
IS “WHY BE MORAL?” A PSEUDO-QUESTION?: HOSPERS AND THORNTON ON THE AMORALIST’S CHALLENGE

BY

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Abstract: Many arguments have been advanced for the view that “Why be moral?” is a pseudo-question. In this paper I address one of the most widely known and influential of them, one that comes from John Hospers and J. C. Thornton. I do so partly because, strangely, an important phase of that argument has escaped close attention. It warrants such attention because, firstly, not only is it important to the argument in which it appears, it is important in wider respects. For instance, if it is sound it has weighty consequences even if the argument in which it figures fails. Secondly, it is not sound; it succumbs to a simple objection.

I.

Many arguments have been advanced for the view that “Why be moral?” is a pseudo-question. Whether any of them succeeds is important, for if even one of them does, “Why be moral?” is much like the question “How tall is the color blue?” We should not try to answer it; we should dismiss it as silly.

I believe that all of these arguments fail, but of course I cannot address all of them in a single paper. In this paper I address one of the most widely known and influential of them, one that comes from John Hospers (1961, p. 194) and J. C. Thornton (1970, p. 445). I do so partly because,

strangely, an important phase of that argument has escaped scrutiny, despite the attention the argument itself has received. That phase is important not just to the argument itself but to other philosophical issues; also, it succumbs to an objection which, as far as I know, has not previously been raised. But more on these matters shortly; my first task is to reconstruct the argument:

- (1) The possible contexts in which “Why be moral?” is a serious issue are those in which the questioner’s hedonic, prudential, and other nonmoral reasons point in one direction; her moral reasons in another. In other words, the weight of her nonmoral reasons tilts against being moral, whereas the weight of her moral reasons tilts in favor of it.
- (2) Thus, whenever “Why be moral?” is a serious issue we cannot hope to answer it by showing the person who asks it that the weight of her nonmoral reasons tilts in the same direction as the weight of her moral reasons, namely, toward being moral.
- (3) But neither can we hope to answer it by pointing out that the weight of her moral reasons tilts toward being moral. Merely to say “You should be moral because that’s what your moral reasons direct you to do” is to assume the very thing she doubts. At any rate, it is not to *persuade* her of the thing she doubts, which is that because her moral reasons direct her to be moral, this suffices to show that she ought rationally to be moral (i.e. that being moral is what she has most reason to do).
- (4) Therefore, whenever “Why be moral?” is a serious issue we cannot hope to answer it. That is, whenever it is such an issue it does not merely lack, it *necessarily* lacks, an answer. So “Why be moral?” is a pseudo-question.

Before I state my aims regarding this argument allow me to make some comments about it. First, it uses “Why be moral?” as short for “Why should *I* be moral?” and it assumes, as it should, that the latter question concerns reasons for action – specifically, *normative* reasons for action, reasons that bear on the rationality of the relevant action. The person who asks “Why be moral?” seeks proof that he has good or conclusive reasons of that kind to be moral. The argument also assumes that normative reasons are of two sorts: moral and nonmoral. It does not state the difference between the two, but this is no shortcoming. It suffices for the argument that the difference exists, and that we generally can distinguish between those two sorts of reasons.

Second, the term “nonmoral reasons” is mine rather than Hospers’ or Thornton’s. They use the term “reasons of self-interest.” By doing so they invite the complaint, often made against them, that reasons of self-interest

are not the only practical reasons besides moral ones. (See, e.g., Nielsen, 1984, p. 83; Overvold, 1984, p. 496). Whether that complaint holds water need not detain us. Their argument avoids it, with no loss of plausibility, once we replace "reasons of self-interest" with "nonmoral reasons."

Third, the term "serious issue" requires clarification. Hospers and Thornton give us little help with this. For instance, Thornton, who prefers the term "really serious complication," does not say what he means by that term.¹ But I see no difficulty here. "Why be moral?" is no pseudo-question if it lacks an answer only in *some* possible contexts. To be a pseudo-question it must lack an answer, if not in every possible context in which it occurs, then in every such context in which it is important to the person who asks it or, leaving aside its status as a pseudo-question, it is important philosophically. So let's understand "serious issue" to mean a question with one of those features.

Fourth, as the preceding comment reveals, the argument employs a slightly unusual notion of a pseudo-question. Usually, a pseudo-question is defined as a question that necessarily has no answer. Step (4) implicitly defines it as a question that necessarily has no answer *or* fails to be a serious issue. But this is no defect. Each of those notions of a pseudo-question has the same upshot: that if "Why be moral?" is a pseudo-question we should ignore it rather than reply to it.

Finally, it is crucial to the argument that it entail, not that "Why be moral?" lacks an answer merely in every *actual* case in which it is a serious issue, but that it lacks one in every *possible* case of that kind. Only if the argument does that, as indeed it does in its present form, does it entail that "Why be moral?" is a pseudo-question. This explains some of the argument's features – for instance, the presence of the word 'possible' in step (1).

