

## Dismissive Replies to “Why Should I Be Moral?”

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### 1.

Replies to “Why should I be moral?” are generally of two kinds: those that purport to answer the question and those that dismiss it as spurious. Those of the first kind aim not to discredit the question but to show that everyone, including the why-be-moral skeptic, is required by reason to be moral. Either that or they aim, more modestly, at showing that most people, though perhaps not the skeptic, have good or decisive reasons to live morally. I find these replies unsatisfying when they are modest and unconvincing when they are not;<sup>1</sup> so it is with interest that I examine the second, dismissive, kind of reply.<sup>2</sup>

I start with a dismissive reply, hereafter called DR, that has several adherents and often turns up in ethics texts. Roughly, DR asserts that “Why should I be moral?” is ill-conceived—ill-conceived if it solicits *moral* reasons to be moral, because such reasons are plain to see; ill-conceived if it solicits *non-moral* reasons to be moral, because no one can reasonably request such reasons.

This reply is unsatisfactory; it commits a serious error. The error is worth exposing, for it infects not only DR but much of the literature on the justification of morals. Also, the steps taken to expose it undermine three other attempts to dismiss “Why should I be moral?” as spurious.

In section 2, following some points about the why-be-moral skeptic, I state DR in more detail; I then make some clarifying remarks. In section 3 I identify the error in DR. Next, I expose the error as just that—an error—by doing some necessary spadework (section 4) and then addressing the arguments, the

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<sup>1</sup>In saying that the modest ones are unsatisfying I mean simply that they leave an itch unscratched, the itch for evidence either that the why-be-moral skeptic is open to rational criticism or that his challenge is confused. Clearly, these modest replies are not necessarily unimportant. Indeed, some are essential reading. These include Gregory Kavka, “The Reconciliation Project,” in David Copp and David Zimmerman (eds.), *Morality, Reason and Truth* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984), pp. 297–319; Kai Nielsen, *Why Be Moral?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1989), essay 8; and David Schmidtz, *Rational Choice and Moral Agency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Let me emphasize, in case it is not obvious, that I use “dismissive” and “dismiss” in a strong sense. To believe that “Why should I be moral?” has an answer, and in that sense to deny that the skepticism it reflects is a plausible option, is not necessarily to *dismiss* the question. To dismiss it is to brush it off as too confused or ill-conceived to deserve a serious reply (except where the “reply” amounts to exposing the confusion, etc.). It is this approach to it, one that many philosophers find tempting, that I address in this paper.

unsound reasoning, from which the error derives (sections 5 and 6). In section 7 I show that the error is widespread; it infects many treatments of morality and practical reason. In section 8 I use the results of earlier sections to refute three further dismissive replies to “Why should I be moral?”

## 2.

What sort of person would ask “Why should I be moral?” Many sorts, perhaps, but I focus on one whose question, taken as a request for reasons to be moral, is a traditional, disquieting challenge to morality. Such a person—call him AI—has the following characteristics.

First, although a skeptic of sorts, AI differs from the usual moral skeptic. AI believes (and I assume in what follows) that some moral duties, including the duty to be fair, honest, and cooperative, are universal and objective. Everyone has them, and has them independently of variable and escapable desires, conventions and the like. AI believes (and hence I assume) that to be moral is to be guided by these duties, to live in accordance with them.

Second, if asked what it means to be guided by moral duties (does it mean *usually* doing our duty? *always* doing it?) AI is unlikely to have a sharp answer. All the same he knows this: even if guidance by moral duties does not preclude occasional backsliding it rules out many deeds from which the agent could benefit, easily and undetected, at the expense of others. It decidedly rules out the life of the immoralist, the person who appears to be morally upright but never refrains from immoral deeds if she can profit undetected by doing them. So even if the moral life defies sharp definition, AI is clear enough on it that he can picture tempting alternatives to it.

Third, AI lacks every direct or obvious source either of desire-based or of self-interested reasons to be moral. For instance, he is devoid of sympathy and free from any pangs of conscience. As a result, he feels no inclination to be moral.<sup>3</sup> His behavior is considerably less than moral and he doubts that he has reason to change it.

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<sup>3</sup>Motivational internalists, those who hold that to believe or make a moral judgment is necessarily to be moved or inclined (at least slightly) to act as the judgment prescribes, will contend that we cannot consistently say *both* that AI believes that he has a moral duty to be fair, honest, etc. *and* that he feels no inclination to fulfill that duty. (They may also say that AI cannot sensibly ask why he should do what he believes to be his duty, for in believing that something is his duty he necessarily is inclined to do it.) Although I disagree with these philosophers, for my purposes there is no need to refute motivational internalism. We can accommodate that thesis by borrowing a distinction often made by its advocates. We can specify that the word “believes,” as it occurs in my earlier point that “AI believes ... that ... the duty to be fair, honest, and cooperative [is] universal and objective,” is an *inverted commas* (rather than a *full-blooded*) use of that word. The idea here is that although AI has a facility for reliably applying moral terms, his lack of any inclination to comply with the resulting judgments means that he does not have a *full* mastery of moral terms and hence does not make *fully* authentic moral judgments. (See Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1994], pp. 68-71.) Given this use of “believes,” we can accept motivational internalism and still say with consistency both that AI believes that he has a moral duty to be fair, honest, etc. *and* that he feels no inclination to fulfill that duty. (Likewise, AI can sensibly ask why he should do what he believes to be his duty, for in doing so he really is asking why he should do

Fourth, Al sometimes wonders whether his doubts are well-founded. This leads him to ask his question; it leads him to request a reason to be moral. However, in “requesting” such a reason he is not asking merely that we *state* such a reason. Al can predict the facts we will state (e.g., “It’s wrong not to be moral”); so if he wanted no more than those facts he would not make his request. He makes his request because he wants us not only to state a putative reason for him to be moral but to show that it really is a reason, a reason for *him*, to be moral.<sup>4</sup>

According to DR, Al’s request is ill-conceived. DR, stated generally enough to house different forms of it, runs as follows:

In asking “Why should I be moral?” Al is asking either (*m*) that we identify a *moral* reason for him to be moral and show that it really is a reason for him to be moral; (*n*) that we identify a *nonmoral* reason for him to be moral and show that it really is a reason for him to be moral; or (*a*) that we identify just *any* reason for him to be moral and show that it really is a reason for him to be moral.

If Al is asking (*m*) or (*a*) his question is silly. For it is a plain fact—call it *M*—that only by being moral (i.e., being fair, honest, etc.) can one live as one morally ought. Fact *M* is not just a reason for Al (and for everyone else) to be moral, it is *obviously* such a reason. In particular, it is obviously a *moral* reason for Al to be moral.

If Al is asking (*n*) his question is confused, unreasonable, or otherwise out of line. At best, it sets a task that no moralist or moral philosopher has any duty to perform; at worst, it asks for the logically impossible, much like asking for a square circle.

Thus, Al’s question is silly or out of line. We need not bother with it.

Three remarks are in order. First, my formulation of DR casts a wide net; it captures the essentials of many superficially diverse arguments, most notably

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what he ‘believes’ to be his duty.) Having noted this fact I will continue to speak in an externalist vein, i.e., as though Al can make authentic moral judgments but be unmoved by them. Two recent, valuable treatments of motivational internalism are Nick Zangwill, “The Indifference Argument,” *Philosophical Studies* 138(1) (2008): 91-124; and Christian Basil Miller, “Motivational Internalism,” *Philosophical Studies* 139(2) (2008): 233-55.

<sup>4</sup>In other words, although it is convenient to call Al’s request “a request for reasons to be moral,” Al is actually requesting *evidence* that one or more putative reasons for him to be moral are genuine reasons of that kind. (Cp. Stephen L. Darwall, “Autonomist Internalism and the Justification of Morals,” *Nous* 24[2] [1990]: 257-67, p. 258.) A second point: The emphasis on “him” in the footnoted sentence has just one intent: to highlight the fact, made familiar by Kai Nielsen and others, that “Why should I be moral?” must not be confused with “Why should *we* (people collectively) be moral?” See Nielsen, *Why Be Moral?* pp. 174-77, 179, 289f.

the argument of John Hospers.<sup>5</sup> However, it does not capture every well-known attempt to discredit Al's question. Among the attempts it excludes are H. A. Prichard's and Stephen Toulmin's.<sup>6</sup> Theirs are addressed in section 8.

Second, some proponents of DR leave item (a) out of account, and some use the term "prudential reason" or "reason of self-interest" where I use "nonmoral reason."<sup>7</sup> Out of fairness to DR I have not followed suit. Phrase (a) is not superfluous; it does not reduce either to (m) or to (n).<sup>8</sup> Also, there may be nonmoral reasons (e.g., aesthetic reasons) that cannot be classified either as prudential reasons or as reasons of self-interest.

