Desires, Reasons, and Reasons to be Moral

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This paper concerns an argument which, in this author's experience, often comes up in discussions of "Why be moral?"[1] Although initially tempting, the argument is in error. The error warrants attention not only because it spoils the argument but because it connects to a second error which is easy to make. Both errors concern the relation between desires and (normative) practical reasons. This paper discusses those errors and the argument in which the first error resides.

1.

That argument runs as follows. Every agent has at least some desires with this feature: one of the best ways for the agent to satisfy them is to be moral, where "being moral" involves habitually doing those deeds—those outward deeds, anyway—of kindness, honesty, fairness, and so forth that morality demands. For many people the desire to live morally has that feature; for others, only the desire to avoid punishment has it. At any rate, everyone has desires with the feature in question, meaning that every agent, even the sociopath, has desires that provide practical reasons—*pro tanto* reasons, at least—for the agent to live morally.[2]

Obviously, this argument has modest aims. It does not purport to show that everyone has *conclusive* reasons to be moral. Even so it has importance, for it contradicts what many philosophers believe: that some people have no rational requirement, not even a minimal or defeasible one, to be moral.[3] Also, there is

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[1] That is, in *conversations* about "Why be moral?" Only occasionally does the argument, or a close cousin of it, appear in print. For an example see Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review*, vol. 95 (1986), pp. 163–207, at p. 202 n. 39. (Railton seems to find the argument he mentions successful but uninteresting. I, on the other hand, find the argument I discuss interesting but unsuccessful.)

[2] Two remarks: First, this paper follows a contemporary trend by using "pro tanto" rather than "prima facie" to indicate actual but defeasible requirements or reasons. The term "prima facie" is potentially misleading given its literal sense. Second, any practical reason referred to in this paper is a *pro tanto* reason, rather than a conclusive reason, unless otherwise indicated.

[3] Most philosophers, including those who advance the above argument, assume that insofar as a person has a *reason* to ϕ the person has a *pro tanto requirement of (practical) rationality* to ϕ. This paper follows suit. One reason it does so emerges in section 4; another is that the assumption is eminently plausible. (E.g., to deny it is to deny, in effect, that a person rationally ought to do whatever that person has most reason to do.) Worth noting, however, is that the assumption has a few challengers. Those challengers contend that even if there is a good reason for an agent, A, to ϕ and absolutely no reason for A not to ϕ, and even if A knows this, A may have no requirement of rationality, not even a minimal or defeasible one, to ϕ.

something independently interesting, something heartening or reassuring, about the view that even the sociopath has *some* reason to be moral—a reason, moreover, to which indifference is impossible. The reasons to which the argument refers derive from desires, and it's conceptually impossible to be indifferent to one's own desires. Moreover, to have reasons that derive from those desires is to have reasons which, given the right conditions, could grow into weighty or even decisive reasons.

The argument has further virtues. For instance, unlike some arguments of its kind it does not rest on the premise that some desires, particularly the desire for happiness, are shared by everyone. The problems with that premise are well known. Unless "happiness" denotes pleasure, absence of misery, or something closely similar it is not likely that *everyone* wants happiness. But if "happiness" denotes pleasure, absence of misery, or something of that kind it is a poor choice of terms, for it has moral overtones that "pleasure" and "absence of misery" lack. The notion of a happy person suggests, among other things, a person who is moral to some degree.

So the argument has some virtues. Nevertheless it fails. This paper shows this, though not by challenging the (plausible) view that desires are a source of practical reasons. Even with that view granted, the argument breaks down. This is shown in sections 2 through 4; meantime, the argument is clarified.

It will help to state the argument step by step, ignoring no tacit step. Also, it will serve fairness to assume that any desire to which the argument refers—indeed, any desire to which this paper refers—is such that no one who shares it has cause to ignore, alter, or extinguish it (e.g., it is neither irrational nor based on misinformation).[4]

Here, then, is the argument:

(1) Every agent, *A*, has at least one desire with this feature: living morally is one of the best ways for *A* to satisfy it.

(2) If ϕing is one of the best ways for *A* to satisfy one of *A*'s desires, that desire provides a reason for *A* to ϕ.

Therefore,

(3) Every agent, *A*, has at least one desire that provides a reason for *A* to live morally.

Two comments are called for. The first, which pertains to steps (2) and (3), concerns the potentially misleading phrase "provides a reason for *A* to ϕ." To say that a desire "provides" a reason for *A* to ϕ is to say, not that the desire itself

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For a recent example of this position see Joshua Gert, "Practical Rationality, Morality, and Purely Justificatory Reasons," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 37 (2000), pp. 227–43. For an argument against the position see Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), p. 152.

