

## The Concept of Voluntariness

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In her work on the distinction between freedom and voluntariness, Serena Olsaretti suggests the following definition of voluntary action: an action is voluntary if it is not non-voluntary, and non-voluntary if it is performed because there are no acceptable alternatives, where 'acceptable' means conformity to some objective standard (which Olsaretti suggests might be well-being).<sup>1</sup> Freedom, by contrast, is defined as pure negative liberty: an agent is free to perform an action if there exists no preventing condition on their doing so, and free *simpliciter* if she has a number of actions that she is free to perform.<sup>2</sup>

Olsaretti's notion of voluntariness is important for two reasons. Olsaretti herself suggests that ascriptions of responsibility are underwritten by judgments of voluntariness, rather than freedom.<sup>3</sup> Hence, agents cannot be held responsible for actions performed non-voluntarily, even if they are free. This she takes to undermine libertarian positions on, for example, hazardous employment.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Olsaretti notes that a concern for voluntary choice might be grounded in respect for autonomy, understood as an ideal of self-determination or '[directing] oneself where different directions are possible'.<sup>5</sup> I suggest (though will not here argue) that one must be able to make voluntary choices if one is to live an autonomous life. This means that two important questions in political philosophy – when an agent is responsible for her actions and what we must do if we want agents to live autonomous lives – hang upon whether Olsaretti's account of voluntariness is correct once it has been developed

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<sup>1</sup> Most recently in S. Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), p.139. See also 'Freedom, force and choice: against the rights-based definition of voluntariness', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 6 (1998), 53–78; and 'The value of freedom and freedom of choice', *Politeia* 56 (2000): 114–121. Olsaretti rejects a subjective standard (such as, for example, that something is acceptable just in case I consider it acceptable) since using the latter would lead to the unpalatable conclusion that whether we act voluntarily (and hence whether we are responsible) would also be subjective (Olsaretti [2004] p.154.) Olsaretti might appeal to familiar intuitions to show this. Imagine someone who thinks that champagne is the only acceptable beverage. If by an acceptable alternative we mean a subjectively acceptable alternative, then our fastidious protagonist acts non-voluntarily in (and is not responsible for) in choosing to drink champagne at a party, and he is not responsible for his choice. If this seems perverse, then we should also prefer an objective standard of acceptability.

<sup>2</sup> In [2004] Olsaretti illustrates the distinction as follows (pp.138-9). Daisy lives in a city surrounded by desert. She desires to leave, but knows she would not survive the journey through the sands, and therefore chooses to stay. Daisy is free to leave – nobody prevents her – but acts non-voluntarily, since she stays only because all other possibilities would be fatal. By contrast, Wendy lives contentedly in a city surrounded by an impenetrable wire fence. Since she can do nothing but stay in the city, Wendy is unfree; but she does so voluntarily because her reason for staying is not that there are no acceptable alternatives.

<sup>3</sup> Olsaretti [2004]: p.139.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* ch.6

<sup>5</sup> T. Hurka, 'Why value autonomy?', *Social Theory and Practice* 13 (1987): 361-380.

in detail.

This paper is a contribution to that development. I show that well-informedness about our options is crucial to whether we act voluntarily or not, and I argue that we should restrict the scope of what we consider relevantly unacceptable only to include things which involve serious prudential harm. Inevitably there are some questions left unanswered, but what follows indicates what I take to be the strongest form of Olsaretti's theory, and one which *can* play the role described for it above.

## 1 Voluntariness and Belief

On Olsaretti's definition, an agent acts non-voluntarily if they act because all other alternatives are unacceptable. Whether an act is voluntary or not therefore depends upon the motivation for an agent's action; and hence upon an agent's beliefs about their options. If those beliefs are incorrect, then an agent can *in fact* have several acceptable alternatives to an action, but it might nevertheless be non-voluntary due to her ill-informedness.

To show this, consider the following cases.

