinking that consideration gave them more reason to do what they did rather than other things they might have done. Similarly, we may think of less of someone morally for some action without that committing us to thinking that there was not sufficient reason for them to have done it.

Suppose, for example, that one does not think that Gauguin's leaving his family to paint in Tahiti rises (or sinks) to the level of culpability, but that it nonetheless warrants moral disesteem (or makes him less morally good). That would not commit one to thinking that the possibility of significant aesthetic achievement could not have provided sufficient reason for him to have gone, all things considered. If, however, one thinks that Gauguin's leaving amounted to culpable wrongdoing, then, I argue, that does commit one to thinking that his aesthetic prospects did not give him sufficient reason to leave. Unlike moral esteem and disesteem, which are committed only on what there is normative reason to esteem or disesteem morally, moral blame is committed also on what there is normative reason to do (and not just from the moral point of view).

Finally, it is not clear that an account of the morally esteemable can be independent of the concept of moral obligation, in any case. Even if Kant is wrong that actions cannot be morally esteemable or have moral worth unless they are motivated by the sense of duty, it is still arguably true that a morally good person would be disposed not to do things that violate (their all things considered) moral obligations. But if, for that reason, it is impossible to identify moral goodness independently of moral obligation, then that must undermine any



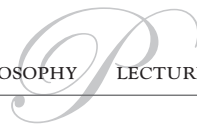
attempt to identify moral reasons through an ideal of the moral esteemable in a way that is fully independent of moral obligation.

### Moral Obligation, Supererogation, and Comparative Weight

RECALL OUR DISCUSSION of the possibility of Schefflerian agent-relative prerogatives and supererogation in the context of an open question argument that deontic moral terms like moral duty, obligation, right, and wrong should be understood as ‘fully deontic.’ And now note that something like an agent-relative prerogative or pro tanto permission to pursue personal projects and relationships out of proportion to the impartial or impersonal good of doing so is not just an intelligible position, but arguably part of moral common sense. When one can accomplish things of marginally greater impartial good only at very great personal cost, it is normally thought, one may sometimes demur without doing wrong, though one also has the prerogative to incur the personal costs in order to promote the greater impartial good (Harman 2016). When people go ahead and pursue the greater impartial good at a cost it would have been unreasonable for them to be required to bear, and so, without being obligated, we say that their actions were supererogatory, beyond the call of duty.

If the only moral ought were the scalar kind ought of most moral reason none of these thoughts could make any sense. Nothing could possibly be both morally best to do, best supported by moral reasons, but also beyond what one morally ought to do in sense of what is most supported by moral reasons.

Moreover, and this is the important point, what one morally ought to do, either pro tanto or all things considered, on the scalar moral kind ought view, is utterly independent both of what one has reasons, however weighty, of other kinds to do and of what one has most reason to do all things considered. That one morally ought to do something neither depends on reasons of other kinds, nor has any consequences for what one should do, things of other kinds considered also. It only means that that is what one has most moral reason to do. Indeed, as we have seen, it is consistent with at least some of the views delimiting moral kind reasons we have considered that moral reasons have no genuine normative practical weight at all.



This makes nothing that commits us on these broader deliberative questions at stake in deciding what we morally ought to do. Since moral kind oughts do not really demand anything in the fully deontic sense, there is no space to protest against them that their demands are unreasonable or excessive. Properly speaking, they make no demands (see Hurley 2006, 2010).

The commonsense idea that situations can arise where there are morally good, supererogatory alternatives that are not morally obligatory only makes sense if we take moral obligation in the fully deontic sense. When we judge that an action is morally obligatory, all things considered, we reckon it something that someone is justifiably held to, that they are accountable for, and that they can justifiably be blamed for not doing it were they not to do so without excuse.

This is what commits us on the broader deliberative question of comparative weight. We cannot intelligibly blame someone for doing what they have sufficient reason to do, all things considered. If someone can convince us that they had sufficiently weighty reasons for acting as they did, then they will have successfully answered for and justified themselves (Darwall 2006, 2016). According to moral common sense, such reasons can include agent-relative reasons that show, via some kind of agent-relative prerogative or pro tanto agent-relative permission (Hurka and Shubert 2012), that an act that would otherwise be morally obligatory is not morally required, all things considered. Unlike scalar moral kind oughts, even all things considered, what is morally obligatory in the fully deontic sense is both sensitive to agents' pro tanto reasons of other kinds, and committing on the question of what they have reason to do, all things considered.

