

HALLVARD LILLEHAMMER

MORAL REALISM, NORMATIVE REASONS, AND RATIONAL
INTELLIGIBILITY

ABSTRACT. This paper concerns a prima facie tension between the claims that (a) agents have normative reasons obtaining in virtue of the nature of the options that confront them, and (b) there is a non-trivial connection between the grounds of normative reasons and the upshots of sound practical reasoning. Joint commitment to these claims is shown to give rise to a dilemma. I argue that the dilemma is avoidable on a *response dependent* account of normative reasons accommodating both (a) and (b) by yielding (a) as a substantial constraint on sound practical reasoning. This fact is shown to have significance for the contemporary dialectic between moral realists and their opponents.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I discuss the theoretical significance of a tension between two ideas widely implicit in common sense ethical reasoning. The first of these is the claim that agents have reasons existing in virtue of the nature of the options confronting them. For example, someone might think you have reasons to stop eating meat products on account of the cruelty involved in the practice of slaughtering sentient creatures for food consumption. I call this the *realist condition*. The second idea is the claim that there is a non-trivial connection between the grounds of at least some reasons and the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning. For example, some people think it could not possibly be rational for anyone to devote their life to counting leaves of grass on geometrically shaped lawns. They might think this because they find it unintelligible how a sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning could lead to the endorsement of such a life project. I call this the *rational intelligibility condition*. In this paper I show how the joint commitment to the realist and rational intelligibility conditions gives rise to a tension within common sense morality. The link postulated by the rational intelligibility condition between the grounds of some reasons and the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning is prima facie incompatible with the autonomy of those grounds postulated by the realist condition. The apparent upshot is the following dilemma. On the one hand, we can give up the rational intelligibility condition, with the



associated cost that we are left without an account of the normativity of the reasons in question. On the other hand, we can give up the realist condition, with the associated cost that we are no longer entitled to the claim that options provide reasons in virtue of their nature. I argue that there is a way between the horns of this dilemma. It is possible to reinterpret the realist condition in a way that is consistent with the *rational intelligibility condition*, provided we adopt a *response dependent* account of normative reasons yielding that condition as a *first order constraint* on sound practical reasoning. I show that taking this way out of the dilemma has the advantage of clarifying the contemporary debate between a certain brand of moral realists and some of their constructivist opponents.

2. NORMATIVE REALISM AND THE REALIST CONDITION

According to the *normative realist*, agents have good reasons to act in some ways rather than others in virtue of the existence of an *independent normative reality* of reason giving options. On a realist account, options provide agents with reasons just in virtue of being the options they are. The realist argues that ends provide normative reasons just in case they satisfy substantive conditions regarding their nature, such as being intrinsically valuable or being themselves otherwise non-arbitrarily distinguishable from ends not providing normative reasons.

The metaphysical claim that options provide normative reasons just in virtue of their nature entails a claim to the existence of a response independent normative reality of reason giving options in the following sense. The normative realist claims that options provide normative reasons either in virtue of their intrinsic nature as options, or in virtue of their external relations to other options, but not in virtue of their external relations to the responses of agents to those options. For simplicity, I say the claim to response independence of reason giving options is the claim that normative reasons obtain in virtue of the nature of options, where this is taken to include their intrinsic nature and their external relations to other options. It follows that if normative realism is true, there can be no account of the reason giving force of options purely in terms of the responses of agents to those options in favourable circumstances. Except, that is, some trivial or gerrymandered account on which these circumstances are defined as ones issuing in appropriate responses to reason giving options independently understood.¹

By an option, I understand the promotion of ends (any object of possible desire), responses to ends in different circumstances, and responses to responses to ends in different circumstances, etc. Thus, there is an op-

tion to pursue the end of universal happiness, to favour the promotion of happiness in conditions of calm reflection, and to favour verdicts yielded in conditions of calm reflection, etc. Options themselves can be favourably responded to either by acting on them or by having beliefs or desires about them. For example, the end of universal happiness can be pursued, desired, or believed to be rational. The normative realist claims that agents have normative reasons in virtue of the fact that certain ends, responses to ends, responses to responses, etc., have response independent rational privilege relative to other ends, responses to ends, responses to responses, etc. For the realist, it is the nature of the options themselves which grounds the attribution to agents of normative reasons, not the relation in which these options stand to agents who respond to them in any given circumstances.

There is another sense in which normative realism does not entail that normative reasons are response independent. Normative reasons are reasons to pursue ends, where ends are definable as objects of possible desire, and therefore in terms of what agents can possibly respond to. In this sense, normative realism is compatible with the response dependence of normative reasons. While it follows trivially from the definition of an end that it is necessarily intelligible for any end that some agent might respond favourably to it, it does not follow that it is *rationally* intelligible for any end that some agent might respond favourably to it. It might be possible to devote one's life to counting leaves of grass even if it is not rationally intelligible to do so. This weaker form of response dependence should not be confused with the response dependence of normative reasons on the responses of agents to options in favourable circumstances.

Core elements of common sense morality are suggestive of normative realism. For example, it is natural to think that whether an end provides an agent with normative reasons to pursue it depends at least partly on the nature of that end, quite independently of the circumstances in which either the agent or anyone else might come to favour its promotion. Certain ends may just seem to be of the wrong kind for practically rational agents to pursue. Thus, the end of instigating a universal holocaust, for example, might easily seem wrongly placed with respect to what is valuable to provide anyone with normative reasons to pursue it.

