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The Wrong Answer to an Improper Question?¹

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A person who sees that she morally ought to do something might wonder whether it would make sense for her to do it. Perhaps Aurelia is on a crowded bus, standing next to an old man whose wallet is almost falling out of his pocket. She says, “I see that the morally right thing would be to warn this man to take care of his wallet. But why should I do the right thing? In fact, why shouldn’t I steal his wallet? It would be wrong of me to do this, but so what? No one is looking. I won’t get caught. What’s to fear?”²

We can imagine different scenarios of this kind. In one scenario, Aurelia is on the verge of deciding to steal the old man’s wallet. She believes it would be wrong to do this, and she is asking whether there is any (further) reason not to go ahead. In principle, the reason she is looking for could be a reason of any kind, perhaps even a moral reason. Perhaps, for example, the old man is very poor and needs the money in his wallet to buy his dinner. This is a morally relevant consideration, and if Aurelia learned of it at the appropriate time, she might take it to give her the reason she is looking for. In a second scenario, Aurelia is unclear whether it makes sense to give any weight at all to moral considerations in deciding what to do. Her question is about moral considerations in general rather than merely about her decision on the bus. Perhaps

she has decided to warn the man to pay attention to his wallet. But she wants to be reassured that in doing the right thing she will be doing something that makes sense.

One might dismiss Aurelia's questions. One might say that she must do the morally right thing because it is the morally right thing. One might say that, morally, she should not need any further reason, and that her request for a further reason reveals a character flaw. I agree that Aurelia has a kind of character flaw in the first scenario, for she is not wholeheartedly committed to morality. And I agree that any further reason we could give her to do the right thing would be one she morally ought not to need. In the second scenario, however, this dismissive response is out of order. Aurelia is asking a theoretical question about morality. Her question might reflect a kind of skepticism about morality, but it need not. It might instead be motivated simply by a desire to understand morality and the force of moral reasons.

In this paper we will be concerned with the kind of theoretical question Aurelia is asking in the second scenario. A philosopher who asks "Why be moral?" is asking a theoretical question of this kind, a question about the force of moral reasons or about the normative status of morality. In order to have a standard way to formulate the kind of issue raised by the questions, I will use the expression "makes sense," but in my view, as I will explain, there is not a single property of making sense. Moreover, as I will explain, a number of different questions can be asked by means of the "Why be moral?" formulation. One of my central tasks in this paper is to distinguish two interesting questions in the "Why be moral?" family.

The first question could be expressed by asking, roughly, whether it makes sense to be moral or to act morally. This question presupposes that there is a morally preferred way to live or to be, or that there are moral reasons or moral obligations. It asks whether there is any

(further) reason to be this way or to act this way. Does this way of living make sense in any terms other than moral terms? The second question is more deeply theoretical. It asks, roughly, how and why moral considerations provide a way of making sense of acting or living in one way rather than another. That is, if moral considerations are a source of reasons, why is this? And what is the significance of these reasons? To use a familiar term, this question asks for a ‘grounding’ of morality. It will take some work to clarify the nature of these questions and the difference between them. I am especially interested in the second question.

In section 1, before turning to these two questions, I discuss a classic paper in which H. A. Prichard appears to argue that the “Why be moral?” question is illegitimate. I claim that his argument actually shows at best that some other question is illegitimate. In section 2, I explain how I am using the expression, “makes sense.” In section 3, I turn to the two questions I have in mind and explain how they are distinguished. The remaining sections of the paper address the second question, the question that asks for a ‘grounding’ of morality. In section 4, I consider attempts to answer the question by ‘reducing’ morality to practical reason. In section 5, I consider T.M. Scanlon’s approach. In section 6, I offer my own ‘free-standing’ account.

1. An Improper Question?

In a classic early paper, Prichard suggests that moral philosophy may consist in the attempt to answer “an improper question,”³ and he appears to have in mind the question, “Why be moral?” He imagines that someone asks, “Why should I do these things?” And he thinks that moral philosophy aims “to supply the answer.”⁴ I have just claimed that a number of different

questions can be posed by asking “Why be moral?” but let me set this complication aside for now. I will contend that Prichard blurs the distinction between “Why be moral?” questions and a completely different question. What his argument shows, at best, is that this other question is improper.

Prichard opens his argument by suggesting that anyone who understands the scope of our various moral obligations will come at some time “to feel the irksomeness of carrying them out, and to recognize the sacrifice of interest involved.” She might ask herself whether there is “really a reason” why she “should act in the ways in which hitherto [she has] thought [she] ought to act.” She might ask, “Why should I do these things?” She might “ask for a proof” that she ought to do so. Prichard suggests that moral philosophy aims to answer this kind of question by supplying a proof of “what [we] and they have prior to reflection believed immediately or without proof,” namely that “we ought to act in the ways usually called moral.”⁵

Prichard argues that the demand for such a proof is “improper.”⁶ It “cannot be satisfied, and it cannot be satisfied because it is illegitimate.”⁷ It is illegitimate because it rests on “the mistake of supposing the possibility of proving what can only be apprehended directly by an act of moral thinking.”⁸ Our apprehension of moral obligations is “immediate,” he contends, “in precisely the sense in which a mathematical apprehension is immediate.” And he adds that “in both cases the fact apprehended is self-evident.”⁹ Hence, Prichard suggests, the demand “to have it proved to us” that “we really ought to do what in our non-reflective consciousness we have hitherto believed we ought to do” is “illegitimate.”¹⁰ If we have an obligation, the fact that we have it is self-evident and not subject to proof.¹¹

Of course an action might be obligatory without being obviously obligatory. For,

Prichard notes, if we have an incomplete description of an action, then even if the action is in fact obligatory, we might not “appreciate” the obligation. But Prichard thinks there is no question of supplying a proof that an action is obligatory. “[W]e do not come to appreciate an obligation by an argument.”¹² For he thinks that if we understand in detail exactly what action is at issue and what the circumstances are – “if the nature of the act is completely stated” – it is self-evident whether it is obligatory.¹³

Prichard’s argument is puzzling since, although self-evident propositions can be known or justifiably believed without proof, it does not follow that they cannot be proved. Hence, even if Prichard is correct that when “the nature of [an] act is completely stated,” it is self-evident whether it is obligatory, it might nevertheless be possible to prove that certain actions are obligatory. Prichard does, however, consider a number of ways that philosophers have attempted to establish that we have certain obligations. He argues that none is successful.¹⁴

For my purposes, the important point is that Prichard seems to be confusing or at least blurring the distinction between two very different questions. These questions are two ways of understanding the query, in Prichard’s words, “Why should I do these things?”¹⁵ When Aurelia realizes that it will be irksome not to steal the wallet, she could ask for a reason to think she actually is obligated not to steal it. More generally, she could ask what reason there is to think morality requires what we think it requires. Call this the “Is it required?” question. Aurelia could pose this question by asking “Why should I not do this?” But in asking this Aurelia might have a different question in mind. She might be confident she is morally obligated not to steal the wallet, but she might wonder whether this matters. She might wonder why she must not act wrongly or why she should do what morality requires. This is the “Why be moral?” question.

These are different questions. To answer Aurelia's "Is it required?" question, we would need to supply a reason to believe that she is actually morally required not to take the wallet. But in providing such a reason, we might not even begin to address her "Why be moral?" question. Aurelia might agree that she is required not to steal the wallet. Despite this she might wonder whether it would make sense for her to take the wallet.

