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Competing Reasons*

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1 Competition Between Reasons

One of the most important facts about the normative domain is that some considerations are contributory, rather than decisive, when it comes to determining what we ought to, must, or may do.[1] They provide defeasible support or defeasible opposition to an option. In epistemology, the theory of practical reasoning, and ethics, it is standard to appeal to contributory or *pro tanto* normative reasons to capture this fact. Most of our options have some reasons in favor and some reasons against; to determine which option to take, we have to determine how these reasons compare. In particular, on the standard view reasons compete with one another, and the outcome of this competition determines what you ought to, must, or may do.[2] That action *A* would be mildly pleasant is a reason to do *A*, and that an incompatible action *B* would prevent a great deal of suffering is a reason to do *B*. These reasons compete with one another, since *A* and *B* are incompatible. If there are no other relevant reasons, then what you ought to, must, or may do—*A* or *B*—will depend on the outcome of this competition.

An important task for normative theory, then, is to explain how the competition between reasons works. A large part of this task will involve investigating relationships of defeat between reasons, since when reasons compete, at least in many cases, some reasons will defeat others—that is how they win the competition. Though the concept of defeat is perhaps more familiar in epistemology, I will be concerned mostly with the practical domain.

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[1] See Ross (1930) for an early and very influential development of this idea; for a recent overview, see Lord and Maguire (2016).

[2] I'm using this slightly long-winded phrase, 'what you ought to, must, or may do', because the differences between these different normative statuses will be important later. To note the difference between 'ought' and 'must' here, consider the following, which may be said about some supererogatory action: "Well, no, I'm not saying you *must* do it, but you really ought to".

Following Pollock (1974), epistemologists have focused primarily on two distinct kinds of defeat: rebutting defeat and undercutting defeat. One reason rebuts another when it is a stronger reason for a conflicting option. In the case above, for example, it is plausible that the reason for *B*, that it would prevent a lot of suffering, rebuts the reason for the conflicting option A, that it would be mildly pleasant. Importantly, in cases of (mere) rebutting, the defeated reason is in an important sense still "in force". It isn't that there is no reason for *A* in this case; after all, it would be mildly pleasant. It's just that this reason is (rebuttingly) defeated, or outweighed. If these are the only reasons in play, then it's very plausible at least that you ought to do *B*, and perhaps that you must or are required to do *B*, in which case it's not true that you may do *A*, or that *A* is permissible.

One reason undercuts another, on the other hand, when the first does undermine the second's status as a reason—to use a common metaphor, it attacks the connection between the consideration and the option it would otherwise support. That you promised to buy me lunch is, or would be, a reason to do so. But that the promise was coerced or given under duress plausibly undercuts this reason, so that in fact it is no reason at all to buy me lunch. So the first important difference between cases of rebutting and cases of undercutting is that in the former, but not the latter, the defeated reason is still in force.[3] The second important difference is that in cases of undercutting, unlike in cases of rebutting, the defeating reason need not, and typically will not, be a reason for a conflicting option. Note that the fact that your promise was coerced need not be a reason against buying me lunch, or a reason to do anything incompatible with buying me lunch, even though it does defeat—in an undercutting way—the promissory reason you would otherwise have to buy me lunch.

A third way in which reasons compete, at least in the practical domain, is captured in Raz's (1999) notion of an *exclusionary* reason. There is some debate about the best way to understand exclusionary reasons, but on a natural understanding, one reason excludes another when the first is a reason to take the second out of consideration. To borrow Raz's example, suppose I promise my partner that my decision about where to send our daughter to school will be guided entirely by the quality of the education she would get. In that case, that Fancy Private School is more expensive than Good Public School just isn't something I should take into account in deciding where to send her. It may seem that my promise is an undercutting defeater of the financial reason to send our daughter to Good Public School. But in fact there is an important difference between undercutters, as in the coerced promise case above, and exclusionary reasons.[4] In the undercutting case, the initial reason is no longer in force at all—it

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[3] In fact this is too simple. There are cases of *partial undercutting* in which a reason is not fully undercut, but just weakened. So a bit more precisely: when a reason is merely rebutted, it retains its full strength, but when it is undercut, it loses at least some—and perhaps all—of its strength. See Schroeder (2007), Chapter 5; compare Dancy (2004), Chapter 3, on attenuators.

[4] See Horty (2012) and Horty and Nair (fc) for the claim that exclusionary reasons are just undercutters. See Raz (1999), p. 184 and Whiting (2017), p. 400, for a rejection of this identification.

is just not a reason anymore. But in the exclusionary case, the reason is in force, it's just that I have a reason not to take it into account in my deliberation.[5] In the undercutting case, there is no reason to be taken into account. Nevertheless, even though the reason in the exclusionary case is in force, it will lose the competition—in fact, since it is taken out of consideration, it doesn't even get to compete.[6]

