

Making the “Hard” Problem of Moral Normativity Easier

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Weighing Reasons

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Abstract and Keywords

It is often assumed that the proposition that agents have (even) some reason to comply with moral obligations is more ambitious philosophically, or more difficult to establish or justify, than that they have reason to do what is in their interest or would fulfill their aims or desires. It is argued that this is not the case, indeed, that the opposite is true. Although it is a conceptually open question whether there is any reason whatsoever for agents to do what is for their good or will advance their aims or desires, an analogous question concerning moral right and wrong is not conceptually open. This is so, it is argued, owing to conceptual connections between obligation and accountability and to inescapable presuppositions of holding someone accountable through moral blame.

Keywords: normative reasons, right, wrong, deontic, obligation, blame, blameworthy, accountability, reactive attitude

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It is often assumed that the claim that agents have (even) some reason to comply with moral obligations is more ambitious philosophically, or more difficult to establish or justify, than that they have reason to do what is in their interest or would fulfill their aims or desires. I shall argue that this is not the case, at least, that it is not so long as we consider what the concepts of moral right and wrong, an agent’s good, aims, and desires commit us to, respectively. Indeed, I shall argue, the opposite is true. Although it is a conceptually open question whether there is any reason whatsoever for agents to do what is for their good or will advance their aims or desires, an analogous question concerning moral right and wrong is not conceptually open. Someone who asks whether there is any reason to be moral may not be conceptually confused, exactly, since the conceptual considerations that close the question are relatively complex. Still, I shall argue that when we properly understand what claims about moral right amount to, we can see that it is conceptually necessary that normative reasons exist for agents to comply with their moral obligations.¹

Of course, we generally believe, as a normative matter, that an agent’s good does give her reasons. But that is just the point. This is a substantive normative conviction and nothing that is conceptually guaranteed. And the situation is actually worse with facts about an agent’s desires and aims. Although not long ago it was widely believed that all reasons for acting must be based in agents’ desires, ends, or preferences,² the philosophical winds have shifted. These days, many argue that desires and ends normally call for support themselves and that the bare fact that one has a given end or desire is not itself a reason for acting—or, at least, (p.258) not in the normal way. Desires are generally “backgrounded” in practical reasoning, and reasons for acting are usually, if not always, “object given” rather than “state given” by the fact of desire (Darwall 1983, Pettit and Smith 1990, Scanlon 1998, Broome 1999, Dancy 2000, Parfit 2011). So not only is the possibility that ends and desires don’t give reasons conceptually open; it is a position many philosophers now embrace.

Moreover, although we generally accept prudential reasons as a normative proposition, so also do most people hold that there is good reason to do what is morally right. When philosophers have assumed that the problem of “moral normativity” is harder than that of prudence or instrumental

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reasons, they have not generally been expressing skepticism on this substantive normative proposition. They have been claiming that vindicating this proposition is, as it were, theoretically downstream from more basic defaults of prudential and instrumental reasons (e.g., Gauthier 1986). The latter have seemed somehow more philosophically fundamental than any normative reasons that derive from moral obligations.

An especially good example is Philippa Foot in her landmark “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives” (Foot 1972).³ There Foot argued against the Kantian view that moral oughts are categorical imperatives. She accepted that moral oughts are categorically “normative” in the sense Parfit calls “rule-involving” (Foot 1972, 309; Parfit 2011, v.1, 144–145). But this just means that whether moral “rules” apply to someone is not generally conditional on his aims and interests. “The agent cannot rebut an assertion about what, morally speaking, he should do, by showing that the action is not [sic] ancillary to his aims and desires” (Foot 1972, 307–308).

So far, the only sense in which moral oughts are normatively categorical is, Foot famously pointed out, the same in which rules of etiquette are. Whether someone acts *comme il faut* also does not depend on that person’s interests or ends. To mark out this sense, Foot coined the notation “should_x” to refer to what a person should do “from the point of view” of some set *x* of norms or rules (1972, 309). Thus what someone should_e do is what she should do from the point of view of etiquette. What someone should_m do is what she should do from the point of view of morality. And so on.

But this, Foot noted, is decidedly not all that Kant or Kant-inspired moral philosophers have intended by the claim that moral obligations are categorical imperatives. They have meant that moral oughts have, as Foot put it, an “automatic reason giving force” going beyond any “rule-involving” normativity that morality shares with etiquette, or indeed, with any set of rules, however arbitrary (Foot 1972, 309). And this they have not shown: “that moral considerations necessarily give reasons for acting to any man” (1972, 309).

(p.259) Foot’s negative claim was effectively that although moral oughts are normative in Parfit’s “rule-involving” sense, they are not in his “reason-involving” sense (Parfit 2011,

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1,144). All that is guaranteed conceptually when we know that an action would be morally wrong and violate morality’s “rules” is that the agent ought_m not do it, that is, “morally speaking.” It is not guaranteed that there is any reason whatsoever not to violate moral obligations, except, perhaps, *subscribed* reasons from the moral point of view.

It is important that Foot’s challenge was not just that any reasons coming from moral obligations might not provide *conclusive* reasons for avoiding moral wrong. Her negative claim was stronger: that moral oughts have no “automatic reason giving force” at all. From the fact that someone is morally obligated to do something we cannot conclude that she has *any* reason to do it that is not *subscribed* or *perspective relative*.

Foot’s eponymous positive claim was that morality is a “system of hypothetical imperatives” rather than categorical ones, since its reason-giving force depends on agent’s “interests or desires” (Foot 1972, 306). By implication, Foot was claiming that the reason-giving force of any ought or imperative is similarly hypothetical. Her positive claim thus assumed precisely the position I shall argue against: that an agent’s ends and interest give her reasons for acting, as it were, by default, whereas this is not true of her moral obligations.

My counter-claim will be almost the exact opposite of Foot’s, namely, that neither an agent’s good nor her desires or ends have “automatic reason-giving force” though moral obligations do. The only reasons for acting that are guaranteed by the concepts of an agent’s good, desires, or ends are subscribed or perspective-relative reasons for acting, from the point of view of the agent’s good, desires, or ends, respectively.⁴ By contrast, I shall argue, it is a conceptual truth that there is reason *period*, and not just perspective-relative reason, for agents to act as they are morally obligated.

