

Justifying Reasons, Motivating Reasons, and Agent Relativism in Ethics

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ABSTRACT. According to agent relativism, each person’s moral requirements are relative to her desires or interests. That is, whether a person morally ought to ϕ depends on what interests or desires she has. Some philosophers charge that the main argument for agent relativism trades on an ambiguity—specifically, an ambiguity in “reason,” “reason for action,” or a kindred term. This charge has been common, and widely thought to damage the case for agent relativism, since its appearance, in 1958, in a now classic paper by William Frankena. In what follows I examine the charge in detail, showing that insofar as it aims to discredit the argument for agent relativism, it fails in its purpose.

Agent relativism is the view that each person’s moral requirements are relative to her desires or interests. Unless an action is suitably related to those desires or interests she has no moral requirement to perform that action.¹

My concern is with the principal argument for this view, specifically with a frequent objection to it. According to that objection, the argument for agent relativism trades on an ambiguity in “reason,” “reason for action,” or a similar term. This objection has been prevalent since its appearance, in 1958, in a now classic paper by William Frankena.² Strangely, although one or two authors

¹ This, at least, is *one* of the views that go under the name “agent relativism.” I have used that name for a very different view in some of my other papers, e.g., in “Cultural Relativism,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 22(2) (2000): 501–47, at 506.

² William K. Frankena, “Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy,” in *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. A. I. Melden (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), 40–81, at 44f, 52f, 57, 59. For similar objections, aimed at siblings or cousins of the argument Frankena opposes, see Ralph M. Blake, “The Ground of Moral Obligation,” *International Journal of Ethics* 38(2) (1928): 129–40, at 136ff; David O. Brink, “A Puzzle About the Rational Authority of Morality,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992): 1–26, at 8f; Robert L. Holmes, “Is Morality a System of Hypothetical Imperatives?” *Analysis* 34(3) (1974): 96–100, at 98f; Robert Lockie, “What’s Wrong with Moral Internalism,” *Ratio* 11(1) (1998): 14–36, at 15; Jan Osterberg, *Self and Others: A Study in Ethical Egoism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988), 62; William Tolhurst, “Moral Experience and the Internalist Argument Against Moral Realism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32(2) (1995): 187–94, at 187, 189f; and Michael J. Zimmerman, “Review of Jeffrey Olen’s *Moral Freedom*,” *Ethics* 100(2) (1990): 415–16, at 416. Many of these authors, including Frankena, deploy their objection as a means of opposing *internalism*, the view that a person’s moral requirements are relative to her goals, desires, wishes, and other “motivational” states. Internalism is a brand of agent relativism, given that the word “desires,” as agent relativists use it, extends to goals, wishes and the like.

have briefly addressed the objection,³ no one, to my knowledge, has treated it in much detail. I do so in what follows. I show that insofar as it aims to discredit the argument for agent relativism, it fails in its purpose.

1.

The principal argument for agent relativism is simple. It asserts that moral requirements necessarily yield reasons for action, and such reasons are necessarily capable of motivating people. But motivation derives from interests or desires; thus, each person's moral requirements are a function of her interests or desires.⁴

This argument is rougher than I would like, partly owing to the term “reasons for action,” which I discuss shortly. This is the condition in which we typically find the argument in the works of its advocates and critics;⁵ so it is best to start with this version and refine it later. This ensures that the argument on which we focus does not deviate from the kind at which the critics take aim.

³ E.g., Gilbert Harman, *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 31, 43f. Also relevant is Jonathan Dancy, *Practical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 20–25. Dancy's concern is not with the objection itself, but with the way many philosophers, including Frankena, characterize the distinction on which the objection rests.

⁴ This argument is a composite; it reflects several arguments I find in the literature. To the extent that those arguments are open to the objection I address, so is my composite argument; and to the extent that my composite withstands the objection, so do the arguments from which the composite is drawn (assuming, of course, that they are interpreted charitably). For those arguments see Harman, *Explaining Value*, essays 1, 3, and 5; Gilbert Harman, “Moral Relativism,” in Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 45–56, 59–63; W. D. Falk, *Ought, Reasons, and Morality* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 33–41, 65f, 97f, 166–79, 187–97; G. C. Field, *Moral Theory* (London: Methuen, 1921), 46–51, 52, 56f, 59, 63; Richard A. Fumerton, *Reason and Morality: A Defense of the Egocentric Perspective* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 82–89, 142, 224–31; Max Hocutt, *Grounded Ethics: The Empirical Bases of Normative Judgments* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2000), 1–5, 23–89; Jeffrey Olen, *Moral Freedom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 7; and W. T. Stace, *The Concept of Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 17–27, 41ff, 290–94.

⁵ Here is a typical passage: “Someone has a reason for acting only if a proposed reason fits into her network of desires, goals, and personal projects—only, that is, if it is capable of motivating her. If a moral rule does not advance her desires, goals or personal projects, it does not provide any reasons for her to act. That is why [some putative moral rules] are not morally binding on her. A moral rule morally binds someone only if it provides her with a reason for acting” (Olen, *Moral Freedom*, 7). This argument is rough partly because the noun “reason for acting,” and with it the verb “has a reason for acting,” admits of multiple readings. (Not all of them are charitable, but let's ignore that for now.) Michael Zimmerman capitalizes on this fact when, after quoting Olen's argument, he says this: “This is unconvincing. We may grant that, in some sense of ‘have a reason,’ one has a reason for acting only if it fits into one's motivation set; and we may grant that, in some sense of ‘have a reason,’ one is morally bound to perform an act only if one has a reason to do so. But what is not at all obvious is that these are the same senses of ‘have a reason’” (Zimmerman, “Review of Jeffrey Olen's *Moral Freedom*,” 416).

The argument meets with many challenges, most of which employ one of three strategies. The first is that of denying that moral requirements necessarily yield reasons for action. Those who favor this strategy include Philippa Foot, Ronald Milo, and Peter Railton. They accept the second and third steps of the argument but reject its conclusion by arguing that a person's moral requirements do not necessarily give her reasons to act.⁶

The second strategy is that of opposing the third premise in the argument—the premise that motivation derives from interests or desires—while granting, or leaving untouched, the first two premises. This is Kant's strategy. He disconnects moral requirements from desires and interests while insisting on a connection between moral requirements and motivation. He does so by arguing that motivation does not always derive from interests or desires.⁷

These two strategies are not my focus, though I say some things relevant to them in later sections. My focus is the third strategy, which consists of charging the argument for agent relativism with trading on an ambiguity. The charge is that “reasons,” “reasons for action” and the like are not univocal. They sometimes denote *justifying* reasons; other times *motivating* reasons. In the agent relativist's argument the first premise is secure only if the reasons to which it refers are justifying, not motivating, reasons. But the second premise is secure only if the reasons to which it refers are motivating reasons.

Three remarks are in order. First, the preceding objection concerns only the first two steps in the argument for agent relativism. Thus, throughout most of this paper I assume that the third step—its plausibility, at least—is not in doubt.