So we have seen three different ways in which a reason may be defeated, or in which reasons can compete. The reason may be rebutted, undercut, or excluded. Arguably, the most straightforward of these is rebutting defeat, in which a reason is defeated by a stronger reason for a conflicting option. One goal for this paper is to suggest that rebutting defeat is actually not as straightforward as it seems. In particular, I will argue that we should recognize two different varieties of rebutting defeat. First, there are cases in which a reason for one option is defeated by a stronger reason for an incompatible option. Second, there are cases in which a reason for one option is defeated by a stronger reason against that same option (or vice versa). Many philosophers have not recognized this distinction between two kinds of rebutting defeat, I believe, because they have not recognized a distinction between reasons for and reasons against. It is a common, though usually implicit, assumption that reasons against an option are just reasons for incompatible alternatives. I argue in Snedegar (2018) that this is a mistake. In this paper, I explore the consequences of recognizing the distinction between reasons for and reasons against for accounts of how reasons compete, focusing on rebutting defeat. The overall goal is to make some progress in understanding how the competition between *pro tanto* reasons determines the overall status of our options.

First I'll introduce what I take to be the most common way of thinking about the competition between reasons, which I call *balance* accounts. Then I'll argue this picture—as so far developed—is inadequate, primarily because it does not recognize the importance of reasons against. I then consider a very different way of thinking about the competition between reasons, which I call *criticism-based* accounts. This kind of view does recognize the importance of reasons against, but misses out on the importance of the competition between reasons bearing on competing options. Finally, I sketch a positive view that incorporates elements of both kinds of view. Open questions remain, but I argue that it gives us the beginnings of an attractive account of how the competition between reasons determines the overall status of our options.

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[5] Whiting (2017) makes essentially the same point, but he understands exclusionary reasons as *second-order* reasons not to base one's actions or attitudes (including decisions) on certain ordinary, first-order reasons. Raz (1999), especially in the postscript, often seems to understand them in this way, as well.

[6] I am glossing over some complications here. For example, there may be cases in which the excluded reason is so weighty that it should *not* be excluded. A full theory of the competition between reasons, and in particular of how exclusionary reasons function, will need to explain this.

2 Balance Accounts

According to balance accounts, reasons compete by weighing against each other in a way that's broadly analogous to how physical objects on a scale compete to let us see which is the heaviest.[7] In fact, discussions of competing reasons often use a scale as a metaphor.[8] The reasons are like differently weighted marbles that go on the pans of a scale, which correspond to the conflicting options. The pan with the most weight in it once all the reasons have been taken into account corresponds to the option you are required to perform. Asking what there is 'most reason' to do is naturally understood as asking about the total amount of support provided by the individual reasons for each of the options, which involves the accrual of these reasons.[9] This is probably the most common picture of the competition between reasons; it is suggested by the platitudinous claim that you are required to do what you have *most reason* to do.[10] This gives us the most natural version of the balance account:[11]

> **Balance:** You are required to *A* when the reasons for *A* outweigh the reasons for any of the alternatives.

The intuitive thought here is that if you have more reason for *A* than for anything else, then you are required to *A*. On this view, we imagine the deliberating agent facing a range of alternatives. Each alternative will have some reasons in its favor. We weigh these up and find out where the balance of reasons lies; that is the option the agent is required to take. This picture relies heavily on rebutting defeat, of course: the reasons for incompatible options compete, and the weightier ones rebut the less weighty ones.[12]

This is a very natural picture, but as so far described, it faces problems. Suppose that pressing either button 1 or button 2 will guarantee that I get a particular $100 bill. But while pressing button 1 has no cost, pressing button 2 will deliver a painful electrical shock. Assuming these are the only relevant factors in this case, it is clear that I am required to press button 1 and that

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[7] A different metaphor comes from Ross (1930), who thinks of the competition between *pro tanto* considerations as analogous to the competition between different forces acting on an object. I take the two physical metaphors to suggest the very similar conceptions of the competition between reasons.

[8] See, e.g., Broome (2004).

[9] On accrual, see Nair (2016).

[10] Often authors use 'ought' instead of 'required' here. I think that most of them have in mind what I'll mean by 'required', including that you'd be acting impermissibly by not doing what you "ought" (in their sense) to do. In any case, this won't matter much for my discussion of the Balance Account, though the difference between these overall normative statuses will become important later.

[11] Compare Parfit (2011), p. 32, Schroeder (2015), and Lord (2018), p. 10-11.

[12] The picture will be more sophisticated than this, to accommodate undercutting defeat, as well as what Dancy (2004) calls enablers, disablers, intensifiers, and attenuators, at least.

I am required not to press button 2. But note that in this case, my reason for pressing button 1 is the same as my reason for pressing button 2—doing so will get me $100. So I do not have more reason for pressing button 1 than for pressing button 2, and so, according to **Balance**, it isn't true that I am required to press button 1. What we need, clearly, is to add reasons *against*: there is a reason against pressing button 2—the electrical shock—that is not a reason against pressing button 1, and this explains why pressing 1 is required and why pressing 2 is impermissible.

This problem may seem fairly obvious, and so you may worry that I've been unfair to defenders of balance accounts. The reason this problem hasn't been apparent, I believe, is that defenders have (in most cases, implicitly) made the assumption mentioned in the introduction, that reasons against an option are just reasons for alternatives to that option. If this were true, then **Balance** *would* take reasons against into account, since reasons against just are reasons for alternatives. The obvious thought in this case is that if we understand the fact that pressing button 2 would give you a shock as a reason for the alternative to pressing 2—that is, pressing 1—then we get an extra reason for pressing 1, and so that is what you are required to do.

