

University of Missouri, St. Louis
IRL @ UMSL

Theses

Graduate Works

4-29-2013

The Rational Authority of Morality: Reason Internalism and Negative Duties

Kyle Stewart Barrett

University of Missouri-St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <http://irl.umsl.edu/thesis>

Recommended Citation

Barrett, Kyle Stewart, "The Rational Authority of Morality: Reason Internalism and Negative Duties" (2013). *Theses*. 255.
<http://irl.umsl.edu/thesis/255>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Works at IRL @ UMSL. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of IRL @ UMSL. For more information, please contact marvinh@umsl.edu.

THE RATIONAL AUTHORITY OF MORALITY:
REASON INTERNALISM AND NEGATIVE DUTIES

by

KYLE STEWART BARRETT
B.A., Philosophy, DePauw University, 2010

A THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI- ST. LOUIS

In partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

PHILOSOPHY

May, 2013

Advisory Committee

Eric Wiland, Ph.D.
Chairperson

John Brunero, Ph.D.

Waldemar Rohloff, Ph.D.

Abstract

In this essay, I will argue that there are moral requirements which are requirements of practical reason that apply to all agents independent of their motives. First, I will outline the argument for the thesis of reason internalism and then briefly set up the resulting problem for the rational authority of morality. To resolve this problem, I will argue for a principle of reason transmission. From this principle, I will argue that there are cases in which agents fail to have a reason for action, regardless of their motivations. Further, I argue that these are universal requirements. Thus, I conclude that there are actions that rationality requires all agents not to do.

1.1 Introduction

The problem for the rational authority of morality results from the apparent inconsistency of the theses of *moral objectivity*, *moral internalism*, *reason internalism*, and *egoism*. However, I will argue that there is no problem for the rational authority of morality and that these four theses are in fact consistent with each other. To do so, I will argue for a principle of reason transmission and show that, in virtue of this principle of reason transmission and reason internalism, there are cases in which agents fail to have a reason for action, regardless of their motivations. Furthermore, that these are universal requirements and thus there are actions that rationality requires all agents not to do.

1.2 Reason Internalism

Reason internalism is an answer to the question as to whether external reasons for action exist. External reasons are understood as reasons for action that are independent of the agent's motivations. In contrast, internal reasons for action are those which depend on

the agent's motivations. Famously, Bernard Williams argued that external reasons for action do not exist. His argument for such a conclusion is as follows:

- i) If a reason is a reason for action, then it could be someone's reason for acting on a particular occasion.
- ii) If it could be someone's reason for acting on a particular occasion, then it would figure in an explanation of that action.
- iii) No external reason statement could *by itself* offer an explanation of anyone's action.
- iv) Thus, an external reason could not be someone's reason for acting on a particular occasion.
- v) Therefore, an external reason cannot be a reason for action.¹

The significance of this argument is that if an external reason cannot be a reason for action, then all reasons for action must be dependent on the agent's motivations. As Christine Korsgaard notes, "it seems to be a requirement on practical reasons, that they be capable of motivating us."² This requirement can be formalized as a necessary condition for being a reason for an action.

*(Reason Internalism) There is a reason for A to do X only if doing X satisfies some element of A's subjective motivational set.*³

However, this requirement poses a central problem for any ethical theory that supposes the rational authority of morality.

1.3 The Problem for the Rational Authority of Morality

The problem is that the thesis of reason internalism is incompatible with the following three theses taken together:

(Moral Objectivity) Moral requirements apply to all agents independent of their motives.

(Moral Internalism) Moral requirements are requirements of practical reason.

*(Egoism) There is no necessary connection between the motives of different agents.*⁴

¹ Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 295.

² Christine Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason," *Journal of Philosophy*, 83, no. 1 (1986): 11.

³ Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 292-298.

Together the first two theses entail that morality provides agents with categorical imperatives. These categorical imperatives are requirements of practical reason that apply to all agents independent of their motives. There seems to be a problem for the rational authority of morality, if we accept egoism and reason internalism. The problem is that if we take these two theses seriously, then “the man who rejects morality because he sees no reason to obey its rules can be convicted of villainy but not of inconsistency. Nor will his actions necessarily be irrational.”⁵ In other words, egoism and reason internalism entails that morality cannot have any rational authority; morality cannot universally provide agents with reasons for action.