Second, most of those who use the objection see it as independently forceful—that is, as forceful whether or not it is followed by any explicit argument against the agent relativist's premises.⁸ Their idea seems to be that

⁶ Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), essays 10 and 11; Ronald D. Milo, *Immorality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 202–17; Peter Railton, “Moral Realism,” *Philosophical Review* 95(2) (1986): 163–207, at 167–71, 201–4. Two comments: First, lest I give a wrong impression, let me say that the works just cited are not explicitly about agent relativism. Even so, the authors of those works clearly think that agent relativism can be avoided through the strategy just outlined. Second, these authors accept the second and third steps of the agent relativist's argument as long as “motivating” and “motivation” are short for “rationally motivating” and “rational motivation.” In other words, what they accept, tacitly, are two premises I discuss later: premises (2) and (3) of Argument A4 (meaning the expanded version of Argument A4, which appears midway through section 3).

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981). See also Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁸ Just how *much* force it has independently of such arguments is another issue—an issue on which the proponents of the objection differ. (See the next of my three remarks; also notes 9 and 11.) My present point is simply that most of those proponents see the objection as having *some* force, i.e., as showing something favorable to nonrelativism, independently of such arguments. I believe, for instance, that this applies to Blake, “The Ground of Moral Obligation,” 136ff; Frankena, “Obligation and Motivation in

once we read “reasons for action” univocally (i.e., once we fix in mind just one, any one, of that term’s multiple senses) we can see, without the aid of an explicit argument, that one of the agent relativist’s premises is in trouble.⁹

Third, in stating the objection I have used the unclear word “secure.” I have done so to bring out an important fact, namely, that the objection admits of multiple readings. To produce the reading I favor I take “secure” to mean “plausible,” and I use “plausible” as short for “plausible enough to be in the running” or “plausible to a substantial (if not to an even greater) degree.”¹⁰ On my reading of the objection, its point is that insofar as the argument for agent relativism uses “reasons for action” univocally it has a premise the advocates of which should feel uncomfortable about holding. If they cannot part with it they should at least hush up about it, for it is not tenable enough to be a serious contender. Moreover, that fact about the premise requires no explicit proof. Most any philosopher can see it, or figure it out with little effort, once the argument for agent relativism is disambiguated.

Does this reading capture the aims of those who advance the objection? I believe that it captures the aims of some of them,¹¹ but I will not pause to defend this. Whatever the aims of its proponents, the objection has interest as something potentially damaging to the argument it targets. That it *purports* to damage that argument is commonly assumed;¹² also, in its familiar forms (e.g.,

Recent Moral Philosophy,” 45, 57, 58f; Zimmerman, “Review of Olen,” 416; and Brink, “A Puzzle About the Rational Authority of Morality,” 8.

⁹ Frankena, for instance, provides no demonstration either that the first of those premises is weak if “reasons” has its motivational sense, or that the second premise is weak if “reasons” has its justifying sense. Yet he clearly expects us to accept both of those claims. (See Frankena, “Obligation and Motivation,” 45, 57, 58f.) Apparently, he believes that the truth of those claims is visible once we become clear on the two different senses of “reasons.” (Cp. Dancy’s remark, quoted in note 12.) This is not surprising. His belief would hold water if “reasons” had the two different senses he attributes to it. More on this in section 2.

¹⁰ As the parenthetical phrase indicates, by calling a statement plausible I do not mean to damn it with faint praise. An *indubitable* proposition would be plausible in my sense. (Of course, no proposition *needs* to be indubitable to be plausible in my sense.)

¹¹ I put it this way because it is not always clear what measure of force the objection is meant to have. Frankena, for example, sometimes gives the impression that he is merely putting the burden of proof on the agent relativist or arguing that the case for agent relativism is disputable. In other passages, however (e.g., pp. 45 and 58f) he implies that if his distinction between justifying and motivating reasons is valid, agent relativists have no recourse but to abandon their argument and look for a new one. The latter implication is what interests me. It gives rise to the idea, one that I think many philosophers share, that the argument for agent relativism commits the fallacy of equivocation, i.e., that we can refute or embarrass that argument merely by disambiguating it.

¹² “William Frankena ... argued that the internalist claim [a brand of agent relativism—see note 2] ... succumbs to the motivating/justifying distinction.... Frankena [argued] that the motivating/justifying distinction is itself sufficient to disprove internalist claims....” (Jonathan Dancy, “Why there is Really no such Thing as the Theory of Motivation,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 95 [1995]: 1–18, at 1f). See also Harman, *Explaining Value*, 43; and Wilfrid Sellars, “On Knowing the Better and Doing the Worse,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 10(1) (1970): 5–19, at 10.

the one in the next section), it *would* damage that argument if it worked without flaw. My question, therefore, is whether it actually damages that argument. To address this question I adopt the above reading.

That reading has consequences for the success of the objection. We must count the objection a failure if, after we have deployed it—that is, after we have removed the ambiguities from the argument to which it applies—we are left with even one creditable version of that argument. By a creditable version I mean a valid version the premises of which are plausible. If such a version exists, and if it remains standing after we have deployed the objection to the argument for agent relativism, then the objection has not discredited that argument. At best, it has merely clarified the argument, leaving the real work of opposing it undone.

The objection fails in just this way. The argument for agent relativism admits of a reading that yields a creditable argument, an argument to which the objection is undamaging. Thus, although the argument for agent relativism is not necessarily beyond criticism, it suffers no harm from the claim, so often made, that “reasons for action” is ambiguous.

2.

Let’s label the argument for agent relativism Argument A. Here is a familiar way of fleshing out the objection to it:¹³

The term “reasons for action” is ambiguous. It often denotes *justifying* reasons, meaning reasons to think that a person ought to do this or that. On every other occasion it denotes *motivating* reasons, meaning the *motives* a person has for doing something.¹⁴ Insofar as Argument A uses “reasons for

¹³ It’s familiar for three reasons. First, it’s adapted from the most well-known source of the objection: Frankena’s “Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy.” (For a pertinent remark see note 14, below.) Second, it receives attention in two of the most well-known defenses of agent relativism: Gilbert Harman’s “What is Moral Relativism?” and his “Relativistic Ethics: Morality as Politics.” (Both papers appear in Harman, *Explaining Value*; see especially pp. 31 and 43f.) Third, some of its components are familiar from other contexts. For instance, we often meet with the view that insofar as reasons for action are not simply motives going under a different name, they are reasons to *think* or *believe* this or that, e.g., that an act is obligatory. See, for example, C. D. Broad, “Critical Notice of S. E. Toulmin’s *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics*,” *Mind* 61(241) (1952): 93–101, at 96; Roy Edgley, *Reason in Theory and Practice* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), 124ff; and A. I. Melden, “Reasons for Action and Matters of Fact,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* (Pacific Division) 35 (1962): 45–60, at 53. For similar, if not identical, views see Holmes, “Is Morality a System of Hypothetical Imperatives?” 98; John R. Boatright, “The Practicality of Moral Judgments,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 23(93) (1973): 316–34, at 323 n. 15; and Joseph Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 187.

¹⁴ As one would infer from the previous note, this characterization of justifying and motivating reasons derives from Frankena, “Obligation and Motivation,” 44f. According to Frankena, when we speak of practical “reasons” we refer either to motivating reasons, i.e., to motives, or to justifying reasons,

action” univocally it is a rough statement of one of the first two arguments below, each of which, although valid, has an implausible premise. (Premise (2) is implausible in the first argument; premise (1) is implausible in the second.) Insofar as Argument A has plausible premises, which it has only if its first premise refers to justifying reasons, its second premise to motivating reasons, it is a rough statement of Argument A3, which is invalid.