An alternative, defended by Schroeder (2007), can also avoid this problem. This is because Schroeder understands the relevant kind of competition to be the competition between reasons for an option and reasons against that option. However, Schroeder makes exactly this kind of assumption about reasons against: he assumes that reasons *against* an option are simply reasons *for* not performing that option.[13] So his version of the balance account is not so different from **Balance**, after all; it's just **Balance** with a particular conception of what the alternatives to *A* are—namely, not doing *A*. The important thing is that both focus just on the competition between reasons for incompatible options.

In fact it is important that Schroeder does make this assumption, because otherwise his account faces a similar problem. Suppose that in the case above, the electrical shock that I will receive if I press button 2 is mild enough that I would be happy to endure it to receive $100. That is, the reason *against* pressing button 2 is weaker than the reason for pressing button 2. So according to Schroeder's view, it looks like I am required to press button 2, which is false. But if reasons against an option are simply reasons for not performing that option, we may be able to avoid this problem. In particular, if we can assume that the reason for pressing button 1—that it will get me $100—is a reason for not pressing button 2—that is, given Schroeder's assumption, a reason *against* pressing button 2—then we can avoid the result that I am required to press button 2.[14]

So the assumption that reasons against are simply reasons for alternatives helps different versions of the balance account avoid problems. Moreover, this assumption is a very natural

[13] See Schroeder (2015) for relevant discussion, and Nagel (1970), p. 47, for the same assumption.

[14] See Pendlebury (ms), who also makes this observation.

one to come to if you begin with the balancing metaphor, and then want to accommodate reasons against. We know how to think about reasons for on this picture: they're like marbles that go into the relevant pan. It isn't immediately obvious how to build in reasons against, on the other hand. But if these are just reasons for alternatives, then we know how to accommodate them. Less metaphorically, this assumption will simplify our theory of the competition between reasons, since we only have to understand one kind of rebutting defeat: the kind that holds between reasons for incompatible options. But as I argue in the next section, the assumption that reasons against an option are simply reasons for alternatives to that option is false. So we cannot appeal to this assumption to defend the balancing account.

3 Reasons For and Reasons Against

I will begin by introducing a paradigmatic example of a reason against. This is borrowed from Greenspan (2005), who also argues (in a different way) for a sharp distinction between reasons for and reasons against. Then I will consider various ways of trying to reduce this reason against the option to a reason for alternatives, and argue that none are satisfactory.[15] This will support the claim that the reason against relation is distinct from the reason for relation, and thus the claim that our theory of the competition between reasons should account for both the competition between reasons for competing options and the competition between reasons for an option and reasons against that same option.

Suppose that I am trying to decide which shirt to wear: the blue one, the red one, or the green one. The blue shirt is boring. This fact is clearly relevant to the choice at hand. This is because it's a reason against wearing the blue shirt. On the view that reasons against are simply reasons for alternatives, its being a reason against wearing the blue shirt must amount to its being a reason for alternatives to wearing the blue shirt. The important question, then, is: *which* of the alternatives?

Perhaps the most natural answer—which has been endorsed by Nagel (1970) and, as we saw in the previous section, Schroeder (2007)—is that reasons against an action are just reasons for *not* performing that action. So to say that the fact that the blue shirt is boring is a reason against wearing the blue shirt is just to say that this fact is a reason for not wearing the blue shirt. I believe that this answer is plausible when we think about the choice the agent is facing as a choice about *whether* to wear the blue shirt—that is, a choice between wearing the blue shirt and not wearing the blue shirt. But in this case, the choice is more fine-grained than this: it is a choice between wearing the blue shirt, wearing the red shirt, and wearing the green shirt. Reasons against wearing the blue shirt, like the fact that it is boring, are clearly relevant for this choice, and not only the more coarse-grained choice between wearing the blue shirt and not wearing it, since they count against wearing the blue shirt. But as so far stated, the view in question doesn't really tell us *how* it bears on this choice. It must count against wearing

[15] See Snedegar (2018) for more detailed versions of these arguments.

the blue shirt by counting in favor of some alternative option(s). But not wearing the blue shirt is not one of the options. The same kind of objection would apply to the view that a reason against wearing the blue shirt is just a reason for the disjunction of the alternatives, since the disjunction of the alternatives is not one of the options, either.[16]

A second initially plausible answer is that the fact that the blue shirt is boring is a reason for *each* of the alternatives. Just as a reason for an option is or indicates something positive (in some sense) about that option, a reason against an option is or indicates something negative about that option—something we'd like to avoid if possible. Wearing the red shirt would let me avoid what's bad about wearing the blue shirt, namely its boringness. So would wearing the green shirt. But this view is false. Suppose that the green shirt is even more boring than the blue shirt. Then the fact that the blue shirt is boring—though it is a reason against wearing the blue shirt—is not a reason for wearing the green shirt. So reasons against an option are not simply reasons for each of the alternatives. Moreover, this case shows that even the weaker claim that each reason against an option is also a reason for each of the alternatives (though reasons against may not be reducible to reasons for alternatives) is also false.[17]