[4] To cover all the bases, a further assumption is made: that any sentence of the form "*A* has no cause to ignore, alter, or extinguish *x*" is short for "*A* has no cause to ignore, alter, or extinguish *x*; also, *A* has no cause to ignore *x*, no cause to alter *x*, and no cause to extinguish *x*."

is such a reason, but that because *A* has that desire a fact exists which counts as a reason for *A* to ϕ. Very likely, that fact refers to the desire in question, but that's not the key point. The key point is that *A*'s possession of the desire brings into being a *fact* which constitutes a reason for *A* to ϕ.

Second, some points are in order about some expressions used from here on. The first expression is "to ϕ," as it occurs in the terms "reason to ϕ" and "reason for *A* to ϕ." Unless otherwise noted "to ϕ" has its ordinary sense; in particular, it is not elliptical for "to ϕ or ψ (or ...)." Perhaps this goes without saying; even so it is worth highlighting. It has relevance later.

The next two expressions are "*A* has no reason to ϕ" and "there is no reason for *A* to ϕ." As used in this paper they mean, not that *A* has reasons *not* to ϕ, but simply that nothing exists that qualifies as a reason for *A* to ϕ. Similarly, the claim that a particular desire provides no reason for *A* to ϕ means that the desire brings into being no fact, no putative reason, that counts as a reason for *A* to ϕ. Finally, the expressions "reason to ϕ" and "*A* has a reason to ϕ," as they are used here, mean the same, respectively, as "reason for *A* (the relevant agent) to ϕ" and "there is a reason for *A* to ϕ."

2.

As indicated earlier, the argument for (3) fails. Its downfall is the phrase "one of the best ways." Before defending this point, however, it's worth showing that the use of that phrase, particularly in place of "the best way," is no *silly* mistake. It has its advantages, even if it ultimately brings problems.

If "one of the best ways" is replaced with "the best way" premise (1) becomes this:

(1´) Every agent, *A*, has at least one desire with this feature: living morally is the best way for *A* to satisfy it.

The problem here is that (1´) is not very plausible. Think of the sociopath,[5] and think of those few desires which, on the one hand, the sociopath can be

[5] The sociopath is usually conceived as a person who, by common standards, is rational, intelligent, and autonomous, but devoid of a conscience and of "pro-social" (and many related) desires and emotions (e.g., empathy and compassion). This understanding differs from, but does not clash with, the richer, technical characterization of the sociopath. This technical characterization is worth pausing over, partly because many philosophers use the term "sociopath" without either defining it or mentioning the psychological literature on it. In the first place, a sociopath, technically defined, is not the same as a person with antisocial personality disorder. Unlike the latter, the sociopath (or psychopath, to use an alternative term) is generally characterized not just by a cluster of behaviors, but also by a cluster of personality traits. In his book *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us* (New York: Guilford, 1993), psychologist Robert D. Hare lists twelve "key symptoms" of sociopathy. (See p. 34 of that book, and chaps. 3 and 4 in general. See also pp. 24–25 for the contrast between sociopathy and antisocial personality disorder.) Hare characterizes the sociopath's *personality* as (i) emotionally shallow, (ii) devoid of empathy, (iii) glib and superficial, (iv) egocentric and grandiose, (v) deceitful and manipulative, and (vi) devoid of guilt or remorse. He characterizes the sociopath's *lifestyle and behavior* as (vii) impulsive, (viii) excessively excitement-oriented, and (ix) deficient in inhibitory controls; also as marked by (x) a

expected to share and which, on the other, the sociopath could satisfy by living morally. Candidates include the desire to avoid punishment and the desire not to be frustrated too often in one's pursuits. Candidates do not include the desire for approval, the desire for friendship, or even the desire for happiness—unless, of course, "happiness" is purged of any moral overtones by defining it as, say, pleasure or the absence of pain.

Now, having identified the requisite sort of desires, consider this question: Is there not even *one* sociopath (the Zodiac Killer, perhaps)[6] for whom those desires are no better served by living morally than by living as a clever immoralist? An immoralist is a person who deliberately appears to be morally upright but never refrains from immoral deeds if he thinks he can profit undetected by doing them.[7] A *clever* immoralist is an immoralist who is vastly skilled both at going undetected in his immoral deeds and at concealing, whenever necessary, the motives and character from which those deeds spring. And the question, again, is whether there is not even *one* sociopath for whom the identified desires would be no better served by living morally than by living as a clever immoralist.

The answer, almost surely, is that at least a few sociopaths would find (indeed, *do* find) life as a clever immoralist an optimal way to satisfy the identified desires. (This is partly because they have an ability that most people lack: the ability to be a *clever* immoralist.) This is so even if—indeed, *especially* if—different ways of satisfying a desire are ranked not only by how well they satisfy *that* desire but by how congenial they are to the agent's *other* desires. (Many sociopaths, e.g., the Zodiac Killer, have desires that cannot be satisfied except through immoral behavior.)[8] So (1´) is not sufficiently plausible to make the argument for (3) forceful.

