Explaining Deontic Status by Good Reasoning

Ulf Hlobil[1]

[1]Department of Philosophy, Concordia University, 1455 De Maisonneuve Blvd. W., Montreal, H3G 1M8, QC, Canada.

Contributing authors: ulf.hlobil@concordia.ca;

Abstract

This paper offers an account of deontic normativity in terms of attributive goodness. An action is permissible for S in C just in case there is a good practical inference available to S in C that results in S performing (or intending to perform) the action. The standards of goodness for practical inferences are determined by what is a good or bad exercise of the human capacity of practical reason, which is an attributive (and not a deontic) assessment.

Keywords: deontic status, attributive normativity, reasoning, virtue ethics, permission, obligation

1 Introduction

You ought to treat people with respect, and you are permitted to break up with your partner. These are deontic normative facts. Here I provide an account of (some) deontic facts in terms of attributive goodness. Facts regarding attributive goodness, as I use the term, are facts about what is a good or bad instance of its kind. I will argue that deontic facts regarding actions that we can intend to do are constituted by facts about good practical reasoning. You are permitted to do an action just in case there is a good piece of practical reasoning available to you that would result in you doing (or intending to do) that action. And a piece of practical reasoning is good iff it could issue from a non-defective capacity of practical reason under favorable circumstances.[1]

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[1]In many respects, this paper is a companion piece to joint work that I did with Katharina Nieswandt (see Hlobil & Nieswandt, 2019; Nieswandt & Hlobil, 2018, 2019). I hope that the current paper elucidates aspects of these other papers that some have found difficult to understand. Conversely, reading these other papers, while not at all necessary, may be helpful for a fuller understanding of my motivations and goals in this paper.

The paper is organized thus: Section 2 sets the stage. Section 3 presents my account of deontic normativity. In Section 4, I consider objections. Section 5 concludes.

2 Background

In this section, I first distinguish three kinds of normative fact. Next, I use this distinction to explain my goal. Then I forestall some misunderstandings. Finally, I explain the notion of practical inference that is crucial for the account I present in the next section.

2.1 Deontic, Predicative, and Attributive Normative Facts

Philosophers often distinguish between prescriptive and evaluative norms (McHugh, 2012, 9-10). I divide the latter kind of norms into two sub-classes: "predicative goodness" norms and "attributive goodness" norms.[2] It is easier to talk about normative facts than norms.[3] Thus, I distinguish three kinds of normative facts.

Deontic: Facts about what someone ought or ought not to do, is permitted or forbidden to do, or has (sufficient or decisive) reason to do.[4]
Predicative: Facts about what is valuable or good simpliciter, and what is dis-valuable or bad simpliciter.
Attributive: Facts about something being a defective vs non-defective K, a healthy vs sick K, a flourishing vs withering K, etc., where "K" is a kind-term.

Some comments on these three kinds of facts are in order. (*ad* Deontic) The deontic facts that are my target always concern (sometimes covertly) actions that the agent can perform or refrain from performing intentionally, or can at least intend to perform. My account might extend to other kinds of normative facts, in particular to acts that can be the result of reasoning (such as beliefs). For the purposes of this paper, however, I restrict my attention to deontic facts regarding intentional or intended actions. (*ad* Predicative) Facts regarding predicative goodness are the sort of facts which Moore (1903) believed to be the proper topic of ethics and to consist, in the simplest case, in an object or state of affairs possessing or failing to possess the—according to Moore undefinable—property of goodness. (*ad* Attributive) Finally, facts regarding attributive goodness are, for my purposes, restricted to what Thomson calls "goodness-fixing kinds," i.e., kinds K "such that what being a K *is* itself sets the standards that a K has to meet if it is to be good *qua* K" (Thomson, 2008, 21).

To illustrate, when I say "You ought not to be angry," I might aim to convey different contents[5]: (i) I might aim to convey the deontic content that you ought to see to it that you are no longer angry. (ii) Or I might aim to convey the predicatively

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[2]I am here setting aside fittingness norms, norms regarding what is good for someone or something, and norms regarding what is good for doing something. I hope that these norms can ultimately be explained in terms of the norms that I am discussing here; however, that is controversial (see Berker, 2022; Howard, 2019; McHugh & Way, 2016, 2022; Thomson, 1996). I will return to fittingness below.

[3]My position is realist about normativity, but for the distinctions here the anti-realist could understand my fact-talk in a minimalist way.

[4]Berker (2022) claims that reason-related normative facts do not form a unified category. However, the kind of reason-related normative facts that will matter for my project are facts about having sufficient and decisive reason to do something, which Berker agrees are deontic facts.

[5]I do not claim that the sentence is ambiguous; it is just that a speaker can use it to do different things.

normative content that the state of affairs of you being angry is bad or disvaluable simpliciter. (iii) Or I might aim to convey the attributively normative content that your anger manifests a defect—perhaps of your capacity to feel appropriate emotions.

2.2 The Explanatory Project

Many have wondered whether some of these three kinds of normative facts can be explained, metaphysically, in terms of others. Moore (1903) and most consequentialists, e.g., think that deontic facts can be explained by predicative goodness. Roughly, they think that S ought to do ϕ iff the results of S doing ϕ are more valuable than the results of all other actions that are available to S. Others aim to explain predicative goodness in terms of deontic facts. Some suggest, e.g., that for a state to be intrinsically good is for it to be such that the "contemplation of it requires that one favor" it (Zimmerman 2001, 10; see also Ewing 1947, 149). Finally, some hold that deontic facts are explained by attributive goodness (Foot, 2001; Thomson, 1997, 2008). My aim here is to articulate and defend a novel version of this latter approach. My thesis is that deontic facts are constituted by facts regarding the attributive goodness of reasoning.

My view is similar, in various respects, to those of Thomson (2008), Foot (2001), Gregory (2014; 2016), McHugh and Way (2022), and Müller (2004). Ignoring some complex exegetical issues, features that are distinctive of the account below are: (a) It makes evaluations of the capacity of practical reason central to the explanation of deontic facts. (b) It takes this capacity to be a goodness-fixing kind that is integral to human nature.

What my view shares with the views of the philosophers just mentioned is that deontic facts are explained by facts regarding the attributive goodness of something that is closely related to practical reason, such as reasons, bases for actions, choices, or the like. Thus, they explain deontic normativity in terms of goodness. However, this explanation differs from the consequentialist explanation, and it lends no support to consequentialism. My metanormative view is compatible with a wide variety of substantive views about what we ought to do. For, these substantive consequences depend on which particular practical inferences are good, and my view is noncommittal on that point.

2.3 Two Clarifications

Before moving on, I want to clarify two points in order to forestall misunderstandings: First, there is a familiar distinction between "generic" or "merely formal" normativity and "genuine" or "authoritative" normativity (McPherson & Plunkett, 2024; Wodak, 2019a). For present purposes, we can think of authoritatively normative facts as facts that determine what the correct outcome of deliberation about what to do can

be.[6] I set aside merely formal deontic normativity and focus on authoritative deontic normativity.