1. A bank manager called Hilda is threatened with a gun and told to open the safe. Hilda complies, believing that refusal will result in a swift death. Hilda believes that the gun was loaded. As it happens, though, the gun is empty.
2. Later, another bank manager called Grace is threatened by the same robber. Having heard Hilda's story Grace believes that the gun is not loaded; but since she dislikes her employers she opens the safe anyway. This time, the gun was loaded.

In case 1, it was not true that Hilda had no acceptable alternatives: unbeknownst to her, she could have defied her assailants and stopped the robbery. However, she acted as she did because she (mistakenly) *believed* the gun to be loaded, and hence that she had no acceptable alternatives. On Olsaretti's definition, Hilda acted non-voluntarily. The converse is true in 2. Grace really had no acceptable alternatives to opening the safe: if she had done anything else, she would have been shot. However, Grace did not act as she did *for that reason*, because she didn't know that the gun was loaded. Her action, therefore, was voluntary by Olsaretti's lights.

That beliefs about one's options can have this effect means that Olsaretti's view is a hybrid, containing both objective and subjective conditions for voluntariness. What counts as acceptable and unacceptable does not depend upon an agent's beliefs, but an agent's motivation does so depend. Hence, in deciding whether an agent acts voluntarily, we must look at what they believe their options to be, their evaluation of those options, and whether they use an appropriate standard for that evaluation.<sup>6</sup> This gives well-informedness a crucial

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<sup>6</sup> Someone who believes that only champagne is acceptable might correctly perceive that all non-champagne drinks are not champagne; but the standard he uses to evaluate his options is inappropriate. Hence, his drinking champagne is voluntary. Hilda, by contrast, has false beliefs about her options but uses an appropriate standard; so, she acts non-voluntarily. It might be objected that if (unlike Hilda) one is responsible for being ignorant of acceptable alternatives, one is responsible for actions performed in that ignorance. I disagree: if an agent acts on the sincere (but mistaken) belief that she has no acceptable alternatives, then at the time she makes that choice it makes no difference to either her voluntariness or responsibility whether she could at an earlier time have become better informed. We might hold her culpable for that

role in providing the conditions for voluntary choice. If an agent is not even aware that there exist more options than one, then they are unlikely to be able to act voluntarily; and becoming better-informed about an option can mean an agent realises that they were wrong to think it unacceptable.<sup>7</sup>

Olsaretti observes that if we want to promote opportunities for an agent to act voluntarily, then we cannot simply increase her freedom by giving her more options: those options must be *acceptable* ones. To this we can add: the agent must also be well-informed about the extent and nature of those options.

## 2 Standards of Acceptability

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earlier omission, but that is a separate appraisal. Thanks to Tom Porter for this objection.

<sup>7</sup>This does not mean that being well-informed *always* promotes voluntariness: in ignorance I may believe that an option is acceptable when greater knowledge would tell me that it is not. As Olsaretti says, we would have to make sure that the options are indeed *genuinely* acceptable.

What counts as objectively unacceptable? My conclusion in the previous section might suggest that we need not have a single standard by which options are judged, so long as those standards are objective. So, should we say that an option is unacceptable in the relevant sense if there is *anything* that makes it objectively unacceptable? Olsaretti herself, though she tentatively suggests that we use a standard specifically of well-being, gives the impression that it is just its objectivity that makes well-being an appropriate standard.<sup>8</sup> Here, I argue that Olsaretti's hint is right, and take a more restrictive line: only prudential unacceptability counts in deciding whether an action is non-voluntary.

The problem with taking *any* objective unacceptability to be relevant for voluntariness is that it implies that many moral choices (by which I mean choices made for moral reasons) are non-voluntary. Such choices involve recognising that only one course of action is acceptable. Suppose, for example, that I am a strong swimmer walking past a shallow pond when I see a baby drowning. Naturally, I choose to jump in and save the baby, and it seems that I do so because *no other possible course of action is acceptable*.