At the level of responses to ends, it is equally natural to think the normative reason giving status of a response to an end depends at least partly on the nature of the circumstance of response in question. Furthermore, it is natural to think this normative status obtains quite independently of any further circumstances in which the agent or anyone else might come to favour this circumstance as suitable for the rational selection of ends. Certain circumstances just seem to be of the wrong kind for practically ra-

tional agents to base their choices on their responses in them. For example, the circumstance of having been continuously tortured and brainwashed seems wrongly placed with respect to what is a reliably rational state of preference formation to provide anyone with normative reasons to pursue the ends favoured in it.

A survey of the contemporary literature shows that appeals to the realist condition are frequently made in support of normative realism. A number of writers seem committed to the claim that the centrality of the realist condition in common sense moral discourse makes normative realism the default position in the theory of normative reasons. These writers include Grice, Bond, Parfit, and Dancy, and others.² According to these writers, common sense morality is committed to the claim that options provide normative reasons in virtue of their nature, and thereby to a response independent normative reality.

It is compatible with normative realism to hold that there are elements of common sense morality suggestive of a response dependent account of rational privilege for options. In the following Section, however, I argue that there are elements of common sense morality which suggest an *exclusively* response dependent account of rational privilege for options. This claim *is* incompatible with normative realism. In arguing for the exclusively response dependent rational privilege of options, I will show that when the common sense claim to response dependent rational privilege is understood, the apparent support for normative realism embodied in the realist condition is unmasked as an illusion.

3. RATIONAL INTELLIGIBILITY

Commitments implicit in common sense moral reasoning suggest a conception of normative reasons as universal and necessarily normative rational prescriptions. This conception is both reflectively more opaque and much harder to coherently articulate than the realist condition. For the purposes of the present argument, it suffices to distinguish three aspects of normative reasons so understood.

First, qua *reasons*, normative reasons are rational prescriptions on the recognition of which agents can be motivated insofar as they grasp them, subject to weights and balances between reasons. A claim that agents can be motivated on their normative reasons is capable of more than one interpretation. There is an ongoing debate about whether normative reasons are entities (mental states or the contents thereof) which themselves motivate agents to act, or whether normative reasons are facts the state of recognition of which motivates agents to act.³ For the purposes of the

present argument we can remain neutral on this question. The irrationality consequent on failure to be motivated by one's normative reasons might consist in the contingent absence of a normative reason from the agent's psychological economy. Alternatively, it might consist in the absence of a motivating state of recognition of a normative reason. Either way, the absence in question is indicative of practical irrationality on the conception of normative reasons as necessarily normative rational prescriptions.

Second, qua *necessarily normative*, normative reasons are rationally inescapable for the agents who fall within their scope. The claims of one's normative reasons cannot be rationally evaded by claiming a lack of interest in such claims.⁴ The presence of a rational link between motivation on a normative reason and sound practical reasoning would explain the rational inescapability of normative reasons, and therefore their necessary normativity, for those to whom they apply. The common sense conception of normative reasons as necessarily normative rational prescriptions is therefore suggestive of a constitutive link between the existence of normative reasons and the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning. On the one hand, the upshots of a sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning give content to the epistemological idea that reason judgements can be more or less justified. It is *prima facie* plausible that normative reason judgements are justified to the extent that they are formed in conditions in which a capacity for practical reasoning has been soundly exercised. On the other hand, the upshots of a sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning give content to the metaphysical idea of correctness for normative reason judgements. It is *prima facie* plausible that agents have reasons to favour whatever would be favoured in conditions where a capacity for practical reasoning has been soundly exercised.⁵

Third, the scope of normative reasons is *universal*. The class of agents to whom normative reasons apply, and for whom therefore normative reasons are rationally inescapable, is the class of all agents sharing a given capacity for practical reasoning. All successful rational agency depends on successful practical reasoning.⁶ It is therefore *prima facie* plausible that action in accordance with responses issued in conditions where a capacity for practical reasoning is soundly exercised is at least partly constitutive of successful rational agency. If so, the responses of agents in conditions where a capacity for practical reasoning is soundly exercised, and the reasons to which these responses give rise, can be necessarily normative for all rational agents in possession of the relevant capacity.⁷ On this view, the degree to which agents of a given capacity grasp and act upon the normative reasons yielded by that capacity is something for which they are each necessarily rationally accountable. Their degree of practical rational-

ity is a function of the extent to which they are able to soundly exercise the relevant capacity for practical reasoning and to act in accordance with the normative reasons it generates. (While the normative reasons generated by sound practical reasoning are potentially distinct from the motives consequent upon reasoning, the content of the latter will depend upon the content of the former in a practically rational agent.)

The universal and necessary normativity of normative reasons is suggestive of a picture of a practically rational agent as someone characterised by the following two properties. The first property is knowledge of the normative reasons applying to her in the circumstances with which she is faced, including a set of true judgements about which normative reasons apply to her. The second property is a motivational profile reflecting the presence and balance of her normative reasons. On this picture, a practically rational agent is an agent who reflectively grasps the reasons applying to her in the circumstances, and who is appropriately motivated by those reasons. It is in virtue of the fact that practically rational agents act as reason demands on the basis of their reflective grasp of normative reasons that they can be said to act *on* those reasons, as opposed to merely in accordance with them. This will be so even if the reasons in question are reasons not to reflect on one's reasons. In this sense, normative reasons are prescriptions which practically rational agents can necessarily make their own in deliberation. To the extent that practically rational agents make normative reasons their own in deliberation, they are knowers in a strong sense beyond mere reliability in the formation of, and motivation in accordance with, true reason judgements. Practically rational agents are agents for whom there is a rationally intelligible link between motivation on their normative reasons and the sound exercise of their capacity of practical reasoning. Furthermore, this rational link is reflectively available to them in the event of their being called on to back up their choices in argument. Practically rational agents are motivated in accordance with true judgements for which they can give an account.⁸