Prichard writes as if only one question is in play, the one he claims to be illegitimate. But he actually raises both of the above questions in the key passage in his paper.¹⁶ Suppose someone recognizes "the irksomeness" of her obligations. As Prichard points out, she might ask whether there is "really a reason" why she "should act in the ways in which hitherto [she has] thought [she] ought to act." This seems to be the "Why be moral?" question. Or, as Prichard points out, she might ask why she should think she is obligated to act "in the ways in which hitherto [she has] thought [she] ought to act." This seems to be the "Is it required?" question.

On inspection, we can see that Prichard's argument targets the "Is it required?" question. He is concerned with a question that demands a proof that we "ought after all to act in these ways." Such a proof would answer the "Is it required?" question but it would not answer the "Why be moral?" question. For example, a proof that Aurelia is obligated not to steal the wallet would say nothing about whether there is "really a reason" for her not to do so. It would leave room for her to ask whether there is a good reason for her not to do it. Prichard contends that the question he is concerned with is illegitimate because it is illegitimate to demand a reason to believe an action is obligatory given that, if this belief is true, it is self-evident. As he says, in summarizing his argument, the mistake lying behind the illegitimate question is that "of supposing the possibility of proving what can only be apprehended directly by an act of moral

thinking.”¹⁷ Even if Prichard is correct that this is a mistake, however, the most that follows is that it is illegitimate to ask for a proof that morality requires what we think it requires. It does not follow that it is illegitimate to ask whether there is a further reason to do what morality requires. That is, it does not follow that the “Why be moral?” question is illegitimate.

Perhaps Prichard intended to argue only that the “Is it required?” question is illegitimate. As I said, he writes as if he means to address only one question. But as I also said, he actually raises both of the questions I have distinguished. At the beginning of his paper,¹⁸ Prichard has his protagonist ask whether there is “really a reason” to act in the relevant ways, and in this context the question at issue seems to be the “Why be moral?” question. But Prichard then has his protagonist raise the issue whether we can prove that our beliefs about what we are obligated to do are true, and in this context the question at issue seems to be the “Is it required?” question. The fact that the sentence, “Why should I do these things?” can be used to ask either of the two questions can explain Prichard’s confusion.

The important point is that Prichard’s argument does not show that the “Why be moral?” question is illegitimate. The question might be illegitimate of course, but to show it is illegitimate we would need a different argument from the one Prichard supplies.

One might think that the material for such an argument is available in what Prichard says. It is arguably a necessary truth that if a person is morally obligated to do something, there is a moral reason for her to do it. Perhaps Prichard is assuming that this is so. But on this assumption, if it is self-evident that a person has a moral obligation to do something, it follows that there is a reason for her to do it. Hence, Prichard might think, there is not an open question whether there is “really a reason” for her to do it. And he might then conclude that if this

question is not open, then the “Why be moral?” question is not open, or at least it admits of a trivial answer. For once we have settled whether we are obligated to do something, we have settled that we have a moral reason to do it. That is, once we have answered the “Is it required?” question, there is no room for the “Why be moral?” question. This might indeed be how Prichard is thinking. It seems to me, however, that this line of reasoning fails to show that the “Why be moral?” question is in any way illegitimate.

Recall the two scenarios involving Aurelia. In the first, she agrees she is obligated not to steal the wallet, so, on the above assumption, we may assume she believes she has a moral reason not to steal the wallet. She asks for a further reason. Even if she has a moral reason not to steal the wallet, there remains the question whether there is a further reason for her not to do this. In the second scenario, Aurelia is asking a theoretical question about moral obligations. The fact that moral obligations entail moral reasons (if they do) does not show that this question is out of order. She is asking whether moral reasons are ‘genuinely normative’, as we might say. She is asking for an account of the nature of morality and of moral reasons that explains why it makes sense to act morally. Even if moral obligations entail moral reasons, it does not follow that this question is illegitimate.

As I have said, I think that a variety of questions can be posed by asking “Why be moral?” These questions are, however, distinct from the “Is it required?” question. When we see that a putative moral obligation can be “irksome,” we might ask, “Why should we do these things?” Here we might be asking the “Is it required?” question. We might be asking whether the actions in question are actually morally obligatory. Or instead, without questioning whether these actions are obligatory, we might be asking a question in the “Why be moral?” family.

Prichard argues that the former question, the “Is it required?” question, is illegitimate. But he has not shown that the “Why be moral?” questions are illegitimate. In what follows, I will be discussing questions in the “Why be moral?” family.

2. ‘Making Sense’ of Something

In the second scenario, Aurelia asks for an account of the nature of morality which shows that it makes sense to do what we are obligated to do, and more generally, that it makes sense to be moral. This question will be the focus of attention in what follows. As I said, I think there are two interestingly different ways to take the question. I begin, however, by explaining how I shall use the expression “make sense.”¹⁹

For my purposes, to ask whether something – an action, policy, or institution – ‘makes sense’ is to ask a generic normative question. It is to ask whether the relevant thing has a sufficient justification of some suitable kind. Which kind of justification is suitable depends on the kind of thing being evaluated, or on the circumstances in which it is being evaluated, or on our interests in evaluating it. In some cases, the issue might be whether a thing has a sufficient moral justification. In other cases, the issue might be whether a thing has a sufficient prudential, legal, aesthetic, or ‘rational’ justification.²⁰ Making sense comes in different ‘flavors’ because, in my view, there are different kinds of justification just as there are different kinds of reason. In my view, moreover, it would be a mistake to assume that making sense of something consists in showing that it would be ‘rational’ to choose it or favor it.²¹ Let me explain.

Near the end of the finale of his opus 95 string quartet, Beethoven changed from a minor

to a major key. We might ask whether it made sense for him to do this. First, suppose we have just finished listening to a performance of the quartet, and suppose we are careful listeners. In this context, if we ask whether it made sense for Beethoven to change the key, we presumably are asking whether there was a sufficient aesthetic reason for him to do this. We are asking whether it made sense aesthetically for him to do this. Second, suppose a powerful man threatened Beethoven with assassination if he changed the key. Knowing this, we might say it made no sense for Beethoven to change the key. In saying this, we presumably would intend to deny the rationality of Beethoven's doing this. Third, suppose Beethoven was troubled by financial concerns. Given that it is not obvious that the aesthetically best music sells best, we might wonder whether it made sense for him to change the key even if doing so improved the quartet aesthetically. In this context, we presumably would be asking whether he was prudent to change the key the way he did. Fourth, suppose we think that composers have a moral duty to compose morally uplifting music. If we ask in this context whether it made sense for Beethoven to change the key, we presumably would be asking whether this made sense morally. These examples illustrate, I think, that the kind of justification at issue when we ask whether something makes sense can vary with the context or with our interests.

One might object that even if there are different kinds of reason and different kinds of justification, there surely is a way of making sense of things period or simpliciter. Call this the “unitary view.” It is a kind of anti-pluralism. Perhaps the standpoint of rational choice and decision is the final arbiter of what makes sense. Or perhaps morality is ‘over-riding’ such that morality is the final arbiter of what makes sense. I have argued elsewhere that these ideas are mistaken,²² and it is beyond the scope of this paper to debate them here. Fortunately, the main

arguments in this paper do not depend on my pluralism.