Argument A1:

- (1) A person, P , has a moral requirement to ϕ —that is, P morally ought to ϕ —only if there is a reason to think that P ought to ϕ .¹⁵
- (2) A fact (proposition, etc.) is a reason to think that P ought to ϕ only if the fact is capable of motivating P to ϕ —that is, of leading P to decide to ϕ .
- (3) Something (a fact, etc.) is capable of motivating P to ϕ only if P has the requisite interests or desires—for instance, desires that P could satisfy by ϕ ing.

Therefore,

- (4) P morally ought to ϕ only if P has the requisite interests or desires.

Argument A2:

- (1) A person, P , morally ought to ϕ only if P has a motive to ϕ , and hence only if something exists (e.g., a belief-desire pair) that qualifies as a motive of P 's to ϕ .

meaning reasons for “regarding” an act as right or obligatory. (Does this mean *morally* right or obligatory, or right or obligatory in just *any* way, e.g., rationally or prudentially? Frankena often takes the first line, but I think we should read him as taking the second. Surely some justifying reasons have nothing to do with *morality*.) Since to *regard* an act as right or obligatory is essentially the same as *thinking that* the act is right or obligatory, and since thinking the latter is little or no different from thinking that the relevant person *ought* to perform the act, it is reasonable to conclude (as many philosophers do, e.g., Harman, *Explaining Value*, 31, 43f) that Frankena regards justifying reasons as reasons to think that a person ought to do this or that. To conclude this is not only reasonable but convenient. The term “reason to think that P ought to ϕ ” is shorter and clearer than “reason for regarding P 's ϕ ing as in some way (e.g., morally or rationally) right or obligatory.”

¹⁵ Three remarks: First, person P is just any (rational, mature) person you please. Second, I assume throughout that “ P has a moral requirement to ϕ ” and “ P morally ought to ϕ ” are interchangeable. Third, I trust that no confusion will result if I sometimes use the singular form, other times the plural, of “reason to think that ...,” “reason for P to ϕ ,” etc. This affects no crucial point either of this paper or of the objection it addresses.

(2) A thing qualifies as a motive of P 's to ϕ only if it is capable of motivating P to ϕ .

(3) & (4): as above.

Argument A3:

(1) A person, P , morally ought to ϕ only if there is a reason to think that P ought to ϕ .

(2) A thing qualifies as a motive of P 's to ϕ only if it is capable of motivating P to ϕ .

(3) & (4): as above.

Two comments are called for. First, my reconstruction of the objection to Argument A is just one feasible reconstruction. This is because that objection can have many forms—for instance, a form in which justifying reasons are defined as something other than reasons to *think* this or that. To accommodate this fact my criticism of the objection must have broad application. Its components, taken together, must apply not only to the objection as I have stated it, but to every feasible variation of that objection.

Second, in criticizing the objection I concede that step (2) of Argument A1 and step (1) of Argument A2 are implausible. For instance, I concede that a person can have a moral requirement to ϕ even if he has no motive to ϕ . More than that, I concede that the negation of that view, although far from silly, is not defensible enough to be “plausible” in our sense. (This concession does not contradict the claim that to have a moral requirement to ϕ a person must have desires which, given suitable knowledge and reflection, will lead him to form a motive to ϕ . Such desires are not themselves a motive to ϕ . I say more about motives in section 4.)

So much for comments; now for the main point: even with the preceding concession in place, the objection to Argument A fails. It does so owing to the following four points.

(a) The nouns “reason,” “reason to ϕ ,” and “reason for action” sometimes stand in not for “motive of P 's to ϕ ” or “reason to think that P ought to ϕ ,” but for “*reason for P to ϕ* .”

(b) The term “reason for P to ϕ ” is broader in meaning than “motive of P 's to ϕ ”; narrower in meaning than “reason to think that P ought to ϕ .”

(c) The term “reason for P to ϕ ” is not ambiguous.

- (d) The following two premises are plausible; moreover, their plausibility depends on no unusual sense, no sense other than the one to which (b) and (c) pertain, of “reason for P to ϕ .” First, a person, P , morally ought to ϕ only if there is a reason for P to ϕ . Second, a fact (proposition, etc.) is a reason for P to ϕ only if it is capable of motivating P to ϕ .

These points, if true, refute not only the objection as I have stated it, but every feasible variation of it. Every such variation makes the following two claims: first, the terms “reason,” “reason for action” and the like are ambiguous; and second, Argument A runs afoul of that ambiguity. No matter what the details of this objection, it fails if (a) through (d) are true. I explain why in the next section, after which I defend (a) through (d).

3.

A consequence of point (a) is that arguments A1 through A3 do not exhaust the feasible readings of Argument A. A fourth reading is this:

Argument A4:

- (1) A person, P , morally ought to ϕ only if there is a reason for P to ϕ .
- (2) A fact (proposition, etc.) is a reason for P to ϕ only if it is capable of motivating P to ϕ .
- (3) Something (a fact, etc.) is capable of motivating P to ϕ only if P has the requisite interests or desires.

Therefore,

- (4) P morally ought to ϕ only if P has the requisite interests or desires.

With this argument no longer under the rug the objection to Argument A crumbles. Allow me to explain this with reference to (c) and (d), thereafter returning to (b).

First of all, unless Argument A4 equivocates on “reason for P to ϕ ” we have no cause to doubt its validity. But owing to (c), Argument A4 does not equivocate on that term. Secondly, a consequence of (d) is that Argument A4 has plausible premises. This is because the premises to which (d) refers are steps (1) and (2) of Argument A4. We can (and hereafter I will) rewrite (d) as follows: “Steps (1) and (2) in A4 are plausible. Also, their plausibility depends on no unusual sense, no sense other than the one to which (b) and (c) pertain, of ‘reason for P to ϕ .’”

Perhaps (d) seems less true of step (2) than of step (1). Note, however, that if we read (2) charitably it does not say that a fact, F , is a reason for P to ϕ only if, whether P is being rational or not, F can motivate P to ϕ . Nor do its proponents intend it that way. Interpreted properly it says that F is a reason for P to ϕ only if F can *rationally* motivate P to ϕ —that is, only if, were P not only fully aware of F but without any hindrances to ϕ ing or any reasons that conflict or compete with F (e.g., reasons for P not to act on F , or reasons other than F for P to ϕ), P would take heed of F , thereby ϕ ing, assuming no defects (slip-ups, lapses) of rationality on P 's part.¹⁶ In other words, we should read Argument A4 as follows; to do otherwise is uncharitable:

Argument A4:

- (1) A person, P , morally ought to ϕ only if there is a reason for P to ϕ .
- (2) A fact (proposition, etc.), F , is a reason for P to ϕ only if F can rationally motivate P to ϕ —that is, only if, were P not only fully aware of F but without any hindrances to ϕ ing or any reasons that conflict or compete with F , P would take heed of F , thereby ϕ ing, assuming no defects of rationality on P 's part.
- (3) F can rationally motivate P to ϕ only if P has the requisite interests or desires—for instance, desires which, in light of F , P could satisfy by ϕ ing.