Let me now state the aims of this paper, first by noting that although the argument for (4) has received critical attention, the first phase of it, the phase consisting of (1) and (2), has escaped close scrutiny. That phase warrants such scrutiny because, firstly, not only is it important to the argument for (4), it is important in wider respects. For instance, if it is sound it has weighty consequences even if the argument for (4) fails. Secondly, it is not sound; it is open to a simple objection. Also, every attempt to repair it either fails to rescue it from the objection or succeeds at too high a price: the "repaired" argument no longer has weighty consequences, nor does it fulfill its role in the argument for (4).

In what follows I give (1) and (2) the attention they warrant; also, I defend each of the claims just made. I begin, in section 2, with my claim about the importance of (1) and (2). In section 3 I show that despite the attention the argument for (4) has received, the first phase of that argument has escaped close scrutiny. In section 4 I subject it to such scrutiny, thereby revealing its defects.

2.

The first phase in the argument for (4) is important not just for the obvious reason that (2) is the first step in the second phase, but for another reason as well: (2) flies in the face of a long-standing tradition in moral philosophy, namely, that of attempting the very thing (2) dismisses as hopeless. Among those who attempt this, either explicitly or on a fair reading, are many philosophers of old, including Plato, Cumberland, and Shaftesbury, and many recent philosophers, including Michael Scriven, Neil Cooper, and David Gauthier.² To take just one example, although Shaftesbury does not explicitly discuss (2) or any arguments in its behalf, he thinks that if we encounter a (reasonable) person who doubts that she rationally ought to be moral we can dispel her doubts by showing that, owing to human nature and the conditions of human life, her best option, not only from the moral but from the nonmoral standpoint, is to be moral. To show the latter, by showing that virtue is necessary for happiness, is one of Shaftesbury's main projects. But of course this project is doomed if (2) is true. (Likewise, it is doomed if (1) is true, because (1) entails (2).)

Let me distill this line of thought as follows: the argument made up of (1) and (2) is significant partly because (2) figures in the following argument, which, if sound, is significant indeed.

- (2) Whenever "Why be moral?" is a serious issue we cannot hope to answer it by showing the person who asks it that the weight of her nonmoral reasons tilts in the same direction as the weight of her moral reasons, namely, toward being moral.
- (5) Therefore, whenever "Why be moral?" is a serious issue we cannot hope to answer it the way Shaftesbury, Scriven, Gauthier, and many others try to answer it: by arguing that every person (or every ordinary person) has nonmoral reasons to be moral that outweigh her nonmoral reasons not to be moral.

In sum, (2) is important both to the argument for (4) and to the argument for (5). Hence, the first phase in the argument for (4), the phase that consists of (1) and (2), has considerable importance.

An objection may arise here, namely, that although I have shown that (2) is significant I have not shown the same about (1), the premise that the possible contexts in which "Why be moral?" is a serious issue are those in which the questioner's nonmoral reasons point in one direction; her moral reasons in another. Step (2) is significant because it is crucial both to the argument for (4) and to the argument for (5). But (1) is not crucial to them, for it is not the only feasible defense of (2). For example, F. H. Bradley, H. J. Paton, and Dan Brock have defended (2) by means of

arguments in which (1) has no role. Indeed, by such means they have defended the wider thesis that no nonmoral justification for being moral is possible.³

This objection calls for two replies. First, if (2) is philosophically significant, so too is any feasible argument for it. This is true even if that argument is less significant than (2) itself, owing to the fact that other feasible arguments exist along side of it.

Second, the arguments of Bradley, Paton, and Brock have a defect that (1) lacks. Each depends for its plausibility on a robust understanding of the term "be moral," whereas the question "Why be moral?," when asked in the contexts to which (1) and (2) refer, often involves a nonrobust sense of that term. In other words, when "Why be moral?" is a serious issue it often means this: "Why should I regularly (i.e. always or at least with great consistency) do the outward deeds required by morality? Why should I habitually tell the truth, abstain from theft, keep my promises, and so forth?" Here the term "be moral" has a nonrobust sense. By this I mean that whether a person is moral in this sense depends solely on his outward behavior. (At least, it *logically* depends solely on that behavior, though it may causally depend on his resolution or choice, from whatever motives, to cultivate the requisite habits.) In particular, it does not depend on his having a particular feeling, belief, or attitude about morality – for instance, an attitude of respect for morality as such.

This nonrobust sense of "be moral" is not contrived or unusual. Of course, other senses of the term are equally uncontrived, but this is beside the point. The term "be moral" is not univocal; it has several ordinary senses, including the one just mentioned (cp. Bayles, 1973, p. 310f). And when it has that sense, "Why be moral?" is both important philosophically and, very likely, important to the person who asks it.

