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Reasons to be Moral: A Case for the Rationality of Moral Action

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“Moral predigen ist ebenso leicht als Moral begründen schwer.” -Friedrich Nietzsche¹

“Then only, when the voice of duty takes the place of physical impulses and right of appetite, does man, who so far had considered only himself, find that he is forced to act on different principles, and to consult his reason before listening to his inclinations.” -Jean-Jacques Rousseau²

I. The Purpose of Morality

Morality is a system of action-guiding principles, rules, and/or reasoning apparatuses. These rules are not arbitrary, but follow from reason and they are consistently applied to like situations, so that relevantly similar cases receive the same moral evaluation and demand relevantly similar action. Morality, then, is a kind of social technology, created in order to (at a minimum) protect moral patients from moral agents and to protect moral agents from each other. J.L. Mackie, quoting G.J. Warnock, explains that “. . . certain general and persistent features of the human predicament [are] 'inherently such that things are liable to go very badly'”.³ These features include scarce resources and limited information, rationality, and intelligence. But what contribute most to making things go badly are the limited sympathies of persons towards each other and other morally significant beings. Mackie rightly claims that “the function of morality is primarily to counteract this limitation of [persons'] sympathies.”⁴

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Wie Man Wird, Was Man Ist* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Taschenbuch, 1988), 173.

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "The Social Contract," *Rousseau: The Social Contract*, N.p., 18 Oct. 1998, 13 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.constitution.org/jjr/socon>

³ J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 107-108.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

This should not be misinterpreted to mean that moral agents are entitled to do whatever is necessary to eliminate external threats to their interests, for morality is not a warrant for Machiavellian scheming or vigilante justice. Prudence may demand these things but, to be sure, morality is something *other* than prudence; (though in some cases the moral thing to do may be the same as the prudent thing to do) it is a system of rational principles designed to constrain what persons may do to each other and to other beings with inherent moral worth. An obvious justification for this is that an anarchic free-for-all is not in the interest of even a pure egoist.⁵

I acknowledge that the essence of morality is a contentious issue. But even if one disagrees with the view of morality's purpose expressed above, the idea that moral demands often run counter to self-interest should be uncontroversial. Indeed, morality *must* be something other than self-interest, for if it were not, it would be entirely superfluous, and it is dubious that the concept of it would have entered our consciousness at all. So, the question “Why be moral?” is meaningful no matter what one's view of the essence of morality is.

II. Why be Moral?

Why should an individual act on moral demands? The question is especially pressing for fortunate egoists, who are powerful enough to see morality as a constraint that they could easily do without. Why should they heed moral demands when their self-interest demands otherwise? The issue is raised by Thrasymachus in Book I of *Republic*, in which he defines justice as that “. . . what is advantageous to the stronger, while injustice is to one's own profit and advantage.”⁶ He believes that there are overwhelming prudential reasons to act unjustly (read:

⁵ This justification will be discussed more in section VIII.

⁶ John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1997), 988.

immorally), while acting justly (morally) is detrimental to those doing so. Given the alleged prudential reasons in favor of acting immorally, “Why be moral?” is an inevitable question.

Though Socrates replies with a series of superficially convincing arguments that cause Thrasymachus to abandon his position, Plato's brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, remain unpersuaded. They restate the Thrasymachean argument without its semantic defects, arguing that just men live worse lives than unjust ones, that people act justly only because they are too weak to get away with injustice, and that therefore, nobody is just willingly.⁷ Adeimantus concludes his argument with the claim that “no one, whether in poetry or in private conversations, has adequately argued that injustice is the worst thing a soul can have in it and that justice is the greatest good.”⁸ While my goal here is not to do what Adeimantus claims has never been done, I will consider several arguments in favor of the position that being moral is *rational*.

But first, the question needs to be clarified. As it stands, “Why be moral?” is too broad an inquiry to allow for a single, satisfactory answer. Thrasymachus' argument seems to assume that the question is something like “How do I benefit from being moral?”, implying that morality is valuable only insofar as it brings personal benefit. But that is just one interpretation of the question. In order for it to be meaningful and answerable, it must be reformulated so that it is more precise. First, one must distinguish between being a moral person and acting morally. The question, “Why should one be a moral person?” asks why one should cultivate a general tendency to act morally, even if there are isolated cases in which one acts contrary to moral rules for prudential reasons. On the other hand, the question, “Why should one perform moral acts?”

⁷ Ibid., 1001-5.

⁸ Ibid., 1006.

asks why, when faced with a choice between a moral action and a non-moral or immoral one, one should choose to perform the moral action.⁹

The latter question is of greater interest, for one cannot be a moral person without first performing at least some moral acts. Moreover, if it cannot be demonstrated that one should consistently perform moral acts, then it becomes far more difficult to argue that one should at least tend to do the moral thing. Suppose, for example, that my prudential reasons are always contrary to my moral ones. If that were the case, why should I ever act morally? Perhaps because non-moral reasons always outweigh moral ones. In that case, though, I would be required to act morally in every individual case, thereby having more than a general tendency to do what is moral. Put differently, an argument for the view that one ought to do what is moral *most of the time* faces the awkward task of explaining on what occasions moral demands may be justifiably ignored. Since I prefer to avoid that, I will focus on the more precise question, “Why should one do moral acts?”

While this reformulation of the question makes it more answerable, it is still not precise enough, for there are at least two ways to interpret it. On one interpretation, the question asks “Why perform acts that are morally good?” On another, it asks “Why perform acts that are morally required?”¹⁰ One may not have sufficient reason to do morally good things like volunteering one's valuable time, but it does not follow from this that one does not have sufficient reason to do what is morally required, or obligatory, like telling the truth. Of course, whether or not this distinction carries weight depends on the ethical theory one embraces. Some

⁹ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Skepticism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2011 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Sept. 25, 2011. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/skepticism-moral/>>

¹⁰ Ibid.

consequentialists might reject it, claiming that whichever action maximizes the good is morally required, and all other actions are to some degree immoral.¹¹ Again, the latter question is the more interesting for, if it cannot be shown that there is always sufficient reason to do what is morally obligatory, then there is little hope of showing that there is always sufficient reason to do what is morally good. So, the question of interest becomes, “Why do what is morally required?”

Now that we have a more precise formulation of the question, an investigation into its possible answers becomes possible. My purpose in what follows is to show that moral reasons are overriding, so that if one has a moral reason to perform some act, then one is required to do so *no matter what*.¹² In other words, I will try to show that one always has most reason to do what morality demands. I will consider and reject various ways in which this conclusion can be argued for prior to articulating my own view, which is based on equal consideration of interests.

III. Egoism

The question above might be asked by anyone and for any number of reasons. But to give this project a clear focus, I will assume that the questioner is an egoist. I am not, however, assuming that egoism is the correct theory of action for, if it were, it would be impossible to argue that self-interest should ever be overridden by moral demands. Indeed, in section IX I will argue that the weight assigned to self-interest by egoists is unjustified. My assumption is that the questioner believes that rational actions are those that benefit the actor. In other words, according to what I refer to as rational egoism, an action is rational just in case it is in one's self-interest.

¹¹ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Consequentialism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Sept. 28, 2011 <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/consequentialism/>>.

¹² Note that my aim is distinct from the more limited aim of showing that moral reasons are merely defeasible reasons for action, that is, reasons which may be outweighed by stronger reasons. My aim is to show that moral reasons are overriding, i.e., that one always has most reason to do what is morally required.

That morality often requires that one act contrary to one's self-interest, or in a way that hinders the maximization of self-interest, isn't news. Since morality, as characterized in section I, is intended to provide constraints on what may be done to moral patients, there will inevitably be situations in which self-interest clashes with these constraints. There may, for example, be a constraint against stealing from others that clashes with my want of money or need for food. In light of situations like this, the egoist asks an even narrower question than the one formulated in the previous section, namely, "Why should I do what is morally required, rather than what is in my self-interest?"

