

Reasons, rational requirements, and the putative pseudo-question “Why be moral?”

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Abstract In this paper, I challenge a well-known argument for the view that “Why be moral?” is a pseudo-question. I do so by refuting a component of that argument, a component that is not only crucial to the argument but important in its own right. That component concerns the status of moral reasons in replies to “Why be moral?”; consequently, this paper concerns reasons and rationality no less than it concerns morality. The work I devote to those topics shows not only that the argument I address is unsound, but that the conclusion of that argument is false. “Why be moral?” is no pseudo-question.

Keywords Rationality · Practical reasons · Moral reasons · Reasons for action · Pseudo-questions · “Why be moral?”

1

From Plato’s time forward philosophers have addressed the question “Why be moral?” Arguably, not one has answered it, if answering it means showing that everyone has good reason to be moral. Perhaps it was inevitable, then, that the idea would eventually emerge that “Why be moral?” is a pseudo-question—that is, a question that cannot be answered owing to a flaw in the question itself. This idea caught on more than a century ago¹ and persists into our own time. In what follows I refute a well-known argument for it and, in the end, show the idea itself to be false.

Why bother to refute, or even consider, a well-known argument for it if I can refute the idea itself? One reason is that it’s unhelpful to expose an error but say nothing

¹ See, for instance, Bradley (1876, 53–59) and Jones (1891, 137).

about the mistakes at its source. Another reason, which I explain later, is that the argument, or rather that part of it on which I focus, is independently important. For these reasons I take an interest in the argument itself, not just in the idea it subserves. I refute one of its main components, after which I show that the work done to refute it reveals that “Why be moral?” is no pseudo-question.

The argument with which I am concerned can be stated in three broad steps. First, if anyone asks “Why be moral?,” thereby asking that we furnish (show the existence of) reasons for her to be moral, we can meet her request, if we can meet it at all, only in terms of *nonmoral* reasons. After all, she is not questioning whether *moral* reasons for her to act exist; she admits that they do. She is questioning whether she should accept those reasons, whether they should influence her deliberations. Thus, we can meet her request only in terms of nonmoral reasons to act—specifically, nonmoral reasons for her to accept moral reasons.²

Second, we cannot possibly answer “Why be moral?” in terms of nonmoral reasons.³ Arguments for this step vary; one of them is this: To give nonmoral reasons in answer to “Why be moral?” is to justify, at most, acting on moral reasons when so acting has nonmoral (e.g., prudential) support. It cannot really justify *being moral*, for to be moral in the true sense is to treat moral reasons as overriding, as the final arbiters of what one ought, all things considered, to do. Thus, replies to “Why be moral?” in terms of nonmoral reasons necessarily fail (Brock, 1977, 73).

Third, given the preceding two steps, no reply to “Why be moral?” can possibly succeed. In other words, that question does not merely lack, it *necessarily* lacks, an answer. This is the mark of a pseudo-question.

The first step in this argument, according to which only nonmoral reasons stand a chance of answering “Why be moral?,” is the component I will refute. Worth noting is that this component has importance even if we reject the premise that follows it, according to which nonmoral reasons necessarily fail to answer “Why be moral?” (I myself reject that premise, as will be evident later.) This stems from an assumption common among philosophers who, because they reject that premise, treat “Why be moral?” as a legitimate question. The assumption in question is that although replies to “Why be moral?” in terms of nonmoral reasons do not *necessarily* fail, they stand little chance of success. (Witness the failures, many philosophers will say, of the replies of Scriven, Gauthier, and the like.)⁴ Given the prevalence of this assumption, it is important to know whether moral reasons, the only alternative to nonmoral ones, are suitable for answering “Why be moral?” The argument I will examine, the first component of the larger argument sketched above, takes a stand on this issue. This makes it worth our attention.

However, for better or worse that component fails. As a first step toward showing this, let me state the component with more precision and detail:

² Two comments: First, for my purposes the word “accept” can mean either “give *some* weight to” or “give *decisive* weight to.” In either case my arguments stand up. Second, for arguments equivalent or akin to the reasoning just sketched see Thornton (1964, 25–26), Atkinson (1969, 94–95), Brock (1977, 72), Olen (1983, 79, 82), Overvold (1984, 494), Nielsen (1989, 286–287), Snare (1992, 174), Arrington (1997, 182), and Scanlon (1998, 149).

³ Worth noting is that not everyone who defends the previous step defends this one. Some philosophers use the previous step for their own purposes; they do not necessarily accept the larger argument in which it figures. Philosophers who accept either the larger argument or a close cousin of it include Thornton (1964, 25–26), Atkinson (1969, 94–95), Brock (1977), and Olen (1983, 79, 82).

⁴ Scriven (1966, chap. 7), Gauthier (1986). See also Cooper (1981, chap. 15) and Smith (2000).

