

C10

## 10

## Normative Authority

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**C10P2** Normative standards sometimes direct us to do what is easy and enjoyable, such as eating a nice meal, supporting a local charity, or improving one's crossword puzzle skills. At other times, they call on us to adjust our lives in ways that are inconvenient or uncomfortable. They could require something as small as avoiding unhealthy foods, making a minor apology, or updating a peripheral belief. Or they could demand something as dramatic as abandoning one's dream, risking one's well-being, or revamping one's worldview. When reflecting on such possibilities, it's natural to pose the following question: why do as these standards direct, even if you face competing demands or have not pledged allegiance to those standards in the first place? We call this the 'authority question.'

**C10P3** Normative realism is committed to there being a positive answer to this question. As we understand it, the relevant sort of authority flows from the existence of *strong reasons* to do as normative standards direct, where a reason is strong just if it is both *categorical* (strong with respect to its grip on an agent) and *excellent* (strong with respect to its weight). Endorsing this idea positions us to answer the authority question via the following claim: in a wide range of cases, agents should act or think as normative standards direct because doing so is backed by reasons that are strong in this sense.

**C10P4** Answering the authority question is one thing; providing reason to accept that answer is another. In what follows we support our answer by defending the existence of strong reasons.

**C10P5** Two comments about our defense. First, we take morality as our focal case, arguing that there are a wide array of strong moral reasons. But we confess to having greater ambitions: if our defense of strong moral reasons is on the mark, it can function as a template for how to argue for strong reasons in other normative domains as well, such as the epistemic or aesthetic. Second, our defense of strong moral reasons is intended to address skeptical doubts about the jurisdiction and weight of moral considerations vis-à-vis those implied by other familiar normative systems, such as those comprising the rules of etiquette or social clubs. Fully answering the authority question requires meeting this challenge.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It also calls for answering other sorts of skepticism, such as one querying the relation between strong reasons and the 'schmeasons' implied by unfamiliar systems such as 'schmorality' (as pressed by,

**C10P6** Our project in this chapter is motivated by the thought that when it comes to normative realism, resolving the authority question is not optional but mandatory. To appreciate this, consider a Nietzschean theory that recognizes objective moral standards which apply to everyone, but says that only those agents enslaved by moralistic thinking face reasons to comply with such standards, and in any case those reasons possess very little importance vis-à-vis that of creative, powerful, and cunning agency. This theory entails that moral standards, while objective, have little or no authority. While a commitment to strong reasons is rarely included in characterizations of realism, this scenario helps to indicate the theoretical importance of such a commitment, by revealing how it distinguishes the view from positions which fail to deliver the sort of authority that has made realism seem worth defending in the first place.

**C10P7** Our discussion begins by characterizing what it is for reasons to be moral, categorical, and excellent. Subsequent sections build on this characterization, defending the existence, categoricity, and excellence of moral reasons. While these defenses address various objections along the way, the final section grapples with the skeptical challenge sketched above.

**C10S1**

## 1. Practical Reasons: Moral, Categorical, Excellent

**C10P8** Reasons are favorers, standing in the favoring relation to whatever they favor.<sup>2</sup> The reasons on which we'll focus are *practical*, favoring the performance or non-performance of actions. We'll assume that reasons apply only to agents endowed with rational capacities, being capable of understanding that considerations favor or disfavor actions, of at least sometimes articulating those considerations to themselves, and of conforming their behavior to their understanding.<sup>3</sup>

**C10P9** Importantly, we reject a promiscuous view of reasons according to which every norm is accompanied by a reason to perform the action the norm calls for. According to that picture, norms of etiquette come with etiquette reasons; norms of chess come with chess reasons; and so forth. We recognize that one can speak of there being such things as chess reasons. But in our view this is just a *façon de parler*. Chess norms by themselves don't give agents any reasons at all.

e.g., Eklund 2017: chs 1 and 2). We lack the space to address these other skeptical challenges here; for an extended discussion of them, see Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (2024: ch. 11).

<sup>2</sup> We'll focus on favoring, ordinarily omitting disfavoring for purposes of presentational economy. Our use of 'reason' and 'reasons' encompasses collections of reasons as well as individual ones.

<sup>3</sup> While some philosophers invoke the phrase 'rational agents' to refer to members of the class of agents identified in the text, we'll use 'agents' as shorthand for these individuals.

**C10P10** The promiscuous view suffers from three interrelated defects.<sup>4</sup> First, it wrongly assigns reasons of compliance to normative systems that do not warrant it, such as those that are inane, gratuitously demanding, or founded on ignorance, bias, or arbitrary whim. Second, it needlessly cheapens the importance of being a reason. Sound counsel enjoins deliberators to not ignore any of their reasons, which are precisely the sorts of things that merit a role in deliberation. By proliferating favorers, the promiscuous view makes it unduly difficult for agents to follow this counsel—all the noise drowns out the signal that genuinely matters when deciding what to do. Third, the view threatens to drain the category of being a reason of its theoretical and dialogical utility: if the promiscuous view were true, there would be little point in doing such things as defending the existence of reasons of a given kind or informing someone of their presence. Proponents of the promiscuous view might reply to these objections by insisting on a distinction between mere reasons and respectable ones, where the latter accompany a narrow subset of normative systems, merit attention in deliberation, and have theoretical and dialogical utility. But this would generate an unhelpful epicycle, leaving us to ask about respectable reasons all the questions we were initially seeking to ask about reasons themselves. By rejecting a promiscuous view of reasons, we sidestep this unhelpful epicycle while avoiding all three of the concerns just aired.

**C10S2**

## 1.1 Moral Reasons

**C10P11** Our interest here is in *moral* reasons. Not every reason is moral; we recognize reasons that are prudential, instrumental, aesthetic, epistemic, and so forth. Moreover, not every reason to act morally is a moral one; there may be non-moral reasons to act morally, as when doing the morally right thing happens to be in one's own interest. So we need a firmer grip on what a moral reason is.

**C10P12** To start, note a threefold distinction between (i) the favoring relation, (ii) a fact R that favors some response  $\varphi$ , and (iii) the fact that R favors  $\varphi$ . The fact in (ii) is a reason.<sup>5</sup> The fact in (iii) is not itself a reason but what we'll call its 'correlative reason-fact.' Part of the value of distinguishing reasons from their correlative reason-facts is that doing so allows us to say what it is for a given reason to be of a specific *kind*, for instance, one that is moral, prudential, instrumental, aesthetic, epistemic, and so forth. Our proposal is:

<sup>4</sup> Our rejection of this view is shared even by some who are deeply skeptical of strong moral reasons, including error theorists such as Olson (2014: 120): 'To say that some behavior is correct or incorrect according to some norm, N, is not to say anything normative [i.e., about what reasons there are]. It is merely to say something about what kind of behavior is required, recommended, or forbidden by N.'

<sup>5</sup> Theorists who prefer to think of reasons not as facts, but rather as (say) propositions, states of affairs, or tropes are welcome to paraphrase accordingly. In our estimation, nothing in our discussion hinges on these metaphysical niceties.

