

## Skepticism about Ought *Simpliciter*

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What ought I to do? A lot of things, and frankly, too many things. Too many things, because there are too many *oughts*. Morally I ought to give to charity, prudentially I ought to invest. Epistemic reasons may demand that I begin to doubt my friend's innocence, while loyalty forbids it. So in some cases it is impossible to satisfy all of these oughts.<sup>1</sup> A natural thought in response to this kind of situation is to ask 'what ought I *really* to do?' or 'what ought I to do *simpliciter*?' But this natural thought, I will argue, should be rejected. That's because the only coherent candidate notion of an ought *simpliciter*, an *all-things-considered* ought, or what Philippa Foot called "the free and unsubscripted" sense of ought (1972/1977: 169)<sup>2</sup> comes with normative commitments that are strange and unpalatable.

This is not to deny normativity altogether. There may be facts about what you morally ought to do. There are almost certainly facts about what you rationally ought to do and what you

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<sup>1</sup> I will talk in this paper about multiple *oughts* and multiple *senses* of ought. None of this should be interpreted as a commitment to polysemy (i.e., massive ambiguity of meaning) about the word 'ought'. I am sympathetic to recent contextualist accounts (e.g. Dowell 2012 and 2013; and Finlay 2009 and 2014) which attempt to give a unified theory of different uses and senses of ought.

<sup>2</sup> The quote is from the footnote 15 added in 1977. Also see (Tiffany 2007: 232 and 233). Note that Foot wrote that "I have never found anyone who could explain the use of the word in such a context" (1977: 169).

prudentially ought to do. But there is no ought that has the job of adjudicating conflicts between these other oughts.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. Precedents: Copp and Tiffany

Arguments denying the existence of an ought *simpliciter* have been offered before. It's worth looking at these both to see the wider consequences of accepting such a denial, and to mark out where the argument of this paper differs.

Evan Tiffany's (2007) argument begins with the plurality of evaluative standards. When offering reasons to justify our actions, we cite, "desires, legal statutes, social norms, aesthetic value... moral value, norms of formal etiquette, future interests, to name a few" (Tiffany 2007: 239). Perhaps there is some way of reducing all of these to a single kind of consideration, but that requires considerable theoretical interpretation. On the face of it, there are distinctive kinds of reasons which don't share a common justificatory source (*ibid*).

But if the kinds of reasons we cite are plural, how do we combine them to reach a conclusion about what to do, especially when they compete? What would be the common scale on which considerations of morality, desire satisfaction, aesthetic value, and etiquette could be compared? Actually, there is no real mystery here. The question of how we combine potentially competing pluralistic reasons is one about our psychology, about what we in fact do (241ff.). This is an empirical, not a normative problem, and presumably not every agent will combine

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<sup>3</sup> But see (McPherson, this volume; and Woods, this volume).

their reasons in the same way.<sup>4</sup>

There seems to be a further question, however, of how we *should* combine these reasons. But this, Tiffany argues, can only be answered from a particular normative perspective, of which there are many (241-43). Tiffany admits that this “deliberative pluralism” is not logically entailed by pluralism about reasons. But it is the most natural consequence: “[I]f some standpoint is capable of generating genuine contributory reasons, why could it not also serve as a legitimate source of deliberative evaluation?” (247). Once we acknowledge the variety of normative considerations that are out there, it looks extremely unlikely that there could be some way of adding these considerations up that isn’t guilty of arbitrariness in its weightings. Consequently, there will be a plurality of (equally arbitrary) ways of combining these considerations. We can criticize one way of combining reasons from another standpoint, but that standpoint is itself equally criticizable from others, and none deserve the status of “reason as such” (240).

One can, nonetheless, hold onto the conviction in the rightness of one’s own standards:

Just as one may be a partisan supporter of the Canucks over the Maple Leafs... without thinking that there is some deep metaethical truth backing up one's partisanship; so too can one be similarly partisan toward, e.g., morality, prudence, or authenticity. (244-5)

What Tiffany’s pluralism rules out is establishing the rightness of one’s standards through

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<sup>4</sup> Tiffany talks about an agent’s “standards of practical deliberation” (241), but it is clear that these standards can be realized by inarticulate psychological tendencies to choose one way or another as much as by consciously held principles.

philosophical argument, or recognizing it through noetic insight into the truth. Coming to see certain standards as right is ultimately a matter of “existential choice” (243-45).

This is essentially an argument from pessimism. Given the apparent plurality of kinds of reasons we cite to support our responses, we are owed grounds for the apparently widespread optimism about the possibility of a non-arbitrary standard for weighing seemingly different kinds of reasons against one another.<sup>5</sup> I am in agreement with Tiffany on this. But a stronger form of skepticism is available. His argument gives grounds for skepticism that any normative standard could exist which satisfies our concept of *reason as such* or which issues prescriptions satisfying our concept of an ought *simpliciter*. I will argue instead that the only coherent concept of an ought *simpliciter* comes with unacceptable normative commitments.

David Copp’s (1997) argument is closer to mine in its aims. If reason as such is to play the role of adjudicating between competing normative perspectives, it must have a special normative authority that they lack. Copp aims to show that any attempt to explain this authority forces us to embrace a contradiction.

Copp starts with a familiar thought: self-interest and morality can conflict. Gyges would be better off as king, whatever Plato thought, but murder is morally wrong. So, Gyges ought self-interestedly to kill the king, while morally he ought to refrain. But now we face the question, which of these two standards, self-interest or morality, is “normatively more important” (93ff.)? Well presumably we ought self-interestedly to listen to the ought of self-interest, and morally we ought to heed the moral ought. Morality is morally more important, and self-interest is prudentially more important.

What we need is an independent standard from which to assess these two competing

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<sup>5</sup> See (Chang 2004) for an example of how one might defend this optimism.

demands. This standard, moreover, must be the normatively *most* important standard: “We want to know whether moral reasons override ... period, not merely whether moral reasons are overriding as assessed by some standard or other” (94).