- (1) If any person, *P*, asks “Why be moral?” we can meet her challenge, if we can meet it at all, only by showing that there’s a (sufficiently weighty)⁵ reason—either a reason of a specific kind or a reason of *some* kind—for *P* to act (specifically, for *P* to *be moral*, on some understanding of that term).
- (2) When *P* asks “Why be moral?” she is not expressing doubt that *moral* reasons for her to act exist; she admits that they do. She is expressing doubt, and challenging us to show, that she (rationally) should accept those reasons, that they should influence her deliberations.
- (3) Thus, we cannot meet *P*’s challenge by showing either that there exist moral reasons for *P* to act or that there exist reasons of *some* kind for *P* to act. *P* already grants those propositions; her question concerns a different issue.
- (4) Therefore, when *P* asks “Why be moral?” we can meet her challenge, if we can meet it at all, only by showing that there’s a *nonmoral* reason—either a nonmoral reason of a specific kind or a nonmoral reason of *some* kind—for *P* to act (specifically, for *P* to *be moral*, where that involves accepting, i.e., giving weight to, moral reasons for *P* to act).

This argument succeeds only if its premises are true. But as I will show, premise (2) is false.

2

Premise (2) purports to tell us what *P* means by her question. But *P* is not a flesh-and-blood person. That is, the gist of (2) is not merely that no actual person intends “Why be moral?” differently than (2) describes, but that we cannot plausibly imagine, much less find, a person who does. Either that, or we can do so only by assuming the following: that the person is insincere; that he is confused or grossly in error; that his question has either a contrived meaning or a meaning that robs it of philosophical interest; or that he does not intend his question as a request for reasons for him to act.⁶ But if we use “person” and related words as I do from here on, as extending to no one with any of those traits, the gist of (2) is that it’s implausible to imagine someone intending “Why be moral?” differently than (2) describes.

This fact has consequences for the truth of (2), but before mentioning them let me say why the fact is important. It is important because (2), and the argument in which (2) appears, is meant to apply not just to actual people but to the *amoralist*.⁷ The amoralist is that imaginary figure who looms in the background, and at bottom is the subject, of philosophical treatments of “Why be moral?” He is the imaginary figure who, although claiming to be rational, cares nothing for morality and defies us to show that he has reason to be moral. A key word here is “imaginary.” The amoralist is not an actual person. His importance resides not in his actual existence but in the

⁵ From here on I will feel free to leave this qualification nonexplicit in the statements in which it applies.

⁶ Perhaps he intends it to mean “Why should *we*, people collectively, be moral?” This differs from requesting a reason for *him* to be moral (hence, it is not to use “Why be moral?” in the way that concerns me in this paper), but neither is it to use “Why be moral?” in a contrived or uninteresting way. For more on this point see Nielsen (1989, 174–77, 179, 289–290).

⁷ Actually, this is just one reason why the fact is important. Even if we put it aside, it would remain the case that if (2) were solely about actually existing people (2) would be far less philosophically interesting than it could be.

challenge he represents. Hence, if (2) were solely about actual people it would not apply to “Why be moral?” as philosophers understand it, namely, as representing the *amoralist’s* challenge.

So (2) not only has, but importantly has, the meaning I have described. Of course, this has consequences for the truth of (2). (2) is true only if the following is untenable:

(5) “Why be moral?,” in the mouth of at least one actual person who asks it, does not express doubt that, if moral reasons for her to act exist, she should accept those reasons. Instead, it expresses doubt, and challenges us to show, that there exist reasons, just any reasons (moral or nonmoral), for her to do the outward deeds required by morality.

Thesis (5) implies that an actual person intends “Why be moral?” differently than (2) describes. Unless (5) is not only false but *untenable*, by which I mean untenable antecedent to any search, any manhunt, for a person of the kind (5) describes, then, contrary to (2), nothing is implausible about *imagining* that (5) is true. After all, what is it to say that it’s implausible to imagine that (5) is true except to say that, even before anyone ascertains empirically whether (5) is true, (5) succumbs to objections. But to say the latter is to say that (5) is “untenable” as I use that term.

So again, unless (5) is untenable nothing is implausible about imagining that (5) is true, in which case (2) is false. And of course if (2) is false we must reject the argument for (4), the argument for the claim that we stand no chance of answering “Why be moral?” except in terms of nonmoral reasons. Those who accept the argument for (4) are no doubt aware of this; so they must have objections to (5).

What are those objections? I can think of exactly three that warrant discussion, the third and most feasible of which will consume most of my attention. But let me start with the least feasible one. Normally, it purports to show not that (5) is false but that replies to “Why be moral?” in terms of nonmoral reasons necessarily fail. In other words, in its familiar form it aims to support the second component of the argument, discussed in Sect. 1, for the view that “Why be moral?” is a pseudo-question.⁸ However, it also suggests itself as an objection to (5).

That objection asserts that if the person referred to in (5) were demanding just any sort of reasons to be moral we could meet her demand with *nonmoral* reasons of that kind. But we cannot do that. In the first place, “Why be moral?” seriously arises for a person only when, nonmorally speaking, she should not be moral—or more precisely, should not do what she takes “being moral” to signify. After all, if things were otherwise—that is, if she had nonmoral reasons to be moral that outweighed, or weighed no less than, her nonmoral reasons not to be moral—she would feel no temptation not to be moral. She would feel none because she would see no conflict between the dictates of the nonmoral standpoint and those of the moral one. Therefore, whenever “Why be moral?” seriously arises for a person we can be sure that for her the weight of nonmoral reasons tilts against being moral. Thus, contrary to what (5) implies, we cannot hope to answer her with nonmoral reasons.