By now, two objections may have come to mind. Each can be expressed as a question. First, what about the *risks* involved in being an immoralist? Isn't it

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lack of responsibility, (xi) early behavioral problems, and (xii) antisocial behavior in adulthood. Hare dubs (i) through (xii) "key," rather than "exclusive," symptoms because, as he often indicates, sociopaths have other traits as well. For example, "psychopathy [or sociopathy] cannot be understood in terms of traditional views of mental illness. Psychopaths are not disoriented or out of touch with reality, nor do they experience the delusions, hallucinations, or intense subjective distress that characterize most other mental disorders. Unlike psychotic individuals, psychopaths are rational and aware of what they are doing and why. Their behavior is the result of *choice*, freely exercised.... Psychopaths are generally well satisfied with themselves.... They see nothing wrong with themselves, experience little personal distress, and find their behavior rational, rewarding, and satisfying" (*ibid*., pp. 22, 195).

[6] The Zodiac Killer was a serial murderer in the 1960's who took great pleasure in planning and committing his murders and in taunting the police. Despite an enormous manhunt and an investigation that spanned many years, this killer was never apprehended and is now widely presumed to have died, decades after the murders, of natural causes. By all accounts the Zodiac Killer was an extreme sociopath, clearly one of considerable intelligence and ingenuity.

[7] Here "profit" means, not "materially profit," but "profit in any way." Many criminals "profit" from their crimes solely by receiving emotional thrills from them.

[8] Worth mentioning is that such desires are shared by people other than sociopaths, and are more varied than many people imagine. For a useful treatment of this subject see Jack Katz, *Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

just a matter of *luck* if an immoralist entirely escapes punishment? The answer is that it's naive to think that the many sociopathic assassins, con artists, and petty thieves who have committed crime after crime without being caught have simply been *lucky*—that is, that although they have avoided capture they have been irrational in their choices, given the risks they have taken. This is naive because, just as people exist whose abilities enable them to walk tightropes with little risk of falling, people exist whose abilities enable them to reject the moral life—indeed, to reject it in favor of a life of predatory crime—with little risk of capture. The annals of crime furnish proof that such people exist. And when such people have sociopathic personalities, meaning that they lack the desires most commonly at the root of moral behavior, it is quite unlikely that their desires include some that are better served by living morally than by living in any nonmoral way.

Second, what about the many philosophical arguments for the view that it "pays" to be good? That is, what about those arguments designed to show that because the satisfaction of a person's desires depends on that person's interactions with others—for instance, on how others react to the person's character—it can pay the person to develop a settled disposition to act morally? The answer is that even the best of these arguments trade on assumptions that are not true of *every* agent. David Gauthier's argument is perhaps the best of the lot, but it rests on the assumption that the people to whom it applies are *translucent:* their character is not inscrutable; they tend to be seen for what they are by the people with whom they interact.[9] This is a limitation because some people are not translucent; others are not translucent to the degree necessary for Gauthier's argument.[10] (Gauthier says nothing to disprove this; he provides no evidence that everyone is translucent.) So Gauthier's argument is no threat to the point that premise (1´), considered as a substitute for (1), is not plausible enough to make the argument for (3) forceful.

It is understandable, then, that the advocates of the argument for (3) opt for (1) rather than (1´). That is, they use "one of the best ways" rather than "the best way." Of course, "one of the best ways" admits of multiple readings, some of which, no doubt, are less fair than others to the argument for (3). Suppose, for instance, that "one of the best ways" means "one of the top five ways." Then even if (1) is plausible, (2) is vulnerable to an objection: If ϕing is a worse way than four others for *A* to satisfy a desire, how can that desire provide any reason for *A* to ϕ? Perhaps the desire provides a reason for *A* to *act*, but the act in question cannot be that of ϕing. This is true even if ϕing is the fifth best way, and hence "one of the best ways," for *A* to satisfy the desire.

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[9] David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). Gauthier's discussion of translucency is on pp. 174–78 of this book.

[10] See Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Deception and Reasons to be Moral," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 26 (1989), pp. 113–22.

In light of this objection, "one of the best ways" is hereafter read such that ϕing is one of the best ways for *A* to satisfy a desire just in case *A*'s ϕing would not only satisfy that desire but satisfy it *at least as well* as any other act available to *A*. Arguably, this reading shields (2) from objections of the kind just stated, yet without making (1) so contentious that it becomes, like (1´), too implausible to serve its purpose.

Unfortunately, this reading does not solve the problem. Even if it shields (1) from potent objections,[11] it does not do the same for (2). Indeed, it is no kinder to (2) than the reading it purports to improve upon. The fact that ϕing is as good a way as any other for *A* to satisfy one of *A*'s desires does not ensure that that desire provides a reason for *A* to ϕ.

In this author's experience, some philosophers are quick to grant this point about (2); others are quick to reject it. Philosophers in the first camp raise an objection to (2) that resembles the one raised a bit ago. They contend that for all the antecedent of (2) says, ϕing is just one way, no better than many others, for *A* to satisfy the desire to which (2) refers. So although that desire provides a reason for *A* to act, the act in question is not necessarily that of ϕing. Hence (2) is not true, though it may seem true because it is *almost* true. Were (2) revised just slightly, by replacing "one of the best ways" with "the best way," (2) would be true.

