ON THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CONSCIENCE

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By

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Moral reasons are considerations that count in favor of or against actions in light of a moral standard. They can be functionally defined as authoritative guides to morally right action. Embedded in this concept is a deep tension between the two features that account for moral reasons having this unique function: namely, practicality and objectivity. On the one hand, in order for a consideration to be objective, as a conceptual matter, it must be mind independent. On the other hand, in order for a consideration to be practical, as a conceptual matter, it must be mind dependent. Since no consideration can be both mind dependent and mind independent, no consideration could be a moral reason, on the innocent functional analysis. I call this the puzzle about moral reasons. The going solutions to the puzzle require conceptual revision, foregoing the idea that moral reasons are, as a conceptual matter, either practical or objective.

This dissertation defends a solution to the puzzle that does not require such conceptual revision. The solution takes its primary inspiration from Thomas Aquinas’s discussions of conscience. On my reading, we see him there putting forward a unique thesis about how moral reasons relate to the minds of those to whom they apply: moral reasons depend on a person’s grasp of general moral principles for their existence and they depend on a person’s practical judgments for what they are reasons to do. On the Thomistic construal of mind dependence, the connection between a person’s psychology and the moral reasons that apply to her does make such moral reasons practical in principle but also leaves intact their objectivity.
I came to Georgetown interested in Aristotelian and Kantian ethics, and so when the late Alfonso Gomez-Lobo agreed to teach a course partly on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, I leapt at the opportunity. There was just one catch: he would be teaching this alongside Aquinas’s action theory. I braced myself to stomach a bit of the stale medieval stuff for a good taste of Aristotle’s ethics. But Alfonso, being the brilliant and passionate teacher he was, presented Aquinas in such a flattering light that my attitude towards him was totally transformed. I owe Alfonso a twofold debt of gratitude: first, for introducing me to the question on conscience, which so puzzled me that I ended up writing the dissertation I did; and second, for his repeatedly admonishing me, “Never trust your translator,” which has led to the rich experience of coming to know Aquinas better by working with the original text.

This dissertation would not be and certainly would not be what it is without the gracious support and assistance of many others, whom I cannot thank adequately here. I am especially grateful to my director, Mark Murphy, for the generous gift of his time and energy; he read hundreds of pages of drafts, speedily returning them with discerning comments, and always opened his office door when I needed to hash through an idea, whether it took ten or a hundred minutes. To my mind, he is the philosophical analog of the coach on Friday Night Lights: always challenging me to be more clear-eyed and disciplined in my arguments, committed to my philosophical growth, and going beyond the calls of duty. I am also thankful to Henry Richardson for serving on my committee; his criticisms never fail to get to the heart of the issues. He has encouraged philosophical creativity both by modeling it in his work and by showing faith in discussions of mine. I owe special gratitude to Tobias Hoffmann, who agreed to serve as an outside reader on this committee, from whom I have learned so much about Aquinas and who has been liberal in his time discussing the textual and philosophical issues in the third chapter; whatever of the interpretation of Aquinas I have gotten right is largely due to his guidance. His adroitness in navigating a wide range of philosophical topics has given me a deeper admiration for ambidextrous historians of philosophy like himself.

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It is a humbling but wonderful thing to come to know how far the love of your friends and family extends, when for the better part of two years you have been sleep-deprived, worn out, inflexible, and fixated on a narrow philosophical problem, and their love for you has not come close to running out. Audrey, Allyce, Andrea, Beth Ann, Carolyn, Hannah, Lauren, Melany, Megan, Paige, Shaden, and Tatiana: thank you for your care and faithful friendship. To my found family, Katherine, David, Josh and Taylor: I am exceedingly grateful not only that you are all such bookworms that my work on vacations went nearly unnoticed, but also that you have constantly cheered me on, and when needed, cheered me up (blithe Scots that you are!).

I could never sufficiently thank my mother, Trent, who has always shown more interest in my work and faith in my ability to complete it than I deserve. My late father, Richard, too, was a constant encourager and valued every project I undertook because he so valued me; I wish he were here to share in the joy of the completion of this project, as his and my mother’s support made it possible.

Finally, I wish to thank the person who spans the categories of philosophical interlocutor, friend, family member, and occupies one of his own. To my husband, Gideon, I owe thanks for his feedback on the arguments of this dissertation (almost every one of which I probably rehearsed to him first), for the insights he offered, and for the exemplary precision and attentiveness to detail in his own work on Aquinas, from which mine has profited. More importantly, during the last two years he has patiently shared my burdens and afforded me the respite and light-heartedness I needed in order to finish. It is with love and profound gratitude that I dedicate this work to him.
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THE PUZZLE ABOUT MORAL REASONS

1.1 The Puzzle About Moral Reasons

1.1.1 What Are Moral Reasons?

While philosophers tend to disagree about what in particular people have moral reason to

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do, we hold out hope that we can agree on what moral reasons are. On a thin analysis that

would be acceptable to most, moral reasons are considerations that count in favor of or

against some action for a person in light of a moral standard. I take it that this much is

uncontroversial because the very concept of a moral reason has to do with action, and

because we can slot virtually any normative theory into the “moral standard” place. For a

moral reason can be a consideration that favors or opposes a person’s taking some course

of action in virtue of the action’s promoting the best consequences overall, satisfying the

moral law, or aligning with what the fully virtuous person would do. Take the moral

reason against stealing, for example. I could have a moral reason against stealing a herbs

from my neighbor’s yard in light of the fact that doing so would fail to promote the most

value realizable in that situation, or in light of a duty I have to respect my neighbor, or

because a virtuous person would not steal in such a circumstance.

Moral reasons have a binding character. If someone has moral reason to perform

an action, she is morally required to perform it, and if she has moral reason against

performing some action, then she is prohibited from performing it. We are licensed to

infer from the fact that I have a moral reason against stealing herbs from my neighbor
that I am morally, rationally required to not steal herbs from my neighbor. This point, too, is not controversial as we can endorse it without taking a stand on the explanatory direction here. Moral requirements might be based on the particular moral reasons that apply to someone, or alternatively, moral reasons might be derived from general moral requirements and prohibitions.

Some theorists want to deny that moral reasons have this binding force because they think either that each moral reason only goes partway towards grounding a requirement, or that only negative moral reasons—reasons against an action—can produce requirements and prohibitions. The first objection comes from the fact that we use the terms “reason” and “moral reason” in the count-noun sense to signify partial considerations hanging in a balance. This could lead someone to think that individual moral reasons do not generate, constitute, or derive from moral requirements or prohibitions. Instead, an all-things-considered reason, the reason produced by the balance of individual moral reasons, corresponds to a moral requirement or prohibition.¹

On such a picture, the all-things-considered moral reason plays the same role as the individual moral reason plays in the way I will be using it. So the difference would be linguistic rather than substantive. A moral reason, in my sense, is just whatever

¹ When I say “all-things-considered reason,” I mean to indicate the mass-noun sense of moral reason rather than the count-noun sense. As Quentin Fisher argues in “The Mass-Sense of Reason as a Clue to the Function of Reasons,” we cannot infer from the truth of a reasons claim in the count-noun sense, “A has a reason to φ” the truth of a reasons claim in the mass-noun sense, “A has reason to φ.” Reasons in the mass-noun sense are successful reasons; so too with moral reasons. If A has moral reason to φ, or has an all-things-considered moral reason to φ, that reason succeeds in binding her to φ. But if A has a moral reason to φ, or a pro tanto moral reason to φ, it is still possible that this reason does not succeed in binding A to φ because of some other overriding moral reason. The conceptual core of moral reason, I take it, is the successful case—the all-things-considered moral reason. Therefore, I will be treating the analysis of moral reasons in this mass-noun or all-things-considered sense exclusively, though I think what we say about this case has repercussions for the other non-core cases or count-noun cases of the use of the term.
consideration matches the moral requirement or prohibition on a person regarding a certain course of action.

The second objection is stronger than the first, and not reducible to a linguistic difference: the asymmetry between reasons for and reasons against makes it the case that only reasons against necessarily correspond to requirements and prohibitions. According to Patricia Greenspan’s notable argument for this view, “A negative reason grounds a criticism, whereas a positive reason grounds a response to criticism…In the absence of significant criticism, a positive reason for action just posts it farther above the justificatory threshold but does not raise the bar on other options.” A moral reason for an action merely justifies the action, fending off potential or actual criticism; by contrast, a moral reason against an action cuts off other options from rational view, so to speak. As Greenspan notes, it seems that a positive reason must be accompanied by a negative reason to generate a requirement. So, for example, in order for a moral reason for you to donate time at a local tutoring program to require you to act, there must be a negative reason against the other practical options available to you (like donating money to the program instead). If those who side with Greenspan on this point are correct, then it is not built into the concept of a moral reason that it be binding in the way I outlined above.

We can appreciate the thrust of Greenspan’s argument without giving up on the idea that moral reasons are binding if we make more precise the claim about what positive moral reasons are reasons to do. Suppose there is a consideration that counts in favor of your donating time at a tutoring program at a local school such that you would

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be morally justified in volunteering there, but it is just as morally justifiable to donate money to the program. In this case, a fuller specification of the moral reason you have would be that you have a moral reason to help the program at the school, and there are (at least) two ways to satisfy that requirement: donating time or donating money. Or, we could say that there is a disjunctive moral reason in favor of either one of these options. I suspect that the proponent of the objection might want to counter by saying that this is just a moral reason against not doing anything to help the program at the school. But notice that this response collapses a de re distinction between the reasons into a distinction between our account of the reason, which would turn out to be more like the difference between a concave and convex surface than the difference between a circle and a square. Moral reasons that favor action are as binding as moral reasons that oppose action, and this is clearer when we specify the action type is required by the reason more perspicuously. Thus we can maintain that as a conceptual matter, moral reasons are binding.

Thin as the initial analysis of moral reasons is, we can still gather from it that the concept “moral reason” picks out a functional kind with a normative and practical aspect. Moral reasons function as authoritative guides to action for those to whom they apply. The normative aspect of this function description has to do with the tone in which the reason speaks in favor of or against some action: a moral reason’s direction speaks authoritatively on what someone ought to do because it brings a normatively authoritative standard—a moral standard—to bear on a person’s potential actions. This will be true irrespective of what normative theory we endorse: an action that conforms to the moral standard, whether by promoting a value, realizing a good, or satisfying a rule or duty, will
be morally justified by the reason that applies that standard to the action in question. The practical aspect has to do with the object about which the moral reason speaks, namely, a person’s action. Moral reasons direct the persons they bind toward or away from particular courses of actions in the circumstances in which those persons find themselves. It is because moral reasons bind persons to a certain action that their function is partly practical.

It is important to note that if moral reasons are a functional kind, then some moral or normative facts may not, on their own, count as moral reasons because they are not fit to guide action in certain contexts. Take for example the fact that penicillin is an effective treatment for syphilis. One set of circumstances in which this fact does not provide a person with moral reasons for action is when no penicillin is available. If you are in the mountains of Peru and come across someone suffering from syphilis, I take it that your failure to give that person penicillin when you discover he has syphilis is not a moral or rational failure, since the nearest place to get penicillin is a five-day trek out of the mountains. Another context in which this fact seems functionally inert is when the fact is undiscovered. A physician practicing in the seventeenth century does not act contrary to his moral reasons by not treating a patient using penicillin, despite the fact that giving penicillin to a patient suffering from syphilis would realize the good of the patient’s health. As an undiscovered fact, it cannot enter into his deliberation and affect the course of action he chooses to take. And even if the physician, by some accident, gave the patient penicillin, his doing so unaware of penicillin’s curative effects would be neither particularly rational nor moral. (On some views of action, such as Anscombe’s, curing the patient using penicillin is not a proper description of his action if he fails to know
what he is doing). For a consideration to be a moral reason for a person requires that it be practically functional, so not every normative or morally relevant fact will be a moral reason for action.

Another thing worth noting about moral reasons that their normative function hangs on the standard they bring to bear on a person’s action being objectively authoritative. If a consideration in favor of or against an action were grounded in or dependent on subjective considerations, like a person’s bias against people of a different racial or ethnic profile, then we would question the binding force of that consideration. Objective considerations have authority that transcends an individual’s idiosyncrasies and potentially sinister biases. An additional motivation for thinking of moral reasons as objective, and so having the special normative authority they do, is that when a moral reason shows up in someone’s deliberation about what she ought to do, that person has the distinct feeling of discovering a value or fact that obtains independently of what she thinks about it. Such a consideration is not merely a construction of her mind, but some stable consideration out there to be discovered. And so its authority over her will resemble objective facts in science or mathematics more than facts about rules of a game, which can be opted out of, or facts about fictional stories and characters.

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3 David Enoch argues that objective normative facts are indispensible for our deliberation, and that this licenses our belief that there are real, objective, normative facts in Enoch, _An Argument for Robust Metanormative Realism_, dissertation submitted to the faculty of NYU, 2003. Talbot Brewer defends the view that reasons must be something external to us as this best explains the feeling of discovery we have in deliberating and justifies the stance we take in deliberation in Brewer, “The Real Problem with Internalism,” _Canadian Journal of Philosophy_, 32 (2002): 443-473.
1.1.2 The Puzzle About Moral Reasons

While objectivity and practicality appear to be equally integral to the concept of a moral reason, functionally described, moral philosophers have considerable difficulty explaining how moral reasons could have both features necessarily. For on the one hand, a consideration’s being practical seems to entail some necessary connection between that consideration and a person’s psychology; and on the other hand, a consideration’s being objective appears to demand just the opposite—that the consideration obtain and apply to each person independently of her particular psychology. In short, if moral reasons are necessarily practical, then they are mind dependent, but if moral reasons are necessarily objective, then they are mind independent. Since nothing can be both mind dependent and mind independent, nothing can be both necessarily practical and necessarily objective. And so if the concept of a moral reason picks out things that are both necessarily practical and necessarily objective, there is something deeply incoherent in the concept. I will call this the puzzle about moral reasons.

The questions that arise in the wake of this puzzle are whether and how we can preserve the ordinary analysis of moral reasons in the face of the theoretical tension between objectivity and practicality. Standardly, responses to these questions proceed by arguing that one of the two features is a necessary feature of moral reasons, conceptually, while the other is a feature of moral reasons contingently or only in some cases.

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4 Arguably, it was Bernard Williams’s seminal piece, “Internal and External Reasons” that drew so much attention to this issue in metaethics the last decades of the twentieth century. Few articles on this topic do not make mention of Williams’s argument for the practicality requirement on normative reasons, in fact. Williams, “Internal and External Reasons,” *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 101-113.

For instance, on one type of view, moral reasons must be able to get a grip on the person it binds as a conceptual matter. So, if some ascribing some property to a moral reason would undermine the claim that, necessarily, moral reasons are able to motivate a person, then we cannot properly predicate that property of moral reasons. Objectivity, which seems to entail mind independence, is one such property. As we cannot simultaneously assert that moral reasons are necessarily mind dependent and so practical, and necessarily mind independent and objective, it seems we ought to relinquish the idea that moral reasons have the property of being necessarily objective.⁶

Arguments for a prominent opposing view work similarly: If objectivity is a property that primarily accounts for a reason being a moral reason, then moral reasons are practical, or action-guiding, only for a rational person with full information and moral motivation. That is, moral reasons are only action guiding given that the person to whom the reasons apply has full information and is morally motivated. Since not everyone under the authority of moral reasons is fully informed and morally motivated, moral

⁶ One notable version of this argument can be found in the fourth part of Russ Shafer-Landau’s *Moral Realism: A Defence* (pp. 187-8). Shafer-Landau explains that, in virtue of moral reasons’ objectivity, we justifiably blame and praise certain agents for failing to act in certain ways even when those actions were not rationally possible for them. Since practical rationality is constrained by antecedent beliefs and commitments agents have, when someone has morally bad beliefs or commitments, the morally right action is not rationally possible for her. Nonetheless, Shafer-Landau wants to say, that person has moral reasons to do the morally right thing. So it must not be the case that moral reasons are tethered to agent motivation the way that practical reasons are. That is, moral reasons are external to the persons and psychologies of the persons they bind.

reasons will be practical only contingently, or for some of the persons to whom they apply. So moral reasons are not necessarily practical.

I have become convinced that revising the concept in one direction or another will not be fruitful. For one thing, whatever theoretical economy a revisionist view gains by cutting down on the moral reasons it countenances it loses because it must construct a convincing error theory to explain away the common sense intuitions and manners of speaking about the moral and rational. Some revisionists will even need to build an apparatus for translating ordinary sentences into sentences that can have truth values within the theory. (Think of the tedious tasks expressivists must undertake, translating ordinary sentences into a “logic of attitudes” so we can still use the perspicuous sentences in reasoning about moral claims— and all of this on top of the error theory they must give to support their position.) Additionally, if there is a revisionary view that fails to pick up on the action-guiding element of moral reasons, it threatens to undermine some of the central purposes of moral theorizing, namely, articulating what actions are to be done and avoided in a way that can actually influence persons. So, if there were some plausible view that preserved the ordinary notion and came more cheaply overall, we should prefer it to a revisionist account.

There is another consideration that bodes in favor of preserving the ordinary notion of a moral reason having to do with the current dialectical situation in meta-ethics. The debate about moral reasons has long proceeded with one side proceeding from starting points the other side is willing to forego, and vice versa. As the parties in the debate have no agreed-upon criteria for deciding which way the conceptual revision should go, the debate has slowed to a standstill. So, at this point, we need an account that
not only provides a viable solution to the conceptual problem, but also proves to be ecumenical enough to propel the debate forward.

1.1.3 A Strategy for Solving the Puzzle

The strategy I propose for finding and defending a non-revisionist account of moral reasons it is this: First, we need to make the conceptual problem around moral reasons especially clear. Once we understand the puzzle, then we can establish formal conditions on a solution to it. I take it that a good solution will not only respond to the theoretical challenge, but will do so in a way that can bring on board philosophers on both sides of the debate. So I suggest that we treat as formal conditions on a satisfactory solution to the puzzle accommodating the fundamental commitments and starting points of those in the debate. This way, we ensure that the view we endorse will help us make real headway rather than perpetuating meta-ethical disagreement. Third, we should give a fair and thorough look at going views to see whether and where they fail to meet the conditions on a good solution. Fourth, if after surveying contemporary views we see that none of them is fit to meet all of the conditions on a good solution to the puzzle, we can begin to develop an alternative that avoids the pitfalls of going views. Finally, once we have an alternative on the table, we need to go back to show that it does in fact satisfy each of the conditions on a satisfactory solution to the puzzle. Then we will we have good reason to adopt that view over the extant revisionist views of moral reasons.