It is obscure how the universal and necessary normativity of normative reasons can be explained if the notion of a reason is explicable independently of the notion of the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning. The idea of a normative reason explicable independently of the notion of the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning entails the a priori possibility of a universal and necessarily normative rational prescription the grasp of which lies beyond the sound exercise of any capacity for practical reasoning. The possibility of an ungraspable normative reason is in prima facie tension with the thought that rational agents are necessarily rationally accountable for their degree of practical rationality,

and thereby with the universal and necessary normativity of normative reasons. If the grounds of normative reasons were located beyond the scope of a capacity for sound practical reasoning, it would be possible for the sound exercise of practical reasoning to play only an accidental role in the process of an agent acting in accordance with her normative reasons. It is mysterious how agents whose true reason judgements bore only an accidental relation to the reasons they truly reflect could be knowers in the strong sense required for them to act *on* those reasons, as opposed to merely in accordance with them. It is therefore also mysterious how agents could be practically rational in such circumstances. Consequently, it is mysterious how agents in such circumstances could be necessarily rationally accountable for their success or otherwise in acting as reason demands, and thereby how the reasons in question could be necessarily normative for them.⁹

Christine Korsgaard has argued that any realist account divorcing the existence of reasons from the exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning fails to answer what she calls “the normative question”.¹⁰ Korsgaard’s realist target is arguably coextensive with the normative realist target of the present paper. Two of Korsgaard’s criteria for an answer to the normative question are plausibly implied by the rational intelligibility condition. The first is that the answer must explain how normative requirements can be addressed directly to the agents to whom they apply.¹¹ The second criterion is that the answer must explain how it is possible to act knowledgeably in accordance with normative requirements.¹² Yet there are two central differences between the argument for the rational intelligibility condition and Korsgaard’s treatment of the sources of normativity. First, Korsgaard gives a number of non-equivalent statements of what she means by “the normative question”, only some of which correspond to the question of normativity addressed by the rational intelligibility condition.¹³ It is therefore unclear whether all of Korsgaard’s concerns can be formulated in terms of the rational intelligibility condition. Second, the argument of the present paper does not entail the neo-Kantian and maxim-based conception of practical reason favoured by Korsgaard.¹⁴ The rational intelligibility condition as interpreted here is equally compatible with such indeterminate and holistic conceptions of practical reason as the neo-Aristotelian or neo-Humean accounts rejected by Korsgaard.

The present argument suggests a conception of normative reasons as constrained by the existence of a rational deliberative link between the motivational state of an agent and that agent’s motivation on that reason insofar as *the agent is practically rational*. It is consistent with this view that there are rational agents for whom there is no rational deliberat-

ive link between their present motivational state and motivation on their normative reasons. Drug addicts, brainwashed victims of oppression, or stubborn children who avoid the toothbrush might still, on this view, have normative reasons transcending their deliberative horizon. Deliberation transcendent normative reasons will exist for such agents to the extent that they can be counted as rationally incapacitated in some way. The present argument is therefore at least partly neutral with respect to the debate between Williams, Korsgaard, McDowell, Parfit, Scanlon and others over the existence or possibility of external reasons.¹⁵ On the one hand, the internalist claim that normative reasons are constrained by the existence of a rational deliberative link between the present motivational state of an agent and that agent's motivation on that reason entails the rational intelligibility condition. Internalists like Williams are therefore committed to that condition. The rational intelligibility condition does not, however, entail the internalist claim. Aristotelians like McDowell, for example, may accept the rational intelligibility condition, but are not thereby committed to internalism. Nevertheless, the rational intelligibility condition does rule out the existence of some forms of external reason. According to the rational intelligibility condition, there are no reasons for which there is no non-trivial connection between their grounds and the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning. The existence of external reasons as defined by normative realists like Parfit and Dancy would therefore seem to be excluded.¹⁶

4. NON-NORMATIVE REASONS

There is conceptual space for reasons the existence of which is divorced from the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning.

First, it is arguable that there are contingently normative practical reasons existing relative to some given historical, social, institutional, or contractual context. For example, there may be institutional reasons within a gentleman's club to always wear a tie to dinner. The existence of these reasons need not be constrained by the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning on the part of all agents to whom they apply. But then it is not plausible that these reasons are universal and necessarily normative for agents. It is natural to think that although agents who rationally choose to be members of the club may have normative reasons to wear a tie at dinner, agents who do not so choose can ignore this custom with rational impunity. They can do so provided the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning would not dictate their adoption of fancy gentleman's habits. Reasons deriving from the law of a repressive state in which one

has had the misfortune to be born provide another, and theoretically more interesting, example of this kind.

The notion of a normative reason differs from that of an institutional reason in that normative reasons are universal and necessarily normative for agents, whereas institutional reasons are neither. Normative reasons gain their universal and necessary normativity from the fact that they are grounded in something necessarily rationally relevant to all rational agents of a given kind. On a conception of normative reasons as grounded in a capacity for practical reasoning, the failure of an agent to act in accordance with normative reasons is a failure which the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning would record as such. It is thereby a failure on the agent's own terms, *qua* rational agent. Similarly, the success of an agent who acts on her normative reasons is an achievement which the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning would record as such, and thereby an achievement on the agent's own terms, *qua* rational agent. In contrast, a conception of normative reasons as divorced from the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning will not yield a non-trivial explanation of how practical rationality amounts to an achievement and practical irrationality amounts to a mistake on the agent's own terms, *qua* rational agent.¹⁷ A putative practical reason which is divorced from the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning is therefore vulnerable to the response facing all reasons generated by etiquette, law, and other institutional systems when confronted by an agent equipped with the ring of Gyges, namely: "So what?". A practical reason completely divorced from the capacity of agents for sound practical reasoning will be alien to that capacity to the extent that rational agents may not be able to make that reason truly their own. According to the rational intelligibility condition, normative reasons cannot be alien in this way. Normative reasons are reasons which agents are necessarily able to make their own insofar as they soundly exercise a relevant capacity for practical reasoning.