Therefore,

- (4) A person, P , morally ought to ϕ only if P has the requisite interests or desires.

It now should be clear that if (a), (c), and (d) are true the objection to Argument A fails. If (a) is true, then owing to (a) and the principle of charity we should read Argument A as Argument A4. If (c) and (d) are true, Argument A4 is a valid argument with plausible premises.

So where does (b) enter the picture? Why include it if we can explain the failure of the objection without mentioning it? The answer is that (b) is important to (c) and (d). First of all, the thesis it principally opposes—that “reason for P to ϕ ” is ambiguous between “motive of P 's to ϕ ” and “reason to

¹⁶ On this point see Christine Korsgaard, “Skepticism About Practical Reason,” *Journal of Philosophy* 83(1) (1986): 5–25, at 11–17; and my “Motivation and Practical Reasons,” *Erkenntnis* 47(1) (1997): 105–27. A second point: those who wish can read “take heed of F ” to mean merely “conform with F , i.e., do the deed for which F is a reason.” Whether reasons for P to ϕ require that P act on them or merely that P conform with them is a minor issue for my purposes. For more on the issue see Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms*, 178–82.

think that P ought to ϕ —is a familiar, perhaps the most familiar, brand of the thesis to which (c) is opposed.¹⁷ Thus, to defend (b) is to take an important first step in defending (c).

Secondly, to defend (b) is to shield (d) from some likely objections. This is because (b) asserts not merely that “reason for P to ϕ ” *differs* in meaning from “motive of P ’s to ϕ ” and from “reason to think that P ought to ϕ ,” but that “reason for P to ϕ ” is *broader* in meaning than the first of those terms, *narrower* in meaning than the second.¹⁸ If “reason for P to ϕ ” were not broader in meaning than “motive of P ’s to ϕ ,” then a statement I granted earlier—namely, that step (1) of Argument A2 is implausible—would make trouble for (d). Likewise, if “reason for P to ϕ ” were not narrower in meaning than “reason to think that P ought to ϕ ,” another statement I granted earlier—that step (2) of Argument A1 is implausible—would put (d) in a bind.

Allow me to illustrate, limiting myself to the second of the two claims just made. Recall that the flaw in Argument A1 is that its second premise is implausible. (Its second premise asserts that unless a fact, F , is capable of motivating P to ϕ , F is no reason to think that P ought to ϕ .) Argument A4 would necessarily share that flaw, making (d) false, if “reason for P to ϕ ” were not narrower in meaning than “reason to think that P ought to ϕ .” If the first of those terms were not narrower than the second, then anything that qualified as a reason to think that P ought to ϕ would also qualify as a reason for P to ϕ . So any implausibility in the second step of Argument A1 would spill over onto the second step of A4. For if, contrary to the second step in A1, a fact can both be a reason to think that P ought to ϕ and be incapable of motivating P to ϕ , and if, further, anything that counts as a reason to think that P ought to ϕ also counts as a reason for P to ϕ , then, contrary to the second step in A4, a fact can both be a reason for P to ϕ and be incapable of motivating P to ϕ .

It is no small point, then, that “reason for P to ϕ ” is *narrower* in meaning than “reason to think that P ought to ϕ .” If that point were false, (d) would clash with my earlier concessions to the objection to Argument A.

4.

In this section I defend (a) through (d). Actually, point (a) is uncontentious; so I defend only (b) through (d). I repeat each point before defending it.

¹⁷ See note 13.

¹⁸ I use “broader” and “narrower” the way they are used in most logic texts: in such a way that a term (concept, definition) A can be both broader *and* narrower than another term B . A is broader than B as long as some of the items to which A extends are not within the extension of B . A is narrower than B as long as some of the items to which B extends are not within the extension of A . See, e.g., Daniel Bonevac, *Simple Logic* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 79f.

- (b) The term “reason for P to ϕ ” is broader in meaning than “motive of P ’s to ϕ ”; narrower in meaning than “reason to think that P ought to ϕ .”

Let’s begin with the second half of this point. Suppose it is a fact, a fact we shall call R , that Pryce has asked us to remind him (in case he forgets) that he ought to return Rae’s stolen ring. Suppose also, as a background to R , that Pryce’s normative judgments are nearly always true. Given this background, R is a reason to think that Pryce ought to return Rae’s ring. For it is evidence that Pryce has judged that he ought to return her ring, which in turn is evidence (given our background assumption) that he ought to return it.¹⁹ But in no case is R a reason for Pryce to return Rae’s ring. Perhaps Pryce has many reasons to do that, and perhaps R is a clue to those reasons, but R itself not one of those reasons. Just imagine someone saying “If there’s a reason for Pryce to return Rae’s ring, point it out to me,” and receiving the reply: “The reason for Pryce to return Rae’s ring is that Pryce has asked us to remind him that he ought to do that.” This reply is absurd. It fails to do what it purports to do, which is to state a reason for Pryce to return the ring.

This argument trades on the fact that given suitable background assumptions most any fact can be a reason to think most anything else; so most any fact can be a reason to think that Pryce ought to return Rae’s ring. This includes fact R , which is not a reason for Pryce to return the ring even if R is accompanied by the background assumptions that make it a reason to think that Pryce ought to return the ring.²⁰ So not every reason to think that P ought to ϕ is a

¹⁹ Why say “in some cases”? Because otherwise the sentence is open to the following objection: “Although R is a reason for us to think that Pryce ought to return Rae’s ring, R is not a reason for $Pryce$ to think that he ought to do so. This is because R is purely a *result*, not a potential *cause*, of a conclusion on Pryce’s part that he ought to return Rae’s ring.” This objection is easily thwarted; even so it is interesting. It is easily thwarted by embellishing the story about Pryce. (Suppose Pryce has just this minute contracted a rare form of amnesia. He recalls everything except his normative judgments and he has trouble making such judgments anew. In this situation, Pryce’s discovery of R could lead him to conclude that he ought to return Rae’s ring.) It is interesting because it raises the possibility that *reasons for P to think that P ought to ϕ* constitute a narrower category than *reasons to think that P ought to ϕ* . I will ignore this possibility—i.e., I will proceed as though the first category is the same as the second—because what I have to say about the second category applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the first.

²⁰ And just *why* is R not a reason for Pryce to return Rae’s ring? Although the points I have made do not hinge on the answer to this question, I will hazard an answer nonetheless. If R were a reason for Pryce to return Rae’s ring, R would be a reason Pryce could *act on*, thereby returning the ring. And were he to act on it, it would figure in an adequate reason-explanation of the resulting action. (Cp. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 102, 106.) But R meets neither of these conditions. Just imagine a case in which Pryce seems to have acted on R , thereby returning Rae’s ring. A little reflection shows that actually Pryce has not acted on R ; instead, he has done the following. First, he has reasoned his way from R to a conclusion, C , that goes something like this: “Only by returning Rae’s

reason for P to ϕ , which means that “reason for P to ϕ ” is narrower in meaning than “reason to think that P ought to ϕ .” And because our argument goes through no matter what normative judgment we use—for instance, even if we replace “Pryce ought to return Rae’s ring” with “Pryce *morally* ought to return Rae’s ring”—“reason for P to ϕ ” is narrower in meaning than “reason to think that P morally ought to ϕ ,” “reason to think that it would be good of P to ϕ ,” and so forth.