But how could there be a normatively most important standard, or a standard of reason as such? After all, it seems that assessments of the importance of some standard can only be made from the perspective of some standard. Copp explains:

Hence, the claim that the candidate [standard] *S* has the property of supremacy is the claim that it is normatively more important than any other standpoint, as assessed from a relevant authoritative standpoint. That is, if *S* is normatively the most important, then there is some authoritative standard *R* that yields the verdict that *S* is normatively the most important standpoint.

(101)

Copp argues that this leads to a dilemma: “either standard *R* is identical to *S*, or it is not” (ibid.). But if *R* and *S* are identical, then *R* cannot serve as the standpoint from which to establish *S*’s normative supremacy. “For a standard cannot be normatively the most important in virtue of its meeting criteria that it *itself* specifies as criteria to be met by standards” (101-2). After all, morality tells you to listen to morality; self-interest tells you to listen to self-interest.<sup>6</sup> Self-endorsement is unimpressive.

On the other hand, if *R* is some standard other than *S*, we run into absurdity. It won’t do if *R* is just some normative standard or another—if self-endorsement is unimpressive, the fact that

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<sup>6</sup> But see (Schafer 2016).

there is *some* other normative standard giving *S* the thumbs-up is also unimpressive. We want to know whether *S* is most important according to the most important standard. So *R* would have to be the most important standard. But then *S* is not the most important standard. This contradicts our initial assumption (102).

The argument I will offer will have obvious affinities with Copp's. But his argument assumes that *S*'s normative supremacy must be explained in terms of the supremacy assigned to it from some standpoint. *S*'s supremacy, however, could be normatively primitive.<sup>7</sup>

From which point of view would reason as such be assessed as normatively most important? From its own.  $R = S$ . Copp's mistake is assuming that the philosopher who says this must go on to *explain S's* normative supremacy on the basis of the normative importance *R* assigns it, and thus must say that *S* is "most important *in virtue of* ... meeting criteria that it *itself* specifies as criteria to be met by standards" [italics mine]. But it could be that *S* is most important in virtue of nothing at all (McLeod 2001: 274, and 286). Taking on brute primitives is of course a mark against a position, but consider the theoretical landscape. If normative non-naturalism is correct, then whichever normative properties are most fundamental—the property of being a reason, say—admit of no further explanation. Once we've said this, it doesn't seem like much more of a theoretical burden to go on and add that the status of those reasons as normatively most important is primitive as well. On the other hand, if some variety of naturalism about the normative is true, then the normative supremacy of *S* presumably does hold in virtue of something else, but that something else is not itself a normative standard; rather it will be, for example, *S*'s reduction base, or something similar.

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<sup>7</sup> For other criticisms of Copp's argument, see (McLeod 2001; and Dorsey 2013).

## 2. The Argument for Skepticism

Let's say the following is true of Gyges: he ought prudentially to kill the king, but morally he ought to refrain. Or we can think up other conflicts. Zach Snyder ought self-interestedly to direct *Batman vs. Superman*, but from the perspective of aesthetic value he ought to decline.

Perhaps in such cases the conflict is resolved by what I ought to do *simpliciter*, or *full stop*. But the initial conflict resulted from too many oughts, not too few. So how does adding another ought help? Why doesn't it simply breed more conflicts? Let's say Gyges ought *simpliciter* to kill the king. Refraining from murder remains, by stipulation, what he ought morally to do. The choice remains immoral, even if he ought full stop to do the immoral thing. At first glance an ought *simpliciter* simply adds an additional conflict. It's unclear how it resolves anything.

If the conflict is resolved, it is because the prescriptions of the ought *simpliciter* trump<sup>8</sup> other prescriptions, or are overriding,<sup>9</sup> or have greater normative authority<sup>10</sup> than the demands of self-interest, or the ought *simpliciter* tells you what you *really* ought to do; or the ought *simpliciter* is *robustly* or *genuinely* normative;<sup>11</sup> or the ought *simpliciter* has *normative force*<sup>12</sup> whereas the rival ought does not (or possesses less of it).

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<sup>8</sup> (McLeod 2001: 271).

<sup>9</sup> (Copp 1997; McLeod 2001: 271).

<sup>10</sup> (Copp 1997: 101; Tiffany 2007: 248).

<sup>11</sup> (McPherson 2011: 233; Broome 2013: 11 and 26-27). Broome contrasts "true normativity" with normativity in a wider sense.

<sup>12</sup> (Parfit 2011: 35).

But talk of normative force is, to put it bluntly, completely metaphorical (Baker, *forthcoming*). The claim that the ought *simpliciter* is the ought that *really* tells you what you ought to do relies on the table-thumping sense of “really” (*ibid*). In the literal sense, the prudential ought really—that is, just as genuinely and accurately—tells you what to do as any other ought. “Overriding” and “normative authority” rely on metaphors of political power, or they are simply vague ways of gesturing at some normative property which needs clearer characterization. Talk of one ought trumping another is a metaphor referring back to card games.

These metaphors and table thumps need interpretation. The most natural interpretation is that one *ought* to act as the ought *simpliciter* prescribes, rather than the prudential ought. But on this interpretation the initial conflict will reappear at the level of which ought we ought to heed. We ought in some sense to heed to the ought *simpliciter* when it conflicts with the prudential ought; but obviously one ought *prudentially* to heed to the prudential ought, otherwise one is a sucker or sap. This conflict forces us to ask whether this new sense of ought—the one telling us we ought to heed the ought *simpliciter*—is overriding or not. If it is, our attempt to characterize overridingness non-metaphorically makes tacit appeal to the original metaphor.<sup>13</sup> If not, invoking such an ought could not resolve our original dilemma.<sup>14</sup>

Alternately, certain oughts might be psychologically overriding. The agent’s conclusion about what this ought prescribes determines what the agent will in fact do. If Gyges judges he ought full stop to refrain from murder, then the conflict is settled in the sense that he will act in

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<sup>13</sup> “The relevant notion of [normative] authority is difficult to characterize non-circularly” (Tiffany 2007: 248).