We shall be concerned with claims about pro tanto reasons, that is, with whether it is conceptually necessary that the facts that it would be wrong (all-things-considered) to act otherwise, or that an act would benefit the agent, or that it would fulfill his aims or desires, provide *some* reason for the agent to act. My claims, again, will be: yes, no, and no.

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I should stress, however, that my claim is *not* that *all* “moral considerations necessarily give reasons for acting to any man.” My claims exclusively concern the distinctively *deontic* concepts of moral obligation, right, wrong, morally required, morally prohibited, and the like. It is part of my argument, indeed, that the concept of moral obligation differs from that of what morality recommends (p.260) or moral reasons favor. Moral obligations are what morality requires or demands, not what it “counsels.”⁵

1 Why the Problem of Moral Normativity Is Not Harder

In this section, I argue that it is conceptually necessary neither that an agent has (even) some (nonsubscripted) reason to do what will benefit her nor that she does to advance her ends or satisfy her desires. Neither her ends nor her interest are automatically reason giving in this sense.

Note first a conceptual distinction between what is good for someone in the senses, first, of benefiting her or promoting her welfare and, second, what she values, prefers, desires, cares about, or takes an interest in. This is the difference between what is *in someone’s interest* and *her interests*. In this section we are concerned with both senses. My claim is that it is not a conceptual truth that the fact an action would good for someone in *either* sense provides some reason for her to do it.

1.1 Ends and Means

As we noted earlier, many philosophers now accept this in the case of what an agent values, prefers, desires, takes an interest in, or adopts as an end. Take end setting first. We can adopt pretty much any end we please, so we typically look for reasons to adopt one end rather than another. When we do adopt an end for some reason, therefore, it is natural to think that any reason we have for taking some means to it will depend upon there being some reason to adopt the end in the first place. Otherwise, it would be possible to “bootstrap” one’s way into having a reason for pursuing an end just by adopting it.

It is important to see that this is not inconsistent with accepting a norm of instrumental rationality as what John Broome calls a “normative requirement” having “wide” rather

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than “narrow scope” (Broome 1999). A plausible norm of instrumental rationality does not say what one must, should, or has reason to do *on the condition that* one has certain ends and means/end beliefs. Rather it says that one ought or must not have a certain *combination* of these mental states: that one must not simultaneously have an end, believe some act necessary to achieving it, and intend not to perform that act. This would not entail that the fact that one has an end is any reason whatsoever for one to realize it (Darwall 1983, 43–48).

It is clearly not a conceptual truth, then, that the fact that an agent has an end is a reason to pursue necessary means to it. A wide scope normative requirement (p.261) of instrumental rationality can be satisfied as well by renouncing an end as it can by taking necessary means to it.

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1.2 Preference and Desire

A similar point holds for decision-theoretic norms of decision under risk and uncertainty. Although these are sometimes supposed to entail or presuppose that agents have reason to realize outcomes they prefer, in fact they do nothing of the kind. The norm of maximizing expected utility, for example, can plausibly be given a wide scope reading that is analogous to the requirement of instrumental rationality. So understood, the decision-theoretic norm tells an agent *either* to perform the expected utility-maximizing act or to revise his preferences or probability estimates accordingly. It does not decide between these options and definitely does not entail that the fact that an agent prefers some outcome is itself any reason whatsoever for him to perform actions that will expectably realize it (Darwall 1983, 62-77).

Jeffrey’s interpretation of utilities as *desirabilities* makes this clearer than it usually is (Jeffrey 1990, 2-5). Desirability is a “reason-involving” concept whereas those of desire, preference, and end are not. From the fact that someone prefers or desires something, nothing follows about what he has reason to do. But if some outcome is *desirable*, then it is conceptually necessary that there is some reason to desire, and therefore to promote, it. Plausibly, indeed, there being reason to desire something is what it is for it to be desirable so long, that is, as the reasons are “object-given” reasons “of the right kind” (Parfit 2011, Rabinowicz and Ronnøw-Rasmussen 2004).⁶ Interpreting the theory of decision under risk in terms of desirability rather than strength of desire or preference retains its uncontroversial core without saddling it with implausible views about desire- or preference-given reasons. In any case, the proposition that an agent’s preferences give her reasons is obviously not entailed by anything in formal theories of decision.

As I mentioned earlier, it used to be commonly believed that any reason for action must be grounded in agents’ desires. This was partly under the influence of Davidson on action explanation and Williams on “internal reasons” (Davidson 1963, Williams 1981). According to the former, actions are explained by “agent’s reasons,” understood as desire/belief complexes that “rationalize” them. A Davidsonian view of motivating reasons, however, does not entail that agents’

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desires give them any *normative* reason for acting whatsoever (Darwall 1983, 36–41).

Worse, “motivating reasons” can mean two different things. One is the Davidsonian idea that motivating reasons are given by the agent’s mental states such as a desire to realize some outcome along with the belief that the action will realize it. A second is *the agent’s reason*, understood as the *consideration* that an agent with (p.262) Davidsonian mental states took to count in favor of the action and *on which* she acted (Darwall 1983, Scanlon 1998, Dancy 2000). This is the sense that Williams clearly had in mind when he famously argued that in order for something to be a normative reason for someone to do something it must be possible for that person to take it to be a reason and to act on it (Williams 1981). Motivation by a reason in this sense is for some consideration to weigh with the agent *from the agent’s point of view*.

Even if it is invariably true that actions admit of Davidsonian explanations in the first sense, therefore, it does not follow that agents’ reasons in the second sense are facts *about* their desires. Indeed, it does not follow even that such desire-given facts are *ever* any agent’s reason for acting. The considerations that seem to be reasons from the agent’s point of view are not typically facts about desires, but facts regarding or features of desires’ objects, as these seem under desire’s influence (Darwall 1983, 37; Petit and Smith 1990).