Let us now turn to the first part of (b), according to which “reason for P to ϕ ” is broader in meaning than “motive of P ’s to ϕ .”²¹ Suppose Peg wants to enroll in an English course, but does not want to enroll in E101 because she believes, mistakenly, either that E101 is not an English course or that a better English course is available. Suppose also that she could easily correct her mistake by recalling what she read in the course bulletin: that E101 is the only English course in the curriculum. Is there a reason for Peg to enroll in E101? Of course there is. The reason—call it E —is that only by enrolling in E101 can Peg fulfill her desire to enroll in an English course. And because Peg could easily become aware of E by recalling what she read, Peg *has* a reason to enroll in E101. But Peg has no *motive* to enroll in E101. She lacks a motive because she has no psychological state, or set of such states, capable of causing and explaining her act of enrolling in E101. The set that would do the trick is the belief-desire pair consisting of a desire to enroll in an English course and a belief that the only way to do so is to enroll in E101. But given Peg’s mistake, she has the desire without the requisite belief; hence she has no motive to enroll in E101.

This example shows that a fact can be a reason for P to ϕ , and P can *have* a reason to ϕ , even if P has no motive to ϕ . So “reason for P to ϕ ” is broader in extension than “motive of P ’s to ϕ .”

Worth adding is that just as “reason for P to ϕ ” is broader than “motive of P ’s to ϕ ,” it is broader than “ P ’s reason for ϕ ing.” For instance, it makes no sense to speak of Pete’s reason for euthanizing his dog unless Pete has either euthanized his dog or formed an intention to do so. However, it often makes sense to speak of reasons for Pete to euthanize his dog even if Pete has not euthanized his dog and has no intention of doing that. So not every reason for P to ϕ is within the extension of “ P ’s reason for ϕ ing.” I mention this fact because

ring can I achieve (or do, or bring about) such-and-such.” Second, he has acted on C (rather than on R), thereby returning the ring. This is why, when it comes to explaining Pryce’s action, a reason-explanation that cites C makes sense (“He wanted to achieve such-and-such and he believed that only by returning the ring could he do so”), whereas a reason-explanation that cites R does not. In other words, just as R fails to meet the first of the two conditions, it fails to meet the second. It cannot yield an adequate reason-explanation of Pryce’s act of returning the ring.

²¹ The following argument owes much to Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 94, 97.

the term “motivating reasons,” which appears in the objection to Argument A, sometimes denotes P ’s reasons for ϕ ing rather than motives of P ’s to ϕ .

Thus far I have said much about what reasons for P to ϕ are not. Before going on I should say one thing about what they are. Reasons for P to ϕ , whatever else they are, are facts that provide P with a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality to ϕ . To see this, suppose a fact, F , is a reason for P to ϕ . Suppose also that P is fully aware of F , meaning that P is vividly aware not only of F but of those features of F that are crucial, or arguably so, to F ’s status as a reason. (For instance, if F is evidence that by ϕ ing P could satisfy her desires, or do herself some good, or do *others* some good, then P is aware of this fact.) Suppose further that P is not hindered from ϕ ing, and P has no reasons that conflict or compete with F (e.g., reasons for P not to ϕ). In addition, P is aware of the latter two facts.

In this situation, what is the *rational* thing for P to do? The question amounts to this: if P has, and is fully aware that she has, a reason to ϕ that is conclusive in the clearest way possible—it does not merely outweigh any conflicting or competing reasons but faces no reasons of that kind—and if, further, P is not hindered from acting on that reason, then what is the rational thing for P to do? The answer is that P should take heed of the reason, thereby ϕ ing. If she fails to do so she is not being fully rational.²² This is the sense in

²² This would be the answer even if my description of P ’s situation were shorn of the phrase “in the clearest way possible—it does not merely outweigh any conflicting or competing reasons but faces no reasons of that kind.” However, with that phrase included my case is strengthened. I mean my case for the claim that in the situation described, if P fails to ϕ she is not being fully rational. (Here “to ϕ ” is short for “to take heed of the relevant reason, thereby ϕ ing.”) The negation of that claim has unacceptable consequences, largely owing to the phrase just mentioned. To see this, suppose that in P ’s situation (the situation in which P has, in F , a reason to ϕ that faces no competing or conflicting reasons, etc.) P can fail to ϕ without being irrational in the least. Then P is not required by rationality to ϕ . No doubt she is rationally *permitted* to ϕ , but she is not rationally *required* to do so. From this it follows that P is rationally permitted not to ϕ . Of course, this does not mean that she is rationally permitted to do just *anything* that counts as not ϕ ing—indeed, to think that she is would be silly. (This assumes, of course, that “ ϕ ” is not a contrived or bizarre act-description.) It does mean, however, that she is rationally permitted to do something—call it ψ ing—that counts as not ϕ ing. But then isn’t there some fact relevant to ψ ing—the fact, say, that by ψ ing P could do herself some good—in virtue of which P is rationally permitted to ψ ? (If not, why is P permitted to ψ but not permitted to do just anything that counts as not ϕ ing? What is it about ψ ing that sets it apart from so many other deeds?) And doesn’t that fact count as (or ensure the existence of) a reason for P to ψ ? Granted, the fact in question does not rationally *require* P to ψ , but this cannot disqualify it as a reason for P to ψ . After all, we said just a moment ago that P is not rationally required to ϕ ; nonetheless F is a reason for P to ϕ . So we are brought to this conclusion: there is a reason for P to ψ , where ψ ing is an act that excludes ϕ ing. (Before I draw the consequences of this conclusion let me note a second route by which we are brought to it. We granted earlier that P is rationally permitted to ϕ . By this we did not mean that P is rationally permitted to ϕ for just no reason at all. We meant that P is rationally permitted to ϕ in virtue of a fact relevant to ϕ ing, namely F [together, of course, with P ’s awareness of F , etc.]. So shouldn’t we grant a parallel claim about the act of ψ ing? That claim would be this: P is rationally permitted to ψ not for just no reason at all, but in virtue of a fact relevant to ψ ing. But then

which every reason for P to ϕ brings with it a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality to ϕ .²³

To return to the main point: I have shown that “reason for P to ϕ ” is broader in meaning than “motive of P ’s to ϕ ”; narrower in meaning than “reason to think that P ought to ϕ .” So (b) is established; we are ready for (c).

(c) The term “reason for P to ϕ ” is not ambiguous.

It may seem that I have already defended this point, but I have done so only in part. I have shown that “reason for P to ϕ ,” as we conventionally use it, is not ambiguous between “motive of P ’s to ϕ ” and “reason to think that P ought to ϕ .” Also, I have done this using “reason for P to ϕ ” in a sense linked to requirements of rationality. However, some may argue that in doing these things I have used “reason for P to ϕ ” in just *one* of its ordinary senses, I have ignored another sense. For instance, some may argue that for one sense of “reason for P to ϕ ” (a sense that differs in extension from the other terms mentioned in (b)), there is a reason for P to ϕ simply insofar as ϕ ing is required of P by a set of norms. Those norms can be of any kind, including norms the compliance with which is not required by rationality.²⁴ This is the sense of

doesn’t that fact, the one relevant to ψ ing, have as much title to be called a reason for P to ψ as F does to be called a reason for P to ϕ ?) This conclusion entails that a reason exists which conflicts or competes with F ; and this, in turn, contradicts an assumption about P ’s situation. That assumption is that F is a reason *in full possession of the field*, meaning that it faces no competitors or conflicting reasons. Thus, starting with certain assumptions, one of which is that F is attended by no reasons that compete or conflict with it, we are forced to conclude, on pain of contradiction, that if P fails to ϕ in the situation we have described, P is not being fully rational.