Such cases as this reveal a general feature of overall (as opposed to *prima facie*) moral demands: when faced with a choice between an act demanded (overall) by morality and an act not so demanded, it would be unacceptable to choose the latter. Therefore, if Olsaretti's definition is unrestricted, such moral choices are non-voluntary, and we are not responsible for them.

We could respond to this argument in three ways. First, we might take it to cast doubt upon the link between voluntariness and responsibility. I do not explore this possibility here, for it would still leave us the problem that moral acts like this are *ipso facto* non-voluntary (though I say more about it below). The second and third responses are to embrace the conclusion — that is, to agree that moral choices are non-voluntary and that we're not responsible for them — or to find some principled way to restrict what counts as relevantly unacceptable. Later I shall consider and reject the second response; here, I shall suggest a modification to the theory that allows us to use the third response.

There are two ways in which an option might be unacceptable. First, an option may mean serious specific damage to the agent, such as starving to death in the case of Daisy. Second, certain moral demands by their nature make all other possible actions unacceptable. The first type of unacceptability relies on prudential concerns, the second on moral concerns.<sup>9</sup> Let us call 'morally unacceptable' those options which are ruled out in the way I described above: some choices are required by morality in such a way as to make any other option unacceptable. Let us call 'prudentially unacceptable' those options which involve what I am loosely calling 'serious specific damage'. In what follows I suggest that reflection upon our intuitions about prudentially unacceptable options suggests a principled way of excluding moral unacceptability as a cause of non-voluntariness.

Suppose that we ask ourselves precisely why having no acceptable alternatives is supposed to undermine the voluntariness of our choices. To say that an option is unacceptable is roughly to say that there is some feature of it that effectively bars us from choosing it. What sort of

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<sup>8</sup> Olsaretti [2004]: p.140.

<sup>9</sup> One might be uncomfortable with this stark separation between moral and prudential concerns: various people have taken how morally good or bad one's life is to be relevant to well-being. For such people, I suggest a terminological alteration: there is a distinction between immediate serious loss of prudential value and the sort of loss that comes about as the result of immorality, and only the former is relevant to judgments of voluntariness.

feature might this be? In most of the paradigm cases of non-voluntary action, it is that the other options involve bringing our well-being below a certain threshold. Daisy's alternatives to staying in the desert city all involve dying of thirst. Hilda, when she faces the robber, believes that she would end up with a bullet through her head if she were to resist. In such cases, we might say that it is the prospect of awful personal consequences that acts as the instrument of force: it is because we cannot face such a loss of well-being that we have to choose in a particular way.

If the other options are *morally* unacceptable, though, it is hard to identify a similar instrument of force. Hence, there is no factor analogous to that which in the presence of prudential unacceptability grounds our judgment that a choice has been made non-voluntary. In most such cases, there will not be dreadful consequences *for us* if we do not do the moral act, and in those cases where there are, the moral demand doesn't depend on their presence.<sup>10</sup> In cases where there is just a moral demand and no prudential concerns, there is nothing that constitutes force in the way that the prospect of awful consequences does in prudential cases. Hence, we should not say that voluntariness is undermined in such cases, even though they are situations where we act because there is no acceptable alternative to the moral choice. This gives us a principled reason to say that only prudential unacceptability is relevant to questions of voluntariness: and that allows us to avoid the implication that moral choices are non-voluntary.<sup>11</sup>

Precisely what this amounts to depends upon a more detailed account of prudential value, and I can here offer only a sketch of such an account. First, if it is to be plausible our definition of prudential value must include not only the well-being of the agent in question, but also other people whose well-being that agent takes for her own. Secondly, to render an option unacceptable, the loss involved would have to be above a threshold beyond which it would be unreasonable to expect someone to bear it; and each option would have to be considered unacceptable on its own merits rather than by comparison with other members of the set.<sup>12</sup> That is, an action is not non-voluntary if it is chosen to avoid *any* harm, however insignificant; and an option cannot be made unacceptable simply by there existing another option which is

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<sup>10</sup> I don't, for example, think that I ought to save the baby *because* I might otherwise get lynched.