Second, it is arguable that there are contingently normative theoretical reasons existing relative to given psychological, social, historical, natural or supernatural facts. For example, there might be reasons to believe there are more than 1 million stars in the Milky Way. Such reasons are not plausibly constrained by the sound exercise of a capacity for theoretical reasoning on the part of rational agents. Arguably, such reasons exist at least partly in virtue of what is true about the world in the relevant respect, thereby constituting an objectively anchored domain of evidence. It is common ground among many philosophers and ordinary folk that the truth in astronomy and related areas of inquiry is independent of the upshots of any sound exercise of a capacity for theoretical reasoning. Truths about stars

and galaxies are normally thought to obtain independently of the responses of agents in even ideal conditions of rational inquiry. In this respect, such truths would not be like truths about normative reasons on the present view. But then neither is it plausible that these astronomical truths and the theoretical reasons they generate are universal and necessarily normative. It is natural to think that although agents who rationally choose to inquire into truths about astronomy have normative reasons to attune their beliefs to accord with astronomical evidence, agents who do not so chose can ignore these truths, and the evidence for them, with rational impunity. They can do so provided the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning would not dictate their adoption of fancy astronomers' habits. This is not to deny the existence of theoretical reasons to believe astronomical truths. Nor is it to deny that agents who ignore this evidence thereby fail to believe what they have theoretical reasons to believe, that they are to this extent theoretically irrational, and that they are thereby failing on their own terms qua theoretical reasoners. The claim is that the rational pursuit of truths about astronomy is just a subset of the ends a practically rational agent can set herself, and need not necessarily be among them. More generally, the claim is that there are cases in which one's nature as a theoretical reasoner is rationally questionable. Theoretical reasons, although they might be universal, are not generally rationally inescapable.¹⁸ At the very least, the pursuit about truth regarding theoretical matters of fact is rationally questionable in a way the pursuit of truth about how to act is not.¹⁹ In fact, the very act of rationally questioning the claims of any set of non-normative reasons demonstrates the rational inescapability of normative reasons. By questioning whether to pursue the truth about any subject matter X, where X is not the subject matter of how to act, one is thereby pursuing the truth about how to act. Similarly questioning the truth about how to act would be reflectively incoherent.

That theoretical and normative reasons differ with respect to the modal status of their normative claims explains why there should be no rational intelligibility constraint on the truths at which theoretical reasoning aims even if there is a rational intelligibility constraint on the truths at which practical reasoning aims. If the aim of theoretical reasoning is a set of truths the discovery of which bears no intrinsic relation to the sound exercise of a capacity for theoretical reasoning, it plausibly follows that the truths in question are possibly unknowable. It also plausibly follows that we could possibly never approach these truths by means of our best rational activities. While these sceptical possibilities are not entailed by the claim that theoretical reasons are only contingently normative, the latter claim does provide one explanation of why the sceptical scenario should have

been considered less of a threat in the domain of theoretical reasoning than in the domain of practical reasoning. It also provides one explanation of why some form of response dependent account is more plausible for discourse about normative reasons than for many other areas of discourse. The constraint that truth is necessarily normative is one that is absent from most, if not all, areas of discourse other than discourse about normative reasons.²⁰

5. AGAINST NORMATIVE REALISM

It is natural to think that if the rational intelligibility condition obtains, options cannot provide normative reasons in virtue of their nature. After all, the realist condition that some options do provide reasons in virtue of their nature is among the principal motivations for normative realism. The apparent incompatibility of the rational intelligibility condition with normative realism therefore suggests that common sense morality is incoherent in its commitment to both the realist and the rational intelligibility condition. If so, common sense morality is faced with a dilemma. Either we maintain the rational intelligibility condition at the cost of losing our entitlement to the claim that options provide normative reasons in virtue of their nature. Or we maintain the realist condition at the cost of losing our entitlement to the claim that reasons can be normative. If maintaining the rational intelligibility condition is necessary to explain the universal and necessary normativity of normative reasons, the only option consistent with continued commitment to their existence would seem to be rejection of the realist condition. The obvious problem with this alternative is that much common sense moral reasoning undeniably proceeds on the assumption that options provide normative reasons in virtue of their nature. Rejection of the realist condition would make a mystery of this fact.

Yet wholesale rejection of the realist condition might not be necessary to save the common sense commitment to normative reasons. While the response dependent construal of normative reasons entailed by the rational intelligibility condition is inconsistent with the response independence attributed to reasons by the normative realist, it is not inconsistent with the realist condition, suitably interpreted. True, the response dependence of normative reasons is incompatible with the metaphysical claim that options provide normative reasons in virtue of their nature and regardless of the responses of agents to them in different circumstances. But the response dependence of normative reasons is consistent with the claim that practically rational agents would deliberate as if, or even on the explicit assumption that, options provide normative reasons in virtue of their

nature and regardless of the responses of agents to them in different circumstances. Agents in conditions where they soundly exercise a capacity for practical reasoning could consistently favour an approach to practical reasoning on which options are treated *as if* they have rational privilege in virtue of their nature. The responses of agents in conditions favourable to the evaluation of methods of practical reasoning might favour the application of the realist condition in first order moral reasoning as an effective way to sort options which do from options which do not provide normative reasons.