(An anonymous referee raises the following objection to this argument. Isn’t it possible that the fact in virtue of which P is rationally permitted to ψ is simply the fact—call it G —that P ’s other ways of not ϕ ing differ from ψ ing in having reasons against them? If so the above argument fails, because we cannot reach the intermediate conclusion that the fact in virtue of which P is rationally permitted to ψ counts as a reason for P to ψ . We cannot reach it because it’s implausible to think that G is a reason for P to ψ . My reply to this objection is that given the conditional premises in the above argument [meaning the argument in the preceding paragraph], one of which is, or implies, that for a fact to be a reason for P to do such-and-such it need not bring with it a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality to do such-and-such, I find nothing implausible about the view that G is a reason for P to ψ . Granted, that view runs counter to my intuitions, but those intuitions stem largely from my assumption that reasons for P to ψ are inseparable from *pro tanto* requirements of rationality. But that assumption is ruled out by the conditional premises in the above argument. Insofar as I accept those conditional premises I find that my intuitions about G evaporate. I find myself thinking “Well, if F is a reason for P to ϕ , why can’t G be a reason for P to ψ ? After all, G rationally permits, even if it doesn’t require, P to ψ , just as F rationally permits, even if it doesn’t require, P to ϕ .”)

²³ A more accurate, but prohibitively cumbersome, term would be “*pro tanto, conditional* requirement of rationality to ϕ .” This term is more accurate because P has the requirement only if certain conditions are met, conditions not covered by the fact that F is a reason for P to ϕ . For example, P would not have the requirement if, owing to no culpable ignorance or error, P were unaware of F .

²⁴ See Brink, “A Puzzle About the Rational Authority of Morality,” 8, 11f.

“reason for P to ϕ ” on which step (1) of A4 depends. Step (2), on the other hand, depends on another conventional sense of that term.

To forestall arguments of this type I must defend (c). This is not to say that I must prove (c); the burden of proof is on its opponents. The burden is on them because we should not assume that a noun is ambiguous if we lack evidence for that assumption. To produce such evidence about “reason for P to ϕ ” the opponents of (c) must show, not that the meaning of “reason for P to ϕ ” is vague, controversial, or hard to pin down, but that “reason for P to ϕ ” is akin to the nouns “chip,” “bed,” “bow,” and “crane.” That is, it is either a single noun with multiple meanings or a single lexical form shared by multiple nouns. But how is one to show this? To my knowledge no attempt to do so succeeds; indeed, the stock attempts fail dismally.

For instance, on occasion I hear it said that because the noun “reasons” has multiple senses, the noun “reasons for P to ϕ ,” which has “reasons” among its components, must also have multiple senses. The grain of truth here is that “reasons” has multiple senses. “Reasons” is a shorthand expression, sometimes filling in for “ P ’s reasons for ϕ ing,” other times for “reasons to think that P should ϕ ,” and so on. However, this does not show that “reasons for P to ϕ ” has multiple senses. To argue that it does is no better than arguing thus: Because “bed” has multiple senses and “bed” is a component of “oyster bed,” the noun “oyster bed” has multiple senses.

I also hear it said that because reasons for P to ϕ are of many kinds—moral and nonmoral, selfish and nonselfish, and so on—the term “reason for P to ϕ ” has many senses. This reasoning is fallacious. The fact that reasons for P to ϕ are of many kinds no more proves that “reason for P to ϕ ” has many senses than the fact that vertebrates come in fifty thousand species proves that “vertebrate” has fifty thousand senses. Nor, of course, does it show that reasons for P to ϕ have no properties in common—the property, for instance, of being inseparable from *pro tanto* requirements of rationality. After all, vertebrates are of many kinds, but they plainly have properties in common.

Another poor argument, if it even counts as an argument, is this: The term “reason for P to ϕ ” sometimes denotes a *reason of rationality*, meaning a reason linked, in the way explained earlier, to a *pro tanto* rational requirement. Other times, however, it refers to a reason appropriately dubbed a *why-reason*. Why-reasons, which form a proper subset of reasons to think that P ought to ϕ , are facts that answer the question: “Why is it that P ought to ϕ ? That is, given that P ought to ϕ , what explains that fact?” Whereas step (2) of Argument A4 is plausible only if it refers to a reason of rationality, step (1) is plausible only if “reason for P to ϕ ” has its second sense, the sense that denotes a why-reason.

This argument has one virtue: it highlights a class of reasons—a class that differs from those mentioned so far—which, possibly, has been lurking in the reader’s mind as a potential problem for Argument A4. But it creates no prob-

lem for that argument. For one thing, we have no evidence that “reason for P to ϕ ” sometimes means the same as “reason why P ought to ϕ .” And even if we did, the advocates of A4 would say that even if “reason for P to ϕ ” sometimes denotes a why-reason, it does not do so in step (1) of their argument. In other words, they would say that even if (c) is false as it stands, it is true if we expand it to say this: “The term ‘reason for P to ϕ ’ is not ambiguous in Argument A4. In A4 it specifically denotes a reason of rationality.”²⁵ I will soon show that this reply is sound. In particular, I will show that (1) and (2) are plausible assuming that (1) uses “reason for P to ϕ ” no differently than (2) does.²⁶

Here is a final attempt to show that “reason for P to ϕ ” is ambiguous: For some philosophers “reasons for P to ϕ ” has a narrow meaning. It refers solely to instrumental considerations—that is, to facts that reveal that by ϕ ing P could satisfy one of her desires. For other philosophers it has a wider meaning: it extends not only to instrumental considerations but to facts that reveal that by ϕ ing P could fulfill a moral requirement.

The meaning to which this claim refers is either *semantic* meaning or *speaker’s* meaning. If it is semantic meaning the claim merely puts flesh on the thesis at issue: that “reasons for P to ϕ ” is ambiguous. If it is speaker’s meaning the claim is irrelevant. Ambiguity is a feature of semantic meaning, and variations in semantic meaning do not necessarily, or even usually, accompany variations in speaker’s meaning. If Ed and Jed disagree over the properties of Phobos,²⁷ the result being that Ed, but not Jed, thinks that Phobos is an asteroid, then when Ed and Jed each say “Asteroids aren’t comets” the speaker’s meaning of “asteroids” differs from Ed to Jed. Ed means to include Phobos; Jed does not. But this does not show that “asteroids” is ambiguous. If it did we would have to conclude, absurdly, that wherever controversy exists over the scope of a noun—over that of “plant,” or of “mammal,” and so on—the noun has as multiple meanings.

So we return to the main point: we have no evidence that “reason for P to ϕ ” is ambiguous. Certainly we have no evidence that it is ambiguous in Argument A4. So we are finished with (c); let us go on to (d).