- C10P13** A reason  $R$  to  $\phi$  is a *reason of kind*  $K =_{\text{def}} [R \text{ favors } \phi]$  is fully grounded in a fact of kind  $K$ , together with  $R$ .<sup>6</sup>
- C10P14** The underlying idea behind this schema is that when trying to determine whether a reason is of a given kind, one asks *why* the reason favors the response it does, and classes the reason by reference to the kind of normative fact that helps to fully answer that question. If a moral fact helps to fully explain why some fact  $R$  favors an action, then  $R$  is a moral reason; if an aesthetic fact plays that role, then the reason is an aesthetic one; and so on.<sup>7</sup>
- C10P15** To see our schema at work, consider that pedestrians have a prudential reason to avoid oncoming trains. This reason is simple: they are extremely dangerous. The reason is a prudential one because its correlative reason-fact—[That oncoming trains are extremely dangerous favors avoiding it]—is fully explained by the fact that they are extremely dangerous plus the prudential fact that avoiding such danger prevents serious harm.
- C10P16** Our schema also preserves the distinction between there being a reason to obey a moral norm, and there being a *moral* reason to do so. To illustrate, consider the fact [Being respectful promotes financial success]. Suppose this fact is a reason to be respectful, and being respectful is morally required. According to our schema, this reason is a moral reason to fulfill that moral requirement just in case the reason's correlative reason-fact,
- C10P17** [That being respectful promotes financial success favors being respectful],
- C10P18** is fully grounded in the reason plus a moral fact. But it's not. Rather, it's grounded in something else, such as an instrumental or prudential fact. So, even though [Being respectful promotes financial success] may be a reason to act morally, it does not qualify as a moral reason to do so. Our schema gets this right.
- C10P19** Economizing expressions, we'll often speak of something 'giving' a reason, where a reason  $R$  is *given by* some  $x$  just in case  $R$ 's correlative reason-fact is fully

<sup>6</sup> Where a fact of kind  $K$  is either a  $K$ -property instantiation or a  $K$ -principle. Presumably the relevant fact is one specifying a relation between  $R$  and  $\phi$ , though for our purposes we can remain neutral on the character of that relation. Note that if any correlative reason-facts are among the fundamental moral facts, then this schema would not apply to them, since fundamental moral facts could not be grounded in a moral fact. If that were so, then the biconditional would be either restricted to non-fundamental correlative reason-facts or liable to modification (e.g., allowing for identity as well as full grounding).

<sup>7</sup> The schema allows a plurality of reasons to perform a given action in the sense that one and the same fact can (say) be a moral reason and a prudential reason to perform that action, as would be the case if that fact's correlative reason-fact has multiple full grounds, one of which conjoins the reason with a moral fact and the other of which combines that reason with a prudential fact. We are officially neutral on whether moral reasons and what grounds their correlative reason-facts can both favor the selfsame action on a given occasion (cf. Johnson King 2019). Nor do we commit to the further idea that the weights of those two reasons would be additive, in a way that generates illicit 'double-counting.'

grounded in  $R$  together with  $x$ .<sup>8</sup> With this stipulation in hand, we can then say of moral reasons:  $R$  is a moral reason to  $\varphi$  just in case  $R$  is given by a moral fact.

C10S3

## 1.2 Categorical Reasons

**C10P20** We turn now to clarifying the two principal features of strong reasons, beginning with categoricity. Such reasons contrast with hypothetical ones, where this distinction hinges on the relation between reasons and contingent commitments. We understand commitments to include desires, goals, aims, intentions, preferences, wants, plans, chosen ends, cares, projects, and other similar facets of agency. *Contingent* commitments are ones it is possible for an agent to lack.<sup>9</sup>

**C10P21** Our characterization of the division between hypothetical and categorical reasons centers on the notion of a reason whose correlative reason-fact depends on an agent's contingent commitments. More specifically:

**C10P22** A reason  $R$  for an agent  $S$  to  $\varphi$  is *hypothetical* =<sub>def</sub>  $R$  applies to  $S$  and [ $R$  favors  $\varphi$ ] is at least partly grounded in  $S$ 's having a contingent commitment.

**C10P23** By contrast, a reason is categorical just in case it's not hypothetical:

**C10P24** A reason  $R$  for  $S$  to  $\varphi$  is *categorical* =<sub>def</sub>  $R$  applies to  $S$  and [ $R$  favors  $\varphi$ ] is not even partly grounded in  $S$ 's having a contingent commitment.

**C10P25** The intuitive idea is that whereas hypothetical reasons are commitment-driven, categorical reasons are not.

**C10P26** To illustrate, suppose your reason to plant tulip bulbs is that doing so will brighten your garden. Plausibly, such a reason is hypothetical: its correlative reason-fact—[That the bulbs will brighten your garden favors planting them]—is grounded in your having a contingent interest in enjoying a cheerful garden. A marathoner's reason to push through to the finish line may be that completing the race will fulfill her New Year's resolution. If so, this reason is also hypothetical: its correlative reason-fact—[That completing the marathon will fulfill her New Year's resolution favors completing the race]—holds in virtue of her having

<sup>8</sup> If  $x$  is a conjunction, then each conjunct partly gives the reason. To simplify, we will use 'gives' to cover partial giving.

<sup>9</sup> An agent's *actual* commitments are those she actually possesses, whereas an agent's *counterfactual* commitments are ones that she would have, or be advised to have, in some improved or idealized condition (see, e.g., Williams 1979; Railton 1986; Smith 1994; Manne 2014; Markovits 2014; and Tubert 2016). To simplify our presentation, we'll speak simply of an agent's 'contingent commitments,' eliding reference to the fact that they can be actual or counterfactual.

the intention to fulfill that resolution. In each case, then, the reason is given by the agent's having the contingent commitments she does.

**C10P27** Now think of the practical reasons to save yourself from a burning building. One of these reasons may be instrumental, given by your having certain contingent commitments (e.g., to witness tomorrow's sunrise). But there is also a prudential reason for you to save yourself, one that might not be given by any of your contingent commitments. This is a candidate non-moral example of a categorical reason.

**C10P28** As noted, the categorical reasons we're most interested in are moral ones. The question is whether any such reasons exist. We return an affirmative answer by defending the thesis we'll call

**C10P29** **Categoricity:** There are categorical moral reasons.

**C10P30** While this thesis maintains that some moral reasons are categorical, it is neutral on whether any moral reasons are hypothetical. This thesis is also compatible with viewing agents as having *non-contingent* commitments which ground moral facts that give at least some of their reasons.<sup>10</sup> While nothing we say is intended to cast doubt on this possibility, we'll henceforth assume that all commitments are contingent. Doing so ensures that we do not make things too easy on ourselves by assigning to agents a commitment whose fulfilment requires moral conduct.

**C10S4**

### 1.3 Excellent Reasons

**C10P31** Let us now attend to the second principal feature of strong reasons, namely, excellence. This feature concerns not the jurisdiction of a reason, but its weight. Although these two things are not always sharply distinguished, they do come apart. Categorical reasons can possess varying weights, from trifling to decisive; the same is true of hypothetical reasons.