There is a principled rationale for incorporating the realist condition in a response dependent account of normative reasons. First, agents who deliberate in conditions that are less than maximally favourable for the selection of rational options could be better at approximating to such conditions by not always having the explicit aim of getting into them. As the so-called paradox of hedonism shows, the best way to get something is not always to aim to get it.²¹ However, the underlying aim of practical reasoning is not to get into maximally favourable conditions for the selection of rational options, but rather to settle on rational options themselves. In order to do so it is not necessary to actually be in maximally favourable conditions for the selection of rational options. It is sufficient that one actually favours options favoured in such hypothetical conditions, and that one does so in a manner which would be favoured in such conditions. An agent in favourable conditions might prefer that you pick the end you immediately fancy in a state of euphoria rather than reflect on which end an agent in favourable conditions would favour. Doing the latter could destroy the euphoria giving point to your selection of ends in the first place. Selecting options in a manner favoured in favourable conditions does not entail a preoccupation with the nature of conditions favourable for the rational selection of options rather than with the nature of options themselves. Agents who focus their attention on the features of options to be selected could be better at picking out the options which would be favoured in maximally favourable conditions than agents who focus their attention exclusively on which options would be favoured in maximally favourable conditions.

One might worry that a response dependent account along these lines would make a mystery of what would take place in maximally favourable conditions for the selection of options.²² One might think there are no contents left on which these agents can deliberate, and that they would be left victims of a mode of purely passive causal receptivity. True, agents in maximally favourable conditions for the selection of rational options would not plausibly be occupied primarily with the nature of these conditions. They would focus their attention on available options in order to

determine which ones to favour. However, doing so need not amount to taking up a purely passive mode of causal receptivity. Any process of option selection of any minimal degree of complexity would require sufficient knowledge of available options to distinguish them from each other. A necessary condition for the acquisition of this knowledge is a direct focus on the nature of the options themselves. Once this knowledge is acquired, differential characteristics of the options can be used to distinguish options favoured from options not favoured. For example, a pleasure-producing characteristic of jokes can be used to distinguish jokes favourably with respect to insults lacking this characteristic. The pleasure-producing characteristic can then come to play an analogous role in the agent's practical reasoning as the corresponding reason-making feature postulated by the normative realist. The agent can go on to select options directly with reference to the presence or absence of this characteristic, and without reflecting further on the nature of the conditions of its endorsement. The agent can also favour the options in question intrinsically (for their own sake), rather than instrumentally (as means to ends).²³ Given the rich phenomenology provided by the reflection on options themselves, there is no compulsion to describe this process of coming to care about something for its own sake in favourable conditions as a mode of pure causal receptivity.

The possibility of rational guidance by the characteristics of options themselves in favourable conditions is transferred to agents who engage in practical reasoning in less than maximally favourable conditions. First, on the assumption that the agents in question have good evidence that some characteristic would be taken to make a difference in maximally favourable conditions, they are correspondingly entitled to treat that characteristic as making a rational difference to their own deliberations without reflecting further regarding favourable conditions. Second, on the assumption that the agents in question are entitled to regard their actual conditions as approximating to maximally favourable conditions, they are entitled to treat the characteristics that make a difference to them as actually making a rational difference. Against the background of a widely shared capacity for practical reasoning in conditions generally favourable for its sound exercise, both assumptions are plausible. Whether this background actually obtains is a question we need not settle here. That the background in question is widely *believed* to obtain is plausible enough. One might suspect that this goes some way toward explaining the extraordinary confidence frequently placed in the allegedly reason-making status of various characteristics of options, and the consequent prominence of the realist condition in common sense morality.

While agents may often assume that they approximate to maximally favourable conditions for the selection of options, they sometimes know that they do not. Agents are sometimes unclear, either about what options would be favoured in favourable conditions, or about what the relevant conditions would be like. In either case, direct preoccupation with the nature of reflective conditions is appropriate. The reflection in question can take several forms. In the former case, reflection could take the form of make-believing that one is in certain counterfactual conditions in order to discover what options one would favour there. In the latter case, reflection could take the form of a process of determining what one would presently regard as an improvement in one's deliberative circumstances, be it the removal of psychological disturbances, an increase in knowledge of options, or whatever. In either case, the reflective process is likely to constitute a step back from the perspective normally taken in deliberation. To this extent, the process might be describable as taking place at a second, or higher, level of practical reasoning.²⁴ It would be mistaken to think that this reflective process is vulnerable to Wiggins's complaint that it may presuppose a perspective of reflection so divorced from the ordinary concerns of practically reasoning as to render incoherent the idea of anyone taking it up.²⁵ In the first place, the question of when we should trust our normative responses is an undeniable feature of common sense ethical thought itself, incorporating the question of how to improve our normative beliefs by improving our circumstances of reflection. In the second place, both the realist and rational intelligibility condition are implicit in common sense ethical thought. The apparent conflict between them is therefore discoverable from within common sense moral thinking, and does not depend on taking up any "the outer perspective", from where nothing is accorded normative significance.²⁶ On the contrary, both the conflict and its resolution are located within the domain of what is intelligible from the "inner perspective" of practical reasoning. Not only does the perspective of the response dependent theorist remain one from which the perspective of ordinary practical reasoning is rationally intelligible. It might be regarded as a perspective yielding a charitable interpretation of ordinary practical reasoning as reflectively coherent.²⁷ Finally, Wiggins's own account of the truth conditions of ethical statements is equally a response dependent account on which the true significance of that dependence is not pre-reflectively transparent to all moral thinkers.²⁸ If the present account is threatened by inconsistency, then so is his.