However, the arguments of Bradley, Paton, and Brock are plausible only if "be moral" has a robust sense, a sense that makes a particular feeling, belief, or attitude about morality essential to being moral. For instance, Bradley's and Paton's arguments rely on the premise that to be moral one must regard morality as good for its own sake, not merely as a means to a nonmoral end (Bradley, 1927, pp. 58, 61, 62, 63; Paton, 1927, p. 381). Similarly, Brock's argument relies on the premise that to be moral one must regard moral principles as overriding, as the ultimate determinants of what one ought, all things considered, to do (Brock, 1977, p. 73). If these two premises are false, Bradley's, Paton's, and Brock's arguments lose plausibility. And of course both premises are false if "be moral" has the nonrobust sense described a bit ago.

The general point here is that once we note that in some of the contexts to which (2) refers the term "be moral" means no more than "regularly do the outward deeds required by morality," the arguments of Bradley,

Paton, and Brock do not merely fail, they lose plausibility. This is not true of the argument that derives (2) from (1). If that argument is plausible in the first place, it remains plausible even if we understand “be moral” as I usually do from here on, namely, as having its nonrobust sense. This is because, unlike many arguments for (2), the argument that derives (2) from (1) depends for its plausibility on no *specific* reading, or narrow range of readings, of the term “be moral.” Fairly interpreted, the gist of the argument is that for any ordinary understanding of that term, “Why be moral?” is not a serious issue if the weight of the questioner’s nonmoral reasons tilts in the same direction as the weight of her moral reasons. It is a serious issue just in case the weight of her nonmoral reasons tilts the other way, thereby creating a conflict between the directives she receives from the nonmoral standpoint and the ones she receives from the moral standpoint. This precludes answering her by showing that no such conflict exists.

Before concluding this section let me note that the point just made about the argument for (2) applies to the argument for (4) and the argument for (5). To the extent that those arguments are plausible, they remain so on the assumption that “be moral” has its nonrobust sense. For instance, that sense would diminish the plausibility of the argument for (5) only if it caused (5) to imply a falsehood about what Shaftesbury, Scriven, and others are attempting when they argue that each person’s nonmoral reasons ultimately prescribe being moral. (After all, that nonrobust sense does not diminish the plausibility of (2) or make the step from (2) to (5) invalid.) But it does not cause (5) to do that. Although Shaftesbury, Scriven, and most others in their camp use “be moral” (or “be virtuous,” etc.) in a way that makes being moral more than a matter of mere *outward* behavior, their arguments presuppose that being moral involves, at a minimum, regularly doing the outward deeds morality demands.⁴

In sum, steps (1) and (2) both have considerable importance. The argument they constitute, the first phase in the argument for (4), deserves close attention.

3.

It may seem, however, that it has already received such attention. This is because the argument for (4) has received its share of criticism – for instance, objections to it have come from Kurt Baier (1978, p. 238), Kai Nielsen (1970, pp. 468–71; 1984, p. 82f), and Ronald M. Green (1978, p. 44f). Let me illustrate, however, that despite this criticism the first phase of the argument has escaped close scrutiny. I will do this by discussing just one of the objections, namely Baier’s, but my main point about it extends to the other extant objections.

Baier's objection can be put as follows. A person for whom "Why be moral?" is a serious issue may be seeking, or at least be receptive to, something unmentioned in (2) and (3) – that is, something other than assurance either that the weight of his moral reasons favors being moral or that the weight of his nonmoral reasons points in the same direction as the weight of his moral reasons. He may be seeking an elucidation of the nature and content of moral reasons that shows them to be more weighty than nonmoral reasons whenever the two kinds of reasons conflict. In other words, it's likely that he would consider his question answered if we produced an account of moral reasons which reveals that whenever a person's moral and nonmoral reasons point in different directions, the person is required by reason to comply with the moral reasons.⁵ So (4) does not follow from (2) and (3). Even if (2) and (3) are true we are not forced to conclude that "Why be moral?" necessarily lacks an answer.

Does this objection succeed? I believe so, but whether it does is not my main interest. I present it mainly to show that it does not subject (1) and (2) to scrutiny. In this respect it typifies the objections made to the argument for (4).⁶ Of course, this is not to criticize those objections. Even so it is to illustrate something important, namely, that the first phase of the argument for (4), a phase that has importance both within that argument and independently of it, has not received the attention it warrants.

One more remark: In making my point about Baier's objection I said, not that his objection does not *oppose* (1) and (2), but that it does not subject them to scrutiny. This was deliberate. There is a way of reading Baier's objection so that it challenges not the validity of the argument for (4) but the truth of step (1). However, that reading is plausible only if (1) has a different formulation than it presently has.⁷ That different formulation comes up in the next section; so it's best to postpone discussion of it until then. Let me emphasize, however, that my point about Baier's objection is true no matter which of the two readings we adopt. The same goes for my more general point that (1) and (2) have escaped close attention.

4.

In this section I show two things. First, the initial phase of the argument for (4) is unsound; a simple objection shows that (1) and (2) are false. Second, although six attempts to rescue that phase deserve attention, not one is effective. The first five fail to rescue it from the objection. The sixth rescues it, but at the cost of ruining both the argument for (4) and the argument for (5).