<sup>14</sup> There are obvious similarities to Copp’s argument described above. The key difference is that I am not asking for an explanation of normative authority or normative force but rather a clear account of the property in a manner free from metaphor. Also see (Baker, *forthcoming*).



compliance with the moral ought and not the prudential. But cashing out “overridingness” in psychological terms seems to change the subject. If all we meant by resolving the conflict was making a choice in the face of a conflict between different flavors of ought, it is unclear why a further ought would be needed at all. Gyges’ personal preferences would have worked just as well.

This is my case against an ought *simpliciter*. This ought is supposed to have some special property in virtue of which it resolves conflicts between other flavors of ought. The characterization of that special property is typically metaphorical or otherwise hopelessly vague and ambiguous. Attempts to cash out the metaphor or otherwise eliminate the vagueness face a dilemma: either they characterize the special property in more familiar normative terms, leading to vicious circularity, or they are non-normative characterizations that seem to change the subject. There is one characterization that avoids this dilemma, but it comes with highly counterintuitive normative commitments. These commitments are distasteful enough that it is reasonable to conclude that we have failed to characterize a concept of the ought *simpliciter* that we currently use or could learn to use.

My reason for assuming that a characterization of the ought *simpliciter* is needed is straightforward: this, and phrases like “authority” or “normative force,” are philosophical terms of art. The burden is thus on those who would invoke these terms in explanations to tell us what they mean. Sections 3 and 4 will call this into question, considering reasons why perhaps we are not owed a definition or why ought *simpliciter* is not a term of art. I will explain why these arguments fail. But this section will deal directly with attempts to characterize ought *simpliciter* informatively.

## 2.1. The Ought that Settles What to Do

Let's say that the ought *simpliciter* is the one which *settles what to do* (or feel, or believe).<sup>15</sup>

Here the ambiguity between a normative and a psychological reading is obvious. We could mean that this ought settles what one *ought* to do, or we could mean that it settles what one *will* do. On the former reading, we have failed to identify anything special about the ought *simpliciter*. It is a clear triviality that ought in any sense settles what one ought in that sense to do. On the second reading, the ought *simpliciter* is special in that it motivates an action. But, as noted before, if all we needed was that Gyges be motivated to act in the face of the dilemma, it's not clear why a special sense of ought was necessary at all. A strong enough desire would serve just as well.

## 2.2. The Categorical Ought

Perhaps we can say that the distinctive feature of the ought *simpliciter* is that it is the categorical use of ought, as opposed to all the others which are hypothetical.

Unfortunately "categorical ought" is ambiguous (Foot 1972; and Joyce 2001). Kant's original example of a categorical imperative was an ought-judgment that remains valid even when one lacks subjective desires that would be furthered by following it. Notoriously, the ought of etiquette and the legal ought demonstrate this kind of categoricity.

On the other hand, if we mean that these oughts entail the existence of *reasons*, we are again giving a normative characterization. This might not seem obviously problematic. At least we are not characterizing the ought *simpliciter* in terms of a further ought, or in terms of vague

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<sup>15</sup> (Wedgwood 2007: 25; Joyce 2001: 50).

bit of philosopher-speak, but in terms of reasons.

The problem is that other oughts entail the existence of reasons in some sense. If you morally ought to do something, then there are moral reasons to do it. If you prudentially ought to do something, there are self-interested reasons in its favor. If etiquette requires something, there are reasons of etiquette to do it. This is just to note that for any normative standard, we can specify considerations in virtue of which, in these particular circumstances, this particular action (or attitude) is prescribed or favored.<sup>16</sup> But when we say that categorical oughts entail reasons, we presumably mean reasons *simpliciter*.<sup>17</sup>

This doesn't help, however, because we can simply run our initial argument again. Gyges' prudential reasons favor killing the king. His moral reasons favor refraining. So there's a conflict. We appeal to reasons *simpliciter* to settle the conflict. But the dilemma resulted from too many kinds of considerations, not too few. So how does introducing another class of reasons help? There must be something special about reasons *simpliciter*, but what? Do they possess normative force? Are they the reasons we ought to heed (or have most reason to heed)? We are merely pushing the bump in the rug.

### 2.3. The All-Things-Considered Ought

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<sup>16</sup> Compare this with Joyce's discussion of *institutional reasons* (2001: 39ff.). Stephen Finlay's end-relational account of reasons would make similar predictions (2014: 84ff.), see especially his brief discussion of perverse reasons (109). Also see (Stroud 1998; and Dorsey 2013: 118).

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Stroud (1998: 172-3) distinguishes reasons of social climbing from reasons *simpliciter*. Only the latter have "force" in practical reasoning. Dale Dorsey (2013: 118) likewise distinguishes *domain* reasons from practical reasons, writing that only the latter are normative (135ff.).

Another thought is that the authority of the ought *simpliciter* consists in its status as the *all-things-considered* ought.<sup>18</sup> Other oughts are based on a partial and incomplete collection of the relevant considerations. The ought *simpliciter* is special in that it is comprehensive—based on all of the considerations in favor and against.

There is actually an ambiguity built into the notion of an all-things-considered ought. We could mean that it is a prescription based on the total state of things—there is no further fact about how the world is that is left out in determining what one ought to do. If one likes, one can think of this as the ought issued as a bit of advice by an omniscient guru, who considers *all the things, in some way or another*. In contrast, by the all-things-considered ought one might mean the all-things-considered-as-they-ought-to-be considered ought.

The former interpretation—on which what we mean is the all-things-considered-in-some-way-or-another ought—is unacceptable. Whatever overridingness or normative authority amounts to, it cannot simply be the fact that *more* considerations go into the relevant prescription. Assume for argument that there is an all-things-considered ought. Notice that another normative system could take into account all the same considerations that serve as inputs to what one ought *all-things-considered* to do, but assign them radically different weights, resulting in a different prescription.