Third, many objections to DR target either its first step, on the grounds that it distorts or abridges Al's request, or its third step, on the grounds that Al can properly request nonmoral reasons to be moral.<sup>9</sup> I find some of these objections feasible; however, I take a different approach in this paper. I grant DR's third step for the sake of argument and I grant its first step because it states a truth,

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<sup>5</sup>John Hospers, *Human Conduct*, 3d ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1996), pp. 25-27. In the first edition of Hospers' book, published by Harcourt, Brace and World in 1961, one can find (on p. 194) an additional argument for the view that Al's question is out of line. That argument, which resembles the second of the arguments I address in section 8, receives criticism in John J. Tilley, "Is 'Why Be Moral?' a Pseudo-Question?: Hospers and Thornton on the Amoralist's Challenge," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87(4) (2006): 549-66. For further versions of DR (or arguments that can be read, with no unfairness, as forms of DR) see Richard Purtill, *Thinking About Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 125; H. J. Paton, *The Good Will* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1927), p. 380f; Marvin Glass, "Why Should I Be Moral?" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 3(2) (1973): 191-95, p. 192; and Francis Snare, *The Nature of Moral Thinking* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 174f. The argument discussed in Frank Snare, "Can a Moral Man Raise the Question, 'Should I be Moral?'" (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 4[3] [1975]: 499-507, p. 499f) and in Michael S. Pritchard, "On 'Should I Be Moral?' A Reply to Snare" (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 6[1] [1976]: 121-26, p. 121f), is also a form of DR. Snare says that he finds that argument in Marcus George Singer, *Generalization in Ethics* (New York: Knopf, 1961), pp. 319f, 325, 327, 339. (A qualifying remark: Some of the arguments cited here, e.g., Paton's, are less clear than they could be; perhaps one or two of them should be classified as forms not of DR but of the second of the three arguments I address in section 8. That argument and DR are similar enough that they often go undistinguished.)

<sup>6</sup>Another is J. C. Thornton's, which appears in his paper "Can the Moral Point of View Be Justified?" in Kenneth Pahl and Marvin Schiller (eds.), *Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 442-53, at p. 445. Thornton's argument is similar in some respects to the second of the arguments I examine in section 8. I directly address Thornton's argument in "Is 'Why Be Moral?' a Pseudo-Question?: Hospers and Thornton on the Amoralist's Challenge."

<sup>7</sup>Regarding the point about (a) see Glass, "Why Should I Be Moral?" p. 192; and Snare, *The Nature of Moral Thinking*, p. 174. Regarding the point about terminology see Glass, *ibid.*, p. 192; Paton, *The Good Will*, p. 381; and Hospers, *Human Conduct*, p. 25f.

<sup>8</sup>Those who leave (a) out of the picture apparently think that because every reason to  $\phi$  is either moral or nonmoral, a request for just any reason to  $\phi$  is ambiguous between a request for a moral reason to  $\phi$  and a request for a nonmoral reason to  $\phi$ . (Glass reasons this way in "Why Should I Be Moral?," p. 195.) If this reasoning were sound the disjunct in which (a) appears would merely repeat one of the previous two disjuncts. But the reasoning is not sound. The fact that any response to a request is bound to be one of two different kinds does not entail that the request is ambiguous between two different requests. Cp. Pritchard, "On 'Should I Be Moral?' A Reply to Snare," p. 123.

<sup>9</sup>For objections of the first kind see Pritchard, "On 'Should I Be Moral?'" p. 124f; and Ronald M. Green, *Religious Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 44f. For one of the second kind see Tara Smith, *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 17-19.

even if not the whole truth, about Al's request. (That is, at least *part* of what Al wants is *(m)*, *(n)*, or *(a)*.)<sup>10</sup> My objection to DR concerns its second step, which is the least criticized and, to my mind, the weakest part of the argument.

### 3.

The second step of DR claims that fact *M*—the fact that only by being moral can one live as one morally ought—is not only a reason, but *obviously* a reason, for Al to be moral. This claim is the serious error to which I referred in my introduction. Actually, it is just one version of that error; the error itself is more general. For example, it is not solely about *M* but about other moral considerations. But until section 7 I will ignore the error in its general form. I will focus on the version at hand.

In other words, I will challenge the claim that *M* is obviously a reason for Al to be moral. In doing so I will resist the temptation to be brusque with it, for instance, to argue as follows: *M* essentially says that everyone morally ought to be moral. If that fact is *obviously* a reason for Al to be moral why do we find many competent philosophers holding that even if a person morally ought to  $\emptyset$  there may be no reason for the person to  $\emptyset$ ?<sup>11</sup> And why do we find most “moral rationalists,” those who think that if a person morally ought to  $\emptyset$  there must be a reason for her to  $\emptyset$ , treating moral rationalism not as an obvious truth but as a truth to be established by argument?<sup>12</sup>

As I said, I will resist this temptation. True, competent opponents of moral rationalism are numerous, and few moral rationalists regard their thesis as an obvious truth. This fact puts a burden of proof on the advocates of DR's second premise. But it does not refute them. They can argue that if we find anything doubtful or less than obvious about the claim that *M* is a reason for Al to be moral we are guilty of a serious oversight, confusion, or the like. I meet

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<sup>10</sup>Missing from the first premise in DR is any mention of the *weight* of the reason in question. This is a shortcoming, for we can assume that Al wants not only *(m)*, *(n)*, or *(a)*, but also to know whether his reason to be moral, assuming he has one, outweighs his reasons not to be moral. I think we could turn this into a potent objection to DR; however, I will leave the objection undeveloped. I will, however, critique an argument that approximates it (see note 30 and the accompanying text).

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), essays 10 and 11; David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chap. 3; and Ronald D. Milo, “Virtue, Knowledge, and Wickedness,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15(1) (1998): 196-215, p. 214 n. 45.

<sup>12</sup>Some examples are Darwall, “Autonomist Internalism and the Justification of Morals”; Smith, *The Moral Problem*, chap. 3; Michael Smith, “In Defense of *The Moral Problem*,” *Ethics* 108 (1997): 84-119, p. 108; Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chap. 2, especially p. 42; and Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 8. As the footnoted sentence reveals, the claim that *M* is obviously a reason for Al to be moral must not be confused with moral rationalism. Moral rationalists assert not that it's *obvious*, but merely that it's *true*, that if a person morally ought to  $\emptyset$  there must be a reason for her to  $\emptyset$ . This explains why many familiar rationalist arguments do not figure prominently in this paper. To make the case that *M* is *obviously* a reason for Al to be moral is an unusual task, one that few rationalists undertake. For some points about the nature of the task see section 4.

philosophers who take this line; hence, I have no plans to treat it curtly. I will return to it in a moment.

In lieu of any brusque treatment of the view that *M* is obviously a reason for AI to be moral I will unearth the errors that underlie that view. I mean the errors which, when that view is challenged, afflict the arguments that arise in defense of it.<sup>13</sup> I begin this task in the next section, with some points about the word “obviously.”

#### 4.

According to the second premise of DR, fact *M* is *obviously* a reason for AI to be moral. The word “obviously” is both essential to that premise and damaging to it. It is essential in this way: without either it or one of its cousins (e.g., “unquestionably”) DR’s second premise contains no evidence that to ask (*m*) or (*a*) is silly. The mere fact, if it is a fact, that *M* is a reason for AI to be moral does not render silly AI’s doubts that he has such reasons. It makes his doubts silly only if it is not just a fact but *obviously* a fact—that is, only if *M* is *obviously* a reason for AI to be moral. If *M* is obviously such a reason then no one, including AI, requires proof that *M* is such a reason. Indeed, any request for such a proof stems from a blindness or a similarly serious shortcoming.

This brings us to the next point: the word “obviously” is damaging to the second step of DR. To say that *M* is obviously a reason for AI to be moral is to claim that if our minds were alert and unclouded, if we were free from drowsiness, inattention, sloppy thinking—in short, free from crude errors and cognitive defects—we would straightaway see (or see as the result of only rudimentary reasoning) that *M* is a reason for AI to be moral. (And of course AI would do the same; the word “we” includes him.) This is an incredibly strong claim. Perhaps it would not be if everyone agreed not only that *M* is a reason for every agent to be moral, but also that no evidence is needed to show this. However, many seemingly clearheaded philosophers, rationalists as well as nonrationalists, disagree with that view. So unless the advocates of DR’s second step can establish, not merely imply, that a muddle, a blindness, or a similarly serious failing underlies any doubt that *M* is a reason for AI to be moral we should reject their claim that *M* is obviously such a reason.