The first phase of the argument for (4) is unsound for this reason: Steps (1) and (2) falsely assume that if the weight of a person's nonmoral reasons were to point in the same direction as her moral reasons she would

be confident of that fact; hence, she would not question whether she ought rationally to be moral. Those steps assume this in the following respect: if that assumption is false – more specifically, if cases are possible in which, although a person's nonmoral reasons point in the same direction as her moral ones, she doubts that they point that way – two things are true. First, contrary to (1), “Why be moral?” can be a serious issue even if the questioner's nonmoral reasons point in the same direction as her moral ones. Second, contrary to (2), in the latter cases we can hope to answer “Why be moral?” by showing the questioner that despite her doubts, the weight of her nonmoral reasons directs her to be moral.

As I said, not only do (1) and (2) make the above assumption, but the assumption is false. We can show this in multiple ways,⁸ one of which is this: Suppose that for a particular person the weight of nonmoral reasons tilts not against being moral but in favor of it, where “being moral” denotes, as remarked earlier, regularly performing the outward deeds morality demands. Does it follow that she knows of that fact, or even that she can easily discover it? Does it even follow that she would know of that fact were she acquainted with the philosophical arguments for it – for instance, the arguments of Scriven and Gauthier? Of course not. For whether it is ultimately true or not, it is neither obvious nor incontestably established that *regularly* doing the outward deeds required by morality comports with the weight of nonmoral reasons. After all, *regularly* doing those deeds involves frequently doing them when, taken individually, they are less than optimal from a nonmoral standpoint. (Imagine a person who refrains from stealing even though, were she to steal just this once, she would produce more nonmoral value than she stands to produce through her act of restraint. For instance, she would profit considerably with no risk of being caught.) This fact is the sticking point for every attempt to show that for each person the weight of nonmoral reasons favors, or at least does not disfavor, regularly acting morally. Moreover, even if this problem is solvable in principle, no one has yet solved it beyond dispute. Thus, even if the weight of a person's nonmoral reasons favors being moral, and even if she is abreast of the philosophical arguments to that effect, she might reasonably wonder whether she rationally ought to be moral. Indeed, she might wonder about it intensely; she might find it a pressing issue.

Consequently, (1) and (2) are false. (1) is false because the points just made show that “Why be moral?” can be a serious issue even if the questioner's nonmoral reasons tilt in the same direction as her moral ones. (2) is false because, if cases are possible in which “Why be moral?” is a serious issue because the person who asks it falsely suspects that her nonmoral reasons disfavor being moral, then in those cases we can do what (2) says we cannot do: we can hope to answer the person's question by showing that her suspicion is false. After all, in those cases her suspicion *is* false,

and we have no reason to doubt that with enough work and ingenuity we can produce evidence that it is false. This is the idea behind the arguments of Scriven, Gauthier, and many others who try to show that our nonmoral reasons, on balance, counsel us to live morally. These philosophers believe that although being moral involves occasionally, perhaps frequently, making choices that are nonmorally less than optimal (e.g. the choice not to steal, described in the previous paragraph), each of us has conclusive nonmoral reasons to be moral. The moral life is nonmorally preferable to any other way of life, despite the drawbacks that attend nonmorally sub-optimal choices. (See, e.g. Shaftesbury, 1963, p. 281f; Scriven, 1966, pp. 230, 232f, 243, 251, 264, 299f; and Gauthier, 1986, pp. 2, 15, 169, 170, 182, 183.) This is what these philosophers are at pains to show, and they are at pains to show it because they know that it isn't obvious.⁹ They know that even if a person's nonmoral reasons ultimately direct her to live morally she might intelligently doubt that they direct her that way, and hence intelligently question whether she should be moral.

Thus, the first phase in the argument for (4) fails; steps (1) and (2) are false. As a result, the second phase of the argument for (4) fails; so too does the argument for (5).

Worth noting is that my objection differs considerably from Baier's. Not only does it target a different part of the argument for (4) and, unlike his, oppose the argument for (5), but it makes no challenge to the assumption Baier denies: that anyone who asks "Why be moral?" is seeking assurance, if not that the weight of her moral reasons favors being moral, then that the weight of her nonmoral reasons points in the same direction as the weight of her moral reasons. My objection shows that even if that assumption is true the argument for (4) is unsound.

It remains to consider how my objection fares against possible replies to it. Six replies suggest themselves, but not one is effective.

The first reply is that although the situation described in my objection – the situation in which a person falsely suspects that her nonmoral reasons advise her not to be moral – could indeed make "Why be moral?" a serious issue, that situation is impossible. In other words, in no possible world does a person falsely suspect that her nonmoral reasons direct her not to be moral.