**C10P32** What we are trying to capture in a notion of excellence is the intuitive idea of a reason that, in a wide range of cases, beats even quite weighty competitors and does not invariably lose to reasons of other kinds. Moral reasons could not be excellent if they rarely won in case of conflict, or were always defeated by (say) aesthetic or instrumental rivals. That said, an excellent reason needn't be invariably decisive; it can retain its status even if there are possible contexts in which a competing reason would outweigh it. For instance, the prudential reason to avoid placing one's body in harm's way is arguably excellent—it is weightier than all comers

<sup>10</sup> This view, or a similar one that invokes a faculty of reason, is arguably held by Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant. Contemporary defenders of such views include Korsgaard (1996; 2009); Rosati (2003); Darwall (2006); Ferrero (2009); Velleman (2009); Katsafanas (2013); Silverstein (2016); Markovits (2018); and Paakkunainen (2018).

in a broad range of scenarios. But we can imagine a situation in which there is a weightier instrumental reason to risk injury (say, if doing so is needed to realize a special artistic or athletic goal). When it comes to moral reasons, it is no part of our brief to argue that they always win against the non-moral competition. But if moral reasons are to be excellent, as we maintain, then they must defeat (outweigh, override, undercut, extinguish, silence, exclude, overcome, neutralize, etc.) even robust competitors in a wide range of cases and not invariably lose to rivals in others.

**C10P33** While this intuitive gloss of excellence may suffice for present purposes, it might be helpful to precisify this notion. The following strikes us as a promising approach. Take a reason of a given kind, whether moral, prudential, aesthetic, epistemic, or some other. We can then say:

**C10P34** A reason of a given kind is *non-trifling* =<sub>def</sub> in a wide range of cases,<sup>11</sup> it defeats whatever competing reasons of other kinds there may be.

**C10P35** But being non-trifling is not the same as being excellent, since excellence isn't earned if each of the outweighed competitors is trivial. So excellence requires more. Let us say that

**C10P36** A reason of a given kind is *solid* =<sub>def</sub> in a wide range of cases, it defeats whatever competing non-trifling reasons of other kinds there may be.

**C10P37** But solidity, too, falls short of excellence: if all of the competitors are barely weightier than trivial ones, then they are non-trifling, though a reason defeating them wouldn't rise to the level of excellence. So let us introduce one further iteration:

**C10P38** A reason of a given kind is *robust* =<sub>def</sub> in a wide range of cases, it defeats whatever competing solid reasons of other kinds there may be.

**C10P39** However, a reason might be robust while always losing to reasons of other kinds in every case of conflict—it's just that the latter don't apply in the wide range of cases in which the robust reason wins against other rivals. That it's a sure loser when pitted against certain competitors would imply that the reason lacks the sort of excellence authority requires. Now suppose that a reason were to defeat all competing solid reasons of other kinds in a wide range of cases, *and* there were no other

<sup>11</sup> A wide range does not require a majority, though it does require diverse kinds. For those concerned by the possibility of there being an infinite number of situations: think of 'cases' as referring to a group of situations individuated in such a way that there are finitely many such groups. In principle, there are numerous ways to individuate groups of situations; we remain neutral on how best to do this.

cases in which reasons of other kinds invariably defeat it. Then that reason is not only robust, but also excellent. So:

- C10P40** A reason of a given kind is *excellent* =<sub>def</sub> it is robust and not invariably defeated by reasons of other kinds.
- C10P41** A reason's excellence is greater to the extent that it defeats a wider range of solid competitors.
- C10P42** Here's an example that illustrates our precisification of the notion of excellence. Suppose your reason for finishing a marathon is that doing so would be an immense personal success. The correlative reason-fact for this prudential reason is [That finishing the marathon would be an immense personal success favors finishing the marathon]. Suppose, however, that there are non-prudential reasons for you to quit the race, such as an instrumental reason to attend a friend's retirement party scheduled for the same time, an aesthetic reason to abandon the race for the purpose of enjoying the gorgeous scenery, and so forth. Suppose further that the correlative reason-fact just mentioned defeats, by extinguishing, your non-prudential reasons to quit; the former reason thereby nullifies the correlative reason-facts of the latter reasons. If your prudential reason defeats other such non-trifling reasons in a wide range of cases, then it is solid. If these competing reasons are themselves solid, then it is robust. Finally, if there is no other kind of reason that invariably defeats your prudential reason, then your reason is excellent.
- C10P43** Our central claim about the weight of moral reasons can be succinctly stated by the thesis we'll call
- C10P44** **Excellence:** There are excellent moral reasons.
- C10P45** As we've emphasized, excellent reasons need not be invariably decisive.<sup>12</sup> Nor, in our book, must they be moral. For all we say, some prudential reasons might be robust without invariably losing to other kinds of reasons (as in the example just described), thereby qualifying as excellent. Likewise for aesthetic or epistemic reasons. Let us also emphasize that we're not committed to classifying all moral reasons as excellent. Many are—or so we'll argue. But some may be merely solid, non-trifling, or even trifling.

<sup>12</sup> It follows that strong reasons, as we understand them, needn't '*settle what to do*'—a characteristic McPherson (2018: 254) builds into his notion of normative authority, which he applies primarily to oughts (cf. Dorsey 2016: ch. 1). Although we're not opposed to employing more robust notions of weightiness, as well as well as weaker ones, we believe that our notion of excellence strikes the right balance.



C10S5

## 2. Defending Moral Reasons

**C10P46** We dedicate this section to defending the claim that there are moral reasons. This work lays the foundation for our case in the next two sections that at least some of them are categorical and excellent.

**C10P47** Our defense has four premises. The first states:

**C10P48** 1. If an agent is blameworthy for his action, then there is reason for him not to perform that action.

**C10P49** We understand an agent to be blameworthy just in case the agent merits the reactive attitudes of censure, disapprobation, or condemnation.<sup>13</sup> Being blameworthy isn't merely to be liable to merited criticism, since such criticism can fall short of blame. In the standard case, one's illegible handwriting earns one criticism even if it does not warrant such attitudes. This understanding of blameworthiness as a particular species of merited criticism lies behind the reference to blameworthiness in the second premise as well:

**C10P50** 2. Some agents are blameworthy for performing immoral actions.

**C10P51** It follows from these two premises that

**C10P52** 3. There are reasons for those agents not to perform those actions.

**C10P53** Now for two additional premises:

**C10P54** 4. At least some of these reasons are given by moral requirements.<sup>14</sup>

**C10P55** 5. If a reason is given by a moral requirement, then the reason is a moral one.

**C10P56** So,

**C10P57** 6. There are moral reasons.

<sup>13</sup> As we understand this, one does not merit the relevant reactive attitudes simply for falling short of an 'unrealizable' ideal, as in cases of what Zheng (2021) dubs 'formative criticism,' which may instead merit a reactive attitude that Fricker (2007: 104) calls 'resentment of disappointment.' (The scenarios that Dorsey 2020 presents as challenges to claims like premise 1 are instances of such criticism, rather than targeting blameworthiness as we understand it.) Note that when an agent is blameworthy, this does not imply that anyone ought to *convey* censure, disapprobation, or condemnation; there may sometimes be compelling reasons to refrain from expressing merited blame. And there may be cases in which it is justified, all things considered, to express blame even when the target of opprobrium is not blameworthy.