This dissertation employs the strategy above as an abductive argument for what I will call the Thomistic theory of moral reasons. The theory is Thomistic in that its primary inspiration is Thomas Aquinas’s discussion of what we now call moral reasons.
The abbreviated view is something like this: Moral reasons are mind dependent, but not in the way meta-ethicists of late have supposed they must be in order to have a practical function. Moral reasons depend on particular moral reasoners—persons who have a grasp of the starting points of moral reasoning—for their existence as moral reasons. And moral reasons depend on the conclusions of their moral reasoning for what they are reasons to do. Of course, some philosophers have said that moral reasons are necessarily related to moral judgments, but they assume that these judgments are unerring in the rational person. By contrast, on the Thomistic view, we can make egregious mistakes in our moral reasoning and draw conclusions about what we ought to do, or what would be good or bad to do, that do not align neatly with the normative or natural facts. Nonetheless, what we have moral reason to do is always given by what we think about what we are doing. When we are correct, we have moral reasons that are narrow in scope, binding us to perform just that action we have it in mind that we ought to do. When we are incorrect, though, we have wide-scope moral reasons that allow us to reverse our reasoning and change our judgments. So we are only bound to not act contrary to our judgments as long as those judgments persist.

Using the abductive argument, I aim to show that this view offers the best bundle of theoretical benefits at the lowest cost, especially in light of our current dialectical position. While I will not provide a positive argument for the truth of the view apart from its theoretical merits, I will revisit the independent argument that seems to lead Aquinas to hold this view. If it turns out that there is another account of moral reasons that satisfies all the criteria for a good solution to the problem, then Aquinas’s argument or
the secular reconstruction of it I lay out in chapter 3 can serve as a backup argument for the Thomistic view.

In this chapter, what I will focus on is clearing the ground regarding the puzzle and setting the conditions on a satisfactory solution to the puzzle. I start by recasting the familiar problem about practicality and objectivity under new lighting. As I indicated above, I see the problem as a puzzle about the relationship between the properties of objectivity, practicality, and mind dependence. After providing some initial motivation for holding onto each of these three conflicting claims about moral reasons, I will look at contemporary defenses of each of the practicality and objectivity claims, respectively. Here I am interested in what, precisely, the valid arguments for these claims can tell us about the mind dependence of moral reasons (and what they cannot tell us), and what we can unearth regarding the fundamental commitments and starting points on which the valid arguments rest. Once I have identified the basic concerns of each of the parties in the debate—the points from which their arguments for the objectivity or practicality of moral reasons proceed—I argue that we can treat the accommodation of each of them as a formal condition on a good solution to the puzzle. My hope, again, is that we can use these formal conditions to find a solution and view that will be ecumenical, rather than launching us into the next iteration of the meta-ethical dispute.

1.2 Formulating and Motivating the Puzzle

What puzzles moral philosophers is that the two features that belong to the concept of a moral reason most fundamentally—objectivity and practicality—pull in opposite
directions. What I want to draw out is that where they pull in opposite directions is on questions about whether moral reasons are mind dependent.

1.2.1 Objectivity, Practicality, and Mind Dependence

On the one hand, if a consideration that bears no relation to someone’s motivational psychology could not guide that person, but moral reasons are action guiding, then for a consideration to be a moral reason would require that there be some relation between the consideration and the motivational psychology of the person for whom the consideration is a moral reason. On the other hand, moral reasons bear the mark of the moral because they bring an objective, moral standard to bear on potential courses of action. The objectivity of the standard in light of which moral reasons favor or count against action, and what makes them distinctive as moral reasons, tells against the possibility that they necessarily bear a relation to a particular person and facts about her idiosyncratic or unique psychology.

The puzzle about moral reasons, as I will call it, is about how to resolve the seeming inconsistency internal to the concept of a moral reason. We can sum up the problem as the incompatibility of the following triplet:

- **OBJECTIVITY DEMAND**: Moral reasons are necessarily objective.
- **PRACTICALITY DEMAND**: Moral reasons are necessarily practical.
- **MIND-DEPENDENCE THESIS**: Moral reasons are necessarily practical only if they constitutively depend on motivational features of agents’ minds; if moral reasons depend on motivational features of agents’ minds, then they are not objective.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) Someone might wonder why I am making the leap from the idea that moral reasons depend on a
Each of the first two claims strikes us as natural and well supported. Consider first the practicality demand. We appeal to moral reasons when we give one another advice, when we form retrospective judgments about what we should have done, and when we explain why some action or other was worth doing. Moral reasons do seem to be considerations poised to play an action-guiding role in the rational deliberation and intentional action of human persons. It is the practical function of moral reasons that best accounts for the concept being frequently invoked in explanations we offer others and ourselves for why some action is worthwhile, whether we do so in advance of performing the action or after the fact.

Turning to the objectivity demand, moral reasons do seem to have a kind of authority that reaches beyond subjective elements of our psychology. We rely on moral reasons in our deliberation about what to do in large part because recognize them as the considerations that will be useful in justifying our actions to our future selves and others, as their normative force ranges over all of us. While we can use motivating reasons, which might be grounded in the idiosyncracies of our tastes and preferences, to explain our actions and choices to our future selves and others, we cannot rely on these reasons to justify our actions and choices to others because they might not share the commitments

motivational feature of a person to the idea that moral reasons depend on a feature of the mind, and hence that “mind dependence” should really be “agent dependence.”

One reason to talk about this issue in terms of mind dependence is that it is more specific than agent dependence but is inclusive of the notion of agent dependence. If something depends constitutively on a person’s conceptual schemas, for instance, which are part of her mental life, then not only is that thing mind dependent, it is also agent dependent insofar as the mind on which it depends is the mind of an agent.

Second, in the literature, this thesis has a variety of names, including stance-dependence, response-dependence, hypotheticalism (although this particular version drops the “constitutive” point). All of the versions implicate some mental state. Thus, I opt for the general heading of “mind-dependence” throughout.

I take the point about advice from Kate Manne, who stresses this interpersonal function of reasons more than other internalists, who focus on their connection to our individual desires and commitments. See Kate Manne, “Internalism about Reasons: Sad But True?” Philosophical Studies 167 (2014): 89-117.
we do, or see as important the standards we invoked to make the choices we did. Moral reasons are supposed to do more: since we are all under the authority of morality, anyone should be able to see the worth of actions and choices that accord with moral reasons. So they serve a special purpose in justifying action among persons.

Intuitively, something has to mark off moral reasons as distinct from other types of practical considerations, and the objectivity demand can serve this purpose. The need to distinguish moral reasons from other practical reasons becomes clear when we think about the practical considerations that come to mind when we are experiencing weakness of will. For instance, when I am thinking about whether to order the aromatic lamb dish or a vegetarian meal, I can come up with all sorts of considerations in favor of eating the lamb dish, like that it has more iron and zinc than the vegetarian dishes on offer, that just have nothing to do with the moral value of the action. The pleasing aroma of the lamb or the fact that it is rich in iron and zinc might figure in my reasoning about what to order, but these considerations are just not moral reasons. The practical function of such a consideration cannot be sufficient to make it a moral reason. Secondly, if someone has an immoral aim or harmful end in mind, then the considerations that seem to favor some course of action over another cannot in principle be moral considerations. Suppose that someone knows her coworker is about to be promoted and wants to sabotage him, hoping this will allow her to leapfrog him in getting the promotion. The fact that spilling coffee on her coworker’s computer will accomplish this end makes spilling coffee on the computer show up as to be done in her deliberation; it is not, thereby, a moral reason counting in favor of spilling coffee on her coworker’s computer. To qualify as a moral reason, a consideration has to do more than meet the practicality demand.
Adding the objectivity demand seems to help us get the extension of moral reasons right. An objective, moral standard will not shift to accommodate our preferences, desires, or commitments that have nothing to do with morality. So the objectivity demand will effectively rule out the counterintuitive possibility that a consideration like my desire to enjoy a tasty piece of meat (at the expense of the moral values of eating the vegetarian option) could be a moral reason in favor of eating it.

Additionally, if a consideration meets the objectivity demand, then it will be better suited to serve the uses to which we put moral reasons in our own deliberation and the giving and taking of advice. In seeking advice or deliberating we are looking for something that could justify our actions to others, and if the standard according to which an action is justified is objective, then others to whom we will attempt to justify ourselves can be expected to share it. When we use moral reasons in deliberation or giving or receiving advice, the point is often to come up with considerations that are inescapable, helping us narrow down our options. When we come into contact with an objective consideration, there will be no escaping the normative force of that reason simply by failing to care about it or about the ends in light of which it favors a particular course of action.

Despite the commonsense intuitions we might have about moral reasons here, it does seem clear that if a consideration is practical it will be dependent on some features of or facts about a person to whom it applies, but that this grates against its being objective. If moral reasons necessarily guide action, then those reasons need to be limited to considerations that have a motivational grip on the agents they bind. But if moral reasons are necessarily objective, and objectivity rules out the possibility of being
dependent on contingent psychological elements, then to be objective moral reasons must be independent of agent psychology. As nothing can be both necessarily mind dependent and necessarily mind independent, the conception of moral reasons as objective and practical seems incoherent.

In light of the mind dependence problem, we might want to analyze moral reasons as the considerations that are the sorts of things that persons would think about in their reasoning and deliberation and be moved to act on if they were perfectly rational and had full information. That analysis would preserve their objectivity and not give rise to the practicality demand. Or, one might wonder, why not analyze moral reasons as considerations that can move the agents they bind in virtue of the moral permissibility of the ends those agents happen to have? Such an analysis would not require that moral reasons be objective and mind independent, and so would never generate the conceptual puzzle. Either revision of the concept would force us to give up entrenched commonsense intuitions, but, one might argue, this is a small price to pay in order to circumvent incoherence.

I said earlier that my strategy for responding to the puzzle about moral reasons is to find a way to avoid revision so as not to perpetuate the current dialectical issue of gridlock; but of course, not everyone wants to be a meta-ethical peacemaker. Some might even complain that this strategy pays too much attention to the contingent facts of our current philosophical, historical moment. The philosophical argument against abandoning

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9 To say that moral reasons and other practical, normative reasons are a function of the ends people happen to have is to take the standard Humean line. For an example of a Humean view of reasons, see Michael Smith, The Moral Problem (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); for a more recent defense of his constitutivism, see “Beyond the Error Theory,” A World Without Values, eds. Richard Joyce & Simon Kirchin (Netherlands: Springer, 2010), 119-139.
the ordinary conception of moral reasons as being practical and objective (independent of
the dialectical situation) is that compelling arguments from fairly modest assumptions
can support each part of the ordinary analysis, whereas heftier assumptions are needed to
support revisionist analyses. In the sections that follow, I will walk through some of these
lightweight rationales for each of the claims that figure in the ordinary analysis.

First, one caveat and a response: The ordinary analysis is bound to stir up some
initial disagreement, given the controversies surrounding other concepts intertwined with
the concept of a moral reason—concepts like “morality” and “practical reason.” But any
account of moral reasons must draw on these other controversial concepts. Thus it should
not be a knock against a particular account that it dredges up old philosophical disputes
about them. All we need to show to lend initial plausibility to the standard analysis, then,
is that there are good arguments underlying each of the parts of that analysis: the part
regarding moral reasons’ function in practical reasoning and the part regarding how their
objectivity differentiates them from other items that function similarly in practical
reasoning.

1.2.2 Why Think Moral Reasons Are Necessarily Practical?

There are a couple of prima facie reasons for standing by the part of the analysis
regarding the practical function of moral reasons. First, if moral reasons are a species of
normative practical reasons, then they will inherit their action-guiding function from their
genus, and second, the subject matter of morality is or includes persons’ actions, so moral
reasons should be about options that are practical. Let’s look at each in turn.
A close relative of the concept “moral reason,” “normative practical reason,” picks out a consideration that count in favor of or against actions or “some practical option” in light of a normative standard.\(^\text{10}\) That a person has a reason to φ makes it the case that if the agent were to fail to be motivated to φ, she would be practically irrational—not responding to her reasons. Similarly, if a person has a \textit{moral} reason to φ and fails to be moved to φ, the failure to be motivated betrays \textit{moral} irrationality. What morality has to say to the rational is borne out by moral reasons.

\(^{10}\) Scanlon famously writes: “Any attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to lead me back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favor of it.” T.M. Scanlon, \textit{What We Owe to Each Other} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 17ff. Patricia Greenspan writes, “Current treatments of practical rationality understand reasons as considerations counting in favor of or against some practical option.” Patricia Greenspan, “Asymmetrical Practical Reasons,” p. 387.

In a 2013 article that surveys recent literature on practical reasons, Ruth Chang gives as the generally accepted definition of normative practical reasons, “the considerations that support or count in favor of performing some action or having some attitude.” Ruth Chang, “Practical Reasons: The Problem of Gridlock,” \textit{Companion to Analytic Philosophy}, eds. Barry Dainton and Howard Robinson (New York: Continuum Press, forthcoming), 1.

Although this analysis has been treated as orthodox it is not without challengers. Pamela Hieronymi, for instance, says that we should “be bothered by the popular claim that ‘a reason is a consideration that counts in favor of an action or attitude’” because it generates the “wrong kind of reasons” problem (Pamela Hieronymi, “The Use of Reasons in Thought” \textit{Ethics} 124 (2013): 115). She argues that a solution to the wrong kind of reasons problem requires that we maintain that reasons are considerations that stand in relation to something, but revise the latter half of the analysis so reasons do not have to stand in relation to some actual piece of agent psychology. Instead, she says, we should say that a reason is “an item in (actual or possible) reasoning” and that reasons count in favor of or against in virtue of their ability “to bear positively on a question such as whether \(p\) or whether to \(x\).” On Hieronymi’s view, reasons are considerations that stand in relation to a question or conclusion taken up in potential or actual reasoning. But this is fine for present purposes, for Hieronymi’s analysis still asserts that reasons are defined by the role they play in potential or actual reasoning.

Stephen Finlay also offers an alternative analysis of normative practical reasons, which he calls the “end-relational account of normative reasons (Stephen Finlay, “The Reasons That Matter,” \textit{Australasian Journal of Philosophy} 84 (2006): 13. According to his end-relational account, “A fact is a reason for φ-ing, relative to a system of ends \(E\), iff it explains why φ-ing is conducive to \(E\). (By an ‘end,’ I mean a possible aim for action or object of desire.)” (ibid). While Finlay’s analysis diverges from the orthodox account, it includes, and indeed highlights, the idea that reasons favor or oppose something \textit{in light of an assumed standard}. The system of ends for any given reason serves as the assumed standard. Notice also that Finlay’s alternative account recognizes the practical function of normative reasons: the facts that count as reasons do so in virtue of their ability to explain the relationship between a particular action and an end, where an “end” is understood as an object of desire or aim of action. Any rational agent who has an end in mind will need to deliberate about how to achieve that end; and the sort of explanation a reason is, on Finlay’s account, is just the sort of thing that would contribute to deliberation about how to achieve that end. The suggested amendments by Finlay and Hieronymi leave intact the notion that normative practical reasons count in favor of or against something in light of a proposed standard.
The orthodox analysis of normative practical reasons folds in the action-guiding function of normative reasons by stating that what reasons are reasons for or against are actions that are “practical options” for the agent they bind. The language of options, it seems to many, implies that reasons are considerations on which agents are able to act. It makes little sense to say that someone is able to act on a consideration if there is no connection between her motivational mental states and the consideration, such that her taking up the consideration in reasoning would effect intentional action. Thus for a consideration to be a normative practical reason of any kind it must bear some relationship to the motivational mental states of the person to whom it applies.

An example will help to illustrate this thought. The impact of burning coal on future generations because of its contribution to climate change is a consideration against burning coal to power trains. In the 1920s, however, people using coal in trains could not be moved by that consideration due to their lack of evidence suggesting that what they were doing would negatively affect future generations. Their failure to avoid excessive use of coal in trains was not a failure of practical or moral rationality. Someone might be tempted to say that false beliefs that burning coal was environmentally innocuous and would have no effect on future generations led to a form of irrationality on the part of those using coal to power trains in the 1920s. But here, we can respond by appeal to convincing arguments in the literature on practical reasons that it is not a requirement of practical rationality that one have all and only true beliefs.\footnote{Scanlon, for instance, argues against placing such a high bar on practical rationality and morality on the grounds that it seems obvious that someone who has a false belief, by some stroke of bad luck or the environment she happens to be in, does not seem to be irrational on that account. See chapter 1 of \textit{What We Owe to Each Other}.} As long as we do not take
having all and only true beliefs to be a criterion for being practically rational, then it would be entirely ad hoc to make it a criterion for being morally rational. With this objection diffused, we can admit that the mere fact about burning coal do not by themselves make burning coal morally irrational for those doing this in the 1920s, as they had no access to the information that would have enabled them to take this fact up in their decisions about what forms of energy to invest in and use in trains. Examples like this tell that intuitively, for a consideration to be a reason for or against a practical option for a person, it must be a consideration on the basis of which that person could be motivated to act. And so if moral reasons are reasons for practical options, then they must be related to a person’s motivational states.

One way to establish the connection between moral reasons and motivational states is by appeal to a species-genus relationship between moral reasons and normative practical reasons. Other theorists have shown that for a consideration to count as a practical reason for someone, it must serve some antecedent ends or desires she has, as practical rationality is largely a matter of coherence between ends and desires. This could be true either because practical reason’s purpose is to serve the passions or ends we have, or because the way a consideration throws justificatory weight behind a particular action is through its relationship to one’s antecedent ends. Therefore, many theorists conclude that as a conceptual matter part of what it is to be a normative practical reason is to be connected to agents’ motivational mental states. Suppose that moral reasons are a species

12 I include the latter explanation, which is somewhat unorthodox, because Julia Markovits makes a convincing case against the orthodox view in “Internalism and the Motivating Intuition” (Markovits, Moral Reason (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 33-81). She maintains that we should still be internalists about practical reasons, though, as there is no extra-mental foundation on the basis of which justification for action could rest (as some think there is in the case of epistemic reasons).
of normative practical reasons. Then it would follow straightforwardly that moral reasons inherit this practicality constraint from their genetic parent. That practical constraint requires that they bear a relation to the motivational states of rational agents.

An easier way to support the practicality demand on moral reasons, still by relying on arguments about practical reasons, is to point to a family resemblance between the two kinds of reasons. If moral reasons merely bear only familial resemblance to normative practical reasons, it is natural to think of this resemblance in terms of their structure as considerations that applying a normative standard—the moral one—to practical options. In order for an option to be practical for a procedurally rational person, it must serve some end or desire she already has and by which she could be motivated to take that option. So moral reasons must depend on the antecedent ends or desires that would motivate a person to act on them.

We can establish that moral reasons must be practical on an even weaker assumption, though the conclusion of the argument will be a modal claim: moral reasons are considerations on the basis of which a person could be motivated to act. The weak assumption is that the subject matter of morality, just like the subject matter of rational normativity, is what moral agents do—the practices, plans, interpersonal relations, and activities that make up a life.¹³ In a world without agents who plan and engage in life projects, there are no persons for whom moral reasons could make a difference to practices and activities. If we accept that morality takes action as its primary target, we

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¹³ Kate Manne, in a recent article, argues persuasively that our theorizing about practical normativity ought to begin with data about our practices. And most will agree with this type of pragmatic move regarding starting points of our theorizing when it comes to morality. See Kate Manne, “Internalism about Reasons: Sad but True?” *Philosophical Studies* 167 (2014): 89-117.
are already committed to morality’s primary purpose being to guide agents in making and carrying out rational life plans. (In a world without persons, it is hard to imagine what moral reasons would be. This is because the clearest characterization of moral reasons is a functional one: moral reasons prescribe practical options for agents.) Unless morality systematically fails to perform its primary function, then, we can safely assume that moral reasons succeed in figuring in deliberation and action at least some of the time, or for some rational persons. Otherwise there is no sense in saying they have this function. If a consideration is a moral reason, it will tend to come off to practically rational persons as a prescription about what is to be done or avoided and it will be able to move such persons. Again, this is a modal conclusion, as it recognizes that not all persons will actually be moved by the considerations that count as moral reasons for them. Even so, this cements a conceptual connection between moral reasons and the psychology of the persons to whom they apply.