A third answer is that what it is to be a reason against an option is to be a reason for *some* alternative to that option. The fact that the blue shirt is boring is a reason against wearing the blue shirt. On this third view, this means that this fact is a reason for some alternative to wearing the blue shirt. The two alternatives are wearing the red shirt and wearing the green shirt. Plausibly a reason for wearing the red shirt—that it's very comfortable—is a reason against wearing the blue shirt, if the blue shirt is not as comfortable. But the fact that the blue shirt is boring doesn't seem to be a reason for any particular alternative to wearing the blue shirt. If we suppose that the green shirt is even more boring than the blue one, as above, then it is clearly not a reason for wearing the green one. Maybe it is a reason for wearing the red one, but the view in question seems to get the direction of explanation backwards: it isn't that it's a reason against wearing the blue shirt *because* it's a reason for wearing the red one, or that its being a reason against wearing the blue one *just amounts to* its being a reason for wearing the red one. Rather, it's a reason for wearing the red one—if it is—because it's a reason against wearing the blue one.[18]

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[16] Appealing to a kind of *transmission* principle, according to which a reason for not doing *A*, or for doing the disjunction of alternatives to *A*, bears on the choice at hand by being a reason for each *way* of not doing *A*, or of doing the disjunction, makes the view equivalent to the view I discuss in the next paragraph.

[17] This brings out further objection to the view that reasons against *A* are reasons for the disjunction of alternatives to *A*. Some of the alternatives to *A* may be even worse than *A* in the relevant respect (i.e. the respect which explains the reason against). If so, then doing that alternative is not plausibly a way of complying with the reason against doing *A*, but the view that reasons against are just reasons for the disjunction of alternatives seems to imply that it is, since it is a way of doing that disjunction.

[18] Compare Greenspan (2005) here.

So none of these three natural versions of the idea that reasons against an option just are reasons for alternatives to that option seem promising. We could offer more complicated answers, for example, that reasons against an option are reasons for disjunctions of only some of the alternatives (e.g., leaving out the alternatives that are even worse along the relevant dimension). But answers like this will not be very systematic, and if reasons against an option are to be *identified* with or *reduced* to reasons for alternatives, we might have hoped for a more systematic account. I think we do better to allow for the existence of reasons against options that are not just reasons for any of the alternatives to that option. These reasons against will bear on choices involving the option. There can also be reasons against an option that are not reasons for alternatives that are even worse along the relevant dimension. Finally, we do not need to find any particular alternative that the reasons against one option are reasons for, in order for them to factor into the competition.

It is also good to step back and think about why we were trying to do without a distinct category of reasons against in the first place. It is indeed hard to see how a reason could count against an option other than by counting in favor of alternatives to that option if we remain wedded to the balancing metaphor. But it's well known that this metaphor is oversimplified. Once we move past that, there seems to be no special problem with reasons against: if we can understand the idea that a reason for an option counts in favor of it, there should be no special obstacle to understanding how a reason could count against an option. Nevertheless, as I said above, this does mean that our theory of the competition between reasons will need to recognize at least two kinds of rebutting defeat or outweighing: that between reasons for conflicting options, and that between reasons for an option and reasons against that same option. In the next section I consider whether a different account of the competition between reasons that incorporates a distinction between reasons for and reasons against might be more successful.

4 Criticism-based Accounts

I call the kind of view I consider in this section a *criticism-based* account. Both Greenspan (2005, 2007) and Gert (2003, 2004, 2007, 2016) defend views of this sort. As I'll explain briefly below, the version I describe here is closer to Greenspan's version, but I take the most important part of the view (for my purposes) to be common between Greenspan and Gert.

According to criticism-based accounts, the conception of reasons and rationality lying behind the balancing account of stacking up reasons for various options and weighing them against each other is mistaken. Instead, as Greenspan says, reasons are "invoked primarily to offer or answer criticism of action", and rationality is not about doing what your reasons most strongly support, but rather "avoiding being subject to significant criticism or having a response to it available".[19]

[19] Greenspan (2005), p. 389.

Note that there are two importantly distinct functions of reasons here, and correspondingly two distinct ways of acting rationally. First, reasons might offer, or ground, criticism of an option. Second, reasons might answer such criticism. You can act rationally either by not acting in ways for which you could be criticized (or "significantly" criticized), or by having an adequate response to such criticism. This contrasts with the balance account, which understand reasons to have a single underlying function, that of counting in favor of options. Since one part of the challenge for balance accounts was to explain two different ways in which reasons could compete, the criticism-based account seems to be an improvement. In particular, the criticism-based account includes a distinct role for reasons against—that of grounding (or perhaps just serving as) criticisms.