<sup>11</sup> Strictly speaking, this means I should amend the definition of non-voluntary action as follows: an act is non-voluntary if it is performed *only* because the other options are prudentially unacceptable. This addresses a problem (suggested by an anonymous referee) with overdetermined acts – are acts performed both because the other options are prudentially unacceptable and because morality demands it voluntary or not? On my theory, they are. Overdetermination of motivation is the satisfaction of multiple sufficient conditions for a given action, and the satisfaction of another sufficient condition (such as acting from moral duty) would mean that one is not acting *only* to avoid prudentially unacceptable alternatives. Of course, it may be practically very difficult to know in a particular case whether such a situation obtained.

<sup>12</sup> It has been suggested that the moral work might all be done by considering what costs we can reasonably expect a person to bear, rendering the notion of voluntariness redundant. I disagree, based on the role I noted in the previous section for an agent's beliefs and motivations. Even if an agent acts with no alternatives we could reasonably expect her to bear, she might nevertheless act voluntarily, depending on her reasons for acting. Thanks to Hallvard Lillehammer and Serena Olsaretti for the concern.

so prudentially advantageous that choosing the first would be irrational.

These reflections are admittedly brief, but they do suffice to establish most of the philosophical constraints that would have to be borne in mind in providing a more substantial account. However in fact we determine the scope of what counts as prudentially unacceptable, an option must be unacceptable in *this* sense if it is to threaten the voluntariness of our actions.<sup>13</sup>

### 3 Moral choices

In arguing that only prudential unacceptability is relevant to judgments of voluntariness, I left open the possibility that there might be an acceptable sense in which we *do* say that moral choices are non-voluntary. A critic might therefore say that, contrary to my suggestions above, we needn't restrict the scope of what counts as relevantly unacceptable. Here, I consider and reject that possibility.

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<sup>13</sup> What should we say about choices made on long-term prudential grounds? For example, someone might give up heavy drinking because all alternatives lead to an early grave. Is the decision to give up the bottle non-voluntary one? I suggest that we say 'no'. A principled distinction can be drawn between short-term choices about what we do right now, and long-term choices about what we intend to do in the future. The latter involve both immediate short-term choices and also intentions about the short-term choices we will make in the future. So, a recovering alcoholic both decides now to eschew a drink, and intends to do so whenever the choice arises. A long-term choice is non-voluntary just in case its present short-term component is non-voluntary. In some cases, however dreadful the eventual prudential harm, this will not be the case: continuing to drink will eventually kill our alcoholic, but it is unlikely that one more drink will do so by itself.

At one point, Olsaretti discusses the difference between two senses of voluntariness.<sup>14</sup> First, there is the sense defined above, meaning actions performed not because there is no reasonable alternative. Second, actions can be voluntary in the sense of being the result of an appropriate process of reasoning. Quoting Bernard Williams, she says that a voluntary act in this sense is ‘intentional in the relevant respect and . . . to the extent that the agent deliberated, is the product of deliberation’.<sup>15</sup> These two senses of voluntariness (she says) correspond to two different notions of responsibility identified by Scanlon.<sup>16</sup> Voluntariness in the first sense — having been performed not because there were no acceptable alternatives — corresponds to a notion of substantive responsibility, which ‘has to do with the obligations people have towards each other’ and holding agents liable for their actions. An agent substantively responsible for an outcome, says Scanlon, is one who ‘cannot complain of the burdens or obligations that result’.<sup>17</sup> Voluntariness in the second sense — being the result of a process of deliberation — corresponds to what Olsaretti calls ‘moral responsibility’, and what Scanlon calls either that or ‘attributability’, which is the quality required for us to attribute an action to an agent, and thereby make them an appropriate subject for praise or blame.<sup>18</sup>