IV. Unsatisfactory Answers

There are two kinds of answers to this question that I will not discuss at length, but of which I will make mention to signal my awareness of their existence. The first kinds are divine command theories, which appeal to a god to explain why one ought to be moral. These require the acceptance of too many suppositions and premises to be promising. Specifically, one might have to accept any or all of the following in order for divine command theory to gain persuasive power: that there is a supernatural realm, that an intelligent and personal god exists, that He cares about human choice and action, that the moral rules of that being can be known by humans, and that there is an afterlife in which rewards and punishments are administered based on compliance with those rules. These beliefs are not universally accepted and, if some rational egoist does not share them, then arguments containing those beliefs as premises will carry no weight for her. And since, as I believe, the problem of evil constitutes an insurmountable obstacle for theism, the project of arguing for these requisite beliefs is hopeless. And even if divine command theory were plausible, awkward, Euthyphro-style questions would remain. Are God's commands moral

because God commands them? Then morality is arbitrary; the rules would have been different had God commanded something else. Does God command certain things because they are moral? Then morality exists apart from God, and He is no longer necessary.

The second sort of answer I will mention only briefly is that which relies entirely on transcendental arguments. Such an argument might look something like this:

1. It is rational to do what is morally required.
2. Rationality is necessary for communication and thought.
3. The egoist communicates and thinks.
4. ∴ The egoist is rational (Prem. 2 and 3).
5. ∴ The egoist should do what is morally required (Prem. 1 and 4).

This is a terrible argument, and I do not doubt that proponents of transcendental answers could do better.¹³ The first premise is particularly suspect, for the question “Why do what is morally required?” asks what this premise simply asserts. If one can show that it is rational to do what is morally required, then the question we are concerned with will have been answered as well as could be hoped for. But even a stronger version of the argument above will suffer from the same defect if it does not offer a supplementary argument for the first premise. And even if such an argument could be made, a fly would remain in the ointment, for the egoist might still be rational *insofar* as she communicates with others, and irrational *insofar* as she does not do what is morally required. In that case she would be irrational on the whole, which would mean that premise (4) of the argument above is false.

¹³ For a proponent who has done better, see Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990).

In the final chapter of *Practical Ethics*, Peter Singer offers an argument of the same genus, though he does not accept it.¹⁴ It claims that “some requirement of universalizability or impartiality is essential to ethics” and that “reason is universally or objectively valid. . . . It cannot be valid for me and invalid for you.” These premises are plausible, but the argument takes a turn for the worse when it claims that egoism is not rational because it cannot be universalized. The assumption seems to be that all egoistic judgments contain references to particular people and are not universalizable for that reason. This is problematic because it ignores the possibility of agent-relative, or deontic, egoism. In Singer's words, the argument fails because it considers

“. . . a non-universalizable imperative, like the purely egoistic: 'Let everyone do what is in my interests.' This differs from the imperative of universalizable egoism – 'Let everyone do what is in *her or his own* interests' – because it contains an ineliminable reference to a particular person. It therefore cannot be an ethical imperative.”¹⁵

As Singer goes on to point out, agent-relative egoism, in which each does what is in his or her own interests, could be adopted by all. While I may not accept your judgments because they are not in my interests, I may still recognize that they are rational from your point of view, because they serve *your* interests. So, the claim that acting morally is rational because moral judgments are universalizable while egoistic judgments are not is false.

V. An Unanswerable Question?

John Hospers argues that “Why be moral?” is asked in a context which makes it impossible to provide (overriding) reasons to be moral.¹⁶ He argues against the vague, original version of the question, replaced above with the more precise formulation, “Why do what is

¹⁴ Peter Singer, “Why Act Morally?”, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 318-319.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Perhaps the question is a category error, like asking “What is seven divided by blue?” If this turns out to be true then it can be legitimately dismissed, for it is either inherently nonsensical or beyond our power to answer it. I will not discuss such arguments here, because it seems obvious to me that the question at least makes sense.

morally required?” The argument, however, is not weakened by a substitution of the more exact formulation. But in order to understand it, one needs to be familiar with the difference between moral and non-moral reasons. Moral reasons appeal to morality, lending support to a course of action on the basis that “it’s the right thing to do”. Non-moral reasons are usually prudential, that is, appealing to personal well-being or self-interest in general. To understand the difference, consider the practice of promise keeping. Someone might ask why she ought to keep a promise to someone else. If we reply by giving her a moral reason we might say, “Because you are obligated to keep your promises and it would be wrong to break them.” We might also appeal to natural facts that are factors causing moral facts to obtain such as, “Breaking your promise will cause him to lose his job.” This is an indirect appeal to morality. On the other hand, we could give non-moral reasons: “If you keep your promise, people will trust you in the future”, or “You will be financially rewarded for upholding your end of the deal.”

The argument Hospers puts forth is that the question, “Why should one do what is morally required?” arises only when a person’s self-interest is contrary to moral demands. Thus, the person will not accept moral reasons to act morally, because she already believes these to be outweighed by her non-moral reasons. Nor is it possible to give the egoist non-moral, prudential reasons for acting morally, since “. . .the situation is *ex hypothesi* one in which the act required of [the egoist] is contrary to [her] self-interest.”¹⁷ The egoist, as Hospers puts it, “. . .wants, and she will accept no other answer, . . .a self-interested reason.”¹⁸ In other words, the egoist who asks the question is receptive only to self-interested reasons, and believes that her self-interest is

¹⁷ John Hospers, *Human Conduct: An Introduction to the Problems of Ethics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 194.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

best served by not acting morally. Hence, the only reasons she will accept are those that she already has.

Hospers' argument is unsound, for it makes all too many assumptions about the question and the questioner. First, as John J. Tilley points out, Hospers “. . .falsely [assumes] that if the weight of a person's nonmoral reasons were to point in the same direction as her moral reasons, she would be confident of the fact.”¹⁹ But there is no reason to suppose that people are always confident of what their interests really are, so it is possible that the question “Why should one do what is morally required?” can arise even when self-interest and morality are not opposed. Conversely, it is possible that the egoist, though she believes that her self-interest is contrary to morality in a given situation, is mistaken about this. In such a case, it would be possible to provide non-moral, self-interested reasons for her to do what is morally required of her.

Hospers also makes an implicit assumption that the egoist knows how non-moral reasons are weighed against moral ones; he assumes that the egoist is convinced that her non-moral reasons outweigh her moral ones. But perhaps this is precisely what the egoist wants to know. It could be that she asks “Why do what is morally required?” because she is unsure which reasons, moral or self-interested, she should accept as overriding. And if the nature of moral requirements is such that they trump any non-moral requirements, then the question is answered as soon that is shown. Of course, if the egoist questions whether moral requirements carry weight at all, any appeal to moral reasons or requirements is doomed to failure until an argument is given in favor of the position that the ontology of moral reasons is such as to be superior to non-moral ones. Nevertheless, a question about the relative weights of moral and non-moral reasons or

¹⁹ John J. Tilley, “Is 'Why Be Moral?' A Pseudo-Question?: Hospers and Thornton on the Amoralist's Challenge”, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 87.4, (2006), 556-556.

requirements is not unanswerable.