We should note here that the practical function of moral reasons, on the ordinary analysis, casts suspicion on the part of the analysis that tells us moral reasons are objective. For the preliminary arguments for the practicality of moral reasons rest on premises like “moral reasons would not be what they are in a world without persons like us” and “moral reasons must be reasons on the basis of which a person is able to act,” tying moral reasons to particular psychological states or facts about persons’ psychology. And we might worry that making the existence of persons, or psychological states, or facts about psychological states conditions for the existence of moral reasons suggests that moral reasons cannot be properly objective. For the kind of objectivity we expect from morality is the sort that is independent of our psychology. Thus, while we find
initial support for thinking of moral reasons as essentially practical, we already see a possible tension between this way of conceiving of moral reasons and including objectivity in our conception of moral reasons.

1.2.3 Why Think Moral Reasons Are Necessarily Objective?

Thinking about moral reasons independently of their practical function, we can see several reasons for taking them to be necessarily objective. For one thing, if we want to precipitate moral reasons out of the mixture of reasons for action, we need to identify some earmark in virtue of which they are moral reasons. As I mentioned earlier, if practical reasons have the function of guiding action, it seems a natural candidate differentia for moral reasons is the feature that makes them normatively authoritative guides to action: the objectivity of the standard they apply to action.

The first wave of support for the claim that moral reasons are objective is constituted by several (competing) views on what sets moral reasons apart from other kinds of reasons: on one view, they have a universal domain of application; on another, objective moral and normative facts ground statements about moral reasons; and on another, moral reasons are inescapable in a way other practical reasons are not. The second wave of support comes from our practices and experience: the objectivity of moral reasons makes intelligible the phenomenology of moral reasoning, goes toward explaining the rationality of moral disagreement, and vindicates our quotidian practices of criticism and giving and taking advice.

I do not expect that any one individual will buy all of the arguments that follow. But I do expect that for each of us, one of the arguments will prove persuasive, at least
persuasive enough to motivate an attempt to keep with the standard analysis of moral reasons as objective in some meaningful sense. Less auspiciously, though, these arguments seem to begin to unravel our confidence in the part of the analysis that speaks to their practical function.

Objectivity could be the feature according to which we partition moral reasons from other kinds of reasons for action if we think of objectivity as setting the domain of application of reasons. We might think that the domain of agents who are bound by moral reasons differs from the domain of agents bound by other practical reasons. While objective demands apply to all persons (perhaps all rational persons or all human persons), other practical rational requirements apply only to those who have certain commitments or motivational starting points. For instance, the practical reason in favor of going on a mission to Mars only applies to trained astronauts who have an antecedent interest in space travel or scientific discovery; by contrast, the moral reason in favor of sparing innocent lives seems to apply to all human or rational persons. If we think of objectivity in terms of the size of the domain of application, it is the objectivity or the higher degree of objectivity of moral reasons that distinguishes them from other normative practical reasons on this kind of view.

While this idea enjoys acceptance among some contemporary meta-ethicists, others disagree with the premise that the moral domain is somehow wider than the domain of application of practical reasons. One might think that the domain of persons to whom moral demands apply is narrower than the domain of persons to whom other demands of practical rationality apply. The moral community, whose members are subject to moral demands, is made up of persons who have entered into an agreement of
respect, whereas rational persons who are not part of such communities are still subject to rational requirements.14 Plenty of moral philosophers reasonably disagree about whether the domain of morality can be subsumed under the domain of practical rationality or whether these domains are identical or coextensive. Thus, to proceed as though the notion of moral reasons as objective is worth protecting (or perhaps retrieving) solely on the basis of the claim that the moral domain is broader than the domain of other practical reasons would be unwise.15

Fortunately there are further resources for backing the claim that moral reasons are objective. One might hold that morality’s norms take a universal shape not because of their domain of application, but because their content is the same for every person under their authority, whereas practical norms differ in content depending on the ends or desires of each person. This is another sense in which moral reasons are said to be objective because their content is invariant across different persons in different cultures, circumstances, or with differing commitments. Again, though, this would exclude particularist views and their close cousins, like the deontic pluralist who thinks that having a reason can justify a particular individual’s action without making it the case that such an individual or any others are required to act on said reason.16

14 For a view on which moral norms are all and only those ratified by the moral community of persons, see Henry Richardson, Articulating the Moral Community, in progress.
Even less contentiously, we might maintain that what sets morality apart is the fact that it has normative authority over persons not because of our interest in or commitment to morality as an end, but some objective grounding fact. A fact about values or goods that does not hinge on personal, arbitrary, or idiosyncratic aims, projects, ends, and desires is a good candidate for a fact that figures prominently in shaping distinctively moral standard for action. If we take this externalist view on values or goods, or what is harmful, or what promotes wellbeing or flourishing, then perhaps moral reasons differ from other practical reasons in that they hold a person accountable to these objective facts.

To sum up, we can onboard many of those in the debate with respect to the objectivity of moral reasons using one or another of the arguments above. Together they form the basis of an overlapping consensus on the point that moral reasons are objective as a conceptual matter, even though each argument may differ on what precisely objectivity amounts to and how objectivity provides a firm distinction between moral reasons and other reasons for action. One question we will need to keep in mind is whether the use of “objectivity” in the conclusions of these arguments is merely homonymous, or whether all of the homonyms all relate to a core meaning (whether they are “pros hen” homonyms in Aristotle’s terms). If further discussion shows that they are homonyms whose meanings are not necessarily related, then the fact that the arguments converge on the conclusion regarding “objectivity” does not tell us much. For now, though, these arguments might suffice to motivate us to explore a conception of moral reasons that involves their being objective, while noting that it may be difficult for this to fit with the claim that moral reasons are always practical for those to whom they apply.
The other series of reasons to take the objectivity of moral reasons as a starting point for our theorizing comes from our practices and experience. One practice predicated on the assumption that moral reasons are objective in a meaningful sense is that of moral, rational criticism. When we criticize our own or others’ actions by invoking moral reasons we failed to act on, we take ourselves to be invoking something that goes beyond our personal perspectives.

Moral criticism differs in its purpose from, for example, criticisms in matters of taste. If my friend tells me he does not find the pizza I made particularly tasty, he does not take himself to be identifying and drawing on some fact independent of his gustatory preferences to which he thinks I am beholden, or according to which I should adjust my behavior, except perhaps when I have him over for pizza. Contrast this with his criticizing me for stealing the herbs I used on the pizza from my neighbor’s garden. Here, the point of launching the criticism is to represent what he thinks is true independently of his own tastes and preferences about stealing from one’s neighbor. Perhaps he aims to change my behavior in the future not only when he comes over for dinner, but whenever I prepare food: he hopes that in coming to recognize the consideration that always counts against stealing from one’s neighbor, I will not take herbs from my neighbor’s garden in the future, even when it would promote an interest or satisfy a desire of mine.

Grant for a moment that the primary purpose of moral criticism is to point out considerations that should bear on the action of everyone similarly situated, or on all moral agents, or in every case where that action shows up as an option. Success in moral criticism presupposes the objectivity of the moral reasons invoked (whether because they apply to all moral agents or all those similarly situated, or rest on facts independent of
individual desires, commitments, or ends). Only if the moral reasons we draw on in moral criticism are objective will the criticism come off in the way we intend—that is, not as a mere recommendation, prudential suggestion, or remark about the other person’s practical options. If we are committed to the possibility of successful moral criticism, then, and we do not want to concede that this practice is predicated on a mistake, then we have some reason to think of moral reasons as objective.\footnote{17} Ph

 Phenomenologically, moral criticism sticks in a way other criticisms do not. When my friend criticizes me for stealing the herbs from my neighbor, the criticism is not misplaced if, because of some desire or goal of mine, I cannot see the consideration as a reason for me. Regardless of what I presently care about, I am morally criticizable for stealing the herbs, so the criticism doesn’t have to attach to some commitment, project, or desire of mine to stick. Contrast this again with my making a pizza that my friend does not like, and suppose the pizza is not up to my friend’s standards because it has no sausage or pepperoni on it. My friend says, “This pizza is no good! It doesn’t have any meat on it!” I can reply, “If you don’t like meat, then it’s a very good pizza.” Once I point out that I prefer meatless pizza, my friend’s criticism of the way I made the pizza falls away, or at least must be qualified. Perhaps he can still say that for a meat-lover, the pizza is no good. But his former criticism is misplaced, and he sees this once I make plain my own preference for meatless pizza. I cannot get out from under moral criticism for stealing by not caring about stealing or preferring to steal.

\footnote{17}{This rationale mirrors Michael Smith’s discussion of rational criticism in \textit{The Moral Problem}, especially the passages in which he rejects the Humean thesis that desires are beyond the pale of rational criticism. See Michael Smith, \textit{The Moral Problem}, 41-43.}
To many philosophers, the feature of “inescapability” is a primary marker of *moral* demands, requirements, and reasons. If morality failed to bind persons with certain subjective states in virtue of their having those states, then morality would be powerless to bring them under rational, moral criticism. But, according to these philosophers, we know that moral demands, requirements, and reasons are unique in that they do not fall by the wayside when a person’s interests or other subjective psychological states change. Moral norms must be objective, and so inescapable.

In addition, the objective source of moral reasons plays an important explanatory role in everyday moral reasoning and moral disagreement. As robust moral realists have recently argued, objective moral facts are indispensible for deliberation about what we ought to do and avoid, since without treating reasons as having objective authority over us we would not be able to progress in reasoning to deliberate decisions and commitments. Instead, our decisions and commitments—the conclusions of our reasoning—would seem arbitrary and lose their meaning. For a justification to succeed in vindicating our action, we need that justification to detach in some way from our own preferences and arbitrary or idiosyncratic interests. Otherwise, the justification is susceptible to collapsing into a psychological explanation. To keep appropriate distance, then, between our actual motivations and actions and the norms that govern them, it seems necessary that those norms have an objective source of authority.

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19 I’m thinking especially of David Enoch’s defense of robust normative realism from the deliberative indispensability of normative reasons and facts (Enoch, *An Argument for Robust Normative Realism*, 2003).

20 This line of reasoning will not appeal to many constructivists; for discussion, see Carla Bagnoli’s
Admittedly, these are not yet full-fledged arguments that moral reasons are objective. For of these phenomena simply point to the objectivity of morality, not moral reasons specifically. And the fact that the standard that moral reasons apply to action is objective does not strictly entail that moral reasons themselves are objective. For it could be that moral reasons only apply a subset of the objective moral standards that accord with the desires or interests of those persons to whom they apply. To get from the idea that morality is objective to the claim that moral reasons are also objective requires articulating the relationship between morality and moral reasons such that the feature carries over from the former to the latter.

Prima facie, though, moral reasons as favoring or counting against actions objectively, that is, based on objective moral facts, even if those reasons are not objective in the exact sense that the moral standard they apply is objective. Perhaps it is sufficiently accurate to say moral reasons are objective because the concept invokes a moral standard which is objective. Just as we can talk about a statue of a human having an eye because it bears a necessary relationship to eyes in living humans, so too we might think a moral reason is objective because it bears a necessary relationship to objective considerations that constitute a moral standard. We might think that moral reasons retain inescapable authority because their basis for counting in favor of or against action is objective. It could be, alternatively, that for a moral reason to apply objectively is just for it to apply to all persons in the domain of moral agents irrespective of those persons’ desires, commitments, and ends, so moral reasons are objective in the same sense universalists about morality say moral standards are objective.

We might return to the idea that objectivity is the best candidate for the feature that distinguishes moral reasons from other practical reasons, and say that the feature “objectivity” in moral reasons is really more like a mode of binding. We think that moral reasons bind objectively because they do not lose their normative force when a person no longer has the goal or desire for an end that casts favorable light on a particular course of action. Suppose, for example, that I desire to bake a cake today. I look in the cupboard and see that I am out of sugar. In light of my desire to bake a cake today, I have a practical reason to get sugar, whether from a neighbor or at the store, since sugar is a necessary ingredient of the cake I want to bake. While the reason binds me to get sugar, it does not do so objectively, because I could always decide against baking a cake today in which case I no longer have a practical reason to get sugar. Unlike the practical reason to get sugar, a moral reason does not disappear when I lose my desire to be moral. As the Kantians put the point, the authority of moral reasons is not “conditional” on our ends and commitments. Binding unconditionally might be the marker of moral reasons, then.

1.2.4 The Tension Generated by the Mind-Dependence Thesis

Ostensibly, each part of the functional analysis of moral reasons is plausible when taken in isolation from the other. When we consider how objectivity and practicality fit together, however, the ordinary conception of moral reasons comes under pressure. More precisely, the way we see each property (objectivity and practicality) relating to the question of whether moral reasons are mind dependent generates the conceptual tension, rather than anything intrinsic to those properties. If we are to solve the puzzle, a good
place to begin to press is on the conception of the relationship between practicality, objectivity, and mind dependence.

Consider first the relationship between the practical function of moral reasons and their mind dependence. If we give moral reasons a functional definition, then a consideration that could not in principle perform the function specified will not qualify as a moral reason. The practical function of a moral reason is to guide the deliberation and intentional action of persons who count as moral agents. For a consideration to be a moral reason, then, it must be able to figure in the deliberation and affect the intentional action of the persons to whom it applies.

Many philosophers suppose that for a consideration to perform any function in an agent’s practical reasoning, it needs to stand in a relation to starting points of practical reasoning. The starting points of practical reasoning are whatever gets such reasoning going in the first place. Usually, these philosophers cite the goals, ends, and desires agents actually have, as constraints on what a person can think about and intentionally do. As we will see later, typically those defending this point say that the consideration itself must be motivating, and that having a connection to what the person is already motivated by gives the consideration motivational pull. For instance, if I am antecedently committed to eating a healthy meal, then the fact that arugula is healthy will be able to motivate me to eat it as I am already motivated to eat what I believe to be healthy. More recently, the intuition that considerations themselves must be motivating has come under fire. Some philosophers argue that reasons can have a connection to our motivational states, and so

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21 See, for instance, Julia Markovits, Moral Reason, 74, 78-81. As a Kantian, Markovits presents internalism about reasons without prematurely casting the view in terms of the Humean theory of motivation.
be practical, without being in the foreground of our thinking and appraisal of potential options. But as I see things, we don’t need to come down on the question of whether the considerations themselves are motivating or moving to see that the practicality demand entails that moral reasons bear some or other relation to the psychology of those to whom they apply. For, whatever the starting points of practical reasoning are, it is clearly a condition on the possibility of a person’s taking up a consideration in deliberation or intentional action that the consideration be intelligible to her in light of her starting points.

Once someone accepts this, then she will typically adopt the mind dependence thesis: moral reasons must depend on the motivational psychological states of the persons they bind. To many it seems to follow straightforwardly from the claim that for something to be a moral reason it must stand in a relationship to antecedent starting points for a person’s practical reasoning. And as most theorists reject as metaphysically and epistemically suspicious the idea that our psychology necessarily hooks up to a moral reality, the way to go is in the direction of moral reasons depending on our psychology.

But this dependence claim about psychology and moral reasons looks problematic in light of what it takes to satisfy the other platitude about moral reasons, namely, that they are objective. The crucial normative function of moral reasons relies on their binding power, which does not hinge on particular agents’ aims, desires, or actual ends. If moral reasons had to be connected to these contingent psychological features in order to be moral reasons, then they would lose their normative force in absence of those features. That is not the sort of normative role, as we saw, that moral reasons are supposed to play. As a traditional Kantian would put it, the authority of moral reasons is not conditional but
objective, or categorical. Moral reasons do not depend on any one person’s interests or ends (not even God’s) and that unconditional form is what makes the reason a moral one. It looks as though objectivity entails mind independence, then. And so if moral reasons are objective, then they are independent of personal psychology.

I briefly stated the problem with the standard analysis at the outset, but now it should be even more obvious. Since the practicality demand seems to entail that moral reasons bear a relationship to the mind and the objectivity demand appears to entail just the contradictory, it cannot be the case that moral reasons are necessarily both objective and practical. One of these features could, of course, happen to be instantiated in every actual moral reason due to some exogenous, fortuitous fact of our world. Suppose a class of rational beings in a world have developed, through evolutionary mechanisms, a moral inclinator. These beings just happen to be inclined to act in accordance with moral reasons, even if other motives sometimes win out. Moral reasons would be practical for these beings. The development of the moral inclinator accounts for this coincidence of the practical in objective moral reasons, but it would not make moral reasons practical as a conceptual matter. The account of moral reasons would still fail to meet the practicality demand.

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22 Derek Parfit, for instance, complains that the practicality demand on moral reasons makes morality “too utilitarian.” Parfit is here responding to Bernard Williams’s argument that external moral reasons statements would make no difference to the people to whom they applied or how we interacted with those people, and so there is no sense to be made of external reasons statements. He retorts, “These remarks assume that, in order for external reasons to make a difference to ethics, they must get leverage on people, by motivating them to act differently. This conception of ethics is, I believe, too utilitarian… Our aim is, not influence, but truth,” Parfit, “Reasons and Motivation,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary* Volume 71 (1997): 111.
Though the tension between objectivity and practicality is conceptual, it is easily illustrated by cases on the ground. Consider, for instance, the position of Narendra Modi, who was the Chief Minister of the Indian province of Gujarat during the religious genocide in 2002. Modi self-identified as Hindu and during the Hindu-Muslim conflict, he expressed no interest in protecting the Muslim constituents in the province.

MODI: In 2002, a riot broke out between a Muslim mob and a Hindu activist group in the Indian state of Gujarat, where Modi served as Chief Minister. The incident precipitated a three-day attack on the local Muslim community in which hundreds of Muslims were killed, raped, and their homes, stores, and places of worship were looted and set on fire. Modi remained unmotivated to intervene and later commented, “The people of Gujarat have shown remarkable restraint under grave provocation.”