The point just made deserves emphasis. To make good the claim that *M* is *obviously* a reason for AI to be moral is an uncommon task, calling for uncommon methods. It cannot be accomplished by arguing merely that moral truths give everyone reasons to be moral, still less by arguing that point in a

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<sup>13</sup>The arguments that arise in defense of it, which I address in sections 5 and 6, are not in the writings of Hospers or the other advocates of DR. Apparently (and not surprisingly), those who believe that *M* is obviously a reason for AI to be moral see no need to defend that belief in print. However, whenever I challenge that belief in conversation I encounter arguments for it; and those arguments, far from being unmanageably diverse, come in just a few general forms. By taking note of those forms—and, of course, by doing some second-guessing—I have produced the arguments addressed in sections 5 and 6.

traditional vein. For instance, it cannot be done by rehearsing or adapting the arguments of Baier, Gauthier, and other neo-Hobbesians or the arguments of Nagel, Korsgaard, and other neo-Kantians.<sup>14</sup> Not one of these arguments shows, implies, or even hints that a cognitive defect or a crude error underlies the philosophical views it opposes. Nor is this a shortcoming, for although the aim of those arguments is to expose an error in the views they oppose, it is not to expose anything so serious as a *crude* error or a cognitive defect. But unless something that serious underlies any doubt that *M* is a reason for AI to be moral, we must reject the claim that *M* is obviously a reason of that kind.

Our question, then, is whether we (or AI, etc.) are necessarily guilty of a severe blunder, blindness, oversight—in short, guilty of a crude error or a cognitive defect—if we doubt that *M* is a reason for AI to be moral. I will address three attempts to support a “yes” answer to this question. I maintain that if these attempts fail, DR fails. It fails because its advocates cannot meet their burden of proof; they cannot establish DR’s second premise.

## 5.

I will distill each attempt into an argument and refute the three arguments.

*Argument 1:* The gist of the second premise in DR is not that *M* is obviously a reason of *some* kind for AI to be moral, but that *M* is obviously a *moral* reason for AI to be moral. This being so, the second premise in DR is true. Perhaps we can intelligently doubt that *M* is a reason *sans phrase* for AI to be moral, but we cannot intelligently doubt that *M* is a *moral* reason for AI to be moral. So those who question whether *M* is a reason for AI to be moral are guilty of a crude error. Most likely, they fail to see what the second step of DR actually says about fact *M*.

As a prelude to addressing this argument let me discuss a familiar use of “moral reason for *A* to  $\phi$ .” Frequently that term denotes what I hereafter call (if only for want of a better term) a moral *practical* reason—or more fully, a moral *practical reason in favor of A’s  $\phi$ ing*.<sup>15</sup> A moral practical reason is simply a practical reason which, owing to one or more of its features (e.g., its propositional content or its role in supporting a moral truth), invites the prefix

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<sup>14</sup>Kurt Baier, *The Rational and the Moral Order* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1995); David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, ed. Onora O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also Smith, *The Moral Problem*; and Darwall, “Autonomist Internalism and the Justification of Morals.”

<sup>15</sup>Although this term is awkward I prefer it to “practical reason for *A* to  $\phi$ .” To use the latter is to suggest that reasons for *A* to  $\phi$  come in two varieties: practical and nonpractical. But that suggestion conflicts with my use of “reason for *A* to  $\phi$ .” As noted later in the text, I use that term solely with reference to *practical* reasons.

“moral.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, it has features that lead us to classify it not just as a practical reason in favor of *A*'s  $\phi$ ing but as a *moral* practical reason of that kind.

But what do I mean by a practical reason in favor of *A*'s  $\phi$ ing? I mean what most philosophers see as the ordinary referent of “reason for *A* to  $\phi$ ,” at least when that term has no qualifying prefix, such as “moral” or “legal.” Roughly put, I mean a fact that brings with it a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality.<sup>17</sup> More precisely, I mean a fact, *F*, with this feature: if *A* were aware of *F* and neither hindered from  $\phi$ ing nor faced with any reasons that conflict or compete with *F*, then either *A* would take heed of *F*, thereby  $\phi$ ing, or *A* would be open to rational criticism. Perhaps the criticism would be less severe than a charge of *irrationality*; even so, the criticism would be in order: *A*'s failure to  $\phi$  would reflect at least a minor epistemic shortcoming (e.g., an error, oversight, or failure of recognition) or at least a minor deficiency of practical rationality. That's the sense in which *A* would have a “requirement of rationality” to  $\phi$ .

It is always a fact of this kind, a fact linked to a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality (of the kind just explained), that I mean by the term “practical reason.” Also, from here on it is always a practical reason that I mean by the term “reason for *A* to  $\phi$ ” (“reason for *Al* to be moral,” etc.). This is true even if I prefix that term with “moral.” In other words, I use “moral reason for *A* to  $\phi$ ” to denote, not something *other* than a practical reason, but a *type* of practical reason. Although moral practical reasons differ from other practical reasons, they resemble them in being tied to *pro tanto* rational requirements.

Now let us ask the following. In Argument 1 should we read “moral reason for *Al* to be moral” to denote a type of *practical* reason, or should we read it to mean something other than a practical reason, something that may or may not come with a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality? The answer is that we should read it in the former way. We should read it to denote a reason which, on the one hand, is appropriately classified as a *moral* reason and which, on the other, is inseparable from a *pro tanto* rational requirement for *Al* to be moral.

Let me defend this answer and indicate its significance, after which I will elicit its consequences. Note first that Argument 1 fails, it lacks relevance to

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<sup>16</sup>As the parenthetical phrase suggests, I take no stand on exactly what properties are essential to moral, as opposed to nonmoral, practical reasons. I need not do so for my purposes. Worth adding is that, possibly, the properties in question are possessed by no genuine practical reasons, in which case no *moral* practical reasons exist. But this affects none of my arguments; the latter do not require the *existence* of moral practical reasons.

<sup>17</sup>Although convenient, this expression is indeed rough. Firstly, as revealed in the next sentence in the text, the requirement is *conditional*: *A* has the requirement only if certain conditions are met, conditions not covered by the mere fact that a reason for *A* to  $\phi$  exists. Secondly, as also revealed shortly, a person could fail to meet the requirement without having *inconsistent* beliefs, preferences, or the like (e.g., she may be guilty of merely a factual error), and without inviting anything so strong as a charge of craziness or *irrationality*. A further point: Although the facts to which I refer here are indeed what most philosophers see as the ordinary referents of “reason for *A* to  $\phi$ ,” some philosophers believe that “reason for *A* to  $\phi$ ” extends also to facts of other kinds, facts not necessarily tied to *pro tanto* requirements of rationality. See, for example, Joshua Gert, *Brute Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Bernard Gert, “Reasons and Rational Requirements,” *Jahrbuch für Recht und Ethik* 13 (2005): 87-102.

Al's request, unless the reason to which it refers is within the category of reasons Al seeks. So what category is that? What sort of reason is Al demanding? The answer is that he is demanding a *practical* reason—specifically, a practical reason in favor of Al's being moral.

The argument for this claim is simple. Suppose we deny that Al is demanding a practical reason. This is to assume that we could meet Al's demand, the demand expressed by "Why should I be moral?," with reasons of another sort, a sort that lacks the connection, essential to practical reasons, to *pro tanto* requirements of rationality. This, in turn, is to assume that we could meet Al's demand only to leave him wondering whether he is open to any rational criticism if he is utterly indifferent to morality. But this is to assume a falsehood. We can meet Al's demand only if we can show that he has a requirement of rationality, of the kind explained earlier, to be moral.<sup>18</sup> At any rate, this is how philosophers generally interpret Al's demand, and they have good reason to do so. For one thing, any other interpretation would be unfair. It would weaken Al's demand and diminish its importance. In particular, it would make his demand unchallenging to the age-old position that moral requirements are "rationally binding" on everyone, meaning that unless we comply with them we are open not just to moral, but also to rational, criticism. This is especially true of an interpretation according to which nonpractical reasons can meet Al's demand. On such an interpretation, Al's demand is unchallenging not just to the view that moral requirements are rationally binding on everyone, but even to the view that moral requirements are *prima facie* rationally binding on everyone.<sup>19</sup>

The upshot is that in Argument 1 we must read "moral reason for Al to be moral" as a reference to a moral *practical* reason. This is significant because some philosophers use "moral reason for A to  $\phi$ " differently from how I do. As we might put it, they use it more "loosely" than I do. They extend it to the following items, whether or not they come with a *pro tanto* rational requirement for A to  $\phi$ : first, any fact that morally enjoins or endorses (by means of the word "ought," "right," or a similar term) A's  $\phi$ ing; and second, any ordinary piece of evidence for a fact of that kind.

Consider, for instance, the fact that A morally ought to  $\phi$  and the fact that A's failure to  $\phi$  would cause unnecessary suffering for many people. Each of these facts is of one of the two sorts just mentioned; thus, even if neither fact is

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<sup>18</sup>In fact, we may have to show that he has a requirement of rationality to be moral in a more stringent sense of "requirement" than I am using. But we can let this pass; it does not affect my argument.