“All-things-considered” must mean, then, “all-things-considered-as-they-ought-to-be-considered.” But this is a normative characterization. So once again, we have a problem of

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<sup>18</sup> (Wedgwood 2007: 24); this also seems to be the characterization found in (Stroud 1998: 175).

circularity.<sup>19</sup> We could mean all-things-considered-as-they-ought-morally-to-be-considered, or all-things-considered-as-they-prudentially-ought-to-be-considered, or all-things-considered-as-they-ought-*simpliciter*-to-be-considered. Presumably we mean the last—but what do we mean by the last?

### 2.3.1. All-Things-Considered, Reconsidered

Perhaps this is too quick. There may be another way to characterize the all-things-considered ought, which is neither normative nor psychological, but metaphysical. Here the idea is that there is a single class of reasons, and terms such as “moral” and “prudential” designate restrictions on this class of reasons.<sup>20</sup> Moral reasons are just a subclass of the reasons, those reasons concerned with the interests of others, perhaps. Prudential reasons are those reasons bearing on one’s own interests. “Morally ought” just designates what’s favored when we restrict ourselves to those reasons that are moral. The all-things-considered ought, on the other hand, designates what all the reasons favor: it is the ought based on unrestricted consideration of the reasons.

The advantage of this picture is that it seems to leave no question of how the all-things-considered ought is normatively superior: the all-things-considered ought actually tells you what you ought to do, whereas the merely moral ought tells you what it *would be the case* that you ought to do, *if only moral considerations were in play*. Another way of putting this might be, all oughts besides the all-things-considered are merely *prima facie*; hence their inferiority.

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<sup>19</sup> But see (Chang 2004: 11ff.) for the claim that we should leave room for the normative judgment of “What values *should* be at stake in an all-things-considered judgment?”

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Daniel Wodak and Geoff Sayre-McCord for proposing an account like this one.

The difficulty with this characterization is how it handles ought-claims based on prescriptive social conventions, such as etiquette or positive law. Consider the ought of etiquette. As noted in the previous section, it will be connected to reasons of some sort. If you ought to reply to an invitation in the third-person, there are considerations in virtue of which etiquette prescribes this action and not some other (*that the invitation addressed you in the third-person*, for example). This leads to the question, does the all-things-considered ought take these reasons of etiquette as inputs into what it prescribes, or not? Or to put this another way, we can follow Dale Dorsey (2013: 118; 135ff.) in naming the reasons on which the all-things-considered ought is based ATC (all-things-considered) reasons.<sup>21</sup> Moral reasons are presumably a subclass of ATC reasons, as are reasons of prudence. The question is, are reasons of etiquette a subclass of ATC reasons?<sup>22</sup> Neither answer will do.

Let's say that they aren't. This looks like the more intuitive horn—that the reasons of etiquette don't play a role determining the authoritative ought. But notice what this implies, given our explanation of normative authority. The strategy we are considering characterizes being less authoritative in terms of being *prima facie*, of being based on a subclass of the ATC reasons. But the ought of etiquette is based on *all* of the (non-ATC) reasons of etiquette. It is not *prima facie* in any sense. The all-things-considered ought is authoritative with respect to the moral ought in the sense that the moral ought is based on a restriction of the ATC reasons; this relation does not hold between the all-things-considered ought and the ought of etiquette. So we

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<sup>21</sup> Note that Dorsey does not use ATC reasons in the manner in which they are being used here.

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to Tristram McPherson and Michael Smith for independently suggesting an answer like this.

have not yet accounted for the authority of the all-things-considered ought with respect to etiquette.

Could one say instead that the all-things-considered ought is authoritative because it is based on the ATC reasons and the ought of etiquette is not?<sup>23</sup> But again, this is a normative characterization of the all-things-considered ought: we are characterizing it in terms of a relation to reasons. In fact, it is just a notational variant of the proposal considered in section 2.2. The all-things-considered ought is tied to ATC reasons, but the ought of etiquette is connected to reasons of etiquette. What makes ATC reasons special? Their normative force? Again, we have merely moved the bump in the rug.

One might argue that reasons of etiquette are not normative, whereas ATC reasons are (Dorsey, *ibid.*). But in what sense are reasons of etiquette not normative? They determine ought-facts that are prescriptive, not predictive. They favor and disfavor options. Claims about what you have reason of etiquette to do are not falsified by non-compliance. Non-compliance licenses criticism. They are connected to *norms*. The idea might be that they are not *genuine* normative reasons. But unless this means that claims about reasons of etiquette are systematically false (which they aren't), this is an emphatic, table thumping sense of "genuine," similar to the use of "really" in the phrase "what you *really* ought to do." Again, we've pushed the bump in the rug.

So perhaps we should agree that reasons of etiquette are ATC reasons. Notice, though, that we are now saying that etiquette has the same kind of normative standing that morality and prudence are typically taken to have. What's more, this must also be true of every prescriptive social convention (or else our characterization of normative authority will remain incomplete). And, as I think everyone is aware, some prescriptive social conventions are awful. We have the

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<sup>23</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this question.

Mafia's code of *Omerta*, feudal norms, the rules of etiquette surrounding race under Jim Crow, the rules of etiquette surrounding gender, conventions governing blood feuds, general norms of machismo. All of these conventions give reasons of the same normative kind as morality and prudence. *That it would send a message about what happens to people who snitch on the Family* would be an ATC reason for a Mafioso to torture someone to death, and play some role in determining what the Mafioso ought, all-things-considered, to do. *That it would show a manly lack of concern for considerations of morality, suffering, or personal health* would be an ATC reason for a man to reject vegetarianism. These ATC reasons apply simply as long as the people in question fall under the scope of the relevant convention, regardless of their persona opinions. The Mafioso can have come to hate the Mafia; the man may have long rejected the ideal of being a bro. They still have ATC reasons to torture or reject vegetarianism.

But isn't the skeptic about normative authority also committed to saying these agents have reasons to torture or eat meat? Yes, but so is everyone. This just follows from the fact that for any prescriptive social convention, we can specify the considerations in virtue of which it prescribes as it does in the particular case. The skeptic can also reject these reasons on the basis of partisanship. It's only if we take the horn of the dilemma under consideration that we have to say the reasons are authoritative (since they are partial determinants of the authoritative ought).