A response dependent account of normative reasons can accommodate the common sense commitment to the realist condition, provided this condition is interpreted as a higher order constraint on the character of

sound first order practical reasoning. The dilemma of choosing between the realist and the rational intelligibility condition is avoidable by adopting a response dependent account of normative reasons accommodating both, suitably understood. On such an account, the rational relevance of the nature of options is maintained by making them the focus of first order practical reasoning as prescribed in conditions favourable for the evaluation of methods of practical reasoning. But equally, the universal and necessary normativity of normative reasons is maintained by the postulation of a rationally intelligible link between their existence and the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning. A response dependent account of normative reasons would therefore seem to preserve the internal coherence of the common sense commitment to normative reasons. The normative realist, on the other hand, would seem committed to sever the link between normative reasons and the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning which explains how reasons can be universal and necessarily normative. The apparent upshot is that normative realism should be rejected in favour of a response dependent account of normative reasons incorporating the rational intelligibility condition.

This upshot has two significant consequences for the contemporary debate about realism in ethics. The first is that the postulation of the realist condition as a constraint on sound practical reason enables us to give alternative sense to Korsgaard's claim that although moral realism fails to answer the normative question, there is a sense in which "realism is true after all".²⁹ What is central to Korsgaard is the Kantian idea that agents need to be guided by maxims in order to construct the practical identities on which their agency depends, this fact making some maxims intrinsically normative for agents.³⁰ What the present argument shows is that a response dependency theorist who fails to be convinced by Korsgaard's Kantian account of normativity can still agree that there is a sense in which realism is true after all. For the rejection of normative realism is consistent with acceptance of the realist condition as a constraint on sound practical reasoning.

The second upshot is that the presence of the realist condition among the commitments constitutive of common sense moral discourse cannot be counted as evidence in favour normative realism. The realist condition can be equally vindicated on a response dependent account of normative reasons incorporating the rational intelligibility condition. Given the use of unqualified appeals to the realist condition in support of normative realism, the significance of this consequence for the contemporary debate cannot be underestimated. The argument of the present paper suggests that normative realists should look elsewhere for evidence in support of their view.³¹

6. THREE OBJECTIONS

(a) Normative Reasons and Agent Rationality

It might be objected that the response dependent account of normative reasons wrongly presupposes the reduction of the question of an agent's normative reasons to the question of the agent's rationality. Thus, it has been argued that while there is a constitutive link between the sound exercise of an agent's capacity for practical reasoning and that agent's rationality, there need be no such link between the exercise of an agent's capacity for practical reasoning and that agent's normative reasons.³² While an agent's rationality is given by the proper functioning of her reasoning capacity, the agent's normative reasons can be given by the nature of the options facing her. If so, there is conceptual space for normative reasons obtaining independently of the responses of agents in conditions where a capacity for practical reasoning has been soundly exercised.

The distinction between reasons and rationality is insufficient on its own to undermine the response dependent account of normative reasons. The response dependence of normative reasons is compatible with the claim that some agents (children, drug-addicts, or the brainwashed) can find themselves in circumstances where no exercise of their capacity for practical reasoning will reveal to them the normative reasons they have. The normative reasons applying to agents in such conditions can be given by the responses of agents (themselves or other) in circumstances where the relevant reasoning capacity has been soundly exercised. It is consistent with this account that agents whose circumstances make the grasp of their normative reasons impossible can still apply their capacity for practical reasoning to better or worse effect. It is therefore also consistent with this account that agents can fail to grasp the normative reasons that apply to them while approximating to a state of practical rationality to different degrees. It does not follow that the normative reasons in question exist in complete independence from the responses of agents in conditions where they have soundly exercised a capacity for practical reasoning. On the contrary, the argument for the rational intelligibility condition suggests that the relevant reasons must be resolutely response dependent. The distinction between reasons and rationality is therefore neutral between response dependent and response independent accounts of normative reasons. There is no support for the normative realist in the fact that there is a potential distinction between the question of an agent's normative reasons and the question of that agent's rationality.

(b) Normative Realist Explanations

It might be objected that any mystery about how reasons can be universal and necessarily normative on a realist account derives from a failure to appreciate the explanatory resources available to the realist. Thus, realist explanations of rational privilege can mention the presence of properties of options qualifying these options as reason giving, such as their intrinsic and extrinsic value. For any reason giving option, the realist may claim to be in principle equipped with a list of normative properties allegedly possessed by that option, and a (potentially infinite) list of natural properties on which these normative properties supervene or otherwise depend. Any such explanation of the rational privilege of options is bound to come to an end somewhere, but so does every explanation, and any theory is bound to take some facts as primitive. The normative realist might therefore maintain that the existence in principle of such explanations for any rationally privileged option should remove all mystery attached to the normativity of response independent normative reasons.³³

This objection fails. The original mystery remains even in the presence of a realist explanation of the nature of reason giving options. Suppose there is no rationally intelligible link between the properties cited in an explanation of the rational privilege of some end and the favourable responses of agents to those properties in conditions where they have soundly exercised a capacity for practical reasoning. It is then obscure how these agents can exhibit a rational defect in being indifferent to that end. An agent whose sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning would make her respond favourably to the end can be conceded to have normative reasons to favour it. But it remains mysterious how the same could be true of agents for whom a sound exercise of practical reasoning would not make them so respond. Agents in the latter position will obviously be able to grasp the intelligibility of the end as *possibly* favoured. This follows trivially from the definition of an end. What the realist explanation fails to show is why the end must be necessarily normative for them and their failure to endorse it a failure on their own terms qua rational agents. There is no rational compulsion for the agents in question to favour this end rather than any other in virtue of their nature as rational agents. Continued insistence that explanation of the nature of options can in principle account for the universal and necessary normativity of reasons is at best able to produce a stand-off between the normative realist and a response dependency theorist.