Philosophers in the second camp contend that even if ϕing is just one way, no better than many others, for *A* to satisfy the desire referred to in (2), *A* nevertheless has, owing to that desire, a reason to ϕ. After all, given that by ϕing *A* could satisfy that desire, the act of ϕing has a virtue that many other actions lack. It promises to fulfill one of *A*'s desires, whereas many other actions do nothing for *A*. Thus, other things being equal (i.e., assuming that those other actions, as well as the act of ϕing, have no further properties that could create reasons either for or against *A*'s doing them), *A* has more reason to ϕ than to perform one of those other acts. But then *A* must have *some* reason, if only a minimal one, to ϕ. That reason can only come from the desire that *A*'s ϕing would fulfill, namely, the desire to which (2) refers.[12]

The resolution of this issue lies in showing, through a sufficiently detailed argument, that (2) is not true. To do this is not only to refute the argument for (3) but to correct an error, an easy one to make, about the conditions under which a desire yields reasons for the acts that fulfill it. This is because (2) follows from (4), and (4) is an easy error to fall into.[13]

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[11] This is a big "if." Although (1) is less contentious than (1´), considerations of the kind that cast doubt on (1´)—considerations about the sociopath's desires and the available ways of satisfying them—very likely cast doubt on (1). But this point will be set aside.

[12] Worth observing is that if this argument were sound, (2) would be true even if "one of the best ways" meant "one of the top fifty ways." Arguably, this observation is a tip-off that something is amiss in the argument. More on this later.

[13] That error (4) is easy to fall into is revealed by the frequency with which philosophers fall into it—

(4) If ϕing is a way for an agent, *A*, to satisfy one of *A*'s desires, that desire provides a reason for *A* to ϕ.[14]

Statement (2) is the first of the two errors mentioned at the start of this paper; statement (4) is the second. The two are related because (4) entails (2); hence, to refute (2) is to refute (4). More on this later; the task for now is to refute (2).

3.

Premise (2) can be refuted by showing the following to be possible:

(5) ϕing is one of the best ways for at least one agent, *A*, to satisfy one of *A*'s desires. Even so, that desire provides no reason for *A* to ϕ.

Statement (5) could not be true if (2) were true, for the very point of (2) is that (5) is not possible. The proof that (5) could be true, and hence that (2) is false, begins with two assumptions and two facts. The assumptions are (6) and (7); the facts are (8) and (9).

(6) ϕing is one of the best ways for at least one agent—Alf, say—to satisfy at least one of his desires, *D*. Also, Alf has exactly two different, equally good ways of satisfying *D*. Alf can satisfy *D* not only by ϕing but by ψing. These ways are equally good not only in being equally capable of satisfying *D* but in being equally congenial to Alf's other desires.[15]

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or if not into *it*, then into errors that differ from it only in small details (on this see note 14). Some examples: "If *P*'s doing *A* is a means to something which *P* wants, *P* has a reason to do *A*" (William David Solomon, "Moral Reasons," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 12 [1975], pp. 331–39, at p. 331). "P *has reason* to perform any action A that promises to fulfill one of his desires" (Max Hocutt, *Grounded Ethics* [New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2000], p. 81). "Means/end considerations always count as prima facie reasons.... If it's a fact that *A* could satisfy his desire for *E* by doing *D*, then that fact is a *reason* for *A* to do *D*...." (John J. Tilley, "Motivation and Practical Reasons," *Erkenntnis*, vol. 47 [1997], pp. 105–27, at p. 110). "Imagine that John would like to offend James and that reminding James of a certain incident would offend him. Therefore, there is a reason for John to remind James of the incident" (Joseph Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990], p. 33). "I want to cheer [Susan] up and think meeting her would do this.... Since I know that taking the Times Square bus would enable me to meet Susan, I ... have a desiderative reason for taking that bus. I have this reason for taking the bus as soon as I desire to cheer up Susan and see taking the bus as a means to that end...." (Michael Bratman, "Intention and Means-End Reasoning," *Philosophical Review*, vol. 90 [1981], pp. 252–65, at p. 252). The argument this paper presents against (4) applies, perhaps with minor embellishments, to each of the remarks just quoted. (More on this in section 5—in the discussion of thesis (4´).) Thus, the authors of those remarks indeed *fall into* an error. This is not to say, however, that they are *committed* to the error. It is not to say, in other words, that they would ruin their arguments if they revised their prose to remove the error. They could do the latter with little trouble. For instance, Solomon could do it by replacing "a means" with "the only means."

[14] Usually, the consequent of (4) says merely that *A has* a reason to ϕ; it says nothing about the *source* of that reason. In such cases, however, it's implicit that *A*'s reason derives from the desire to which (4) refers.