Second, the view that I am advocating is similar to (some versions of) neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics (Foot, 2001). These views are sometimes criticized on the basis that they (allegedly)[7] hold that claims of the form "S ought to ϕ" can be derived from claims of the form "S is a defective K, unless S ϕs" or "If S does not ϕ, then S is not living up to her human life-form." Such a derivation is impossible because claims of the form "x is a defective K and x is how it ought to be" are perfectly coherent, as in "This mosquito is defective because it cannot suck blood, and this is how it ought to be." So, it is at best unclear why the fact that you are a defective human being unless you act in a certain way should imply that you ought to act that way. This worry is sometimes expressed by saying that attributive normativity is not authoritative, or, as Enoch (2017, 33) puts it for the case of morality: "Moral evaluation is not just the evaluation of something-qua-something [...], but of how good it is, period."

In order to forestall misunderstandings, I want to point out that I do not rely on a derivation of "S ought to ϕ" from "If S does not ϕ, then S is not living up to her human life-form" or the like. Rather, on my view, what you are permitted to do is determined by what you have sufficient reason to do, which is in turn determined by which pieces of practical reasoning are good *qua* practical reasoning. I do not claim that there is any general connection between attributive goodness and authoritative deontic normativity. Rather, I hold that there is a particular class of cases in which such a connection holds and that the attributive goodness of practical reasoning belongs to this class. Other cases of attributive goodness that seem to have authoritative normative weight include those expressed by "good person," "good friend," "good motive," and the like.[8]

2.4 Practical Inference

Below I will use the notion of practical inference.[9] Hence, I want to introduce this notion here.

A practical inference is a piece of practical reasoning (Anscombe, 2000, 2005; Broome, 2013; Dancy, 2018).[10] If someone makes a practical inference, the result is that she acts (or refrains from acting) or intends to act in a certain way. The premises

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[6] I am here in broad agreement with McPherson's (2018) idea that normatively authoritative facts are conceptually tied to the constitutive standards of non-arbitrary selection. However, I understand this kind of selection as a case of practical inference. McPherson sometimes puts his view by saying that the authoritative "ought" settles deliberation. This can be understood in a way that I reject; for I think that the practical inference from "I ought to ϕ" to doing ϕ can fail to be good.

[7] Together with Katharina Nieswandt, I have argued against this interpretation elsewhere (Hlobil & Nieswandt, 2019). Nothing below hangs on whether we are right that this common interpretation is a mis-interpretation.

[8] I think that in all of these cases, their connection to deontic normativity can ultimately be explained by their connection to the attributive goodness of practical reasoning. But this idea need not detain us here.

[9] I have presented an account of inference, which is meant to apply to practical as well as to theoretical inference, in (Hlobil, 2014, 2015, 2019a, 2019b). This account underwrites a version of Boghossian's (2014) Taking Condition, but in a way that is neither a doxastic nor an intuitional construal of takings. The details of this account do not matter here.

[10] I disagree on details of each of the cited accounts. Unlike Anscombe (2005, §35), I think that there are practical inferences in which all premises state backward-looking motives, e.g.: "He killed my brother; so, I shall kill him." Unlike Dancy, I think that practical inference is not best understood as "a process in which we try to work out how to respond to the situation which confronts us" (Dancy, 2018, 97). For working something out takes time, while individual steps of inferences cannot be interrupted. Unlike Broome (2013),

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of her practical inference are the reasons (collectively) for which she acts or intends to act. One can act intentionally for reasons without having performed a practical inference, just as one can believe for reasons without theoretical inference. There are good and bad practical inferences. Good inferences need not be good in any formal or logical sense, and, *pace* Anscombe (2000, §35), not all practical inferences involve a "calculation what to do." According to some views, the attitude towards at least one premise of a practical inference must be a desire-like attitude, and I call such premises "conative premises." According to other views, in some practical inferences all the attitudes towards premises are belief-like attitudes, and I call such premises "cognitive premises." I stay neutral on this controversial issue.

The premises to which we have belief-like attitudes are propositions.[11] The premises to which we have desire-like attitudes may be propositions or the contents of infinitival clauses.[12] The same holds for the conclusion, as I take the content of an intentional action to be the content of the intention in action that makes the action intentional (McDowell, 2010).[13]

In good practical inferences, the premises are collectively good normative reasons for the resulting (or intended) action.[14] Good practical reasoning is best conceived as a four-place relation: in context C, the inference from premises Γ, against the background attitudes Δ, to conclusion A may be good or bad. By "context" I mean the agent's situation, and by "background" I mean the agent's perspective on her situation. Philosophers may disagree about what the context includes (all facts about the situation or only the facts that hold in the agent's proximity at the time of action) and whether the background includes all of the agents attitudes (or perhaps only her beliefs).

I distinguish between the context and the background because some may hold that whether a practical inference is good does not supervene on facts about the agent's perspective but only on this perspective together with the actual situation. Here is a potential example:

Inf-1   Given a context (C) with the practice of promising, against background beliefs (Δ) that do not include any consideration that justifies me breaking my promise to NN, the inference from the belief (Γ) that I told NN that I will help NN to move, to the action (A) (or intention) of helping NN to move is a good inference. If the context is changed to a society without a practice of

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I do not think that practical inferences that conclude in intentions are primary, unless we include what Anscombe calls an "intention in action." Nothing in this paper hangs on such details.

[11] If Frege is right that facts are true propositions, some of these premises may also be facts.

[12] The contents of infinitival clauses may or may not be propositions (with unpronounced subject terms).

[13] There is a disagreement about what the bearers of deontic properties are. Geach (1982) has argued that "ought" should not be understood as applying to propositions because it can happen, e.g., that NN ought to invite MM to dinner while it is not the case that MM ought to be invited to dinner by NN, where the embedded proposition would be the same. If the conclusions of practical inferences are intentions (in action), then my view is compatible with the bearers of deontic properties being the referents of infinitival clauses (which may be act-types, and not propositions).

[14] My formulation here disagrees with the widespread view that normative reasons are always facts. For the premises of a good practical inference might be false. In the terminology of Section 3.2 below, it is common to call only good fact-relative reasons normative reasons. My formulation here can be read to include good belief-relative and good evidence-relative reasons in the class of normative reasons. I think this way of speaking has advantages, but the issue strikes me as mostly terminological.

promising and the background includes that I got free tickets for a concert, the practical inference may no longer be good.

Philosophers with sympathies for some versions of subjectivism about deontic normativity might think that the actual practice of promising makes no difference to the goodness of the practical inference; all that matters is whether the agent believes (or is justified in believing) that such a practice exists. By including the context and the background in our schema, we can stay neutral on this issue by allowing for the possibility that the context may turn out to be redundant.