(c) Rational Luck

The normative realist might claim that the universal and necessary normativity of reasons is compatible with agents genuinely acting *on* their reasons as a result of a fortuitous correspondence between those reasons and the upshots of a sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning. An agent's possession of a capacity for practical reasoning, the degree of development of that capacity, and the availability of circumstances for its exercise, all depend on facts external to the agent's exercise of her practical reasoning capacity, such as mental constitution and social environment. It follows that the practical rationality of any agent is partly a matter of brute luck on any account of normative reasons. If so, it might be questioned whether the dependence of rational motivation on the fortuitous correspondence between reasons and the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning can be used to undermine normative realism in favour of a response dependent account of normative reasons.³⁴

The necessity of brute luck beyond the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning must be conceded on any account of how normative reasons are possible. The possession of a capacity for practical reasoning and the obtaining of circumstances for its sound exercise are clearly matters which are partly external to any agent's exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning. It does not follow that a response dependent account is equally reliant on elements of fortune as a realist account. On a response dependent account incorporating the rational intelligibility condition, an agent's normative reasons are a function of the sound exercise of a rational capacity, given that the agent is lucky enough to possess it. Rational agents necessarily have a rational interest in their normative reasons, qua their nature as rational agents, and regardless of whether circumstances for the sound exercise of their reasoning capacity actually obtain.³⁵ The reasons in question are necessarily normative for rational agents because, qua rational agents, they must regard the failure to reason soundly as a failure on their own terms. On a normative realist account, an agent's grasp of her reasons implies a further element of fortune, namely the correspondence between the upshots of the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning and a domain of reasons which obtain in complete independence from those upshots. Given this independence, there is no rational compulsion for rational agents to regard failure to grasp these putative reasons as a failure on their own terms. On the contrary, failure to grasp the reasons postulated by the normative realist would seem to be compatible with maximum success on one's own terms qua rational agent. The further element of fortune implied by the dissociation between reasons and the sound exercise of practical reasoning brings with it an element of mystery about how reasons can be

universal and necessarily normative which a response dependent account can avoid. A response dependent account incorporating the rational intelligibility condition therefore retains a genuine advantage over normative realism with respect to the universal and necessary normativity of reasons, notwithstanding the ubiquitous presence of rational luck.

7. CONCLUSION

The above discussion of the realist and rational intelligibility conditions on normative reasons might be thought to justify either of two conclusions, depending on one's independent philosophical allegiances. The strongest conclusion, and the one least likely to appeal to those independently drawn towards realism in ethics, is that normative realism is incoherent because it is incompatible with the universal and necessary normativity of normative reasons. Consequently, the only account of normative reasons with any chance of success is a response dependent account postulating a non-trivial connection between normative reasons and the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning. Whether the account should take a broadly Humean, Kantian, or Aristotelian form is then a further, and open, question.

The weaker conclusion is one which even philosophers attracted to realism should be able to contemplate. This conclusion is that a response dependent account of normative reasons receives *prima facie* support from the fact that it accommodates both the universal and necessary normativity of reasons and the idea that it rationally matters what the nature of options are. Normative realists are thereby stripped of the right to appeal to the realist condition in support of their view. Realists are also *prima facie* committed to the abandonment of the rational intelligibility condition, thereby leaving the universal and necessary normativity of reasons unexplained.³⁶

For the purposes of the present argument it makes no difference which of these conclusions the reader is inclined to draw.

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NOTES

¹ For discussion of the notion of response dependence, see e.g., Pettit (1990), Wright (1992), and Johnston (1993).

² See e.g., Grice (1967), Bond (1982), Parfit (1984, 1997), and Dancy (2000).

³ For discussion, see e.g., Williams (1981), Smith (1994), and Dancy (2000).

⁴ For discussion of two kinds of contingently normative reasons, see Section 3 below.

⁵ See e.g., Williams (1981) and Smith (1994).

⁶ Even doing nothing requires strict rational discipline. See e.g., Bennett (1994).

⁷ By “rational agent” here I mean “agent capable of practical reasoning”. Not all rational agents are practically rational. There is a murky question concerning the uniqueness or otherwise of the capacity for practical reasoning which characterises rational agents. This question need not detain us for the purposes of the present argument, for which it suffices that we restrict the domain of the argument to human beings, and accept the assumption that there is a capacity for practical reasoning which characterises humans.

⁸ For a critical discussion of a corresponding constraint in the theory of knowledge, see e.g., Goldman (1986).

⁹ For a parallel argument for the existence of a link between the responses of agents and the existence of other normative properties, such as the funniness of jokes, see Wright (1992). Wright does not discuss the notion of a normative reason. See also Blackburn (1998) and Wiggins (1991).

¹⁰ See e.g., Korsgaard (1995, pp. 14ff). See also Korsgaard (1983).

¹¹ “...the answer must actually succeed in *addressing* someone in that position ...the answer we need is really the first person answer, the one that satisfies *us* when we *ourselves* ask the normative question” (Korsgaard, 1995, pp. 16–17.)

¹² “A normative moral theory must be one that allows us to act in the full knowledge of what morality is and why we are susceptible to its influence, and at the same time to believe that our actions are justified and make sense” (Korsgaard, 1995, p. 17).