To fix usage, let me stipulate that a reason or a justification is a “practical” reason or justification just in case, necessarily, any rational person would take it appropriately into account in decision-making, if she believed she had this reason or justification for deciding one way or another. A practical reason or justification is one that it would be “irrational to ignore,” as I will say, for short.²³ Of course this stipulation leaves room for disagreement about the concepts of rationality and irrationality.

On the pluralist view, there are reasons and justifications that it is not necessarily irrational to ignore. For example, a pluralist might say, it is not necessarily irrational to ignore aesthetic reasons. In designing a surgical instrument, it might not be irrational to ignore aesthetic considerations altogether and to pay attention only to functional considerations. The pluralist holds, inter alia, that it is not the case that every justification or reason is one that it would be irrational to ignore in decision-making. Hence, given my stipulation that a practical reason is a reason that it would be ‘irrational to ignore’, the pluralist says that some reasons for action and some justifications are not practical reasons or justifications.

Nothing substantive turns on this stipulation. We could instead adopt a different, wider usage according to which any reason for action is a practical reason. On this usage, if there are moral reasons and aesthetic reasons, they are practical reasons. On this usage, a pluralist would say that there are kinds of practical reason that it is not necessarily irrational to ignore.

Some philosophers would object that the only reasons or justifications that can genuinely make sense of a choice or a decision are reasons or justifications that it would be irrational to ignore. On this view, one might say, only practical reasons and justifications (in the narrow

sense) are genuinely normative. On this view, the standpoint of rational choice is the arbiter of what makes sense. Call this idea the “rationality assumption.” If it can be rational to ignore aesthetic considerations, then, on the rationality assumption, an aesthetic consideration by itself might not genuinely make sense of anything. It is a short step from the rationality assumption to the claim that moral reasons cannot make sense of actions or decisions unless it would be irrational to ignore them. I think that the assumption is mistaken, as I have argued elsewhere,²⁴ but I cannot discuss it here. I will return to it below, in section 4.

I agree, of course, that there is room to question whether a putative kind of reason or justification can genuinely make sense of anything. This explains why there is room to raise the “Why be moral?” questions. There is room to ask whether it makes sense to pay attention to moral reasons. But it seems to me that there is also room to ask whether it makes sense to pay attention to practical reasons in the narrow sense. We can ask whether it makes sense to aim to act rationally or to avoid irrationality. We can ask for a further suitable justification, a justification that goes beyond the fact that, of course, it makes sense rationally to act rationally. Suppose that a person thinks it is sometimes immoral to do what is rationally required. In light of this, she might ask whether it always makes sense to do what is rationally required. She might take it as given that it makes sense to avoid acting immorally but wonder whether it makes sense to avoid acting irrationally. She is asking whether there is a justification of some suitable kind to avoid irrationality. One might question the coherence of her question, but below, in section 4, I will defend its coherence.

In this section, I have been explaining how I use the expression “makes sense.” To repeat, as I use the expression, to ask whether something makes sense is to ask whether it has a

sufficient and suitable justification. Which kind of justification is suitable depends on the kind of thing being evaluated, or on the context, or on our interests in evaluating the thing.

3. Two Questions About Morality

Let me return, then, to the family of “Why be moral?” questions. I take it that to ask whether it makes sense to be moral is to ask whether there is a sufficient justification of some suitable kind for being moral. We might take it as given that it makes sense morally to be moral or to act morally. If so, in asking whether it makes sense to be moral we must be asking for a further justification, a justification that goes beyond the fact that being moral makes sense morally.

In principle, one could ask this question from a variety of normative standpoints. Following Oscar Wilde, as I understand his perspective, one might ask whether it makes sense aesthetically to be moral. Will the narrative of one’s life be more or less aesthetically pleasing if one does the right thing in every circumstance? Or, following Susan Wolfe, as I understand the perspective she took in a widely read paper,²⁵ one might ask whether it makes sense from the standpoint of personal excellence to be moral. Will one’s life be more or less excellent if one does the morally best thing in every circumstance? Given the perspective that philosophers typically adopt, however, and especially if one makes the rationality assumption, the issue will be whether it would be rational to be moral. There are, to be sure, philosophical discussions of whether being moral makes sense in self-interested terms, but these are typically framed by the assumption that rationality consists in the efficient pursuit of self-interest.²⁶ In asking whether it

makes sense to be moral, then, a philosopher typically would be asking whether being moral has a rational justification, a justification that appeals to practical reasons, or reasons it would be irrational to ignore.

This, then, is the first interpretation of the “Why be moral?” question that I will discuss. On this interpretation, the question concerns the relation between morality and practical rationality. I will call it the “relational question.” The question is whether it is rational to be moral or to act morally, and this amounts to the question whether a person is necessarily, or at least always, rationally required, or at least rationally permitted, to be moral or to act morally. I assume that if a person is morally required to do something, it follows that there is a moral reason for her to do it. So, on this understanding, the “Why be moral?” question leads quickly to the question whether moral reasons are practical reasons, reasons it would be irrational to ignore. This raises the question of how we are to understand practical rationality.

The issue of what practical rationality consists in, however, seems to be at least partly verbal. Philosophers have used the term “rationality” to speak of various standards of evaluation. Some have thought that rational persons are self-interested. I have proposed that rationality consists in efficiently pursuing the realization of what one values.²⁷ Others have proposed that rational agents, just in virtue of being rational, must act morally or at least be appropriately responsive to moral reasons. We obviously can evaluate the performance of a person relative to any of these standards, but the issue whether one or another of the standards is definitive of full “practical rationality” does not seem to be substantive. As Michael Smith has said, “the term ‘rationality’ is almost entirely a philosopher’s term of art.”²⁸

To be sure, important substantive questions are at stake, but to address them, we do not

have to settle controversial questions about the nature of rationality. We can instead formulate a normative standard and then ask about the relation between morally required action and action that meets this standard. When we do this, it may seem that nothing of much interest turns on whether we can show that this standard is definitive of practical rationality. For instance, we can ask about the relation between morality and self-interest without worrying about whether rational persons are necessarily self-interested. (This is why I want to call the question at issue the “relational” question rather than the “rationality” question.) The point is that to answer the question in a substantively interesting way one must formulate a standard for action without using moral concepts and then argue that this standard always at least permits us to act morally.

I have discussed the relational question elsewhere.²⁹ In doing so, I proposed a standard of “self-grounded rationality” according to which “rational persons,” just in virtue of being rational, are responsive to the reasons given them by their values. I argued, however, that it is a contingent matter whether a person’s values give her sufficient self-grounded reason to do what she is morally obligated to do. I shall say no more about the relational question. Instead, I want to consider a second interpretation of the “Why be moral?” question.

On the first interpretation, the question is whether it is rational to be moral or to act morally. One might raise this question without having any doubt as to whether a ‘moral justification’ is a way to make sense of actions, policies, institutions, and the like. This, however, is the central issue on the second interpretation of the question. On the second interpretation, the challenge is to provide an account of the nature of morality that explains how moral ‘justifications’ and moral ‘reasons’ are ways to make sense of things. The question asks for a showing that, as we might say, moral reasons and moral justifications have ‘normative

import'. We can call this the "moral-importance" question.

Suppose I announce that everyone is to go dancing out of doors in a public place at midnight on any day there is a full moon. This, I say, is a requirement of "moon-love." I persuade a number of people to join me as moon-lovers. We 'justify' our dancing outdoors at midnight by saying that there is a full moon. We say there is a 'moon-love reason' to go dancing at midnight when there is a full moon. But so-called moon-love 'justifications' are not actually justifications. They are not a way of making sense of anything. Now the moral-importance question challenges morality in the way that requirements of moon-love can be challenged. It asks for an explanation of the nature of morality which shows that so-called moral 'justifications' and moral 'reasons' are ways to make sense of things. This is the question I will consider in the rest of the paper.