<sup>14</sup> We focus here and below on requirements (rather than prohibitions) just for ease of exposition.

- C10P58** Since the claim in 5 is a direct implication of the understanding of moral reasons we provided in §1.1, we won't pause to discuss this premise here. Instead, we'll focus on the argument's other three premises in the order they're presented.
- C10P59** Premise 1 expresses the general principle that blameworthiness presupposes reasons. If there were no reasons for you to refrain from performing a given action, then performing it could not merit blame. After all, being deserving of blame entails that you have ignored, disregarded, or otherwise neglected a relevant consideration opposing the action you have performed. If there are no such considerations, then the action stands unopposed. But then you are not blameworthy for having performed it. So an agent is blameworthy for an action only if the agent has failed to comply with some reason standing against it. That is what the first premise says.
- C10P60** Although this defense of premise 1 may seem fairly simple, the issues it covers are in fact both significant and complex. So let us dig deeper, probing what are arguably the most pressing objections that can be leveled against it. We consider three such objections here.
- C10P61** The first appeals to putative counterexamples, such as the following: A person intentionally sets out to do something awful, morally speaking. He has no justification and no excuse. So he is blameworthy. But through his inadvertence, or some fortunate accident, what he ends up doing isn't at all bad, and may even be quite good. For example, imagine a disgruntled employee who believes that the coffee he is about to hand a co-worker is laced with poison. Unbeknownst to our wrongdoer, the poison is just saccharine, and the coffee is served up exactly to his co-worker's tastes. Surely such a person is blameworthy for what he's done. Yet there is no reason to avoid handing someone a delicious cup of coffee. So we have warranted blame for an action without there being a reason to have acted otherwise. Thus premise 1 is false.
- C10P62** We agree that, all else equal, there is no reason to refrain from handing a perfectly safe cup of coffee to someone who will enjoy it. But that is not what we are blaming the employee for. We are blaming him for attempting to poison his co-worker. And there is a reason not to do this. That the employee ignores this reason, or treats it as favoring his conduct, explains why he is culpable for his action. What this case illustrates is that, when an agent is blameworthy, we must attend carefully to the specific aspect of his behavior meriting criticism. The availability of descriptions under which an agent's actions are innocuous or even attractive is insufficient to establish that he is not, in virtue of performing those actions, flouting a reason to act otherwise.
- C10P63** A second route to criticizing premise 1 claims that blameworthiness does not entail the flouting of reasons, but rather just the presence of immoral motivations or intentions. The idea here is that agents are blameworthy for their misdeeds because, in performing them, such agents are ill-motivated. Thus ill-motivated

actions warrant blame even in cases where the agents lack reasons to act otherwise than they do.

**C10P64** We demur. Suppose, for instance, that a jealous person performed his moral duty out of spite. If we know nothing more about the case, then, on this basis alone, we have no reason to regard him as blameworthy for his conduct. This is not to immunize him from other sorts of criticism. Indeed, we may appropriately issue a negative assessment of his motives, various aspects of which could even merit blame. Further, we might also rightly blame him for having discharged his duty resentfully, snidely, or only begrudgingly, though such blame would be merited only if there is a reason not to behave in such a manner. No matter how ill-motivated, a person is not deserving of blame for performing an action, or for performing it in a particular manner, if there are no reasons that oppose his doing so.

**C10P65** Turn now to the third objection to premise 1. This objection says that agents are blameworthy for actions if they violate a norm of conduct in good standing—even if they lack a reason to do what the norm says. The objection assumes that such a norm need not give reasons of compliance. Rather, the norm is justified on other grounds. For example, general conformity to it would achieve a valuable social goal, such as coordinating behavioral expectations, encouraging agents to act in non-harmful ways, or signaling to community members that certain actions are apt for sanction. The core thought here is that warranted blame occurs within a practice defined by a set of rules in good standing (such as those effective in achieving a valuable social goal); blame is deserved whenever these rules call for it, and they may do so even when there is no reason for a given individual to abide by these rules. As a result, premise 1 is false.

**C10P66** While we agree that warranted blame occurs within a practice, we find the line of thought underlying this objection unpersuasive. Specifically, we deny that mere failure to conform to a norm in good standing thereby renders an agent blameworthy. Although the norm to observe public debates between candidates for public office is in good standing, since it promotes a valuable social goal (such as having elections decided by an informed electorate), a given agent is not blameworthy for flouting this norm if there is no reason for that agent to conform to it.

**C10P67** Merited blame points to a shortcoming. When the object of such blame is not a collective but an individual, as in our cases, that shortcoming implicates the agent. Although she may be liable to certain sorts of criticism for flouting norms in good standing, she does not merit the reactive attitudes of censure, disapprobation, or condemnation for flouting a norm that fails to give her any reason for obedience. Those attitudes would be deeply unfitting. What is more, any norms licensing blame must allow for the existence of legitimate excuses; an agent has such an excuse if there are no reasons for her to comply with those norms. The objection we are considering severs the tie between blameworthiness and personal shortcoming, sanctions unfitting reactions, and fails to recognize a class of legitimate excuses. Premise 1 preserves the connection between blameworthiness and

personal shortcoming, bars the relevant unfitting reactions, and can help explain why agents are sometimes blameless for the actions they perform. That is good reason to accept this premise and to reject the third objection.

**C10P68** Consider next the argument's second premise, which states that some agents are blameworthy for having acted immorally. We regard this premise as safe. While it has been denied, such denials do not occupy a privileged position that would justify either the rejection of our view or the disruption of our efforts to defend it. What is more, the premise can be defended by observing that agents sometimes inexcusably perform wrongful actions on the basis of uncoerced choices expressive of their character. It is fair to say that if agents act in this way, then they are blameworthy for their actions. It follows that some moral agents are blameworthy for their immoral conduct, just as premise 2 says.<sup>15</sup>

**C10P69** Turn now to premise 4, which tells us that at least some of the reasons are given by moral requirements. We can defend this premise by identifying examples in which (i) agents flout reasons applying to them, (ii) agents are blameworthy, (iii) agent fall within the scope of a moral requirement, and (iv) agents' blameworthiness is explained by their failure to conform to that requirement. This confluence, we contend, is best explained by the claim that those reasons are given by these requirements.

**C10P70** Consider a case in which you've promised to provide a meal for an injured colleague and her family. Suppose that, rather than keeping your promise, you fritter the day away by playing video games. You would be blameworthy for doing so. We know from premise 1 that there must be a reason for you to have acted otherwise, since you are blameworthy. We also know that there is a moral requirement to keep this promise. Furthermore, your blameworthiness is explained by the fact that you failed to satisfy this requirement, by breaking your promise. What could explain this confluence? Suppose the reason to fulfill your promise is given (in the sense specified above) by the moral requirement to provide a meal. That is, suppose the reason's correlative reason-fact,

**C10P71** [That you've promised to prepare a meal favors providing it],

**C10P72** is fully grounded in the fact that you've made that promise together with the fact that you are morally required to keep your promises. That would make good sense of things. By contrast, were the reason and requirement not related in this way, the fact that you are blameworthy for violating the requirement, by failing to do what you have reason to do, would be utterly perplexing.