In an attempt to resolve this inconsistency, philosophers have argued for the rejection of each of the different theses. For the remainder of this essay, I will argue that there is no problem for the rational authority of morality. In other words, I will argue that these four theses are consistent with each other. I do concede that reason internalism and the thesis of egoism are inconsistent with *some* categorical imperatives; in particular, those categorical imperatives that require agents to *do* certain actions, or positive duties. However, as I will argue, there is no inconsistency with categorical imperatives that require agents to *not do* certain actions, or negative duties.

2.1 The Principle of Instrumental Reasoning

The most familiar principle of practical reason is the principle of instrumental reasoning. This principle states that by willing an end, rationality requires that one wills the necessary means to that end. In other words, if I intend an end, then I should take the

⁴ David Brink, "A Puzzle about the Rational Authority of Morality," *Nous-Supplement: Philosophical Perspectives*, 6 (1992): 1.

⁵ Foot Philippa, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 289.

necessary means to that end. However, this is not the principle of practical reason needed to show what reasons for action there are for an agent. First, this principle derives a normative claim from a seemingly non-normative claim; that I *should* take the means to my ends is surely normative, whereas intending an end is not apparently so. If intending, or willing, an end is not normative, then we are faced with Hume's objection that one cannot generate an "ought" from an "is." Christine Korsgaard addresses this problem by arguing that "you must think that the fact that you will an end *is a reason* for the end."⁶ Thinking that the fact that you will an end is a reason for that end may make the means normative, you should think there is a reason for the means to that end, but thinking so does not, by its self, make it the case that there is a reason for the end or the means.

Clearly, there is a difference between *thinking* that the fact that you will an end is a reason for the end and *it being the case* that there is a reason for the end. To see that intention is not normative in this way, we need only to look at an example from Bernard Williams. Suppose there is a glass of clear liquid before me and I have a thirst for a gin and tonic. Believing the clear liquid to be gin, I intend to mix it with tonic and drink it. Yet, suppose that the clear liquid is in fact petrol. Though I intend to mix it with tonic and drink it, we want to say that I do not have a reason to do so.⁷ Through this example, we can see that intending to do something is not the same as there being a reason to do so.

2.2 The Right Kind of "Should"

Additionally, we should draw a distinction concerning different senses of the term "should." As such, the "should" used in the instrumental principle is not the reason for

⁶ Christine Korsgaard, "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason," *The Constitution of Agency*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 58.

⁷ Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 293.

action “should.” Rather, this is the “should” of good practical thought.⁸ To explicate this concept of “good practical thought” as distinct from “reason for action,” let us return to the example from Williams. In the example, we can say that since I intend to mix the clear liquid with tonic and drink it and to do so I must fetch some tonic, then the principle of instrumental reason states that I *should* fetch some tonic. This “should” is a “should” of good practical thought, not reason for action. This can be seen, if we again suppose that the clear liquid is not gin, but rather petrol. In this case, it is not true that I have a reason to mix the clear liquid with tonic and drink it. Thus, it is not true that I have a reason to fetch the tonic. However, since I intend to mix it with tonic and drink it, it is “reasonable” that I fetch the tonic. In other words, by fetching the tonic, though I do not have a reason to do so, I am still acting rationally or, as Williams would say, I am acting rational relative to a false belief.⁹ Thus, when the instrumental principle states that I should do M, it is saying that to be rational, relative to my intention to do E, I must do M. However, it is *not* saying is that there is a reason for me to do M.

2.3 A Different Principle of Practical Reason

Taking this into account, we should use a similar, but distinct principle of practical reason. This is the principle of means-end transmission, which states that:

*(Transmission) If you should do E, all things considered, and doing M is a necessary means to doing E, then you should do M, all things considered, too.*¹⁰

The principle of transmission avoids the difficulties of the instrumental principle. It derives a normative claim from another normative claim and thus is not subject to

⁸ Kieran Setiya, "Cognitivism about Instrumental Reason," *Ethics*, 117, no. 4 (2007): 649-673.

⁹ Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 293.

¹⁰ Kieran Setiya, "Cognitivism about Instrumental Reason," *Ethics*, 117, no. 4 (2007): 652.

Hume's criticism. Furthermore, it is the appropriate kind of "should," the reason for action "should." Though this principle is different than the instrumental principle, it gets to the intuition about means-end reasoning that leads many to accept the principle of instrumental reasoning.