<sup>19</sup>Even if such an interpretation were not unfair it would be useless to DR. To show, as DR aims to do, that Al's question is silly one must show more than that his question is silly on one particular reading of it. One must show that it is silly, if not for every reading of it, then at least for the most natural, philosophically important readings. The latter include the traditional reading according to which Al's question is a challenge to the view that moral demands rationally bind every agent. But Al's question is no such challenge if we interpret it as soliciting merely nonpractical reasons.

tied to a rational requirement for  $A$  to  $\phi$ —that is, even if neither is a practical reason—each is a “moral reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$ ” in the loose sense of that term.

However, Argument 1 uses “moral reason for AI to be moral” in no loose sense. It uses it to denote a (moral) practical reason in favor of AI’s being moral; otherwise, it lacks relevance to AI’s request. And therein lies the weakness of Argument 1, for it faces the following objection. Although we cannot intelligently doubt that  $M$  is a “moral reason for AI to be moral” in the loose sense just explained, we can intelligently doubt that, for AI anyway,  $M$  is a *practical* reason. We can do so because (to adapt a point from David Brink)<sup>20</sup> we can find plausible theories of morality according to which moral demands are agent-neutral (i.e., independent of the agent’s goals, desires, and the like), and plausible theories of rationality according to which demands of practical rationality are agent-relative. Moreover, these two sets of theories are compatible; hence, agent-neutrality about morality and agent-relativism about practical rationality are *jointly* plausible. The result is that arguably, even if not certainly, AI could be aware of  $M$ , unhindered from acting on  $M$ , and unaffected by ignorance, factual errors, or other epistemic shortcomings, and yet be unmoved by  $M$  without displaying even a minor failing of practically rationality. This would mean that in AI’s case,  $M$  is divorced from any requirement of rationality of the broad kind explained earlier. Therefore, we can intelligently doubt that  $M$  is a practical reason in favor of AI’s being moral.

As I said, Argument 1 faces this objection. Is the point of the objection true? I believe so; in fact, I believe the opposite view to be quite implausible. (If it were *beyond intelligent doubt* that  $M$  is a practical reason in favor of AI’s being moral, why would we find, as in fact we do find, many competent philosophers denying that  $M$  is such a reason?)<sup>21</sup> But suppose I am wrong. Suppose we can no more intelligently doubt that  $M$  is a moral *practical* reason in AI’s case than we can intelligently doubt that  $M$  is a “moral reason for AI to be moral” in the loose sense of that term. Even if this is true, it is not *obviously* true; it requires some evidence. That is, to accept it we need to see evidence that if anyone doubts that  $M$  is a practical reason in favor of AI’s being moral she is not merely mistaken but seriously confused, thick-headed, or the like. But Argument 1 provides no such evidence. Given what that argument means by a moral reason for AI to be moral—or more precisely, given what it *must* mean by that term if it is to pertain to AI’s question—it merely asserts without argument, as one of its premises, that no one can intelligently doubt that  $M$  is a practical reason in favor of AI’s being moral. This is to beg the question.

Before I proceed to Argument 2 let me stress a consequence of my points about Argument 1. Even if “reason for AI to be moral” has a sense that obviously extends to  $M$ , this does not necessarily establish the second step of DR. Unless  $M$  is obviously a *practical* reason, DR’s second step is false. It is

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<sup>20</sup>David O. Brink, “Moral Motivation,” *Ethics* 108(1) (1997): 4-32, pp. 18-21.

<sup>21</sup>See note 11.

false because, presumably, DR uses “reason for Al to be moral” to denote a reason of the kind Al seeks, a practical reason in favor of Al’s being moral. This is not necessarily to say that the proponents of DR intend the term that way; it is to say that we must read the term that way if DR is to pertain to Al’s request. This is what makes DR’s second step hard to establish. That step does not assert merely that *M* is obviously a reason of one or more kinds; nor does it assert merely that *M* is a practical reason in favor of Al’s being moral. It asserts something quite contentious: that *M* is *obviously* a reason of the latter sort.

With these points in mind, let us go on to Argument 2.

*Argument 2:* Al’s request, which reduces (roughly) to “Show me that there’s a reason for me to be moral,” further reduces to “Show me that there’s a reason to think that I ought to be moral.” This is because, as William Frankena has taught us, the term “reason for *A* to  $\phi$ ” is ambiguous between “motive for *A* to  $\phi$ ” and “reason to think that *A* ought to  $\phi$ .”<sup>22</sup> Whenever it does not stand in for the first of those terms it stands in for the second, and *vice versa*. So Al’s request means either “Show me that there’s a motive for me to be moral” or “Show me that there’s a reason to think that I ought to be moral.” But surely, Al’s request does not mean the first of those things. Clearly, only if Al were unaware of any motive for him to be moral would he request proof that such a motive exists. However, if he really were unaware of any such motive he would seek no proof that one exists. He would seek none because he would realize that, since he knows of no motive for him to be moral, no such motive exists. After all, if one existed he would know of it, for it would consist of one of his own desires and one of his own beliefs. The upshot is that Al’s request means “Show me that there’s a reason to think that I ought to be moral.” Now, *M* is undeniably a reason to think that Al ought to be moral; therefore, assuming that “reason for Al to be moral” denotes a reason of the kind Al seeks, no one, including Al, can reasonably doubt that *M* is a reason for Al to be moral.

Let us grant that as Al intends his request it means “Show me that there’s a reason for me to be moral.” The question then arises, Is the term “reason for me to be moral,” as Al intends it, ambiguous between “motive for me to be moral” and “reason to think that I ought to be moral”? Unless the answer is yes, Argument 2 fails. It fails even if, in ordinary language, “reason for me to be moral” is ambiguous between those two other terms. Argument 2 is specifically about Al’s request; thus, for our purposes the issue is not whether “reason for me to be moral” is ambiguous in ordinary speech but whether it is ambiguous

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<sup>22</sup>William K. Frankena, “Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy,” in A. I. Melden (ed.), *Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), pp. 40-81, at p. 44.

as Al intends it. (Of course, in the last analysis these issues may be the same. But this does not affect my point.)<sup>23</sup>

Our question, therefore, is whether “reason for me to be moral,” as Al intends it, is a surrogate for one of two other terms: “motive for me to be moral” and “reason to think that I ought to be moral.” The answer is no. As Al intends “reason for me to be moral” it denotes a practical reason in favor of Al’s being moral. But as I will show, unless we construe “motive for *A* to  $\emptyset$ ” and “reason to think that *A* ought to  $\emptyset$ ” in ways that ruin Argument 2, the following things are true: first, not every reason to think that *A* ought to  $\emptyset$  is a practical reason in favor of *A*’s  $\emptyset$ ing; and second, a practical reason in favor of *A*’s  $\emptyset$ ing differs from a motive for *A* to  $\emptyset$ .

Let me begin with the second of these points, the one about practical reasons and motives.<sup>24</sup> Suppose Asha wants to enroll in a speech course, but does not want to enroll in S101 because she believes, mistakenly, either that S101 is not a speech course or that a better speech course is available. Suppose also that she could easily correct her mistake by recalling what she read in the course bulletin: that S101 is the only speech course in the curriculum. Is there a practical reason in favor of Asha’s enrolling in S101? Of course there is. That reason—call it *S*—is that only by enrolling in S101 can Asha fulfill her desire to enroll in a speech course. This is surely a practical reason in favor of the relevant deed, for it is a fact that brings with it, in the way explained earlier, a *pro tanto* rational requirement for Asha to enroll in S101.<sup>25</sup> All the same, Asha has no *motive* to enroll in S101. 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 S101. The set that would do the trick is the belief-desire pair consisting of a desire to enroll in a speech course and a belief that the only way to do so is to enroll in S101. But given Asha’s mistake, she has the desire without the requisite belief; hence, she has no motive to enroll in S101.

In sum, although *S* is a practical reason in favor of Asha’s enrolling in S101, *S* neither constitutes nor ensures the existence of a *motive* for Asha to enroll in that course. So practical reasons in favor of *A*’s  $\emptyset$ ing differ from motives for *A* to  $\emptyset$ .

Let me add a qualification here, namely, that Asha *does* have a motive to enroll in S101 if we understand “motive for *A* to  $\emptyset$ ” very loosely—that is, as

<sup>23</sup>Allow me to add that even in ordinary language the term “reason for *A* to  $\emptyset$ ” is not ambiguous between “motive for *A* to  $\emptyset$ ” and “reason to think that *A* ought to  $\emptyset$ .” I argue for this in section 4 of my paper “Justifying Reasons, Motivating Reasons, and Agent Relativism in Ethics,” *Philosophical Studies* 118(3) (2004): 373-99. See also G. R. Grice, “Are There Reasons for Acting?,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 3 (1978): 209-20.

<sup>24</sup>My argument for this point owes much to Grice, “Are There Reasons for Acting?” pp. 210-12; and especially to Smith, *The Moral Problem*, pp. 94, 97.