<sup>15</sup> Those with qualms about the notion of blameworthiness are welcome to focus on a variant of our defense of moral reasons that instead appeals to the notion of regret-worthiness (discussed in §4). We could then recast our substantiation of premise 2 by noting the immense plausibility of the claim that inexcusably performing wrongful actions on the basis of uncoerced choices expressive of one's character is regret-worthy.

**C1oP73** This line of reasoning easily generalizes to other moral requirements and prohibitions. Consider, for instance, the requirement to protect your children from lethal danger, or the prohibition against engaging in recreational slaughter. Absent excuse, those who violate these demands are blameworthy, which entails that there is a reason for them to have acted otherwise. And their blameworthiness is explained by the fact that they have flouted the requirement or prohibition in question. In any such case, and in a great many others, this confluence is best explained by viewing the requirement or prohibition as giving the reason. That is why we should believe premise 4.

C10P74 This concludes our defense of the existence of moral reasons. We turn now to arguing for the claim that some of these are categorical.

**C<sub>10</sub>S<sub>6</sub>**

C10P75 Our argument here spotlights a figure we'll call the 'immoralist.' The immoralist is an agent who is fully informed about non-normative matters and has a perfectly consistent set of commitments. He is highly capable of assessing options, assiduously gathers information to discover how best to pursue his chosen goals, and takes the needed steps to ensure his goals are met. He is also, crucially, entirely indifferent or opposed to the demands conveyed by various moral requirements and prohibitions, and has no contingent commitments that would be served by toeing the moral line. The character we are imagining has not been brainwashed or neurologically manipulated into having his odious psychological profile, but autonomously aligns himself with evil ends. While such a person needn't always choose evil ends or deeds as such (i.e., *de dicto*, under the guise of evil), he does delight in such things as humiliating the weak, breaking promises that others heavily rely on, or, at the limit, killing people for sport. He forsakes opportunities to easily rescue others from dire situations and takes immense pleasure in watching the fatal consequences unfold. He discriminates against others based on their appearance. He attaches no intrinsic importance to the interests of others. And so on.

**CioP76** We focus on the figure of the immoralist not because his misdeeds are somehow disfavored in a way that others' actions are not. As we shall see, this position is untenable. Rather, the immoralist simply serves as a heuristic device in moral philosophy, in much the same way as a frictionless plane does in physics.<sup>16</sup> In particular, the figure of the immoralist enables us to clearly formulate our argument for the Categoricity thesis, which has two premises:

<sup>16</sup> The immoralist we've described is familiar from literature, reminiscent of characters such as Iago (*Othello*), Michel (*The Immoralist*), Humbert Humbert (*Lolita*), Judge Holden (*Blood Meridian*), Annie Wilkes (*Misery*), and Anton Chigurh (*No Country for Old Men*).

- C10P77 A. If there are reasons for the immoralist not to perform his immoral actions, then at least some of those reasons are categorical moral reasons.
- C10P78 B. There are reasons for the immoralist not to perform his immoral actions.
- C10P79 So,
- C10P80 **Categoricity:** There are categorical moral reasons.
- C10P81 We will try to reveal the attractions of both premises of this argument in what follows.<sup>17</sup>

### C10S7 3.1 Immoralists and Their Reasons

- C10P82 Premise A of the argument is meant to be acceptable to both fans and critics of categorical reasons. The immoralist we are imagining is flouting widely acknowledged moral requirements, and is precisely a person who lacks any contingent commitments that would be furthered were he to hew to the moral path. So *if* there are any reasons for him to refrain from his evil deeds, then those reasons are categorical ones, given by the moral requirements that direct him to so refrain. This constitutes both a defense and an explanation of premise A.
- C10P83 Critics might push back in one of two ways. A first objection insists that the immoralist must have *some* contingent commitments that would be served were he to refrain from his wicked ways.<sup>18</sup> On such a line, whatever reasons the immoralist has to desist will stem straightforwardly from his aversion to jail, or his desire to avoid the potential harms inflicted by his vengeful victims, and so on. That would enable these critics to resist premise A, since the immoralist's reasons would then be hypothetical, rather than categorical. But this response is unavailable, since we have stipulated that the immoralist does *not* have such commitments. In reply, the critic is likely to raise the second objection, namely, that this makes the immoralist a mere fantasy, for all people in the real world have some commitments that would be served were they to refrain from moral wrongdoing. Yet even if all actual people do have some contingent ends that would be served by avoiding cruelty, we can specify a possible world in which there is an immoralist who does not.<sup>19</sup> And this

<sup>17</sup> For a precursor of this argument, see Shafer-Landau (2003: 187–8 and 2009). Cf. Darwall (2006: §1.3). Enoch (2011: 261–3) refers to a similar line of reasoning as the ‘Sufficiently Bad Bad Guy’ argument.

<sup>18</sup> Schroeder (2007) can be interpreted as advancing this criticism; we respond to his criticism here and assess his preferred position in Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (2024: ch. 9, §4, and app. 9.B). Recall that we’re assuming the commitments in question are contingent.

<sup>19</sup> Many fantasies depict genuine possibilities. Sharon Street (2009: §4) agrees that immoralists are possible but claims that when we are sufficiently imaginative to picture what such a person is like, we’ll no longer be tempted to think that there are reasons for him to refrain from such cruel treatment. But

is all that's needed to establish the claim that the reasons to which premise A refers are categorical.

**C10P84** To further allay the worry that the immoralist is purely fictitious, imagine someone very much like our immoralist, but who has, like the rest of us, some contingent commitments that *do* give him hypothetical reasons to refrain from immoral behavior. Such an agent might, for example, have a strong aversion to being punished for his misdeeds. As we see it, this aversion might give him an additional reason not to inflict misery on others, one that is likelier than a moral reason to motivate him to do the right thing. However, such additional reasons—whether hypothetical or not—are not the whole story. They can't be. For the misanthrope we are envisioning is as blameworthy as the immoralist. Given the connection between blameworthiness and reasons codified in premise 1 of our argument above, this entails that there are reasons opposing his actions. But he hasn't thwarted his prudential or instrumental reasons, or indeed any others that are commitment-driven. On the contrary: he's blameworthy despite fully honoring all such reasons. His blameworthiness is instead due to his failure to respect other reasons, such as one concerning the misery his conduct occasions, which are not commitment-driven. So, if there are reasons opposing this misanthrope's misdeeds, at least some will be categorical, not hypothetical.