2.4 Necessary Means

If we understand this "should" as the reason for action "should," one may question why having a reason to do E commits them to having a reason to do M.¹¹ The answer seems to be that M is necessary for doing E. However, one may ask, what is it for M to be "necessary" for doing E? We can understand being a necessary means as being part of the conditions of satisfaction of E. A condition of satisfaction of E is that which cannot fail to be the case, if it is to be the case that E. It is that which cannot fail to be the case, if one is to be judged as to have successfully done E.¹² We can offer two accounts of being a part of the conditions of satisfaction:

(Specific Account) M is part of the conditions of satisfaction for A to do E iff in this particular case it cannot fail to be the case that M, if A does E.

(General Account) M is part of the conditions of satisfaction for A to do E iff in all cases it cannot fail to be the case that M, if A does E.

As such, the set of M's entailed by the general account is a subset of the set of M's entailed by the specific account. To clarify these accounts, let us look to an example from John Searle.

Suppose that there is a reason for me to fix your tooth and it is true of *this particular case* that if I fix your tooth, then I will cause you pain. On the specific account,

¹¹ John Searle, *Rationality in Action*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001), 263-266.

¹² John Searle, *Rationality in Action*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001), 263-266.

we would conclude that, in virtue of my reason to fix your tooth, I have a reason to cause you pain. This is because, *in this particular case*, I cannot fix your tooth without it being the case that I cause you pain. Though it is part of the conditions of satisfaction of fixing your tooth in *this particular case*, it is not part of the conditions of satisfaction for fixing your tooth *in all cases*. For example, had the facts about this case been different and I failed to cause you pain, it would not entail that I failed to fix your tooth; maybe in this different case I am a much better dentist or used anesthetics. Therefore, on the general account, we would conclude that I do not have a reason to cause you pain; causing you pain is at most a by-product of fixing your tooth.

In so far as the set of M's entailed by the general account is a subset of the set of M's entailed by the specific account, it is sufficient for our purposes to move forward using the general account. For if we can show that an agent has a negative duty with regards to an M entailed by the general account, then that duty with regards to that M will apply to agents in all cases. Thus it provides the universality required for a categorical imperative. To show that an agent has a negative duty with regards to an M entailed by the specific account, but which is not entailed by the general account will require a further argument that I will not provide in this essay. Considering this account of "necessary means" and understanding that this "should" is the "should" of practical reason for action, we can define the principle of transmission as:

(Transmission) If there is a reason to do E, all things considered, and doing M is part of the conditions of satisfaction of E, then there is a reason to do M, all things considered, too.*

2.5 All Things Considered

Some may question what is meant by the qualification “all things considered.” It should be understood as the conditions for being an *all-in* practical reason for action, which is different than being a *pro tanto* practical reason for action. The *pro tanto* practical reason counts in favor of doing an action, but it is “slack” in that I can fail to act for a *pro tanto* practical reason and still be rational.¹³ However, if I failed to act for my *all-in* practical reason for action, then I would have failed to act rationally. The *all-in* practical reason for action is based on all the relevant facts. This includes the fact about how the agent weighs the elements of her subjective motivational set. Now, I want to be careful and clarify that I am not supposing that any principle of reasoning is involved in the weighing of the elements of the agent’s subjective motivational set. The principle of transmission is compatible with various theories about how these elements could be weighed. The reason that figures in the principle of transmission is that reason which the agent has posterior to the elements have been weighed. Further, the “weighing” of the elements need not be a deliberate conscious process; the agent need not be aware of how the elements of her subjective motivational set are weighed.

2.6 An Equivalent Principle of Transmission

The principle of transmission can be reformulated into a principle that states when there fails to be a reason to do E, all things considered, that is equivalent to transmission*:

*(Transmission**) If there is no reason to do M, all things considered, and doing M is part of the conditions of satisfaction of E, then there is no reason to do E, all things considered, too.*

¹³ John Broome, "Normative Requirements," *Ratio*, 12, no. 4 (1999): 398-419.

It is easy to see how this is equivalent to transmission*. Suppose that there is no reason to do M, all things considered. By modus tollens on the conditional that is transmission*, we can infer that the conjunction “there is a reason to do E, all things considered, and doing M is part of the conditions of satisfaction of E” is false. We know that a conjunction is false when either one or both the conjuncts are false. If we suppose that it is true that doing M is part of the conditions of satisfaction of E, then we can infer it is false that there is a reason to do E, all things considered.