This objection to (5) fails in at least two ways. First, it does not touch the key implication in (5), the one that makes (5) so troublesome for (2). That implication is that the person to whom (5) refers does not already know, but instead questions,

⁸ See Thornton (1964, 25–26). For a similar argument see Hospers (1961, 194). In reconstructing this argument I use the term “nonmoral reasons” where Thornton and Hospers would use “reasons of self-interest.” I do so because, contrary to what Thornton and Hospers seem to assume, the category of nonmoral reasons may be broader than that of reasons of self-interest.

whether moral reasons for her to act exist. By leaving that implication intact the objection leaves open the possibility that we can revise (5) so that although (5) and (2) remain in conflict, (5) does not imply or suggest that nonmoral reasons are suitable for answering “Why be moral?”

Second, and more important, it is a mistake to think that “Why be moral?” seriously arises for a person only when, for her, the weight of nonmoral reasons tilts against being moral—or more accurately, against what she takes “being moral” to signify. This mistake stems from the false assumption that if the weight of nonmoral reasons did not tilt that way, she would know of that fact and hence feel no temptation not to be moral.

To see the error in that assumption note that anyone who understands “being moral” as (5) would have us understand it, namely, as short for “doing the outward deeds required by morality,” very likely takes that phrase to mean *regularly* doing those outward deeds—that is, doing them habitually rather than sporadically or only when prudence dictates. (Certainly this is *one* of the things she could take it to mean, and if she does, her notion of “being moral” is not odd in the least. More on this shortly.) Now suppose that for this person, the weight of nonmoral reasons tilts not against being moral but in favor of it, where “being moral” has the meaning just described. Does it follow that she knows of that fact, or even that she can easily discover it? Does it even follow that she would know of that fact if she were acquainted with the philosophical arguments for it?⁹ Of course not. For whether it is ultimately true or not, it is neither obvious nor incontestably established that *regularly* doing the outward deeds required by morality comports with the weight of nonmoral reasons. After all, *regularly* doing those deeds entails frequently doing them when, taken individually, they are less than optimal from a nonmoral standpoint. (Imagine a person who refrains from stealing even though, were she to steal just this once, her act would have more going for it, nonmorally, than her act of restraint does. For instance, she would profit considerably with no risk of being caught.) This fact is the sticking point for every attempt to show that for each person the weight of nonmoral reasons favors, or at least does not disfavor, regularly behaving morally. Moreover, even if this problem is solvable in principle, no one has yet solved it beyond dispute. Thus, even if the weight of a person’s nonmoral reasons does not disfavor being moral, and even if she is abreast of the philosophical arguments to that effect, she might seriously wonder whether she ought to be moral.

So the first objection to (5) fails.¹⁰ So does the next one, which asserts that to be moral one must not simply do the *outward* deeds morality requires; instead, one must act on distinctively *moral* reasons—reasons that evidence an act to be morally right.

⁹ E.g., those of Scriven (1966, chap. 7) and Gauthier (1986, chaps. 5–7).

¹⁰ I have shown this (partly) by observing that “be moral” can mean “regularly do the outward deeds morality requires.” However, I could have shown it just as well by observing that “be moral” can mean “do *X*,” where *X* is not a pattern of action but an *act-token* required by morality. I could have done so because the point that dooms the objection is this: the way in which a person’s nonmoral reasons tilt can differ from the way in which he *thinks* they tilt, the result being that although his nonmoral reasons favor being moral, he suspects differently and hence doubts that he rationally ought to be moral. This point is true whether “be moral” means “regularly do the outward deeds morality requires” or instead means “do *X*,” where *X* is a morally required act-token. Often, a person can reasonably but *falsely* think that an act-token, *X*, of fairness (or reparation, etc.) is contrary both to his reasons of self-interest and to any other nonmoral reasons that might bear on the matter. This can lead him to ask “Why do *X*?” even though, in reality, his nonmoral reasons, no less than his moral ones, favor doing *X*.

More fully, one must act on such reasons, thereby doing whatever outward deeds those reasons prescribe.¹¹ Of course, those outward deeds will be the ones required by morality; hence, doing the outward deeds required by morality is *part* of what it is to be moral. But it's only one part; the key part consists of acting on moral reasons. Thus, when a person asks "Why be moral?" he is essentially demanding reasons to act on moral reasons. But then the reasons he is demanding cannot be just any sort of practical reasons. After all, those would include *moral* reasons; so he would not be demanding them unless he already granted the cogency of moral reasons. But if he already did that, he would not be asking "Why be moral?" Hence, (5) is false: no one who asks "Why be moral?" is seeking just any sort of reasons to be moral. Nor is he using "be moral" to denote merely the *outward* deeds morality demands.