This reply fails because, first of all, it is surely possible that a person *suspects* that her nonmoral reasons direct her not to be moral. So the reply holds up only if no person can *falsely* suspect that her nonmoral reasons do that. It holds up, that is, only if either it is impossible that a person's nonmoral reasons direct or permit her to be moral, or it is impossible that although a person's nonmoral reasons direct or permit her to be moral, she mistakenly suspects that they do not. But neither disjunct is plausible. For instance, a person surely can be mistaken about the direction in which her nonmoral reasons point. The fact that those

reasons are *her* reasons does not rule out such mistakes. For example, just because a fact, *F*, is one of *P*'s nonmoral reasons to \emptyset , it does not follow that *P* is infallible about *F*'s importance relative to her other nonmoral reasons. Of course, this claim presupposes an *ordinary* notion of "*P*'s nonmoral reasons," and we can always replace that notion with a stipulative definition – specifically, a definition that makes it tautologous that *P* never errs about the direction in which her nonmoral reasons point. But to do this is to make (1) implausible. Surely, "Why be moral?" can be a serious issue for *P* even if, on an *ordinary* understanding of "*P*'s nonmoral reasons," *P*'s nonmoral reasons tilt against being moral.

The second reply takes off from a passage in Hospers' piece, a passage in which Hospers states his first premise.¹⁰ The gist of that passage is not that "Why be moral?" is a *serious issue* just in case the questioner's nonmoral reasons disfavor being moral, but that "Why be moral?" is *likely to arise* only if the questioner's nonmoral reasons do that. So, according to the second reply, we should revise (1) by replacing "a serious issue" with "likely to arise."

This reply fails dismally. In fact, I raise it only because the passage to which it refers may cross a few readers' minds. It fails because the situation my objection describes is not one in which "Why be moral?" is unlikely to arise. That question is just as likely to arise when a person *falsely* thinks that her nonmoral reasons disfavor being moral as when she *correctly* thinks that they do.

The next reply asserts that to armor the argument for (2) against my objection we need only insert, at just the right place in (1), the verb "suspects" or a kindred term (e.g. "believes"). That is, it asserts that the argument for (2) holds up if we formulate (1) properly, in which case (1) says this: The possible contexts in which "Why be moral?" is a serious issue are those in which the questioner *suspects* that his nonmoral reasons point in one direction; his moral reasons in another.

This reply fails because it is unfriendly to (2), the assertion that whenever "Why be moral?" is a serious issue we cannot hope to answer it by showing the person who asks it that the weight of her nonmoral reasons tilts in the same direction as the weight of her moral reasons. That assertion is false if the revised version of (1) is true. To see this let us grant, if only for the sake of argument, that "Why be moral?" is a serious issue just in case the person who asks it *suspects* that his nonmoral reasons direct him not to be moral. This implies that if a person asks that question because he *falsely* suspects that his nonmoral reasons do that, his question is a serious issue. In this situation the antecedent of (2) is true, but the consequent of (2) is false. It is false because, given that the person's question stems from a mistake about the way in which his nonmoral reasons tilt, we can hope to answer his question by correcting his mistake – that is, by showing that contrary to what he suspects, the weight of his

nonmoral reasons tilts in the same direction as the weight of his moral ones. After all, if someone asks "Why should I be moral?" because he falsely suspects that his nonmoral reasons direct him not to be moral, the following response, if backed by good evidence, answers his question: "You should be moral because, contrary to what you suspect, the balance of your nonmoral reasons does *not* direct you not to be moral. It directs you to be moral, just as your moral reasons do."

So the third reply fails. Also, it cannot be repaired by revising it to say that the term we should insert into (1) is "justifiably suspects," "correctly suspects," or "knows." First of all, to insert "justifiably suspects" into (1) is to produce the same problem for (2) that I discussed in the preceding paragraph. A person can justifiably but *falsely* suspect that his nonmoral reasons direct him not to be moral. In such a case, if the revised version of (1) is true then the antecedent of (2) is true, but its consequent is not. Secondly, if we insert "correctly suspects" or "knows" into (1) the revised version of (1) is just as false as the original version, meaning the version I refuted early in this section. The revised version of (1) is this: The possible contexts in which "Why be moral?" is a serious issue are those in which the questioner *correctly suspects* (or knows) that his nonmoral reasons point in one direction; his moral reasons in another. This version is just as false as the original version, the version that lacks the words "correctly suspects," because "Why be moral?" can be a serious issue even when the questioner does not correctly suspect that his nonmoral reasons disfavor being moral. His question can be a serious issue even when he *incorrectly* suspects that his nonmoral reasons do that.

The fourth reply, like the previous two, challenges my formulation of (1). It takes off from some remarks by Hospers and Thornton which indicate, possibly, that those authors would say the following. Step (1), properly formulated, is not mainly about the *contexts* in which "Why be moral?" is a serious issue. Rather, it is mainly about the *meaning* of that question when it arises in those contexts. In those contexts we should take the questioner to be asking "Why should I be moral when my nonmoral reasons advise me *not* to be moral?"¹¹

Capitalizing on these remarks, the fourth reply asserts two things. First, we should revise (1) as follows:

- (1') The possible contexts in which "Why be moral?" is a serious issue are those in which that question means this: "Why should I be moral when the weight of my nonmoral reasons directs me not to be moral?"