Some philosophers argue, in fact, that *all* normative reasons for acting are “object-given” rather than “state-given” considerations such as that an action would realize something the agent desires (Dancy 2000, Parfit 2011). Whether or not these philosophers are correct, their view is clearly conceptually possible and compatible with whatever is guaranteed by the concepts of rational agency, desire, end, and the like. It follows, therefore, that considerations about the agents’ preferences and desire do not have “automatic reason-giving force.”

What’s more, I have argued elsewhere that what makes an agent’s desires, concerns, values, projects, etc., reason giving for the agent (when they are) is actually the agent’s own dignity as a person, a value that no less grounds moral obligations (Darwall 2001). We can see this most easily in the case where the desires, concerns, values, projects, etc., are

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someone else’s. If you want or care about something, then, even if you have no object-given reason to do so, it would arguably be a failure of respect for me to treat your concern as giving me no reason for acting at all because it is unsupported by object-given reasons. Most of us believe that someone’s *asking* something of us gives us some reason to do as she asks (Enoch 2011). By treating another’s request as reason giving, we accord her a kind of respect. Similarly, when we do something because someone wants something or cares about it, we show her respect as well (Jaworska 2007, Smith 2013).

But we can take the very same attitude toward ourselves. Suppose that a couple deciding where to spend the evening takes account of one another’s desires and preferences and not just to the extent that these are supported by object-given reasons. But now suppose that one is unable to go. It would make no sense for the one whose evening remains free not to treat the fact that he wants to see a film as giving him a reason to do so. Taking one’s own desires, projects, values, and so on as giving one reasons beyond the object-given reasons one has for them, is a form of self-respect that is on all fours with respect we show for others when we treat their desires, projects, and values as reason giving for us (Darwall 2001, see also Markovits 2014).

(p.263) Obviously, this line of thought gives no comfort to anyone who thinks that the reason-giving force of morality requires a kind of justification that that provided by an agent’s own ends, desires, and concerns does not. To the contrary, it turns this latter view on its head.

1.3 A Person’s Good

But what about the fact that an act would be good for an agent in the sense of promoting her good or welfare? Here the situation looks more promising. Unlike the considerations canvassed in the last two sections, pretty much everyone agrees that an agent’s good gives her reasons. But this does not mean that prudential considerations have an “automatic reason-giving force” that morality lacks. It does not show that it is conceptually necessary, or more basic in the order of justification, that agents have reason to promote their own good.

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It can be fairly easily shown, moreover, that this is *not* conceptually necessary. Imagine a fully coherent depressive who has full command of the concept of reason for acting, but who denies that the fact that an act would benefit him is any reason whatsoever for him to perform it. This need not betray conceptual confusion. “Why should I do what will benefit me?,” he asks. Suppose he adds that there *would* be reason to benefit himself if *he* had value or was worthy of anyone’s concern, but that since that is not so, no one has reason to promote his own good, including him.

We would of course insist against such a person that he does have reason to benefit himself. But this would be a normative disagreement. We could simultaneously think that the depressive was expressing a coherent normative outlook while steadfastly disagreeing with it. Moreover, we could even agree with the depressive’s conditional, that he would have reason if he were worthy of care and concern, while disagreeing that it is a *counterfactual* conditional. We could coherently say: “You are worthy of concern and do have value, so you do have reason to benefit yourself, as I have reason to benefit you also.”

I take the considerations of the last two paragraphs to show two things. First, an agent’s good is not reason giving as a matter of conceptual necessity. It can coherently be denied that prudential considerations give even *pro tanto* reasons for acting. Second, it is a coherent possibility that prudential reasons derive, and so are downstream, from the value of the person whose reasons they are, that is, there being reason to care for that person.

This is not a mere coherent possibility, moreover. I have argued elsewhere that it is a plausible philosophical position and that the concept of someone’s good or welfare is itself to be understood in relation to care (Darwall 2002). Most obviously, it is a normative concept we have a use for from the perspective of care. When we care for someone, we face the normative question of what there is reason to want for her. According to a *rational care theory* of welfare the concept of a person’s good is a rather specific normative or “reason-involving concept”: that of (p.264) what there is reason to want for someone from the perspective of concern for that person or, I claim, equivalently, what there is reason to want for someone if there is reason to care for that person. On such

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a view, what makes an agent’s good reason giving for her is the same as what makes it reason giving for others—namely, that she is valuable in the sense of there being reason to care for her.

I do not need to assume that this view is correct here. All I need is for it to be coherent, since if it is, then an agent’s good will lack “automatic reason-giving force” in the sense of its being conceptually necessary that it gives the agent reasons for acting. A coherent possibility is that its reason-giving force depends on an independent normative premise—namely, that the agent has value in the sense of there being reason to care for her.

I take it as established, therefore, that the problem of moral normativity is no harder than any connected to an agent’s ends, concerns, or good. If, as Foot claims, morality lacks “automatic reason-giving force,” it is at least no worse off in that respect than prudential or instrumental considerations. Beginning in the next section, I argue that morality is better off and that the problem of moral normativity is actually easier. When we understand what the concepts of moral duty, obligation, right, and wrong involve, we can see why it is a conceptual truth that there is reason for agents to act as they are morally obligated.

2 Why the Problem of Moral Normativity Is Easier

2.1 Moral Obligation and the Blameworthy

I take it that the following are all equivalent:

1. S is morally obligated (required, under a moral demand) to do A.
2. It is S’s moral duty to do A.
3. It would be wrong for S not to do A.

We can assume that the relevant obligation, duty, or wrongness is “all-things-considered,” that is, given all considerations bearing on S’s moral obligations. The question of moral normativity is whether S’s being morally obligated to do A, all-things-considered, creates or entails even pro tanto (nonsubscripted) normative reason for him to do A. Foot’s claim, again, is that morality is not “automatically” reason

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giving, although considerations of the agent’s aims and interest are. We have seen reason to reject the second clause. What about the first?

I argue against the first clause of Foot’s claim in this section. My strategy will be to consider what *deontic* moral claims like 1, 2, and 3 come to and show that they differ from rule-involving subscripted ought claims about what there is reason to do from the moral point of view, or “morally speaking.” A proper understanding of the concept of moral obligation reveals, I argue, that it is conceptually necessary that there are always nonsubscripted reasons to comply with moral obligations.