This objection fails because it assumes, falsely, that the term "be moral" has just one correct use, that to use it properly is to denote acting on moral reasons. This assumption is false because "be moral" is not univocal. Certainly it is not univocal as it figures in "Why be moral?"¹² Perhaps some who ask that question use "be moral" as short for "act on moral reasons," but others, no doubt, use it as short for "regularly, i.e., always or with great consistency, do the outward deeds of truth-telling, promise-keeping, and so forth that morality requires." This usage is not the least bit contrived, nor does it make "Why be moral?" unimportant or unchallenging. Arguably, it makes that question highly challenging, for it is no easy matter to show that rationality requires everyone, even the amoralist, *regularly* to tell the truth, honor agreements, refrain from theft, and so forth. So reflection on the correct use of "be moral" does not undermine (5).

We now come to the third objection to (5), which runs as follows. If any person, *P*, asks "Why be moral?" he thereby grants, if only tacitly, that he ought, morally speaking, to do certain things. And of course he knows that to do them is to do the outward deeds required by morality. Thus, he grants the existence of truths of the form "*P* morally ought to ϕ ," where ϕ ing is one of the outward deeds (or the set of such deeds) morality demands. But surely everyone, including *P*, must grant that truths of that kind, as well as the facts used to support them (e.g., "*P* will cause needless suffering if he fails to ϕ "), are moral reasons for *P* to ϕ . Perhaps they are not reasons *sans phrase* for *P* to ϕ , but they clearly are *moral* reasons for *P* to ϕ . Hence, to accept (5) is to imply, implausibly and unfairly (and worse yet, contrary to the remarks about "person" early in Sect. 2), that the person to whom (5) refers is questioning the unquestionable. To assert, as (5) does, that a person is requesting just any reasons, moral or nonmoral, for him to do the outward deeds morality demands is to imply that he does not already *know* that he has moral reasons to do those deeds. But surely he already knows that; so he cannot be demanding proof of it. What, then, is he doing? Most likely, he is doing what (2) says he is doing: he is expressing doubt, and challenging us to show, that moral reasons deserve his respect, that such reasons should carry weight with him.

¹¹ I take this to be the thrust of the remarks in Bradley (1876, 53, 56–57).

¹² Cp. Bayles (1973, 310–311). This point makes trouble not just for the objection in question here, but for Brock's argument, mentioned in Sect. 1, for the claim that "Why be moral?" defies answers in terms of nonmoral reasons.

Here, I believe, is the argument to which (2) owes its following.¹³ At any rate, it seems the most promising objection to (5). Does it succeed? It does so only if the following is true:

- (6) For any person, P , it is beyond question that any moral truth that enjoins or endorses P 's ϕ ing ensures the existence of a moral reason for P to ϕ . For instance, if P morally ought to ϕ , then either that fact or one of the facts on which it rests is indisputably a moral reason for P to ϕ .

Unless this proposition is true the third objection to (5) fails. It fails because the claim it makes about (5) lacks evidence. That claim is that (5) implies, *implausibly and unfairly*, that the person to whom (5) refers does not already know that he has moral reasons to do the outward deeds morality requires. What lacks evidence (if (6) is not true) is the italicized part of this claim, for there is nothing implausible or unfair about implying that a person does not already know X , if X is something that needs showing, something that is not beyond doubt. So unless (6) is true the third, and final, objection to (5) fails, and thus (5) is not untenable. But as indicated earlier, unless (5) is untenable premise (2) goes by the board, and thus so does the argument for (4).

Our question, then, is whether (6) is true. I claim that (6) is false, assuming that it uses “moral reason for P to ϕ ” in the appropriate way, the way at work in the argument for (4). I explain this in the next two sections, starting with some points about different uses of “moral reason for P to ϕ .”

3

In philosophical literature we find “moral reason for P to ϕ ” used in at least two ways. When philosophers use it in the first way they intend what I hereafter call a *moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ* . A moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ is a reason-for- P -to- ϕ 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 “moral.” In other words, it has features that lead us to classify it not just as a reason-for- P -to- ϕ but as a *moral* reason-for- P -to- ϕ .

But what do I mean by a reason-for- P -to- ϕ ? I mean what most philosophers see as the ordinary referent of “reason for P to ϕ ,” at least when that term has no qualifying prefix, such as “moral” or “legal.” Briefly put, I mean any fact that brings with it a *pro tanto* requirement of practical rationality.¹⁴ That is, I mean a fact, F , with this feature: if P were aware of F and of those aspects of F that are central, or arguably so, to F 's status as a reason, and if, further, P were neither hindered from ϕ ing nor faced with any reasons that conflict or compete with F , then, were P aware of the latter fact (the lack of hindrances, etc.), P would take heed of F , thereby ϕ ing, assuming no defects (lapses, slip-ups) of rationality on P 's part. (Here “rationality” is not a stand-in for some other noun, the referent of which is what this or that *theory* of rationality claims

¹³ I find it implicit, for example, in Nielsen (1989, 286–287). Also, I find that its animating premise, namely thesis (6), below, is widely accepted. See, for example, Snare (1992, 174) and Hospers (1961, 193–194).