[15] Why include this final sentence in (6)? Because without it an assertion made shortly—that (6) guarantees (11)—is debatable.

(7) Alf cannot both ϕ and ψ. Indeed, Alf cannot ϕ without intentionally not ψing. (Also, this stems from no defect on Alf's part.)

(8) If Alf cannot ϕ without intentionally not ψing, then any reason for Alf to ϕ is a reason for Alf not to ψ. To put this another way, if Alf cannot ϕ without intentionally not ψing, then if any putative reason, R, is not a reason for Alf not to ψ, it is not a reason for Alf to ϕ.

(9) If R is a reason for Alf to either ϕ or ψ,[16] then R is not a reason for Alf not to ψ.

As just indicated, although (6) and (7) are assumptions, (8) and (9) are facts. To see that (8) is a fact imagine someone saying, "There's a reason for me to leave town tonight, but there's no reason for me not to remain in town all night." This statement is absurd because no one (at least no psychologically ordinary person) can intentionally leave town without intentionally *not* remaining in town. Hence, any reason for a person to perform the first action is a reason for the person not to perform the second.

To see that (9) is a fact suppose Alf wants to drive home and can do so equally well by taking either Route 1 or Route 2, the only two routes available. Alf has an instrumental reason to either take Route 1 or take Route 2. Clearly, that reason is not a reason for Alf *not* to take Route 2. If it were, it certainly could not be a reason for Alf to either take Route 1 *or* take Route 2.

The task now is to draw conclusions from (6) through (9). (6) clearly entails this:

(10) ϕing is one of the best ways for Alf to satisfy D.

Premise (6) also ensures that, owing to D, Alf has a reason to act. In other words, given (6), Alf cannot help but to have at least one practical reason, namely, a reason that derives from D. (6) also ensures that any reason D provides Alf is a reason for Alf to either ϕ or ψ. For instance, given an assumption stated earlier, any reason D provides Alf cannot be a reason for Alf to ignore, alter, or extinguish D. Nor can it be a reason for Alf to ϕ-but-eschew-ψing, given that ϕing is no better than ψing as a means of satisfying D.

In sum, (6) guarantees this:

(11) D provides Alf with at least one practical reason. The practical reason(s), R, that D provides Alf is a reason for Alf to either ϕ or ψ.

With (11) established the remainder of the proof goes quickly. Premises (7) and (8) entail that if R, the reason(s) D provides Alf, is not a reason for Alf not to ψ, then R is not a reason for Alf to ϕ. And (9) and (11) entail that R is not a reason for Alf not to ψ. From these two entailments it follows that R, the

[16] Please excuse the split infinitives in this paper; their purpose is to ensure precision. In fact, to remove them would be to alter considerably the meaning of the relevant sentences.

reason(s) *D* provides Alf, is not a reason for Alf to ϕ. This is to say that *D* provides no reason for Alf to ϕ. The latter conclusion, combined with (10), entails that

(12) ϕing is one of the best ways for Alf to satisfy *D*. Even so, *D* provides no reason for Alf to ϕ.

Statement (12) entails (5). Thus, it's possible that (5) is true. More fully, since (5) follows from premises which, taken individually or collectively, are either true or possibly true,[17] (5) could be true. This means that (2) is false; consequently, the argument for (3) is unsound.

4.

Proponents of the argument for (3) have some possible replies. The first is that although (2) is indeed false, it would not be if "one of the best ways" were replaced with "the best way." But this reply fails. Although the revised version of (2) is true, combining it with (1) does not establish (3). To remedy that problem (1´) must be substituted for (1). But as already shown, (1´) is not plausible enough to make the argument for (3) successful.

The next reply is this: Taken as a *generalization*, (2) is indeed open to disproof. However, if "ϕing" stands for living morally and "ψing" stands for living nonmorally, (6) or (7) is false and hence the objection to (2) fails. To put this another way, if the argument for (3) is interpreted properly, if "ϕing" is read not as a variable or an unknown but as a stand-in for "living morally," then (6) through (9) must be interpreted accordingly. They must be interpreted, that is, so that "ϕing" and "ψing" denote, respectively, living morally and living nonmorally. Although this does not affect facts (8) and (9), it does affect assumptions (6) and (7). At least one of those assumptions is false; hence, the objection to (2) is unsound.

The first thing to be said here is that if (6) or (7) is false, (6) alone is the falsehood. In other words, if "ϕing" stands for living morally and "ψing" for living nonmorally, (7) holds its ground. It does so because, presumably, the argument for (3) uses "living morally" in such a way that Alf cannot live morally without intentionally not living nonmorally. If the argument does that, it dovetails with common usage and, especially, with the usage standard in replies to "Why be moral?" So (7) is not false if "ϕing" and "ψing" denote, respectively, living morally and living nonmorally.