Second, with this revision made, the argument for (2) withstands my objection. It does so for two reasons. Firstly, unlike (1), (1') comports with the claim, made in my objection, that "Why be moral?" can be a serious

issue even when the questioner's nonmoral reasons tilt in the same direction as her moral ones. (1') does not imply the negation of that claim; it implies merely that *something* about the cases in which "Why be moral?" is a serious issue makes that question equivalent to "Why should I be moral when the weight of my nonmoral reasons directs me not to be moral?"

Secondly, given the truth of (1'), the consequent of (2) cannot be false when the antecedent of (2) is true. The consequent of (2) is that we cannot hope to answer "Why be moral?" by showing the person who asks it that the weight of her nonmoral reasons tilts in the same direction as the weight of her moral reasons. And the point here is that given (1'), that consequent cannot be false when the antecedent of (2) – that "Why be moral?" is a serious issue – is true. An implication of (1') is that the antecedent of (2) is true only when "Why be moral?" is equivalent to "Why should I be moral when the weight of my nonmoral reasons directs me not to be moral?" And in any such case, the consequent of (2), the consequent stated a moment ago, is true. For we cannot hope to answer the question "Why should I be moral when the weight of my nonmoral reasons directs me not to be moral?" by saying "You should be moral because, contrary to what you suspect, the weight of your nonmoral reasons does *not* direct you not to be moral. The weight of those reasons tilts in the same direction as the weight of your moral ones." To say the latter is merely to invite the retort: "I don't necessarily suspect that the weight of my nonmoral reasons directs me not to be moral. My question is this: *When* the weight of my nonmoral reasons directs me not to be moral, why should I be moral?"

This reply has much in common with the previous one, and fails in a similar way. But it fails for a second reason as well; so let me explain that reason first. That one is well illustrated by Baier's objection. As I presented that objection in section 3, its key point was not that the first step in the argument for (4) is false, but that (2) and (3) do not entail (4). However, if we replace (1) with (1') and then read the question in (1') as the above reply would have us read it – namely, as meaning "When the weight of my nonmoral reasons directs me not to be moral, why should I be moral?" – the thrust of Baier's objection is this: The first step in the argument for (4) is false because "Why be moral?" can be a serious issue when it means, not what the fourth reply takes it to mean, but the following: "Although the weight of my moral reasons directs me to be moral, the weight of my nonmoral reasons directs me not to be moral. So please show me, if you can, that moral reasons have features that make them override nonmoral reasons."

Baier's objection illustrates a general point: "Why be moral?" can be a serious issue when it does not mean what the fourth reply takes it to mean. This is one problem for that reply. A further, related problem is that the fourth reply, like the third, is unfriendly to (2).

To see this, suppose we replace (1) with (1'), and that (1') is true: "Why be moral?," when more than a negligible issue, is short for "Why should I be moral when the weight of my nonmoral reasons directs me not to be moral?" The latter question can mean, as the fourth reply says it means, (a) "When the weight of my nonmoral reasons directs me not to be moral, why should I be moral?" However, it also can mean (b) "The weight of my nonmoral reasons directs me not to be moral. So why should I be moral?" This distinction is important because "Why be moral?" can be a serious issue when it means (b) rather than (a). Perhaps it can be a serious issue when it means (a), but that's immaterial. The point is that (1') is false if it implies that "Why be moral?" is a serious issue *only* when it means (a). Thus, assuming that (1') is true and (for simplicity) that (a) and (b) are the only feasible readings of the question in (1'), (1') means one of the following:

The possible contexts in which "Why be moral?" is a serious issue are those in which that question means (b).

The possible contexts in which "Why be moral?" is a serious issue are those in which that question means (a) or (b).

However, if (1') means either of the latter, (2) is false if (1') is true. Suppose, for instance, that (1') means the same as the second of the two statements, and that the second statement is true. Then (2) is equivalent to this:

(2') Whenever "Why be moral?" occurs in a context in which it means (a) or (b), we cannot hope to answer it by showing the person who asks it that the weight of her nonmoral reasons tilts in the same direction as the weight of her moral reasons, namely, toward being moral.

This statement is false. Suppose a person asks "Why be moral?," intending that question as (b), because she falsely thinks that the weight of her nonmoral reasons directs her not to be moral. In this case the antecedent of (2') is true, but the consequent is false. It is false because, given that the person's question stems from a false belief about the direction in which her nonmoral reasons tilt, we can hope to answer her question by showing that her belief is false. After all, her belief *is* false; so, very likely, with enough work we can show that it is false. To do so is to answer her question.

So much for the fourth reply; let us consider the fifth. It asserts that I have been unfair to the argument for (2) by construing "be moral" to mean "regularly do the outward deeds morality demands." It says that (1) and (2) are most likely true if we construe "be moral" the way Hospers and

Thornton appear, at least in some passages, to construe it: as meaning “do x ,” where x is not a pattern of action or a way of life, but an *act-token* required by morality (Hospers, 1961, pp. 174, 181, 191, 193, 194; Thornton, 1970, p. 445).