¹⁴ Two remarks: First, a more accurate, but prohibitively cumbersome, term would be “*pro tanto* conditional requirement of practical rationality.” This term is more accurate because, as the next sentence in the text suggests, P has the requirement only if certain conditions are met. Second, I should note that some philosophers believe that “reason for P to ϕ ” does not extend solely to facts of the kind mentioned here, facts tied to *pro tanto* requirements of practical rationality. See, for example, Gert (2004) and Gert (2005, 94–98, 99–100).

to be essential to rationality. It is simply a reference to rationality, with no built-in position on what is essential to rationality.)

It is always a fact of this kind that I intend by the term “reason-for- P -to- ϕ .” This is true even if I prefix that term with “moral,” “legal,” or some other such label. Thus, as I use “moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ ” a fact is a moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ only if, like any reason-for- P -to- ϕ , it is inseparable from a *pro tanto* rational requirement for P to ϕ .

As I said, philosophers sometimes use “moral reason for P to ϕ ” for a moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ . However, they sometimes use it for what I call (for want of a better term) a *moral reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing*. The latter is a reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing which, owing to one or more of its features, invites the prefix “moral.”

But what do I mean by a reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing? I mean an item of a familiar but hard to define kind. Any of the following is an item of the kind I mean:

- a reason-for- P -to- ϕ ;
- a *normative truth*, by which I mean a moral, legal, prudential, or other evaluative truth that enjoins or endorses (by means of the word “ought,” “right,” or a similar term) P 's ϕ ing; and
- a piece of evidence (of an ordinary sort) for a normative truth.¹⁵

Any fact of one of these types, even if it comes with no *pro tanto* requirement of rationality (and thus fails to be a reason-for- P -to- ϕ), is a “reason for P to ϕ ” given one common use of that term. In my terminology, it is a reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing. Also, I assume, if only for convenience, that no fact outside of these types is a reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing. If this assumption is false it is only because the use of “reason for P to ϕ ” that I aim to capture is slightly broader than the assumption indicates. But this affects none of my conclusions.

As examples of reasons-for- P 's- ϕ ing consider the fact that P legally ought to ϕ and the fact that P 's failure to ϕ would constitute running a traffic light. The first of these facts is a normative truth; the second is a piece of evidence for that truth. So each is a reason for P to ϕ (specifically, a legal reason for P to ϕ) given the use of “reason for P to ϕ ” that I mean to capture with my term “reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing.” Moreover, it is such a reason whether or not it is a reason-for- P -to- ϕ .

At this point I can breath more clarity into the notion of a *moral* reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing. Any item of one of the following types (and, as a convenient assumption, *only* an item of one of these types) is a moral reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing:

- a moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ ;
- a *moral truth*, by which I mean a moral truth that enjoins or endorses P 's ϕ ing; and
- a piece of evidence (of an ordinary sort) for a moral truth.

Consider, for instance, the fact that P morally ought to ϕ and the fact that P 's failure to ϕ is sure to cause pointless suffering. The first of these facts is a moral truth; the second is a piece of evidence for it. So each is a moral reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing. Also, it is such a reason even if it fails to be a moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ .

To ensure clarity let me add a few more points, the first of which is that if a moral truth or a piece of evidence for it fails to be a moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ it fails to be *any* sort of reason-for- P -to- ϕ . This is because any fact, F , that counts as a moral truth or as

¹⁵ Clearly, this item and the preceding one, as presently formulated, are not congenial to noncognitive accounts of normative sentences. I think that I could revise them to make them so; however, for simplicity I will leave them be.

evidence for such a truth has a feature which, were F to qualify as a reason-for- P -to- ϕ , would lead us to count F as a *moral* reason of that sort.

Suppose, however, that for a particular person, P , no moral truth and no evidence for such a truth is a reason-for- P -to- ϕ . Does this mean that no moral reasons-for- P -to- ϕ exist? Probably so, for it is unlikely that a fact could be a moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ without also being either a moral truth or a piece of evidence for such a truth. But this point is not crucial. The important point for now is simply that any item of one of the above three sorts—that is, any moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ , any moral truth, and any piece of evidence for a moral truth—is a moral reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing.

I do not mean to suggest that no possible relation among the above three items has importance. One such relation has considerable importance. Some philosophers claim that for any person, P , either moral truths or the facts that support them invariably count as moral reasons-for- P -to- ϕ .¹⁶ Other philosophers deny this. They think that depending on P 's desires or interests, a fact can be a moral truth or a piece of evidence for such a truth without creating any *pro tanto* rational requirement for P to ϕ , and thus without being a reason-for- P -to- ϕ .¹⁷

I have been speaking of two uses of “moral reason for P to ϕ ,” the first of which (its extension, that is) is captured by “moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ ”; the second by “moral reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing.” However, a term can have two uses without having two corresponding *extensions*. What if, when people use “moral reason for P to ϕ ” in the second of the ways I have described (the one that embraces any moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ , any moral truth, and any piece of evidence for a moral truth), everything within the scope of the term is necessarily connected, perhaps unbeknownst to those using the term, to a *pro tanto* rational requirement for P to ϕ ? Then the extension of “moral reason for P to ϕ ,” when it has this second use, is no different from its extension when it has the first use. This is to say that the extension of “moral reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing” is no different from that of “moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ .” Thus, nothing I have said thus far ensures that the first of those terms is broader than the second.