Thus, the reply is committed to the claim that if "ϕing" stands for living morally and "ψing" for living nonmorally, (6) is false. Fairness to that claim requires that its consequent be taken to mean, not that just *any* component of (6) is false, but that the *middle* component of (6) is false. The middle component is the thought expressed by the second two sentences in (6). ("Also, Alf has

[17] The *possibly* true ones are assumptions (6) and (7); the true ones are facts (8) and (9).

exactly two different, equally good ways of satisfying *D*. Alf can satisfy *D* not only by ϕing but by ψing.") To deny any other sentence in (6) is useless—useless, that is, to the proponents of the argument for (3). For instance, if "ϕing" stands for living morally, to deny the first sentence in (6) is to deny premise (1). Obviously, this is to undercut the argument for (3).

But now comes a problem. What is the best interpretation of the claim that if "ϕing" stands for living morally and "ψing" for living nonmorally, the middle component of (6) is false? Of the available interpretations, most are not feasible, at least not for supporters of the argument for (3). For instance, it will not do to read the claim to mean this: for Alf, living morally (ϕing) is *worse* than living nonmorally (ψing) as a way to satisfy *D*. This reading would make the claim clash with the first sentence in (6), a sentence the supporters of the argument for (3) wish to preserve. The only feasible reading of the claim is this: for Alf, living morally is *better* than living nonmorally as a way to satisfy *D*.

The problem now becomes clear. Given the reading just stated, the claim being examined—that if "ϕing" stands for living morally and "ψing" for living nonmorally, the middle component of (6) is false—amounts to this: For Alf, living morally is better than living nonmorally as a way to satisfy *D*, where *D* is a desire of Alf's with this feature: living morally is one of the best ways for Alf to satisfy it.

This statement is reminiscent of (1´), and, depending on who Alf happens to be, is just as implausible. Suppose that Alf is a sociopathic con artist, in which case *D* most likely is, or is akin to, the desire to avoid punishment. Suppose further that Alf is only a *petty* con artist (the kind rarely reported to the police); also, that Alf is enormously clever. Then it's unlikely that for Alf, living morally is *better* than living nonmorally as a way to satisfy *D*.

The third reply to the objection contends that the expression "*x* (a desire) provides a reason for *A* to ϕ" has two senses. For one of them, that expression asserts a truth just in case, owing to *A*'s possession of *x*, something (a fact) counts as a reason for *A* to ϕ, where "reason for *A* to ..." and "to ϕ" have their usual meanings. For instance, "reason for *A* to ..." denotes a fact which creates (so to speak) a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality to which *A* is subject; and "to ϕ" is not elliptical for "to ϕ or ψ." For this sense of "*x* provides a reason for *A* to ϕ" the objection to (2) succeeds. But the expression "*x* provides a reason for *A* to ϕ" has a second sense. For that sense, to say that *x* provides a reason for *A* to ϕ is to say, roughly, that owing to *x A* is rationally permitted to ϕ. More precisely, it is to say that because *A* has *x*, there is a fact which, if known to *A* and unopposed by other practical reasons, results in *A*'s being rationally authorized to ϕ. For this sense of the expression the objection to (2) fails. For example, one of its steps, step (11), implies something that the objection explicitly, and of necessity, denies: that *D* provides a reason for Alf to ϕ. Step (11) asserts that *D* provides a reason for Alf to either ϕ or ψ; and any reason of that kind is a fact which, if known to Alf and unopposed by other practical

reasons, results in Alf's being rationally authorized to ϕ. (Interestingly, this is true whether (11) employs "*D* provides ... a reason for Alf to ..." in the first of its two senses or in the second.) So (11) implies that *D* provides a reason for Alf to ϕ in the second sense of "*D* provides a reason for Alf to ϕ." Thus, as long as (2) uses "*x* provides a reason for *A* to ϕ" in the second of its two senses, in which case the objection to (2) must do the same, the objection to (2) is fatally flawed.

This reply is weak because, even if "*x* provides a reason for *A* to ϕ" has these two senses (rather than just the first), the second sense, unlike the first, is uncongenial to the argument for (3). That argument is of little interest unless (3) entails that everyone has (or would have, given suitable knowledge) a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality to be moral. If (3) entails merely that everyone has a *pro tanto authorization* of rationality to be moral, then (3) packs little punch. It says nothing very surprising; also, it fails to ensure, as its advocates mean it to,[18] that everyone rationally ought, *ceteris paribus*, to be moral. (From the fact that a person is rationally *authorized* to do something it does not follow that the person rationally *ought* to do it.) In short, the argument for (3) is in a fix unless it entails that everyone has a *requirement* of rationality to be moral.

But it entails no such thing if the final phrase in its conclusion—"at least one desire that provides a reason for *A* to live morally"—has the second of its two (purported) senses. If the phrase has that sense it means simply this: "at least one desire *A*'s possession of which produces a fact which, if known to *A* and unopposed by other reasons, results in *A*'s being rationally authorized to live morally." This implies nothing about a rational *requirement* for *A* to live morally; it coheres with the view that *A* has no rational requirement, not even a *pro tanto* one, of that kind.