Both the relational question and the moral-importance question can be posed by asking, "Why be moral?"³⁰ The relational question is more transparently posed, however, by asking whether there is a rational justification for being moral or for acting morally, or whether it is rational to be moral. The relational question takes it as given that moral considerations are a way of making sense of things. It poses a theoretical question about the relation between morality and practical rationality. A direct answer to it would be a normative claim, such as, perhaps, the claim that one is rationally required to be moral. The moral-importance question is more transparently posed by asking for an explanation of how the moral status of something might be in itself any kind of justification of that thing. The moral-importance question does not take it as given that moral considerations are a way of making sense of things. It poses a theoretical question about the normative status of morality. The challenge is to explain how it is that moral

considerations can justify actions, policies, and the like, if indeed it is true that they can. To meet the challenge, we would need to provide a theory that explains how it is that moral considerations can make sense of things.

4. The Reduction of Morality to Practical Reason

The moral-importance question asks, then, for an explanation of how it is that so-called moral ‘justifications’ and moral ‘reasons’ can make sense of, or provide justifications for, actions, policies, and the like. What kind of justification might be at issue? For many if not most philosophers, the issue would be whether so-called moral justifications and moral reasons provide rational justifications or make rational sense of anything. In the next section, I will consider an alternative, but for now, I again focus on the notion of rationality.

Many philosophers make the rationality assumption that I introduced above, in section 2. That is, they assume, the only reasons or justifications that can genuinely make sense of a choice or a decision are practical reasons or justifications, those it would be irrational to ignore. The only genuinely normative justifications of actions, policies, and the like, are justifications that appeal to practical rationality. Philosophers who make this assumption naturally take the moral-importance question to amount to the question whether so-called moral justifications provide rational justifications of anything. On this construal, the moral-importance question is obviously closely related to the relational question. They are distinct questions, however, for the relational question takes it as given that moral justifications are a way of making sense of things. The moral-importance question does not take this as given.

Philosophers who are interested in the moral-importance question and who make the rationality assumption might ask whether it is possible to ‘reduce’ morality to practical reason. If this reductionist strategy could be carried out in a suitable way, it might yield an answer to the moral-importance question. It might give us an account of the nature of morality and, if suitably designed, this account might entail that moral reasons are practical reasons that make sense of actions on the same basis that (other) practical reasons do. In this section, I will briefly discuss three contemporary reductionist theories. I will argue that these theories cannot answer the moral-importance question in a fully satisfying way unless they are combined with a defence of the rationality assumption. Why is it that so-called rational justifications, and only so-called rational justifications, are genuinely normative? Most important, are so-called rational justifications a way of making sense of anything? If so, why is this? Does it make sense to be practically rational? Since different theorists have different accounts of practical rationality, what we need more exactly is an account of why it is that it makes sense to be practically rational on the given theory’s account of what practical rationality consists in.

David Gauthier begins with the notion that rationality requires us to maximize the expected degree to which our desires will be satisfied.³¹ On this conception, in his terminology, rationality is a matter of “straightforwardly maximizing.” Gauthier then argues that any agent in suitable circumstances would be rational in the maximizing sense to become disposed to follow a conditionally cooperative strategy in interacting with others. Gauthier argues that to follow such a strategy is to be moral, by the standard of the only rationally defensible morality. And he argues that to follow a strategy that one would be rational to adopt is to be rational. Hence, in suitable circumstances, to be rational is to be moral.

For my purposes, the chief difficulty with this approach is that it cannot successfully dispose of the moral-importance question unless Gauthier can show that it makes sense to act rationally by the lights of his account. On his account, to act rationally is to act on a disposition with the property that, in suitable circumstances, in order to straightforwardly maximize, one must choose to adopt this disposition. It is questionable whether it generally makes sense to act on such a disposition. As Gauthier recognizes, even if one would straightforwardly maximize in adopting a disposition of the kind he has in mind, one might fail to straightforwardly maximize in acting on the disposition. But if acting on the disposition might involve failing to straightforwardly maximize, it is not clear why the fact that one would straightforwardly maximize in adopting it can show it would make sense to act on it.³²

Michael Smith thinks of the ideally rational person as being fully informed and as having a fully coherent system of beliefs and desires.³³ There are in addition certain a priori truths regarding what a fully rational person would desire.³⁴ Smith contends that what a person has reason to do is what an ideally rational counterpart of the person would want the person to want to do – assuming that all ideally rational persons would converge appropriately in what they want their counterparts to want. Smith contends that moral reasons are just a kind of reason, a reason with a certain subject matter. Moral reasons are practical reasons.

For my purposes, the chief difficulty with this position is that it cannot dispose of the moral-importance question unless Smith can show that it makes sense for us to act on what his account takes to be our reasons. Set aside the question whether all ideally rational agents would converge in their desires. Convergence cannot matter unless the recommendations of my ideal counterpart would matter anyway. Suppose that my ideally rational counterpart would want me

to want to do something contrary to my most cherished values – to support the John Birch Society, for example. Perhaps my ideal counterpart perversely enjoys the thought that I, his pitiful actual counterpart, might act contrary to my values, and perhaps this is why he wants me to want to do this. Unless it can be shown that the desires my ideally rational counterpart would have for me are responsive to my good, it will seem doubtful that the fact that he wants me to want something means that it would make sense for me to want it. More generally, it needs to be shown that it would make sense for me to want whatever my ideally rational counterpart would want me to want.³⁵

Christine Korsgaard argues that any agent must value something, and in valuing anything at all, we are rationally committed to valuing our rational agency.³⁶ She then argues that in valuing our rational agency, we are committed to valuing rational agency as such. Any agent is therefore committed to valuing rational agency as such, and, she contends, action that properly takes account of the value of rational agency is morally appropriate. Hence, any agent is committed to acting morally.

For my purposes, the trouble with this argument is that it is not clear that it makes sense to value rational agency as such even if Korsgaard is correct that, in valuing anything, one is ‘committed’ to valuing rational agency as such. Gyges plots to depose the King, to marry the Queen, and to take over the kingdom. He values power and love, and this means that, if Korsgaard is correct, he is committed to valuing rational agency as such. Moreover, if Korsgaard is correct, carrying out his plot would conflict with his valuing rational agency as such. Yet carrying out his plot would help him to achieve a life of power and love. In this circumstance, it is not clear why it would make sense for him to abandon his plot simply on the

basis that carrying out the plot would conflict with his properly valuing something he is committed to valuing. His choice is between achieving something he values and protecting something he does not value but is committed to valuing. It is not clear why it would make sense for him to protect the thing he is committed to valuing at the cost of losing something he actually values. Unless it can be shown that this would make sense, it appears that Korsgaard's approach cannot successfully answer the moral-importance question.³⁷

Reductionist strategies attempt to answer the moral-importance question by reducing morality in some way to practical rationality. But if I am correct, there is an importance-of-rationality issue that is analogous to the moral-importance issue. The importance-of-rationality question can be posed by asking whether or why the fact that something is rationally required or rationally permitted is in itself any kind of justification of that thing. This is a theoretical question about the normative status of rational considerations. Unless this question can be answered, reductionist strategies merely postpone the fundamental question.