This horn may result in a coherent characterization of authority, but the normative implications are bizarre. That we find these commitments preposterous is good evidence that our concepts do not in fact work this way, and we have failed to characterize a notion of authority that we in fact use or could learn to use to resolve dilemmas.

#### 2.4. The Ought of Rational Criticizability



Perhaps an agent who fails to do what she ought *simpliciter* to do is irrational; or perhaps an agent who fails to do what she *judges* she ought *simpliciter* to do is irrational (e.g., Korsgaard 1986; Smith 1994; Hubin 1999; Wedgwood 2007; Kieseewetter 2011; Broome 2013; Dorsey 2013: 116; Dreier 2015). Either way, this would establish something special about the ought *simpliciter*: it is connected to rational criticism in a way that other oughts aren't.

But this is another normative characterization. To see why this is the problem, notice that the agent who fails to do what she ought morally to do is immoral. The agent who acts contrary to prudence is imprudent. The agent who acts contrary to etiquette is rude. It cannot simply be, then, that the ought *simpliciter* is overriding in the sense that it is tied to criticism. The tie to criticism is not unique to the ought *simpliciter*. It must be that there is something special about *rational* criticism.

But as Donald Hubin asks in a similar context: “what, exactly, is it about the charge of irrationality that makes it carry more weight ... than that of immorality? It is certainly not that being irrational is *morally* worse than being immoral” (1999: 40). Presumably we don't want to know if irrationality is morally worse, we want to know whether it is worse *simpliciter*.

Now we can run the argument again. It is morally worse of Gyges to do what he prudentially ought, but it is worse *for Gyges* to do what he morally ought. We have a conflict between values. Now let us add that it is worse *simpliciter* if Gyges listens to self-interest, and kills the king. But our problem resulted from too many evaluations, not too few, so how does adding a third evaluation help? The conflict still remains. It must be that there is something special about evaluation *simpliciter*, in virtue of which it resolves the conflict. But what could that be? Overridingness? Evaluative weight, as the corollary of normative force? Once again, we

have merely moved the bump in the rug.

## 2.5. The Ought We Cannot Question

Perhaps the special authority of the ought *simpliciter* is that “it is not available for legitimate questioning” (Joyce 2001: 51). For any other ought-claim, a claim about what I morally ought to do or a claim about what I prudentially ought to do, it is sensible for the person to whom it applies to ask, “Why should I?” But this question is unintelligible for the ought *simpliciter*. I am asking for a reason to do what I have most reason to do; I am already implicitly granting the authority of reasons in my very question (Joyce 2001: 49ff.).

Let’s grant that the questions, “Why should I do what I should do?” or “What reason do I have to do what I have most reason to do?” are self-undermining. As Joyce puts it: “[T]o question practical rationality is unintelligible –it is to ask for a reason *while implying that no reason will be adequate*” (51, italics mine). It doesn’t follow that the question “Why morally ought I to do what I ought *simpliciter* to do?” is self-undermining. This question does not imply that *no* reason will be adequate. It implies that a moral reason will be adequate. Someone could even fill her challenge in like this: “I get that I ought *simpliciter* to X. But I don’t care about that. I’m a moral fanatic. So you need to give me some moral reason to X, or I’m not going to do it.”

Joyce addresses this possibility (*ibid.*), but claims that insofar as one accepts moral reasons one accepts practical reasons. His grounds for this, unfortunately, are not entirely clear. If he means this as a psychological claim, it seems false. Intuitively, the moral fanatic or committed egoist (as described above) are fully conceivable agents. The only way to rule them out is to hold that one regards a reason as authoritative simply in virtue of having some

motivating commitment to act on it. But this is a psychological reduction of the notion of authority: we are now characterizing authority in terms of the agent's motivations.

On the other hand, without this implicit psychological characterizations of authoritative reasons, the whole trick to showing challenges to reasons or the ought *simpliciter* self-undermining seems to rest on putting self-undermining words in the challenger's mouth. "What reason do I have to do what I ought simpliciter to do?" is a self-undermining challenge. But so is "What moral reason do I have to do what I morally ought to do?" On the other hand, "What reason do I have to do what I have most moral reason to do?" is not self-undermining; but neither is "What moral reason do I have to do what I have most reason *full stop* to do?" All this shows is that it doesn't make sense to challenge a kind of consideration or a sense of ought in terms of that very same kind of consideration or sense of ought. So don't imagine that those who would challenge the ought *simpliciter* would phrase their challenges that way!

## 2.6. Accepting Psychological Characterization

Perhaps we should accept a psychological characterization of the ought *simpliciter*'s special authority. One could easily imagine a Humean at this point saying, "Of course you can only characterize it in terms of psychological dispositions to be motivated: that's what we've been trying to tell you!"<sup>24</sup> On this interpretation, ought *simpliciter* is the ought for which a motivational internalist constraint holds. It is the ought that makes up the content of those ought-judgments that are by their nature motivating. This is what its special authority consists in.

This position could be seen as a kind of "conceptual retreat" about normative authority,

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example (Finlay 2007).

motivated by skeptical worries. On one reading Hume, for example, he can be seen as deploying skeptical arguments to motivate similar conceptual retreat about causation. Ideas are based on impressions for Hume, and terms must express some idea to be meaningful. Now, if causation were a kind of necessary connection or power or force, the term 'cause' would be meaningless, as we have no impressions of necessary connections or powers or forces, and so could have no idea of them either. But the more conservative response is to realize that 'cause' means something of which we do have impressions, perhaps *regular succession*, or perhaps one's feeling of being compelled to imagine the effect upon encountering the cause.

By analogy, if normative force were anything other than some species of psychological force, we would have no clear concept of it at all. So the conservative response is to identify normative force with some species of psychological force.

My objection to this move is that first, unlike 'cause', the notions of an ought *simpliciter* and normative force are not terms with day-to-day familiarity, but philosophers' terms of art. There is, therefore, no general reason of conservatism to accept the conceptual retreat. We can just jettison the terms.