¹³ A random sample of Korsgaard’s normative questions: (a) “... what justifies the claims that morality makes on us?” (Korsgaard, 1995, pp. 9–10); (b) “The normative question is a first person question that arises for the moral agent who must actually do what morality says... You then ask the philosopher: must I really do this? Why must I do it? And his answer is his answer to the normative question”. (Korsgaard, 1995, p. 16); (c) “To ask the normative question is to ask whether our unreflective moral beliefs and motives can withstand the test of reflection” (Korsgaard, 1995, p. 47); (d) “... whether we can endorse our human nature” (Korsgaard, 1995, p. 54). The relevance of questions (a) and (b) to the present argument is obvious. The relevance of (c) and (d) is less obvious.

¹⁴ Korsgaard’s neo-Kantianism is embodied in her third criterion on a theory of normativity. According to Korsgaard, moral claims “... issue in a deep sense from our sense of who we are”. A successful answer to the normative question “... must show that sometimes doing the wrong thing is as bad or worse than death” (Korsgaard, 1995, p. 17). This criterion is not plausibly implied by the rational intelligibility condition, even if one ties the question of existence to one’s nature as a rational agent. It may be possible to question one’s rational nature, perhaps in response to paradoxes of rationality, or whatnot.

¹⁵ See e.g., Korsgaard (1986), McDowell, (1995), Williams (1981), Parfit (1997), and Scanlon (1998).

¹⁶ See e.g., Parfit (1997, p. 130): “Reasons for acting, I believe, are all external. When we have a reason to do something this reason is provided by the facts We have reason to try to achieve some aim when, and because, it is relevantly worth achieving”. Dancy (2000, pp. 69–70) similarly claims that some of our reasons are given by “features of the situation” rather than by our beliefs or desires.

¹⁷ A trivial explanation: “the success or failure of a practical reasoner in grasping a normative reason the existence of which is completely divorced from the sound exercise of a capacity for practical reasoning is a failure on the agent’s own terms qua practical reasoner because a practical reasoner is seeking to discover the reasons there are”. For a realist account coming close to embracing this kind of triviality, see e.g., Parfit (1997).

¹⁸ It is consistent with this claim that all rational agents have reasons to aim at enough true beliefs to successfully promote their desires, whatever they may be. See e.g., Bernard Williams (1995).

¹⁹ I assume that asking oneself how to act is paramount to asking oneself what one has normative reason to do, and that claims about normative reasons have truth-conditions. For the purposes of the present argument these assumptions are harmless.

²⁰ For some related comparisons between practical reasoning and reasoning about other matters of fact, see e.g., Harman (1977), Millgram (1996), and Wiggins (1991).

²¹ For a classical treatment, see Sidgwick (1874). For a contemporary discussion, see e.g., Parfit (1984).

²² See e.g., Johnston (1989), and Broome (1993).

²³ On the present account options are extrinsically reason giving in the sense of being appropriately responded to in favourable circumstances. It does not follow that they are extrinsically reason giving in the sense of standing in instrumental relations to other options. Confusion between these two senses of being extrinsically reason giving may underlie some of the resistance towards response dependent accounts of normative reasons. See e.g., Korsgaard (1983).

²⁴ For a discussion of this distinction in the case of moral reasoning, see e.g., Hare (1982).

²⁵ See e.g., Wiggins (1991). Wiggins’s target is a view claiming that the objects of our concern have no intrinsic normative significance due to the absence of normative significance in what he calls “the outer perspective”, from which only the primary qualities discovered by natural science are discernible. For a more sympathetic account of the outer perspective, see e.g., Williams (1985) and Nagel (1986).

²⁶ See Wiggins (1991, pp. 99ff).

²⁷ See Wiggins (1991, pp. 111ff): “. . . we can supersede the separate outer and inner perspectives by a common perspective that is accessible to both theorist and participant” (p. 115). A similar interpretative strategy is proposed in Jackson (1998), who calls this perspective “mature folk morality”. For doubts about this interpretative reading, see e.g., Lillehammer (1999).

²⁸ ‘Surely it can be true both that we desire x because we think x good and that x is good because x is such that we desire x . It does not count against the point that the explanation of the ‘because’ is different in each direction. Nor does it count against the particular anti-non-cognitivist position that is now emerging . . . that the second ‘because’ might have to be explained in some such way as this: such desiring by human beings directed in this way is one part of what is required for there to be such a thing as the perspective from which the non-instrumental goodness of x is there to be perceived’ (Wiggins, 1991, p. 106). The explanation of the ‘because’ here is clearly a theoretical matter, potentially opaque to the

individual practical reasoner. The more delicate differences between Wiggins's account and that proposed in the present paper do not matter here.

²⁹ Korsgaard (1995, p. 108).

³⁰ The relevant passage reads: "A good maxim is good in virtue of its internal structure. Its internal structure, its form, makes it fit to be willed as a law. A good maxim is therefore an *intrinsically normative entity*. So realism is true after all" (Korsgaard, 1995, p. 108).

³¹ This is not to say that no such arguments exist. For one such argument, see Lillehammer (2000).

³² For this distinction, see e.g., McDowell (1995) and Scanlon (1998).

³³ For discussion of normative realist explanation, see e.g., Lillehammer (2000).

³⁴ For a discussion of the wider ethical significance of luck, see e.g., Williams (1981).

³⁵ They also have a rational interest in developing that capacity to some, possibly minimal, extent.

³⁶ The realist might want to give up on the rational intelligibility condition altogether, given the admitted difficulty of giving a coherent description of it. It is a moot semantic point whether giving up on the universal and necessary normativity of reasons is compatible with retaining the title "normative realist".

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Faculty of Philosophy
 University of Cambridge
 Sidgwick Avenue
 Cambridge
 UK
 E-mail: hl201@cam.ac.uk

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