<sup>25</sup>Note that although *S* is a *desire-based* practical reason, no part of my treatment of Argument 2 assumes that *every* practical reason is desire-based. Similarly, although my criticism of Argument 1 presupposes the *tenability* of the view that all practical reasons are desire-based, it does not presuppose the truth of that view.

referring to just anything, whether a psychological state or a species of reason, that not only favors (prescribes, motivates)  $A$ 's  $\phi$ ing but bears a close relation to  $A$ 's desires. For on this understanding of the term,  $S$  is a motive for Asha to enroll in S101. However, to understand "motive for  $A$  to  $\phi$ " this way is to ruin Argument 2. A key assumption in that argument is that a motive is something the relevant agent surely knows he possesses, assuming that it exists. This assumption is false if "motive for  $A$  to  $\phi$ " has the loose sense just explained. Fact  $S$  illustrates this point, for although it is a motive in the loose sense, Asha is unaware of it.

Consequently, to avoid ruining Argument 2 we must not read "motive for  $A$  to  $\phi$ " loosely. We must read it to denote something which, if it existed, would be known by  $A$  to exist (and to count as a motive). But then  $S$  is not a motive for Asha to enroll in S101, and hence we return to the point that a practical reason in favor of  $A$ 's  $\phi$ ing is not the same as a motive for  $A$  to  $\phi$ .

Now let me show, using "practical reason," "reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$ ," and so forth no differently from how I have used them so far, that unless we use "reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$ " in a way that ruins Argument 2, not every reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$  is a practical reason in favor of  $A$ 's  $\phi$ ing.

To begin, note that any reason to think that  $A$  legally ought to  $\phi$  is a reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$ . However, not every reason to think that  $A$  legally ought to  $\phi$  is a practical reason, a reason that brings with it a *pro tanto* rational requirement for  $A$  to  $\phi$ . In some situations, a person is not even *pro tanto* subject to rational criticism if she breaks the law.

Let us consider two possible replies to this argument. According to the first, in Argument 2 the term "reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$ " does not mean, as I have assumed it to mean, "reason to think that  $A$  ought, in at least one ordinary sense of 'ought,' to  $\phi$ ." Instead, it means "reason to think that  $A$  ought, at least in the moral sense of 'ought,' to  $\phi$ ." Given this meaning, not every reason to think that  $A$  legally ought to  $\phi$  is a reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$ .

The proponents of Argument 2 should shun this reply, for it renders false a key premise in their argument: that insofar as "reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$ " does not denote a motive for  $A$  to  $\phi$  it denotes a reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$ . Assuming that Argument 2 pertains to  $A$ 's request, which solicits a practical reason, and assuming (for the moment) that the reply we are considering is true, the key premise just mentioned boils down to the following statement: Insofar as practical reasons in favor of  $A$ 's  $\phi$ ing are not simply motives going under a different name, they are reasons to think that  $A$  ought, at least in the moral sense of 'ought,' to  $\phi$ .

However, this statement is false, as we can see by considering fact  $S$ , the fact that only by enrolling in S101 can Asha fulfill her desire to enroll in a speech course. Fact  $S$  is a practical reason, and like any such reason it is not simply a motive going under a different name. Even so, it is no evidence that Asha *morally* ought to enroll in S101.

The second possible reply is this: In Argument 2, “reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$ ” is short for “reason to think that  $A$  rationally ought to  $\phi$ ” or “reason to think that  $A$  ought, all things considered, to  $\phi$ .” Given either of these meanings (which may be equivalent), not every reason to think that  $A$  legally ought to  $\phi$  is a reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$ .

This reply is no better than the previous one. A premise in Argument 2 is that  $M$  is obviously a reason to think that  $AI$  ought to be moral. This premise is true for some readings of “reason to think that  $AI$  ought to be moral,” but it is false for the two readings mentioned in the reply.

For instance, it is not at all obvious that  $M$ , which is a reason to think that  $AI$  morally ought to be moral, is also a reason to think that  $AI$  *rationally* ought to be moral. Not only that, but if we read “reason to think that  $AI$  ought to be moral” as “reason to think that  $AI$  rationally ought to be moral,” then Argument 2 begs the question. Recall my earlier points about the word “obviously,” and note further that every reason to think that  $A$  rationally ought to  $\phi$  is the same thing, or pretty much the same thing, as a practical reason in favor of  $A$ ’s  $\phi$ ing. Given these points, the premise that  $M$  is obviously a reason to think that  $AI$  rationally ought to be moral asserts, in essence, that those who doubt that  $M$  is a practical reason in favor of  $AI$ ’s being moral are guilty of a gross blunder, oversight, or equally serious failing. This assertion is what Argument 2 aims to establish; thus, Argument 2 cannot use it as a premise.

So I return to my point that although every reason to think that  $A$  legally ought to  $\phi$  is a reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$ , not every reason of the former sort, and hence not every reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$ , is a practical reason in favor of  $A$ ’s  $\phi$ ing. Of course, this point rests on a specific reading of “reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$ ,” and some might object to that reading. However, to replace it with a reading that falsifies my point is to ruin Argument 2. I have illustrated this fact by discussing the most feasible readings that would falsify my point, in each case showing that to adopt the reading is to make Argument 2 unsound. It would be easy to show that what goes for these readings goes for others of their kind.

Consequently, unless “reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$ ” has a meaning that ruins Argument 2, not every reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$  is a practical reason in favor of  $A$ ’s  $\phi$ ing. This conclusion, combined with my earlier one about the difference between practical reasons and motives, refutes Argument 2 by refuting one of its premises: that “reason for  $AI$  to be moral,” as  $AI$  uses it, stands in either for “motive for  $AI$  to be moral” or for “reason to think that  $AI$  ought to be moral.”

So Argument 2 fails; let us go on to Argument 3. Interestingly, this argument aims not only to establish the second step of DR but also to refute my objection to Argument 2.

*Argument 3:* Something has gone wrong in the criticism of Argument 2, for we cannot plausibly deny that any reason to think that  $AI$  ought to act

in a certain way is also a reason for him to act in that way. This is evident from the oddness of the remark “ $F$  is a reason to think that Al ought to do such-and-such, but  $F$  is no reason for Al to do such-and-such.” This remark puzzles us, revealing that  $F$  cannot be a reason of the first of the two kinds without also being a reason of the second kind. More generally,  $F$  cannot be a reason to think that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$  without also being a reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$ . Hence, those who doubt that  $M$  is a reason for Al to be moral are either blind to the fact that  $M$  is a reason to think that Al ought to be moral or blind to a plain consequence of that fact.

It is tempting to reply to this argument as follows. First, the oddness on which the argument relies stems from the imprecise, and sometimes shifting, use of “reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$ ” that we find in everyday discourse. Second, Al’s use of “reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$ ” to denote a practical reason, although certainly a common use, differs a bit from the everyday use. At the very least, it is a “cleaned up” version of that use, one that is sharper and more stable. Thus, because the use of “reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$ ” in Argument 3 differs a bit from Al’s use of the term, Argument 3 does not succeed. It does not show that any reason to think that Al ought to be moral is necessarily a reason of the kind Al seeks, namely, a practical reason in favor of Al’s being moral.

Although this reply is feasible, I hesitate to use it because it relies on the claim that Al’s use of “reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$ ” differs slightly from the use we find in Argument 3. This claim may be true, but it is questionable enough that I prefer not to rely on it.

Thus, let us grant, if only for the sake of argument, that Al’s use of “reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$ ” is no different from the use we find in Argument 3. This is to grant that as Al intends that term it has no different sense than it has in the odd-sounding remark: “ $F$  is a reason to think that Al ought to do such-and-such, but  $F$  is no reason for Al to do such-and-such.” Our question is whether, having granted these things, we must accept Argument 3.

The answer is no. In the first place, the oddity to which Argument 3 refers is no *more* of an oddity than various oddities that arise if we accept Argument 3. Suppose it is a fact, a fact we shall call  $R$ , that Arlo has asked Ruth to remind him (in case he forgets) that he ought to raise money for Oxfam. Suppose also, as a background to  $R$ , that Arlo’s normative judgments are always true. Given this background,  $R$  is a reason to think that Arlo ought to raise money for Oxfam. For it is evidence that Arlo has judged that he ought to raise the money, which in turn is evidence (given our background assumption) that he ought to raise it. Hence, if we accept Argument 3 we must grant that  $R$  is necessarily a reason for Arlo to raise money for Oxfam. This is to grant, tacitly at least, that if someone asks us to state a reason of that kind we can properly reply as follows: “A reason of the kind you seek, a reason for Arlo to raise money for Oxfam, is that Arlo has asked Ruth to remind him that he ought to do that.” But certainly this reply is *odd*—just as odd, surely, as the puzzling remark

mentioned in Argument 3. Also, it will not do to say that we can explain the oddness without charging the reply with absurdity. Such a retort cuts both ways, for, as I will soon show, the same goes for the oddness of the remark in Argument 3.