So the third reply is unsatisfactory. A fourth reply, equally unsatisfactory, goes as follows.[19] Premises (6) through (9) indeed entail that *D* provides no reason for Alf to ϕ. Also, if those premises are altered just slightly, by replacing "ϕ" with "ψ" and vice versa (in which case the new premises are no less plausible than the old), they entail that *D* provides no reason for Alf to ψ. But then something has gone wrong, because those two entailments, combined, contradict statement (11). They do so because they imply that *D* fails to provide a reason for Alf to either ϕ or ψ. Just imagine someone asserting "*D* provides no reason for Alf to ϕ, and *D* provides no reason for Alf to ψ; even so, *D* provides a reason for Alf to either ϕ or ψ." This assertion is contradictory, revealing that the conjunction with which it begins implies that, contrary to (11), *D* does not provide a reason for Alf to either ϕ or ψ.

This reply invites two comments. First, it's related to the third reply in this way: if "*D* provides a reason for Alf to ..." is assumed to have the second of the

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[18] Recall note 3.

[19] I thank an anonymous referee for pointing out this objection.

two senses to which the third reply refers, then the assertion to which the fourth reply refers is indeed contradictory. It resembles the assertion "*D* does not authorize Alf to ϕ, and *D* does not authorize Alf to ψ; even so, *D* authorizes Alf to either ϕ or ψ."

Second, the assertion to which the fourth reply refers does not sound contradictory. It sounds odd, but to sound odd is not to sound contradictory. Nor is the oddness of an utterance always, or even usually, to be explained by the presence of a contradiction.[20] So the reply yields no compelling evidence that in ordinary language the sentence "*D* provides a reason for Alf to ..." means something like "Because Alf has *D*, there is a fact which, if known to Alf and unopposed by other practical reasons, results in Alf's being rationally authorized to ..." At any rate, the sentence cannot have that meaning in the argument for (3). (More exactly, the sentence form "*x* provides a reason for *A* to ..." cannot have that meaning—or a kindred meaning, rather—in the argument for (3).) If the argument for (3) is to have the significance it is meant to have, "*D* provides a reason for Alf to ..." must mean something like this: "because Alf has *D*, there is a fact which, if known to Alf and unopposed by other practical reasons, results in Alf's being rationally required to ..." But then the assertion to which the fourth reply refers is no more contradictory than this one: "*D* does not require Alf to ϕ, and *D* does not require Alf to ψ; even so, *D* requires Alf to either ϕ or ψ."[21] So the fourth reply fails.

5.

The objection in section 3 withstands the four replies. That objection is sound; the disproof of (2) succeeds. Even if "ϕing" stands specifically for living morally, the antecedent of (2) fails to ensure the consequent. That is, it fails to ensure that the desire to which it refers provides a reason for *A* to ϕ. Perhaps it ensures that the desire to which it refers provides a reason for *A* to *either* ϕ or ψ (where "ψing" stands for living nonmorally), but that fact does not help (2). Nor does it help the argument in which (2) occurs; little would be achieved by revising the argument in light of it. The claim that everyone has a reason to either live morally or live in some other way does not entail that everyone has a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality to live morally. But unless the argument for (3) entails that assertion, it does not merit the attention it has received here. Formulated and interpreted so that it merits that attention, it falls to the objection in section 3.

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[20] See H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *The Logic of Grammar*, ed. Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (Encino, CA: Dickenson), pp. 64–75.

[21] Interestingly, some people find this statement odd on a first hearing, though a little reflection shows it to be noncontradictory. This fact supports a point made a bit ago: that the oddness of a statement is no proof that the statement harbors a contradiction.

Before closing, three more points are in order. The first is that because (2) is false, (4) is false also. After all, (4) entails (2); so the disproof of (2) amounts to a disproof of (4).

The second point concerns the authors cited in note 13. According to that note, those authors hold (4) or something like it. What most of them hold is this:

(4´) If ϕing is a way for an agent, *A*, to satisfy one of *A*'s desires, then *A* has a reason to ϕ.

If (4´) is elliptical for (4) it already stands refuted. If it is not elliptical for (4) it can be refuted in short order. To begin, note that because (4) is false, the following is a possible state of affairs:

(13) ϕing is a way for at least one agent—Ann, say—to satisfy one of her desires, *E*. Even so, *E* provides no reason for Ann to ϕ.

Now combine (13) with this assumption: "If *E* provides no reason for Ann to ϕ, then Ann has no reason to ϕ. For instance, Ann has no desire, aside from *E*, the satisfaction of which would be promoted by Ann's ϕing." This assumption, together with (13), entails this:

(14) ϕing is a way for Ann to satisfy one of her desires. Even so, Ann has no reason to ϕ.