Someone might therefore say that it is not as unintuitive as it first seems to say that if a choice is made for moral reasons it is *ipso facto* non-voluntary. A moral choice can be non-voluntary in Olsaretti’s sense, but voluntary in Williams’ sense (because it is the product of deliberation). Therefore, an agent who acts morally can be morally responsible (liable to praise and blame) without being substantively responsible (liable to punishment). Perhaps our intuition that moral actions are voluntary is sufficiently captured by saying that they are voluntary in Williams’ sense; and so saying that they are non-voluntary in Olsaretti’s sense is more palatable. To illustrate, suppose that in saving the baby from the pond, I ruin my wristwatch. I am still owed praise for saving the baby (because my action was voluntary in Williams’ sense) but I might think I deserve compensation for losing my watch, since I *had* to do what I did (because my action was non-voluntary in Olsaretti’s sense). If we were prepared to accept this diagnosis of the situation, then we might accept that moral actions are non-voluntary.<sup>19</sup>

In my view, this argument fails for three reasons. First, it depends upon our being satisfied with Scanlon’s distinction between substantive and moral responsibility. Secondly, it relies upon an inconclusive inference to the best explanation of our intuitions. Thirdly, it is at best an invitation to us to bite the bullet.

Scanlon’s distinction is doubly problematic: it is clear neither what the distinction actually is nor that it is morally significant. To start with, Scanlon never gives a clear characterization of the distinction. In one place he says that moral and substantive responsibility are, respectively, the ‘basis for moral appraisal’ and that which grounds ‘substantive claims about what people are required . . . to do for each other.’<sup>20</sup> This gives us only the role that each concept plays in

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<sup>14</sup> Olsaretti [2004]: p.158.

<sup>15</sup> B. Williams, ‘Voluntary Acts and Responsible Agents’, *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 10 (1990): 1-10.

<sup>16</sup> T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998) ch.6.

<sup>17</sup> Scanlon [1998]: p.290.

<sup>18</sup> Olsaretti [2004]: p.158; Scanlon [1998]: pp.248-51.

<sup>19</sup> This line of thought was suggested by Olsaretti.

<sup>20</sup> Scanlon [1998]: p.248.

moral reasoning, and not the explanation we need of the concepts themselves.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, Scanlon says that moral responsibility depends upon ‘determining whether a given action did or did not reflect that agent’s judgment-sensitive attitudes’, while substantive responsibility depends upon an agent ‘having their actions and what happens to them depend upon and reflect their choices and other responses.’<sup>22</sup> This, though, is obscure, and does little to illuminate the distinction being drawn.

Neither is much light shed by examining the examples used to argue that our intuitions support his thesis. Scanlon’s main example, drawn from Aristotle, concerns a group of sailors who jettison the cargo of their ship to avoid their ship being sunk in a storm.<sup>23</sup> Scanlon says that this is an example of a situation where we have two divergent intuitions about responsibility: the sailors’ choice can be attributed to them (i.e. they are morally responsible), but they are not blameworthy.<sup>24</sup> This contradicts Scanlon’s assertion elsewhere that blameworthiness depends on moral rather than substantive responsibility.<sup>25</sup> How might we interpret this passage?

One possibility is that attributability is not an actual moral appraisal, but rather is the precondition for moral appraisal: an action must be attributable to an agent if that agent is to be appraised, or indeed to be held substantively responsible for it. It is consistent to say that the sailors satisfy the preconditions for blameworthiness because their acts can be attributed to them, but to deny that they are in fact blameworthy.<sup>26</sup> If *this* is what the distinction consists in, then the sense in which one is still responsible for moral choices becomes perilously thin; and the thinner the notion of responsibility, the more implausible becomes the claim that we are not responsible for our moral choices in the other sense. Even worse, on this reading of Scanlon actual attributions would just track judgments of substantive responsibility. This brings us back to where we started: even if only substantive responsibility is undermined by non-voluntariness in Olsaretti’s sense, we would still have to conclude that our moral choices cannot be praiseworthy.