(p.265) There is a sense in which I can agree that 1, 2, and 3 are not reason involving. None straightforwardly *entails* the existence of (pro tanto) normative reason *to do A* in a way that the following clearly do:

4. Doing A would be choiceworthy (for S).
5. A would be a good (the best) thing for S to do.
6. A is what S should do (period).

“Choiceworthy,” “good,” and “should,” in 4, 5, and 6, respectively, are all obviously reason-involving in that 4, 5, and 6 all obviously entail:

7. There is normative reason for S to do A.

Arguably, the most plausible accounts of “choiceworthy,” “good,” and “should” in 4, 5, and 6 would all be buck-passing and, like 7, make explicit their reason-involving character.

But no such account is plausible for the deontic moral terms featured in 1, 2, and 3. Most obviously and uncontroversially, 1, 2, and 3 concern, not what S has reason to do in general, but what morality, in what Gibbard calls the “narrow sense,” dictates (Gibbard 1990, 6). That, after all, is what leads Foot to think that morality’s oughts are subscripted and concern what there is reason to do *from the moral point of view*. Everyone can agree that 1, 2, and 3 differ from 4–7 in being “narrow” in this way. We can even agree with Foot that 1, 2, and 3 are not reason-(*for-acting*)-involving in the sense that none directly asserts or *straightforwardly* entails the existence of

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Easier (nonperspective-relative, nonsubscripted) normative reason for S to do A—i.e., 7.

By the same token, however, it can be fairly easily shown that deontic moral claims like 1, 2, and 3 cannot be understood simply in terms of what S ought to do, or what there is reason for S to do, *from the moral point of view* or “morally speaking,” either. This is an important but insufficiently appreciated point, so it is worth taking some care to lay it out.

Begin by noticing that we can agree with the common view that there is a *sense* of the moral “ought” that means what moral reasons favor or justify. In other words, there is a sense of

8. S morally ought to do A

that means the same as

9. Morality recommends (moral reasons favor) S’s doing A.

The crucial point is that 1, 2, and 3 differ from 9, and hence from 8 when it means 9. Sometimes we assert 8 and mean 1, 2, and 3. When we do, what we mean is something different from 9. 1, 2, and 3 are *deontic* in a way that 9 is not, and therefore that 8 is not when it means 9.

To see this, notice that two people can agree that moral reasons most highly favor a given action, but coherently disagree about whether morality *requires* (p.266) that action, whether the 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 can agree that morality always most recommends the optimific act. But they disagree about whether especially burdensome personal costs can render an action that would otherwise be morally obligatory morally permissible. Scheffler asserts that an agent’s personal costs have relevance beyond their accounting in an impersonal calculus, whereas the act consequentialist denies this. They agree that morality most recommends the optimific act, but disagree about whether the optimific act is always morally obligatory.

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For such a disagreement to be so much as possible, the parties must take statements like 1, 2, and 3 to mean something different from 9. Statements 1, 2, and 3 differ from 9 in being *deontic* claims. Deontic terms like “required,” “obligatory,” “prohibited,” “wrong,” “permissible,” and the like, occupy a different conceptual space than do those that concern what reasons favor, support, or justify (Darwall 2006, see also Pink 2007). That does not mean that deontic terms do not hook up with claims about what there is reason to do; I shall argue that they do. But that is not what they are used directly to assert, unlike claims like 4–7.⁷

But how then are we to understand deontic moral claims like 1, 2, and 3? I argue in *The Second-Person Standpoint* (SPS) that they are to be understood by their conceptual relations to moral accountability and to justified Strawsonian reactive attitudes like moral blame through which we hold one another and ourselves accountable (Darwall 2006, 2013a, 2013b). The conceptual distinction between 1, 2, and 3, on the one hand, and 9, on the other, is that the former, but not the latter, entail:

10. S’s omitting A would be blameworthy were S to lack adequate excuse.

In other words, although we require an excuse to avoid justified blame for doing wrong or failing to discharge our moral duty or obligation, we do not require an excuse for failing to do what morality most recommends unless the failure amounts to wrongdoing. The fact that moral reasons favor or “counsel” some action does not entail that omitting the action without excuse would be blameworthy. I take the following, then, to be a conceptual truth:

MORAL DEONTIC: Moral deontic claims like 1, 2, and 3 entail that S’s omitting A is an action of a kind that would be blameworthy, were S to omit A without excuse.⁸

(p.267) Blame, as I understand it here, is a Strawsonian reactive attitude (Strawson 1968).⁹ Blame differs, first, from any act or public performance. It is an *attitude* rather than any action or practice. Normally, indeed, acts of blaming are taken to express the attitude of blame. Blame differs, second, from the belief or judgment that someone failed to meet some standard, or that better reasons existed for acting otherwise

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or even, indeed, from the belief that someone’s action was blameworthy, just as one can judge an act fittingly resented, but no longer resent it, or to warrant (one’s) feeling guilt, but not feel guilt. Blame also differs, third, from other critical attitudes, like contempt or disesteem. Blaming someone for what he did differs from any form of looking down on him or thinking less of him. It is a distinctive attitude through which we hold someone responsible for his action.

What is distinctive about Strawsonian reactive attitudes like moral blame is that they *hold* their objects accountable in a way that implicitly relates *to* them. When you and I feel reactive attitudes—whether “personal” reactions like resentment or guilt or “impersonal” ones like indignation or moral blame (Strawson 1968, 72)—we implicitly address demands *to* the objects of these attitudes; we take up what Strawson called an “inter-personal” (what I call a “second-personal”) standpoint and imaginatively *hold* the person responsible (Strawson 1968, 79, Darwall 2006; see also Watson 1986, Wallace 1994). We view her from the perspective, as Strawson says, of “involvement or participation in a human relationship” with her, as opposed to from an “objective” (third-person) point of view. Unlike third-personal critical attitudes like disesteem or contempt, reactive attitudes come with an RSVP, an implicit bid for the other’s acknowledgment of the authority to hold, and of the appropriateness of holding, him accountable, an authority we and he share, and which his holding himself accountable through the feeling of guilt can acknowledge and reciprocate.¹⁰ Blame, in other words, is not a form of disesteem. Blame is second personal; disesteem, even moral disesteem, is third personal.