**C10P85** From here it's a small step to establishing that the reasons would be *moral*, as premise A asserts. For this to be so, their correlative reason-facts would need to be fully grounded in moral facts, together with the reasons themselves. That is what we find here. Among the misdeeds the misanthrope is blameworthy for are immoral actions, such as wantonly inflicting suffering on others, which flout a number of moral requirements. When conjoined with the reasons opposing the misanthrope's conduct, those requirements are fitted to fully ground the correlative reason-facts at issue—for instance, the fact that his behavior will occasion misery favors refraining from such behavior. This is evidence that the reasons are moral ones.

**C10P86** Supposing we are right about this, premise A is secure: *if* there are any reasons opposing the immoralist's actions, then there are categorical moral reasons. It is time to consider whether the antecedent of that conditional—premise B—is true.

### **C10S8** 3.2 The Blameworthiness of Immoralists

**C10P87** Premise B says that there are reasons for the immoralist not to do what he has his heart set on. We can summarize our defense of this premise thus: Agents who perpetrate serious immoralities, while possessed of deeply immoral motivations and

Street offers no argument for this claim, focusing instead on raising objections to the idea that we have certain *prudential* reasons that are not grounded in contingent commitments.

intentions, and lacking in any excuse, are blameworthy for their deeds. The immoralist we are envisioning meets all of these conditions. His actions are as bad as can be. His motivations and intentions are no better. And he is clearly an agent, responsible for his deeds. It may be a gross understatement to say so, but when such an agent succeeds in his aim, he is blameworthy for his actions.

**C10P88** As we argued above, however, one is blameworthy for an action only if there is some reason to refrain from committing it. Since the immoralist is blameworthy for his deeds, there is a reason opposing his actions. That he has violated or ignored it is the basis of his blameworthiness.

**C10P89** We have here the makings of an argument for B. Its first premise is identical with premise 1 in our argument for the existence of moral reasons, repeated here:

**C10P90** 1. If an agent is blameworthy for his action, then there is reason for him not to perform that action.

**C10P91** The argument's other premise is a variation on premise 2 in the argument for moral reasons:

**C10P92** 2\*. The immoralist is blameworthy for his immoral actions.

**C10P93** These two premises entail:

**C10P94** B. There are reasons for the immoralist not to perform his immoral actions.

**C10S9** *Each premise in this argument strikes us as highly plausible. We have defended the first premise in §2, and so focus our efforts here entirely on the second premise, 2\*.*

**C10P95** This premise tells us that immoralists are blameworthy for their terrible deeds. It can be supported thus: If *any* agents are blameworthy for their actions, surely those who are, without excuse, voluntarily bent on the gravest evil are among them. This is so whether immoralists are doing evil for its own sake, or doing what is in fact evil, all the while characterizing their actions to themselves as aimed at a good. An informed, uncoerced immoralist is the perfect exemplar of the blameworthy agent. His consistency is no proof against criticism. His intelligence and cunning, his ability to select appropriate means to his chosen ends, and the meticulous care with which he prepares to hurt others render him more, rather than less, liable to blame.

**C10P96** We can defend this verdict, and so 2\*, by means of the same line of reasoning we used in our defense of premise 2 (in §2). There, we maintained that if an agent inexcusably performs an action that is morally wrong on the basis of an uncoerced choice expressive of his character, then he is blameworthy for his action. Now consider the immoralist. He has performed morally terrible deeds. Moreover, he's done so on the basis of uncoerced choices expressive of his character. Furthermore,



he lacks an excuse for his characteristic wrongdoing. These three points jointly support the claim that, and explain why, he is blameworthy for his terrible deeds.

**C10P97** The first two points are simply part of our stipulation regarding the figure of the immoralist. The third point follows from the observation that the standard conditions for exculpation do not apply here. The dedicated evildoer we are imagining is not compelled to act as he does, but has chosen his path and has ruthlessly pursued it in the absence of duress, coercion, or factual ignorance. His terrible deeds are as inexcusable as an agent's actions can be.

**C10P98** Note that the argument we've offered is compatible with the possibility of a moral monster of some description whose wrongdoing *is* fully excused. Perhaps, for instance, such a person was brainwashed from an early age by members of his community, prevented from leaving the community, and raised in such ignorance as to be unable to engage in the sorts of reasoning that might lead him to the moral truth. These conditions might together fully exculpate this person—call him the 'incurrible evildoer.' But even if the conditions were exculpatory, this would in no way threaten the case we've made for categorical moral reasons. Two observations support this verdict.

**C10P99** First, our argument requires just a single example in which the figure introduced above is blameworthy for his evil deeds. The original case we described satisfies this description. The immoralist is a paradigm of blameworthiness, even if his incorrigible cousin is not. Second, even if incorrigible evildoing is an excuse,<sup>20</sup> this gives us no reason to suppose that anything less than incorrigibility is exculpatory. If the incorrigible evildoer is to be excused for his bad behavior (a matter about which we remain agnostic), this is presumably because there was *never* a moment in which he was able to autonomously elect good over evil. Here in the real world, however, such moments are available to nearly anyone—and, probably, to everyone. So it's likely that everyone, or perhaps nearly everyone, is subject to categorical moral reasons they would be blameworthy for defying.

**C10P100** One might think that the incorrigible evildoer poses a problem for our view for a different reason, expressed by the following argument: If there is categorical moral reason for one agent to  $\phi$ , then there is categorical moral reason for every agent to  $\phi$ . But for every morally required action, there will be at least one such agent—the incorrigible evildoer—who lacks such a reason. So there are no categorical moral reasons after all.

**C10P101** Both premises are mistaken. The initial conditional is false; there are many categorical moral reasons that apply only to a subset of agents. There is, for example, a categorical moral reason for those issuing racist comments to apologize for their conduct, a reason their victims lack; that you promised to help your neighbors gives you a categorical moral reason most others lack (since they've made no such

<sup>20</sup> Wolf (1987) maintains that it is; Mason (2019: ch. 6) treats such incorrigibility as an excuse from only one type of blame.

promise). The premise that there is no categorical moral reason for the incorrigible evildoer to refrain from his awful conduct is also false. To be clear, we are allowing that he is blameless, if his conduct is indeed fully excusable. However, that he is fully excusable (if he is) is one thing; that there was no reason opposing his conduct is quite another. An excuse for bad behavior does not extinguish the reasons opposing it; in fact, excuses for poor conduct presuppose the existence of reasons not to engage in it. Arguably, Jean Valjean should be excused for stealing bread to feed his sister's children. Still, there is reason for him not to steal. If there weren't, then his actions wouldn't be apt for exculpation in the first place.

**C10P102** While the line of thought we've pursued in our argument for the existence of categorical moral reasons has taken a variety of twists and turns, we can succinctly summarize it as follows. Premise A of the argument says: if there are reasons for the immoralist to act otherwise than he does, then at least some of them are categorical moral reasons. We defended this premise in §3.1, by drawing attention to our stipulations regarding the immoralist's choices, character, and aims. Premise B says: there are indeed reasons for the immoralist to act otherwise than he does. We defended that premise in this subsection, by means of an argument whose first premise, borrowed from our argument in §2, registers a general connection between blameworthiness and reasons; its second premise—that the immoralist is blameworthy—is a direct consequence of his having inexcusably performed morally terrible deeds on the basis of uncoerced choices expressive of his character.