The wise course, then, is not to accept Argument 3 but to cast a critical eye on it, particularly on its tacit premise about the remark “*F* is a reason to think that *Al* ought to do such-and-such, but *F* is no reason for *Al* to do such-and-such.” That tacit premise is that the oddness of the remark shows that the remark contradicts itself. This premise is false. We learned long ago (e.g., from H. P. Grice) that oddness alone is no proof of self-contradiction.<sup>26</sup> The present case is no exception, for we can plausibly explain the oddness of the remark without charging the remark with falseness, much less with inconsistency. Very likely, the oddness stems from the following facts. First, the two main terms in the remark—“reason to think that *Al* ought to do such-and-such” and “reason for *Al* to do such-and-such”—are similar enough that when we hear the remark it can seem, if only for a moment, that we are hearing something of the form “*F* is an *X*, but *F* is no *X*.” Some italics here and there, on some of the words that distinguish the two terms, would help with this problem. Second, and more important, when we cite reasons to think that *Al* ought to do such-and-such we ordinarily choose facts that we regard as reasons for *Al* to do such-and-such. In other words, reasons for *A* to  $\emptyset$ , or at least the facts we regard as such reasons, are the most commonly cited reasons to think that *A* ought to  $\emptyset$ . As a result, when we hear it said that something is a reason of the latter kind but not one of the former kind, we find the remark odd.

If, as I suspect, the oddness has these sources, the oddness should fade if we revise the remark as follows: “*F* is a reason to think that *Al* *ought* to do such-and-such, but *F*, being an unusual reason of that sort, turns out to be the wrong kind of fact to be a reason for *Al* to *do* such-and-such.” Frankly, I hear no oddness here; certainly not enough to charge the remark with inconsistency. But if the original version of the remark were inconsistent, this one would be so as well.

## 6.

Arguments 1 through 3 are unsound, and I know of no arguments that succeed where they fail. This is not to say that I know of no other arguments for the second step of DR; merely that the others are either less feasible than arguments 1 through 3 or defective for reasons that have already surfaced.

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<sup>26</sup>This is not to say that the oddness of the remark in Argument 3 is to be explained in Gricean fashion; merely that an implication of Grice’s work is that to encounter an odd-sounding remark is not necessarily, or even usually, to encounter a self-contradictory remark. See H. P. Grice, “Logic and Conversation,” in Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (eds.), *The Logic of Grammar* (Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1975), pp. 64-75.

Allow me to give an example.<sup>27</sup> Some might argue for DR's second step by saying, first, that we all share the "intuition" that *M* is a reason for everyone, including Al, to be moral; and second, that unless we are willing to distrust philosophical intuitions in general, in which case philosophical reasoning comes to a halt, we must trust our intuition about *M*. That is, we must grant that our intuition reflects reality, that *M* is a reason for everyone to be moral. To do otherwise is to be unreasonable.

This argument is implausible. Assuming that it pertains to Al's question it does not use "reason for everyone to be moral" as short for "moral reason for everyone to be moral," where the latter has the loose sense explained earlier. Instead, it uses it to mean a *practical* reason, a reason to which a person cannot be indifferent without being open to rational criticism. But to the extent that I fix that fact in mind, and equally fix in mind Al's unusual psychology, I find that I lack the intuition to which the argument refers. I see nothing "intuitively" mistaken, ignorant, less than completely rational, etc. about Al's indifference to moral demands.

More important, the argument would fail even if we all shared the intuition to which it refers. It would do so because, unlike some intuitions, the intuition about *M* is one that we should expect to be prevalent whether it is reliable or not. In other words, we can easily explain the intuition about *M* without supposing that it reflects reality. For instance, we no doubt *wish* that *M* were a practical reason for everyone, and we have been taught from childhood to *treat M* as a practical reason for everyone.<sup>28</sup> Also, in the back of our minds lies an assumption which, even if we consciously reject it, we have difficulty fully suspending. That assumption is that every person, even Al, has at least some desires that make it instrumentally rational—defeasibly so, at least—for him to live as he morally ought. These facts suffice to explain the intuition that *M* is a reason for everyone to be moral. However, they do nothing to vindicate that intuition.

## 7.

Thus, as I said, arguments 1 through 3 fail and I know of no arguments that succeed in their place. I conclude, therefore, that the proponents of DR cannot

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<sup>27</sup>In earlier drafts of this paper I gave three examples. Although I do not regret cutting two of them to shorten the paper, I would like to drop a hint about their content by stating a couple of facts about them. First, they resemble Argument 3 in that each trades on a linguistic oddity. The first trades on the oddness of (i) "Although *F* is the reason why Al should  $\phi$ , *F* is no reason for Al to  $\phi$ "; the second on the oddness of (ii) "Only by being moral can Al live as he morally ought, but this is no reason for Al to be moral." Second, each fails for roughly the same reason that Argument 3 fails. For instance, the oddness of (ii) almost surely derives from things other than a contradiction in (ii). Consider, in this connection, the following variation of (ii): (ii') "Only by being moral can Al live as he *morally* ought, but this is no reason for Al to be moral." Personally, I hear no oddness in (ii'); certainly not enough to charge it with contradicting itself. (I detect that Al is odd, but that's another point.) But if (ii) were contradictory, (ii') would be so as well.

<sup>28</sup>Cp. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, pp. 79f, 153, 162.

meet their burden of proof; they cannot establish the second premise of their argument. We should reject their claim that *M* is obviously a reason for AI to be moral, and with it their claim that to ask (*m*) or (*a*) is silly. This is to reject DR.

Of course, these remarks presuppose that “reason for AI to be moral” has the same meaning in DR that it has in my treatment of arguments 1 through 3. But as revealed earlier, this presupposition is true. Assuming that DR does not miss the point of AI’s question we must read “reason for AI to be moral,” as it occurs in DR, to mean a practical reason in favor of AI’s being moral.

Having said this let me go on to my next task, which is to show that the error I have exposed is widespread. Here I speak of the general error I have exposed, the one that remains if we pare away nonessentials. We can do that in four steps.

First, since it is false that for any agent, *A*, fact *M* is obviously a practical reason in favor of *A*’s being moral, it is also false that for any agent, *A*, fact *M* is obviously a practical reason in favor of *A*’s acting. In short, it is false that for any agent, *M* is obviously a practical reason. After all, if *M* were such a reason the act it would favor would be the one to which it refers, namely, that of being moral.

Second, with only slight rewording my work shows not just that *M* falls short of obviously *being* a practical reason for every agent, but that *M* falls short of obviously *providing* such a reason to every agent. *M* would provide such a reason to every agent if, for any agent, *M* either qualified as a practical reason or ensured the existence of such a reason. *M* does not *obviously* do either of those things.

Third, since *M* does not obviously provide every agent with a practical reason, we err not only if we say that *M* obviously does so but if we in any way treat as axiomatic, as in need of no evidence, the view that for any agent, *M* provides a reason of that kind. (Even if this is not an error in *every* context, it is an error in any context in which why-be-moral skepticism is an issue.)

Fourth, these points apply not just to *M* but to many similar facts—for instance, the fact that unless AI is moral he will cause needless suffering, and the fact that AI expects others to be moral, at least in their dealings with him. Such facts are what philosophers call “moral considerations.” Although moral considerations defy sharp definition they have two key features: first, if they are not moral claims themselves they are facts used to support such claims; and second, the support they yield is not remote, obscure, or unusual. That an act is cruel, that it would be unfair, that it would cause much pain—these are examples of moral considerations.

I now can identify the general error I have exposed. That error consists of treating as axiomatic, as in need of no argument, the view that for any agent, one or more moral considerations (identified extensionally, or by a shared form or content, or by the mere fact that they are moral considerations) provide the agent with practical reasons. Of course, “treating” that view as axiomatic does not necessarily mean asserting or believing it to be axiomatic. An argument

treats the view as axiomatic if, on the one hand, it depends on the view for its success, but on the other, it neither defends that view nor comes accompanied by such a defense. DR is an argument of this sort, but it is far from the only one. In other words, the general error I have exposed is widespread; it infects many treatments of Al's question.

Among the best examples are those treatments that assert or imply, without any argument to link right and wrong to practical reasons, that if anyone asks "Why be moral?" the mere retort "Because it's right" suffices as an answer. Although some of these examples come from proponents of DR, most have other sources.<sup>29</sup> What these sources share, and what makes them defective, is a lack of evidence for their key assumption: that the moral rightness of act provides everyone with a practical reason. I call this "their" assumption because their thesis presupposes it. Unless the assumption is true, the retort "Because it's right" does not answer "Why should I be moral?," at least not as some agents (e.g., Al) intend that question.

Let me give a further example. This one is an argument for the view to which DR is opposed, namely, that Al's question is not out of line.<sup>30</sup>

Dismissive replies to Al's question are off the mark in charging Al with silliness or confusion. Al is not seeking reasons to be moral; he is not asking (*m*), (*n*), or (*a*). Al already knows that he has (moral) reasons to be moral, but he also knows that he has (egoistic) reasons not to be moral. His question amounts to this: "Given that some reasons dictate that I live morally whereas others dictate otherwise, why should I treat the former reasons as supreme?" This question is sensible; it is not out of line in the least.