## So What, Then, Are Moral Reasons?

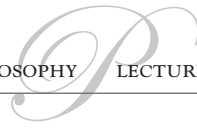
WHAT WOULD AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT of moral reasons look like that might fit with a fully deontic account of obligation and a sensible view of the possibility of moral supererogation? We are now in a position to see that if to be a moral reason is to be a pro tanto moral obligation- or prohibition-making consideration in the fully deontic sense – a genuine right- or wrong-making consideration – then something important does hang on the question of whether something is a moral reason or not. It will matter, since if a consideration is a moral

reason, that means that it bears on the question of whether the action is of a kind that, other things equal, the agent is to be held accountable for performing and that they would justifiably be blamed for not performing without excuse. This puts issues of comparative weight at stake, since it is impossible for an action to be blameworthy but also justifiable by normative reasons, all things (and now, really all things) considered (Darwall 2016).

This, then, is my proposal: moral reasons are pro tanto moral obligation- or prohibition-making considerations, that is, considerations that tend to make an act either morally obligatory or morally prohibited, in the fully deontic sense, all things considered. Another way of putting the claim is to say that moral reasons are considerations that figure in Rossian prima facie (pro tanto) duties (Ross 2003).

Consider, again, the case we discussed earlier where an agent is in a position to promote greater impartial good but at so great a personal cost that we judge that it would not be wrong for them to decide not to. They are covered, we might say, by an agent-relative prerogative or permission. (Assume also that there are no other relevant pro tanto duties.) On the current proposal, it remains true, despite the agent-relative prerogative or permission, that the considerations of impartial good in favor of the action they are not morally required to take, are still moral reasons for them to do so. The reason is that, on the plausible assumption that there is a pro tanto moral duty to advance impartial good (even if it can be outweighed or otherwise defeated by other pro tanto duties or permissions (like an agent-relative prerogative)), then considerations of impartial good count as moral reasons. They are such reasons because they are considerations that tend to make the actions they support morally obligatory – they are pro tanto obligation-making considerations – and they would have made the action morally obligatory, all things considered, had there not been other considerations that made not performing the action morally permissible (such as the considerations of great personal cost). This, I believe, is why we hold in such a case that although the agent is not morally obligated to bear the personal cost, there are nonetheless moral reasons for them to do so. The considerations of impartial good still *tend* to make bearing the personal cost morally obligatory, though this tendency is prevented from actually making that obligatory by the agent-relative prerogative or permission.

Note, by the way, that the obligation-defeating considerations are not moral reasons for the agent to refuse to bear the personal cost, since they make it equally permissible for them



to bear the person cost, and so, to promote the greater impartial good. The considerations of impartial good that would support an obligation to promote it absent the obligation-defeating agent-relative permission or prerogative remain as moral reasons to promote the greater impartial good even at substantial personal cost. Because this is so, we judge bringing about the greater impartial good to be a morally better course of action. That choice goes “above and beyond the call of duty” – it is not just outside what duty requires; it is a moral improvement. That action is better supported by moral reasons; it is supererogatory.

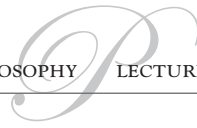
It might be objected to my proposal that if, as in the current case, the agent is *not* morally obligated to bear the personal cost, why does it matter that they would be if, say, the cost were not so great.<sup>5</sup> To see why it does, it helps to compare this case with a different one that is otherwise similar. Suppose I promise you to do something (*X*), that you accept my promise, but that you later decide you strongly prefer that I not keep my promise and communicate this to me. It remains true that not doing *X* would be not doing something I promised to do. However, in this case, this latter fact no longer tends to make my failure to do *X* wrong. We therefore say that in such a case I have not broken my promise, since you released me from it.

This is different from the supererogatory case. The foregone impartial benefit still tends to make a failure to bear it wrong, and so continues as a moral reason to bear it. Here the tendency is not destroyed, but *prevented* by the agent-relative prerogative or permission from making the action wrong, all things considered. The tendency, remains, and so makes the impartial benefit, on my proposal, a moral reason to bear the personal cost though the agent is not morally required to do so.

By making the very category of moral reasons dependent on fully deontic moral obligation, this proposal turns what can otherwise seem an attractive view of moral ought and obligation on its head. If it is correct, then not only is there a fully deontic sense of moral obligation that is distinct from and irreducible to a (scalar) kind ought of most moral reasons. What makes something a moral reason is itself its relation to fully deontic moral obligation. Moral reasons are fully deontic obligation-making considerations.

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5 I am indebted here to Japa Pallikkathayil.



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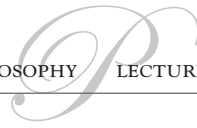
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