This reply calls for two responses. First, replies of this kind, those that object to my reading of “be moral,” are more harmful than helpful to (1) and (2). Presumably, the argument in which (1) and (2) appear, the argument for (4), is about “Why be moral?” as that question is ordinarily understood. That is, the argument is supposed to be sound for any of the ordinary meanings of “Why be moral?” But as indicated earlier, among those meanings is this one: “Why should I regularly, rather than sporadically or only when prudence dictates, do the outward deeds of truth-telling, promise-keeping, and so forth that morality demands?” So unless (1) and (2) are true when “Why be moral?” has that meaning they cannot fulfill their role in the argument for (4).

Second, and more important, (1) and (2) are false even if we understand “be moral” as the reply recommends. The point that undermines (1) and (2), the one raised by my objection, is that the way in which a person’s nonmoral reasons tilt can differ from the way in which he *thinks* they tilt, the result being that although his nonmoral reasons favor being moral, he suspects otherwise and hence questions whether he rationally ought to be moral. This point is true whether “be moral” means “regularly do the outward deeds morality demands” or instead means “do x ,” where x is an act-token required by morality. Often, a person can reasonably but *falsely* think that an act-token, x , of kindness (or reparation, etc.) is contrary both to his reasons of self-interest and to any other nonmoral reasons that might bear on the matter. Hence, “Why do x ?” can be an important issue for him even though, in reality, the weight of his nonmoral reasons favors doing x .

We have seen five replies to my objection to the argument for (2), not one of which rescues that argument. The next reply rescues it, but at the cost of ruining both the argument for (4) and the argument for (5).

According to this reply, the argument for (2), as I have formulated it, is much too ambitious: each of its steps is an overstatement. To correct this flaw we must revise (1) by replacing the phrase “the possible contexts in which” with “some of the possible contexts in which” and then revise (2) accordingly. With these changes made, the key point of my objection – that “Why be moral?” can be a serious issue even when the questioner’s nonmoral reasons, on balance, point in the same direction as his moral ones – no longer refutes (1) and (2).

This reply fails because if we do what it suggests, (2) can fulfill its role neither in the argument for (4) nor in the argument for (5). In other words, if we revise (1) and (2) as the reply recommends, (4) no longer follows from (2) and (3), and (5) no longer follows from (2). For example, (5) asserts that whenever “Why be moral?” is a serious issue we cannot

hope to answer it the way Shaftesbury, Scriven, and many others try to answer it: by arguing that each person has nonmoral reasons to be moral that outweigh her nonmoral reasons not to be moral. This assertion does not follow from (2) if (2) says merely that in *some* of the possible contexts in which "Why be moral?" is a serious issue we cannot hope to answer it by showing that the questioner's nonmoral reasons, on balance, point toward being moral. Nor does it do so if, through further revisions to (2), we make (2) specify the contexts in question here. The statement,

- (2'') in some of the possible contexts in which "Why be moral?" is a serious issue – specifically, in any context in which the questioner's nonmoral reasons, on balance, disfavor being moral – we cannot hope to answer that question by showing the person who asks it that the weight of her nonmoral reasons tilts in the same direction as the weight of her moral reasons, namely, toward being moral,

does not entail that whenever "Why be moral?" is a serious issue we cannot hope to answer it the way Shaftesbury and Scriven (*et al.*) try to answer it. Whether (2'') is true or not, "Why be moral?" can be a serious issue when it arises, not in the contexts to which (2'') refers, but in the contexts which, according to Shaftesbury and Scriven, characterize the human situation – namely, those in which the questioner's nonmoral reasons, on balance (though perhaps unbeknownst to the questioner), direct her to be moral.

Thus, as I said, the sixth reply ruins the argument for (4) and the argument for (5). Also, to revise (4) and (5) to avoid this problem is merely to rob (4) and (5) of interest. For instance, if we revise (2) as the reply suggests – if we replace "whenever" with "in some of the possible contexts in which" – then (4) follows from (2) and (3) only if we make a similar revision to (4). In that case (4) becomes this:

- (4') In some of the possible contexts in which "Why be moral?" is a serious issue we cannot hope to answer it. That is, in some contexts of that kind it does not merely lack, it *necessarily* lacks, an answer. So "Why be moral?" is a pseudo-question.

However, if we revise (4) in this way its first sentence says nothing very contentious. Worse yet, its third sentence is out of place. The claim that "Why be moral?" necessarily lacks an answer in *some* of the possible contexts in which it is a serious issue does not imply that "Why be moral?" a pseudo-question.

Having finished with the six replies let me summarize this section. The argument for (2) is unsound because, as my objection shows, (1) and (2) are false. Contrary to (1), "Why be moral?" can be a serious issue even if

the questioner's nonmoral reasons point in the same direction as his moral ones. Contrary to (2), cases are possible in which, although "Why be moral?" is a serious issue, it's not hopeless to try to answer it by arguing that the questioner's nonmoral reasons, on balance, favor being moral. Furthermore, the attempts to rescue the argument for (2) are defective. The first five fail to rescue it. The sixth rescues it, but at too high a price: if (2) is revised as the reply suggests it no longer entails (5), nor does it fulfill its role in the argument for (4).