Blame’s Presuppositions and the Blameworthy. One of Strawson’s central aims in “Freedom and Resentment” is to argue that the perspective we take on someone who is the object of a reactive attitude attributes a kind of freedom to him, not as a belief we have on evidence, but as a presupposition of the (second-personal, holding-accountable) attitude we take toward him. Watson carries Strawson’s idea that reactive attitudes implicitly address demands further, concluding that they must therefore presuppose various “constraints on moral address.” For example, “to be

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intelligible, demanding requires understanding on the part of the object of the demand” (Watson 1987: 264).

(p.268) The point is not that making a demand is unlikely to be effective unless its object has the capacity to understand it. It is rather that reactive attitudes are “forms of communication” that are unintelligible in their own terms without the presupposition that their objects can understand what is being said and act on this understanding.¹¹ In *SPS*, I argue that accountability is always implicitly mutual and that when we hold someone accountable through blame, we presuppose that she is able to hold herself accountable through the reciprocal reactive attitude of guilt that implicitly acknowledges and reciprocates blame.¹²

According to Moral Deontic, propositions about moral obligation, right, and wrong are tied to propositions about the blameworthy conceptually. To hold that someone has a moral obligation to do something, and that it would be wrong to omit it, is to be committed to holding that there would be justification for blaming him for omitting it, were he to do so without adequate excuse.

Now I claim that among the presuppositions of blame is that there was good reason for the person one is blaming to have complied with the moral obligation that one blames her for not having complied with. It is simply incoherent to blame someone for doing something while simultaneously accepting that there was no (nonsubscripted, nonperspective-relative) reason for her not to have done it. It is insufficient to accept that there were moral reasons in favor of her avoiding the wrongful act or even that there was an all-things-considered reason for her to have avoided it *from the moral point of view*. After all, you could accept both of these latter propositions without blaming her for the omission or judging that her omission was blameworthy.

Blaming someone is tied to holding him accountable or answerable for his action. If someone were to assert that though there was reason from the moral point of view for him not to have done what we blame him for doing, this was nonetheless not even a pro tanto (nonsubscripted, nonperspective-relative) reason for him to have omitted the action, and if we were to accept what he says, then we would have to accept that he had successfully answered for his

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action and that we can no longer justifiably blame him. When we blame someone, we presuppose that the person we are blaming cannot sufficiently answer for what he has done. It is impossible coherently to blame someone and simultaneously accept that he lacked any (nonsubscripted, nonperspective-relative) pro tanto normative reason to act as he was morally obligated.¹³ I conclude, therefore, that a presupposition of blame is that moral obligations do provide such reasons.

(p.269) We are now in a position to advance the following argument solely on conceptual grounds.¹⁴

11. Since blame presupposes that there is pro tanto normative reason to act as one is morally obligated, an act can be blameworthy (warrant blame) only if there was pro tanto, non-subscripted normative reason not to have done it.

12. It is conceptually necessary that an act is morally obligatory, wrong to omit, only if it is an action of a kind that would be blameworthy to omit without excuse.

13. Therefore, it is conceptually necessary that if an act is morally obligatory, then there is pro tanto, non-subscripted normative reason to do it.

I take this argument to show, on conceptual grounds alone, that moral obligations are reason giving. Since we established in the last section that this is not the case with the agent's good, desires, ends, and interests, this shows that the problem of moral normativity, in the sense in which we have been considering it, is not only no harder than that of what is good for the agent in any of these senses, but that it is actually easier.

3 Some Objections and Replies

Since this argument is conceptual, we should be careful to note what it does not show. Since it cannot show that the concepts that feature in it are ever instantiated, it cannot show either that moral obligations exist or, *a fortiori*, that because they do, we have reasons to act as we are obligated. The most it can establish is that *if* an act is morally obligatory, then there is necessarily pro tanto reason to perform that action. But even if the concept of moral obligation is tied to (nonsubscripted) normative reasons in a way that the concepts

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of etiquette and even of what is good *for* the agent in any of the senses we canvassed are not, why think that that there actually are any moral obligations?

Although the considerations of the last section do not show that we have any moral obligations, hence any reasons for acting deriving from them, they do show that the existence of moral obligations is tied conceptually to the existence of (object-given) reasons (of the right kind) for blame and related reactive attitudes, such as resentment and guilt. There is a sense, then, in which deontic moral concepts *are* reason-involving concepts after all. They don't assert or directly entail the existence of normative reasons *for acting*, but they do assert or entail the existence of normative reasons *for blame* and associated reactive attitudes. And these are non-subscripted, nonperspective-relative reasons. Reasons for blaming someone (p.270) are not just reasons “from the moral point of view” for blaming him. Moreover, I have argued that the existence of reasons for blame presuppose the existence of nonsubscripted reasons not to have done the wrongful act.

There remains, of course, the general philosophical problem of how there can be (nonsubscripted) normative reasons for *any* attitude—whether belief, desire, intention, *or* attitudes like blame and other reactive attitudes. But obviously, that problem is not unique to normative reasons for reactive attitudes, and therefore to the normativity of deontic moral concepts. The real question is whether there is any justification for suspicion about the existence of reasons for blame that does not hold also for other attitudes.

I shall argue there is not. First, however, we should consider some objections that have been, or might be, raised to the kind of argument I am advancing here. One is that it amounts to a kind of circularity or begging of the question since, if an action can be blameworthy only if there is normative reason not to do it, then moral obligation gains normativity not by honest toil, but for free. We will simply not count something as a moral obligation unless the agent already has reason to do it, perhaps independently.