Thirdly, Hospers appears to equivocate answering the question (1) “Why do what is morally required?,” period, and (2) answering that same question *to the satisfaction of the egoist who is asking it*. In fact, there is a critical difference. If the egoist is given a good reason to do what is morally required, then the question has been answered, even if the egoist rejects the reasons given. In that case, the fault would lie neither with the question itself nor with the reasons given in answer to it, but with the egoist. The egoist's failure to recognize good reasons when she hears them is not the same as a failure to provide good reasons. Whether or not the egoist is satisfied with the answer given says nothing about whether the question has been answered.²⁰

Finally, Kai Nielsen argues that instead of showing “Why do what is morally required?” to be unanswerable, Hospers shows us how profound it really is. Nielsen realizes that there are two kinds of answers to the question, and both are sensible or question-begging, depending on whether one takes a moral view or a self-interested one. He writes that, “. . .from the moral point of view 'Because it's right' must be sufficient answer. . .” but that “. . .cannot possibly be a sufficient answer from the point of view of self-interest or from the point of view of an individual challenging the sufficiency of the whole moral view, as a personal guide to his actions.”²¹ And from the moral point of view, 'Because it's in your interest' cannot be a sufficient reason *not* to do what is moral. So, Nielsen concludes that “it seems that we have two strands of discourse here with distinct criteria and distinct canons of justification.”²² In other words, self-

²⁰ I owe this insight to Chris Heathwood.

²¹ Kai Nielsen, *Why Be Moral?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 181.

²² *Ibid.*

interested reasons will be sufficient for egoists, and moral reasons will be sufficient for those taking the moral point of view, but there is no reason to adopt either view rather than the other. Far from dismissing the question, Hospers shows us its full depth.

VI. Appeals to Moral Reasons

In contrast to Hospers, some philosophers argue that moral reasons are always overriding, so that there is only one rational strand of discourse, which is the moral point of view.²³ In that vein, F.H. Bradley holds that the question, “Why do what is morally required?” is born of false assumptions about the nature of morality itself. It assumes that morality is only instrumentally valuable. That is, the question assumes that moral demands are a means to some greater end.²⁴ This assumption, according to Bradley, is “. . .in direct antagonism to the voice of moral consciousness.” He goes so far as to claim that the question is immoral, writing that the idea that “. . .consciousness, when unwarped by selfishness and not blinded by sophistry, is convinced to ask for the Why? is simple immorality; to do good for its own sake is virtue, to do it for some ulterior end or object, not itself good, is never virtue; and never to act but for the sake of an end, other than doing well and right, is the mark of vice.”²⁵ So, to ask why one ought to do what is morally required is to assume that there must be something “in it for me”, but the point of morality is not to promote an agent's self-interest. Bradley suggests that following moral rules because it is in one's interest is not truly moral; one should do what is morally required simply because it is morally required.

Similarly, Brian Medlin believes that rational egoism is a reprehensible but unassailable

²³ I will argue for this when I present my own view, the PVU.

²⁴ Frances Herbert Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (New York: Stanford University Press, 1904), 53-54

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

position because the only reasons for acting morally are themselves moral, so the egoist will not accept them. Rejecting attempts to give the egoist self-interested reasons to act morally, Medlin writes that one should not persuade such a person to heed moral demands.²⁶ Like Bradley, he hints that the very project of persuading the egoist to be moral is questionable, writing, “I’m a philosopher, not a rat catcher, and I don’t see it as my job to dig vermin out of such burrows as individual egoism.”²⁷

Inflammatory rhetoric aside, both men imply that if the question is answerable at all, then it should be answered by an appeal to moral reasons: one should do what is morally required because that is the right thing to do. This begs the question, because the weight of moral reasons is precisely what is at issue. The only alternative, according to this view, is to dismiss the question altogether as undeserving of an answer. But this dilemma does not necessarily amount to a victory for egoists, for it is the in the nature of intrinsic goods not to be desirable for anything other than their own sake. If morality is such a good, then asking about its instrumental value will unavoidably elicit a response appealing to morality itself or no response at all.

Whether morality is an intrinsic good is a difficult question and I confess that I am not sure what its answer is. Morality defined as in section I, that is, as a social technology, has instrumental value only: It is valuable insofar as it protects moral patients from moral agents and moral agents from each other.

But perhaps the statement that morality is intrinsically good is just shorthand for the statement that the protection of moral patients from moral agents and moral agents from each other is intrinsically good, or that their safety and well-being is intrinsically good. Moreover,

²⁶ Brian Medlin, “Ultimate Principles and Ethical Egoism,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 35.2, (1957), 113.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

according to the definition of morality in section I, any system or pattern of principles that pursues this goal is a system of morality. This means that one cannot claim that this goal is not best achieved by a moral system. In other words, the action-guiding system or pattern of behavior that best protects moral patients from moral agents and moral agents from each other is *necessarily* a system of morality.

There are common intuitions that provide reasons for supposing that morality is intrinsically good. Consider the ticking bomb scenarios that are so characteristic of the debate surrounding torture. Let us give the advocates of torture (though they would likely reject that term in favor of something more euphemistic) what they want: suppose that a terrorist with knowledge that could save a great number of lives is apprehended by law enforcement, but that he will not reveal that knowledge unless he is tortured. Suppose also that time is highly limited. If the police fail to extract the relevant knowledge from the terrorist, many people will die. And now suppose that the interrogators, aware of these facts, decide not to torture on the grounds that doing so is immoral. So, time runs out and many people are killed. Nobody will deny that the consequences of the decision to act morally were bad in this case but it seems to me that, though the scenario just described is a dark one with a bad ending, the decision made by the interrogators is a good-making property of an otherwise bad series of events. That is, the decision not to torture, i.e. to act morally, was good *even though* it led to bad consequences. But perhaps this intuition is the product of a misfiring of my moral sense since the decision not to torture tends to result in the protection of the victim, who is at least a moral patient if not also a moral agent.

There is much more to be said about this question, and only when we are more certain

which view is correct will we be able to evaluate the view that one ought to act morally for its own sake. If my conception of morality is accurate, then determining whether or not acting morally is intrinsically good ultimately turns on whether the safety of moral patients from moral agents and of moral agents from each other is intrinsically good, and that is beyond the scope of the present work. I acknowledge that there is hope of answering the egoist's question by showing morality to be intrinsically good, but I shelve that project for another day and will now consider other answers.

VII. Eudaimonistic Answers

Eudaimonistic answers appeal to individual well-being, or flourishing, to answer the question of why one should do what is morally required. Arguments of this sort are characteristic of virtue theorists, dating back at least as far as Plato. Virtue theorists make either the strong claim that a virtuous life is the best life or the weaker claim that happiness is not possible without virtue. Some philosophers have used the word “justice” instead of “virtue”, or they have regarded justice as being one of several cardinal virtues that individuals should cultivate. To suit the present context, let us assume that acting in accordance with virtue, or acting justly, is the same as acting morally. Where it is clearly not the same thing, we can still draw inspiration from the following positions and adapt them so that they stand a chance at answering the question, “Why do what is morally required?”

In Book I of *Republic*, Socrates' answer to Thrasymachus' challenge, though inelegant and unpersuasive, is that justice is always advantageous vis-a-vis injustice because, “. . . a just man will live well, and unjust one badly. . .” so that “. . . anyone who lives well is blessed and

happy, and anyone who doesn't is the opposite.”²⁸ Plato's position is expanded in Book IV, at which point considerations about the organizational structure of the just city and the nature of the soul form a philosophical foundation for it. The soul, according to Plato, is tripartite, consisting of reason, pride, and appetite. Justice supervenes on the whole of these parts when all three are in perfect harmony;²⁹ a just man “. . .does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other.”³⁰ Justice is “. . .a kind of health, fine condition, and well-being of the soul. . .”³¹ For Plato, it amounts to a state of psychological well-being, or inner peace, while its opposite is a state of inner turmoil, discord, and unhappiness. Thus does he bolster the radical claim that justice is not only necessary, but sufficient for happiness. Indeed, the end of Book IV has Glaucon hinting, by way of the rhetorical questions so characteristic of Plato's dialogues, that life without justice is not worth living, no matter how much material wealth and power one enjoys. ³²

Plato's view was not unpopular in ancient philosophy. The Greek and Roman stoics held similar views, exhibited, for example, in Cicero's *Stoic Paradoxes*. However, modern audiences are unlikely to accept the Platonic psychology that underlies the argument for justice. Even if Plato's argument, or the tripartite conception of the soul on which it is built, could be modified to accommodate modern views, difficulties remain. To make the argument more suitable for our modern context, one need only replace the tripartite theory of the soul with something vaguer, like a healthy mind. So, let us suppose that a person is psychologically healthy if and only if she

²⁸ Cooper, *op. cit.*, 998.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1,067-1,072.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1,075.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1,076.