3.1 Reasons for the Conditions of Satisfaction to be Met

In this section, I hope to demonstrate that, in virtue of transmission**, there are particular kinds of cases in which an agent can fail to have a reason to do an action despite the agent’s motivations to do that action. In particular, there can fail to be a reason to engage in sex with or end the life of another person because of the necessary means for doing such actions.

The Case of having Sex with Another Person

In the case of having sex with another person, if anyone is to successfully have sex with another person, then that other person cannot fail to have sex with that person. For example, in order for Jack to have sex with Jill, Jill must have sex with Jack. Jack could not have successfully had sex with Jill, if Jill failed to have had sex with Jack. Jill’s having sex with Jack is a necessary means for Jack to have sex with Jill; it is part of the conditions of satisfaction of Jack having sex with Jill. Furthermore, this is true not just in the case of Jack and Jill, but in all cases in which anyone has sex with another person.

Knowing the conditions of satisfaction for having sex with another person, we must ask whether there is a reason, all things considered, for these conditions to be met.

In other words, is there a reason, all things considered, for Jill to have sex with Jack? I contend that, in virtue of reason internalism, whether such a reason exists depends on Jill and her motivations, not Jack and his motivations. Since reason internalism states that there is a reason for A to do X only if doing X satisfies some element of A's subjective motivational set, then there is a reason for Jill to have sex with Jack only if having sex with Jack satisfies some element of Jill's subjective motivational set. Furthermore, the principle of transmission requires that this reason not be a pro tanto reason, but rather a reason all things considered. Thus, for there to be a reason, all things considered, for Jill to have sex with Jack, there must be an element which having sex with Jack would satisfy that outweighs those elements that not having sex with Jack would satisfy. Certainly, there are cases in which there could be such a reason. Yet, surely it could also be the case that there is *no* reason, all things considered, for Jill to have sex with Jack. In such cases where there is no reason, all things considered, for Jill to have sex with Jack, we should conclude from transmission** that there is no reason for Jack to have sex with Jill, all things considered.

The Case of Ending Another Person's Life

Likewise, in order for anyone to end the life of another person, it cannot fail to be the case that the other person never does anything ever again. For example, in order for Bob to have ended Bill's life, Bill must not do anything ever again. Bob could not have successfully ended Bill's life, if Bill went on to engage in various future activities.¹⁴ Bill not doing anything ever again is part of the conditions of satisfaction of Bob ending Bill's

¹⁴ This is our natural understanding of the conditions for being dead; leaving out the possibility of divine intervention or the "living dead." Furthermore, it is true that not doing various activities is *not sufficient* for being dead, but it does seem to be *necessary*.

life. Again, this is true not just in the case of Bob and Bill, but in all cases in which anyone ends the life of another person.

Knowing the conditions of satisfaction for ending the life of another person, we again must ask whether there is a reason, all things considered, for these conditions to be met. In other words, is there a reason, all things considered, for Bill to never do anything ever again? Again, in virtue of reason internalism, whether such a reason exists depends on Bill and his motivations, not Bob and his motivations. Reason internalism requires that for there to be a reason for Bill to never do anything ever again, that it be true that never doing anything ever again would satisfy some element in Bill's subjective motivational set or that there is no element of Bill's subjective motivational set that any future activity would satisfy. Additionally, that element which never doing anything ever again would satisfy must outweigh every element that would be satisfied by doing something. Again, there could be cases in which there are reasons, all things considered, to never do anything ever again. Yet, it could also be the case that there is a reason, all things considered, for Bill to do something in the future. In cases where there is a reason, all things considered, for Bill to do something in the future, we should conclude from transmission** that there is no reason for Bob to end Bill's life, all things considered.

3.2 Explanation of Actions

One may object that this is just not true. Jack, having weighed the elements of his subjective motivational set, is most motivated to have sex with Jill. Moreover, Jack's motivation can explain both Jack's and Jill's actions. The objection is that Jack's motivation meets the internalist requirement for being a reason for action. Similarly, Bob is most motivated to end Bill's life and his motivation can explain why Bill never does

anything ever again. This too meets the internalist requirement for being a reason for action. Therefore, there is a reason for Jack to have sex with Jill and a reason for Bob to end Bill's life.