It might be objected that practical rationality cannot coherently be questioned. Richard Joyce has offered an argument to this effect.³⁸ Joyce thinks it would be incoherent to question practical rationality because, he contends, to ask for a reason of any kind "is to imply the acceptance of practical rationality." He says, "asking any practical question [– any question about what to do or what to care about –] implies an acceptance of practical rationality."³⁹ Moral reasons can be questioned, since one can ask for a practical reason to care about what one has moral reason to do. But Joyce thinks it would be incoherent to question whether one's practical reasons should be decisive in one's decision-making since to question this is to ask for a reason while at the same time "implying that no reason will be adequate."⁴⁰ "Practical

rationality is not available for legitimate questioning,” and, in this sense, the reasons of practical rationality are ‘inescapable’.⁴¹

This argument strikes me as implausible chiefly because, in this context, to question practical rationality is to ask for a theoretical reason to believe something about rationality rather than for a practical reason to do something or to care about something. It is to ask for a reason to think that rational ‘justifications’ or practical ‘reasons’ are actually justifications that can make sense of actions. There is no incoherence in asking for a reason to think this. Moreover, there are disputes about the nature of practical reason. We are working here with the ‘narrow’ idea of practical reasons as reasons it would be irrational to ignore, as I explained before. Because there can be disagreement about the nature of such reasons, when a theory proposes an account of the nature of practical rationality, we can question whether it makes sense to act on practical reasons on this theory’s account. We can question the normative importance of being rational on the given account.

It seems to me, then, that it is not incoherent to question practical rationality any more than it is incoherent to question morality. Not every alleged kind of justification for action is actually a kind of justification. In asking the moral-importance question, a philosopher asks for an account of the nature of morality that explains how it is that moral ‘justifications’ and ‘reasons’ can make sense of actions. In asking the importance-of-rationality question, a philosopher asks for an account of the nature of practical rationality that explains how it is that putative rational ‘justifications’ and practical ‘reasons’ can make sense of actions. This question is analogous to the moral-importance question.

It obviously would be circular to attempt to answer the importance-of-rationality question

in a way that presupposed that putative rational justifications are actually justificatory. One cannot reduce practical reason to practical reason and thereby support the normativity of practical reason. Only a ‘free-standing’ account could hope to be viable, where, by a ‘free-standing’ account, I mean an account that does not rest on a putative reduction of practical reason to some other putatively normatively significant way of making sense of things.⁴²

If such an account is possible, however, it might also be possible to provide a free-standing answer to the moral-importance question – an answer that, likewise, does not rest on a putative reduction of morality to practical reason or to some other putatively normatively significant way of making sense of things. The fundamental issue is not to show that so-called moral ‘justifications’ justify things rationally. The fundamental challenge is to explain how it is that a so-called moral ‘justification’ is actually a kind of justification, a way of showing that something makes sense. A free-standing answer aims to explain this.

The importance-of-rationality question and the moral-importance question ask for a normative grounding of practical reason and morality, respectively. Ideally we would aim to provide the same kind of answer to both questions. Ideally we would aim to provide a single schema that could be applied to different kinds of normative system, with appropriate adjustment to account for the differences between the kinds of system. I have elsewhere proposed such a view, which I have called ‘pluralist-teleology’.⁴³ I will discuss this proposal briefly below, but before doing so, I will consider T.M. Scanlon’s contractualist answer to the moral-importance question.

5. Scanlon’s Contractualist Strategy

Scanlon seems to raise the moral-importance question in “Contractualism and Utilitarianism”,⁴⁴ and, as Pamela Hieronymy has suggested,⁴⁵ he seems to raise the possibility of a free-standing answer to it. He says:⁴⁶

[A]n adequate philosophical theory of morality ... need not, I think, show that the moral truth gives anyone who knows it a reason to act which appeals to that person's present desires or the advancement of his or her interests. I find it entirely intelligible that a moral requirement might correctly apply to a person even though that person had no reason of either of these kinds for complying with it. Whether moral requirements give those to whom they apply reasons of some third kind is a disputed question which I shall set aside. But what an adequate moral philosophy must do ... is to make clearer to us the nature of the reasons that morality does provide, at least to those who are concerned with it. ... It must make it understandable why moral reasons are ones that people can take seriously.

Scanlon here seems to contend that an adequate moral philosophy need not show that moral requirements give us reasons of any nonmoral kind. But he claims that an adequate theory must clarify the nature of moral reasons and make it understandable why we take them seriously. In my terminology, his suggestion is that an adequate theory must answer the moral-importance challenge but it need not attempt to do this by linking morality with practical rationality.

Scanlon also seems to raise the moral-importance question at the beginning of What We Owe to Each Other:⁴⁷

[T]he fact that a certain action would be morally wrong seems to provide a powerful reason not to do it, one that is, at least normally, decisive against any competing considerations. But it is not clear what this reason is. Why should we give considerations of right and wrong,

whatever they are, this kind of priority over our other concerns and over other values?

There are two issues here. One is the question we have been asking: How is it that moral reasons make sense of our actions or justify them? How is it that they have normative import? The second question is, as Hieronymi puts it, “Just what is the big deal?” Why is it that moral justifications have priority? The moral-importance question is the first of these questions.

According to Scanlon’s contractualism, the reason not to act wrongly is that “such an action would be one that I could not justify to others on grounds I could expect them to accept.”⁴⁸ He proposes that “an act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behavior that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement.”⁴⁹ And he adds that “the idea that we have reason to avoid actions that could not be justified [to others] accounts for the distinctive normative force of moral wrongness.”⁵⁰ He claims that his account characterizes wrongness in a way that makes clear what reasons wrongness provides.⁵¹ His account is attractive because it captures the intuitive idea that to act on moral reasons is to act in a way that can be justified to others. It suggests that moral reasons are compelling because of the fact that if we ignore them we ignore the reasonable concerns of other people.

The foundation of Scanlon’s account is the idea of reasonable rejection. His account invokes the idea of reasonableness where the theories I discussed in section 4 invoke the idea of rationality. Scanlon’s theory therefore does not actually provide a free-standing answer to the moral-importance question. Moreover, if I am correct, there is an importance-of-reasonableness question just as there is an importance-of-rationality question. The question can be posed by asking whether or why the fact that something cannot reasonably be rejected is in itself any kind

of justification of that thing. This is a theoretical question about the normative status of considerations about what would be reasonable.

The success of Scanlon's answer to the moral-importance question therefore turns on whether he can answer the importance-of-reasonableness question. Certain kinds of challenge to his theory can be set aside for our purposes here. For example, one might worry that, on Scanlon's account, a person who does not care whether he can justify his actions to others might be entirely rational to pay no attention to moral reasons. This is not yet an objection, however, for Scanlon does not offer his account as an answer to the relational question, and he does not aim to answer the moral-importance question by reducing morality to practical reason or by otherwise invoking the idea of rationality. He intends instead to answer the moral-importance question by invoking the idea of reasonableness. But then Scanlon needs to address the importance-of-reasonableness question.