³² *Ibid.*

acts morally. Even then, it remains unclear whether one needs to do what is morally required in every situation, or if a general tendency to adhere to moral demands is sufficient for psychological health. How many immoral acts can I get away with before I am deprived of the nirvana of virtue? If a general tendency to act morally is enough, then it is probably true, on Plato's view, that a moral life is preferable to a non-moral one, since health is always more desirable than illness.

But there is no reason to think that a general tendency to do what is morally required is enough for Plato. In fact, Plato's position is closer to the claim that a psychologically healthy person is one with a potent moral conscience, who would suffer if she acted contrary to moral demands. This implies that any immoral act will create some degree of psychological discomfort; so much so, perhaps, that a psychologically healthy person will always act morally. But if Plato defines a psychologically healthy person as one with a moral conscience so powerful that any immoral act, no matter its benefits, is unthinkable, then he is selling himself the argument. There are, after all, many people who are psychologically healthy in the normal sense of the term, who are able to commit petty moral infractions without being guilt ridden afterwards. So, the view that morality and psychological health are inseparable is doubtful and, even if it is true, it does not offer a convincing reason to avoid isolated immoral acts.

Just as doubtful is the claim that a just soul is sufficient for happiness. No sane person would dispute that health is preferable to sickness, and that worldly goods are much more difficult to enjoy if one is sick. But is psychological health all that is needed for happiness? That is a whopping implausibility. Even Aristotle, the father of virtue ethics, argues against it. In Chapter VIII of *Nicomachean Ethics*, he writes that certain worldly goods are also necessary

for happiness:

“ . . .if deprived of some things, men sully their happiness, as for instance, of noble birth, good children, or beauty: for the man of deformed appearance, and of ignoble birth, and the solitary and childless man, is not at all likely to be happy: and still less perhaps is he likely to be so whose children or friends are utterly wicked, or have been good, and are dead . . . therefore . . . there seems to be a need of the addition of . . . external prosperity. . .”³³

Of course, in claiming that happiness is something reserved for good-looking aristocrats, Aristotle goes a few steps too far. A complete dearth of external goods is highly unlikely to make for a happy life, but I do not believe that one requires all that Aristotle claims is necessary in order to be content and to live well. Still, the doctrine of Plato and the stoics, that a life of justice or virtue (pick your word) is all that is needed for happiness is too much to put up with. But what of the more moderate position to which Aristotle subscribed, namely, that virtue is necessary for happiness?

In “Moral Beliefs”, Philippa Foot argues that people need certain virtues just as they need eyes and ears.³⁴ Sense organs and hands are indispensable for a good life. Circumstances in which a good life is possible without hands and eyes, for instance, occur with vanishing rarity and can certainly not be foreseen or counted on. So, Foot argues that the notion that a person does not need his hands, eyes, or ears, can be safely dismissed. She goes on to draw the parallel with virtues, writing:

“Consider, for instance, the cardinal virtues, prudence, temperance, courage and justice. Obviously any man needs prudence, but does he not also need to resist the temptation of pleasure when there is harm involved? And how could it be argued that he would never need to face what was fearful for the sake of some good?”³⁵

In short, a person who has cultivated the virtues of prudence, temperance, and courage is far

³³ Robert William Browne, *The Nichomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1889), 21.

³⁴ Philippa Foot, “Moral Beliefs,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1958): 83-104. *JSTOR*, 12 Oct. 2011.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

better equipped to live a good life than one who has not. But though moral demands sometimes require courage or prudence, it is justice that is most relevant to moral action. And justice is fundamentally different from other virtues, a fact that Foot acknowledges. Its distinguishing feature is that it does not benefit the person who has it so much as it benefits others, often at the just man's expense. A rational egoist, then, would not hesitate to accept Foot's advice and cultivate attitudes of prudence, temperance, and courage, while passing on justice.

Foot concedes that if it cannot be shown that justice is necessary for a good life in the same way that eyes and hands are, then it “. . .can no longer be recommended as a virtue.”³⁶ She attempts to show its necessity for a good life by arguing that an unjust man faces a dilemma. Determined to act unjustly whenever it is to his advantage, he can either admit that he does not recognize the moral status of others, or he can pretend that he does. If he chooses the former, then “. . .even those who combine with him will know that on a chance of fortune, or a shift of affection, he may turn to plunder them, and he must be as wary of their treachery as they are of his.”³⁷ More likely, though, such a person would feign justice, and act unjustly only when certain that he will benefit and not be detected. Foot argues that in this case, even if it were possible to deceive others so effectively and consistently, “. . .the price in vigilance would be colossal.” The implication, then, is that a holistic analysis of a just life versus and unjust one shows the former to be preferable.

However, the holistic advantage of a just life does not show why one should refrain from the occasional act of immorality from which one might derive great personal benefit. Foot may have shown why one should prefer a just life, but not why one should prefer a just act. It is the

³⁶ Ibid., 99.

³⁷ Ibid., 103.

same problem that plagues Plato's more radical view. Foot gives her own example of a just person who would rather face death than act unjustly; he would rather die than let an innocent be convicted of a crime of which he has been accused.³⁸ The obvious implication is that this person would benefit by not being executed, and that he could prevent his execution by framing someone innocent. So, the moral course of action flies in the face of the man's self-interest. Why should he do what is morally required?

Foot answers that this man had good reasons to act justly, just as one has good reasons to be courageous and to preserve one's eyes, ears, and hands. The fact that justice brings death on the man could not be foreseen, but he “. . . could not have it both ways and while possessing the virtue of justice hold himself ready to be unjust should great advantage accrue. The man who has the virtue of justice is not ready to do certain things. . .”³⁹ Thus, Foot implies that whether or not to be just is a decision that cannot be made atomistically. It must be holistic, just as the benefits of justice are holistic. If one sincerely resolves to be a just person, certain things are off limits, come what may. But this response reduces the issue to semantics. Experience shows that there are a good number of people who may be fairly described as just, and who would not hesitate to act contrary to morality when the damage is judged to be small enough to go unnoticed and the personal gain is appreciable. Foot's example is extreme, for framing someone for a capital offense is not something that a decent person would easily choose to do, even if his own life were at stake. A person who commits such an act is rightly called unjust, but what of an otherwise decent person who eats more than his share at a picnic, or tells a fib to prevent his own embarrassment in some trivial matter? Such acts are easy to get away with and do not require

³⁸ Ibid., 104.

³⁹ Ibid.

constant, exhausting vigilance that outweighs their trivial benefits. And even if one's picnic buddies catch one snagging the last cookie, the consequences are likely to be very small, especially in the long term. Yet it is a stretch to call such people unjust, and, if they are unjust, the question of why they should bother with justice remains open.

It seems that Foot's argument ultimately rests on empirical claims. Specifically, she makes an implicit psychological claim that character traits, once developed, are fixed and rigid, so that a just person *cannot* frame an innocent for personal benefit, for example. If one is inclined to accept this claim, then it makes sense that choosing whether or not to be a just person is a onetime, irreversible existential decision with a huge effect on what choices will be available to one in the future. Given this understanding, Foot's view that choosing to be virtuous is always the better choice, given how indispensable the virtues are for most lives, is plausible. But my goal is to show that if a person has a moral reason to perform some action, then that person is required to do so *no matter what*. If the obligation to do what is morally required rests on contingencies like differences of circumstance or psychology, then the most that will have been shown is that moral reasons are defeasible reasons for doing something, rather than overriding reasons. So, while Foot's view is compatible with the present project, it does not suffice to achieve its goals.