I distinguish the background from the premises because adding beliefs to the background can defeat a practical inference; and the same holds for moving beliefs from the background to the premises. The following is a potential example:

Inf-2   Given a context (C) in which taking injured people to hospitals is likely to improve their health, against background beliefs (Δ) that include that there is a hospital nearby and that no one else is in the process of taking NN to the nearby hospital, the inference from the belief (Γ) that NN is injured, to the action (A) (or intention) of taking NN to the nearby hospital is a good inference. If we add to the background the belief that the nearby hospital has been evacuated because of a natural catastrophe, the inference is no longer good. And if we move the belief that my neighbors will admire me for rescuing NN from the background into the premises of my inference, this turns the inference into a bad one (for then I no longer act for good reasons but for the bad reason of vanity).

Whether my opinions about Inf-1 and Inf-2 are correct is not crucial here. I merely want to illustrate how the goodness of a practical inference can vary with different factors.

Note that the set of premises (Γ) can be the empty set, according to my view. And there are good practical inferences whose set of premises is the empty set, analogously to how logical theorems can be inferred from the empty set of premises. If I have, e.g., no obligation to do anything else, it might be a good practical inference for me to infer from no premises to the action (or intention) to count the numbers of grains of sand on a beach. As Anscombe (2000, §17) notes, the question *Why?* "is not refused application because the answer to it says that there is no reason." Since such answers state the agent's reasons and what is expressed in the answer "for no particular reason" sometimes suffices to act for sufficient reasons, no reasons are sometimes sufficient reasons. And since, according to the reasoning-view of reasons that I endorse below, reasons are the considerations that can figure as premises in reasoning, a harmless extension of the idea of practical inference yields the result that we can sometimes infer practically from no premises to a conclusion. And that might be a good inference.

Practical inferences are manifestations of the capacity of practical reason. If the capacity of practical reason of a given individual includes a disposition to reason badly, the individual's capacity of practical reason is defective, or else extraneous factors interfere with the exercise of her capacity. The kind of extraneous factors that I have in mind are conditions that interfere with the agent's normal functioning, such as fatigue or temporary confusion or distractions that make it impossible for the agent to think

clearly and the like. Circumstances in which no such extraneous factors interfere I will call "favorable circumstances." Moreover, I say that a practical inference is available to an agent in a context C if the agent has the requisite premise-attitudes and no extraneous factors stand in the way of her making the inference, though we will see below that we can vary this notion of availability in interesting ways.

With all this background in place, we can now move on to my account of deontic normativity in terms of attributive normativity.

3 Explaining Deontic Facts

In this section, I articulate my explanation of deontic facts in terms of attributive goodness. I start by introducing my two core ideas, which I then unpack by explaining how the account handles different kinds of deontic facts. Next, I motivate my two core ideas by providing further clarifications and drawing connections to related views. Finally, I consider two alternatives to the second of these core ideas.

3.1 The Basic Idea

I start with a bare-bones version of my account of permissions. I will assume that "ought" (obligations) and "may" (permissions) are duals, i.e., you are obligated to ϕ iff it is not the case that you are permitted not to ϕ.[15] Obligations are explained by their dual permissions. For example, as will become clearer below, it is impermissible for me to steal my colleagues phone because there is no good practical inference which could result in me stealing it. I ought to be honest with my partner because there is no good practical inference that results in me lying. And it is not the case that I ought to dance on my desk, although doing so might be permissible, because there are good practical inferences that do not result in such dancing, although perhaps some good practical inferences do. So, by explaining permissibility in terms of good practical inference, we can also explain obligations not to act, obligations to act, and the absence of obligations.

With the duality of permissions and obligations in mind, let us now focus on permissions. My account of permissions is the combination of the following two ideas.

PERMISSION What we are permitted to do is determined by the standards of good practical reasoning.

STANDARDS The standards of good reasoning that apply to us are determined by what constitutes defect and excellence in our capacity of practical reason.

The relation denoted by "determines" is transitive and such that if x determines y, then we can give a metaphysical (here: constitutive) explanation of y in terms of x. Hence, PERMISSION and STANDARDS imply that we can give a metaphysical explanation of deontic facts in terms of facts about what constitutes defect and excellence in our capacity of practical reason. In the rest of this paper, I spell out this idea. Let me restate the argument more rigorously:

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[15]The English "must" and "ought" differ in meaning, and some hold that taking this into account is important, e.g., to make room for supererogatory acts (Mares & McNamara, 1997; Snedegar, 2021). For simplicity, I am ignoring such complications here, hoping to take them into account in the future.

(P1) S is permitted to ϕ in C iff, in C, there is a good practical inference, PI, available to S and a result of S making PI is that S ϕs or intends to ϕ.

(P2) A practical inference, PI, is good, in C, iff having (under favorable circumstances)[16] the disposition to make PI in C is compatible with possessing a non-defective capacity of practical reason.

(Cl) Therefore, S is permitted to ϕ in C iff there is a practical inference, PI, available to S in C such that a result of S making PI is that S ϕs or intends to ϕ and having (under favorable circumstances) the disposition to make PI in C is compatible with possessing a non-defective capacity of practical reason.

Here (P1) spells out PERMISSION, and (P2) spells out STANDARDS. The conclusion (Cl) captures the core of my account of deontic normativity. The explanatory directions are not explicit in this argument but they are clear in PERMISSION and STANDARDS. On my account, facts about what we are permitted to do are metaphysically explained by which practical inferences are good in which circumstances, and this is in turn metaphysically explained by facts about what constitutes a defect in our capacity of practical reason.

According to the dual account of obligation, you are obliged to ϕ in C iff, in C, there isn't any good practical inference available to you that would fail to result in you ϕ-ing or intending to ϕ.[17] And this is the case if any disposition to make a practical inference in C that doesn't result in you ϕ-ing or intending to ϕ (under favorable circumstances) would be incompatible with your capacity of practical reason being non-defective.

Note that my theory of deontic facts really includes a whole family of such theories because we can understand the notion of an "available" inference in different ways. While this may seem like a dangerous ambiguity, it is really a virtue of my theory that it is parametric over "available" in this way. That is the topic of the next subsection.

3.2 Different Kinds of Permission and Obligation

I have set aside merely formal deontic facts. There are, however, further dimensions along which deontic facts vary in kind. Hence, the question arises how my view can explain such variations. The answer that I give in this subsection is that the notion of availability of an inference can be spelled out in different ways, corresponding to different kinds of deontic facts.

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[16]In (Nieswandt & Hlobil, 2018), we explain in more detail how the qualification that the circumstances must be favorable should be understood. Our explanation there turns on the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* readings of counterfactuals. I do not spell out these details here, and I refer the reader to (Nieswandt & Hlobil, 2018).