The competition between reasons, on this view, works as follows. Reasons against an option tend to rule it out as a permissible option—thus, they tend to generate requirements not to act in that way. Reasons for an option, on the other hand, can help justify you in performing the option even in the face of the reasons against it. For example, that you risk being killed by running into the street is a reason against doing so; it would typically be sufficient to generate a requirement not to do this. But if there is a child stranded in the street, that is a reason *for* running into the street that can plausibly justify you in doing so, even in the face of the requiring reason not to.[20] That you risk being killed by running into the street is a criticism of doing so; that the child is stranded there answers this criticism, making running into the street rationally permissible. From a moral perspective, things are reversed: the fact that the child is stranded in the street counts against staying on the sidewalk, and would make it impermissible. But you have a reason for staying on the sidewalk, namely that there are cars hurtling past, that can morally justify you in staying on the sidewalk.

So far this seems compatible with the balance account, since we could just understand all of this in terms of the weights of the reasons involved.[21] What is distinctive of this view, for the purposes of this paper, is the insistence that reasons against an option cannot be understood as reasons for alternatives to the option (including reasons for not performing the option). The central notion of *criticism* gives us a basis for a substantive distinction by understanding reasons against an option as grounding criticisms of the option, and reasons for as answering those criticisms. To criticize one option is not necessarily to answer a criticism of another option. That the blue shirt is boring does not necessarily answer any criticism of wearing the red shirt. In fact, it's plausible that criticizing one option does not even necessarily provide any support for alternatives. At the very least, we can understand the arguments against identifying reasons against with reasons for as showing that it is far from straightforward to identify *which* alternative a criticism of a given option would support, in a way that both gives plausible

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[20] I take this example from Gert (2007), p. 538.

[21] In fact one of both Greenspan's and Gert's main points is that we cannot properly handle these kinds of cases just by appealing to some single notion of weight. In particular, we can't explain why you are permitted to run into the street but not required to do so.

results (by not falsely claiming that a criticism of *A* supports *B* when *B* is subject to the same kind of criticism, for example) and explains how reasons for and against can play the appropriate role in deliberation (by explaining how they actually bear on the options under consideration). In addition, answering a criticism of one option is not the same as criticizing an alternative option, so reasons for alternatives to *A* cannot just be reasons against *A*.[22] For example, that I like the way the blue shirt fits may answer the criticism that it's boring, but it does not necessarily amount to any criticism of the alternatives. This means that the opposite kind of reduction to that suggested on behalf of the balancing account—reducing reasons for alternatives to *A* to reasons against *A*, instead of reducing reasons against *A* to reasons for alternatives to *A*—won't work, either. Thus, on this view, we have a sharp distinction between reasons for and reasons against.

Gert (2004, 2007) focuses on a distinction between the requiring and justifying strengths of reasons. The mechanics of the competition between reasons are similar to that sketched above: justifying reasons (or reasons with justifying strength) are used to justify you in performing options that you would otherwise be required not to perform, due to the requiring reasons against them. Gert's examples often involve reasons against options with requiring strength and reasons for those options with justifying strength. For example, he holds that in the case above involving the child stranded in the street, the fact that the child is stranded in the street has significant justifying strength in favor of running into the street—enough to justify you in doing so even in the face of the strong requiring reason against doing so, but no requiring strength, since it cannot generate a rational requirement to run into the street (whether it can generate *moral* requirements is a different question). But in fact the distinction between requiring and justifying and that between reasons for and against are cross-cutting. Nevertheless, on Gert's view the primary competition between reasons is always between reasons for an option and reasons against that same option, where the two kinds of reasons are playing importantly different roles. It's just that sometimes, for Gert, the reasons for play the requiring role while reasons against play the justifying role, and sometimes the reverse is true. Thus, in focusing on the competition between reasons for an option and reasons against it, Gert's view is relevantly similar to the one sketched in this section, which is most directly based on Greenspan (2005, 2007).

The criticism-based view, understood in terms of reasons for and reasons against, gives a plausible account of the competition between reasons for an option and reasons against it. When the reasons against an option win out, you are required not to perform that option. When the reasons for an option win out, you are permitted to perform it. Both Gert and Greenspan emphasize that this is the most we can say here: we cannot go on to say that you

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[22] Though of course sometimes it can, in a sense. Kurt Sylvan (p.c.) suggests that some criticisms of one option, *A*, might be so serious that they suffice to answer or at least ignore criticisms of the alternative, *B*. But here it is more natural to say that the reason for *B*, or the answer to the criticisms *B*, are that you can *avoid A*, or maybe just that the (only) alternative is so terrible. If so then the reason for *B* is not identical with but rather derivative of the reason against *A*.

are required to perform the option, just because the reasons for the option win out over the reasons against it. This is because both reject a maximizing conception of rationality. All that rationality requires is not acting as you have overriding reason against acting, or avoiding unanswered criticism. So your reasons will generate a requirement for a particular action only by ruling out all of the alternatives: an option is required if and only if all of the alternatives are impermissible, while it is permissible.[23]

Even granting this non-maximizing conception of rationality, this leaves out an important element for a normative theory, namely an account of what you *ought* to do. Though what you ought to do is not always properly distinguished from what you are required to do in moral philosophy, these are two importantly distinct overall normative statuses. What you are required to do is plausibly very closely tied to what you can be criticized for not doing. But what you ought to do is not necessarily tied to criticism in this way.[24] Think of the way we might describe the normative status of some supererogatory action: "You really ought to help out, though of course you don't have to". On some demanding moral theories, there may not be a substantive distinction between what you ought to do and what you are required to do, but I think it is clear that there is at least a conceptual distinction.[25]