²⁵ This revision of (c) does not force us to reword or abandon (b) or (d). It forces us merely to interpret those points, or some of the words in them, a bit differently than we did before. Their truth remains intact.

²⁶ To show this is to forestall a number of arguments that resemble the preceding one. An example: “Sometimes, ‘reason for P to ϕ ’ refers to a fact which, were you and I in P ’s situation, would give *us* (but not necessarily P) a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality to ϕ . Other times, it refers to a fact that gives P a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality to ϕ . Whereas step (2) of Argument A4 is plausible only if it refers to a fact of the latter kind, step (1) is plausible only if it refers to a fact of the former kind.”

²⁷ Phobos is one of the two moons of Mars. Whether Phobos is a captured asteroid is a matter of controversy among astronomers.

- (d) Steps (1) and (2) in A4 are plausible. Also, their plausibility depends on no unusual sense, no sense other than the one to which (b) and (c) pertain, of “reason for P to ϕ .”

Argument A4, charitably stated, begins with the two premises below. It is to these premises that point (d), properly interpreted, refers.

- (1) A person, P , morally ought to ϕ only if there is a reason for P to ϕ .
- (2) A fact (proposition, etc.), F , is a reason for P to ϕ only if F can rationally motivate P to ϕ —that is, only if, were P not only fully aware of F but without any hindrances to ϕ ing or any reasons that conflict or compete with F , P would take heed of F , thereby ϕ ing, assuming no defects of rationality on P 's part.

That premise (2) is plausible, and plausible given the conventional meaning of “reason for P to ϕ ,” is evident enough to require no defense. In other words, whether (2) itself is evident or not, the claim that (2) is *plausible*, that it holds its own among the alternatives to it, is uncontentious enough to stand without proof. Were I permitted to argue *ad populum* I would bolster this point with a long list of philosophers, many of them distinguished, who endorse (2), and I would note how seldom we find (2) challenged.²⁸ As it is, I will bolster my point merely by recalling an earlier argument: namely, my argument for the view that every reason for P to ϕ brings with it a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality to ϕ . That view is no different from (2), given what (2) means by “rationally motivate.” Hence, in defending that view I supported (2), and thus gave derivative support to the claim that (2) is plausible.

So the only thing needing defense is the claim, implicit in (d), that (1) is plausible even if “reason for P to ϕ ” has the same meaning in (1) that it has in (2). The objection to be overcome here is that if (1) is plausible it is plausible only because, when we consider (1), we let the term “reason for P to ϕ ” drift from its usual extension and signify, in our minds, something to which (2) does not plausibly apply. For example, we let it signify the reason *why* P morally ought to ϕ or a reason to *think* that P morally ought to ϕ .²⁹

²⁸ For a noteworthy challenge see Joshua Gert, “Practical Rationality, Morality, and Purely Justificatory Reasons,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37(3) (2000): 227–43. Although I have no space to argue it here, I find nothing in Gert’s article to overturn my earlier arguments for the view that if P has, and is fully aware that she has, a reason attended by no competing or conflicting reasons and by no impediments to P 's acting on it, then P rationally ought to take heed of that reason, thereby ϕ ing. (See note 22 and the accompanying paragraphs in the text.) And that view is no different from (2), except for its wording.

²⁹ We can read this objection not only as a challenge to (d) but as a variation of the objection to Argument A. We can take it to say that Argument A4, the most charitable reading of Argument A, equivocates on “reason for P to ϕ ,” where “equivocates” has a loose meaning. In this context “equivocates”

This objection fails because the arguments that support (1) rely on no use of “reason for P to ϕ ” other than the one on which (2) relies. For instance, a statement like “Al morally ought to aid Liz, but there’s no reason for Al to aid Liz” sounds remarkably odd, if not downright contradictory. It does so owing not to a special use of “reason for Al to aid Liz” but to the conventional meaning of that term.³⁰ This linguistic oddity is among things that make (1) plausible.

Let’s consider a second, more important, way of supporting (1). Philosophers generally believe, with good reason, that morality is action guiding. Indeed, many believe, plausibly, that it’s conceptually true that morality is action guiding. In saying that morality is action guiding they mean not one thing but two: first, that a person’s awareness that he morally ought to ϕ usually, perhaps invariably, moves him (*ceteris paribus*) to ϕ ; and second, that it moves him quite differently from the way startling noises and the like move him. It moves him in the sense that it *rationally* moves him: his rationality is a contributor to his action. Arguably, the best way to explain this action-guiding feature of morality is to grant step (1) of A4, keeping in mind that “reason for P to ϕ ” has the same sense on which (2) relies, the sense whose referents are linked to rational motivation. For then P ’s moral requirements to ϕ are tied to reasons which, unlike other things that go under the name “reasons,” do both of the following: they influence P if he is being rational; and, unlike startling noises and the like, they typically influence P through the exercise of his rationality. For it is a mark of reasons for P to ϕ , where “reasons for P to ϕ ” has the sense on which (2) relies, that in any typical case in which they influence P they do so not only *if* P is being rational but *because* P is being rational. P ’s rationality, his propensity to think and behave as he rationally ought, is a key contributor to P ’s action.

A third argument for (1) is this:³¹ Even if our ordinary use of “morally ought” and “moral requirement” ensures a logical gap between P ’s moral requirements and reasons that rationally motivate, we should revise our moral language to remove the gap. After all, there is little point to showing a person that she morally ought to do something if she can grant what we say and still ask for a reason—meaning a *practical* reason, a reason with the feature described in (2)—to do the morally required deed. And there is little sense in assuming, as most people do, that the moral “ought” is the most basic “ought” (i.e., that what a person ought *morally* to do is what she ought, *period*, to do) if moral “ought”’s are severed from reasons of the kind just mentioned. For any

cates” does not imply that “reason for P to ϕ ” is genuinely ambiguous. It implies merely that we must *use* that term ambiguously, i.e., we must misuse it in one premise but not in another, if we are to make premises (1) and (2) plausible.

³⁰ See Fumerton, *Reason and Morality*, 86; Smith, *The Moral Problem*, 6, 60; and Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 39.

³¹ This argument resembles that of Fumerton, *Reason and Morality*, 82–89, 224–31.

rational agent concerned with acting rationally, the “ought”-judgments that take center stage are those that assert, in essence, that this or that action has the weight of reasons behind it, where those reasons are of a certain kind. They are not *why*-reasons or reasons to *think* this or that, but reasons of the kind to which (2) applies. Either moral “ought”-judgments imply the existence of such reasons or they lack the fundamental importance people claim for them.

I have been brief in presenting these arguments, but even in this brief form they suffice to make (1) plausible. The first two make (1) plausible as a thesis about moral judgments as we *actually* use them. The third makes (1) plausible as a thesis about how we *should* use those judgments, assuming that we presently use them in a way that does not tie them to practical reasons. Not one of the three arguments trades on a sense of “reason for *P* to ϕ ” other than the sense on which (2) depends.

Before closing this section let me add two points. First, step (3) of Argument A4, which is no less plausible than (1), is plausible not because it employs “rationally motivate” differently than (2) does. There is simply no evidence that “rationally motivate” is used differently in (3) than it is in (2), or that the case for (3) relies on a sense of “rationally motivate” that would make (2) implausible. To contend that A4 equivocates on “rationally motivate” is to oppose A4 on *ad hoc* grounds.