[17]An opponent might worry that this conflicts with the idea that ought implies can. For, I leave open the possibility that practical inferences conclude in intentions, and one can intend to do something that one cannot do, at least if one does not know that one cannot do it. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.) My answer is that, in the dictum that "ought" implies "can", abilities must be understood as relative to facts, or evidence, or beliefs, in the same way in which I hold that deontic facts are relative to facts, or evidence, or beliefs, as I will explain below. You are able to do something relative to your beliefs or evidence or the facts iff you doing the action is compatible with what you believe or your evidence or the facts. On my view, a practical inference to an action that you cannot fact-relatively do is not fact-relatively available to you, and similarly for the notions relativized to beliefs and evidence. So, my view does not violate the dictum that "ought" implies "can." It merely implies that someone can be evidence- or believe-relatively obliged to do something while being fact-relatively unable to do it.

In a famous case due to Williams (1979), an agent beliefs that there is gin in her glass, when in fact it is petrol. Many philosophers want to say that while the agent has no objective reason to drink the liquid in her glass, she may have a subjective reason to do so (Wodak, 2019b). Indeed, we can follow Fogal and Worsnip (2021) and distinguish reasons even more finely by whether we mean the reasons that an agent has relative to the facts, or relative to her evidence, or relative to her beliefs. For example, if our agent has evidence that her glass contains petrol but nevertheless fails to believe that it contains petrol, then she may have a fact-relative and a evidence-relative reason not to drink the content of her glass while she may nevertheless also have a belief-relative reason to drink it.

We can distinguish obligations in the same way. To see this, suppose that you are a doctor treating a patient who is clearly suffering from a bacterial infection, which you know to be curable by penicillin. Unbeknownst to you, the patient is allergic to penicillin. In this case, you have an obligation to give your patient penicillin because you are obliged to help your patient. However, this obligation is only belief-relative and not fact-relative because giving the penicillin will not in fact help the patient. If you have evidence that your patient is allergic to penicillin, then you also have an evidence-relative obligation to withhold the penicillin. If this evidence is misleading, you still have an evidence-relative obligation to withhold the penicillin but you no longer have the fact-relative obligation to do so.

The same applies to permissions. If the patient from above is allergic to penicillin, then you are not fact-relatively permitted to administer penicillin. However, you are fact-relatively permitted to administer the safe alternative antibiotic doxycycline (which I will assume is otherwise like penicillin). If you have no evidence that the patient is allergic to penicillin, then you have an evidence-relative permission to administer either the penicillin or the doxycycline. If you believe that the patient is allergic to doxycycline but you have no evidence that supports that belief, then you have a belief-relative permission to administer the penicillin (indeed an obligation if there is no alternative) but you do not have a belief-relative permission to administer the doxycycline. So, in the same situation, you may have a fact-relative permission to administer the doxycycline but not to administer the penicillin, an evidence-relative permission to administer either drug, and a belief-relative permission to administer the penicillin but not the doxycycline.

We have uses for all of these deontic notions in our ordinary discourse. In particular, these different notions seem to be related in different ways to blameworthiness. Although blame and blameworthiness are complex issues and there seem to be no exceptionless generalizations, we tend not to blame people for violations of merely fact-relative permissions. We tend to blame people for stupidity or other cognitive failures if they violate evidence-relative permissions without violating belief-relative permissions—because they fail to believe something important for which they have evidence. And we blame people for wicked or bad motivations if they violate belief-relative permissions. If that is correct, then it is one (perhaps among several) reasons to distinguish these different deontic notions and to give philosophical accounts of all of them.

My account can explain these deontic facts by varying the notion of availability of a practical inference. You are fact-relatively permitted to do ϕ iff there is a good practical inference that results in you ϕ-ing such that all (cognitive) premises are true and the background is the maximally informed belief state. Similarly, you are evidence-relatively permitted to do ϕ iff there is a good practical inference that results in you ϕ-ing such that all (cognitive) premises are supported by your evidence and you have no background evidence for additional premises that would defeat the inference. And you are belief-relatively permitted to do ϕ iff there is a good practical inference that results in you ϕ-ing such that you believe all of the (cognitive) premises and you have no background beliefs that would defeat the inference.[18]

Finally, we can vary the notion of availability by varying whether we require that the agent has the ability to perform the inference in question. Suppose, e.g., that you are playing chess and the only good practical inference that is fact-relatively available to you is one that results in you castling, but you are a chess novice and don't possess the concept of castling. Are you fact-relatively obliged to castle? We should answer "no" if we require that available inferences are performable by you. Otherwise, we should answer "yes." In the context of giving advice, the second option seems very plausible. For someone may give you helpful advice by telling you: "You should castle." When we are offering criticism, however, the first option is more plausible. For it seems unreasonable to criticize you for not castling, given that you don't even know what it is to castle. Hence, it seems that we have uses for both kinds of deontic assessments. So we should allow both notions of available inference and distinguish the resulting deontic notions in order to avoid confusion.

To sum up, my account of deontic facts can account for many different deontic notions by allowing for different notions of available inferences. That is as it should be because we make use of these different deontic notions in our pre-theoretic deontic assessments. The distinctions to which my account gives rise are independently plausible. I take this to be an attraction of the account.

3.3 Permissions and Good Practical Reasoning

I now return to my two core ideas: PERMISSION and STANDARDS. In this subsection, I motivate PERMISSION. Recall that this is the idea that what we are permitted to do is determined by which good practical inferences are available to us. Why should we accept this idea?

PERMISSION is plausible because practical reasoning is supposed to guide our actions towards what is right and away from what is wrong, by the lights of reason. It is difficult to see what this could mean if it doesn't at least imply that such reasoning is supposed to result in (at least) permissible actions. So practical reasoning that doesn't yield permissible actions seems to fail *qua* practical reasoning.[19] If we

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[18]We could go more fine-grained regarding our deontic notions by putting different conditions on conative premises, such that we count inferences as not available if these conditions aren't met. Perhaps, e.g., conative premises must have objects that are desirable (see Asarnow, 2019; Setiya, 2014). I don't spell this out here.

[19]As will become clearer below, I do not claim that permissible action is the aim of practical inference. Indeed, I doubt that practical inference has an independent aim in the same way in which many other acts have aims. However, it suffices for my thesis that aiming at whatever the aim of practical inference may be ensures that the conclusion of a good practical inference is always (an intention for) a permissible action, and that every permissible action could be the result of a good practical inference. This is compatible with

can explain what is good practical reasoning independently of what one is permitted to do (as I maintain below) and good practical reasoning and permissions are not both determined by some common third factor, such as normative reasons (which is an alternative view to which I will return below), then the best explanation of this link between the two is that what we are permitted to do is determined by what is good practical reasoning.