We could put this point another way: why doesn't the advocate of psychological characterizations simply become an eliminativist about normative force, or authority? There is an action-determining sense of ought. It has the philosophically interesting property of being the content of those normative judgments that actually (perhaps necessarily) cause action. This allows it to resolve conflicts between other oughts, albeit in the minimal sense of causing the

agent to side with one or the other. No other senses of ought have these properties.<sup>25</sup> This seems like enough. What else do we gain by hanging onto metaphors about authority or overridingness when what we really mean is *causes*, or tends to cause?

## 2.7. Other Options

The characterizations so far obviously don't exhaust the possibilities. What, then, justifies our confidence that the pattern—of circularity or changing the subject—will hold?<sup>26</sup> There are of course limitations on our ability to object to proposals that have yet to be proposed, but there is a general problem that any proposal, to be credible, must address.

First of all, when asked what we mean by “authority” or by one ought “trumping” another, it is very natural to answer in further normative terms: the authoritative prescriptions are the ones we ought to listen to, or the ones that have importance. But this can't serve as a characterization for reasons of circularity. Furthermore, as we have seen, there is no class of normative terms that seem unique to intuitively authoritative standards: etiquette supports ought-claims; there are reasons (internal to etiquette) why one ought to do these things; doing so realizes the value of politeness. So attempts to characterize authority in terms of reasons or

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<sup>25</sup> Donald Hubin's (1999 and 2001) position, while not exactly like this, is similar enough to merit note (see especially his 2001: 465ff.). Hubin accepts a Humean, instrumentalist account of practical rationality. There is a sense in which rationality, so explained, is just one more normative standard among many. Nonetheless, rationality is of special philosophical interest because it defines what an agent should do from that agent's own evaluative point of view.

<sup>26</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for posing this problem.

values will not pull us out of the circle. We end up forced to characterize the authority of ought in terms of its tie to authoritative reasons or authoritative values. But it was authority, not ought, that we wanted characterized.

On the other hand, non-normative facts seem irrelevant to what phrases like “trumping” or “authority” were meant to evoke (this is probably why the normative characterization seemed so natural). I have focused here on psychological accounts, because many of the characterizations in the literature seem ambiguous between a normative and psychological reading. But we could say the same about metaphysical characterizations.

Imagine Gyges’s dilemma again. The ought *simpliciter* tells him not to kill the king. But, he asks, how does that help, given that the prudential ought advises murder. Ah, we respond, the ought *simpliciter* has a special metaphysical status: it is a non-natural, *sui generis* relation, whereas the ought of prudence can be given a naturalistic reduction. Gyges could be understandably perplexed at this point. He asked for the sense in which the ought *simpliciter* overrides conflicting oughts, and he’s told that its metaphysics is more exotic. This seems to change the subject. Naturalistic stories about the ought *simpliciter* don’t look better. Perhaps the ought *simpliciter* has a less gruesome reduction base than the ought of prudence. Fine, but how does that, in itself, capture what we were gesturing at earlier—that its prescriptions are more genuinely prescriptive?

Of course, a philosopher wishing to pursue a metaphysical characterization might have more to say. But the point is she must say it. Metaphysical claims do not wear their connection to normative authority on their face. In fact, it’s difficult to imagine any non-normative characterization of the ought *simpliciter* illuminating what authority is supposed to be. The obvious non-normative characterizations seem simply to be about something else. But normative

characterizations won't do; hence the general pessimism that the terms philosophers have introduced here have any definite meaning.

### 3. Lack of Theoretical or Practical Utility

My case against an ought *simpliciter* is that such an ought would have to have some special property, but that property cannot be characterized except in normative terms that invoke the very same property (e.g. 'the authoritative ought is the one you ought (in the authoritative sense) to heed'), or in psychological terms that seem to change the subject.

This argument for skepticism may seem to trade on an open-question-type problem facing the normative in general: namely, the apparent impossibility of giving a satisfying definition of normative terms in anything except further normative terms. It may seem I am demanding an analysis of a normative term, then complaining that that analysis is either in further normative terms, and so circular, or else in non-normative terms, and so a violation of the Moorean ban on defining the normative in terms of the natural. But such an argument would prove too much—that we should be skeptics about the coherence of normative concepts in general.

This would be to misrepresent my argument, however. The normative terms which are standardly denied to be non-normatively analyzable are familiar terms of everyday use: 'ought', 'reason', 'good', 'bad', 'permitted', 'forbidden', 'right', 'wrong'. We can claim an implicit understanding of what these terms mean, even if informative definitions elude us. By contrast, terms such as 'normative authority', 'normative force', 'overridingness', and 'ought *simpliciter*' are philosophers' terms of art. What I am asking for is some characterization of these terms of art

in something besides further terms of art.

There may still be two reasons why even this demand is illegitimate, however. First, one might point out that in other domains of inquiry we accept new terms of art that cannot be defined in more familiar terminology. Metaphysicians have by and large accepted a relation of metaphysical *grounding*, for example, a relation which according to these metaphysicians cannot be defined in more familiar terms. Second, one might claim that ‘normative authority’ is a term to express a concept that we already deploy implicitly, but for which we lack a distinctive word. The evidence that we deploy such a concept is presumably deliberative practice. Sometimes we face conflicting oughts, and we make a further judgment about what we ought to do, or we ask for advice about the same. What sense of ought could we be deploying in these cases, besides the one that resolves the dilemma?