Initially we might think it obvious that on any decent moral theory, someone in Modi’s political position has a moral reason against standing by and allowing such needless violence. Forget Modi’s parochial religious interests; the objective moral facts obviously call for national intervention to protect the Muslims under attack. On further reflection, however, our appraisal of Modi is not so easy. The objective considerations that would count in favor of his calling for intervention are so far removed from Modi’s mind at the moment when action is needed that, if he did call for state intervention, it’s unclear in what sense that would have been an action he performed on the basis of reasons—that is, that he performed rationally. Calling for intervention from the national government would not only undermine his present goals, it would jar with his appraisal of the situation in Gujarat—his thought that the Hindus in Gujarat were showing “remarkable

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23 “We Have No Orders to Save You: State Participation and Complicity in Community Violence in Gujarat” in Human Rights Watch 14(3) April 2002.
restraint” in their response to the Muslim protesters. In light of these psychological facts, commonsense would just as well tell us that there is no reasoning with Modi about calling for national intervention at the time of the Gujarat crisis, so perhaps even though he is doing something that morality prohibits, he is not morally irrational for doing so, nor does he violate any moral reasons that apply to him. It would be a category mistake to attribute a consideration in favor of calling for state intervention a moral reason for him. Cases like Modi make it seem as though we need a conscious uncoupling of the objectivity and the practicality attributed to moral reasons in theory seeing as these features just cannot cohabitate in practice.

1.2.5 Why Not Revise the Concept?

It should be no surprise that the concept of a moral reason is perplexing, since it is the progeny of a marriage between two notions—morality and practical reason—that bring a host of their own issues into the relationship. I want to suggest that we not respond by giving up on the concept altogether. And one way to justify that response is to show that any view of moral reasons, revisionist or not, will invite this particular controversy.

On one side, moral philosophers have long labored to explain how someone can be under the authority of the moral without its having an analytic connection to that person’s motivations.24 And on the practical side, there is a long legacy of philosophers disputing that any objective properties could also be reason-giving for every person.25

24 Jonathan Dancy identifies W.D. Falk as the first modern philosopher to classify moral theories by their position on this very question (Dancy, Moral Reasons (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 1).
25 The idea that morality has a special kind of authority purely because of its objectivity, in the sense of its demands being categorical, is not without challengers. Most notably, Philippa Foot calls into question
Perhaps we should not think of morality as necessarily practical or related to practical rationality at all.

The first source of pressure on a moral theory to link up morality and motivation comes from the old question from Plato’s Republic: Why be moral? The ‘why be moral’ question prompts reflection on whether moral requirements must have some relationship to the motivations of, at the very least, rational agents. The hope has been that some theory can forge a sufficient connection between the psychology of ordinary persons and morality such that the answer to the ‘why be moral’ question shows everyone to have a reason to be moral. If there is a rational basis for being moral, then moral requirements will have a practical function for rational beings.

However, as Pritchard points out, the ‘why be moral’ question invites either an unsatisfying answer that invokes a moral claim as the ground for being moral, or an answer that makes the incentive for moral action too external to morality to seem correct.

26 Travis Rieder has argued deftly that moral theories’ answers to the why be moral question generally fall somewhere between the poles of the unhelpful and the objectionably external.27 Wherever a theory falls on that spectrum, it will appear dissatisfying in some respect to those who endorse a view on the other end of the spectrum. Even if one finds practical rationality a non-objectionable basis for the motivation to be moral, suspicion lingers that practical rationality could pull off such a
feat: for it seems conceptually possible that a perfectly rational, calculating person can be morally vicious. Finally, efforts to develop psychological theories on which moral claims necessarily motivate have been met with resistance on metaphysical and epistemological grounds. So, as the concept of a moral reason inherits the questions about motivation which apply to moral requirements, the thorny conceptual issues with moral reasons are not unique to the standard analysis. Any account will have to face them and will leave someone less than completely satisfied, revisionist and standard views alike.

Why should we think that it is worth whittling the concept of a moral reason out of such knotty material? If the concept of moral reasons were to have both the objective gene from its moral parent and the practical gene from its rational parent, then it stands to reason that it will have the genetic flaws of both. It is tempting to give up on the idea of a necessarily practical and objective consideration altogether, or to revise it radically such that it loses the characteristics of one of its parent concepts. And many philosophers have opted for that route, as we shall see below.

I do not think the fact that the concept of a moral reason comes from a family of vexing concepts is, by itself, a good enough reason for us to preemptively decide not to

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29 For a survey see Nick Zangwill, “Besires and the Motivation Debate,” *Theoria* 74 (2008): 50-59. John McDowell is one of the most notable defenders of this desire theory; see McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” *Monist* 62 (1979): 331-350. The other option Derek Parfit highlights in “Reasons and Motivation,” which meets with even more criticism, is what he calls a Platonic view, and what we might call Socratic Intellectualism. Upon seeing what is good any rational person will be motivated to act accordingly.
try to defend it as is. For hope remains that when objectivity and practicality are combined in a particular configuration, the worries each of those properties generates on its own disappear.

Another reason against throwing in the towel too hastily is that the conception of moral reasons as objectively binding and practically functional is no philosopher’s fiction. As I mentioned earlier, the concept of moral reasons as practical and objective features prominently in commonplace practices: individual and joint decision-making, in giving and taking advice, and in judging peoples’ actions. Someone might remark that the lead character on Dexter, cool and calculating, is perfectly rational, but wonder whether he has moral reasons to murder serial criminals. Or we might appeal to distinctively moral reasons against allowing our government to torture suspects in terrorism cases, even when we can appreciate prudential reasons for doing so. The everyday usage of moral reason intimates both something that purports to bind an individual independently of her interests and desires but also something which is not only accessible from a god’s-eye view, but could be used in an individual’s reasoning or reasoning with the individual it binds. If a philosophically respectable account could underwrite the important practices we have developed around the ordinary conception of moral reasons, so much the better for that theory.

Aside from the significant role the concept of a moral reason plays in our ordinary practices and language, there are theoretical benefits of having the standard conception of moral reasons in the neighborhood. Practical reasons, as they are often conceived of in contemporary theory, have the serious limitation of being conditional on agents’ ends—ends that may be a product of contingent evolutionary history, upbringing, preferences,
and choices. Even if reasons are constrained by the ends of an entire social community, those reasons might be insidious to future generations or other beings that merit moral consideration outside that community. Moral reasons that boast of objectivity would seem to dodge this set of worries.

Moreover, if morality can make itself felt to rational agents through the medium of its own species of practical reasons, morality might not be subject to accusations of strangeness or inability to bind agents like ourselves without relying on a picture of moral motivation any more controversial than the picture of rational motivation that gives practical reasons their action-guiding power. So if we want some concept that will explain away the oddity of moral binding and also show how rational agents are bound to a set of norms that goes beyond their private, idiosyncratic interests, we have a vested interest in keeping the commonsense conception of moral reasons alive.

In the sections above, I presented the puzzle as I have come to see it: as a problem about the nature of mind dependence given the demands of practicality and objectivity. Admittedly, there are other ways of framing the puzzle and the debate about moral reasons swelling up in its wake. Meta-ethicists and moral philosophers have cast the debate in terms of whether moral reasons are agent neutral or agent relative, whether moral reasons must be explanatory as well as justificatory, whether reasons are subjective or objective, and whether moral reasons are external or internal to agents. These distinctions all bring out important questions an account of moral reasons should answer.

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30 Kantian theories that hang all of our duties to or reasons to benefit others on their rationality often face this type of criticism: they do not adequately attend to other entities we now think are loci of value, like animals, ecosystems, and even cognitively impaired members of our own species.
My own view is that (i) the questions about mind dependence are more fundamental, (ii) that they force perspicuity that is often wanting in these discussions, and (iii) that once we frame the puzzle in these terms we will be able to see a way forward that reconciles practicality and objectivity without serious conceptual reconstruction. I believe that once we have answers to the mind-dependence question, we will be able to work out more adeptly through issues about agent neutrality and relativity, explanation and justification, as well as reasons internalism and externalism.

My way of framing the puzzle requires fewer assumptions than others to get off the ground, as I have aimed to show in the previous sections. The bare-bones arguments above for the idea that moral reasons are practical in some respect and objective in some respect lend enough initial support to the ordinary conception of moral reasons for us to think it is worth keeping around.

My formulation of the puzzle also leaves open the possibility of reconciling certain strands of moral realism and moral constructivism to one another, rather than pitting them against one another and making weaker their arguments against anti-realism. It would do so by putting the practicality demand and the objectivity demand on a par with one another from the beginning, allowing us to start from a point on which the realist and constructivist can agree. We need not assume, for instance, any narrow theory of moral psychology to see the problem; nor do we need to prematurely dismiss particular conceptions of objectivity.

Now that we have the puzzle on the table, the question is how we should go about solving it. As I said earlier, my strategy is to come up with formal conditions for an ecumenical solution by looking at the commitments and claims that lead meta-ethicsists
to adopt the revisionist views that are in vogue. An account reconciled to all of these foundational commitments will be the subject of a kind of overlapping consensus, and so worth pursuing. What I will do in the sections that follow is unearth the concerns that ground revisionist conceptions, both those that meet the practicality demand and ignore the objectivity demand and those that meet the objectivity demand but not the practicality demand.

1.3 Conceptual Revision in the Direction of Practicality

Many philosophers are convinced that objectivity and practicality are features that cannot cohabitate in one concept, and that the practical function of moral reasons is more central and, on reflection, acceptable as a conceptually necessary property of moral reasons. Thus, they are willing to forego objectivity for practicality in their accounts of moral reasons.

More traditional formulations of the puzzle have put the problem in terms of whether moral reasons are internal or external to agents, and so those who hold the view that moral reasons are necessarily practical but not fully objective are called “internalists” about reasons. To the internalist’s mind, all arguments point in the direction of moral reasons being practical and so mind dependent. The internalist usually makes two moves to support her position. First, she points out compelling reasons for thinking that the practicality demand is pressing. Second, she tries to show that the intuitive support for the objectivity demand falls away on scrutiny, or that what counts as objectivity must change drastically. A variety of views come under the umbrella of internalism, but we can
discern their shared commitments and concerns by looking at defenses of moral reasons internalism.

1.3.1 Williams’s Argument for Internalism

Bernard Williams famously offers an argument for the idea that facts about moral and practical reasons depend on facts about agent motivational psychology in “Internal and External Reasons.” The classical argument popularized reasons internalisms of all varieties, perhaps because the argument leaves copious room for interpretation. I will offer my reading of the argument in hopes of distinguishing between claims contemporary internalists happen to hold and claims supported straightforwardly by Williams’s argument. My interpretation will also aid us in identifying what theorists who embrace Williams’s style of internalism care about most.

Williams begins by noting that statements about an agent having a reason to perform an action can be understood in at least two ways:

On the first, the truth of the sentence implies, very roughly, that A has some motive which will be served or furthered by his φ-ing… On the second interpretation, there is no such condition, and the reason-sentence will not be falsified by the absence of an appropriate motive. The first reading of a reasons statement is the “internal” reading and the second is the “external” reading. Williams then sets out to show that there is something deeply

31 Bernard Williams, “Internal and External Reasons” reprinted in Moral Luck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 101. The internalist view is no invention of Williams, however, as it was a view debated by W.D. Falk and William Frankena decades earlier.


33 Ibid., 101.
problematic about the external reading of a reasons-statement, which fact should make us suspicious of any claims that there are reasons that bear no relation to our motives.

There are three constraints on internal reasons statements. One, if A has a motive based on a false belief, or if it is false that A’s φ-ing would contribute to the satisfaction of that motive, then the motive does not give A a reason to φ on the internal reading. Two, the agent an internal reasons statement is about can in principle discover the truth of that statement through deliberation. This is because the statement depends on the agent’s existing motives, and so the agent has something within herself that can serve as the basis for her arriving at the judgment that the statement is true. The third constraint follows loosely from the first two: a consideration can only be a reason on the internal reading for an agent when the agent has a motive that would be served by her acting on it, or by the reason “embodying a commitment” of the agent such that she can deliberate and arrive at another motive that would be served by her acting on that consideration.

With these assumptions in place, Williams launches a defense of the claim that all true reasons-statements must be internal reasons-statements, so there are no external reasons. Take the external reasons statement, “The fact that serving one’s country is noble is a reason for Sam to enlist in the army.” We do not want it to be sufficient for Sam acting rationally that Sam enlists in the army if she does it to impress a friend or because she thinks she will meet her future spouse there. We also do not want Sam to have a reason just in case Sam thinks that it is noble to serve her country if Sam’s belief is false. To avoid these unwelcome possibilities, we need to impose two constraints. First,

34 Ibid., 103.
35 Ibid., 105
Sam must come to believe the reasons statement in order for her enlisting to be rational. Second, Sam must come to believe the reasons statement when she is “considering the matter aright.”

Williams explains these two conditions:

If the theorist is to hold on to these conditions, he will, I think, have to make the condition under which the agent appropriately comes to have the motivation something like this, that he should deliberate correctly; and the external reasons statement itself will have to be taken as roughly equivalent to, or at least as entailing, the claim that if the agent rationally deliberated then, whatever motivations he originally had, he would come to be motivated to φ.\(^{36}\)

To put it formally, in order to effectively exclude the possibility that a person could satisfy his reasons by acting according to but not on the basis of the reason she has, we need to make it a necessary condition on the truth of an external reasons statement that the person will be moved by the consideration itself. And in order to exclude the possibility that a false belief about a reason could give rise to a reason for action, we need to introduce the condition that an agent who deliberates correctly about his reasons to φ will come to believe the external reasons statement that he ought to φ.

Williams then takes himself to have cornered the defender of external reasons statements using her own concerns about acting from ignorance and acting on the basis of alternative motives. If a necessary condition on its being true that Sam has a reason to enlist is its being true that if Sam were fully rational and able to correctly deliberate, then Sam would be motivated to enlist, then if Sam has a reason to enlist it must be true that Sam has some motive from which she could deliberate correctly and arrive at the conclusion that she has a reason to enlist and be motivated enlist by that reason. In short,

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
the internal reasons statement must also be true of Sam for the external reasons statement to be true. The only external reasons statements that are true are also internal reasons statements.

This clever argument purports to illustrate that as a matter of conceptual necessity, on pain of an absurd implication, normative practical reasons depend on what Williams calls agents’ motives. Insofar as moral reasons are akin to or a species of normative practical reasons, the argument can be run on moral reasons. We could say that if a moral reason bears no relation to an agent’s actual motives, then it would not be genuinely morally rational for that agent to act according to it, since she could not be in a position from which correct deliberation would lead her to do so either for the right reason or without mistaken beliefs.

Interpreters can take this argument to lead to either an ambitious conclusion or a modest conclusion. The ambitious conclusion is that reasons must have a connection to the motives of those persons to whom they apply. The more modest, conditional conclusion is that if reasons can only be satisfied by agents acting on the basis of them (not merely in blind conformity with them), and if reasons cannot be satisfied when agents act according to them but because of false beliefs, then it must be the case that reasons have to have a connection to agents’ motivations.

The modest form of the conclusion allows the defender of external reasons to perform modus tollens and accept the negation of those conditions as a counterintuitive conclusion. She will concede that sometimes, because of the contingent psychology persons have, what they have moral reason to do is to act on false beliefs or to act according to reasons they do not believe they have, or on the basis of non-reasons. It is
very hard to do this and to hold that rational action is action performed on the basis of reasons, as it seems painfully obvious to most that acting on false beliefs or acting in mere conformity with but not because of reasons is not paradigmatic rational action.

What Williams and those who endorse this argument find unacceptable is the idea that there are reasons even a rational agent could not come to believe she had or on which she could not be motivated to act. In the dénouement of the argument, he points out that at the very least, the flawlessly reasoning rational agent should have some cognitive access to the reasons that apply to her and should have the conative resources to respond with action. At the very least, such an ideal agent must be able to be moved by her reasons, and so there is at least this conceptual connection between reasons and agent psychology: moral reasons are considerations which would come to be appreciated by and acted on by perfectly morally rational agents.

We have a few lessons to learn from this argument. First, it shows that theorists do not want to call “rational” actions not deserving of the title because they are done in ignorance of the facts or for the wrong kinds of reasons. Second, taking the stronger version of the argument’s conclusion, internalists want to maintain a connection between reasons and the motivational states of rational agents. Third, they think that reasons are the sorts of things agents discover and engage in deliberation that leads to motivation and action. An account that satisfies the practicality demand is attractive in virtue of its having the aforementioned theoretical advantages.
1.3.2 Staving off Metaphysical and Epistemological Skepticism

Internalists have mounted a whole series of arguments for the practicality of normative and moral reasons with the express purpose of defending accounts against epistemological and metaphysical objections.\(^{37}\) If moral reasons were fully objective and not dependent on what mattered to us, or what we cared about, then they would be so odd we would not have license to believe in their existence. Tethering moral reasons to our motives is one way to dodge this objections that would otherwise endanger an account of such reasons.\(^{38}\)

One related epistemological worry goes like this: Suppose there are objective moral reasons. There is no guarantee, aside from the practicality demand, of those reasons tracking what we actually value. In fact, arguments can be made from evolutionary biology that our dispositions to adopt certain goals and undertake commitments have evolved not in keeping with what is best for all human beings or morally right, but with what has been advantageous for individuals.\(^{39}\) Even if there were objective moral reasons, it would be a happy coincidence if we could come to know about them. And nothing about them (except their practicality, which we are putting to the side right now) would indicate that we have special access to them or have evolved to sniff them out. So, chances are, knowledge of objective reasons would be so difficult to come by that we would have not have sufficient reason to believe most of our judgments about our reasons to be correct.


\(^{38}\) “This position is favored by its transparent intelligibility as well as its metaphysical and epistemological economy,” Alan Goldman, *Reasons from Within: Desires and Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 20.

\(^{39}\) Again, more on Street’s version of this will come in chapter 2.
On the metaphysical side, there are two separate issues apparently mitigated by making moral reasons mind dependent and so necessarily practical. If moral reasons have absolutely no relationship to agent psychology, then a theory of moral reasons can end up with the overgeneration problem: the theory will countenance too many reasons.\textsuperscript{40} Any fact at all might give someone moral reasons; the fact that climate change is happening in 2014 could constitute a moral reason for Nikola Tesla to have drawn up plans for creating clean energy instead of working for so long on currents in 1888. If space is curved, this fact could give us a moral reason not to teach our children Euclidean geometry. Given that we may never have the evidence to support the hypothesis that space is curved and that Tesla had no way to know and reason about climate change, these facts do not seem like good candidates for reasons. But an ontology of moral reasons totally divorced from the psychology of agents in the actual world to whom they apply is silent on whether, in principle, these facts could give agents reasons. And so an account of moral reasons that denies that moral reasons must be practical will suffer an embarrassment of riches.

Another theoretical consideration in favor of internalism, from the metaphysical point of view, is that moral reasons would introduce a profound discontinuity into the realm of natural objects if they were objective and independent of our ends and desires.\textsuperscript{41} On a charitable reconstruction of this argument, most norms are subjectively binding in virtue of their being practical. For instance, norms of mathematical theorizing may be objective in some sense, but they only bind those mathematicians to whom they matter.

\textsuperscript{40} Mark Schroeder, \textit{Slaves of the Passions} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
\textsuperscript{41} J.L. Mackie’s argument has been termed the “argument from queerness” and proceeds by pointing out the ways in which moral reasons, if objective, would be unlike other entities (Mackie, \textit{Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong} (Middlesex: Penguin, 1977), esp. Part I).
So their binding power is not actually objective. Other norms bind more universally because they matter to more agents; for instance, many norms of practical reason regard self-preservation, and most people care about self-preservation, so most are bound by those norms. But something that purported to be objective but still binding on those for whom it was not practical would shatter the existing categories we have, even when it comes to the normative. If moral reasons are practical, and so subjective in the way norms of practical reason or math are, then they are back on the continuum with other norms. They would not constitute a sui generis ontological category.