Moreover, PERMISSION has some significant theoretical virtues. First, it explains why the kind of deontic facts that are my topic here form a unified kind of deontic fact, namely facts that concern only what we can intend or do intentionally. PERMISSION explains this because the things we can do as the result of practical reasoning are things that we can intend or do intentionally. Second, PERMISSION explains why you cannot act for sufficient reasons when you violate an obligation. For, if acting for sufficient reasons is to act for reasons that could figure as premises in a good practical inference (as I will maintain below), then my view implies that someone who violates an obligation acts for reasons that are not sufficient. If you violate an obligation, e.g., by failing to respect your neighbor's right to her newspaper, then you are not acting for sufficient reasons.

In addition to these considerations, there are three connections of my ideas to the extant literature that lend further support to PERMISSION. First, the idea behind PERMISSION is not original with me but is a version of Hanser's (2005) inferential account of permissibility. Hanser distinguishes adverbial and adjectival permissibility. And he formulates his theory of adverbial permissibility as follows:

> [A]n agent acts permissibly if and only if the practical inference embodied by his action is a good one—if and only if, that is, the premises of that inference justify, or provide adequate grounds for, the acceptance of its conclusion. (Hanser, 2005, 447)

He adds that we can explain adjectival permissibility in terms of adverbial permissibility by saying: "it is permissible to ϕ in C if and only if it is possible for an act of ϕ-ing in C to embody a permissible practical inference" (Hanser, 2005, 450). We can understand Hanser's notion of possibility here to restrict us to what I call the "available" inferences.

Hanser's theory explains why doing something for which one has sufficient reason is doing something permissible (adjectival); but one acts permissibly (adverbial) only if one does it for those reasons. And it explains why we get credit for our permissible actions only if we acted permissibly. Because it is only then that we acted for the right reasons, i.e., that our practical inference was good. My account can immediately take on board all these features of Hanser's view.

Second, given some plausible further premises, PERMISSION follows from the so-called "reasoning view of reasons," i.e., the view that normative reasons for ϕ-ing are things that can serve as premises in good reasoning to ϕ-ing (Setiya, 2014; Silverstein, 2016; Way, 2017). Since the reasoning view of reasons strikes me as plausible, I take this to lend support to PERMISSION. Here is how the argument goes.

It is plausible that we are permitted to do something iff and because we have sufficient reasons to do it (where no reason may count as sufficient reason in limiting

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the aim of practical inference being richer than permissible action, just as the aim of belief my be richer than truth and still ensure that all and only truths are the possible objects of correct belief.

cases). And it is plausible that we have sufficient reasons to do something iff the reasons aren't undercut or outweighed by other reasons, i.e., the reasons are not defeated. According to the reasoning view of reasons, this means that we are permitted to do ϕ iff, and because, there is a good (and undefeated) piece of practical reasoning that results in us ϕ-ing. Hence, what we are permitted to do is determined by the standards of practical reasoning, i.e., PERMISSION is true.

In order to acknowledge a potential worry, I should note that philosophers who hold that other normative facts should be explain in terms of reasons, while reasons are fundamental, can accept the claim that we are permitted to do something if and because we have sufficient reasons to do it (Dancy, 2000, 2018; Parfit, 2011; Scanlon, 2014).[20] However, according to such a "reasons first" view, facts about reasons are not explained by facts about good reasoning. In the current argument, I am using the reasoning view of reasons, which is incompatible with the "reasons first" view, as a premise. Some have argued against the reasoning view of reasons (Logins, 2019; Schmidt, 2021).[21] I remain unconvinced by these arguments, an engagement with which would lead me too far afield. Here, I can merely acknowledge that the reasoning view is controversial, and highlight that I take others to have made a strong case for it (Asarnow, 2017; Setiya, 2014; Silverstein, 2016, 2017; Way, 2017).

This brings us to the third and last attractive connection between PERMISSION and some related ideas. Once we take the reasoning view of reasons on board, PERMISSION allows us to transfer attractive features of the reasoning view of reasons to the theory of deontic facts. One such attractive feature is that the reasoning view of reasons can account for the defeasibility of reasons by appealing to the defeasibility of practical reasoning (Way, 2017).[22] Now, PERMISSION allows us to transfer this idea to deontic facts and to account for the defeasibility of permissions and obligations by appealing to the defeasibility of practical reasoning. Given normal circumstances, e.g., the belief that you need to get to the hospital cannot serve as a premise in a good practical inference to the action or intention to take your neighbors car without their consent. If we add, however, the premise that a major catastrophe will happen unless you get to the hospital very soon and the only way for you to do so is to take the car without consent, then the inference may be good. The view I am advocating predicts that in the first scenario, it is not permissible for you to take the car, while it is permissible in the second scenario. That seems to be the intuitively correct result.

We may want to know more about how the defeasibility of practical reasoning works; but it should be uncontroversial that practical reasoning is defeasible. Hence, explaining this defeasibility isn't a burden that is special to my view and I can freely appeal to it without spelling out the details that are desirable in the ultimate analysis.

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[20]Philosophers who want to explain reasons in terms of—evidence for (Kearns & Star, 2009) or explanations of (Broome, 2004)—what we ought to do may have difficulties accepting this claim. If so, I take this to speak against these views. However, I cannot engage the issue here.

[21]For example, Logins (2019) thinks that the fact that the building is on fire and I don't believe so is a reason for me to investigate whether the building is on fire. Others think that the fact that there is a surprise party waiting at home for you is a reason to go there, while you cannot reason from this fact to the response of going home without thereby ruining the surprise and hence the reason for going home. I think that all these objections can be answered (see Kietzmann, 2023). In particular, I think these objections usually turn on the unquestioned assumption that reasons for an action are considerations that count in favor of the action. Advocates of the reasoning view should not accept this claim in an unqualified way.

[22]Brunero (2022) has presented a challenge to this, which I leave for another occasion.

Thus, I take it to be an attraction of my view that it can account for the defeasibility of obligations and permissions.

To sum up, PERMISSION seems intuitively plausible, it has explanatory power, it allows us to accept Hanser's theory of adverbial and adjectival permissibility, and it is entailed by the reasoning view of reasons (given some plausible further premises). Finally, PERMISSION allows us to explain the defeasibility of obligations by the defeasibility of practical reasoning. Taken together, these considerations strike me as a strong case for PERMISSION.

3.4 Practical Reason and Practical Reasoning

I now turn to my second core idea: STANDARDS. This is the idea that the standards of good reasoning that apply to us are determined by what constitutes defect and excellence in our capacity of practical reason. In order to motivate STANDARDS, I must first clarify some of my terminology.

By a capacity I mean a potentiality that is inherent in its bearer such that being an exercise of the capacity is a goodness-fixing kind. We sometimes say that people have the capacity to drink one liter of water. This is not a capacity in my sense. For the kind "drinking one liter of water" is not a goodness-fixing kind. By contrast, the capacity to add two numbers is a genuine capacity, on my way of talking, because what it is to be an instance of the act-type "adding two numbers" fixes a standard for being a good (correct) or defective (incorrect) instance.