Peter Singer has offered a more moderate answer that keeps with the spirit of Plato and Foot. He does not claim that justice and other cardinal virtues are necessary, let alone sufficient, for a good life, or that a life of virtue is the best life possible. Rather, Singer takes the weaker position that a moral life is more fulfilling than a self-interested one. He cites the “paradox of hedonism”, writing that “if our life has no meaning other than our own happiness, we are likely

to find that when we have obtained what we think we need to be happy, happiness itself still eludes us.”⁴⁰ Aiming for personal happiness is a sure way not to get it. In light of this, Singer doubts that a rational egoist can attain lasting happiness by fulfilling her desires. Dismissing the selfish life as ultimately unfulfilling and even self-destructive, Singer suggests that we find a purpose for our lives that “. . . will allow us to see our lives as possessing significance beyond the narrow confines of our own conscious states. . . .”⁴¹ Rationality, in its broadest sense, can compel us to look beyond our immediate desires and adopt the “ethical point of view”, which requires that we transcend self-interest and see the world from the standpoint of an impartial observer. Unlike Plato and Foot, Singer does not insist that adoption of the ethical point of view is sufficient, or even necessary for a good life. He merely suggests that, if we are interested in happiness and fulfillment, it is prudent to see beyond self-interest and take the ethical point of view.

Weaker positions often have an advantage over stronger ones by virtue of their concessions, which make them less vulnerable to major objections. So, Foot need not maintain, contrary to Plato, that a just person will be happy even if subjected to prolonged torture. She does not claim that virtue or justice is sufficient for happiness, but only that they are probably necessary for a good life. Her view is weaker, and therefore more plausible. Singer's view is weaker still, but does not derive any advantage from this. In fact, it suffers from the same malady that plagues Plato and Foot, namely, that it does not specify whether one must consistently do what is morally required, or if a general disposition towards moral action will suffice. Singer would likely respond that someone who has adopted the ethical point of view won't be ever

⁴⁰ Peter Singer, *op. cit.*, 331-332.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 333-334.

vigilant for opportunities to advance her own interests. Rather, such a person would have transcended self-interest to an extent where the rational egoist's mindset is alien to her. This is similar to the move made by Foot regarding the choice of a virtuous man not to frame another in order to avoid execution.

But even if Singer can overcome this difficulty, there is worse to come. His claim that the ethical point of view is a surer road to happiness and fulfillment than a rational pursuit of self-interest is merely conjectural. It is an empirical claim about human psychology, and some egoists might deny that it is true in their cases. And, even if an egoist concedes that achieving all of her goals and interests will not bring her peace, she can still say that it is the pursuit of her interests that brings joy to her life, and that the pursuit of the general welfare is too impersonal for her to have the same effect. In short, Singer's account relies on the assumption that people are psychologically wired like Singer. But by his own admission, he can say nothing to minimally rational psychopaths (he is not obligated to convince *irrational* psychopaths) or anyone who is so constituted as to find lasting happiness by other means. He even goes so far as to suggest that it is rational for some people to collect stamps rather than act morally, conceding that "Why act morally?" cannot be given an answer that will provide everyone with overwhelming reasons for acting morally. Ethically indefensible behavior is not always irrational."⁴²

Far from making Singer's view more satisfactory, these concessions are fatal to its chances of achieving the aim of this project. Singer's view does achieve the more limited aim of showing the egoist that she is *probably* so constituted as to live a more fulfilling life if she acts morally than she could if she always acts selfishly. But some rational egoists may not be so

⁴² Ibid., 334-335.

constituted; they may get more satisfaction and fulfillment from the pursuit of their own ends. These egoists would then slip through the cracks, because Singer's view gives them no reason to do what is morally required in cases where doing so is contrary to their self-interest. Since I do not want to rest the answer to the question "Why do what is morally required?" on psychological facts or other personal contingencies, Singer's view is not sufficient for this project's aim, which is to show that *all* moral agents have most reason to do what is morally required *no matter what*. In view of this, and of the problems with the other eudaimonistic views discussed above, we will have to look elsewhere for an adequate answer.

VIII. Contractarian Answers

Contractarian philosophers have supplied a more promising answer to our question. They argue that a society in which people conform to moral rules is better for any individual within that society than an arrangement in which each pursues his or her own self-interest. The most prominent, early advocate of this view was Thomas Hobbes. He recognized that in a state of nature, that is, a condition in which uncooperative individuals relentlessly pursue their own interests, there could be ". . .no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; no Culture of the Earth; . . . no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and, which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death."⁴³ In such a bleak situation, the life of a man would be ". . .solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short."⁴⁴

More recently, David Gauthier has invoked game theory and the prisoner's dilemma to

⁴³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan; or, The Matter, Forme & Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (New York: University Press, 1904), 84.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

make the same point.⁴⁵ Suppose that two men are arrested and put into separate interrogation rooms by the police. There is insufficient evidence against them to put them away for long, so if neither confesses against the other, both will receive two-year sentences. However, if one prisoner confesses and the other remains silent, the confessor will walk free as a reward for his testimony while his less loquacious companion will be condemned to no less than ten years. Finally, if both men confess, each will receive a five-year sentence.

Both prisoners realize that silence carries with it the risk of spending ten years 'bending for the soap' in the prison shower. But confession both eliminates this possibility and provides a chance of walking free. And so, being wholly dedicated to their individual self-interest, both prisoners will confess, because betrayal is always more beneficial than cooperation for each individual. If one prisoner remains silent, the other may walk free by confessing; if a prisoner confesses, the other is forced to confess as well, so as to save himself from the maximum sentence. But mutual confession condemns the prisoners to five years of jail time each. The prisoner's dilemma, then, is a case in which the pursuit of individual self-interest by each leads to a sub-optimal outcome for all. When their actions are seen in this way, it is clear that both prisoners would have been better off had they agreed to remain silent. As Kurt Baier puts it, “. . . it will be clear to everyone that a universal obedience to certain rules overriding self-interest would produce a state of affairs which serves everyone's self-interest much better than his unaided pursuit in a state where everyone does the same.”⁴⁶ Morality, by such an account, amounts to mutually beneficial cooperation intended to avert universally detrimental outcomes

⁴⁵ See David Gauthier, “Why Contractarianism?” In *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Steven M. Cahn, and Peter J. Markie (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 537-547.

⁴⁶ Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View: A Rational Basis of Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), 308.

in prisoner's dilemma-style cases.

This sort of view, while being a persuasive case for the necessity of moral rules, may not convince a die-hard egoist. The egoist might concede that life would be very undesirable in a Hobbesian state of nature, and that that is why moral rules should be followed generally. Nonetheless, the contractarian answer says nothing about committing the occasional self-interested, immoral act within a society which, by and large, adheres to moral rules. The egoist's claim, in other words, is something like this: "I can see why most people should act morally, but that does not tell me why *I* should act morally."