However, the first of those terms is *arguably* broader than the second. For it is surely arguable, whether ultimately true or not, that some moral reasons-for- P 's- ϕ ing (e.g., some moral truths) are disconnected from any *pro tanto* rational requirement for P to ϕ . If that point were not arguable, if it were plainly false, we would not find so much debate over it among competent philosophers. We find such debate largely because (to adapt a point from Brink, 1997, 18–21) 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-relativity about rationality are *jointly* plausible. The result is that arguably, even if not certainly, many moral reasons-for- P 's- ϕ ing are severed from *pro tanto* requirements of practical rationality. Thus, arguably, many such reasons fail to be reasons-for- P -to- ϕ .

¹⁶ Perhaps, for greater accuracy, we should replace “count as moral reasons-for- P -to- ϕ ” with “count as, or somehow bring with them, moral reasons-for- P -to- ϕ .” But my arguments stand up, *mutatis mutandis*, whether we make that replacement or not. For examples of the position referred to here, see Darwall (1990), Smith (1994), Korsgaard (1996), Shafer-Landau (2003, chaps. 7–8), and Sterba (2005, chap. 2).

¹⁷ See, e.g., Foot (1978, essays 10 and 11), Harsanyi (1985, 49, 55), Brink (1989, chap. 3), Railton (1992), and Milo (1998, 214, n. 45).

4

At this point it is worth recalling that if (6) is false—that is, if it is false that for any person, P , we cannot intelligently doubt that any moral truth that enjoins or endorses P 's ϕ ing ensures the existence of a moral reason for P to ϕ —then the argument for (4) fails. More fully, if (6) is false then (5) is tenable, in which case we must reject step (2) in the argument for (4).

With this in mind let us ask two questions, the answers to which will reveal that (5) is tenable and hence (2) is false. First, in the argument for (4) what is the referent of “moral reason(s) for P to act”? That is, what species of reason does that term denote? Second, assuming that (6) uses “moral reason for P to ϕ ” for that same species of reason, is (6) true or false?

A partial answer to the first question is that “moral reason for P to act,” as it occurs in the argument for (4), denotes a (moral) species of what premise (1) means by “reason for P to act.” This is clear from examining that argument; more important, if “moral reason for P to act” did not denote such a species the argument for (4) would be invalid. So what does premise (1) mean by the term “reason for P to act”?

It means a reason-for- P -to-act, a reason tied to a *pro tanto* rational requirement for P to act.¹⁸ This is the sort of reason P is demanding; hence, assuming that (1) is true, this is the sort of reason to which (1) refers.

The argument for this claim is simple. Suppose we deny that P is demanding a reason-for- P -to-act. This is to assume that we could meet P 's demand with reasons of another kind, a kind that lacks the connection, essential to reasons-for- P -to-act, to requirements of practical rationality. This, in turn, is to assume that we could meet P 's demand only to leave P wondering whether she has any rational requirement, even a defeasible one, to be moral. But this is to assume a falsehood. We can meet P 's demand, the demand expressed by “Why be moral?,” only by showing that P is required by rationality to live morally. At any rate, this is how philosophers generally interpret that demand, and they have good reason to do so. Not only is it the most natural interpretation, but any other interpretation would be unfair. It would weaken P 's demand and greatly diminish its importance. In particular, it would make it unchallenging to the age-old position that moral demands are rationally binding on everyone. To make it challenging to that position—indeed, to make it challenging even to the view that moral requirements are *prima facie* rationally binding on everyone—we must read it not as a demand for reasons of just any kind, but as a demand for reasons-for- P -to-act.

We now can answer the first of the two questions raised earlier, the one about the referent of “moral reason for P to act.” The answer is that in the argument for (4), “moral reason for P to act” denotes a moral reason-for- P -to-act. It does so because, as indicated a bit ago, it denotes a moral species of what (1) means by the term “reason for P to act.”

Now for the second question. Assuming that (6) uses “moral reason for P to ϕ ” for the same type of reason picked out, in the argument for (4), by “moral reason for P to act,” is (6) true or false? The first thing to note is that (6) indeed uses “moral reason for P to ϕ ” for the type of reason just mentioned. If it did not, it could not serve its purpose. Its purpose is to show that thesis (5) is implausible, and it can show this only

¹⁸ Either that or it denotes a specific *kind* of reason-for- P -to-act. But we can ignore this complication; it does not affect the substance of what follows.

if the reason to which it refers is the same in kind as the reasons to which (5) refers. And of course the reasons to which (5) refers are the same in kind as those to which premise (2) refers. The upshot is that (6) uses “moral reason for P to ϕ ” for the type of reason signified, in the argument for (4), by “moral reason for P to act.”

Consequently, (6) is a stand-in for this:

- (6.1) For any person, P , it is beyond question that any moral truth that enjoins or endorses P 's ϕ ing ensures the existence of a moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ . For instance, if P morally ought to ϕ , then either that fact or one of the facts on which it rests is indisputably a moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ .

We now can reframe our question about (6). That question, reframed, is whether (6.1) is true.

The answer is no. This is because the claim to which (6.1) refers—that for any person, P , any moral truth that enjoins or endorses P 's ϕ ing ensures the existence of a moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ —is not beyond question. Certainly it is questionable whether everyone, including every sociopathic con artist, has a *pro tanto* requirement of rationality to refrain from conning people. Thus, it is questionable whether for any person, P , there is a reason-for- P -to-refrain from conning people. This is so even if everyone *morally* ought to refrain from such deeds.

To make the point another way, (6.1) differs from (6.2), below, though the two are easy to confuse. They are easy to confuse because, owing to the dual use to which “moral reason for P to ϕ ” is put, each would normally appear in the guise of thesis (6).

- (6.2) For any person, P , it is beyond question that any moral truth that enjoins or endorses P 's ϕ ing ensures the existence of a moral reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing. For instance, if P morally ought to ϕ , then either that fact or one of the facts on which it rests is indisputably a moral reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing.

This thesis is true. The claim to which it refers is indeed beyond question because moral truths of the form “ P morally ought to ϕ ,” “It would be morally good of P to ϕ ,” and so forth are paradigm examples of moral reasons-for- P 's- ϕ ing.

However, the fact that (6.2) is true does not make (6.1) true. Even if, as a matter of fact, every moral reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing is a moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ , (6.2) does not entail (6.1). (6.2) entails (6.1) only if every moral reason-for- P 's- ϕ ing is not only a moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ but *indisputably* such a reason. But as noted in the previous section, not every reason of the first kind is indisputably one of the second kind.

In sum, although (6) is true on one common reading of “moral reason for P to ϕ ,” that reading makes (6) useless for opposing (5), given the type of reasons to which (5) refers. The reading suited to the task of opposing (5) is the one that makes (6) equivalent to (6.1). However, (6.1) is false.

5

At the end of Sect. 2 I promised to explain something, namely, that if (6) uses “moral reason for P to ϕ ” in the appropriate way, the way at work in the argument for (4), (6) is false. In the previous two sections I have explained and defended that claim. The use of “moral reason for P to ϕ ” at work in the argument for (4) is one that denotes a moral reason-for- P -to- ϕ . If (6) uses the term the same way, (6) reduces to (6.1), which

is false. And because it is false, the objection in which it figures, the third objection to (5), is unsuccessful.

Thus, (5) withstands the three objections to it, which, to my knowledge, are the only feasible objections of their kind—“their kind” meaning those that are not purely empirical, those that involve no actual search for a person of the sort (5) describes. This being so, nothing is implausible about *imagining* that (5) is true. To ensure precision here, let me state the thesis, formulated in adequate detail, that I have established by countering the three objections to (5):

- (7) We can plausibly imagine a person—call her Pam—who asks “Why be moral?” with such an intent that her question does not express doubt that, if moral reasons-for-Pam-to-act exist, she should accept those reasons. Instead, it expresses doubt, and challenges us to show, that there exist (sufficiently weighty) reasons-for-Pam-to- ψ , just any reasons-for-Pam-to- ψ , where “ ψ ing” signifies regularly telling the truth, keeping promises, and doing the other outward deeds morality requires.

Having established this thesis I have done what I set out to do: I have refuted the argument for (4), the argument for the view that when a person asks “Why be moral?” we can meet her challenge, if we can meet it at all, only in terms of nonmoral reasons. Thesis (7) contradicts step (2) of that argument; hence, the argument for (4) is unsound.

We can go two steps further. First, (4) itself is false. This is because (7) rules out (4) just as surely as it rules out (2). First of all, (7) ensures that we can plausibly imagine someone intending “Why be moral?” in such a way that, were we to show what she evidently doubts—that moral reasons-for-her- ψ ing, the existence of which she tacitly admits, are reasons-for-her-to- ψ —we would succeed in answering her question. (7) ensures this owing to the way Pam, the person to whom (7) refers, intends “Why be moral?”

How might we show that moral reasons-for-Pam’s- ψ ing are reasons-for-Pam-to- ψ ? Perhaps by showing that insofar as Pam is indifferent to moral reasons-for-Pam’s- ψ ing she is guilty of a form of inconsistency, a form so serious, or of such a type, that to exhibit it is to be irrational even if so doing promotes one’s interests and desires. I have little faith that we can do that (and I believe that Kant and his followers have failed to do it), but if anyone did it he would meet Pam’s challenge, and meet it in terms of moral reasons-for-Pam-to-act. For he would establish the existence of reasons with the following features. First, they are (sufficiently weighty) reasons-for-Pam-to-act; hence they are reasons which, if Pam is indifferent to them, ground a charge of irrationality against her. Thus, they are reasons suited to the task of meeting Pam’s challenge.¹⁹ Second, they are *moral* reasons-for-Pam-to-act because, in addition to being reasons-for-Pam-to-act, they are moral reasons-for-Pam’s-acting. (Clearly, any reasons-for- P -to- ϕ that also are moral reasons-for- P ’s- ϕ ing count as *moral* reasons-for- P -to- ϕ .) Consequently, to establish their existence would be to meet Pam’s challenge, and to meet it in terms of moral reasons-for-Pam-to-act.