5.

To conclude: The argument for (4), the argument through which Hoppers and Thornton famously contend that "Why be moral?" is a pseudo-question, has fatal flaws in its first phase, the phase consisting of (1) and (2). Specifically, (1) and (2) are false. That fact and the considerations that establish it are significant for at least three reasons. First, they have been neglected, even among philosophers who criticize the argument for (4). More generally, the first phase of that argument has not received the attention it warrants.

Second, the argument made up of (1) and (2) is important independently of its role in the argument for (4). If it were sound it would doom the efforts of Shaftesbury, Scriven, Gauthier, and many others to answer "Why be moral?" by arguing that each person's nonmoral reasons, on balance, favor the choice to be moral. As it stands, it creates no problems for those efforts.

Third, even if, contrary to what some philosophers argue, the second phase of the argument for (4) is valid, the argument for (4) fails. To put this another way, even if (2) and (3) entail (4), we must conclude that for anything we have seen in this paper, "Why be moral?" is a sensible and serious question that either has an answer or, if it lacks one, lacks one only contingently. It is not on par with "How tall is the color blue?"¹²

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NOTES

¹ Hoppers is even less helpful than Thornton; he uses no term akin to "serious issue." Although proposition (1) is a charitable reading of his first premise it is far from a literal one. More on this in section 4.

² Plato, 1987; Cumberland, 1969; Shaftesbury, 1963, pp. 280–338; Scriven, 1966, chap. 7; Cooper, 1981, chap. 15; Gauthier, 1986. For further recent attempts of this kind see White, 1988, chap. 5; Singer, 1993, chap. 12; van Ingen, 1994, chap. 8; Smith, 2000; and Slote, 2001, chap. 7.

³ Bradley, 1927, pp. 58–64; Paton, 1927, p. 381; Brock, 1977, pp. 72–76. Some would add H. A. Prichard (1970) to this list, but I'm reluctant to do so. Prichard does not treat

"Why be moral?" as a request for reasons to do what one admits to be one's moral duty. Instead, he treats it as a request for proof that one's putative moral duties are truly one's moral duties. So his claim that we cannot answer "Why be moral?" in terms of nonmoral reasons is not equivalent to the view held by Brock, Bradley, and Paton.

⁴ This should not surprise us. It would be odd for a philosopher to identify being moral with something – a particular commitment, say – that only infrequently, or only when prudence dictates, leads to the outward deeds required by morality. And no philosopher I have mentioned does this. Scriven, for instance (1966, p. 232f), takes care to indicate that he does *not* do it.

⁵ This is a cautious way of making the point. Arguably, it is not merely *likely*, but plainly *true*, that he would consider his question answered if we produced such an account of moral reasons. If the doubt that motivates his question is the one to which (3) refers – the doubt that because his moral reasons direct him to be moral, this suffices to show that he ought rationally to be moral – then although, as (3) informs us, we cannot remove his doubt simply by stating the obvious fact that the weight of his moral reasons tilts toward being moral, we surely can remove his doubt if we can show that owing to the nature and content of moral reasons, such reasons override nonmoral reasons whenever the two sorts of reasons conflict. At least, we can do so on the assumption, which I make throughout this paper, that he can follow our arguments and is willing to accept them if he finds them sound.

⁶ Nielsen (1970) is a special case because, although he says things which suggest that his objection, like Baier's, is essentially an effort to show that (4) does not follow from (2) and (3), he also makes remarks (e.g. in pp. 471–78) that *could* be read as a challenge to (2). He even anticipates, in one sentence on page 471 (lines 23–25), the objection to (1) and (2) that I aim to develop. But he does not seem to intend either that sentence or the other remarks just mentioned as a challenge to (2). For example, he grants (on p. 468) the statements by Hospers that I have reconstructed as (1) through (3). In any case, his objection is not *obviously* a challenge either to (2) or to (1); nor is the error in (1) and (2) salient, if even identified, in his article. This is not to criticize his article; it is simply to suggest that his objection is best seen as an attack on the *second* phase of the argument for (4).

⁷ These points apply not just to Baier's objection but to Nielsen's and Green's.

⁸ One of which differs from the one I am about to present in that it construes the expression "be moral" as meaning "do *x*," where *x* is not a pattern of action or a way of life, but an *act-token* required by morality. More on this later in the section.

⁹ More accurately, *most* of them know that it isn't obvious. Naturally, some exceptions exist. For a good example see Campbell, 1994, p. 206f.

¹⁰ Meaning the premise that corresponds with proposition (1), the premise proposition (1) aims to capture. See Hospers, 1961, p. 194, lines 21–22 and 24–25.

¹¹ See Hospers, 1961, p. 194; and Thornton, 1970, pp. 442, 445, 450. Keep in mind that Hospers and Thornton speak not in terms of an act's being contrary to nonmoral reasons but in terms of its being contrary to self-interest.

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