An epistemological worry related to this one is that even if there were such entities, the fact that they do not fit our current categories and that we do not have sufficiently good evidence for their existence provides some resistance to believing in non-practical, objectively binding moral reasons.

The epistemological and metaphysical problems outlined above take as a point against a theory its inability to connect reasons with agents’ awareness and commitments. These objections stress that moral reasons ought to fall into categories we already understand or to limit facts about moral reasons in principle to make them accessible to agents like us, whom they bind. We can think of them as implicitly requiring that a theory be able to be squared with our having some knowledge of facts about moral reasons, whether that be antecedently because of their metaphysical constraints to the realm of our cognition or consequently because of their continuity with other facts we know.
1.3.3 The Explanatory Role of Reasons

Some realists about moral reasons (and moral values) have defended their position against the metaphysical and epistemological charges mentioned above by appealing to the explanatory role of moral reasons and values. Their arguments invoke the general principle that if an entity plays a crucial part in the best explanation for a phenomenon, then, assuming one does not have good reasons to give up the phenomenon altogether, the role the entity plays in the explanation vindicates belief in the entity. The moral realist then argues that moral reasons (or moral facts and values) are critical in the explanation of phenomena like moral disagreement, our ethical practices, and moral judgments. The explanatory role justifies our belief in moral reasons.\(^{42}\)

In order for the argument to go through, it needs to be the case that moral reasons can effect our practices, judgments, and beliefs, and so partly explain the phenomena of moral judgments, disagreements, and practices like holding responsible.\(^{43}\) If an account builds practicality into the concept of a moral reason, it secures the tight connection that must obtain between such phenomena and moral reasons. That is, if to be a moral reason, a consideration must be practical and have some connection to motivation, then it will certainly be the case that at least some of our behaviors, formation of beliefs and attitudes are ultimately accounted for by moral reasons themselves. If moral reasons were practical only contingently, then there would be no guarantee that any of the phenomena the realist


\(^{43}\) I do not see in Sturgeon’s argument anything to suggest that he thinks we need this claim about efficacy for the argument to go through. However, his argument is much stronger and more plausibly sound if we introduce the further premise that moral facts are able to affect us and our practices.
picks out—moral judgment, moral disagreement, and ethical practices—would actually rely on moral reasons. Something besides those reasons would account for persons’ motivation to engage in those phenomena. If satisfying the practicality demand gives an account of moral reasons this argumentative resource, then having practicality as a necessary feature of moral reasons would make an account more desirable.

By linking moral reasons and motives, an account can preemptively suppress the objection that we never know whether a person performs the action for the moral reason that applies to her. An account that denies a necessary relationship between moral reasons and agent motives does not inspire any confidence that agents will act for reasons that apply to them, since those reasons do not intrinsically have power to motivate agents. By contrast, if part of what it is to be a moral reason is to have the property of being able to move agents when they take up the reason in deliberation, or even to be the sort of thing that agents do take up in deliberation, then we have some reasons for confidence that when agents act in accordance with their moral reasons they are acting for those reasons.

This is a riff on the point about explanation, of course; practical moral reasons, in virtue of their being practical, are primed to make a difference in agents’ deliberation and action, and so will serve as good candidates for explaining moral deliberation and action. This particular line of reasoning stresses that an account of moral reasons ought to make intelligible not only how agents can avoid violating their moral reasons, but how it is that agents can act for their moral reasons.
1.3.4 Ought Implies Can

At the heart of this second line of argument is the age-old intuition that “ought implies can.” The formulation of the puzzle about moral reasons that Michael Smith has named “the moral problem” also underscores the importance of the ought implies can principle. According to Smith, morality is objective, so facts about morality are truth-functionally evaluable. Agents like us are able to make judgments about moral facts, but the alethic status of facts is not something to which desires are sensitive. But agents can only be motivated by desires. Since there is no necessary connection between judgments and desires, as Hume famously argued, the objectivity of morality makes moral facts look accessible to the wrong psychological feature of agents, if agents are to be able to motivated to act as they ought.44

Smith and others solve this version of the problem by letting facts about what is practical reshape the intuitions we previously had about moral objectivity. These moral philosophers insist that moral reasons must be necessarily linked to a conative element of psychology—the springs of motivation, so to speak. If moral reasons must bear a connection to motivational states like desires, then in principle the persons they bind will have the ability to act on those reasons. Internalists like Smith thus make it a necessary condition on some consideration’s being a moral reason that it can infiltrate or connect to

44 Many internalists expressly avow the principle as something they are unwilling to give up. (Here is a quick example of an internalist using ought implies can to stop the externalist out of the gate: “Other philosophers have contended that, even in the case of love, we do have reasons to love other people, and these reasons are external, independent of our actual feelings. The first problem with this suggestion is that ought implies can,” Goldman, Reasons from Within, 129). For a fuller discussion, see Jonny Anomaly, “Internal Reasons and the Ought-Implies-Can Principle,” Philosophical Forum 39 (2008): 469-483; Rosemary Lowry, “Reasons for Action and Psychological Capacities,” Ethical Theory and Moral Practice (2012): 521-531; Peter Vranas, “I Ought, Therefore I Can,” Philosophical Studies 136 (2007): 167-216; Clayton Littlejohn, “Does ‘Ought’ Still Imply ‘Can’?” Philosophy (2012): 821-28.
the person’s goals or desires. Smith puts his moral rationalist solution this way: facts about moral rightness, or moral reasons, just are facts about what we would want ourselves to do if we were fully rational.

The argument for moral rationalism relies on the idea that it must be possible for at least the fully rational versions of ourselves to be motivated by moral reasons. If the motivational states of our counterparts place this conceptual constraint on what could count as a moral reason for us, then moral reasons have a modally necessary connection to motivation. Ideal advisor theories work the same way, but ground facts about what an agent can do in facts about what her advisor in a nearby possible world would counsel her to do.

Consider the implicit assumption of ought implies can in the more perspicuous form of the argument: A person cannot intentionally φ for a moral reason r without being motivated to φ for r; to be motivated to φ for r requires that a person have a desire or goal served by φ-ing for r. Since, according to ought implies can, it must be possible for a person to be motivated to φ for r in order for it to be true that she ought to φ for r, and the possibility of a person’s φ-ing for r hinges on one’s counterpart having a desire that would be served by doing so, reasons depend on desires of idealized persons.

Another set of concerns that motivate the idea that moral reasons are practical but not objective has to do with what we say about persons who are in non-ideal circumstances. If a moral reason is totally objective and mind independent, it will likely not discriminate in its prescriptions to persons who are in ideal circumstances, fully informed, or perfectly rational, and persons like us. We are subject to epistemic limitations, akratic failings, and coercive pressures that make a difference to what actions
are feasible for us to perform and what attitudes it is feasible for us to have. It is a mistake to analyze moral reasons in isolation from these realities, because it will commit us to moral evaluations of actual persons in non-ideal circumstances that grate harshly against our everyday practices and talk. To avoid this mistake, we must include in the analysis the practical function of moral reasons.

I want to consider two types of non-ideal circumstances in which commonsense morality bolsters the internalist view of moral reasons as necessarily practical, or at the very least that ought implies can. On the first type, the non-ideal circumstance is one in which the person is coerced and so seems not to be subject to the same moral reasons and requirements as she would be otherwise. On the second type, a lack of information or misinformation causes the person to act in a way she would not have if she had full information, and so we tend to excuse her for not acting in a manner that would have been moral or rational if she had the correct information. Let’s consider each in turn.

Suppose there is an objective moral reason against putting oneself in harms’ way or being subservient. Now, suppose that a young woman has been trafficked to the US to work for a man who is physically stronger and older than her; he is abusive, but threatens to physically harm her if she attempts to leave him. She recognizes that her servility towards him is bad for herself; at the same time, she is under his thumb and fears for her bodily integrity. To say that in this situation, objective, mind-independent morality places a burden on the trafficked woman to get out of the situation seems out of place. Precisely because she is a victim of coercion and psychological harm, we want to excuse her from the moral requirement to do what is required to avoid self-harm or servility. Since commonsense morality does not tell us that the trafficked woman is immoral or irrational,
but rather in a tragic situation that excuses what might otherwise be wrongdoing, the burden is on the theorist who takes morality to be completely independent of psychological conditions. At the very least, we want to be able to say that a prima facie moral reason disappears as another consideration overrides it. But to do so would be to accept that what one has an all-things-considered moral reason to do is in some way dependent on psychological states and circumstances particular to the person who has the moral reason. The theorist who accepts that moral reasons, by definition, have a practical function predicts that the trafficked woman does not have a reason to attempt leaving without any further structural or external support. So much the better for the internalist view.

Many cases in which the person acting is ignorant also evoke the commonsense judgment that the action performed in ignorance is not immoral or irrational because ought implies can. Imagine, for example, that a nurse who has been working in a Texas hospital where an Ebola patient is being treated believes she has not come into contact with the virus; she checks her symptoms and even calls the Center for Disease Control to make sure her getting on a flight to Ohio is not a public health risk, and they give her the green light to board the plane. As it turns out, she has contracted Ebola, and is posing a risk to other passengers on the plane to Ohio. Is her getting on the plane a failure of her moral rationality? Or is it unfortunate that she did not receive the correct information? Most of us do not want to blame the nurse for getting on the plane, given that she sought out advice from experts and just did not receive sufficient information. But, perhaps we need to divorce our theory of blame from our theory of moral reasons. Even so, I do not think most of us are willing to concede that the nurse acted irrationally or immorally. And
most of those objectivists who still want to stand their ground on the immorality of the nurse’s action do not want to bite the bullet completely and say that her action is just as immoral as it would have been if the nurse knew she had Ebola. The ought implies can principle again underwrites the intuition that in this case, the nurse does not have a moral reason against boarding the plane because there was no way for her to soundly deliberate to the conclusion that she ought not fly to Ohio, much less for her to be motivated to act on the consideration against flying to Ohio. While an internalist view on which all moral reasons are necessarily practical can deny that the nurse has such a reason, an account of moral reasons that detaches them from all psychological and epistemic conditions of the persons to whom they apply will get into trouble, here. Especially in cases of inculpable ignorance, then, the internalist view seems to do better in accommodating our commonsense intuitions.

The ought implies can principle serves as a starting point from which arguments for the practicality of moral reasons proceed, rather than a conclusion that those arguments produce. If that diagnosis is correct, then respecting the ought implies can principle turns out to be a major concern for metaethicists who want to revise the concept of a moral reason in the direction of practicality.

1.3.5 *Getting Practicality Via a Theory of Motivation*

According to reasons internalism, normative practical reasons have a necessary relation to agent psychology and this relation accounts for those reasons being necessarily
practical.\textsuperscript{45} If one accepts moral internalism and moral rationalism, the view that if an action is morally required or prohibited there is a reason for or against performing that action, one ends up committed to the view that moral reasons, like other normative practical reasons, have a necessary relationship to agent psychology.\textsuperscript{46} Because desiring or having a desire accounts for an agent’s being motivated, on a popular strand of internalism, the claim that moral reasons depend on what agents desire allows an account to meet the practicality demand.\textsuperscript{47}

Once the moral reasons internalist accepts rationalism, what remains to be explained is the relationship between conative motivational states or facts and moral reasons that makes it the case that all such reasons are action-guiding. Most internalists hold that “motivation is a constituent of the ethical facts themselves”\textsuperscript{48} or that “reasons and motivations are constitutively interdependent.”\textsuperscript{49} A more radical species of this

\textsuperscript{45} Stephen Arkonovich nicely sketches the various versions of this view, including its moral counterparts, in “Varieties of Reasons/Motives Internalism” \textit{Philosophy Compass} 8 (2013). If one believes that moral requirements give agents practical reasons, then this commitment coupled with a commitment to reasons internalism about practical reasons yields a commitment to internalism about moral reasons.

\textsuperscript{46} The argument usually goes, as Mark Schroeder puts it, “If (as Moral Rationalism claims) an action (like ordering genocide) is morally wrong for an agent (like Hitler) only if there is a reason for him not to do it, and if (as HTR claims) there is a reason for him not to do it only if he has some desire that would be served by his not doing it, then it follows that whether an action is morally wrong for an agent depends upon what he desires.” (Mark Schroeder, “Internal and External Reasons” 1.2.2).

\textsuperscript{47} Internalists will often fend off worries about whether desires motivate by distinguishing between an agent’s being moved to φ and being motivated to φ; an agent is moved to φ if the motivation to φ is not drowned out by other desires or when the agent tries to φ, whereas motivation need only be an impulse in the direction of satisfying the desire. See, for instance, Julia Markovits, “Why Be an Internalist About Reasons?” \textit{Oxford Studies in Metaethics} 6 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), fn. 12.


claim, sometimes called hyper-internalism, is characterized by the idea that “all motivating reasons are psychological states of the agent, and that normative reasons must be a subset of motivating reasons.”50 Despite the differences between specific name-brand versions of internalism, most contemporary internalists make use of the mind-dependence thesis from my formulation of the puzzle and accept the antecedent of the conditional: as a conceptual matter, moral reasons have conative motivational features of agent psychology as parts. The mind-dependence thesis together with the central thesis of internalism (that moral reasons are mind dependent) yield the sort of link between reasons and action Bernard Williams calls for in his argument. That is, every moral reason has as one of its constituents a motivational state or fact about a motivational state that explains how a rational deliberator would come to see that consideration as a reason for her and be moved to act on the basis of it.

At this point, one might begin to worry about illicit assumptions about moral psychology in the internalist’s response to the puzzle about moral reasons. For instance, the argument sketched above assumes the correctness of the Humean picture of psychology and thus frames the puzzle as though it is tantamount to a question about how to link up moral reasons with agents’ desires and goals. But we need not (and perhaps ought not) follow suit. The question with which we began is how moral reasons could be the sorts of things suited to play a role in actions for those to whom they apply. Williams analyzes reasons in terms of their functional role in deliberation and their explanatory role in intentional action as well. By starting out from a neutral standpoint on the

mechanics of human motivation, we can view the question internalism seeks to answer in a very different light. The question Williams’ puzzle raises is how to reconcile the functional role of moral reasons with the notion that moral reasons are objective, not how to square the idea that moral reasons depend on desires with their being objective or how to specify the relationship between conative mental states and moral reasons.

One need only consider a few alternative accounts of motivation to see how the internalists’ presupposition that the Humean picture of psychology is correct narrows the possible solutions to the puzzle. First, suppose there were a strong modal connection between judgments and desires—for instance, if judgments potentially inform or steer desires. It would be possible to meet the practicality requirement while maintaining that moral reasons are objective because one could argue that correct moral judgments make possible motivation to act on objective moral reasons by influencing our desires. It would also be possible to criticize an agent’s desires if those desires were, say, based on false moral judgments or beliefs.51

Second, views on which judgments are by themselves motivationally efficacious can easily accommodate the practicality requirement. On these accounts, grouped under the heading of “judgment internalism,” persons have access to moral facts via the faculty of moral judgment. Since moral judgments motivate, moral facts hook up with motivation in the right way. Thus, for any objective moral fact, the moral reason to act on that fact is practical in that any agent who forms a correct judgment about that fact will be motivated to act on it.

51 Smith and other Humeans (e.g. Julia Driver) go this route; the difficult task for them is to explain the connection between beliefs and desires without making that connection a necessary one.
Third, some moral philosophers claim that there is no distinction between judgments and desires; rather, the mental states that apprehend moral reasons or facts at once perceive them and motivate the agent.\textsuperscript{52} This view has been nicknamed the “besire” theory, since it states that motivating mental states share features of beliefs and desires. According to besire theory, all virtuous moral agents have the capacity to grasp moral reasons, and in virtue of the same capacity they are motivated to act on those reasons. These are just a few ways one could loose oneself from the internalist’s moral problem as Smith describes it by rejecting the Humean assertions that desires alone motivate and are sufficient for motivation, and that beliefs and desires (or judgments and desires) have no necessary connection.

Not every form of moral reasons internalism simply relies on the Humean view without further justification. Alan Goldman’s more recent defense of internalism, for instance, develops a sophisticated analysis of desire as complex psychological states.\textsuperscript{53} He maintains that evaluative judgments can be motivating aspects of complex desires, and so does not make so sharp a distinction between beliefs and desires as other Humeans like Smith who treat the difference in these mental states’ directions of fit as evidence that they cannot compose one state. Goldman’s analysis of desire may even do better than simpler Humean theories because of its direct engagement with cognitive science on emotions; in virtue of accommodating insights from that literature his account does more to show us that what he calls desires function as motivators for agents like ourselves.

\textsuperscript{52} See, for instance, Nagel’s and McDowell’s “besire” theories of moral motivation.
\textsuperscript{53} Alan Goldman, \textit{Reasons from Within}, especially chapters 3 and 4.
The Kantian internalist gets closer to having her cake and eating it too when it comes to practicality and objectivity, precisely because she does not adopt the Humean theory of motivation. In *Moral Reason*, Julia Markovits argues for a version of Kantian internalism on which moral reasons depend on the ends we already have, not because those ends have motivational force, but rather because the relation between an action φ and an end we have “throws justificatory weight behind φ-ing.”

Reasons provide us with evidence that some action will conduce to ends we have, and so work to motivate us through procedural rationality. On Markovits’s view, moral reasons are practical both because they serve our ends and because they can be invoked in advice we give ourselves or others in deliberation. What the Kantian view does not get is a guarantee that moral reasons are doing any of the motivating, so we are left with cases in which agents act morally rationally even though they are not acting on the basis of their reasons. In fact, Markovits argues against thinking of being morally sensitive to all our reasons and motivated by them as ideal. In my own estimation, Markovits gives the most persuasive Kantian internalist story about moral reasons that does not rest on controversial theses about motivation. But the view struggles to capture the practicality of moral reasons in a way that accommodates some of the central commitments that lead to the practicality demand in the first place. Notably, and against my reading of Williams, it permits action that is done in accordance with but not for a moral reason to be morally rational. I do not

55 Markovits takes this to be a feature rather than a bug of her theory because it allows her to handle cases like Kavka’ nuclear deterrence and toxin puzzles. See *Moral Reasons*, 50. But I am not inclined to think that accommodating the initial intuitions about these outlier cases is a considerable advantage of a view, since they are, after all, outliers and problematic for most theories of rationality. A proponent of the view that cannot support the intuitions can easily respond with a companion in guilt argument, and so the failure to support those intuitions is not a high cost.
pretend to be giving an argument against Markovits’s position here, only drawing out the added difficulty of meeting the practicality demand in a manner that attends to the concerns that underwrite that demand without the Humean theory of motivation.