In response to the first point, assessing the case for the use of a relation of grounding in metaphysical theorizing is beyond the scope of this paper. That said, if the case for grounding really is the same as the case for an ought *simpliciter*—we can only indicate what this relation was supposed to be through metaphor, for example—then we should be skeptics about grounding as well. To the extent that we should accept grounding, it is because the cases are not analogous. First, grounding is linked to a familiar concept we obviously have—*explanation*. Second, advocates of the relation have put in considerable work to show the theoretical utility of this concept, mostly in giving a more perspicuous characterization of existing theoretical debates, and have further argued that this theoretical work cannot be done by some more familiar relation, such as supervenience (e.g., Fine 2001; Schaffer 2009; Rosen 2010). The theoretical utility of the relation is a reason to accept it, even if a reductive definition in more familiar terms



cannot be offered.<sup>27</sup>

In the case of the ought *simpliciter*, by contrast, we lack any sort of link to a more familiar theoretical notion. Instead, we have vague but evocative phrases (‘normative force,’ ‘what you *really* ought to do’) that gesture at it. One may argue that it is linked to *reasons*,<sup>28</sup> but as we saw (sections 2.2 and 2.3.1) oughts in general are linked to reasons. To identify a linkage unique to the ought *simpliciter* we have to restrict ourselves to *authoritative* reasons or reasons *simpliciter*—that is, we must use more terms of art. More importantly, the notion lacks theoretical utility. There is, to put it bluntly, no theoretical problem that the ought *simpliciter* solves, or helps us to characterize more perspicuously. Consider our initial case. Gyges ought self-interestedly to kill the king, and he ought morally to refrain. This is how the world is. There is no mystery here crying out for explanation.<sup>29</sup>

The problem which the ought *simpliciter* might seem to solve is: *how is he to resolve the conflict?*<sup>30</sup> But this is not a theoretical problem; it is a practical one. There is no mystery about how the world is which this sense of ought clears up. (Gyges is the unfortunate position of not being able to pursue self-interest and morality at once; that is not mysterious at all.) Rather, there

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<sup>27</sup> But see (Wilson 2014) for arguments against the theoretical utility of grounding.

<sup>28</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

<sup>29</sup> But see (McLeod 2001: 274ff.) for an enumeration of possible theoretical uses of the concept. Constraints of space prevent me from addressing all of these, but the most substantial—that the concept has deliberative utility—is addressed in the following paragraphs.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, (Stroud 1998: 175; McLeod 2001: 278-9; Kiesewetter 2011: 2-3).

is practical dilemma for Gyges about which choice to make.<sup>31</sup> But there is no need to assume that the practical problem admits of any solution. Every theory of practical reason must allow that some possible problems admit of no solution: if only because there must be conceivable circumstances in which the reasons favoring option *A* tie with those favoring *B*.

But even if such problems can't be solved, they can be *resolved* in the minimal sense already discussed: the agent *As* or the agent *Bs*, in either case arbitrarily. But, again, everyone needs to accept that some decision problems admit of no solution and must be resolved arbitrarily. The skeptic about ought *simpliciter* simply thinks that dilemmas like this are more common. She is not alone in holding they exist. Unsolvable dilemmas, then, are not some extra theoretical burden unique to the skeptic alone, nor is positing a capacity to act arbitrarily in the face of such dilemmas.

What if instead of theoretical or practical utility we appeal to familiarity? It is true that ought *simpliciter* is a philosopher's *term* of art, but it doesn't follow that we only learn the *concept* through philosophical theorizing. It may simply be that there was no special word for this concept, perhaps because we didn't need one. The ought *simpliciter* is a philosopher's name for the default sense of ought we deploy in advice-giving and deliberation. The metaphors and table thumps aren't there to help gesture at some new concept; they're to help one focus on a concept that's already familiar.

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<sup>31</sup> A referee wonders whether the ought *simpliciter* is necessary to solve the theoretical problem of how Gyges *should* resolve the dilemma. It is not necessary to explain how Gyges should resolve the dilemma *morally*, nor how he should resolve it *prudentially*. But how Gyges should resolve the dilemma *simpliciter*? This question presupposes that there is something one should do *simpliciter*. Deny there is a should *simpliciter*, and there is no mystery to solve.

In reply, the skeptic is entitled to ask what the evidence is that we deploy such a concept. It's not enough to say that we do come to a decision about what we ought to do in the face of conflicts from different normative domains. That could be explained just as easily if we were, as Tiffany put it, partisans of one normative domain or another. Some people care about morality more than self-interest, others about self-interest more than morality. An ought *simpliciter* is unnecessary, so long as we are constituted to care about some oughts more than others.

A better case for such an ought is offered by Judith Jarvis Thomson (2001: 46):

Suppose that Alfred is ill, and that only a dose of a certain medicine will cure him. It tastes truly awful, however. Alfred asks us "Ought I really take it?" It is a wildly implausible idea that we can reply only: "Well, your taking it would be very unpleasant, so in one sense of 'ought,' it's not the case that you ought to take it, namely the 'ought<sub>enjoyable</sub>' sense of 'ought.' But your taking it would be good for you, so in another sense of 'ought', you ought to take it, namely the ought<sub>goodness-for-Alfred</sub>' sense of 'ought.'" It is likely that Alfred will repeat his question: "But ought I take it?"

Alfred's question is intelligible. And that looks like a problem for the skeptic. There is not some obviously relativized ought that Alfred is asking for information about. Nor could Alfred plausibly be asking us what Alfred ought to do according to Alfred's personal deliberative standards—how would we know, or at least, how would we know better than Alfred? So here we have a *prima facie* case of the use of a non-relativized ought shared in common by both Alfred and ourselves, an ought *simpliciter*.

To see the skeptic's answer, we have to first notice that the skeptic can agree that sometimes we make judgments about what we ought to do, and sometimes this causes us to act. But sometimes it doesn't. When it doesn't, this might be because what Tiffany calls my personal deliberative standards are silent on how to resolve this particular dilemma. It could also be instead that my deliberative standards do tell me what to do, but they fail to move me on this occasion (that can happen—I don't always live up to my commitments). In situations like these, I might try to imagine the options and competing values in a variety of ways, from a variety of perspectives. I might read Epictetus or Emerson, and try to get fired up. I might ask a friend for advice. Maybe I can take what they tell me I ought to do as an indication of what they would do, and that might be enough to move me. Maybe my friend is good at getting me fired up. Maybe I already know what I'm going to do and just want a thumbs up first. People ask for advice for lots of reasons.