Dale Dorsey has recently advanced an objection of this kind.¹⁵ To assume a conceptual connection between wrongdoing and blameworthiness, he argues, is already to assume that moral obligations provide reasons—indeed, overriding reasons

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(Dorsey 2013, 19). Dorsey argues that I in effect acknowledge this when, in claiming that moral obligations are necessarily reason giving, I “not[e] that this is because [the proposition that it is conceptually necessary that if an act is morally wrong it is blameworthy (lacking excuse)] presupposes this very claim” (Dorsey 2013, 19). However, the argument I am making is not that either of the *propositions* that wrongness is conceptually tied to blameworthiness or that an action is blameworthy presuppose that there is normative reason not to do what would be wrong or blameworthy. It is blame and associated reactive attitudes *themselves* that presuppose this. We cannot coherently have these attitudes toward people and simultaneously accept that they had no reason not to do what we are blaming them for doing. The point is that the attitude of blame itself takes a stand on the existence of nonperspective-relative reason to avoid actions that violate moral obligations in a way that other critical attitudes need not.

Dorsey argues against tying moral wrong to blameworthiness by claiming that we can speak of actions that are *rationally* right or wrong no less than those that are *morally* right and wrong, and that blameworthiness can frequently go with the latter rather than the former (2013, 20). He imagines someone who accepts a very demanding morality requiring him to donate his resources to overseas aid (p.271) even if this means not being able to send his daughter to an excellent college (2013, 12-13). Dorsey asks us to imagine agreeing that this would be so, but nonetheless thinking that such a wrongful action would nonetheless be “rationally right,” what there really is most (nonsubscripted) reason for the person to do (2013, 20). In such a case, he claims, we would not blame the father for providing for his daughter’s education. Indeed, we would blame him if he did not.

As I see it, however, it is impossible to separate the question of when we could warrantably blame the father (if he lacked excuse) from what he is morally obligated to do.¹⁶ If we blame the father for preferring to aid needy strangers over his daughter, then that will be because we think, not just that people have good reason to support their children, but that it is wrong for them not to.¹⁷ And if we would not blame someone for using resources to benefit his daughter in this

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way, then we must either see this as a kind of excuse or, more likely, think that it is not really wrong so to act (perhaps, even, that it would be wrong for him not so to act, if, as we were just imagining, we would blame him if he did not).

We can of course use words in any way we like, and we can, and certainly do, use “right” and “wrong” in other contexts. We can agree with Dorsey that we can and do sometimes use these terms to mark out what we think people have nonsubscripted reason to do or not to do, how they ought to live their lives. The question is how these uses relate to warranted blame and conceptually related reactive attitudes like resentment and guilt. Blame is warranted in the sense of fitting, i.e., reflects the act’s being blameworthy or culpable, just in case guilt would be a fitting response for the agent and resentment for any victim—that is, someone, if anyone, who was wronged by the action.

I have been using “blame” here to refer to a (putatively) impartial Strawsonian reactive attitude. But of course, we can, and people sometimes do, use the term in different ways. Hume uses it, for example, simply to refer to a form of disesteem, from the “general point of view,” for motive and character. Clearly this is different from a reactive attitude in Strawson’s sense since it does not necessarily implicitly address a demand and so can be third personal rather than second personal (Darwall 2013a). Or we could use “blame” to refer to any form of criticism, for example, (p.272) of an action as not what there was most reason for the agent to do, or not what she had the most reason to believe she should do, and so on.

When we focus, however, on blame as a Strawsonian reactive attitude, it seems clear that we do not generally blame or think culpable in that sense just any failure to do what there is good reason for someone to do. Surely we can think that people are doing what they have reason not to do without thinking their actions warrant anything like guilt from them or blame from us (in the reactive attitude sense). I might think someone would have a better life if she would only relax a bit, live more in the moment, and breathe. Add in that she has good reason to believe this, even that she knows it. If she does not act on this knowledge, I am of course committed to thinking she is making a kind of mistake. But that doesn’t mean that I must

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think she is doing anything culpable or think she should feel guilty as a way of holding herself accountable for her failure to fully enjoy life.

Blame and related attitudes that are conceptually implicated in the deontic moral concepts of obligation, duty, requirement, right, wrong, and so on are Strawsonian reactive attitudes through which we hold one another and ourselves answerable.¹⁸ It seems clear that, in this sense, we do not blame people for just any failure to act for good reasons. To the contrary, we use deontic moral terms to mark out what we think there is reason to hold people accountable for in this distinctive sense.

A related worry is that the reason it might be true that blame cannot be justified if no reason exists to avoid wrongdoing is simply that there being reason to blame someone depends upon its being *independently* true that there was reason for the agent not to do have done it.¹⁹ If that were so, then even though moral obligation would be reason guaranteeing, no normative reasons would come from the moral obligation; they would rather be a precondition for it.

Certainly nothing I have said so far requires this possibility. If blame were just an attitude that expresses what the agent has good reason not to do, then the fact that an action is wrong in the sense of being blameworthy without excuse could not *itself* give the agent reasons. But that is not what blame and related Strawsonian reactive attitudes are. They are distinctive attitudes that implicitly hold their objects answerable for complying with demands they implicitly address (and bid for agents to hold themselves to through the reciprocating attitude toward themselves).

The worry just mentioned would be genuine if the correct account of deontic moral terms were a buck-passing one concerning what agents have reason, or even moral reason, to do.²⁰ If “wrong” meant acting contrary to what there is good (p.273) reason to do, or even against good moral reasons, and if blame simply expressed the judgment that the agent acted against these reasons, then of course blame would presuppose that the agent had reason (or at least, moral reason) not to do what she is being blamed for. But any reasons for acting would not be coming from the fact that her act was wrong or

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blameworthy. Wrongness and blameworthiness would “pass the buck” to reasons not to act that would themselves be justifying blame and attributions of wrongdoing.

There is not space to develop the point adequately here, but I have argued elsewhere that such a buck-passing account of wrong and related deontic moral terms is mistaken and that “because it would be wrong” does (purport anyway) to give agents a reason for acting that is additional to the considerations that make an act wrong (Darwall 2013d). When an action is wrong there will have, of course, to be features that make it wrong, and we normally take these features to be independent reasons not to perform the action. But the fact that these features combine in such a way to make the action culpable (if done without excuse) is a further moral fact, the act’s being wrong, the violation of a moral obligation.²¹ And this fact (purports anyway) to give the agent a further reason for acting, namely that the action is legitimately demanded; something we are accountable for doing.