If my appraisal of Markovits’s view as the strongest contender against Humean internalism is on target, and the other views on the market rest on contested psychological theories or analyses of desires and motivations, then internalists are in a bit of a predicament. Either their view is only as compelling as its theory of motivation, which is seriously contested, or their view is compelling on grounds besides its ability to meet the practicality demand with any ease. And if a view has trouble straightforwardly satisfying the demand for practicality, but maintains some vestigial feature of Humean internalism that keeps it from satisfying the demand for objectivity, it will be quite unattractive at the end of the day. I will not discuss these potential problems again until we circle back to strategies for meeting the practicality demand in chapter 4, but for now, we need only take note of them.

1.3.6 What To Do About Objectivity

For all their theoretical appeal, revisionist theories that take the conception of moral reasons in the direction of practicality do not preserve the sense of moral objectivity many moral philosophers and ordinary users of the concept want, and so they prove unsatisfying to many. Internalists can only hope to convince those who believe that moral reasons are necessarily objective that internalism is true if they also provide, with the arguments for their view, coping strategies for the former objectivist. Below, we will take
a look at some of the most palliative treatments they offer to potential and recent converts from the objectivist side of the debate, then consider remaining weaknesses.

The first step the internalist should take in a solution, according to Mark Schroeder, is to weaken the relation that must obtain between an action and a desire in order to satisfy the demand of practicality. Schroeder argues that we should plump for the “promotion” relation: if an action promotes the object of an agent’s desire, even if it is not necessary for attaining the object of that desire, then there is a reason for that agent to perform that action. Now, the very low bar for practicality increases the probability that any old desire will promote acting in a particular way. For example, Ted the serial killer has a desire to eat well; this desire to eat well might turn out to be promoted by turning over a new leaf (his foodie neighbors might invite him over for dinner more often). So even Ted the serial killer has a moral reason to not brutally murder potential victims. Schroeder concludes that if we conceive of the promotion relation in this way, there will be plenty of agent-neutral, or objective, moral reasons.

Take Smith’s view that facts about moral rightness just are facts about what we would want ourselves to do if we were fully rational. So what we have moral reason to

56 Ibid., 114-115
57 Julia Driver has also informally argued that contingency should not bother us in her PEA Soup article. She first states the contingency problem: “A major worry that the Humean faces is that of the contingency problem. This is a problem that plagues accounts of moral norms that appeal to human nature. This is because any particular feature of human nature arose contingently, as a product of, for example, blind evolutionary forces. This means that human nature could have been otherwise. It would seem to follow, then, that morality could have been otherwise, and this runs up against a very strong feature of moral phenomenology – the seeming necessity of moral truths. This is the problem for Humean constructivism that I’ve been thinking about most recently.” Then, she follows Sharon Street’s response: we ought to stop worrying about contingency. Driver suggests that the insight from philosophy of mathematics that “necessity doesn’t guarantee an end to a satisfactory account” could be appropriated in metaethics. If necessity does not guarantee explanatory sufficiency, then we have good reason not to worry about it. In comments, however, she concedes that this view cannot avoid relativity. Driver, Julia “Substantive Humean Constructivism” PEA Soup (October 28, 2013): http://peasoup.typepad.com/peasoup/2013/10/featured-philosopher-julia-driver-part-two.html.
do, according to the objective facts, will necessarily be a matter of what we could be motivated to do in a possible world in which we are fully rational. Smith gives an analysis of rationality that precludes false beliefs, absence of relevant beliefs, and bad inferences in deliberation.\textsuperscript{58} Desires, he says, are often produced by beliefs and evaluative judgments, and can come under rational criticism when they are not based on the pertinent true beliefs or when they are not desires we would have if we had full information and were deliberating correctly. If moral reasons depend on the desires we would have if we were fully rational, on his view, then they still have many of the features objective moral reasons would have: they are subject to criticism, independent of desires we might contingently have as a result of irrationality, and not based on false beliefs or judgments.

One problem with the type of solution Smith offers, raised by David Copp, is that it wrongly assumes that for any person, the fact that she would desire to $\phi$ if she were fully rational is accessible to her.\textsuperscript{59} For on Smith’s account, if a person, Sam, falsely believes she would enlist during wartime if she were fully rational, but she actually would not enlist in wartime if she were fully rational, then she would be acting irrationally if she enlists in wartime rather than not. However, rationality is supposed to a matter of \textit{internal} coherence, and there seems nothing incoherent about Sam’s enlisting if she believes that she would do just that if she were fully rational. So the analysis seems to pick out the wrong psychological feature of the person, since intuitively we want to say

\textsuperscript{58} See \textit{The Moral Problem}, chapter 5.
she is not irrational when she acts on a false belief if she does not know the belief to be false.

Another way to put pressure on a view like Smith’s is to question whether desires and goals are even doing the work for which they are brought into the theory—making sure moral reasons can be motivating—if the desires and goals are not actually in the agent but in her counterpart or an ideal advisor. I will address this question more fully in the next chapter. For now, suffice it to say that as internalist views come closer to accommodating intuitions about moral objectivity by grounding facts about agents’ desires and motivations in more rational or ideal versions of themselves, or even hypothetical agents, the further away they get from meeting the practicality demand. Smith’s view completely changes the subject of the desires that figure in moral reasons to a person’s counterpart to keep out problems of contingency and arbitrariness of desire. And in doing so he alienates the actual person, who is subject to all sorts of misinformation and irrational development of desires, from the reasons that apply to her. As Copp notes, it is not even clear how a person would come to know what her ideal self would want in a particular circumstance.

Smith’s is not the only strategy an internalist can use to discharge the burden of the objectivity demand, though. Mark Schroeder develops what he calls a hypotheticalist view that makes moral reasons a function of what desires agents have but does not give the reasons weight based on the phenomenological strength of the desires which would be promoted by acting on those reasons.60

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60 Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions*, especially “Weighting for a Plausible Theory of Humean Reasons.”
Let’s first consider three cases where the defender of the objectivity of moral reasons seems to have a leg up on the defender of the practicality of reasons, and then consider how someone like Schroeder could respond, to see how the view works more clearly. Russ Shafer-Landau invokes three cases to illustrate the need for a theory’s countenancing objective, mind-independent moral reasons:

SADIST: “Imagine a person who is very sharp, very cunning, but also deeply malicious. His happiness is directly proportioned to the misery he wreaks. His top priority in life is to cause pain and suffering.”

TORTURER: “Consider an experienced torturer working on behalf of an authoritarian government. Such a person not only endorses the legitimacy of the regime, but takes active pleasure in breaking his victims. His greatest joy is stripping the last vestiges of dignity from those who initially resist his demands.”

Bystander: “A child has strayed from her parents on a busy city street, and is about to toddle into the path of an oncoming car. The bystander sees what is happening. He need only reach an arm down to the child to save her from an awful death. Rather than doing so, he watches in delight as the child is run over and killed.”

The Sadist, Torturer, and Bystander examples grate harshly against some of our most deeply held commonsense intuitions about moral objectivity. For those moral philosophers who esteem tutored common sense, this upshot comes at much too high a theoretical price. This is the Too Few Reasons problem, so designated by Schroeder.

Schroeder distinguishes between two versions of internalism—the “atomistic versions” and “holistic versions”—and says that the latter have more trouble with the Too Few Reasons problem than the former, so as good internalists we should choose the later. Atomistic versions only require one single motivating mental state that would be

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served by acting on a reason to explain why an agent has such a reason, whereas holistic versions require that an agent’s motivations would be served on balance, or on the whole, by acting on a reason to explain why the agent has such a reason. Since for any given moral reason, it is likely that an agent has at least one desire, goal, or the like that would be served by acting on that reason, the counterintuitive examples will arise less frequently for atomistic accounts than for holistic accounts. So one way to deal with the Too Few Reasons problem is to endorse an atomistic version of reasons internalism. Humeans like Schroeder and Julia Driver argue that it is not difficult to imagine that there are motivating mental states every human shares, perhaps due to evolution, and so there will be some reasons that are universal, or shared by everyone.62

As Schroeder and Driver both recognize, the response to the Too Few Reasons objection is unlikely to satisfy the demand of objectivity if we think moral reasons are necessarily, rather than contingently, objective. What Schroeder’s solution shows is that the possibility of there being objective moral reasons is not ruled out by practicality; what it does not show is that there are such reasons in this world.

However, Schroeder is happy to have made the objectivity of moral reasons just as plausible as the existence of moral reasons, for if (and this is a big “if”) one can succeed in arguing that moral reasons exist, then one can also succeed in arguing that they are objective in the sense of agent-neutral in the actual world. Externalists, no doubt, will remain dissatisfied with this outcome, since it renders the analysis of moral reasons on which moral reasons are objective only as likely as the fact that there are entities in

62 I am grateful to Julia Driver for discussion of this issue. See also Schroeder, Slaves of the Passions, 106.
this world whose nature satisfies that analysis. As we shall see later, those who think that the concept of a moral reason includes their being objective and that the analysis of moral reasons should hold in all possible worlds; so it will not be contingent upon whether there are, in any given world, natures that would satisfy that analysis. Such objectivity is not available for the proponent of an account like Schroeder’s.

Furthermore, facts about motivation might explain a psychological obstacle to performing morally rational actions, but why should this obstacle give us reason to lower the bar of morality? What Humean psychology seems to demonstrate about morality, if anything, is that moral action is not always possible. It may well be a matter of luck whether one’s desires appropriately align with one’s moral judgments and so it may well be a matter of luck whether one acts morally. But it is unclear why moral reasons would have to be actionable always and for everyone to be what they are. We could maintain instead that, in general, morality is practical in a very thin sense even if some moral reasons are not actionable for many (even most) particular agents. That it would make moral action less frequent or more difficult seems a bad reason for changing our view of morality substantially.63

Those views that do best when it comes to the practicality demand fare badly when it comes to the objectivity demand. Moreover, the inverse relationship does not look like an accident of particular versions of internalism. The mind-dependence thesis

63 Schroeder himself notes that most internalists quickly move from the idea that desire is a sine qua non of moral action to the loaded notion that the feature that makes moral action possible must be part of the justification for that action. As Talbot Brewer states, something can be a necessary condition for but not a component of justification. Talbot Brewer, “The Real Problem with Internalism about Reasons,” Canadian Journal of Philosophy 32 (2002): 443-473. This is an issue I want us to keep in mind, and which I will take up explicitly in chapter 2.
would explain why this is the case. If practicality requires that moral reasons be mind dependent, objectivity requires moral reasons to be mind independent, and mind dependence requires constitutive dependence on non-cognitive mental states, then it is no wonder that the more practical moral reasons are on an analysis the less objective they are. My own suspicion is that the commitment to the third thesis of the puzzle’s triplet—the mind-dependence thesis—that goes largely unchallenged is at least partly to blame, but more will be said on this point in chapter 2. What is more important for the present purposes is that we see the unacceptable deficiencies, from the perspective of those who take objectivity seriously, of revisionist analyses of moral reasons like internalism that are best positioned to pick up on the practicality requirement.

1.4 Conceptual Revision in the Direction of Objectivity

A slew of philosophical arguments have been leveraged to show that our commonsensical intuition about moral reasons’ being objective is in fact correct. Once substantiated by such arguments, the objectivity demand is less easy to treat flippantly as a product of folk concepts about the moral. So-called externalist and robust realist conceptions of moral reasons revise the concept by making objectivity a necessary feature and practicality a contingent feature that can be found in actual moral reasons sometimes and not others.

As we shall see, though, the arguments betray that there are several conceptions of objectivity floating around, not all of which are reducible to a single thesis. Fortunately we can weed out some of the conceptions of objectivity as confused, untenable, or unsupported by the arguments forged for their defense. What remains gives us a better
sense of what is so desirable about having it be a conceptual truth that moral reasons are objective. In this section I proceed by walking through particular arguments for objectivity, showing where the conceptions invoked can withstand reflective criticism (or in some cases, cannot), and identifying common threads among those arguments that operate on plausible conceptions. I also point out the limitations of the arguments and reasons why their proponents cannot successfully reach across party lines in the debate.

1.4.1 The Impartiality Motivation and an Objection

Many theorists invoke objectivity because it seems to entail impartiality. The concept of the moral, such theorists say, brings along with it the idea of fairness or equality: morality takes into consideration all agents’ interests equally. This feature of the concept would appear to rule out *ab initio* the possibility that moral reasons would stick or fail to stick based on some psychological, personal facts, as this would make them partial. For if moral requirements are supposed to be fair, then they should not discriminate on the basis of personal features or applied unevenly between persons with differing personal psychological features. Another way this has been put is that what chiefly characterizes the moral point of view is that it is impartial, thus for a reason to be a moral reason it must not cater to or be constrained by parochial preferences, attachments, and interests, ceteris paribus.

My own view is that issues around impartiality have more to do with the closely related, but separate, debate about whether moral reasons are “agent relative” or “agent
neutral.”64 Earlier, Thomas Nagel discusses the same distinction under a different name: the subjective/objective reason distinction. If a moral reason is agent relative, then the antecedent of a conditional claim like “if \( p \), then one has a reason to \( \varphi \)” must make mention of a specific person (or what Nagel calls the “free-agent variable”). If a moral reason is agent neutral, then the antecedent of such a claim does not reference a specific person. Now, if moral reasons are mind dependent, then whether there is a reason to \( \varphi \) depends on the mental features of a specific person. In other words, the antecedent of a conditional statement about mind-dependent moral reasons must reference a specific person. Therefore, mind-dependent moral reasons are agent relative. More perspicuously, mind dependence supervenes on agent relativity. For there can be agent relativity without mind dependence, since an agent-relative reason could depend on a non-mental, physical feature or geographical feature of the agent. But there cannot be a difference in mind dependence without there also being a difference in agent relativity of a reason.

In recent decades, arguments have surfaced indicating that the question of whether moral reasons are agent relative or agent neutral is closer to normative bedrock than the question of whether consequentialism or deontology is the correct normative theory. James Dreier, for instance, maintains that for any moral theory, if we build into the “consequences” the values, goods, or whatever is of moral importance, then we can

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64 Derek Parfit coins these terms in Reasons and Persons, but he appropriates the distinction between subjective and objective reasons from Thomas Nagel’s The Possibility of Altruism. See Thomas Nagel, The Possibility of Altruism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 27. Brad Hooker notes that Parfit’s terms in On What Matters—“person-relative” and “impartial”—are misleading because “impartial” seems to mean more than agent-relative. For reasons that will become clear in section 1. I agree with Hooker on this point. Thus, I will keep with the “agent-relative” and “agent-neutral” terminology. See Brad Hooker, “Must Kantian Contractualism and Rule-Consequentialism Converge?” Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics: Volume 4, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), especially pp. 37-45.
make the theory into a consequentialist theory in the following sense: what one has moral reason to do is to promote the better consequences. Douglas Portmore clarifies in a later article that what a consequentialized version of a deontological theory will lead to the same verdicts about which acts someone has moral reasons to perform as the non-consequentialized version (and which actions are supererogatory), so the only difference is in the underlying rationale for those verdicts. Grant that one can consequentialize any deontological view. Grant also that the consequentialized version and the non-consequentialized version yield verdicts on reasons and action that are extensionally equivalent. Plausibly, as Dreier argues, the more interesting points of contention that remain boil down to disagreements about the agent relativity or agent neutrality of moral reasons. Some theories will insist that the moral reasons one has are had by any person so situated— that the values or goods that one has moral reason to promote are agent neutral. Others will always tie moral reasons to the persons for whom they are reasons, seeing the persons’s partial commitments, desires, and aims as structuring the values or shaping what is morally important and so influencing what moral reasons the person has for certain actions.

The arguments given by Dreier and Portmore illustrate that the question of whether moral reasons are agent relative or agent neutral proves to be “a fundamental part of the most useful taxonomy” in normative theory, but it is not clear that the agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction is really about objectivity. And as I explained above, whether moral reasons are mind dependent bears on whether these reasons are agent

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66 Ibid., 38.
relative or agent neutral, but there are ways of reasons being agent neutral without being
objective, and an agent relative reason may well be objective, depending on the
circumstances of the agent but not her interests. But getting clear on whether moral
reasons are mind dependent and whether they are objective can help us advance the
dispute over this other seemingly foundational concern for moral theories by adding
clarity and precision.

Some philosophers, however, argue that the way to get objectivity in one’s theory
of moral facts and reasons is by making the fundamental moral reasons agent neutral and
making all agent-relative reasons explainable in terms of non-moral facts and facts about
agent-neutral reasons. Agent neutralizing, we might call it, accommodates the intuition
that agents in different positions have different moral reasons without losing the idea that
moral reasons are impartial. For instance, if there is a moral reason for me to go to the
party and a moral reason for you play tennis, that is because there is some consideration
that is a moral reason for all, independently of any relation it bears to a particular agent,
to keep promises, and I happen to have promised to go to the party and you have
promised to play tennis. The non-moral difference between our circumstances accounts
for the fact that the way for you to satisfy the agent-neutral reason for keeping promises
diverges from the way I must satisfy that same agent-neutral reason. I think that one
reason theorists adopt the agent-neutralizing strategy is to maintain the credibility of our

67 Schroeder’s term for this view is “The Standard Model,” and according to him is held by most
traditional realists.
68 I am building on Mark Schroeder’s discussion of the Standard Model Theory (2004). Nagel explains
that “any claim that what is a reason for me is not a reason for someone else to draw the same conclusion
must be backed up by further reasons, to show that this apparent deviation from generality can be
accounted for in terms that are themselves general. Generality of reasons means that they apply not only in
identical circumstances but in relevantly similar circumstances. Ideally, the aim is to arrive at principles
that are universal and exceptionless” (Nagel, The Last Word, 5).
commonsense intuitions about cases where agents’ reasons appear to differ without devolving into moral relativism, or a close cousin that allows moral reasons to give undue slack to some but not other agents.

While the importance of keeping in place certain pre-theoretical intuitions should not be ignored, I want to flag a worry for the agent-neutralizing strategy and views that put impartiality front and center. The standard agent-neutralizing strategy may have a privileged place in our theorizing because on first blush it seems like the most intuitive way to secure objectivity as impartiality, but it creates more problems than it fixes. First, if the most fundamental moral reasons are agent neutral, what grounds do we have for denying that these reasons apply to non-rational animals, or even inanimate objects? That is, without a necessary connection between agents like us and moral reasons it is not safe to assume that the moral reasons there are are reasons for us but not reasons for other existing things. Take the moral reason against precipitating the death of human beings against their wills, for example; if all beings in a position to effect a human’s death have a moral reason against acting in a way that precipitates involuntary death, then it would follow that a boulder tumbling towards a biker on a highway below has a moral reason against falling down onto the biker, and that a bear in the path of a hiker has a moral reason against attacking the hiker. It is uncontroversial, though, that the activities of boulders and bears are not governed by moral reasons. To block these hare-brained results, a moral theory needs to acknowledge that moral reasons are limited to the domain of moral agents, and some beings, like bears and boulders, fall outside the jurisdiction of moral reasons because they do not belong to that domain. Once a theory allows this
much, and sees that such a claim does not jeopardize the impartiality concern, we can set aside the agent-neutralizing strategy.