Second, many who oppose A4 do so in defense of a thesis inherited from Kant. According to that thesis, moral requirements are *inescapable*: no agent can opt out of them without forfeiting his status as a full-fledged *agent*.³² If this is the motive for attacking A4, step (1) is not the step to attack. For it is hard to see how moral demands could be inescapable if they were severed from practical reasons. For instance, it will not do to say that moral demands could be inescapable—inescapable though detached from practical reasons—as long as the *truth* of the relevant “ought”-judgments had no tight connection to variable desires, interests, and the like. Many normative requirements, including those of etiquette, have *that* kind of inescapability, but no Kantian would regard them as “inescapable” in Kant’s sense. To be inescapable in Kant’s sense moral demands must be inseparable from practical reasons. It is no surprise, therefore, that Kant made no objection to (1). He focused his efforts on (3).

5.

It is time to sum up. According to the objection I have addressed, the argument for agent relativism trades on an ambiguity in the term “reasons for action.” To remove that ambiguity is either to render the argument invalid or to expose one of its steps as implausible. This objection fails because, owing to point (a) and

³² The classic paper on this topic is Philippa Foot’s “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” in Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 157–73. Also valuable is Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, chap. 2. I am indebted to these sources for some of the points in this paragraph.

the principle of charity, we should read Argument A as Argument A4, which, owing to (c) and (d), is a valid argument with plausible premises.

So I have done what I set out to do. I have shown that the charge, so often made, that an ambiguity lurks in the term “reason for action” does not discredit the argument for agent relativism. If we wish to discredit that argument we must find a better tactic.

Only one viable tactic remains: that of opposing a premise in A4.³³ However, not all of those premises are feasible points to attack. Consider premise (2). Even if (2) is not true of *all* reasons for P to ϕ , it surely is true of some of them.³⁴ Let us use the term “reasons of rationality” for reasons of that kind, the ones for which (2) is true. (An uglier, but in some ways better, term would be “reasons of rational requirements.”) To put (2) beyond doubt we need only stipulate that the reasons to which A4 refers are reasons of rationality.

This stipulation may seem to undercut (1), but it does not. Two of our earlier arguments for (1), the second and the third, involve the assumption, and are plausible on the assumption, that the reasons to which they refer—reasons for P to ϕ —are reasons of rationality. If, contrary to that assumption, some reasons for P to ϕ are not reasons of rationality, we need not discard the two arguments. We can revise them so that the only reasons to which they refer are reasons of rationality.³⁵

So step (2) of A4 is not the point to attack. This leaves (1) and (3). These are the points at which the argument must be challenged, assuming that a challenge is in order.

³³ I say “viable tactic,” rather than “tactic,” because a nonviable tactic pops to mind: that of contending that the conclusion of A4 is unacceptable; hence at least one premise in A4 is false. This tactic is not promising because the conclusion of A4 is far from absurd. It is “unacceptable” in the sense of being contrary to ordinary morality; also in the sense of being distasteful to many philosophers. But this is a far cry from being counterintuitive in a way, or to the degree, that would suffice for a *reductio*.

³⁴ This is granted by the staunchest critic of (2), Joshua Gert. See Gert, “Practical Rationality, Morality, and Purely Justificatory Reasons,” 229.

³⁵ True confessions: the three arguments for (1) harbor a minor ambiguity—“minor” in that it spells no trouble for those arguments, at least if we take them singly. In those arguments I use variations of the phrase “the sense of ‘reason for P to ϕ ’ on which (2) relies.” That phrase could mean either (i) “the conventional, i.e., ordinary-language, sense of ‘reason for P to ϕ ’” or (ii) “the sense (or *a* sense) of ‘reason for P to ϕ ’ that makes (2) true.” I tend not to distinguish these meanings because in my view the truth of (2) relies, or needs to rely, on none but the conventional sense of “reason for P to ϕ .” But suppose my view is false. Suppose (2) is true just in case (2) uses “reason for P to ϕ ” to denote a reason of rationality, where to use it that way is to use it more narrowly than we use it in ordinary language. Then (1) must use it the same way. Once it does, the first of the three arguments for (1) goes by the board, for it presupposes an ordinary-language use of “reason for P to ϕ .” However, the other two arguments continue to be plausible and to retain their original intent as long as the phrase “the sense of ‘reason for P to ϕ ’ on which (2) relies” has meaning (ii). (In that case, “reason for P to ϕ ” denotes a reason of rationality. Note that this is not to have an unusual meaning. It is to have a technical or restrictive meaning, but one that is far from unusual among philosophers. I mention this point because the notion of an “unusual” sense of “reason for P to ϕ ” crops up a few times in this paper.)

This observation is important. It would not be if (1) or (3) were easy to refute, but even the most severe critics of those premises admit that they are no pushovers. Kant, for instance, had his crosshairs on (3) when he tried to show that categorical imperatives are possible, but he warned from the start that such a task requires “a special and difficult effort.”³⁶ Indeed, one of the attractions of the objection we have examined is that if it were sound we could discredit the argument for agent relativism *without* having to contend with (1) or (3). With that objection now out of commission we are thrown back onto a more difficult, perhaps an impossible, task.³⁷

As I said, I have done what I set out to do. But what I have done gives rise to a question: in light of the things argued here, what becomes of the distinction between *justifying* and *motivating* reasons? Frankly, although that distinction has legitimate uses I think we could purge it from our vocabulary with little loss. For instance, if it marks the distinction between, on the one hand, either *reasons for P to ϕ* or *reasons to think that P ought to ϕ* , and, on the other, either *motives of P's to ϕ* or *P's reasons for ϕ ing*, we can replace it with a pair of the latter four terms. Also, if it marks a distinction *within* the category of reasons for *P to ϕ* we can replace it, nearly always, with something more reflective of what we intend. If we intend, say, the distinction between moral and prudential reasons for *P to ϕ* , we should use words that make that apparent.

At any rate, whether we retain the distinction or not, the results of this paper stand. The argument for agent relativism, in the form in which it typically appears, may indeed harbor an ambiguity. But that ambiguity is no Achilles' heel. To remove it is not to discredit the argument; on the contrary, it is to uncover, in the form of Argument A4, the reasoning that makes agent relativism tenacious.³⁸

³⁶ Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 29 (Ak 420).

³⁷ Allow me to make a personal revelation here: I think that although the task is difficult, it is not impossible. More specifically, I think that although the case for (1) is plausible, it fails in the final analysis. Let me add, however, that my opinion is widely disputed and that (1) is a tough nut to crack. (So tough is it to crack that I will not attempt, in this paper anyway, even a précis of my case against it. I have made a start on that case elsewhere: in section 5 of my as yet unpublished “Dismissive Replies to ‘Why Should I Be Moral?’”) Thus, in stating my view about (1) I am retracting nothing argued earlier. Regardless of what I think about (1), neither (1) itself nor the argument in which (1) figures is a soft target. To overcome Argument A4 we must *roll up our sleeves*; we cannot damage it with anything so simple as a charge of equivocation.

³⁸ For helpful discussion or comments I thank Michael Burke, Richard Joyce, Luise Morton, and, especially, an anonymous referee for *Philosophical Studies*.