The problem with this objection is that it has confused an explanatory reason with a normative reason. It is true that both Jack's and Bob's motivations would explain their actions, as well as Jill's and Bill's actions. Furthermore, it is true that reason internalism requires that normative reasons for action be explanatory of the actions; it must be able to function in an explanation of the action. However, it is not true that an explanation is sufficient for being a normative reason for action. The difference is between explaining an action and guiding an action. Something that guides can be referenced so as to explain an action, however explanations are not themselves guides. If Jack's and Bob's motivations are normative reasons at all, they might be pro tanto reasons for Jack to have sex with Jill and Bob to end Bill's life. However, Jack's and Bob's motivations, by themselves,¹⁵ could not be reasons, *all things considered*, for Jill to have sex with Jack or for Bill to never do anything ever again. This is because such motivations, by themselves, fail to be motivating for Jill and Bill and thus could never have guided their actions.

3.3 The Guidance of Actual Actions

One may argue that regardless of the Jill's and Bill's motivations, Jack and Bob will do what they themselves are most motivated to do. Since having sex with Jill and ending Bill's life is what Jack and Bob are most motivated to do, this is what they will do. Since they will act because of their motivations, their motivations are action guiding and thus are normative reasons for action. However, this argument fails because such

¹⁵ By "by themselves" I mean that there are no corresponding motivations in Jill's or Bill's subjective motivational set. For example, neither Jill or Bill has the motivation to satisfy Jack's or Bob's motivations.

motivations ultimately could not be action guiding. If what an agent is most motivated to do is just the motivation for which the agent did act, then this motivation could not be action guiding. It could not be action guiding because the agent could not fail to be guided. We cannot be guided by our motivations, if anything we do would count as following it.¹⁶ Therefore, being the motivations for which an agent actually acts is not sufficient for being a normative reason.

3.4 Different Reasons for Different Agents

Why could we not just say that there is a reason for Jack to have sex with Jill and Bob to end Bill's life and no reason for Jill to have sex with Jack and Bill to have his life ended by Bob? As previously stated, Jack and Bob could have reasons for such actions, but that these are merely pro tanto reasons. In order to be all-in practical reasons, they must be reasons all things considered. Within the scope of all the things that need to be considered are the reasons for the necessary means for doing that action. For if there fails to be a reason, all things considered, for the necessary means of an action, then a pro tanto reason to do that action is defeated. For example, Nathan has a pro tanto reason to burn down his house, doing so would satisfy his desire to be warm, but no longer having shelter is part of the conditions of satisfaction of burning down his house.¹⁷ Suppose that Nathan has no reason, all things considered, to be without shelter. As such, Nathan's pro tanto reason to burn down his house is defeated because he fails to have a reason for the necessary means.

¹⁶ Christine Korsgaard, "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason," *The Constitution of Agency*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 41.

¹⁷ I am supposing that Nathan does not have other means of shelter. Though this is a case in which I am appealing to conditions of satisfaction that are entailed by the specific account, it still explicates how not having a reason for the necessary means will defeat the pro tanto reasons for an end.

Likewise, in addition to the motivations of Jack and Bob and the resulting pro tanto reasons, the reasons for the necessary means for performing such actions need to be considered. Being that these are cases of interactions between agents, to meet the conditions of satisfaction for such actions entails that the other agents do or not do some or any action. Just as in the case of an action involving only one agent, if there fails to be a reason, all things considered, for the necessary means of an action, then a pro tanto reason to do that action is defeated. Thus, Jack's and Bob's pro tanto reasons are defeated when there fails to be a reason for the necessary means of their respective actions. As stated in section 3.1, if there fails to be a reason for Jill to have sex with Jack and Bill to never do anything again, then Jack's pro tanto reason to have sex with Jill and Bob's pro tanto reason to end Bill's life are defeated. Thus, there is no reason for Jack to have sex with Jill and Bob to end Bill's life, *all things considered*.