Next I distinguish two kinds of capacities. Capacities and their acts can be good or bad instances of their kinds. The standards governing the capacity and governing acts are plausibly not independent. A defective capacity tends to yield defective acts. Now, some capacities are such that the standard for the acts is prior to and explains the standard for the capacity. The capacity to make omelets is like that. There is a prior and independent standard of a good act of omelet-making, namely that it produces a tasty omelet. What it is for a capacity to be a non-defective capacity to make omelets is to issue reliably in acts that produce tasty omelets. The standard for acts of omelet-making explains the standards for the capacity of omelet-making. Let's call such capacities Act-First capacities.

Act-First capacities contrast with Capacity-First capacities, in which the standard that governs the capacity is prior to, and explanatory of, the standard that governs the acts.[23] To illustrate what I mean, let me give some potential examples, which different readers may deem compelling to different degrees and regarding which I can stay noncommittal, as long as the intelligibility of Capacity-First capacities is granted. It seems plausible to me that the capacity to assess the aesthetic value of a piece of art is a Capacity-First capacity. Acts of assessing the aesthetic value of art are good iff they accurately capture the aesthetic value of the object. But what it is for an object to possess aesthetic value is, according to one possible view, to be such that someone with a non-defective capacity to assess aesthetic value would issue such a

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[23]The idea of taking the capacity to be central has similarities with Schellenberg's (2018) work on perception. However, a key advantage of Schellenberg's view is that the exercise of a capacity is something that hallucinations and perceptions can have in common. There is nothing analogous in my case.

positive assessment, under favorable circumstances.[24] This is plausible, at least, if we think of aesthetic value as a response-dependent property.[25]

There are also potential cases of Capacity-First capacities that don't involve response-dependent properties. The capacity to live a meaningful life, for example, is plausibly such that what it is to lead a meaningful life is determined by what a non-defective capacity to lead a meaningful life is. Similarly, the capacity to be a good spouse is perhaps such that the standards for the acts are determined by the standards for the capacity.

In all these cases, we may list some salient features of paradigmatic good acts of the capacity but these features are neither necessary nor sufficient for being a good act of the capacity, and these features seem to have little systematic unity or connection beyond being salient features of such good acts. Nevertheless, the standards that govern the capacity aren't entirely obscure. The capacity of aesthetic taste, e.g., should include the capacities to appreciate virtuosity, irony, overall composition, etc. The capacity to lead a meaningful life should include the capacities to judge which of two aims is more important, the capacity to give love and work the proper place in one's life, etc. In none of these cases do we have an algorithm for how the component capacities should be combined to yield a good overall capacity. It seems nevertheless plausible in all these cases that what it is to be a good act of the overall capacity is to be the kind of act that could issue from a non-defective instance of the capacity.

The idea behind STANDARDS is that the capacity for practical reasoning is a Capacity-First capacity. We can list some salient features of good acts of practical reasoning, such as being conducive to the agent's worthy ends, or taking into account all the normatively relevant features of the agent's situation, etc. Just as for assessing aesthetic value, leading a meaningful life, and being a good spouse, however, the unity and connection of these features seems difficult to understand. I submit that this is because to be a good act of practical reason is to be the kind of practical reasoning that could be the act of a non-defective capacity of practical reason (under favorable circumstances), i.e., STANDARDS is true.

Capacity-First capacities are often best understood by reflecting on their role in the life of their bearers. Appreciating art, living a meaningful life, and being a good spouse are, plausibly, important parts of a good human life. This role can elucidate the standards that govern the corresponding capacities. Given the role that the appreciation of art plays in our lives, e.g., it makes sense that the capacity to appreciate art must include the capacities to appreciate virtuosity, irony, etc. This also applies to the capacity of practical reason. For example, given that practical reasoning guides our behavior and that humans are so vulnerable that they often need help, it makes sense that the practical inference pattern from "NN needs help that I can easily give" to "So, I shall help NN" is *ceteris paribus* compatible with a non-defective capacity of

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[24] A similar idea can be found in Thomson (1996, 138): "a K's being good to look at consists in its being such as to please, by its looks, those who are experts in Ks, and a K's tasting good consists in its being such as to please, by its taste, those who are experts in Ks, and so on."

[25] The term "response-dependent concept" was introduced by Johnston (1989, 145) for concepts such that what it is for an object to fall under the concept is for subjects to be disposed to produce a particular response to the object. Such concepts express response-dependent properties. There is a broad class of theories according to which aesthetic value is a response-dependent property, a example of which is (Gorodeisky, 2021). For an overview see (King, 2023); and see (Watkins & Shelley, 2012) for opposition.

practical reason. So, while I take the notions of excellence and defect in (human) practical reason to be primitive in my explanation of deontic normativity, these notions can be elucidated by reflecting on the role of practical reason in a good human life. Here I agree with many broadly neo-Aristotelian philosophers, who offer accounts of practical rationality by appealing to the good human life (Foot, 2001; Müller, 2004; Setiya, 2007).

To sum up, STANDARDS is the idea that practical reason is a Capacity-First capacity. We can elucidate the standards of practical reason by looking at the role that practical reason plays in a good human life. I have suggested that STANDARDS is plausible because it is unclear what the prior and independent standard of acts of practical reasoning, which we must posit in order to hold that practical reason is an Act-First capacity, should be. I have not given (and I do not have) any conclusive argument that no such prior and independent standard of practical reasoning exists. In order to provide more (defeasible) support for STANDARDS I want to end this section, by considering two alternative views on which practical reason is an Act-First capacity and, hence, the standard governing its acts is prior and explanatory of the standard that governs the capacity.

3.5 Considering Two Alternatives

I can imagine two ways to resist my suggestion that practical reason is a Capacity-First capacity. First, one may argue that practical reason is the capacity to respond to reasons, so that normative reasons set the standard for practical reasoning. Such a response might come natural to advocates of views on which reasons are primitive (Parfit, 2011; Scanlon, 2014; Schroeder, 2021) or views on which reasons can be explained in terms of evidence (Kearns & Star, 2009) or explanations (Broome, 2004) of what we ought to do. This objection involves rejecting the reasoning view of reasons. The second way to resist my suggestion is to offer an alternative account of the standards of practical reasoning, without rejecting the reasoning view of reasons. I cannot refute either of these two options here. I can merely point to some reasons why it is worth developing my alternative view, at least as a potential rival against which more familiar views can be assessed.