Bernard Williams noted that “Practical reasoning is a heuristic process, and an imaginative one, and there are no fixed boundaries on the continuum from rational thought to inspiration and conversion” (110).<sup>32</sup> The skeptic about ought *simpliciter* should accept this, since there is an awful lot of thinking leading up to decision-making that cannot plausibly be seen as the working out of what's required by one's prior deliberative standard or desires. But if we accept this about the intrapersonal case, it should be true in the interpersonal, advice-giving case as well. So when we ask for advice we may be asking what some normative standard (morality, self-interest, authenticity, our own personal deliberative standards, our interlocutor's standards) favors doing. But we may be asking, instead, that our interlocutor convert us to a standard, or

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<sup>32</sup> Also see (Hubin 1999: 42).

inspire us to live up to some standard we already accept, or to help us construct a new standard—while converting and inspiring us in the process.

In short, the skeptic can say that Alfred is asking us to supply an ought-claim that will move him to act. The oughts initially invoked don't do this, so Alfred wants us to offer another one, maybe with more effective rhetoric behind it. Of course, Alfred has no special sense of ought in mind in advance: he doesn't know in advance which ought will move him. He's hoping we might have one in mind that he hasn't thought of yet, or might invent an attractive (to him) way of weighing dissimilar kinds of considerations on the spot.

By way of analogy, consider when you ask your friend to suggest which restaurant you both eat at that night. One reason you might ask her is none of the options you have thought of strike you as attractive, and so you are asking to see if she can think of one you can't call to mind, but which, once it's mentioned, you'll endorse. Sometimes we do the same with oughts.

#### 4. Denying Multiple Senses of Ought

Thomson offers another argument on behalf of the ought *simpliciter*—it is the only sense of ought that we have (2008). Thomson's argument is simple: if there were relativized ought, no sense could be made of an ought *simpliciter*. But we can make sense of an ought *simpliciter*. Therefore, there are no relativized oughts (2008: section X.2.).

Thomson, then, can be seen as accepting the validity of the basic argument here,<sup>33</sup> but concluding that the correct response to such an argument is to apply *modus tollens*, not *ponens*.

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<sup>33</sup> Thomson's argument is simpler than mine. Roughly, if any uses of ought are relativized, then an unrelativized use of ought would be ill-formed (168).

The question, then, is what it is more reasonable to give up on: an ought *simpliciter* or various relativized oughts.

Thomson's case in her (2008) is intuitive. She regards it as extremely implausible that there is no ought *simpliciter*:

I draw attention, first, to the intuitive implausibility of the following conclusion that the argument issues in: that there is no such thing as the proposition that A ought to  $V_{act}$ . (Just as there is no such thing as the proposition that A is taller.)

(168)

But this argument is weak. First, the skeptic agrees that sometimes *statements* of the form “A ought to  $V_{act}$ ” are true. She simply holds that they are elliptical, and so, in conjunction with context, they denote a proposition of greater complexity than the surface grammar of the sentence reveals. Thomson's argument here depends on our possessing highly reliable intuitions not simply about the surface grammar of acceptable claims, but also about whether the meaning of these claims possesses any hidden structure. It is very doubtful, however, that we have reliable intuitions directly about such matters. The recent wave of contextualist treatments of ‘ought’ argue that, as a modal verb, ought-claims possess considerable hidden structure (e.g., Dowell 2011 and 2012, Finlay 2008 and 2014).<sup>34</sup> These accounts may be right or wrong—but if they are

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<sup>34</sup> Finlay's contextualist account of an ought *simpliciter* is especially relevant here: “s ought to  $\phi$  ‘simpliciter’ just in case it would be correct and felicitous in the absence of any special context to assert simply ‘s ought to  $\phi$ ’” (2014: 151). Note that my argument in this paper has nothing to say against his interpretation of the ought *simpliciter* on which it has no special normative standing, only special conversational relevance.

wrong, this is shown by demonstrating that they are inadequate to explaining our intuitions about various ought-claims in various contexts (or incapable of being integrated into our overall semantic picture, etc.). The brute intuition that ought-propositions are logically simpler than that is not something such accounts should be expected to answer.

This greatly weakens the case for *tollens*-ing over *ponens*-ing. What's more, insisting that there is only an ought *simpliciter* forces us to attribute very odd normative commitments to people who utter the following, very sensible sentences:

- (1) "Nixon ought to have burned the tapes."
- (2) "Instead of pushing eastward into Russia, Hitler ought to have sent the Wehrmacht south to seize the Romanian oil-fields."
- (3) "The killer should have covered his tracks better."

These are normal things for people to say, and do not imply that the speaker is a committed amoralist, Nazi, or whatever. Someone could utter (1) and still agree that Nixon ought to have handed himself in and confessed his crimes.<sup>35</sup> According to Thomson, this person must have contradicted herself. But it's more likely that 'ought' is being used in a sense that implicitly restricts the kinds of considerations in play—to those of self-interest, or desire-satisfaction, or good military strategy, for example.

So, if we have to choose between relativized oughts and ought *simpliciter*, as Thomson and I both agree we must, it is the latter that must go.

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<sup>35</sup> Similar examples can be found in (Dowell 2012; and Finlay 2014: 50, and 137).

## 5. Conclusion

Perhaps we can accept some very strange normative commitments. We can hold that conventional standards have independent normative importance simply in virtue of being standards. If we reject this, however, as I think we should, we must reject the ought *simpliciter*. This would mean, admittedly, a rejection of the practicality of philosophy. There is no absolute perspective from which different kinds of considerations can be weighed. Individual agents may have their deliberative standards for measuring one kind of consideration against another, but these standards are themselves arbitrary, in the sense that they are simply one more standard among many. Conflicts between self-interest and morality, or any other two normative standards, cannot be resolved by coming to appreciate some philosophical (or everyday) truth. Rather, it is resolved through what Tiffany calls partisanship and existential choice.

Despite this, most of moral philosophy will remain in place. Since most of us are partisans of morality, we naturally have an interest in what morality in fact requires. We can still ask questions about morality's naturalistic *bona fides* and the relation between morality and rationality. But there is one question to which we as philosophers have no special answer, and that's "So what?"\*

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