To persuade the egoist that she should act morally, Gauthier tells us the following story. He asks us to imagine two men, Smith and Jones, who own adjacent farms. He writes:

"Although neighbors, and not hostile, they are not friends, so that neither gets satisfaction from assisting the other. Nevertheless, they recognize that, if they harvest their crops together, each does better than if each harvests alone. Next week, Jones' crop will be ready for harvesting; a fortnight hence, Smith's crop will be ready. The harvest in, Jones is retiring, selling his farm, and moving to Florida, where he is unlikely to encounter Smith or other members of their community. Jones would like to promise Smith that, if Smith helps him harvest next week, he will help Smith harvest in a fortnight. But Jones and Smith both know that in a fortnight, helping Smith would be a pure cost to Jones. Even if Smith helps him, he has nothing to gain by returning the assistance, since neither care for Smith nor, in the circumstances, concern for his own reputation, moves him."⁴⁷

Gauthier argues that Jones will be worse off if he does not assist Smith because Smith, aware that Jones ". . . acts straightforwardly to maximize the fulfillment of his preferences, . . . will not help Jones even if Jones pretends to promise assistance in return."⁴⁸ So, both men are worse off. Gauthier adds that people who are prepared to take moral rules seriously enough to act against their short-term self-interest when morality so demands are better off in the long run than those who pursue their self-interest without regard for moral constraints. This is because the

⁴⁷ David Gauthier, *op. cit.*, 543.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

former “. . . will be welcome partners in mutually advantageous cooperation, in which each relies on the voluntary adherence of others.” In contrast, those who do not put moral constraint on their self-interest will be excluded from such pacts, and deprived of the advantages and opportunities thereof.⁴⁹

Whatever its merits, Gauthier's answer depends on the possibility that the egoist is detected when she does not act morally, or at least that others are aware of her intentions and therefore refuse to enter into a contract with her. Thus, the egoist may acknowledge that she has good reason to obey moral rules when there is the possibility of suffering consequences, whether they come in the form of immediate punishment or a treacherous reputation. “But,” she might ask, “what reason do I have to act morally when doing so is against my self-interest and when there is no chance that my actions will be discovered?” Gauthier's story can be modified to reflect this sort of situation. Imagine that Smith knows nothing of Jones' plans to retire and move to Florida, and that both men live so far away from civilization that nobody else knows about them. Smith would have no reason to suspect that Jones would not fulfill a promise to assist him, and Jones, not revealing his plans to move, would almost certainly never encounter Smith again, who has no reason to travel to Florida. Nor would he encounter anyone else with knowledge of his betrayal, since nobody else is aware of the existence of the two men. Given these circumstances, why should Jones return Smith's assistance?

A number of responses offer themselves, but many of them appeal to contingencies which the egoist can avoid by modifying the scenario. For instance, one could point out that Jones cannot be certain that he will never encounter Smith again, or that word of his actions will

⁴⁹ Ibid., 543-544.

not spread somehow. Likewise, one could appeal to Jones' conscience and say that he will suffer from guilt for the rest of his life if he does not make good on the promise to help Smith. The egoist, though, will simply ask us to suppose that conditions are such as to guarantee that nobody will ever learn of Jones' actions, and that Jones is not a man who is disposed towards feelings of guilt. Perhaps he dismisses his conscience as nothing more than an internalization the very social norms and morals that he sees no reason to adhere to. The egoist may also assure us that Jones is not mistaken about his self-interest; he has nothing to gain from helping Smith harvest and he would benefit by making a false promise to his neighbor. Is there any reason why Jones should act morally in *these* circumstances?

There are two things to be said about the egoist's hypothetical.⁵⁰ The first is that the scenario she asks us to consider is what P.H. Nowell-Smith refers to as a desert-island argument: one whose force “. . .[depends] expressly on the improbability of the case supposed.”⁵¹ Because the circumstances proposed are so unlikely, they may be ignored. Reasoning regarding human conduct, after all, is done based on “. . .empirical truths that are so general and obvious that we can afford to ignore exceptions.”⁵² The first response to the egoist, then, is that cases as improbable as the one she is proposing can be disregarded, at least until they arise; fantastic thought experiments prove nothing and, practically speaking, it is still in the egoist's best interest to act morally in virtually every situation.

The second response to the egoist is simply to bite the bullet. We might concede that, vanishingly rare though they may be, there are cases in which it is simply not in one's best

⁵⁰ For a more detailed discussion, see Kai Nielsen, *Why Be Moral?*, op. cit., 176-193.

⁵¹ P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (London: Penguin Books, 1954), 240.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 132.

interest to do what is morally required. Luckily, such cases are too few to risk a societal collapse into a Hobbesian state of nature. One might even argue that no harm results from immoral actions of this kind since they are never detected; to be sure, they must be harmless enough to remain undetected. The egoist will also realize that if her immoral actions are detected, the consequences must be small enough to ensure that the actions remain in her self-interest. The social and legal repercussions of serious moral transgressions, like murder and kidnapping, are enough to make even psychopathic egoists think twice before risking them. Self-interested acts that violate moral rules, then, would be limited to the petty and the mundane.

Nielsen points out that our safety from such a nightmare scenario of frequent and severe deviations from moral conduct is further guaranteed by egoists themselves. He predicts that “. . .it will become increasingly difficult to be successfully non-moral as a society gains more knowledge about itself and the world.”⁵³ This means that it will become more difficult for any individual egoist to get away with self-interested actions that violate moral rules. Nonetheless, it is in the egoist's interest to promote society's efficient enforcement of morals because her own immorality only pays if others behave morally. And even if egoists are somehow able to get away with ignoring morality's demands, their self-interest will prevent rampant immorality because, as Nielsen writes, “. . .if too many go the way of the rational individual egoist, then it will no longer pay to be non-moral so that large numbers of individual egoists, if they are rational, will become men of good morals.”⁵⁴

While these considerations suffice to save us from a Hobbesian state of nature, they provoke questions about whether, under a contractarian view, rational egoists are actually acting

⁵³ Nielsen, *op. cit.*, 193.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

morally. Given that contractarian theories can give no reason to refrain from petty acts of immorality that will not be detected, they do not show that moral requirements trump prudential ones. Indeed, it seems that a contractarian society is just a product of mass rational egoism: a social order that emerges because the egoists recognize that they do better with a few ground-rules than with total anarchy. But whenever the observance of these rules is contrary to self-interest, or when their violation serves one's self-interest, the rules are ignored. Therefore, complying with moral requirements on contractarian grounds is not the same as doing what is morally required, for such compliance may be dictated by pure, egoistic self-interest.⁵⁵ On a contractarian view, morality is merely a pleasant side-effect that is produced by rational egoism *most of the time*, but not always.

And there is worse to come, for some might think that major moral transgressions will result if morality is grounded on the fulfillment of self-interest.⁵⁶ A major problem with the contractarian answer to the question, “Why should one do what is morally required?” is that it applies only to morality that is enforced. That is, contractarians give no reason to heed those moral rules which, when violated, do not result in social or legal consequences. This problem is rooted in the very nature of contractarian theories, and is a natural consequence of holding that there are no moral rules except those that rational agents would, or do, agree to. This aspect of the theory infects the answer it offers to the question at hand, causing feelings of unease among

⁵⁵ Perhaps this doesn't matter much, since the important thing is that the rules are complied with. But as already mentioned, there is good reason to doubt that compliance will be universal and consistent.

⁵⁶ Contractarian philosophers might disagree, arguing that something is morally wrong if and only if it violates rules that rational agents would agree to, so that any intuitions we have about wrongness apart from the agreed rules are mistaken. For instance, if rational agents would not agree to rules forbidding the torture of non-human animals for fun, then doing so would not be wrong, no matter what our intuitions tell us. This strikes me as very implausible. If contractarianism cannot accommodate some of our strongest moral intuitions, then contractarians need to provide solid reasons why these intuitions are mistaken.

non-contractarians who believe in moral rules existing regardless of whether one would agree to them.

To make this point clearer, consider abortion. In “Why Abortion is Immoral,” Don Marquis makes a plausible argument against abortion on the grounds that it deprives the fetus of a “future-like-ours.”⁵⁷ But there are many countries the world over in which abortions are both legal and socially acceptable. If Marquis is right that abortion is immoral, then people in those countries are able to act contrary to what is morally required without any consequences. Nor, according to Marquis' view, is an abortion a petty or insignificant violation of moral rules; according to his account of what makes killing morally wrong, abortion is a more egregious moral transgression than killing an adult. The fetus, after all, has a greater future to be deprived of than someone who has already lived for several decades.