3.5 Universal Rational Requirement

Since Transmission** is a material conditional, every case in which the antecedent is true the consequent must also be true. So, it is never the case that there is a reason for someone to have sex with another person, if there is no reason for that other person to have sex with them. Also, it is never the case that there is a reason for someone to end another person's life, if there is a reason for that other person to do something. Furthermore, if there is no reason for an agent to do E, then rationality seems to require that the agent ought not to do E. Therefore, everyone ought not to have sex with another person, if there is no reason for that other person to have sex with them and everyone ought not to end another person's life, if there is a reason for that other person to do something. These are categorical imperatives, negative duties required of all agents.

4.1 Further Objections

Now one may want to object that such universal rational requirements violate the thesis of reason internalism, since the required actions may not satisfy any element of an agent's subjective motivational set. However, reason internalism only requires that the action satisfy some motivation, if *there is a reason* for the agent to do something.

Whereas these negative duties state that *there is no reason* for the agent to do certain actions. There not being a reason for an action need not satisfy some motivation. For example, being without a motivation makes it the case that I have no reason to do some action. Further, reason requires that I do not do that action, if I have no reason to do it. Acting without a reason for that action would certainly be irrational.

With this said, one may question why I argued that it fails to be the case that there is no reason for Bill to do anything ever again to the conclusion that there is no reason for Bob to end Bill's life. The objection is that according to the argument in the previous paragraph, in order for there to be no reason for Bill to do anything ever again, not doing anything need not satisfy any of Bill's motivations. It being the case that there is no reason for Bill to do anything ever again is consistent with any of Bill's motivations. Just as there is no reason for Bob to end Bill's life is consistent with any of Bob's motivations.

These two cases do seem to be very similar. However, there is one major difference between the two. Bob is required to not do *one* action, whereas Bill would be required to not do *any* action he could possibly be motivated to do. Rationality would require a lot more of Bill than it does Bob, presumably too much more. I have not argued, and will not argue, for a thesis about the sufficient conditions for there being a reason for

action. Yet, I will suppose that of all the future actions that would satisfy some elements of Bill's subjective motivational set, there would be at least one that would meet these conditions.

4.2 Intended Actions without Reasons

Suppose an agent intends to do some action which that agent has no reason to do. For example, Jill intends to have sex with Jack, though she has no reason to do so. Jack finds Jill sexually attractive, does Jack have a reason, all things, considered, to have sex with Jill? Since Jill does not have a reason to have sex with Jack, Jack does not have a reason, all things considered, to have sex with Jill. Were Jack to have sex with Jill knowing *only* Jill's intentions, we could say that Jack acted rationally, relative to a false belief, such as we did in Williams's example about the tonic and petrol. We could say in some sense that he acted rationally, but he ought not to have had sex with Jill. Though, if Jack had all the true relevant facts knowing whether Jill had a reason, all things considered, to have sex with him and he still had sex with Jill, then we would say he did not act rationally and he ought not to have done so.

4.3 Reductio Ad Absurdum

Others may object that my reasoning requires too much; that one ought not to buy beer, that two boxers ought not to hit each other, and that one ought not to hang a murder.

The Case of Beer Money

Suppose that the money I spend on beer could have gone to buying food for a starving person. One may argue that it is part of the conditions of satisfaction of my spending that money on beer that the starving person continues to starve. Yet, we suppose

that there is no reason for the starving person to continue to starve and thus no reason for me to buy beer.

The problem with this objection is that according to our general account of “necessary means,” the fact that the starving person continues to starve is *not* part of the conditions of satisfaction of my buying beer *in all cases*. We can imagine a case in which I spend my money on beer, but Peter Singer, being motivated to bring about more good in the world, buys the starving man food. Thus, I can be judged to have successfully purchased the beer even if the starving man fails to continue to starve.

The Case of the Boxers

Suppose that Joe and George are in a boxing match. Joe’s hitting George will hurt George. George has no reason to allow himself to be hurt and good reason to avoid the punches. One may object that it follows from my reasoning that Joe has no reason to hit George, but this is absurd since Joe has a reason to hit George, so as to win the match.