**C10P103** Importantly, the line of reasoning we've pursued in this section is not applicable just to the immoralist or misanthrope; it applies to all of us. If even those miscreants are subject to categorical moral reasons, then surely the rest of us are. After all, it's not as if ordinary agents remove themselves from the jurisdiction of those reasons just because they're better motivated than the bad guys described above. Were you to perpetrate the misconduct they so enjoy, you'd be as blameworthy as they are. This means that you—together with the rest of us—are subject to the reasons entailed by that blameworthiness. Those reasons are both moral and categorical.

**C10S10** **4. Defending the Excellence Thesis**

**C10P104** When arguing for Categoricality, we developed the intuitive idea that there are intimate connections between moral reasons and states such as being blameworthy. Here we draw and expand upon these points in order to argue for the Excellence thesis, according to which there are excellent moral reasons.

**C10P105** We begin by drawing attention to three points about blameworthiness implicit in our discussion to this point. The first is that blameworthiness is 'focused': when blame is appropriately directed at an agent, it is directed at a normative failure of

a particular kind, which could be (say) moral, prudential, epistemic, or aesthetic. Indeed, one of these failures captures what has gone wrong with blameworthy agents of the sort we considered in the previous section. Such agents are not (or not merely) blameworthy for prudential, epistemic, or aesthetic failures. Rather, they are blameworthy for *moral* ones. Since the failure on which their blameworthiness is focused is moral, such agents are morally blameworthy.

**C10P106** A second point about blameworthiness is that it is ‘revealing’: when an agent merits blame, and the failure for which he is blameworthy is of a certain kind, then there are reasons of that kind which disfavor the action he is blameworthy for. In the case of moral failure, for example, an agent’s being morally blameworthy for that failure shows there to be a moral reason he has flouted.

**C10P107** A third point about blameworthiness is that it is ‘gradable’: agents and their actions can be more or less blameworthy, in the sense that the intensity of the blame that is merited can differ. In some cases, only mild censure is called for; one is blameworthy, but only a little, as when one is slightly rude to a clerk. In other cases, an agent merits intense disapproval that is not countermanded by any merited esteem, however substantial. For example, a famous but mediocre saxophone player may release a record of himself improvising over an original version of a jazz masterpiece. This behavior deserves intense disapproval for the way in which it treats the original, namely, as a mere vehicle to increase wealth and fame.<sup>21</sup> It is also plausible to suppose that such intense disapproval is not countermanded by whatever esteem the behavior earns (say, because it is financially savvy and garners increased popularity). When the blame that is merited for performing a given action is of this last intensity and would not be countermanded by any merited esteem for having performed that action, we’ll say it is ‘deep,’ and the agent ‘deeply blameworthy.’

**C10P108** All three points generalize to states other than blameworthiness. Consider regret-worthiness. Like blameworthiness, regret-worthiness is focused: it concerns normative failures of particular kinds, including ones in which agents have acted in ways that exhibit moral failures. Moreover, regret-worthiness is revealing, for when an action is regret-worthy, it reveals there to be reason against having acted in that way. Finally, regret-worthiness is gradable, as it comes in degrees. When the regret that is merited for having performed a given action is intense and would not be countermanded by any merited enthusiasm for having performed that action, then it is deep; such an action is deeply regret-worthy.

**C10P109** These points interact in the following manner. Suppose that an agent is deeply morally blameworthy for performing an action that is deeply morally regret-worthy. It follows from the first two points that there is moral reason for the agent to refrain from performing this action. Since the blameworthiness and

<sup>21</sup> See <http://www.jazzoasis.com/methenyonkennyg.htm>.

regret-worthiness are deep, the third point entails that there is no countermanding merited esteem for performing this action. As this implies the absence of any considerations at least as weighty as those revealed by that blameworthiness and regret-worthiness, the moral reason for the agent to perform this action compares favorably to—and, indeed, defeats—whatever considerations there may be for this agent to refrain from performing that action.

C10P110

Now for our argument, which applies these points to examples on behalf of the Excellence thesis. Recall that an excellent reason needn't always be decisive, but it is robust (i.e., in a wide range of cases, it defeats whatever competing solid reasons of other kinds there may be) and does not invariably lose to reasons of other kinds. The requirement for parents to protect their children from lethal danger, we contend, gives such a reason. There are cases in which solid reasons of various non-moral kinds favor acting in ways that violate this requirement. Imagine a scenario in which there are competing non-moral reasons of every other kind that apply to you. Suppose the best are solid prudential and instrumental ones which favor preparing for a career-enhancing meeting. But you realize that acting on these reasons would leave your children unattended, exposing them to lethal danger. Had you opted to prepare for your meeting, and so imperil your children, you'd thereby be deeply morally blameworthy, and your act would be deeply morally regret-worthy. We'd register the same verdict no matter the kind of competing solid reasons at play. Endangering your children in order to (say) visit the Louvre or complete important lab work wouldn't get you or your action off the hook—the same blame and regret would be merited. Given that blameworthiness and regret-worthiness are focused and revealing, it follows that there is moral reason for you to protect your children in such a case. Since the blameworthiness and regret-worthiness are deep, there is no countermanding merited esteem for failing to extend protection. So the moral reason to perform such an action defeats whatever competing solid reasons of other kinds there may be for not doing so; moreover, since all candidate rivals are present, that reason is not invariably defeated by reasons of other kinds. Given that the moral reason's victory in this example would be repeated in a wide range of cases, it follows that there is an excellent reason for you to protect your children.<sup>22</sup> This example is hardly unique. The same line of reasoning could be applied to reveal the excellence of moral reasons given by other fixed points, as well as many moral requirements and prohibitions extending beyond them.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Darwall (2006b) and Portmore (2011), who invoke considerations of blameworthiness in crafting complementary defenses of comparatively weighty moral reasons. They do not, however, advert to the three features of blame (viz., its being focused, revealing, and gradable) that make our argument tick.

**C10P111** Summing up, our argument for the Excellence thesis runs as follows:

**C10P112** 1. There is a wide range of cases in which agents would be deeply morally blameworthy for failing to act as moral requirements and prohibitions direct, where that failure would also be deeply regret-worthy.

**C10P113** Moreover,

**C10P114** 2. In those cases, there are competing reasons of every kind; the best of them are solid non-moral ones that favor acting incompatibly with these moral requirements and prohibitions.

**C10P115** Since

**C10P116** 3. Blameworthiness and regret-worthiness are focused, revealing, and gradable,

**C10P117** it follows that

**C10P118** 4. There are moral reasons to act as moral requirements and prohibitions direct, despite the existence of solid non-moral reasons that favor acting otherwise.

**C10P119** Given that

**C10P120** 5. The blameworthiness and regret-worthiness are deep,

**C10P121** it follows that

**C10P122** 6. There is no countermanding merited esteem.

**C10P123** So, in light of the above, we can infer that

**C10P124** 7. The moral reasons revealed by that blameworthiness and regret-worthiness defeat whatever competing solid non-moral reasons of other kinds there may be in those cases, and thereby are not invariably defeated by non-moral reasons of other kinds.