The same problem arises with regard to non-human animals. Many philosophers have argued that non-human animals enjoy a degree of moral status making it wrong to kill them for sport or food, or to use them in scientific research. Most prominently, Tom Regan, Myelin Engel and Peter Singer have given plausible and convincing arguments against the raising of non-human animals for food and their use in experiments and cosmetic testing.⁵⁸ Yet I know of no states in which the raising and slaughtering of non-human animals for food is prohibited by law. Nor am I aware of any societies, apart from certain religious circles, who are likely to impose social sanctions on a member of their group who hunts, tortures, experiments on, or eats a non-

⁵⁷ Don Marquis, “Why Abortion is Immoral” In *Bioethics: An Anthology*, ed. Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 51-62.

⁵⁸ See Mylan Engel, “The Immorality of Eating Meat.” In *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature*, ed. Louis P. Pojman, (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 856-889. Also see Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 2nd ed., (New York: New York Review of Books, 1990) and Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

human animal. Here, as in the case of abortion, we see what could be a serious violation of moral rules.⁵⁹

Non-contractarian readers are sure to think of more examples similar to those mentioned. The problem that these examples reveal is that contractarian theories do not give any moral reasons to avoid abortion, the mistreatment and killing of non-human animals, or even severely cognitively deficient humans, despite good reasons to think that these actions are wrong. In short, it makes no room for the existence of a moral sphere beyond what rational, self-interested agents would agree to. This defect in the contractarian answer to the question, “Why do what is morally required?” is not a small one. One might assign derivative moral status to human fetuses, infants and non-human animals, but that will not satisfy the strong intuition that infanticide, for example, is wrong. For if infants enjoyed only derivative moral status, an infanticide would be an offense not against the infant, but against the infant's relatives, caregivers, or other rational agents. But surely our intuition is that an infanticide is wrong on account of what it does *to the infant*, rather than what it does to others who are appalled by it.

It is to be expected, of course, that an answer given based on the premises of any particular moral theory is likely to leave proponents of rival theories unsatisfied. I concede that, if contractarianism has the best chance of providing a rationale for complying with moral requirements,⁶⁰ then its flaws are a price worth paying. But before we pay it, let us see if there is not a better alternative.

IX. The Point of View of the Universe

I will call the response I favor 'the point of view of the universe' (PVU), a phrase

⁵⁹ Not to speak of the environmental consequences and deleterious health effects of meat consumption.

⁶⁰ If contractarianism does this at all, which I doubted previously.

borrowed from Sidgwick. In *The Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick writes that it is a “. . . self-evident principle that the good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the universe, than the good of any other. . .”⁶¹ Now, the word 'importance' is ambiguous, and might be interpreted either in a deontic sense or in an axiological sense. I use the word in the latter sense, meaning that 'importance' here refers to value rather than duty or obligation. For the present purposes, then, Sidgwick's claim is that the interests of all moral patients are of equal objective value. Thus, the PVU holds that there are no rational grounds for believing that one's self-interest is more valuable than the interests of others. This shifts the burden of proof onto the shoulders of the rational egoist, who must find a way to justify her moral discrimination. If her preference for her own interests over the equal or greater interests of another is rational, she must show why that is. In other words, she must either show that the PVU is false, or propose a plausible, compatible principle that justifies assigning greater value to self-interest.

Since Sidgwick's claim is directly about value, the PVU, on its own, does not demand that we do anything. It is not a prescriptive principle, but rather a constraint on the choices available to rational agents, for it demands impartiality. It implies that if the egoist values her own interests, then she has no reason, lacking some further principle, to assign less value to the interests of others, since her good “. . . is of no more importance, from the point of view . . . of the universe, than the good of any other. . .”⁶² Now, one might point out that there is a gap between something being valuable and an agent's having reasons to act on that thing. Specifically, accepting the PVU and thereby accepting that the interests of all persons are

⁶¹ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London: Mamillan and Company Limited, 1962), 382.

⁶² Ibid.

equally valuable seems compatible with having more reason to pursue one's own interests; I might concede that my interests are just as objectively valuable as yours and consistently maintain that I have more reason to pursue my own. How can this gap between the equal value of interests and the impartial pursuit of interests be bridged?

This gap constitutes the crux of the issue, for the egoist holds that it does not follow from the equal value of interests that there is no more reason to pursue one's own interests. But in order to show that one has *most* reason to pursue interests impartially (read: do what is morally required), one must show that this *does* follow. The gap is bridged by the fact that only objective value provides rational agents with reasons to act. This is because the 'goodness' or 'badness' of a state of affairs on the whole is a question of objective value, and it is not rational for an agent to act in a way that she knows will create a sub-optimal outcome. To do so would be tantamount to preferring a state of affairs that is worse on the whole, and nobody can rationally prefer what is worse. Nor is it rational for an agent to prefer a state of affairs she knows to be worse on the whole just because it is better *for her*, since that would contradict the PVU. Therefore, rational agents are bound to act based on objective value, i.e., to satisfy interests based not on who has them, but on their number and magnitude. That is what it means to do what is morally required.

So, given the equality of goods, or interests, the egoist has no more reason to pursue her own interests than to pursue the interests of others. If we are inclined to pursue A because we value it, and A is relevantly similar to B, then rationality forces us to recognize that we have just as much reason to pursue B. If I have an interest in eating the last cookie at a picnic, and you have an (equal) interest in eating that same cookie, then I have as much reason to eat the cookie as I have to let you eat it. Acting specifically to realize one of these outcomes would be rational

only if our interests were unequal: If you are dying of cookie-cravings, and I am close to nausea from eating too many other cookies (Unlikely!), we are both rationally justified in acting to make sure that the last cookie goes to you. Of course, I would still prefer to have the cookie for myself, but it would be irrational for me to act on that preference, since doing so would create an outcome that is worse on the whole.

One virtue of this view is that it can appeal to principles and preferences that the egoist already has. For instance, the rational egoist has an interest in avoiding starvation and knows that others have this same interest. Now suppose that this egoist is prepared to spend a great deal of money on a luxurious vacation. Her reason for this is that such an indulgence would make her life better; it would satisfy a preference that she has. But the money necessary for it could just as easily be sent to a poor country, where it would alleviate the starvation of some villagers who share her interest in not starving. Indeed, starvation is far worse for any one of them than the absence of a luxurious vacation is for the egoist. So our egoist, realizing that sending the money to alleviate the starvation satisfies more (and greater) interests than spending the money on a luxurious vacation, and that her interests are of no greater importance than those of others, ought to send the money, even though this is worse *for her*. She will still prefer the vacation, but she will realize that acting on this preference is irrational in this case, because that would create a state of affairs that is worse on the whole.

So, the fact that the interests of all have equal objective value means that, lacking some further principle, there are no *prima facie* grounds for pursuing one's own interests instead of the interests of others. As mentioned previously, it is rational to discriminate only on the basis of the magnitude and number of interests that would be satisfied or frustrated by some action, but not

on the basis of whose interests they are.⁶³ In other words, I have most reason to satisfy the greatest number and magnitude of interests that I can, and the mere fact that a certain interest happens to be mine gives me *no more reason* to satisfy it. Nor does the mere fact that a certain interest is contrary to one of my preferences give me *any less reason* to satisfy it. Hence, the starving villagers are rationally warranted in acting to prevent their starvation at the cost of depriving someone else of a luxurious vacation, since their interest in not starving is far greater than that other's interest in going on vacation. The same logic applies to other preferences as well.⁶⁴

IX.i. Objections and Responses

The egoist's central tenet is that self-interest matters most. She does not care about the attractiveness of states of affairs on the whole, but only about the attractiveness of states of affairs *for her*. The question that interests the egoist is not “Which would be the best world on the whole?” but “Which would be the best world *for me*?” So, the egoist would not regard it as rational to spend her money on humanitarian aid rather than a luxurious vacation because, though others would benefit far more than she would be harmed, this would be worse *for her*.