Having stated this argument, its advocates can continue along either of two routes: they can try to answer Al's question or they can argue that, in Al's case, no good answer exists. However, I am not concerned with sequels to the argument; I am concerned with the argument itself. It is not successful, for it pertains to DR and to Al's request only if the reasons to which it refers are *practical* reasons, reasons linked to requirements of rationality. But if the

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<sup>29</sup>Among the latter are G. A. Johnston, *An Introduction to Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1915), pp. 149, 153; Melvin Rader, *Ethics and Society* (New York: Henry Holt, 1950), p. 211f; Austin Duncan-Jones, *Butler's Moral Philosophy* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1952), p. 85; P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1954), p. 41f; Robert C. Solomon, *Ethics: A Brief Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), p. 101; and Colin McGinn, "Why Not Be a Bad Person?" in Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers (eds.), *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*, 6th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004), pp. 349-58, at p. 350.

<sup>30</sup>This example is a composite of arguments in Green, *Religious Reason*, pp. 44f, 47; Pritchard, "On 'Should I Be Moral?'" p. 124f; and Paul W. Taylor, *Principles of Ethics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1975), pp. 217, 219. Close cousins of this argument are advanced by Kai Nielsen and, especially, by Kurt Baier, but whether they commit the error I am illustrating is a matter for debate. See Nielsen, *Why Be Moral?* chaps. 8 and 14; Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), especially chaps. 3, 7, 8, and 12; and Kurt Baier, "Moral Reasons and Reasons to be Moral," in Alvin I. Goldman and Jaegwon Kim (eds.), *Values and Morals* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978), pp. 231-56.

reasons to which it refers are practical reasons it assumes without argument that everyone has practical reasons in favor of being moral. Indeed, it assumes that Al knows that he has such reasons. Now, just what are these practical reasons? What facts does the argument assume to be practical reasons for everyone? A search of the relevant sources reveals, unsurprisingly, that those facts are none other than moral considerations.<sup>31</sup> They include such facts as “ $\phi$ ing is morally right” and “I’ll let Maude down if I don’t  $\phi$ .”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the argument goes wrong by presupposing, rather than demonstrating, that moral considerations furnish everyone with practical reasons.<sup>33</sup>

Thus far I have exposed the error in DR and shown that it plagues other treatments of Al’s question. My final task is to refute three other dismissive replies to that question. But first an interim point: Although I have taken my own route to my conclusions, those conclusions resemble those of others. One of those others is Philippa Foot. I specifically have in mind her articles “Reasons for Action and Desires” and “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives.”<sup>34</sup> The similarity of my views to Foot’s would decrease the need for this paper were it not that Foot’s work, although justly famous, is usually ignored in explicit treatments of Al’s question. Foot shows that if the arguments of Kant and similar rationalists fail we have no right to take for granted that moral considerations supply everyone with practical reasons. Our linguistic habits tempt us to do so, but that fact cannot settle the issue.<sup>35</sup> Strangely, although Foot’s work is well known and clearly relevant to Al’s question, it often receives neglect in discussions of that question.<sup>36</sup> Common in such

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<sup>31</sup>Insofar as this claim pertains to Green and Taylor I base it on my reading of Green, *Religious Reason*, Introduction and chaps. 1-2; and Taylor, *Principles of Ethics*, chap. 9, especially pp. 210-15, 216, 218, 220. Although the cited pages support an alternative reading, on that reading Green and Taylor commit a greater error than the one noted here. On the alternative reading, the moral “reasons” to which those authors refer are not moral considerations but a much wider class of things: namely, just any reasons to believe a moral proposition.

<sup>32</sup>Taylor, *Principles of Ethics*, p. 216; Pritchard, “On ‘Should I Be Moral?’” p. 124.

<sup>33</sup>A possible comeback is that a major proponent of the argument, Paul Taylor, does not take for granted, but explicitly argues (on p. 216 of *Principles of Ethics*), that moral considerations are reasons for each person to act. This comeback fails because the cited page contains not an argument but simply a repeated insistence that any facts that justify our acceptance of a moral judgment count as reasons for us to comply with the judgment. Assuming that the reasons to which Taylor refers are *practical* reasons, he is simply taking for granted that moral considerations supply everyone with practical reasons.

<sup>34</sup>These papers, which appeared in 1972, are reprinted in Foot’s *Virtues and Vices*, pp. 148-73. As many know, Foot has changed her views over the years; her recent work conflicts with much of the work she did in the 1970’s. (See Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* [Oxford: Clarendon, 2001].) However, this does not affect the point I want to make. Anyone concerned with “Why be moral?” must come to terms with Foot’s earlier work. Foot herself knows this; in her recent work she has no tendency to take for granted, rather than to argue, that moral considerations provide everyone with practical reasons. This is evident in chapter 9 of *Natural Goodness*, e.g., in Foot’s statement that “we *must try to show him* [Al] the conceptual connection between acting well and acting rationally; so that if he is to challenge us further, this is where the challenge must come” (p. 65; my italics).

<sup>35</sup>Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 160f.

<sup>36</sup>For instance, the treatments of “Why should I be moral?” in the following works, which appeared after Foot’s work had become well known, make no mention of that work: Green, *Religious Reason*;

discussions is the tacit, unargued premise that moral considerations furnish practical reasons to every agent.

## 8.

The previous few sections undermine, or yield materials for undermining, three other dismissive replies to Al's question. The first is suggested by a passage in William Frankena's classic paper "Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy":<sup>37</sup>

In asking "Why be moral?" Al is either seeking a reason to think that he ought to be moral or seeking a motive to be moral.<sup>38</sup>

If Al is seeking a reason to think that he ought to be moral his question is silly. Clearly, only by being moral can Al live as he morally ought. This fact is obviously a reason to think that Al ought to be moral.

If Al is seeking a motive to be moral his question is unreasonable. At any rate, it is unreasonable if addressed to moral philosophers. To *move* people to be moral is not their task.

Thus, Al's question is silly or unreasonable. We need not bother with it.

This argument resembles Argument 2 in section 5. It fails for similar reasons. Its first premise is false, for Al seeks neither of the things it mentions. Its first premise would not be false if "reason for me to be moral," as Al intends it, were ambiguous between "motive for me to be moral" and "reason to think that I ought to be moral." However, as shown earlier, the term is not ambiguous in that way.

The next reply is the same in its essentials to the replies of Dan Brock, R. F. Atkinson, and, on one reading, H. A. Prichard.<sup>39</sup>

Hospers, *Human Conduct* (3rd ed.); McGinn, "Why Not Be a Bad Person?"; Purtill, *Thinking About Ethics*; Snare, *The Nature of Moral Thinking*; and Solomon, *Ethics*. This fact reflects a wider phenomenon. Philosophical treatments of Al's question (e.g., those on whether his question is spurious) often show little influence of developments in the broader area of practical reason (e.g., work on whether, and how, morality is linked to practical reasons and on how practical reasons relate to desires). Foot's writings are seldom ignored in works on that broader topic, but such works are insufficiently reflected in many works specifically about Al's question.

<sup>37</sup>Frankena, "Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy," p. 44f. This argument, or a similar one, is implicit in Holmes, "Is Morality a System of Hypothetical Imperatives?" *Analysis* 34(3) (1974): 96-100; and in Ralph M. Blake, "The Ground of Moral Obligation," *International Journal of Ethics* 38(2) (1928): 129-40, pp. 136-39. In fairness to Frankena let me note that he does not regard Al's question as ill-conceived. This is evident from his book *Thinking about Morality* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), pp. 75-94.

<sup>38</sup>We can read the "ought" in this sentence either as "morally ought" or as "ought, in just any sense." The first reading is a more literal reading of Frankena than the second one is, but the second reading is more charitable to the dismissive reply we are considering here. On either reading my objection to that reply goes through.

If AI asks “Why should I be moral?” we can meet his demand only by showing that he has a reason to be moral. Any reason we produce will be a moral or a nonmoral reason.

If the reason we produce is a moral reason, our reply cannot possibly succeed. AI is challenging the practice of paying heed to moral reasons; thus, to answer him in terms of such reasons is to miss his point. It is to assume the very thing he doubts, which is that moral reasons should carry weight with him.

If the reason we produce is a nonmoral reason, our reply cannot possibly succeed. Any nonmoral reason we produce cannot be a reason to *be moral*. The notion of nonmoral reasons to be moral is incoherent or, at any rate, necessarily without an extension.

Therefore, AI’s question not only lacks, but necessarily lacks, an answer. This makes it a pseudo-question.