¹⁹ It won’t do to object: “No, they’re not suited to that task, because Pam might be unmoved by them owing to a lapse of rationality. A truly successful reply to ‘Why be moral?’ is one that invariably moves the relevant agent even if she is not being rational.” If this objection were sound no reply to “Why be moral?” could succeed, not even one in terms of the most weighty instrumental reasons. Such reasons do not *invariably* move a person to act. They move the person insofar as she is being rational. See Korsgaard (1986) and Tilley (1997).

The upshot is that (7) ensures this: We can plausibly imagine a person asking “Why be moral?” with such an intent that her question does not *necessarily* rule out an answer in terms of moral reasons-for-her-to-act.

This proposition contradicts (4). It does so because, first, (4) uses “reason for *P* to act” to mean a reason-for-*P*-to-act; and second, the gist of (4) is not merely that no *actual* person means “Why be moral?” in such a way that, were we to reply to him with something besides nonmoral reasons-for-him-to-act, our reply would either fail only contingently or not fail at all. The gist of (4) is that we cannot plausibly imagine, much less find, a person who means that question in such a way. This being so, (4) runs afoul of the fact, ensured by (7), that we can plausibly imagine someone asking “Why be moral?” with such an intent that his question does not necessarily lack an answer in terms of moral reasons-for-him-to-act.

I said that we can take two further steps; let us now take the second. Not only does (7) rule out (2) and (4); it rules out the view they subserve. I mean the view that “Why be moral?” is a pseudo-question. For “Why be moral?” to be a pseudo-question it is not enough that, for one or two readings of it, it necessarily has no answer. It is a pseudo-question only if, for each of its conventional uses—or, if not for each of them, then at least for its “important” ones, the ones that would make the question philosophically interesting—it necessarily has no answer. But given (7), and given that Pam’s use of “Why be moral?” is neither unusual nor unimportant,²⁰ “Why be moral?” has at least one conventional, important use for which it does not necessarily lack an answer. As said a bit ago, if someone could show that reasons-for-Pam-to- ψ exist, perhaps by showing that moral reasons-for-Pam’s- ψ ing are reasons-for-Pam-to- ψ , he would succeed in answering Pam’s question. Of course, his success is not guaranteed. But this is beside the point; the point is that nothing about Pam’s question *necessarily* dooms his efforts.

Before concluding let me add a related point, namely, that because (7) is true “Why be moral?” not only fails to preclude answers in terms of moral reasons but fails to preclude answers in terms of nonmoral reasons. To say that “Why be moral?” precludes answers of the latter kind is to say this: it is implausible to imagine someone intending “Why be moral?” in such a way that, were we to reply to him in terms of nonmoral reasons, our reply, even if it failed, would not fail *necessarily*. This clashes with (7). Given how Pam uses “be moral”—namely, to denote the regular performance, from whatever motives, of the *outward* deeds morality demands—replies to Pam in terms of nonmoral reasons-for-Pam-to-act are not *necessarily* bound to fail.

6

To sum up: I have shown three things, mainly by showing that (5) is tenable, that it withstands the feasible objections to it. First, (2) is false, and hence the argument for (4) fails. Second, (4) itself is false. Third, “Why be moral?” is no pseudo-question. I have shown these things by showing that, contrary to (2), nothing is implausible about imagining someone asking “Why be moral?” as a means of demanding proof that reasons-for-her-to- ψ exist, be they moral or nonmoral in kind. (Recall that “ ψ ” means “regularly do the outward deeds required by morality.”) This is to imagine a person

²⁰ Recall the first paragraph in Sect. 2. Also recall the remarks, later in Sect. 2, about the different uses of “be moral.”

who intends “Why be moral?” in such a way that, contrary to the view that “Why be moral?” is a pseudo-question, her question does not *necessarily* lack an answer. Also, contrary to (4), her question does not necessarily lack an answer in terms of *moral* reasons-for-her-to- ψ .

These results are important. For one thing, they fly in the face of many received views about the amoralist, that imaginary person who has no regard for morality, who ignores morality’s demands, and who challenges us to prove that he has reason to change his ways. No longer should we think that his question “Why be moral?” must solicit specifically *nonmoral* reasons. (Consequently, no longer should we accept the view, common in ethics texts, that the amoralist’s challenge is the same as the *egoist’s* challenge.) Likewise, no longer should we see him as a sophomoric figure who asks a logically unanswerable question. A more plausible view is that he intends his question the way Pam, the person referred to in thesis (7), intends hers. By posing it he is challenging us to show that reasons-for-him-to- ψ exist, be they moral or nonmoral in nature. Not only is his question no pseudo-question, it is not silly in any other way, as perhaps it would be if it concerned reasons of another sort (e.g., reasons-for-his- ψ ing). Whether philosophers can meet the amoralist’s challenge is an issue I leave open. The point I wish to close with is that they cannot take the easy way with it; they cannot dismiss it as spurious.²¹

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