Given that the steps from which (14) follows represent possible states of affairs (i.e., either they are true or they could be true, whether viewed individually or collectively), (14) does the same. But if (14) represents a possible state of affairs, (4´) is false.

A possible reply is that (14) has an absurd consequence, revealing that something has gone wrong in the above argument. The second part of (14) says that Ann has no reason to ϕ. But the first part entails that, other things being equal, Ann would act rationally were she to ϕ. The result is the following absurdity:

(15) Ann has no reason to ϕ; nevertheless, other things being equal, Ann would act rationally were she to ϕ.

One problem with this reply is that (15) is not absurd. (15) is odd, but its oddness is no proof of absurdity.[22] As evidence for this, note that the following is not absurd:

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[22] And just *why* is (15) odd? Perhaps because the sentence "*A* has no reason to ϕ" is often used to mean not that *A lacks* a reason of this or that kind but that *A has* a reason—indeed, a conclusive reason—to refrain from ϕing. (Compare: "*A* has no business ϕing." Normally, the intent of this statement is not that *A* lacks something but that *A has* something, namely, an obligation not to ϕ.) If the sentence were used that way in this paper, (15) would be absurd. Of course, it is not used that way in this paper. But because people sometimes use it that way, (15) has an odd ring.

(16) Ann has no reason to ϕ, but Ann does have a reason to *either* ϕ or ψ. Thus, other things being equal, Ann would act rationally were she to ϕ.

If (15) were absurd (16) would be absurd, because (16) plainly entails (15). But (16) is not absurd; nor is it the least bit odd. And of course nothing is amiss in its first sentence. As shown earlier, a person can have a reason to either ϕ or ψ without having a reason to ϕ.

The third point concerns the brief argument for (2) that emerged in section 2. The key premise in that argument can be stated thus:

(17) If ϕing has a virtue that many other actions lack—specifically, if ϕing promises to fulfill one of *A*'s desires, whereas many other actions do nothing for *A*—and if, further, not one of those actions, including the act of ϕing, has any other properties that could create reasons either for or against *A*'s doing it, then *A* has more reason to ϕ than to do one of those other, useless actions.

This premise, combined with a few others the truth of which is secure, entails (2). Since (2) is false, (17) is false.

Even so, (17) sounds plausible. Most likely, it does so because the question "Which act, ϕing or χing, does *A* have more reason to do?" is seldom distinguished from the question "If *A* had to choose between ϕing and χing, which of those acts would *A* have more reason to do?" If the answer to the second question is "ϕing," people tend to give that same answer to the first question. This is so because the first question is seldom asked unless one of two things is assumed: either that *A*'s options are limited to ϕing and χing, or that each of those options has some reasons in its favor, meaning that *A* has *pro tanto* reasons to do it. If either of those assumptions is true, "ϕing" is the answer to the first question if it is the answer to the second.

At any rate, if the answer to the second question is "ϕing" people tend to give that same answer to the first question. This is the natural knee-jerk response. Now suppose that "χing" stands for those acts, referred to in (17), that do nothing for agent *A*. Then the answer to the second question is "ϕing" if the (two-part) antecedent of (17) is true. (More fully, if *A* must choose between ϕing and χing, and if, further, ϕing has the virtue, and χing the shortcoming, mentioned in the antecedent of (17), then as long as the rest of that antecedent is true, *A* has more reason to ϕ than to χ.) Thus, when the antecedent of (17) is true one tends to give that same answer—"ϕing"—to the first question. That is, one tends to regard the consequent of (17) as true. This tendency is what makes (17) sound plausible.

But as already said, (17) is false. In some situations, the antecedent of (17) does not preclude the possibility that although the relevant agent has a reason to *either* ϕ or ψ, the agent lacks a reason to ϕ. And if the agent lacks a reason to ϕ

the agent cannot have *more* reason to ϕ than to do something else. Thus, despite its plausible ring, (17) is not true.

6.

It is time to sum up. The phrase "one of the best ways" is the downfall of the argument for (3). That phrase makes premise (2) false, and hence makes the argument for (3) unsound. Also, the measures which show this reveal that (4) is false. Thus, this paper has fulfilled its aims. First, it has exposed a fatal error in a tempting argument for the view that everyone, even the sociopath, has reasons to be moral. Second, it has exposed a further error, an easy one to make, about the conditions under which a desire provides reasons for the acts that fulfill it. To have a desire—a rational, non-misinformed desire—the satisfaction of which could be achieved through a certain deed is not necessarily to have a reason to perform that deed.

Clearly, these errors are worth avoiding. To make them is to risk attributing reasons to a person that don't really exist. Arguably, the latter include reasons for any *sociopath* to be moral. At any rate, philosophers out to show that everyone, even the sociopath, has reasons to be moral must use a better argument than the one addressed in this paper.[23]

[23] I thank Jason Eberl, Paul Warren, and an anonymous referee for useful remarks on an earlier draft. I also thank Michael Burke for some valuable chats about some of the topics addressed here.