Similarly, someone might object that my argument covertly assumes that an action can only be wrong if there are sufficient reasons not to do it that make it wrong, and if so, it is no surprise that there is sufficient reason not to do what is wrong, since this was already being assumed.²² But again, what my argument depends upon is not that the reasons that make the act wrong, and so justify blame, are necessarily themselves sufficient reasons. It is rather the further fact that these reasons combine to be wrong- and blameworthy-*making* that guarantees sufficient reason.

Blame does not presuppose that the agent has good reason not to do the blameworthy thing consisting just in the wrong-making, blame-warranting features of the action. When, consequently, in blaming someone we presuppose that there was good reason for him not to do what we blame him for, we are not just assuming that these reasons exist independently of their warranting blame.

4 Blame, Reasons for Attitudes and Action, and Recognition

I have argued that what ties moral obligation to reasons for acting conceptually, unlike prudential considerations and those relating to the agent’s ends and desires, are two

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conceptual truths: first, that what we are morally obligated to do is what there would be reason to blame us for not doing (without excuse); and second, that (p.274) blame presupposes the existence of (nonsubscripted) reasons for not doing what a person is blamed for having done.

Deontic moral concepts are thus reason involving, but the reasons they conceptually implicate in the first instance are reasons for reactive attitudes like blame, rather than for action directly. Since it is incoherent to blame someone while accepting that she had no reason not to do what one is blaming her for doing, it follows that if an action is blameworthy then there is (nonsubscripted, nonperspective-relative) reason not to do it.

But why think that anything actually *is* blameworthy, that there even can be normative reasons for blame? Since we are concerned with normative reasons for reactive attitudes in particular, we can abstract from the general problem of normativity, of how there can be normative reasons for attitudes or action at all—whether for belief, desire, intention, esteem, or any other attitude. We can assume, therefore, that there can be (object-given) reasons (of the right kind) for attitudes and actions, and therefore, that things can be X-worthy or X-able, for some attitudes at least (D’Arms and Jacobson 2002a, 2002b).

The question must then be whether there is any special reason to be skeptical of normative reasons for reactive attitudes like blame, hence of any actions being blameworthy or morally wrong. If there is not, then moral obligations can exist and also, therefore, normative reasons to comply with them.

But what could such special reasons be? Suppose someone says that reasons for the attitude of blame are somehow less basic than reasons for other attitudes. They might try to argue, for example, that they do not figure among any transcendental conditions for the possibility of having attitudes at all, or even of agency or the practical standpoint. Consider the latter possibility, and assume, on these grounds, that the category of normative reasons for action is somehow more basic. But reasons for acting have to come from somewhere, and is there any reason for thinking that the reasons conceptually linked to moral right and wrong are

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somehow less basic than any other reasons for acting? What about object-given reasons for desiring outcomes; might these be more basic than moral deontic reasons?

We can grant that outcomes might be desirable and so provide reasons for acting even if there were no moral right and wrong. But that is not the question. After all, it is conceptually *possible* that there could be reasons for acting deriving from moral right and wrong even if there were no object-given reasons for desiring outcomes, except perhaps as these might derive from reasons to do what is morally right. Above we considered how agent’s preferences and desires might give others and themselves reasons for acting that are independent of object-given reasons for their desires. I alluded to an argument I make elsewhere that “because I want it” can give reasons owing to the agent’s dignity or value as a person (Darwall 2001).²³ But if that is right, then these reasons will not be independent of deontic moral reasons. So it would not then be true that the desirable is somehow more (p.275) basic than the obligatory or the culpable. Even though there could be reasons for acting stemming from the desirable without morality, so also might there be reasons for acting stemming from moral obligation and the blameworthy without the desirable (what there are object-given reasons for desiring).

We also considered above the possibility that prudential reasons might somehow be more basic than those deriving from morality. It seems clear that there could be reasons for acting even if prudential considerations provided no reasons for acting whatsoever. (That was the conceptually coherent claim of our rational depressive.) And I conjecture, moreover, that reasons for acting coming from a being’s good, whether this being is an agent or not, depend upon there being normative reasons for the attitude of benevolent concern or care toward that being. Obviously, the relationship of such reasons to deontic moral reasons is a complex issue, but here again, it might be the case that reasons of welfare, including prudential reasons, exist only if deontic moral reasons do also. And even if this is not so, there is no reason to think that prudential reasons for acting are more basic than reasons for blame, and hence for moral obligation.

I can see no reason for suspicion of normative reasons for reactive attitudes like blame that do not generalize to other attitudes.²⁴ The culpable is no more suspect than the

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desirable, the estimable, the respectable, and so on. For any normative concept to be instantiated, there must be (object-given) normative reasons (of the right kind) for the distinctive attitude to which it is conceptually linked.

In closing, I would like to comment briefly on some of Bernard Williams’s claims concerning the relation between blame and reasons for acting (Williams 1995). Williams agrees that blame presupposes that its object had reason not to do what she is blamed for, but since, as Williams famously argues, only “internal reasons” for acting anchored in the agent’s “motivational set S” exist, this often makes blame problematic. The problem, obviously, is that the reasons that blame presupposes can exist only if these reasons are suitably “internal,” and what can guarantee that?

Clearly, any such grounds for suspicion of the culpable and moral obligation depend upon how we interpret Williams’s “internal reasons” thesis. What I wish to focus on here, however, is what Williams says about a way in which blame can function proleptically to bring into existence the reasons it presupposes. Williams notes that “blame asks for acknowledgment” (Williams 1995, 42). I have been arguing that this is an important insight: reactive attitudes have an implicit RSVP, calling for acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the demands they implicitly address.

Williams’s idea, however, is that when the object of blame lacks an internal reason, blame can function proleptically to create it via the blamed agent’s desire to be respected by those she respects. Blame makes vivid that noncompliance puts (p.276) mutual respect at risk and so can strengthen an internal reason to comply. Williams concludes that this is this way that blame can “hope to achieve recognition” and give the blamed agent’s reasons without falling into “moralistic” bluster and “force” (Williams 1995, 43).