Regarding the first alternative, as already intimated, I take others to have made a strong case for the reasoning view of reasons (Asarnow, 2017; McHugh & Way, 2022; Setiya, 2014; Way, 2017). I think that alternative accounts of reasons each have particular shortcomings. One shortcoming that many of these views share is that it is not clear whether and how they are compatible with a broadly naturalistic metaphysics. The reasoning view of reasons is compatible with a broadly naturalistic metaphysics insofar and because such a metaphysics can accommodate standards of good reasoning. And any plausible broadly naturalistic metaphysics must be able to accommodate standards of good reasoning, on pain of undermining reasoning regarding that metaphysics itself. Hence, there is independent pressure on any broadly naturalistic metaphysics to be compatible with the reasoning view of reasons. Of course, this does not rule out the first way to resist STANDARDS but I hope it indicates in what direction the considerations lie that make me prefer the reasoning view over alternative accounts of reasons.

The second way to resist STANDARDS is to offer an alternative account of the goodness of practical inferences. I do not have an argument to rule out all such alternatives; so I merely want to discuss one interesting recent proposal, to illustrate where I see advantages of my view. McHugh and Way (2018; 2022) have recently suggested that the standard of good reasoning is that, *ceteris paribus*, it preserves fittingness, i.e., if the premise-attitudes are fitting, then so is the conclusion-attitude.[26]

(FV3)   The move from $P_1, ..., P_n$ to C is a good pattern of reasoning iff, and because, (i) normally if $P_1, ..., P_n$ are fitting, C is fitting too, and (ii) you can competently follow this pattern in reasoning to a new attitude. (McHugh & Way, 2022, 53)

McHugh and Way do not commit themselves to any particular view about the conditions under which beliefs and intentions are fitting (McHugh & Way, 2022, ch. 3). However, if we use "choiceworthy" for the fittingness condition of conative premises and conclusions and furthermore assume that truth is the fittingness condition of cognitive premises of practical reasoning, then the idea is that a pattern of practical reasoning is good iff, and because, normally, if all the conative premises are choiceworthy and all the cognitive premises are true, then the conclusion is choiceworthy, and you can competently follow this pattern in reasoning to a new attitude.

Like McHugh and Way, I explain deontic status by good reasoning (which also explains reasons). Moreover, I could formulate my view in terms of fittingness thus: Good practical inferences are those that are fitting to make, and which practical inferences are fitting to make is explained by what practical inferences can issue from a non-defective capacity of practical reason. And I need not reject the biconditional in (FV3); for I could endorse it as a constraint on accounts of fittingness of attitudes that figure in practical inferences. However, I disagree with the explanatory claim in (FV3) for two reasons.

First, I think it is preferable not to posit fittingness as a normative primitive and fundamental. Excellence and defect in our capacity for practical reasoning are a more satisfying basis for an explanation of deontic status. As already intimated, these are properties that any plausible broadly naturalistic metaphysics must be able to accommodate. And there is nothing mysterious about the idea that one can reason well or poorly about what to do. By contrast, as McHugh and Way (2022, ch. 3.5) admit, it is not clear that one can specify the fittingness conditions of attitudes without appealing to normative entities that are as mysterious as deontic status or reasons. If, e.g., the fittingness condition of an intention turns out to be the permissibility of the intended action, then an account like (FV3) does not allow us to explain permissibility. A similar worry arises again when we ask for an elucidation of what fittingness is. For, advocates of uses of fittingness typically try to elucidate fittingness in terms of *meriting* or *being worthy* of a certain response (see Howard & Rowland, 2022). These notions of merit and worthiness may, however, cry out for explanation (in order to be legitimately used in elucidations of a primitive notion of fittingness) just as much as deontic normativity.[27]

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[26] For a general worry about fittingness-based views see (Achs & Na'aman, 2023).

[27] Advocates of fittingness have offered various ways to make the notion of fittingness clear and non-mysterious (see Berker, 2022; Howard & Rowland, 2022). Without having space to engage the issue, I can

Second, (FV3) includes "normally" to allow for the defeasibility of practical inferences. The idea is that in all the most normal worlds in which the premises are fitting, the conclusion is fitting—while this may fail in non-normal worlds.[28] Unless the normality-ordering of worlds varies between inferences, this approach implies the meta-inference called Cumulative Transitivity (CuT), i.e., that if the inferences from $P_1, ..., P_n$ to C_1 and from $P_1, ..., P_n, C_1$ to C_2 are good, then so is the inference from $P_1, ..., P_n$ to C_2 (McHugh & Way, 2022, ch. 2, appendix 1). I have argued elsewhere that the best way to account for the defeasibility of inferences requires that CuT can fail (Hlobil, 2018; Hlobil & Brandom, 2024). For example, the inference from "My clothes are dirty" to "I shall wash my clothes" and the inference from "My clothes are dirty and I shall wash my clothes" to "I shall reward myself for washing my dirty clothes by taking the afternoon off" is good, but the inference from "My clothes are dirty" (without the intention to wash them) to the conclusion "I shall reward myself for washing my dirty clothes by taking the afternoon off" is not good. McHugh and Way point out that CuT can fail if the normality ordering of worlds varies between inferences (McHugh & Way, 2022, 67). Notice, however, that, unless we put constraints on the normality orderings and how they vary with the inferences, for any inference with a conclusion that is fitting in some world, we could stipulate that the most normal worlds relative to this inference are the worlds in which the conclusion is fitting.[29] Thus, clause (i) of (FV3) may become so thin to be almost empty, unless an account of how normality orderings vary with inferences is added. Now, which worlds we should focus on in a particular piece of practical reasoning—which worlds are normal (relative to what inferences)—seems to be the kind of issue that is best answered by an account of excellence and defect in the capacity of practical reason. So, McHugh and Way can either accept CuT, or they spell out how normality orderings of possible worlds vary. The first horn is blocked by counterexamples. The second horn probably requires an appeal to resources that are not part of their account as it stands, such as excellence and defect in the capacity of practical reason. I think it is preferable to appeal immediately to the attributive goodness of practical reason.

To sum up, STANDARDS is the idea that practical reason is a Capacity-First capacity. This implies that what constitutes good practical reasoning is determined by the standards that govern the capacity of practical reason, which we can elucidate by its role in the good human life. And I have suggested that it is not easy to find a good alternative view on what constitutes good practical reasoning.

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merely say that such efforts often appeal to occurrences of the English suffixes "-ible" and "-able", and such appeals do not work well in many other languages (including my first language).

[28]This is a version of the approach to nonmonotonic consequence familiar from preferential logics (Kraut, Lehmann, & Magidor, 1990). See my (Hlobil, 2018) for a discussion of some limitations of this approach.

[29]An anonymous referee objects that McHugh and Way would not allow arbitrary stipulations of normality-orderings and make substantive claims about these orderings. However, I fail to see why this should matter here. My point is that according to their account, choosing an appropriate normality ordering, we can make any practical inference come out good or bad, as we wish. Perhaps McHugh and Way want to rule out the normality ordering that we would need in a particular case. But in this case, it is not their idea that good inferences preserve fittingness that ensure that a given inference is good or bad. Rather, it is their rejection of a particular normality ordering as illegitimate that ensure the result. My point is not that McHugh and Way allow arbitrary normality orderings; my point is that what does the real work in their theory are constraints on normality orderings. Because of that (FV3) is not really the rival theory to my account that it might seem to be.