Faced with this, we might think that Scanlon’s statement that the sailors are not ‘blameworthy’ was a slip of his pen, and that he in fact meant to suggest that they are morally but not substantively responsible. Or, indeed, that he meant it to illustrate the effect that duress has upon his two types of responsibility: it undermines substantive responsibility but not attributability, instead just changing the ‘character of what can be attributed.’<sup>27</sup> This multiplicity of interpretations just goes to underline the fact that Scanlon’s appeal to intuitions is indeterminate: and since his argument depends upon taking the distinction to be the best explanation of our intuitions, that indeterminacy is fatal. There are other ways we might explain our intuitions in the case – Aristotle himself pointed to the case to indicate that there are actions which seem to bear the hallmarks of both voluntary and involuntary action, rather

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<sup>21</sup> By analogy, suppose I tried to explain the distinction between petty and high treason by saying that the first grounds life imprisonment and the second is the basis for execution: this would say nothing about what the offences actually are.

<sup>22</sup> Scanlon [1998]: p.291.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics* 1110a9-19, ed. R. Crisp (Cambridge: CUP).

<sup>24</sup> Scanlon [1998]: p.280.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*: p.248.

<sup>26</sup> Thanks to Robert Adams for this suggestion.

<sup>27</sup> Scanlon [1998]: p.279. Thanks to Serena Olsaretti for this suggestion.



than that the sailors are both responsible and not responsible for their actions.<sup>28</sup> Scanlon's claim that we can separate ascriptions of blameworthiness and substantive responsibility is just one of the various possible conclusions. If one already understands and accepts that distinction, then one might indeed take Aristotle's case as more evidence in favour of that distinction playing a significant role, but without that prior acceptance the case provides little reason for the sceptic to change their mind.

I could run through other examples that Scanlon raises, but the general point is the same in each. Insofar as each case is supposed to provoke certain intuitions, the best explanation for which is the implicit recognition of a distinction between moral and substantive responsibility, the strategy fails. The cases fail either to illustrate the distinction clearly or to force us to recognise its existence.

The point is best made in response to Olsaretti's own interpretation of the case of the baby in the pool. Suppose that we agree both that I am due praise for my action and that I should receive compensation for the loss of my wristwatch. To provide support for Scanlon's distinction (and the proposed use of it to show that we do consider some moral choices non-voluntary), we must also agree that the most plausible reason for awarding compensation is that I was not responsible (in some sense) for my action and the loss thence ensuing. However, arguing by appeal to the best explanations of our intuitions in these cases is both unilluminating and inconclusive. Instead of the explanation given above (which suggests that our intuition about compensation would support the claim that I wasn't responsible for the moral choice I made to save the baby), why not say that it is evidence for some other latent moral principle? Why not argue that the best explanation of our intuitions is that we believe simply that it is right to rectify losses that come about as a result of morally required actions? Or, why not say that the case provides support for an indirectly consequentialist position: we must rectify losses like this because it would make myself and other people less likely to hesitate in saving babies in the future? My point here is not to argue for either of these as the correct interpretation of the case. Rather, it is to indicate that the plethora of alternative explanations shows how inconclusive the appeal to intuitions is inevitably going to be. Unless we are given good prior reason to believe that the appeal to Scanlon's distinction is the best explanation in these cases, the defence fails: but for that reason, the cases cannot be appealed to as support for the distinction itself.

My third response is this: even if we bolster the appeal to Scanlon's distinction, this is still nothing more than an invitation to bite the bullet. We are still asked to accept that there is a sense in which moral choice is *ipso facto* non-voluntary, and we are justified in declining the invitation if we consider that doing so stretches the notion of non-voluntariness beyond recognition. I would suggest that it does, and that the Scanlonian response provides an inadequate alternative to my revised theory, according to which only prudential unacceptability is relevant to assessments of voluntariness.

#### **4 Moral blackmail**

Having pointed to problems with the view that morally required acts might be characterised as non-voluntary, I conclude by considering a problem with the view I favour. The criticism is that we can be morally blackmailed: sometimes an option being morally unacceptable might seem to undermine voluntariness by making it necessary for us to choose something otherwise

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<sup>28</sup> Aristotle [2000]: p.38.

unpalatable. Hence, there might be some cases of non-voluntariness which my revised theory fails to account for.