At this point it is appropriate to ask what it is about the egoist that makes her so special. If her interests are what matter most, ought the poor, starving villagers acknowledge that the right thing to do is for her to take a vacation? Ought others donate money to the egoist so that she can retire and spend the rest of her life on sun-soaked Caribbean beaches? That cannot be the what the egoist means, for she has not disputed the claim that the good of “. . .any one

⁶³ The magnitude of interests matters because it is better that fewer intense interests be satisfied than more, less intense interests, e.g., it is better that ten people be deprived of ice-cream than that one person die a painful death.

⁶⁴ Knowing the preferences of others is crucial and it can be tricky. A masochistic person should not assume that others enjoy pain or humiliation, for example. But we may safely assume that we share basic preferences, such as to have food, shelter, warmth, respect, and so on.

individual is of no more importance, from the point of view . . . of the universe, than the good of any other. . .”⁶⁵ But clearly her view is that her own goods, or interests, are categorically preferable to the interests of others, and this is not compatible with Sidgwick's claim.

Perhaps the egoist holds an agent-relative view by which each individual should act so as to produce a state of affairs that is as good as possible *for that individual*. One might call this *deontic egoism*. If the egoist espouses this view, then her preference for a vacation stems from her belief that the vacation would be better *for her*. This is compatible with the view of the starving villagers that a world in which the egoist had donated her money to a humanitarian organization would be better *for them*. So, the egoist can accept Sidgwick's claim that no individual's interests are of any more objective importance than those of any other individual, while also believing that she has most reason to promote her own interests. Every individual, on this view, ought to prefer his or her own self-interest above all else.

Deontic egoism is more believable, but still odd. If the egoist acknowledges that the interests of all moral patients are of equal objective importance, and holds that she has reason to promote her own interests, it should follow that she has the very same reason to promote the interests of others. In other words, lacking a relevant difference between her and others, it is not clear why the egoist's reasons to promote her own interests do not apply to the promotion of the interests of others, like the starving villagers. By acknowledging that the interests of all moral patients are of equal objective importance but at the same time promoting only her own interests, the egoist engages in what appears to be baseless discrimination. What warrant could she have for this? If the interests of all carry equal weight, how can such discrimination be justified?

⁶⁵ Ibid., 382.

The egoist might respond that one always has most reason to promote one's own self-interest, and that this is a brute fact, or basic principle, of the universe, just like the brute fact that the interests of all moral patients count equally. As a brute fact, it cannot be derived from more basic premises, nor need it be. Thus, though all rational persons will acknowledge that their interests are of no greater objective importance than the interests of others, they should also acknowledge that they have most reason to promote their own interests. Where the PVU acknowledges only the former fact, the egoist's ethic of self-interest acknowledges both.

But the view that it is a brute fact of the universe that one always has most reason to promote one's own self-interest is questionable. First, it appears to butt heads with the brute fact of the equality of interests of all moral patients, on which the PVU is founded. While it was established above that one could believe both facts without contradiction, it is strange that both are brute facts of the universe. It would be a strange universe indeed if two facts were woven into its fabric, one of which seems to demand that we act as if the other were not true. The fact of the equality of interests alone would give anyone as much reason to promote the interests of others as to promote his own but, according to the egoist, a second fact exists which gives us additional (overriding) reason to promote our interests. How implausible! Why would a fact of the universe single out any individual's interests as being more worthy of pursuit by that individual than some *other* individual's interests? It strikes me as just as likely that there exists a brute fact that gives us most reason to promote the interests of our father-in-law, our neighbor, our cat, or all interests *except* our own. That is preposterous, and it is evidence that the egoist's claim is false: there is no brute fact that warrants moral discrimination.

The last objection that I will address regards the demanding nature of the view proposed

above. The PVU demands absolute impartiality; it implies that any act that fails to satisfy the maximum number or magnitude of interests is irrational and therefore morally wrong. Such rigidity clashes with some of our most basic moral intuitions. For example, the PVU seems to demand that a father who can either save the life of his own child or the lives of two strangers ought to save the two strangers, thereby letting his own child die. Such implications may cause great discomfort even among non-egoists. In *Reasons and Persons*, Derek Parfit addresses the issue with the following example: “Clare could either give her child some benefit, or give much greater benefits to some unfortunate stranger. Because she loves her child, she benefits him rather than the stranger.”⁶⁶ The PVU implies that Clare acts immorally in this case. Doesn't that discredit the view?

I believe that the answer is no. The two cases described above are examples of what Parfit calls “*moral immorality, or blameless wrongdoing.*”⁶⁷ He suggests that Clare could reply to the charge of immorality by saying,

“I acted wrongly because I love my child. But it would be wrong for me to cause myself to lose this love. That I make the outcome worse is a bad effect. But this is part of a set of effects that are, on the whole, one of the best possible sets. It would therefore be wrong for me to change my motives so that I would not in future act in this kind of way.”

In other words, Clare could change her motives so that she would not have acted wrongly in this particular case, but only at the cost of acting wrongly more often (or no less often) *on the whole*. Suppose she were psychologically so constituted that she did not love her child. This might motivate her to benefit the unfortunate stranger instead, but it would also be symptomatic of other, more unpleasant character traits; someone who is ice cold towards their own child is unlikely to show much compassion to others, and that may cause them to act even more

⁶⁶ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 32.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* (Emphasis in original.)

immorally on the whole. Ideally, Clare's motives would be such as to motivate her to act morally in every case. But if that is impossible due to certain psychological facts about her, we should hope that she adopts the best *possible* set of motives that is most conducive to moral behavior.

X. Conclusion

The aim of this project has been ambitious. I have tried to find reasons supporting the claim that moral reasons are overriding, so that one always has most reason to do what morality demands. It was argued that “Why do what is morally required?” is an answerable question, and that appealing to moral reasons to answer it requires that morality be an intrinsic good. It also turned out that while there are good reasons for rejecting the eudaimonistic and contractarian approaches articulated above, there are also good reasons to suppose that the PVU succeeds in achieving the aim of this project. In brief, the PVU claims that acting morally amounts to pursuing interests impartially and that, given the equal importance of equal interests, such impartial pursuit is demanded by rationality. If so, then it is incumbent on us, as rational beings, to act morally *no matter what*. The Rousseau quote with which I began this thesis is an eloquent expression of this point. If the PVU is correct, then our rationality places on us what, in light of human weakness and egocentrism, is no small demand; weighing the interests of total strangers equally with our own or with those of our closest friends and relatives amounts to superhuman impartiality, but it *is* rational.

Finally, if the PVU is false, or if I have otherwise failed to show that moral reasons are overriding, we should not conclude from this that moral reasons are *not* overriding, and still less that there is no reason to act morally, or to live a life that is moral on the whole. It would, after all, be hasty to conclude that a project is hopeless or a position untenable based on the failure of

a single attempt. Besides, though the PVU may fail in its implications, the fundamental advantage it enjoys over egoism is that it is built on impartiality, a principle which is central to rationality and for which egoism makes no room. Any moral theory suggested as an alternative to the PVU would have to incorporate this principle. Egoism's failure to do so marks it as an irrational and therefore unacceptable theory. (Indeed, 'rational egoism' is actually a contradiction in terms. I have used the label only as a convenient name for the egoist's position.)⁶⁸ Of course, this argument against egoism deserves much more development and consideration than I have given it. My primary aim, after all, has been to make a positive argument for moral action, not one against egoism. And while I believe that the PVU succeeds in achieving this aim, I do not conclude from this that better, more intuitively acceptable theories are not possible. But the discovery and development of such theories is a task I leave to abler minds.

⁶⁸ Robert Hanna has made the same statement about ethical egoism, and he is just as right.