It is true that it would be absurd in this case for Joe to not have a reason to hit George. However, the problem with this objection is that it would be absurd for George to enter into a boxing match if he has a reason, all things considered, to not allow himself to be hit. If George has a reason, all things considered, to enter into a boxing match, then George has a reason, all things considered, to allow himself to be hit in virtue of his reason to enter into the boxing match. This is because it is part of the necessary means of being in a boxing match that each boxer has a reason to hit each other, so as to win the match.¹⁸ Now, George does have a reason to avoid getting hit, so as to win the boxing

¹⁸ It does seem possible that there could be a boxing match in which one boxer fails to hit the other. However, even in this case the one boxer has a reason to hit the other boxer. One may object that a boxer may fail to have a reason to hit the other boxer, if one boxer has a reason to lose the match (maybe that

match, but upon entering this competition he has provided Joe with a reason to hit him. This is just what it is to be in a boxing match. Thus, it would be irrational for George to have no reason, all things considered, to be hit and a reason, all things considered, for him to be in a boxing match.

The Case of Hanging a Murder

Suppose that Bill had done something such that he deserves to be hung and Bob is the hangman. Does it follow from the case of ending another person's life that Bob ought not to hang Bill? Surely, if we read "deserved to be hung" as providing a reason for hanging him, then of course Bob ought to hang Bill, but this would just be begging the question. Rather, it should be read as describing the action Bill had done as being an action that would be grounds for being hung, if there are any grounds for being hung.

Given my arguments in section 3.1, provided that Bill has reason to do things in the future, it follows that Bob ought not to hang Bill. However, suppose that Bill had a reason to engage in a contract with Bob that states that if either of them were to do an action, such as the action done by Bill, then the one ought to hang the other. In this case, Bill has a reason, in virtue of the reason for which he entered the contract, to be hung for having done such an action. I am not sure whether, Bill and Bob have a reason, all things considered, to agree to a contract with such dire consequences, but it is at least possible. There is a further question about whether Bill has a reason to uphold his contracts, which I will not address because it is a substantive question itself and falls outside the scope of this essay.

boxer was paid to throw the match). However, it seems that this match is a charade and fails to be a real boxing match, in so far as real boxing matches are genuine competition and not some sort of theatrics.

5.1 No Positive Duties

It should be asked, why does my argument not extend to positive duties? Suppose Steve is drowning in a lake and Susan walks by the lake on her way to class. Susan could rescue Steve instead of going to class and doing so is without significant risk or expense to Susan. Furthermore, it is true of this case that if Susan continues to class, then Steve will drown. Ought Susan save Steve?

The argument I have given for negative duties does not extend to positive duties because of the use of the general account of necessary means. The fact that Steve would drown is not part of the conditions of satisfaction of Susan's continuing to class. Again, this is because the fact that Steve would drown is not part of the conditions of satisfaction of Susan's continuing to class *in all cases*. We can imagine a case in which Susan could successfully continue on to class and it fail to be the case that Steve drowns. Perhaps, Peter Singer is on his way to a lecture when he sees Steve drowning and saves him. Thus, it need not be the case that Steve drowns, if it to be the case that Susan successfully continues on to class *in all cases*. This is much different than the cases of negative duties, where *in all cases* it is part of the conditions of satisfaction that Jill has sex with Jack and Bill never does anything ever again, if it is to be the case the Jack has sex with Jill and Bob ends Bill's life.

5.2 No Problem for the Rational Authority of Morality

If we understand morality to include only negative duties, then there is no problem for the rational authority of morality. Agents do have negative duties in so far as there are actions which all agents fail to have reason to do them. These are actions for which it fails to be the case that there is a reason for the conditions of satisfaction of that

action to be met. Furthermore, it can fail to be the case that an agent has a reason to do such actions even if the agent is most motivated to do so. This is not inconsistent with the thesis of reason internalism because reason internalism only requires that an agent be motivated to do an action, not refrain from action. Additionally, the fact that the agent will do what they are most motivated to do fails to establish such motivations as a normative reason for action, all things considered.

Work Cited

Brink, David. "A Puzzle about the Rational Authority of Morality." *Nous-Supplement: Philosophical Perspectives*. (1992).

Broome, John. "Normative Requirements." *Ratio*. no. 4. (1999).

Korsgaard, Christine. "Skepticism about Practical Reason." *Journal of Philosophy*. no. 1. (1986).

Korsgaard, Christine. *The Constitution of Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Philippa, Foot. *Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives. Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*. Edited by Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Searle, John. *Rationality in Action*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001.

Setiya, Kieran. "Cognitivism about Instrumental Reason." *Ethics*. no. 4. (2007).

Williams, Bernard. *Internal and External Reasons. Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*. Edited by Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.