The criticism-based view has trouble accounting for what you ought to do, in this sense.[26] This is because ought is closely connected to what's best, in the sense of being the most strongly supported by reasons.[27] 'Best' and 'most' are *comparative* terms: you ought to do something when it's *better* or *more strongly supported* by reasons than the alternatives. The account of the competition between reasons sketched so far on behalf of the criticism-based view is focused on the competition between the reasons for an option and the reasons against it. We don't yet have any way of comparing different alternatives in terms of how well supported they are by the reasons.[28]

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[23] This last clause is important if we accept the possibility of dilemmas, in which all of our options are impermissible and none are required.

[24] Perhaps some sort of criticism is appropriate in some cases in which you don't do what you ought to do, even if you aren't required to do it; see, e.g., Driver (1992), Macnamara (2013). But the criticism will at least typically be weaker and not call for apologies, reparations, punishment, etc.

[25] For a sampling of work on this issue, see McNamara (1996a, b), Bedke (2011), Snedegar (2016).

[26] Bedke (2011) also argues that Gert's view fails to explain ought as opposed to requirement, though in a different way. See also Snedegar (2016).

[27] For early work on the connection between 'ought' and 'best', see Sloman (1970). Finlay (2010, 2014) also emphasizes the connection between 'ought' and 'best'.

[28] Perhaps using 'ought' to describe the best action is sometimes too strong, or at least can sound wrong, for example when the best action is only best by some trivial amount. The objection to the criticism-based view is essentially just that it leaves us no way to make comparisons between the options in terms

The balance account focuses on the competition between reasons for competing options, but does not have a natural way to account for the competition between reasons for an option and reasons against it. The criticism-based account focuses on the latter kind of competition, but does not have a natural way to account for the former. The latter's trouble accounting for what we ought to do, as opposed to what we're required to do, is a symptom of this problem.

Suppose that reasons for one option are *also* reasons against alternatives, even if we don't *identify* reasons against with reasons for alternatives. Then we have some sort of relationship between the reasons bearing on different alternatives. But even if this is true, such that reasons for alternatives to an option are factored into the competition between reasons for that option and reasons against it, this still doesn't yet solve the main issue raised above. The problem is to explain how to compare competing alternatives in terms of how well they are supported by the reasons. Without this, we won't be able to explain how your reasons determine what you *ought* to do, in addition to what you must and may do. The reasons bearing on alternatives get factored into the competition between reasons for and reasons against a given option; but the outcome of this competition determines what you must or may do. So we still don't have an answer to the question of how your reasons determine what you *ought* to do. In the next section I sketch a positive account that draws on aspects of both the balance account and the criticism-based account, and argue that it gives us a more complete picture of how the competition between reasons determines the overall normative status of our options. But I'll also show that open questions and problems remain.

5 Toward a Positive Account

To sum up and simplify a bit, criticism-based accounts recognize the importance of considering the reasons against an option in determining its overall normative status, but do not seem to accommodate the importance of comparing the option to its alternatives. Balancing accounts, on the other hand, focus on comparisons between alternatives, but do not have a natural way of accommodating the importance of reasons against options. If reasons against an option were simply reasons for alternatives, then each kind of account may avoid these problems. But as I've argued, reasons against cannot be reduced to or identified with reasons for alternatives. In this section, I sketch a view that explicitly recognizes the two different kinds of competition between reasons—the two different kinds of rebutting defeat—that I've focused on in this paper. The view does not require that the two kinds of competition are radically distinct, such that what it is for a reason for A to compete with a reason for B is very different, metaphysically speaking, from what it is for a reason for A to compete with a reason against A. In sketching the account, I understand both kinds of competition as involving the weights of the reasons involved. Rather, the difference is in the normative relevance, in terms of what you ought to, must, or may do, of the outcomes of the two different kinds of competition. It may be

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of how strongly supported those options are. Focusing on the overall status expressed by 'ought' is a natural way to bring this out. Thanks to Kurt Sylvan here.

that for the outcomes of the competitions to play these roles, the two kinds of competition must differ in some deep way, but I leave that question aside.

The view incorporates elements from both criticism-based accounts and balancing accounts. I'll explain the role of each kind of competition in determining the overall normative status of the options. Along the way I will flag some important questions and choice points; settling these will require further work, which will sometimes involve doing substantive normative theory.

The proposal here is not radically new. I suspect it is largely just a way of spelling out an orthodox way of thinking about the competition between reasons.[29] What is important is (i) the distinction between the two different kinds of competition between reasons, and correspondingly, (ii) the different roles these competitions have in determining overall normative status.