Consider again Gyges's plot to overthrow the King, to take over the kingdom, and to marry the Queen. I assume that any principles that permitted Gyges to carry out his plot could reasonably be rejected "as a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement" by at least some people, including, most obviously, the king. It follows that Gyges would be wrong to carry out his plot, on Scanlon's account.⁵² Yet because the plot promises him the love and power that he values so highly, Gyges himself would reject any principle that prohibited his plot, if it were proposed as a principle "for the general regulation of behavior," and he arguably would be rational to reject any such principle. The key question, for Scanlon, however, is whether Gyges would be reasonable to reject such principles – reasonable to reject them as principles for the general regulation of behavior that could be accepted in an informed, unforced, general

agreement. If Gyges could reasonably reject all principles that prohibit his plot, it is not clear why it is significant that others would reasonably reject all principles that permit the plot.

One might respond by denying that it would be reasonable for Gyges to reject all principles that prohibit his plot. To have a basis for denying this, it seems to me, one would have to stress the idea that the relevant issue is whether principles could reasonably be rejected if proposed as principles for the general regulation of behavior that could be accepted in an informed, unforced, general agreement. One would have to argue that if others could reasonably reject all principles that permit his plot, Gyges would see that such principles could not be a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement, and so, to secure such an agreement on principles for the general regulation of behavior, he could not reasonably reject all principles that would prohibit his plot. But the situation is arguably symmetrical. If Gyges could reasonably reject all principles that prohibit his plot, then others would see that such principles could not be a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement, and so, to secure such an agreement on principles for the general regulation of behavior, they could not reasonably reject all principles that would permit his plot. That is, if we assume that the others can reasonably reject all principles that permit the plot, we can argue that Gyges cannot reasonably reject all principles that prohibit it, but if we assume that Gyges can reasonably reject all principles that prohibit it, we can argue that the others cannot reasonably reject all principles that permit it.

One might protest that the King's reasons to reject principles that would permit the plot are much more weighty than Gyges's reasons to reject principles that would prohibit the plot. But this depends on details. Perhaps the potential cost on both sides is the same, the loss of a future of power and love. One might protest that Gyges has no right to impose this loss on the

King. But a move of this kind is not open to Scanlon. He cannot invoke moral criteria to assess the reasonableness of rejecting principles. For, as Scanlon notes, if he were to employ moral criteria in this way, he would thereby undermine his attempt to explain the reason-giving force of wrongness.⁵³ The wrongness of Gyges's plot, and the "distinctive normative force" of its wrongness, was to be explained by the fact that reasonable people would reject any principle that permitted it.⁵⁴ But if we invoke moral criteria to assess the reasonableness of a person's rejecting a principle, then her reasonable rejection of the principle would rest on prior moral facts such as facts about wrongness. The wrongness would explain the reasonableness of rejection rather than the reasonableness of rejection explaining the wrongness.

Let us nevertheless assume that reasonable people would reject any principle that permitted Gyges's plot and that no one, not even Gyges, could reasonably reject all principles that prohibit it. Even if so, it is not clear why this cuts any ice. For recall that Gyges plausibly would be rational to reject principles that would prohibit his plot, and he plausibly would be rational to abandon the goal of securing informed unforced agreement on principles for the general regulation of behavior. Given this, even if reasonable people who had this goal would reject any principle that would permit Gyges's plot, it is unclear why this is a reason for him not to carry out his plot. It is difficult to see why principles "for the general regulation of behavior" that could not reasonably be rejected by anyone with the goal of securing "informed, unforced, general agreement" are authoritative or have normative force even if they could be rationally rejected by someone who rationally lacked this goal. In short, the plausibility of Scanlon's answer to the moral-importance question seems to depend on his answer to the importance-of-reasonableness question. And it is not clear how he would answer this question.

If it is true that reasonable people with the goal of reaching agreement would reject principles that allow wrong actions, they presumably would reject them for reasons that run deeper than merely the fact that other people, similarly motivated, would also reject them. It is these reasons that are at issue. These are the reasons that underlie the wrongness of the actions that are prohibited by principles that no appropriately motivated reasonable person could reject. To have an adequate account, we should aim to explain the nature of these reasons.

6. Pluralist-Teleology and the Society-Centered Theory

Scanlon suggests that it might be part of the meaning of the expression “morally wrong” that an action is morally wrong just in case it violates important standards of conduct and so is open to serious criticism.⁵⁵ As I would say, it is part of the meaning of this expression that an action is wrong just in case it is ruled out by a moral standard that has a relevant kind of authority or justification. The nature of this authority is what gives these standards their importance and determines how serious it is to violate such a standard.

The central idea is that if there are any moral truths, including truths about wrong actions, there must be some status that a moral standard can have such that its having that status underwrites the truth of corresponding moral propositions. There must be some property that distinguishes the standard that prohibits torture from standards that have no moral standing, such as the moon-love standard. Let us call this the status of being “authoritative.” The idea is, then, that if torture is wrong and if there is a reason not to torture, then there is a relevantly authoritative standard that precludes torture.

There can be different theories about the relevant kind of authority. The nature of this authority is not encoded in the meaning of the expression “morally wrong.” Hence, a theory’s account of the nature of this authority should not be interpreted as a proposal about the meaning of “morally wrong.” It should be interpreted instead as a proposal about the nature of wrongness and the other moral properties. This is how I would want my own society-centered theory to be understood.⁵⁶ Scanlon says that his aim is to provide an “interpretation of what at least many of us are claiming when we say that an action is morally wrong.”⁵⁷ I would add that the goal, among other things, is to provide an account of the nature of wrongness and other moral properties that reveals why moral ‘reasons’ and ‘justifications’ are ways of making sense of things. The goal, in part, is to answer the moral-importance question.

In section 2, I suggested that there are different kinds of justification and different kinds of reason. This idea has been in the background of my discussion. In section 3, I denied that an arbitrarily selected rule for behavior, such as the standard of moon-love, can provide genuine justifications or reasons for action. This idea has also been in the background of my discussion. It explains the force of the moral-importance and importance-of-rationality questions. For it suggests that there is room to ask, of any putative kind of justification, whether it is genuine or whether it is actually a way of making sense of anything. That is, there is a very general philosophical question in the background of the moral-importance and importance-of-rationality questions, a question about the nature and grounding of normative standards. We should aim to answer this background question.

I have elsewhere proposed a view I call “pluralist-teleology.”⁵⁸ On this view, roughly speaking, the ‘function’ of the various normative systems or standards is to ameliorate

corresponding problems of ‘normative governance’. For example, the function of morality is to ameliorate a problem I call the problem of “sociality.” A normative system has a relevant authority or ‘grounding’ just when it is appropriately well-suited to ameliorating a problem of normative governance. Let me briefly explain.⁵⁹

J.L. Mackie suggested that humans face a “problem” because of “certain contingent features of the human condition,” and that morality is a “device” that is needed to solve the problem.⁶⁰ In particular, he said, “limited resources and limited sympathies together generate both competition leading to conflict and an absence of what would be mutually beneficial cooperation.”⁶¹ This is the problem of sociality. The problem is that, in order to achieve what we value, within a wide range of things we might value, we need to live together in societies, and to live peacefully, cooperatively and productively. Yet because there are limited resources and because we have limited sympathy and conflicting interests, there is always the potential for conflict, and because we have different talents, there is a need for us to coordinate our efforts in order to achieve what we value. In order to address this problem, a society plausibly needs to be characterized by a social moral code – where a social moral code is a system of shared standards that is generally subscribed to, socially enforced, and culturally transmitted, and that calls for pro-social behaviors of various kinds. The currency of a suitable social moral code would facilitate coordination and cooperation and help us deal peacefully and productively with conflicts of interest. It would secure motivation for the needed cooperation and peaceful and productive behavior among society’s members. Other things being equal, a society with such a code would do better than it otherwise would at securing cooperation among its members and at avoiding conflict. Because of this, other things being equal, the members of such a society

would be more successful at achieving what they value than would otherwise be the case. That is, the currency of a suitable social moral code would enable us better to cope with the problem of sociality than would otherwise be the case. To summarize these ideas, I say that the ‘function’ of morality is to ameliorate the problem of sociality.⁶²

We can characterize problems of normative governance as follows: There are general facts about the circumstances of human life and about our nature that, other things being equal, reduce or interfere with our ability to achieve what we value, no matter what we value, within a wide range of things we might value. A problem of normative governance is a problem of overcoming or ameliorating such a limitation in our ability to achieve what we value where two further conditions are met. First, our ability to cope with the problem is affected by our decisions and choices, and second, the problem is better coped with when people are governed by an appropriate system of norms that they endorse than otherwise would be the case.