Suppose we consider someone — call him Carlos — who takes a farm job with regular exposure to dangerous pesticides because he will starve if he doesn't. According to my revised definition of unacceptability, Carlos' choice is non-voluntary: he acted to avoid prudentially unacceptable alternatives.<sup>29</sup> But suppose that Carlos were to have one extra option: he could go to South America and grow coca leaves for the international drug trade in prudentially acceptable conditions. However, Carlos refuses the option because it is morally unacceptable to contribute to the production of a dangerous drug. My critic could then say: in such a situation, just as much as in the case where all alternatives were prudentially unacceptable, we say that Carlos acts non-voluntarily in deciding to take the hazardous farm job. My revised account implies otherwise; hence, if the criticism is correct, I leave out something important.<sup>30</sup> My suggestion here is that we bite the bullet and accept that Carlos *does* act voluntarily when one of the alternatives is *morally* unacceptable. I argued above that saying someone acts non-voluntarily renders him ineligible for praise or blame. But if praise is deserved anywhere, it is in situations like Carlos', where one resists an attractive but morally unacceptable option. This leaves us with two balancing intuitions, at least one of which we must jettison: either we can say that Carlos acts non-voluntarily, or we can say that his action is praiseworthy, but not both. Of these two, losing the first seems the best option, for the following reason. Why might we resist accepting that Carlos' choice is voluntary? The reason seems to me to be that ascriptions of non-voluntariness are used primarily as excusing conditions. If Carlos acts non-voluntarily, it means that he oughtn't to be penalised for his action (as he would be, for example, if we were to deny him healthcare on the grounds that he has no one to blame for his ruined health but himself). However, to say that non-voluntariness is sufficient to excuse him is not to say that it is necessary: there may be other excusing conditions, even when his action is voluntary. Hence, the existence of the coca farm does (on my account) make Carlos' action voluntary, but that doesn't imply that we don't have other reasons to ameliorate the working conditions he endures when he chooses not to take the coca option. If the desire for an excusing condition explains why we might be tempted to say that Carlos acts non-voluntarily, then this discussion ought to be sufficient to defuse the criticism. In which case, we have reasons to bite the bullet and claim that Carlos acts voluntarily, in order to avoid more unsavoury implications (such as the conclusion that he is not praiseworthy for his choice).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have made two points about Olsaretti's claim that voluntary action is action performed not because there are no acceptable alternatives. First, in saying that an action is performed because there are no acceptable alternatives, we must be talking about an agent's motivating reasons for that action. This means that an agent's beliefs about the nature of her options are crucial to the question of whether she acts voluntarily or not. In particular, an agent might act non-voluntarily if she believes all her options to be unacceptable, even if in fact she has several acceptable options; so long as the standard by which she judges her apparent options is an appropriate one. Hence, if we want to promote an agent's opportunities to make

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<sup>29</sup> Olsaretti takes cases such as Carlos' to be paradigmatic of free but non-voluntary choice (Olsaretti [2004]: pp.119–200).

<sup>30</sup> Thanks to Robert Adams for this objection.

voluntary choices, we cannot simply attend to the existence and quality of her options, but must also ensure that she is well-informed about them.

Secondly, I discussed the constraints upon what should count as our objective standard of acceptability. Olsaretti hints at, but does not argue for, a standard of well-being. I argued that something of this sort is urgently needed, since the main alternative (taking objective unacceptability in any sense to be the relevant standard) leads to the unpalatable conclusion that many moral choices are non-voluntary merely in virtue of being moral. I went on to suggest a principled way in which we might avoid this conclusion, by saying that it is only if they are prudentially unacceptable that options are barred from us in the way relevant to judgments of voluntariness.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For discussion or comments I thank Robert Adams, Daniel Elstein, Fabian Freyenhagen, Hallvard Lillehammer, Serena Olsaretti, and Tom Porter; and audiences in Cambridge, Oxford, London, Warwick and Manchester.