This argument, like DR, is weak at its second step.<sup>40</sup> That step rings true if we read “moral reasons,” as it occurs in that step, to have the loose sense explained in section 5. But we must not read it that way. The “reasons” to which the above argument refers, including the “moral reasons” to which its second step refers, are *practical* reasons; otherwise, the argument sidesteps AI’s request. Consequently, the second step in the argument implies, falsely, that AI is challenging the practice of paying heed to reasons which, being practical reasons, have a rational bearing on his conduct. Recall from section 5 that any *practical* reason brings with it a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality; whether it is a moral or a nonmoral practical reason is immaterial. AI is a rational agent; thus, he is not questioning whether to give weight to moral practical reasons.

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<sup>39</sup>The main place where these three replies differ is in their rationale for the claim, in the third premise, that “if the reason we produce is a nonmoral reason, our reply cannot possibly succeed.” My formulation of that rationale comes closest to Atkinson’s. See R. F. Atkinson, *Conduct: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 94f; Dan W. Brock, “The Justification of Morality,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14(1) (1977): 71-78; and H. A. Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” (1912), in Pabel and Schiller, *Readings*, pp. 402-16. As the footnoted sentence suggests, Prichard’s reply is open to at least two interpretations. On the first one, the thrust of his reply is captured by the argument to be examined here. (See T. M. Scanlon, “Self-Anchored Morality,” in J. B. Schneewind [ed.], *Reason, Ethics, and Society: Themes from Kurt Baier, with His Responses* [Chicago: Open Court, 1996], pp. 197-209, at p. 197; and Faviola Rivera Castro, “How Should We Understand the Project of the Moral Point of View Theorists? Reply to Kai Nielsen,” *Crítica* 32[95] [2000]: 103-114, p. 105.) On the second interpretation (a more plausible one, in my view), the thrust of his reply differs from that argument. The second interpretation, or rather the argument that results from adopting it, receives no attention in this paper. It receives none because it rests on an understanding of “Why should I be moral?” that differs from AI’s. Rather than treating the question as a request for reasons to do what one admits to be one’s moral duty, it treats it as a request for proof that one’s putative moral duties are truly one’s moral duties. The latter request is not AI’s, for AI doubts neither that he has moral duties nor that he knows what they are.

<sup>40</sup>It also is weak at its third step, but I’ll let that pass.

Perhaps he is questioning whether, in his case, *moral* practical reasons really exist—that is, whether the facts that pass as such reasons really provide *him*, not just ordinary people, with *pro tanto* requirements of rationality—but he is not questioning whether to respect such reasons if any prove themselves genuine. A rational agent, we can assume, wants his behavior to be immune to rational criticism.

The next reply is a reconstruction of Stephen Toulmin’s argument.<sup>41</sup>

If Al asks “Why should I be moral?” his “should” is a moral, a nonmoral, or a generic “should.”<sup>42</sup> He wants us to show that he ought morally to be moral; that he ought nonmorally (e.g., prudentially) to be moral; or that he ought, either morally or nonmorally, to be moral.

If Al’s “should” is moral or generic his question is silly. That Al ought morally to be moral is a tautology.

If Al’s “should” is nonmoral his question is unreasonable. At any rate, it is unreasonable if addressed to moral philosophers. It gives them a task that is not theirs.

Therefore, Al’s question is silly or unreasonable. We need not bother with it.

This argument divides “should”’s into three kinds. Suppose Al is asking (*a*) that we identify, and prove the credentials of, just any practical reason in favor of his being moral. Then which of the three “should”’s is he using? He is not using the moral or the generic “should.” Al is aware of *M*, the fact that only by being moral can he live as he morally ought; thus, Al already knows that he ought morally to be moral.

Hence, Al must be using a nonmoral “should.” And indeed he is. He is using the rational “should,” the “should” which, when used to ask “Why should I  $\phi$ ?” solicits practical reasons in favor of  $\phi$ ing.<sup>43</sup> This being so, the third step

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<sup>41</sup>Stephen Toulmin, *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), pp. 162-65. I find Toulmin’s argument less clear than it could be; so I have taken some liberties in reconstructing it. In doing so I have taken care to be charitable. For instance, I have formulated his first premise so that it mentions the generic “should” along with the moral and the nonmoral “should.”

<sup>42</sup>Toulmin would add: unless Al is asking a *limiting question*, in which case Al’s “should” has no literal meaning and any answer we give him will simply generate a similar why-question, the answer to which will generate another why-question, and so *ad infinitum*. (See Toulmin, *Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics*, pp. 165, 202-21.) However, Al’s question is not of this type.

<sup>43</sup>Worth noting is that Al’s “should” would not be the moral “should” even if he were asking (*m*) rather than (*a*)—i.e., even if he were requesting a specifically *moral* practical reason in favor of being moral. If his “should” were moral we could silence his request, we could meet it beyond dispute, merely by showing that he ought morally to be moral. But we cannot silence a request for a practical reason that way, even if the request is for a moral species of practical reason. As shown earlier, it is not beyond

in Toulmin's argument is false. It is not unreasonable to request practical reasons in favor of being moral. Nothing we have seen so far discredits that request; nor do we have other grounds for dismissing it as out of line.

For instance, it will not do to claim, as Toulmin does, that "to show that you ought to choose certain actions is one thing: to make you *want to do* what you ought to do is another, and not a philosopher's task."<sup>44</sup> This claim is true but of no help to the third step in the above argument. As evident from section 5, to seek practical reasons is one thing; to seek motives is another. If Al were seeking motives Toulmin's claim would be to the point. But Al seeks practical reasons; hence, Toulmin's claim is wide of the mark.

Nor will it do to claim that because Al's "should" is nonmoral he seeks nonmoral (e.g., prudential) reasons to be moral, the very term for which—"nonmoral reasons to be moral"—is contradictory. If this claim were true Al's question would be unreasonable, for it would logically defy an answer. But the claim is not true; Al is not seeking specifically nonmoral practical reasons. His "should" is nonmoral because it is the rational "should," the "should" that solicits just any practical reasons, moral or nonmoral, for the act in question.<sup>45</sup> Thus, despite his nonmoral "should" he is open to replies in terms of moral practical reasons. Suppose we could show, perhaps through a neo-Kantian argument, that moral facts count for any agent as practical reasons in favor of being moral. This would be to meet Al's request in terms of moral practical reasons.<sup>46</sup> So unless something is incoherent about the notion of being moral on the basis of such reasons, Al's question does not logically defy an answer. Perhaps it *lacks* an answer, but this is irrelevant. A question that merely lacks an answer, unlike a question that logically defies one, is not necessarily unreasonable.

## 9.

I conclude with a brief summary and a parting remark. First of all, DR fails; its second step is false. Neither *M* nor any similar fact is *obviously* a reason for Al to be moral. To think that *M* is obviously such a reason is to commit a common but serious error. At least, it is to do so if "reason for Al to be moral" denotes a

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dispute that insofar as a person ought morally to be moral he has a *practical* reason, either moral or nonmoral, in favor of being moral.

<sup>44</sup>Toulmin, *Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics*, p. 163.

<sup>45</sup>Of course, his "should" would be nonmoral if it meant, say, "prudentially should," "should from the point of view of self-interest," or "should from the perspective of my nonmoral practical reasons." But those are not the *only* ways for a "should" to be nonmoral. If a "should" is short for "rationally should" or "should from the perspective of my practical reasons in general, meaning all such reasons (moral or nonmoral) that bear on the matter," then it surely is a nonmoral "should." After all, it is not synonymous with "morally should." But just as surely, it is not a "should" which, when used in "Why should I  $\phi$ ?" makes that question a request for specifically *nonmoral* practical reasons.

<sup>46</sup>For an example of this approach see Darwall, "Autonomist Internalism and the Justification of Morals."

reason of the kind AI seeks, namely, a practical reason in favor of AI's being moral.

Secondly, the error just mentioned has multiple roots; to expose it is no simple task. But the task is worthwhile. In the first place, it corrects mistakes that have long clouded discussion of "Why be moral?"—for instance, the mistake of confusing different uses of "moral reason for AI to be moral." Also, it not only reveals the flaw in DR but also undermines, or yields materials for undermining, three other dismissive replies to AI's question. Finally, it exposes not only the error just mentioned—the error of regarding *M* as obviously a reason for AI to be moral—but a more general and important error: the error of treating as axiomatic, as in need of no evidence, the view that moral considerations supply every agent with practical reasons. This error is not confined to DR. Many treatments of "Why be moral?" are similarly flawed.

In a nutshell, my chief aims have been to refute four dismissive replies to "Why should I be moral?" and to expose an error that infects many treatments of that question. I have combined these two projects because they are closely related: the error I have exposed undermines one of the four replies, and the work done to expose the error does much to undermine the others.

In parting, let me say that I have no more fondness for amoralism, meaning the moral indifference AI represents, than anyone else does. However, nothing is gained, either practically or philosophically, by underestimating the amoralist's challenge. If that challenge withstands the stock attempts to brush it off as silly, let us face this fact squarely, regrettable though it may be. Our goal is the truth, even if the truth is displeasing.<sup>47</sup>

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