But this mistakes the way in which reciprocal recognition enters into blame. Blame does not seek compliance as a kind of tribute, as the *price* of reciprocal recognition and good standing. As Strawson himself points out, reactive attitudes *already* express recognition for the other as an equal; they “continue to view him as a member of the moral community; only as one who has offended against its demands” (Strawson 1968, 93). In this way they are unlike contempt or disdain in

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an honor society, which seek to lower their objects’ standing (Darwall 2013c). Second, the acknowledgment that blame calls for is of the legitimacy of the demand it implicitly addresses, as part of the addressee’s holding himself accountable.²⁵ Blame seeks an acknowledgment that expresses an internal acceptance that the wrongness of the agent’s conduct itself provided and/or entailed good reason not to have done it.

Adam Smith makes a related point about resentment: “what resentment is chiefly intent upon, is . . . to make him sensible that the person whom he injured did not deserve to be treated in that manner” (Smith 1982, 95-96). Even insincere apologies can appease or annul insults in an honor society; they can “take the insult back.” But they cannot provide the kind of acknowledgment that blame seeks, an expression of a reciprocating self-blame that presupposes that moral obligations provide reasons for acting no less than does the blame they reciprocate.²⁶

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Notes:

(¹) In so doing, I will be developing an argument that I make quickly in Darwall (2006, 98–99).

(²) This is what I called the DBR (desire-based reason) thesis in Darwall (1983).

(³) However, see Foot’s “Recantation” of her “Humean” views in Foot (1972) in the addendum to the reprinted essay in Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton (1996).

(⁴) This requires some revision in the case of an agent’s good. As I shall argue presently, the concept of someone’s good or welfare is a reason-involving one, but the reasons that are involved are not straightforwardly or unconditionally reasons. They are reasons for acting on the condition that there is reason to care for the person whose good it is.

(⁵) On the importance of Suarez’s distinction between “command” or “law,” and “counsel,” in early modern

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conceptions of natural law and morality, including for Grotius, Pufendorf, and Kant, see Darwall (2013a).

(⁶) This would be a “buck-passing” account of desirability in the spirit of Scanlon’s buck-passing account of value in Scanlon (1998).

(⁷) The early modern natural law tradition observed this in a distinction made first, so far as I know, by Suarez, between law, demand, and command, on the one hand, and “counsel,” on the other (see Darwall 2013a).

(⁸) I don’t intend this as a reductive analysis, so it is unproblematic if the notion of excuse cannot be analyzed independently of deontic terms and blameworthiness.

(⁹) For extended discussion of the points in this and the following paragraphs, see Darwall (2006, 2013b, 2013c).

(¹⁰) Tom Tyler’s experimental studies on tort victims are relevant here. Tort claimants, Tyler concludes, “are primarily interested in receiving an apology. . . .” Where an individual has been negligently injured, compensation is generally “a poor substitute for . . . accountability” (Tyler and Thorisdottir 2003, 361).

(¹¹) Watson notes that the communicative (second-personal) character of reactive attitudes does not mean that they are “usually communicated; very often, in fact, they are not. Rather the most appropriate and direct expression of resentment is to address the other with a complaint and a demand” (1987, 265). See also McKenna 2012.

(¹²) This is what I call “Pufendorf’s Point” in Darwall (2006).

(¹³) For convenience, I henceforth drop “nonsubscripted, nonperspective-relative” when context makes it clear that this should be understood.

(¹⁴) This develops ideas presented in Darwall (2006, 97–99).

(¹⁵) In Dorsey (2013). Dorsey mainly discusses a version of the argument in Portmore (2011, 42–44), which derives from my version in Darwall (2006). Other versions can be found in Gibbard (1990, 299–300), Williams (1995, 40–44), Skorupski

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Easier (1999, 42–43), Shafer-Landau (2003, 181–183), and, as Dorsey notes, Skorupski (2010, 291–300).

(¹⁶) It is worth noting in this connection that Dorsey’s arguments are more directly targeted on those who would use an *a priori* connection between moral obligation and normative reasons to argue against consequentialism. I regard the arguments I am making here as neutral on that question and as being consistent with act consequentialism as a substantive normative theory of right. It does, however, take a stand on what act consequentialists would then be committed to.

(¹⁷) It may be objected that blame and other reactive attitudes may be justified (by object-given reasons of the right kind) when no *moral* requirements are in play. For example, some of the accomplices of James Whitey Bulger who testified against him said they blamed him for various failures of loyalty to his partners in crime, but someone might hesitate to say they thought his disloyalty was morally wrong. We can use words like “moral” and “morality” however we choose, of course. For myself, I find it hard to believe that accomplices of Bulger who blamed him did not feel he had “done them wrong.” Whether *they* would use the phrase “morally wrong” to express their blame, if they felt what Bulger did was culpable, it seems appropriate to say they felt his actions were wrong.

(¹⁸) Philosophers sometimes use “accountable” and “answerable” in a wider sense than I here intend. For example, Pamela Hieronymi uses the term in a wider sense when she claims that there is a distinctive control we have over our attitudes that is captured by the idea that we are answerable for them in the “Anscombean” sense that it is intelligible to ask for *our* reason for having them.

(¹⁹) I am indebted to T. M. Scanlon for pressing this worry.

(²⁰) For the “buck-passing” idea, see Scanlon (1998).

(²¹) These are what Parfit calls “deontic reasons” (Parfit 2011, 1, 172–174). Parfit also argues against buck-passing accounts of wrong in Parfit (2011, 1, 165–174). For a discussion, see Darwall (2014).

(²²) I am indebted to a referee from the Press for pressing this objection.

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Easier ⁽²³⁾ For another argument for this claim, see Markovits (2014).

⁽²⁴⁾ If reactive attitudes were to presuppose contra-causal metaphysical freedom, and if no such freedom exists, then that might provide a reason for suspicion. I am inclined to doubt, however, any such metaphysical presupposition.

⁽²⁵⁾ This is an aspect of what I call “Pufendorf’s Point” in Darwall (2006).

⁽²⁶⁾ I am grateful to participants and attendees at the Weighing Reasons Conference at Princeton University in December 2012, and many people at various universities where I have presented earlier versions. I am also indebted to Xingming Hu for catching an egregious typo and an anonymous reader of the Press for helpful comments.