In my own view, not much would be lost by the denial that moral reasons are perfectly agent neutral or impartial if we could show that they are in some other significant sense objective. I think that the intuitive support for the impartiality claim can also be made to sustain a more modest view about moral reasons and objectivity. Specifically, if we are concerned not to allow certain kinds of agents from escaping moral demands in virtue of arbitrary facts about them, then all that needs to be true of moral reasons is that there are some moral reasons that bind every agent, and that when particular moral reasons do not bind an agent it is not in virtue of some arbitrary fact about her. In the next section I want to explore arguments for this more manageable notion of what it would take for moral reasons to be objective.

1.4.2 The Argument from Moral Absolutism and Commonsense Intuitions

Perhaps a better way to motivate the objectivity demand is by looking at what might occur in its absence. Moral reasons externalism is usually characterized by its rejection of moral reasons internalism. Externalism is the view that reasons can exist and apply independently of what we think, care about, or could be motivated to do. So reasons must not be mind dependent. As Mark Schroeder points out, externalists are moved by some version of moral absolutism:

MORAL ABSOLUTISM: Some actions are morally wrong for any agent no matter what motivations and desires she has.

At least some reasons apply to all agents regardless of what they may be inclined to or desire to do. Just as the teenager who doesn’t care what his parents tell him to do is still
under their authority, so too the agent who does not care about morality is still under its authority. This intuition serves as a driving force behind reasons externalism, for it captures what the defenders of the view find objectionable about internalism: internalism lets agents without any motives that would be served by acting morally off the hook, but moral requirements are not the sort of requirements that can be escaped because of one’s desires or aims.

An oft-cited argument for moral reasons externalism proceeds by *reductio*:

Suppose a person, Michael, has a moral reason to φ only if Michael has some desire or end that would be served by her φ-ing for that reason. Say Michael is vicious. Plenty of vicious people have bad ends, and do not have desires or ends that would be served by acting morally. On internalism, Michael would not meet the conditions for having moral reasons to perform actions that do not serve his present vicious desires. According to moral absolutism, though, there are some moral actions that no person can wiggle her way out of simply through not caring. Even if Michael has no desire that would be served by not contributing to genocide, he still has a moral reason against contributing to genocide. So the vicious person like Michael does have, on the commonsense view, some moral reasons that do not serve her present desires, but does not, on the internalist view. The internalist view must be false.

One of the most prominent defenders of moral realism, Russ Shafer-Landau, takes the above argumentative tack. In an argument for the existence of what he calls categorical reasons, he tows out the three villainous characters Sadist, Torturer, and Bystander (we saw these examples in one of the objections to internalism above). “We don’t want to make the case against cruelty depend on an instrumental link with man’s
goals,” he says. He spells out the argument that that relies on the intuition about cruelty in three simple steps: “If there are reasons for these dedicated immoralists [Sadist, Torturer, and Bystander] to refrain from their evil deeds, then practical instrumentalism is false; there are such reasons; therefore practical instrumentalism is false.” Similar arguments have been advanced by others using Hitler, the amoralist, misogynists, and mafiosos. Shafer-Landau and other realists just need their interlocutor to agree that there are moral reasons against genocide, ignoring moral considerations altogether, and tossing people into rivers with hands and feet tied. Then the interlocutor will accept the second premise, which is the lynchpin of the argument. If there are such reasons, and it is possible that there are persons for whom acting on these reasons would not be in service of any of their aims or desires, then moral reasons must not depend on a person’s aims and desires.

Particularly helpful for our purposes is Shafer-Landau’s clear articulation of how his version of the argument from moral absolutism works. In fact, it is more like an argument for moral absolutism. His exposition highlights the fact that the externalist and realist care about preserving commonsense intuitions about cases where it seems most obvious to us—where we feel we really know—that the action in question is morally irrational. One could justify the general strategy of Shafer-Landau and others by means of a Moorean move: if you are more certain that an act of cruelty is morally irrational than you are of any premises in the best argument for moral reasons internalism, that would undercut that claim, then it is rational for you to abstain from believing the conclusion of

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70 See responses to Korsgaard in her Sources of Normativity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); also, Brink, Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 59-60.
71 Also see his more recent Moral Realism: A Defence.
the argument for internalism. Whatever vindicates the move, the fact that the realist and
eexternalist self-consciously make it shows us that they treat accommodating
commonsense intuitions on cases as a primary desideratum for a theory of moral reasons.

The concern to which Shafer-Landau’s argument gives voice is one that derives
from a more general commitment to the moral absolutist thesis in its own right. That is,
the real concern is that practicality limits the binding power of moral reasons such that
the amoralist, psychopaths, and villains escape. Often, meta-ethicists adopt moral
absolutism because it is entailed by the realist claims that support our common sense
intuitions about such persons as Sadist, Torturer, and Bystander. To name a few,
cognitivism (the claim that moral judgments can be true or false), evidence insensitivity
(that the truth or falsity of moral statements is not indexed to our evidence or theorizing
about them), and metanormative realism (that there are moral facts, properties, and
entities that exist as part of the world’s fabric) all help to justify our intuitions that these
agents are just acting in violation of moral norms. What drives at least many of the
arguments from absolutism is the commitment to preserving our pre-theoretical intuitions
about the particular cases like Sadist, Torturer, and Bystander, which those views that do
well with respect to practicality seem unable to leave untouched.

72 Shafer-Landau defends his argumentative method instead by considering the charge that the
argument is question begging and then arguing that some forms of question begging are licit and others not. As long as his argument is a form of licit question begging it stands.

73 Many meta-ethicists characterize moral realism as the combination of these theses and the claim that
moral reasons are mind independent or stance independent. For instance, Richard Boyd, “How to Be a
Moral Realist,” Essays on Moral Realism ed. Geoffrey Sayre McCor (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,
1988), 181-229; David Brink, “Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and
Queerness” reprinted in Arguing About Metaethics eds. Andrew Fisher and Simon Kirchin (New York:
Routledge, 2006), 80-82; Peter Railton, “Moral Realism” reprinted in Arguing About Metaethics eds.
Before we move on, a brief word about the conception of objectivity that the arguments above are operating under. Arguments from moral absolutism do not rule out that there are some reasons agents do not share because they are differently situated; it does not even rule out the possibility that most reasons are not reasons held in common by all moral agents. It only tells us that these particular persons—Sadist, Torturer, Bystander, and their kin—do have moral reasons that apply to them. And if the theorist who trots out the argument does so in the name of preserving the objectivity of moral reasons, then objectivity on her conception need not mean universality in the sense of being shared by all. For neither the conclusion of the argument nor the premises require each and every moral reason to be a moral reason for all agents regardless of their social and historical circumstances, even beliefs and desires. Some moral reasons externalists explicitly allow desires to make a difference to what reasons one has in “tie-breaker” situations. In any case, the kind of objectivity sought by those who draw on moral absolutism or intuitions that underlie it does not demand universal, shared reasons.

The conception of objectivity Shafer-Landau, as well as many Kantians, take their arguments to promote is categoricity. Contrasting the categorical with the hypothetical, these theorists say that moral requirements must hold categorically, as being the

unconditional condition of value is what morality is all about.\textsuperscript{75} The categoricity conception of objectivity insists that moral reasons float free of any psychological, contingent properties of existing agents, like the agent’s being alive in the twenty first century, wanting to have a child, or liking coffee ice cream.

The adoption of the moral absolutist thesis could be born out of a worry in general about allowing the subjective and arbitrarily fixed psychologies of vicious agents fix the parameters of moral, rational authority. The concern about arbitrariness, however, can be distinguished conceptually from the concern about commonsense intuitions in cases involving vicious or psychopathic agents. I will explore these concerns below.

\textit{1.4.3 Meta-ethical Concerns About Objective Grounds}

Many meta-ethical arguments for the objectivity of moral reasons will end up allowing a view to support those intuitions, but these arguments proceed by another route, heading off the possibility of vicious persons having no moral reasons. The strain of arguments I want to discuss below place importance on avoiding arbitrariness and contingency in the grounds of moral reasons.

Suppose facts about moral reasons, or the application of the moral standard by moral reasons, were grounded partly in attitudes of agents inhabiting a particular stance. One might complain that what would turn out to be moral or what one would have moral reason to do on that view would be just as arbitrary as having that stance. Why, she might

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{75} Philippa Foot famously distinguishes hypothetical from categorical requirements of moral reason and argues for internalism; as Shafer-Landau mentions, Foot reneged on this view after rejecting the Humean theory of motivation and practical instrumentalism. See Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” \textit{Philosophical Review}, 81 (1972): 305-326.}
ask, do the persons inhabiting one stance, rather than some other, have the authority to determine moral demands’ content and range? To guard against arbitrary authorship, the moral realist contends that moral reasons and facts about them are fixed by standards that are objective in the sense of being stance-independent.

Against the Humean who thinks that the existence of agents’ desires ground the facts about what moral reasons there are, the moral realist will argue that even sufficiently deep-seated or psychologically central desires can be nonetheless idiosyncratic and arbitrary, and so are unsuitable as grounds for facts about moral reasons. Kantian constructivists and contractarians also face a version of this challenge; Rawls says that for the Kantian categorical imperative to have objective content we must appeal to “true human needs,” which again, are contingent features of our particular world. Thus, human needs are inappropriate as grounds for the demands of morality. The theorist pining for objectivity—especially the moral realist—wants a standard whose correctness is not explained by its acceptance by someone, its construction by someone, or its expressing the contingent dispositions of someone.

At the root of the worry about grounds lies suspicion about the authority of a moral code generated by agents or groups of agents with idiosyncratic or contingent features. Even if hypothetical agents constructed a moral code that applied to us, we might wonder why hypothetical agents conceived of as having certain features would generate moral standards superior to those another kind of hypothetical agent would

76 Julia Driver has written on the problem of arbitrariness and contingency recently, though not in print. I am grateful to her for discussions of this worry and potential responses.

generate. Building into one’s account of moral reasons the idea that the basis of moral demands is independent of any peculiar, arbitrarily chosen stance ensures that the account stands a chance of capturing the authority of the morality that applies to us. Hence the impulse to claim that moral standards and the reasons that bring them to bear on action are objective.

Notice the different conception of objectivity at play in the arguments from arbitrariness. Here, the idea is not so much about the categoricity of reasons themselves, but rather of the facts that give rise to the reasons. The categoricity conception of objectivity seems to require a kind of anti-reductionist position about normativity, where there is a brute normative truth or set of truths not themselves conditional on and hence explained by any non-normative truth. But the stance-independence conception working against arbitrariness could well be coupled with reductionism about reasons, even buck-passing-back from reasons to value. An objectivist account of moral reasons on the stance-independence conception of objectivity simply needs to exclude from the reduction base contingent or parochial psychological features of persons.

78 Consider Russell’s statement that “I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I do not like it,” in Russell (1960) pp. 310-311 quoted in Cristina Lafont, “Moral Objectivity and Reasonable Agreement: Can Realism Be Reconciled with Kantian Constructivism?” Ratio Juris 17 (2004): 43.

Nicholas Rescher also argues that this problem should drive us into the arms of moral objectivism: Moral relativisms are deeply problematic because they are “caught up in the evident implausibility that any moral code, any set of moral rules whatsoever, is as good as any other for us here and now, in the circumstances in which we find ourselves in interaction with others. Moral nihilism, on the other hand, is caught up in the no less striking implausibility of the contention that no moral code whatsoever is valid, that no code can make a warranted claim to effectiveness in safeguarding the interests of people,” Rescher, “Moral Objectivity,” Social Philosophy and Policy 25 (2008): 394.

Explaining the Phenomena of Disagreement and Error

A separate interest served by the idea that moral reasons are objective is the preservation of the phenomenology of moral disagreement and the possibility of error in moral judgment. I made reference to this in the initial argument for the plausibility of thinking of moral reasons as objective in some sense. But what I want to do now is look at more substantial positive arguments for the objectivity requirement.

When we argue about what moral reasons people have, the realist says, we don’t feel as though we’re disagreeing about what Hume called “matters of taste.” The phenomenological difference can be captured even from an observer’s perspective. For instance, a friend recently told me that when she was teaching English in Erzeram, Turkey, she found her students disagreeing with her about the wrongness of cheating; all I needed to do was hear the story for the disagreement to strike me as distinct in kind from a disagreement about whose cuisine was better. Moral realists count the experiences we have in moral disagreement as evidence in favor of objectivity.

A range of conceptions of objectivity, from truth-aptness to mind independence, could back the phenomenology of moral disagreement. Mind-independent moral facts provide no guarantee that agents like us have knowledge of them, and so introduce the possibility of error. Additionally, they resemble mathematical facts or physical facts more

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than facts about preferences in virtue of their mind-independent status. If the best explanations for the phenomena of moral disagreement and the appearance of moral error are that there are objective moral reasons and objective facts about them, then on pain of failing to appreciate the phenomena and capture the data, it seems we should grant that moral reasons must be the sorts of things that would be objective.

The commitment to the phenomena of moral error and disagreement could be fairly characterized as another species of the commitment to preserving pre-theoretic intuitions about cases. The cases of interest in these arguments, though, do not involve mafiosos or torturers, but mistaken agents and agents who disagree about substantive ethical issues. The moral reasons externalist and the moral realist will both insist that a good theory will not leave the first-personal experiences of these characters by the wayside in doing conceptual analysis on moral reasons.

1.4.5 Mind Independence: Objectivity on the Cheap?

What unifies the revisionist accounts of moral reasons that plump for objectivity over practicality, despite the different ways they conceive of objectivity, is their insistence that if moral reasons are mind independent, they will be objective. Evidence of this fact is that theorists catalogue the various views I outlined above under the heading of moral

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82 The analogy with meta-ethical facts and mathematical or physical facts is a favorite with new robust normative realists like David Enoch and Cornell realists like Richard Boyd, as I have been citing. Justin Clarke-Doane’s recent article registers his agreement with the conclusion that we should think of moral reasons as objectively real entities but not because the analogy with mathematics is close. Instead, Clarke-Doane says, the analogy breaks down because the principle that would be an analog to the Benacerraf-Field principle overgeneralizes. See Clarke-Doane, “Moral Epistemology: The Mathematics Analogy,” *Noûs* (48): 238-255.

83 For refreshing examples of moral philosophers who consider their views species of moral realism but do not endorse mind-independence, see Geoffrey Sayre-McCord and John McDowell.
realism, since according to contemporary orthodoxy, “To hold a realist position with respect to \( X \) is to hold that \( X \) exists in a mind-independent manner.”

The mind independence of moral reasons by itself is treated as a guarantee of the objective authority of moral reasons. If moral reasons come from without, rather than from within, then they will be impervious to arbitrary and contingent limitations that would be introduced by our psychology. The mind independence status of moral reasons also easily explains their being categorical rather than hypothetical, since there is no psychological condition an agent must meet for a moral rational requirement to attach to an agent. There is also a neat analogy with other domains of disagreement and error in science and mathematics: scientists and mathematicians treat their disagreements as more than mere discussions of their differing tastes because they take themselves to be talking about mind independent truths. So too, then, agents who are arguing about moral matters and take themselves to be talking about independent truths will not see their debates as being about matters of taste, as Hume called them. It looks like taking the view that moral reasons are mind independent is the smoothest path to meeting the objectivity demand.

Unfortunately, if moral objectivity does entail moral absolutism, then whether moral reasons are able to explain intentional action turns out to be a contingent matter. That is, nothing about these moral considerations being reasons guarantees that they will potentially figure in explanations of intentional action.

The explanatory problem is not the only obstacle to maintaining the objectivity of moral reasons. Another classical challenge to the traditional analysis of morality as

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objectively prescriptive is the argument from queerness. Suppose that moral reasons are at once objective and prescriptive. Like objective mathematical facts, they are true independently of the features of human psychology—both individual and species psychology. Like prescriptive legal facts for members of a certain jurisdiction, they also place demands on us. When we look for other kinds of relations or entities that have both of these properties, however, we will be unable to find any. It may even be difficult to conceive of anything (besides moral reasons or moral facts) that is at once objective and prescriptive because normally, objective facts do not make demands on us and prescriptive facts make demands on us conditional on our aims or commitments. The property of being objective and prescriptive is therefore metaphysically “queer,” as John Mackie points out.

Moreover, if this dual property of moral reasons is metaphysically queer, the realist is saddled with what David Enoch calls the “epistemological problem for metanormative realists.”\textsuperscript{85} The realist stands in need of an explanation for our epistemic access to moral facts if their nature and existence depends in no way on us. Mackie claims that we would need a special cognitive faculty to discern or perceive moral reasons. It appears that we have no such special faculty, so we are not licensed in believing that these queer relations or entities actually exist.\textsuperscript{86}


\textsuperscript{86} A less worrying challenge is the problem of explaining moral disagreement. I don’t have much to say here because I find convincing Nick Sturgeon’s refutation of Harman’s claim that even if there were moral facts they would not be necessary in explaining our moral judgments. But I can go into this in detail if need be.
The puzzle for the externalist realist, as I see it, is this. Intentional action is the appropriate subject of moral evaluation. Moral reasons most appropriately apply to persons who perform intentional actions. Intentional action is best characterized as action performed for reasons recoverable from the psychology of the person acting. As Aristotelians like Elizabeth Anscombe and more recently, Michael Thompson explain, the most apt description of an action makes reference to what the person in question thinks she is doing, the end she has in mind while acting. This distinguishes the intentional actions of human persons from unconscious action of magnetosomes or plants. It is a psychological fact that makes it true that a person is capable of performing intentional action: the person can think of her action under a description. Her reflexive capacity accounts for her action being able to be in this special category that is the subject of moral evaluation, unlike actions of other sentient beings. But this forces a dilemma: Either the moral realist can continue to claim that moral reasons are mind-independent and thereby leave herself unable to explain why agents who perform intentional action are especially subject to these sorts of reasons, or she can account for the connection between intentional action and moral reasons, in which case she must part with mind independence.

More precisely, if she denies that moral reasons have a necessary connection to the psychology of the persons to whom they apply, she must accept that either moral reasons have no connection to personal psychology or their connection is purely incidental. Now if there is no connection, then she has to bite a big bullet: moral reasons apply equally to the actions of other non-human agents and would exist even if there were no world with persons who had the mental and social life human beings do. If there
is a merely incidental connection, then she cannot use this connection to explain why other creatures do not come under the domain of application of moral reasons. My suspicion is that it will end up being appealed to as a brute fact, and this is no place for brute facts in one’s theory. So she should not take this horn of the dilemma.

If she accepts that moral reasons apply necessarily only to those who can perform intentional actions, then she must accept the entailment of that claim: moral reasons apply necessarily only to those who have a certain psychological capacity. For it is a psychological capacity that makes a person the sort of being that performs intentional actions. If moral reasons apply necessarily to only those who have a certain psychological capacity, then there would be no beings to whom moral reasons could apply in a world without beings with that kind of psychology. And moral reasons are functional items, so a world in which they could not in principle function is a world in which it is not conceivable that they would exist. Thus, moral reasons depend for their existence, on this horn of the dilemma, on the existence potential or actual of persons with a kind of psychological capacity. But then moral reasons are mind dependent in a meaningful sense. So moral reasons cannot be absolutely mind independent.