**C10P125** Consequently,

**C10P126** **Excellence:** There are excellent moral reasons.

C10S11

## 5. Moral Authority

C10P127

The arguments we've presented to this point form the backbone of our answer to the authority question. Each focuses on specific cases in which agents would be blameworthy—in some cases, deeply so—for moral failures that also merit regret. Scenarios of this sort are not rare or unusual. With a little patience, we could identify a host of others in which moral failures are worthy of such attitudes. These situations include actions involving breaches of trust, gross neglect, indifference, exploitation, cruelty, and malicious intent, which violate moral requirements in addition to those we've considered. In cases such as these, and a broad range of others, there are moral reasons that are strong, being both categorical and excellent.

C10P128

Accordingly, the arguments we've advanced provide good reason to believe

C10P129

**Moral Authority:** In a wide range of cases, there are strong moral reasons.

C10S12

## 6. Morality vs Other Familiar Normative Systems

C10P130

If our defense of strong moral reasons is successful, it resolves one sort of skepticism about the authority of morality. This kind of skepticism is neither metaphysical nor epistemological—it does not call into question the existence of moral facts or our ability to grasp them. Rather, it queries whether morality enjoys the sort of authority, vis-à-vis other familiar normative systems, that realists claim for it. Philippa Foot, who has raised this concern as sharply as anyone, suggested that while people talk [...] about the “binding force” of morality [...] it is not clear what this means.<sup>23</sup> After posing this clarificatory challenge, Foot went on to highlight a further one: we must be told what it is that makes the moral ‘should’ relevantly different from the ‘shoulds’ appearing in normative statements of other kinds, particularly the ‘should’ statements based on rules of etiquette, or rules of a club.<sup>24</sup> These are paradigmatic instances of what we'll call ‘institutional norms,’ a term covering the rules of games, teams, guilds, disciplines, fraternal orders, and their kin—all of which clearly lack the sort of authority realists accord to morality. In Foot's judgment, the difference between moral norms and institutional ones has yet to be satisfactorily defended and explained.

C10P131

The discussion thus far provides a response to Foot's clarificatory challenge: the binding force of morality consists in the fact that moral reasons given by moral requirements and prohibitions are categorical and excellent. As for the other challenge, we propose that moral norms are relevantly different from institutional

<sup>23</sup> Foot (1972: 310).

<sup>24</sup> Foot (1972: 309). Foot couches her discussion in terms of moral shoulds and imperatives that she characterizes as categorical. Under a plausible reading, she has something in the vicinity of strong moral reasons in mind.

ones, because moral norms give reasons that are strong, while these other norms do not. The work we've done supports the conclusion that moral reasons are strong, thereby taking the first step toward vindicating this proposal. The next step is to show that no institutional reasons are strong. We'll do this by defending the claim that there are no such reasons at all.

**C10P132** Our earlier argument against promiscuous views of reasons (§1.1) reminds us that when it comes to reasons, there is no free lunch.<sup>25</sup> Those views claim that every norm is accompanied by a correlative reason—no matter the content or basis of the norm. But this is too quick: it cannot be assumed that there are institutional reasons. There are institutional norms, to be sure. And there are often reasons to obey them. But whether the reasons flow from those norms, rather than being given by (say) instrumental, prudential, or moral ones, remains an open question.

**C10P133** We wish to close it, and return a negative answer, via an argument in which etiquette serves as a lead example. Drawing upon §4's discussion of the notion of regret-worthiness, this argument states:

**C10P134** 1. There is reason of kind  $K$  to  $\varphi$  only if failure to  $\varphi$  is of kind  $K$  and is regret-worthy as such (i.e., is regret-worthy just insofar as it is a failure of kind  $K$ ).

**C10P135** However,

**C10P136** 2. A failure of etiquette is not regret-worthy as such.

**C10P137** It follows that

**C10P138** There are no etiquette reasons.

**C10P139** Let us comment on the two premises in this argument, each of which strikes us as highly plausible.

**C10P140** The first relies on the earlier observation that regret-worthiness is 'focused': it is directed at a normative failure of a particular kind, which could be moral, prudential, epistemic, aesthetic, or the like. A failure to invest wisely, to plan efficiently, or to support a friend in need are prudential, instrumental, and moral failures, respectively. Each is worthy of regret as such. Of course, some actions can manifest two normative failures at once; these merit regret twice over. (This is double-counting precisely where it's legitimate.) None of this is to say that an agent should regret a failure under a description referencing the kind in question. Rather, the point is that an action is worthy of regret just insofar as it is a certain kind of normative failure.

<sup>25</sup> Foot (1972: 309) agrees that reasons are not promiscuous, describing the view that all norms supply reasons as 'implausible.'



**C10P144** Turn now to premise 2, which allows that many failures of etiquette are regret-worthy, denying only that they merit regret *as such*—that is, just insofar as they are violations of the rule of etiquette. While some impolite actions are indeed regret-worthy, this is not because they have violated a standard of etiquette *per se*. Rather, it is because they involve such things as immorality, imprudence, or instrumental irrationality. Considered simply as a failure of etiquette, donning white trousers after Labor Day merits no regret, even if it is instrumentally regret-worthy (since it frustrates one's desire to be fashionable). This is not an isolated

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case: counterexamples swamp the idea that failures of etiquette merit regret just insofar as they are failures of etiquette. When combined with 1, this point entails that there are no etiquette reasons, despite there often being reason to do as etiquette says.

**C10P145** We've now defended the claim that there are no such things as etiquette reasons, and a fortiori no strong etiquette reasons. So far as we can tell, exactly the same reasoning can be employed to cast doubt on the existence of any institutional reasons. The upshot is that we have a ready defense and explanation of the asymmetry that caused Foot such worry: moral norms are relevantly different from institutional ones because the former give reasons that are strong, while the latter do not give reasons at all.

**C10P146** Foot's skepticism has typically been cast as questioning the authority of morality vis-à-vis normative domains such as etiquette or social clubs, whose rules are normally compatible with morality's. But one might also ask realists to explain why morality enjoys a privileged position as compared with normative systems instructing agents to flout moral requirements and prohibitions. After all, there are also Mafioso norms and the norms of apartheid. These might be regarded as rivals to morality not just in their content, but also with respect to their authority. However, these are still institutional norms, and our reasoning above works equally well for them. Given the falsity of the promiscuous view, it shouldn't be assumed that such norms give any reasons at all. Indeed, we have positive reason to deny that there are any such reasons, since failures to comply with Mafioso or apartheid norms are not regret-worthy as such. This is not to say that there could never be any reasons to act as those norms instruct. A consigliere may well have instrumental reason to do as the don commands. Black citizens in South Africa faced dire punishments for violating apartheid norms, and so had some prudential reason to comply with them. But these reasons do not flow from the Mafioso or apartheid norms themselves if our argumentation is sound. For it supports the general conclusion that

**C10P147** There are no institutional reasons,

**C10P148** which are precisely what alleged Mafioso or apartheid reasons would be.

**C10S13**

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