My suggestion, then, is that morality answers to the problem of sociality; the ‘function’ of morality is to ameliorate this problem. Other normative systems with a suitable grounding are similarly suited to ameliorating other problems of normative governance. The function of these other normative systems is to enable us to cope with these problems. For example, as I have suggested elsewhere, the standard of practical rationality has the function of ameliorating a problem of autonomy.⁶³ The moral-importance and the importance-of-rationality questions obviously have different answers, according to pluralist-teleology, but the theory says that these answers are unified by the fact that, in each case, the answer refers to a problem of normative governance. Morality has the function of ameliorating one problem and practical rationality has the function of ameliorating another problem.

Clearly, however, there are differences among imaginable systems of standards with respect to how well their serving as a social moral code would deal with the problem of sociality. According to pluralist-teleology, roughly speaking, the system of standards the currency of which in a society would best ameliorate the problem of sociality is the moral code that is relevantly authoritative. Call this the “code of sociality.” Here, for simplicity, I ignore the possibility that different codes might work equally well. If we make this simplification, and a few others, the theory says that torture is morally wrong if and only if the system of standards the currency of which in society would best ameliorate the problem of sociality contains or implies a prohibition on torture.

Elsewhere I proposed the society-centered theory as an account of the authority of moral standards. This theory says, roughly, that the moral code that would best serve the basic needs of society is the code that is relevantly authoritative.⁶⁴ Let me stipulate that the “ideal moral code” for a society is the system of norms the currency of which in the society would enable the society better to serve its basic needs than would the currency of any other system of norms and better than would be the case if no system of norms had currency in the society. The ideal code is authoritative in that, the theory says (ignoring certain complications), a basic moral proposition is true just in case this code includes or entails a relevantly corresponding standard. For example, torture is wrong just in case the ideal code includes or entails a prohibition on torture. Wrongness is therefore relational, according to the theory. The term “wrong” expresses a relation, wrongness in relation to society S, which is, roughly, the property of being prohibited by the ideal moral code for S, where the context fixes which specific society is at issue.

This is only a sketch of the view.⁶⁵ When fully developed, it needs to allow for ties

between distinct moral codes, the currency of which would serve a society's needs equally well. It needs to take into account the fact that when the ideal code is not a society's actual social moral code, it might be counter-productive to act on it. The view also needs to be accompanied by an account of what societies are, by an account of which society counts as the 'relevant' society in a given context, and by an account of societal needs. A society has needs for physical integrity, cooperative integrity, internal social harmony, and peaceful and cooperative relationships with neighboring societies, but these ideas should be placed in a theoretical framework. The theory needs to be defended against familiar objections to moral relativism. Issues and complications of these kinds are beyond the scope of this paper. I have addressed them elsewhere.⁶⁶

Viewed from the perspective of pluralist-teleology, the society-centered theory is a proposal about how best to address the problem of sociality. I am therefore committed to conjecturing, in effect, that the society-centered theory captures the conditions a moral code would meet just in case its currency in society would best ameliorate the problem of sociality.⁶⁷ In effect, the society-centered theory proposes that the ideal moral code for a society and its code of sociality are one and the same. For present purposes I will assume that this is so. As Mackie said, "limited resources and limited sympathies together generate both competition leading to conflict and an absence of what would be mutually beneficial cooperation."⁶⁸ Limited resources and limited sympathies tend to undermine the ability of societies to meet their needs. It is plausible, then, that a solution to the problem of sociality would tend to enable societies to meet these needs. In any case, if pluralist-teleology is to be the guiding idea, society-centered theory needs to be assessed with this in mind.

The central question is whether the approach I have sketched here offers an adequate response to the moral-importance question. It seems to me that it might. First, pluralist-teleology offers a general account of normative judgment. It aims to explain what making sense of something consists in. It claims basically that making sense of something consists in showing that the thing meets conditions specified by a normative system that answers to a problem of normative governance. In the case of morality, the theory offers an explanation of how it is that morality is a source of normative justifications of actions and choices. It says that our moral obligations are the requirements of the code the currency of which would best ameliorate the problem of sociality. This explains the significance of the reasons provided us by our moral obligations. It explains why the fact that certain actions are morally required can make sense of these actions. It explains how it is that moral justifications and moral reasons can make sense of things.

Second, and more intuitively, the fact that morality has the function of ameliorating the problem of sociality explains the importance of morality to us. Given that morality has the function of ameliorating the problem of sociality, and given that the code of sociality would best fulfill this function, a society would have reason to want its code of sociality to serve as its social moral code and we have practical reason to want the social moral code of our society to be its code of sociality. And third, given the (intuitive) moral value of the goods that a well-functioning society makes possible, it makes moral sense (intuitively) to comply with the requirements of the code of sociality.

Prichard argued that we cannot show there is a moral obligation to do some action by showing that the action will lead to something good.⁶⁹ One might think that the society-centered

theory is subject to basically this objection, an objection that Stephen Darwall has called the “wrong kind of reason” objection.⁷⁰ We demand that people comply with their moral obligations, Darwall points out, and we take ourselves to be warranted in holding each other accountable for complying with moral standards.⁷¹ We hold moral obligations to be non-optional in at least this sense.⁷² Even if morality has the function of ameliorating the problem of sociality, one might think this cannot account for the non-optional character of obligations. Hence, it may seem, the society-centered theory is incapable of explaining the nature of our moral obligations.

In response, I say that the theory does account for the fact that members of the moral community have the standing, and are warranted, to demand that people comply with their moral obligations. It accounts for this in the same way that it accounts for the content of our moral obligations. I think the theory most likely supports a familiar deontological moral view and makes room for various familiar moral statuses of actions and persons.⁷³ Suppose, then, that the ideal code contains a prohibition on torture. In this case the code presumably would also contain a norm that gives members of the moral community standing to demand that no one engage in torture. If this is part of what it is for moral obligations to be non-optional, it appears that the theory can account for it.