The discussion will be idealized in familiar ways by assuming that we can perform something like mathematical functions on and make mathematical comparisons of the weights of reasons and sets of reasons. I assume (i) that we can compare the weights of reasons and sets of reasons using something like the greater than (>), lesser than (<), and equal to (=) relations, (ii) that we can make sense of the combined weight of reasons (e.g., R1 and R2, taken together, support the option to a certain degree) and the difference in weights of reasons (e.g., R1 is weightier than R2 by a certain degree), and (iii) that we can make sense of the overall weight of the reasons bearing on an option being positive or negative—that is, that the reasons, taken together, either support the option or count against it. Importantly, (ii) is not to assume that the weights of reasons combine in a purely additive way, such that if R1 and R2 are the only reasons for A, then the combined weight of the reasons for A is simply the weight of R1 plus the weight of R2, or that if R3 is a reason for A and R4 is a reason against A, and these are the only reasons in play, then the overall weight of reasons for A is simply the weight of R3 minus the weight of R4. Nevertheless, for convenience I will use '+' for the combining weights operation and '−' for the difference in weights operation. Issues involving the more complicated ways that reasons actually seem to combine and weigh against each other will have to be left aside here.[30]

The first kind of competition is that between reasons for an option and reasons against it. What we need for this is the combined weight of all the reasons for A, $W(RF_A)$, and the combined weight of all the reasons against A, $W(RA_A)$. Then we find the difference in these weights: $W(RF_A) - W(RA_A) = W(R_A)$, which gives us the degree of overall reason for an option. As a first pass at how the competition between reasons for and reasons against determines the overall normative status of an option, I propose the following. If $W(R_A)$ is positive (i.e., if $W(RF_A) > W(RA_A)$), then A is permissible. If $W(R_A)$ is negative (i.e., if $W(RF_A) < W(RA_A)$),

[29] Compare the *generalized weighing framework* in Berker (2007), especially pp. 113-114.

[30] For work on related issues, see Dancy (2004), especially Chapter 3, Bader (2016), Nair (2016), Sher (2019), Maguire (2016), Maguire and Snedegar (ms).

then A is impermissible.[31] This leaves cases in which the reasons for and reasons against an option are balanced. I am inclined to think that such options are permissible, to accommodate the thought that when there's no reason at all either for or against A, A is permissible, but there are likely interesting questions here (compare: "There was no reason to do that!" as a criticism, vs. "There was no reason not to!" as a defense). So provisionally, we can say that when $W(RF_A) \geq W(RA_A)$, A is permissible.

This takes from the criticism-based approach the idea that the reasons against an option are particularly relevant in determining whether it is permissible. They tend to rule out performing the option, and unless there are sufficiently strong reasons in favor, the option will be impermissible. Thinking of the reasons against an option as criticisms of it makes this particularly clear: if there are criticisms of some option that cannot be answered or compensated for, then it is plausible that the option is impermissible.

As stated so far, though, this account of permissibility faces a problem.[32] We can see this by looking at the case I used above to criticize balance accounts. You can press either button 1 or button 2. Pressing either button will get you a particular $100 bill, but pressing 2 will also deliver a mild electric shock. You would be willing to endure this shock to get $100, so it seems that the reason for pressing 2, that it will get you the $100 bill, is weightier than the reason against, that you will be shocked. So according to the account above, pressing button 2 is permissible. But this is incorrect: pressing button 2 in this case would be foolish.

I have tried to explain permissibility (and, shortly, requirement) just in terms of the reasons for and against the particular option, whereas what you ought to do will be explained in terms of comparisons among the alternatives. But the lesson of this case is that even for permissibility and requirement, the alternatives matter: it is only because of the availability of pressing button 1 that pressing button 2 is impermissible. The task for now is to say exactly how it is that the alternatives matter for permissibility and requirement.

One way in which the alternatives can matter is by the reasons bearing on those alternatives transmitting to the option in question. In my view, sometimes reasons for one alternative are also reasons against incompatible alternatives. This is one way to explain the notion of an opportunity cost: among the costs of an option are the good features of the alternatives that you'll miss out on. This is consistent with denying that all reasons against options are nothing over and above reasons for alternatives. But in this case, given that you will get the $100 either way, I don't think it is plausible that the reason for pressing button 1—that it will get you $100—is a reason against pressing button 2.

Rather, I think that in cases like this, the alternatives matter by helping to determine which considerations are or are not reasons for the option in question. In particular, since you will get

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[31] Compare Sher (fc), p. 2.

[32] Thanks to Jonathan Way here.

the $100 either way, I hold that the fact that you'll get the $100 by pressing button 2 is not a reason for pressing button 2. Hence, there is only a reason against pressing button 2 (the shock), and so it is impermissible.

The surprising consequence of this view is that there the $100 also does not give you reason to press button 1. So if the money and the shock are the only relevant considerations, there won't be any reason to press button 1. Nevertheless, pressing button 1 will be permissible, since there's at least as much reason for it as against it (namely, no reason either way). In fact it will be required, since the only alternative is impermissible.[33] Though it may seem initially surprising to deny that the fact that you can get $100 by pressing button 1 (or button 2, for that matter) is a reason for pressing button 1, I think this is plausible. The crucial point is that you'll get the $100 *no matter what you do* (assuming pressing 1 and pressing 2 are the only options). So you cannot, for example, justify yourself in pressing button 1 (instead of button 2) by pointing out that you'll get $100. Also, it would be odd to base your decision to press button 1 (instead of button 2) on the fact that you will get $100 by pressing button 1. Being able to serve as justifiers or at least sensible bases for decision are commonly thought to be earmarks, if not conceptual requirements, for some consideration's being a reason.[34] So it should not seem so surprising that in this case, that you can get $100 by pressing button 1 will not be a reason to press button 1, since you'll get the $100 no matter what you do.