4 Two Potential Objections

In the previous section, I have explained how PERMISSION and STANDARDS can be used to explain deontic facts in terms of facts about attributive goodness. Moreover, I have motivated both ideas and explained some attractions of the resulting explanation of deontic facts. In this section, I end by considering two potential objections.

4.1 Blameworthiness and Harm

An opponent might worry that I said too little about blameworthiness. For it seems that if someone does something that they are not permitted to do without an excuse, then they are blameworthy. However, we do not blame people for acting in ways that could not be the result of good practical inferences. Rather, we blame people for the harm that results from their actions.[30]

I reply that the fact that an action would cause harm is a reason not to do the action and that it is sometimes appropriate to blame people for acting against this reason. Let me explain how this response is compatible with what I said above. I take the practical inference from the premise that ϕ-ing would cause harm to the conclusion of refraining from ϕ-ing to be, other things being equal, a good practical inference. And I take the consideration that ϕ-ing would cause harm, other things being equal, to defeat practical inferences that result in the agent ϕ-ing. Thus, other things being equal, that an action causes harm is a reason not to do it and makes doing the action impermissible.

What does that mean for blame? As already intimated, blameworthiness usually arises from violations of belief-relative and evidence-relative permissions. If an agent had no way of knowing that her action will cause harm, we typically do not blame her. We tend to blame people for causing harm if and because a practical inference from the premise that ϕ-ing would cause harm to the conclusion of refraining from ϕ-ing was available to the agent, in the belief-relative or evidence-relative sense, and considerations of harm in the background beliefs defeated inferences to ϕ-ing. In such cases, we blame people for harming others by ϕ-ing because the fact that ϕ-ing causes harm is the reason that they failed to take appropriately into account; it is the reason that made their action impermissible and they were in a position to know this.

4.2 Worries about Standards of Reasoning

An opponent might say that in order to understand the standard of goodness for practical inferences, we must appeal to the aim of practical reasoning. A non-defective capacity to make practical inference is one that reliably issues in accurate or correct practical inferences, i.e. practical inferences that reach their aim. And in order to derive deontic claims from claims about the standards of practical reasoning, we must appeal to a substantive account of the aim of practical reasoning. Here is Silverstein making this point:[31]

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[30]Thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me with this point.

[31]Velleman puts his argument for this idea as follows: "Any enterprise that has a formal object must have a substantive object as well—that is, a goal that is not stated solely in terms that depend on the concept of being the object of the enterprise. [...] A game whose object was specifiable only as 'winning' wouldn't have an object—that is, wouldn't have any object in particular. And if a game had no particular object,

> Reasoning always has an aim. [...] One account of the aim of practical reasoning is uncontroversial: practical reasoning aims at figuring out what to do. This characterization, though accurate, is incomplete. It specifies only the formal object of practical reasoning, and—as J. David Velleman has argued—"any enterprise that has a formal object must have a substantive object as well [...]." [...] Practical reasoning [...], then, must have a substantive object or aim: there must be something at which practical reasoning aims in virtue of which it aims at figuring out what to do. (Silverstein, 2016, 5)

Here Silverstein seems to deny the possibility of Capacity-First capacities, and in particular the possibility that the capacity of practical reason is Capacity-First. If Silverstein is right, STANDARDS is false and we need some independent and prior standard by which we evaluate practical inferences in order to assess the capacity of practical reason as defective or not.

My response is that Silverstein—and Velleman—are mistaken, insofar as their claims conflict with STANDARDS. My examples from above are counterexamples to their claim.[32] The "enterprise" of appreciating art, or leading a meaningful life, or of being a good spouse do not have any substantive object; they merely have the formal objects of appreciating art well, leading a meaningful life to the fullest extent, and being a good spouse to the fullest extent. We may be able to characterize this formal object more colorfully and in a more detailed fashion. But there isn't any independently intelligible state that we aim at in virtue of aiming at appreciating art, leading a meaningful life, or being a good spouse.

I submit that the same is true of practical reasoning. Practical reasoning doesn't have a substantive object over and above the formal object of reasoning well. Of course, we often pursue some independently given goals in our practical reasoning. But we can reason well without achieving these goals and reason badly while achieving them. These goals do not provide the standard of practical reasoning; they are something that shows up only from within practical reasoning.

Perhaps an opponent would reply that STANDARDS fails because we know much better when a practical inference is good than when a capacity for practical reason is defective. This is so because we often recognize actions or intentions as immoral or irrational when we see them, and this allows us to say that the practical reasoning that yielded such actions or intentions must be defective (either in its premises or in its transitions). And we can often do that without having any inkling about any corresponding excellence and defects in the capacity of practical reason.

My response is that my meta-normative claim must not be confused with an epistemic claim. My claim is that what is good vs bad practical reasoning is constituted by what is an excellence vs defect in the capacity of practical reason. That claim is compatible with the claim that we know that something is an excellence or a defect in that capacity on the grounds that we know that some particular acts of practical reasoning are bad.

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then there would be no such thing as winning it, and so it wouldn't be a fully constituted competitive game. Similarly, a hunt whose object was specifiable only as 'the quarry' wouldn't be a fully constituted search, and the question 'What is the answer?' isn't by itself a fully constituted question" (Velleman, 1996, 701).

[32]It seems to me that acts for which Velleman and Silverstein are correct and acts for which they are not is closely related to Aristotle's distinction between production (*poesis*) and acting (*praxis*). However, this is merely a hypothesis and beyond the scope of this paper.

5 Conclusion

I have presented a view according to which that ϕ-ing is permissible for S in C is explained by the fact that a good practical inference that results in S's ϕ-ing is available to S in C. That a practical inference is good is explained by it being possible that the practical inference issues from a non-defective capacity of practical reason.

I suggested that we can elucidate the idea of excellence and defect in the human capacity of practical reason by appeal to the role that this capacity and its acts play in a good human life. It is, of course, at this point that my allegiance to neo-Aristotelian (meta)ethics comes out. However, my explanation of deontic facts does not rely on any premise to the effect that something ought to be a good exemplar of its kind. Rather the crucial premise is that we may do what we can reason to doing in a piece of reasoning that is a good exemplar of its kind. I did not assume that you should care about reasoning well.

The account I have presented opens up new options for natural realism about deontic normativity. For if we can explain attributive goodness, as it applies to our capacity of practical reason, in naturalistic terms, then my account allows us to extend this to a naturalistic explanation of deontic facts. Working this out, however, will have to wait for another occasion.

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