Finally, one might object that pluralist-teleology together with the society-centered theory show at best that it makes sense for society to have a moral code and for us to want our society to be characterized by its ideal moral code. It does not show that it makes sense for us actually to comply with the ideal code. But I do not claim that the account addresses the “Why be moral?” question in all of its readings. It does not address the relational question. It does not

show that we are rational to be moral.⁷⁴ It does not provide a reason to be moral that goes beyond the moral reasons that we recognized from the start. It rather explains the nature of morality in a way that makes it transparent what is at stake and that explains what kind of failure is involved in immorality. It explains morality as a response to the problem of sociality, and this, I think, explains the nature of the reasons morality provides. It is in light of these reasons that it makes sense for us to do the things that are morally required.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Sam Black, Josh Gert, Evan Tiffany, and Jon Tresan for helpful and challenging comments on an early draft of this paper.
2. I thank Josh Gert for helpful discussion of this example.
3. H.A. Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” in Moral Obligation: Essays and Lectures (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 1-17 (at 1). This essay was first published in Mind 21 (1912), 21-37.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 1-2.
6. Ibid., 1.
7. Ibid., 13-14.
8. Ibid., 16.
9. Ibid., 8.
10. Ibid., 13-14.
11. Ibid., 16.
12. Ibid., 9.
13. Ibid., 7-9.
14. Ibid., 2-7.
15. Ibid., 1.
16. Ibid., 1-2.
17. Ibid., 16.

18. Ibid., 1.
19. I thank Sam Black, Josh Gert and Evan Tiffany for pressing me to clarify this usage.
20. There is also an explanatory use of “makes sense,” as in the claim that evolutionary biology can “make sense” of biological diversity. I will avoid this usage. All actions can perhaps be explained, at least in principle, but many actions do not make sense (in the sense of the expression that interests me) since people sometimes act without a suitable and sufficient justification.
21. One might of course stipulate that this is how one will use the expression “makes sense.” Obviously I have no objection to this stipulation, but I use the expression differently, as I explain in the text. Allan Gibbard uses the expression as equivalent to “rational” in one use of the latter term. See Gibbard, Wise Choices, Apt Feelings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 37.
22. David Copp, “The Ring of Gyges: Overridingness and the Unity of Reason,” in David Copp, Morality in a Natural World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 284-308; also David Copp, “Normativity, Deliberation, and Queerness,” in Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin, eds., A World without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Error Theory (Berlin: Springer, 2009).
23. See Copp, “Normativity, Deliberation, and Queerness.”
24. Ibid.
25. Susan Wolfe, “Moral Saints.” Journal of Philosophy 79 (1982), 419-439. See also Thomas Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value,” in Mortal Problems (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 128-141.
26. See Gregory Kavka, “The Reconciliation Project,” in David Copp and David

- Zimmerman, eds., Morality, Reason, and Truth (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984), 297-319. In some discussions of morality and self-interest, the background assumption might be that, rationality aside, people are generally motivated by self-interest. I am not here concerned with questions about motivation.
27. David Copp, "The Normativity of Self-Grounded Reason," in Copp, Morality in a Natural World (2007), 309-353.
 28. Michael Smith, "In Defense of The Moral Problem," *Ethics* 108 (1997), 91.
 29. Copp, "The Normativity of Self-Grounded Reason"; see also Copp, "The Ring of Gyges: Overridingness and the Unity of Reason."
 30. Both of the questions may be motivated by a desire to understand morality and moral reasons rather than by any indecision about how to act or how to live.
 31. David Gauthier, Morals by Agreement (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
 32. I discussed Gauthier's approach in David Copp, "Contractarianism and Moral Skepticism," in Peter Vallentyne, ed., Contractarianism and Rational Choice: Essays on Gauthier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 196-228, and in David Copp, Morality, Normativity, and Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). See Anita Superson, The Moral Skeptic (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
 33. Michael Smith, The Moral Problem (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
 34. See Michael Smith, Ethics and the A Priori (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
 35. I discussed Smith's view in David Copp, "Belief, Reason, and Motivation: Michael Smith's The Moral Problem," *Ethics* 108 (1997) 33-54 and in David Copp, "Review of Michael Smith, Ethics and the A Priori: Selected Essays on Moral Psychology and Meta-

- Ethics,” Mind 115 (2006), 476-481.
36. Christine Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity, ed. Onora O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
37. I discuss Korsgaard’s argument in David Copp, “Moral Naturalism and Three Grades of Normativity,” in Copp, Morality in a Natural World, 249-283. And in David Copp, “Korsgaard on Rationality, Identity, and the Grounds of Normativity,” in Rationality, Realism, Revision, ed. Julian Nida-Rumelin (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 572-581.
38. Richard Joyce, The Myth of Morality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001).
39. Ibid., 50.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 51.
42. I proposed a free-standing account in Copp, “The Normativity of Self-Grounded Reason.”
43. David Copp, “Toward a Pluralist and Teleological Theory of Normativity,” Philosophical Issues 19 (2009), 21-37.
44. T. M. Scanlon, “Contractualism and Utilitarianism,” in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, eds., Utilitarianism and Beyond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 103-128.
45. Pamela Hieronymi, “The Appeal of Contractualism: A(nother) Restatement.” An unpublished paper presented to the 2008 Dubrovnik Conference in Moral Philosophy.
46. Scanlon, “Contractualism and Utilitarianism,” 127.
47. T. M. Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1.

48. Ibid., 4.
49. Ibid., 153. Scanlon limits the scope of his account to our duties to other people (6).
50. Ibid., 5.
51. Ibid., 11.
52. It follows, that is, that any set of principles (of the right kind) that no one could reasonably reject (for the right purpose) disallows the plot. This entails, on Scanlon's account as he formulates it, that the plot is impermissible. It does not entail that there is a set of principles (of the right kind) that no one could reasonably reject (for the right purpose). For it simply means, on the standard analysis, that if there is a set of principles (of the right kind) that no one could reasonably reject (for the right purpose), that set of principles disallows the plot. This leaves open the possibility that there is no such set of principles. It leaves open the possibility that, say, Gyges could reasonably reject any set of principles that would disallow the plot. I discuss this issue in the text.
53. Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other, 213-214.
54. Ibid., 5
55. Ibid., 10.
56. Copp, Morality, Normativity, and Society, and David Copp, Morality in a Natural World.
57. Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other, 9 (emphasis added).
58. Copp, "Toward a Pluralist and Teleological Theory of Normativity."
59. For more detail, see Copp, "Toward a Pluralist and Teleological Theory of Normativity."
60. J. L. Mackie, Morality: Inventing Right and Wrong (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1977), 121.
61. Ibid., 111.

62. For more detailed development of this idea, see Copp, “Toward a Pluralist and Teleological Theory of Normativity.”
63. Copp, “The Normativity of Self-Grounded Reason”; and Copp, “Toward a Pluralist and Teleological Theory of Normativity.”
64. I am here focusing on what I call the “basic” society-centered theory. See Copp, Morality in a Natural World, 18-21. The theory I presented originally in 1995 in Morality, Normativity, and Society was not free-standing in the sense I am exploring here. I discussed the differences between the original and the basic theories in Copp, Morality in a Natural World.
65. For some amendments, see David Copp, Morality, Normativity, and Society, 198-200; David Copp, “Moral Knowledge in Society-Centered Moral Theory,” in Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 257-58. See also the introduction to Copp, Morality in a Natural World.
66. Copp, Morality, Normativity, and Society; Copp “Moral Knowledge in Society-Centered Moral Theory”; Copp, Morality in a Natural World, 16-26.
67. I mentioned a ‘functionalist’ interpretation of society-centered theory in Copp, Morality, Normativity, and Society, 110-112.
68. Mackie, Morality: Inventing Right and Wrong, 111.
69. Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” 3.
70. Stephen Darwall, The Second Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 15-17.
71. Ibid., 17.

72. Ibid., 36.
73. Copp, Morality, Normativity, and Society, 201-209.
74. But see Copp, “Normativity, Deliberation, and Queerness.”