If this kind of solution is on the right track, and can be generalized, then we have the start of an account that tells us when an option is permissible in terms of the reasons for and against it. We also get an account of when an option is required: an option is required when all of the other options are impermissible—that is, when the reasons against each of the other options outweigh the reasons for them. If more than one option is permissible, then no single option is required.[35] There are clear similarities between this understanding of permissibility and requirement and the one we get from the criticism-based account.

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[33] In fact things will be a bit trickier since it seems that we can make true reasons ascriptions like, "That you will get shocked by pressing button 2 is a reason to press button 1, instead". I think that this is true, but that the reason ascribed is a derivative reason—derivative on the reason against pressing 2. A full theory here will need to explain when we get these derivative reasons and how their weights do or do not contribute to the overall status of the options in question. It would seem to be a mistake, for example, to treat this derivative reason for pressing button 1 as having weight that is independent of and in addition to the weight of the reason against pressing button 2 on which it is derivative.

[34] See, e.g., Schroeder (2007), Chapter 2, Setiya (2014), Gregory (2016), Silverstein (2016), Way (2017), and Snedegar (2019).

[35] An open question at this point is whether it is possible for the reasons against to win out for every option, making every option impermissible. Many people think that such tragic dilemmas are impossible. We could, for example, argue that the fact that an option is the "least bad" is always a decisive reason to do it.

But as I argued in the previous section, this leaves out an important part of the normative domain—namely, what we *ought* to do, as opposed to what we're *required* to do. To quickly review the main points from the previous section: we ought to do is very plausibly what's best, in some sense.[36] But to say that some option is the best is to say that it's better than the alternatives. So to account for what we ought to do, we need to introduce a comparison among the alternatives.

The overall weight of the reasons bearing on an option, A, which I called $W(R_A)$, is determined by the difference between the weight of the set of reasons for A and the set of reasons against A. So we can compare these weights of overall reason for each of the options. What we ought to do is the option that ranks at the top of this comparison: you ought to do A when $W(R_A) > W(R_B)$, for all the alternatives, B. Whereas the competition between reasons for an option and reasons against that option are most directly relevant for determining which options are permissible and required, the competition between the reasons bearing on competing alternatives is most directly relevant for determining what you ought to do.[37]

This picture has some attractive features. First, it explains important overall or verdictive normative statuses—permissibility, impermissibility, requirement, and ought—in terms of *pro tanto* reasons. This is a popular and attractive idea, but it has proved challenging to provide satisfactory accounts of all of these notions in terms of reasons.[38] Second, the picture captures the correct logical relationships between permissibility, requirement, and ought. To focus on the relationship between requirement and ought: if some option A is required, then it is also what you ought to do. Since A is required, the reasons against each alternative B outweigh the reasons for B; thus $W(R_B)$ will be negative for all the alternatives, B. Moreover, since A is required, it is either the only permissible option, in which case it is the only option for which $W(R_A)$ is positive. So $W(R_A) > W(R_B)$ for each alternative B, and thus A is what you ought to do. But A might be what you ought to do without being required, since it is compatible with $W(R_A) > W(R_B)$ that $W(R_B)$ is nevertheless positive—that is, B is permissible. This is just what we want, because it has been widely noted in both linguistics and philosophy (the former focusing on the modals that express these normative statuses and the latter focusing on the

[36] Cf. Sloman (1970), Finlay (2010), von Fintel and Iatridou (2008).

[37] As noted in the introduction, I am focusing on the moral case. In the epistemic domain, it is much less clear that there is a substantial difference between ought and requirement. One possible explanation for this, which I cannot explore at any length here, is that in the epistemic domain, unlike in the moral domain, reasons for believing p, or evidence for p, are always reasons against believing, or evidence against, propositions that are incompatible with p. If so, then it would plausibly turn out that any time the reasons for believing p outweighed the reasons against believing p, the reasons against believing any incompatible alternative q would outweigh the reasons for believing q.

[38] See Snedegar (2016) for arguments against some recent attempts, including Bedke (2011).

statuses themselves) that there is a one-way entailment from requirement to ought.[39] This captures the commonsense idea that there are things that you really ought to do, though you are not required to do so, and are not acting impermissibly if you don't—think of paradigm cases of supererogation, for example.

This is just a sketch, and open questions remain, but I do think it gives us the beginnings of an attractive account. As I noted above, I don't take this view to be any radical departure from an orthodox way of thinking about how reasons compete. Rather, what is important about it is the incorporation of the two different kinds of competition between reasons. Both the standard balance account and the criticism-based account are incomplete because they focus on just one kind of competition.

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[39] See, for example, Wertheimer (1972), McNamara (1996b), von Fintel and Iatridou (2008), Portner (2009), Snedegar (2012, 2016).

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