1.5 Towards a Solution to the Puzzle

1.5.1 Theoretical Gridlock

Now that we have a representative set of views and arguments for them on the table, we can see why the debate about the puzzle has reached a stalemate. While both moral reasons internalism and moral reasons externalism or robust realism have virtues to
recommend them, each proponent of a view offers distinct theoretical benefits at a price the other will not accept. For instance, reasons internalists fall under the charge of abandoning our deep-seated commonsense intuitions for the sake of respecting the ought implies can principle. If moral reasons were constrained by agents and their psychology, the externalist says, a theory would be impoverished in the domain of cruel, psychopathic, and amoralist agents, and we would have to relinquish our intuitions about the moral status of these agents. This is far too steep a cost for practicality for the moral reasons externalist. But reasons internalists can object to externalism on the grounds that the latter countenances metaphysically suspicious entities and fails to show that moral reasons could fulfill their essential practical function or do any explanatory work.

Because there is no agreed upon method of adjudication here, the debate has stalled to a point David Lewis once warned us about: “Once the menu of well-worked out theories is before us, philosophy is a matter of opinion.” 87 I do not want to suggest that this state of the debate merits a pessimistic response. Instead, I would like to argue that the problems of going views give us reason to head in a new direction, making more precise our theoretical claims and taking more seriously the insights of our neighbors on the other side of the fence. When we come to a theoretical standstill like that we see between internalism and externalism, one way we create new room for maneuvering is by rooting through the underlying assumptions of both views, and then considering alternatives that emerge in the absence of those assumptions. If we can demonstrate that

there is reason to reject an assumption, and an alternative does better than both the going views, then it merits our consideration.

What counts as “doing better than both the going views?” Here, we need to give formal conditions on a solution to the puzzle that will be satisfactory to those on both sides of the debate. If a thesis serves as a solution to the puzzle and can harmonize with the core commitments of internalists and externalists alike, it will help us to progress forward in the debate to consider that solution, and such a solution would merit our attention.

1.5.2 Four Formal Conditions on an Adequate Solution

Consider an analogy. Imagine that you are in a room full of judges at a film festival. Half of the judges in the room think that the best picture should have stunning visual effects, excellent cinematography, a fitting score, impressive costume design, a fair storyline and decent acting; the other half agrees that the acting and screenplay should take priority, and that costume design, cinematography, and soundtrack need only be a bit above average. As they disagree about the criteria for the award for best in show, they will certainly disagree about which film merits that award. If, however, there were a film that stunned the audience with its visual and audio effects, cinematography, and costumes while also drawing them in with the storyline and acting, then the judges should be able to agree on the fact that the film was meritorious of the award for best in show. And so by each judge expanding his or her criteria to include the concerns of the other judges, they would come up with a standard they could all agree on. Before the judges see the particular film described above, though, they doubt that one of the candidate films can
pull off the great cinematic effects while also being the best-written screenplay and well acted, and so their lists of criteria did not align.

Let’s stretch the analogy to the present predicament regarding moral reasons. Why not think that, if there were a solution to the puzzle about moral reasons that could be shown to accommodate the major concerns of both parties in the debate, then the best criteria for a solution to the puzzle would include what both sides fundamentally want? One could worry that, unlike the film festival analogy, the commitments that are held most seriously by the sides in the debate about moral reasons directly conflict. I have gestured a few times in this chapter, and will spend time arguing in the next chapter, that the appearance of a direct conflict among the criteria for a solution comes from the mind-dependence thesis. But the mind-dependence thesis in its conditional form—that if moral reasons are mind dependent then they constitutively depend on conative psychological states—has gone un-scrutinized. So it would not be surprising if, on further reflection, the mind-dependence thesis was faulty, and also led to the conflict between moral reasons internalists and externalists coming to a virtual halt.

We have already catalogued the most fundamental concerns that theorists on both sides of the divide have. We did this by looking at the ideas and intuitions that underwrite the arguments they give for their respective positions. So to compile a non-parochial list of desiderata for a good solution to the puzzle about moral reasons that everyone would reasonably agree to, we simply need to articulate the basic worries and commitments of each view. No one group with skin in the game will be put at an advantage or disadvantage dialectically if we appropriate this strategy.
The conditions for a good solution to the puzzle about moral reasons, then, boil down to accommodating four concerns. First, an account of moral reasons must meet the demand of objectivity on some plausible construal of objectivity (as outlined above). Second, the account must guarantee that moral reasons are practical in the sense that they make a difference to rational deliberation and action, and that agents can act not just according to but for those reasons, not accidentally or out of ignorance. Third, the account should respect the trusted ought implies can principle that serves as a starting point for so many arguments for internalism. And finally, the account should not require us to jettison our tutored commonsense intuitions about cases, whether those cases be about agents with bad ends or impoverished motives, or about agents engaged in moral disagreement or committing errors.

1.5.3 A Preview of the Argument for the Thomistic Mind-Dependence Thesis

In coming chapters I offer an alternative way of conceiving of the mind-dependence thesis, one that dispels the worries the moral externalist has about mind dependence. The Thomistic version of mind dependence does not depend on Humean psychology, does not suffer from the typical problems, gives a more satisfactory justification for thinking mind dependence is true all while meeting the practicality demand. The Thomistic mind-dependence thesis, however, does not entail moral relativism or ask us to give up judgments that can be reconciled with commonsense intuition. It will specify what agents have moral reason to do in a way that may not immediately align with less reflective intuitions, but nonetheless can be vindicated by reflective commonsense; it does this while meeting the objectivity demand.
The solution hinges on the notion that practicality tells us that moral reasons must be mind dependent in some way or another, but does not specify the dependence relationship; and objectivity tells us what the dependence relationship cannot be, but leaves open the possibility of mind dependence more generally. So an account of moral reasons can accommodate the demands of practicality and objectivity jointly by making use of this insight.

To argue effectively for the Thomistic mind dependence thesis as a solution to the Puzzle About Moral Reasons, I will need first explicate what mind dependence amounts to; and as it turns out, the answer to that question is all but clear in the literature. So I spend the next chapter spelling out the various kinds of mind dependence and mind independence that could be exhibited by moral reasons. I shall then circle back to certain assumptions flagged in this chapter, show that those assumptions are dispensable, and then argue that in their absence the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis surfaces as a live option.
In the previous chapter, we saw that the debate about whether moral reasons are internal or external really turns on the question of whether moral reasons are mind dependent, and we saw that this debate has reached a standstill. Internalism can capture the practicality of moral reasons but at the cost of satisfying the objectivity demand, it seems, while externalism can explain the objectivity of moral reasons but has to cede that moral reasons are not necessarily practical. Two factors have lead to the standstill: the protagonists on each side have accepted that their commitments are diametrically opposed, and so they have stopped attempting reconciliation; and theorists disagree about the very criteria by which to evaluate a revisionist account of moral reasons. Thus, not much progress can be made in the debate as things stand.

When our arguments bring us to the point of gridlock, one way to create new room for maneuvering is by rooting through the underlying assumptions of current views and considering alternatives that emerge in the absence of those assumptions. If we can identify a widespread assumption shared by parties in the debate, offer good reasons for rejecting it, and then show that some alternative that surfaces fares better than the existing views, we will have good reason to consider that alternative. This is the approach I take in the present chapter.
I will argue that a promising substitute for the standard view of mind dependence is what I call the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis. I begin by identifying two assumptions shared by those presently engaged on both sides of the internalism/externalism debate: the Constitution Assumption and the Conative State Assumption. The Constitution Assumption is an assumption about the kind of dependence relation that would be exhibited by moral reasons if they were dependent on agent psychology. The Conative State Assumption is an assumption about the pieces of agent psychology on which moral reasons depend, if they are mind dependent. After showing how going views help themselves to these assumptions, I explain why an account of moral reasons does not need either assumption to meet the practicality demand. In fact, since these assumptions cannot guarantee that an account will meet the practicality demand, and each assumption only further impedes an account from meeting the objectivity demand, we should forego them both.

The success of these arguments against the Relation and Conative State Assumptions lends support to the idea that if moral reasons are mind dependent, they are not mind dependent in the way contemporary theorists suppose. The Aristotelian mind dependence thesis is promising because it has the capacity to support both the objectivity and the practicality of moral reasons.
2.1 The Standard Mind-Dependence Thesis

We should begin with a clear and precise statement of the standard mind-dependence thesis and evidence that it is indeed treated as orthodoxy. It will also be helpful to have in view the popular argument internalists give for that thesis before proceeding into the main argument of the chapter.

The particular mind-dependence thesis that serves as the basis of internalism is this:

STANDARD MIND-DEPENDENCE THESIS: Normative practical reasons, including moral reasons, constitutively depend on agents’ conative mental states (e.g. desires, goals, evaluative attitudes).

In other words, what we want, care about, value—the psychological states that motivate us to act—are always and ineliminably involved our normative practical reasons and moral reasons. Nothing could be a genuine normative or moral reason without its standing in relation to our motivating mental states.

2.1.1 The Many Faces of the Standard Mind-Dependence Thesis

Those who agree with the standard mind-dependence thesis will find themselves in good company, although its diverse specifications make this consensus less than obvious. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord describes the theories that endorse the standard mind-dependence thesis as those

88 In the literature, this thesis has a variety of names, including stance-dependence, response-dependence, hypotheticalism (although this particular version drops the “constitutive” point). Because all of the versions implicate some mental state, I shall use the general heading of “mind-dependence” throughout. Among the many prominent moral philosophers whose views would be appropriately cast as “internalist” (as I define it here) are Christine Korsgaard, Mark Schroeder, Phillip Pettit, and Michael Smith. Despite the differences between their positions, these philosophers all share the notion I am targeting here—namely, that reasons depend constitutively on attitudes or other psychological states. For an excellent discussion, see Stephen Finlay and Mark Schroeder, “Reasons for Action: Internal vs. External.”
which “deny both noncognitivism and the moral error theory but maintain that moral facts are mind-dependent.”

Because “there are many non-equivalent ways of understanding the relation of mind-(in)dependence,” as Sayre-McCord points out, the more general thesis comes under criticism far less than the more detailed views which incorporate some version of it.

Nonetheless, on critical reflection we see an expansive set of views can be appropriately characterized as resting on the standard mind-dependence thesis.

Among the varieties of mind-dependent accounts of moral reasons are existence internalism, constitutivism, Kantian internalism, and Humean internalism. Each of these views operates as though the standard mind-dependence thesis is true, although the extent to which they explicitly endorse parts of this thesis differ in degrees. Stephen Darwall describes existence internalism as the metaphysical claim that “motivation is a constituent of the ethical facts themselves.”

This formulation straightforwardly claims a constitution relation between psychology and moral reasons. As on this view, moral reasons are fixed by motivations, and proponents of the view take motivations to be conative mental states, the view also relies on the

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89 Geoffrey Sayre McCord “Moral Anti-Realism.”
90 Ibid.
91 Stephen Darwall, “Internalism and Agency,” p. 157. Interestingly, in this discussion of what he calls “existence internalism” (as opposed to judgment internalism, which tracks a separate debate in metaethics), Darwall notes that one of the motivations for adopting the constitutive claim is that it supplies a response to Mackie’s famous objection from metaphysical queerness. See also, for examples of the former kind, Alan Goldman, “Reason Internalism,” pp. 505 – 533; Chris Heathwood, “Desire-Based Theories of Reasons, Pleasure, and Welfare,” pp. 79-106. For examples of hyper-internalism, the version of the view on which reasons just are desires, see both Uriah Kriegel, “Justifying Desires,” and Yonatan Shemmer, “Desires As Reasons”. For examples of the latter kind, see, Michael Smith, The Moral Problem; David Sobel, “Subjectivism and Idealization”; Thomas Nagel, The Possibility of Altruism; Stephen Darwall, Impartial Reason; Julia Markovits “Why Be an Internalist About Reasons?”,; Peter Railton, “Moral Realism.”
second part of the mind-dependence thesis. S.L. Hurley endorses what she dubs a moderate form
of internalism: “Reasons and motivations are constitutively interdependent.”\textsuperscript{92} Though
admittedly more vague, the succinct summary of this view shows it to be closely related to
existence internalism as it states that reasons depend on motivations in a constitutive way, even if
the reverse is also true. Characterizing (thought not endorsing) a more radical position according
to which moral reasons and other normative reasons can be reduced to psychological states,
Jonathan Dancy says, “All motivating reasons are psychological states of the agent, and that
normative reasons must be a subset of motivating reasons.”\textsuperscript{93} Humean constitutivists claim that
moral reasons are a matter of what ideal agents desire; they also hold onto the idea that desires
motivate; so moral reasons are a matter of ideal motivations. On the Kantian side of things, Julia
Markovits describes the most prominent form of internalism as the view that what we have
reason to intend or do “depends only on ends we already have and the requirements of
procedural rationality.”\textsuperscript{94} She then fills in the details of her more specific view: “The normative
standard and psychological facts about the agent’s antecedent ends jointly determine her
reasons.”\textsuperscript{95} The language of “determining” and “dependence” does not get cashed out more
precisely, so perhaps Markovits’s view is not wedded to the constitutivist assumption within the
standard mind-dependence thesis. Then again, Markovits expresses no qualms with the orthodox
internalist position on this point, which does take the position that the relationship between

\textsuperscript{93} Dancy, “Acting for a Good Reason,” p. 266.
\textsuperscript{94} Julia Markovits “Why Be an Internalist About Reasons?” p. 268.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 259-60
psychology and reasons is a constitutive one. In sum, what the various species of internalism have in common is their adherence to the standard mind-dependence thesis.\footnote{One “internalist” who rejects the constitutive portion of the mind-dependence thesis is Mark Schroeder. Instead, he advocates “hypotheticalism,” a view on which agents’ desires and commitments help to explain facts about reasons but are not themselves part of those reasons. Schroeder is self-admittedly unorthodox on this point.}

2.1.2 Arguments Involving the Standard Mind-Dependence Thesis

Arguments for the standard mind-dependence thesis mirror the arguments for the mind-dependence of value, and more generally, arguments for the mind-dependence of normative truths. Sharon Street aptly presents her argument for the mind-dependence of normative truth by pointing out that if the normative truth were mind independent, then we would be faced with a “Darwinian Dilemma” of the following sort: Either our judgments have evolved to reliably track the independent normative truth or they evolved in ways that go against or do not bear a relation to the independent normative truth. Taking the first horn of the dilemma involves making scientifically indefensible claims, and taking the second horn of the dilemma invites the skepticism about our normative judgments. So to Street’s mind, “the only solution is to adopt… the view that value”—and normative truth—“is mind dependent after all.”\footnote{Sharon Street, “Why Quasi-Realists Can’t Have It Both Ways,” \textit{Oxford Studies in Metaethics: Volume 6}, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15-16.} We can imagine someone posing this dilemma to the realist about moral truth, or truths about moral reasons. Either we do have some special sense for the moral, or we have evolved in ways that do not ensure that we reliably track moral reasons. If moral reasons and truths about them are mind independent, it is unlikely, given our best scientific evidence, that we have evolved so as to grasp
moral reasons or truths about moral reasons. So if there are such reasons, it is more respectable to admit that they are mind dependent after all.

I think that Street’s argument for the mind-dependence thesis actually rests on the assumption about moral reasons having a practical function with which this dissertation began. According to Street, the first horn of the Darwinian Dilemma entails something scientifically indefensible, namely, that our normative judgments have evolved to track independent normative truths. For simplicity, let’s restrict the discussion to moral judgments and moral truths. The entailment is not strict between the first premise of her argument about the evolutionary, social, and cultural influences on our judgments and our ability to track the moral truth. For the realist can accept that our judgments about the independent moral truth result from various selective pressures and contingent historical and social facts that have nothing to do with the moral truth without digging in her heels to say that we must have an ability to track that truth nonetheless; she might accept that, tragically, our judgments are unreliable and often mistaken. Then, the implausible empirical claim about our faculties need not follow. Instead, the internalist needs to make use of the further notion that we are justified in acting according to our best moral judgments, and this is so because we tend to get the world right. And further, if the realist denies that moral reasons about which we make judgments have a practical function, then it should come as no surprise—certainly no threat to the theory by its own standards—if our judgments do not help us act according to our moral reasons. The argument for mind dependence, which works by showing this horn of the dilemma to be untenable for the realist, thus relies on the further claim that moral reasons or facts have a practical function.
Another argument for the standard mind-dependence thesis begins with the premise that reasons are explanatory of prospective action. Moral reasons are a kind of reason for action. For a consideration to be a part of the explanation for an agent’s action, though, the agent must be able to be motivated to take that consideration as a reason for her action. So in order for a consideration to be a moral reason, there must be a motivational mental state that makes it possible for her to take the consideration to be a reason for her. Thus, the explanatory requirement on reasons yields the thesis that moral reasons depend on motivational mental states.

Although reliance on the mind-dependence thesis is not always explicit, a survey of the literature will show that the majority of externalists and internalists take for granted that if moral reasons are mind dependent, then they \textit{constitutively} depend on agents’ \textit{conative} mental states. According to internalists, the standard mind-dependence thesis allows them to account for the practicality of moral reasons, which in turn renders reasons less metaphysically dubious than they would be if they floated free of our mental states. According to externalists, the same thesis threatens to undermine an account of the objectivity of moral reasons. \footnote{Some externalists take the standard mind-dependence thesis to be the root of the problem with internalism. On David Enoch’s account of robust metanormative realism, moral truths are “independent of us, our desires, and our (or anyone else’s) will” (David Enoch, “A Defense of Robust Metanormative Realism” p.1). A fair number of externalists take it to be a mark against a theory if there is any sort of mind dependence, not just dependence on conative features of the persons to whom they apply. David Brink, for instance, construes mind-independence as the claim that moral facts are “logically independent of our evidence” (Brink, David “Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness in \textit{Arguing About Metaethics} eds. Simon Kirchin and Andrew Fisher. (New York, Routledge), 80). Peter Railton commends a view on which “facts exist about what individuals have reason to do, facts that may be substantially independent of, and more normatively compelling than, an agent’s occurrent conception of his reasons” (Railton, Peter “Moral Realism,” p. 160). Geoffrey Sayre-McCord summarizes the moral realist position as any view advocating the thesis that moral facts exist in a mind-independent manner.}

Since internalists...
welcome the conclusions that result from the standard mind-dependence thesis, they happily
defend it, while externalists find those same conclusions objectionable, and so throw their
reasoning in reverse, rejecting altogether the notion that moral reasons are mind dependent.

Hopefully the above discussion makes clear that the standard mind-dependence thesis
plays a role in arguments for internalism about practical and moral reasons and that its
acceptance is what unifies the many species of internalism under one genus. What views ranging
from existence internalism to constitutivism have in common is their endorsement of the more
general claim that moral reasons depend on motivational psychological states. And internalists
like Street cite arguments for the mind-dependence thesis as arguments for internalism, signaling
that internalists themselves see the mind-dependence thesis as an integral part of their view. If
we want to uproot a major assumptions that might be a roadblock to solving the puzzle about
moral reasons, the standard mind-dependence thesis is a good place to start.

2.2 The Constitution Assumption

The first assumption that underwrites the standard mind-dependence thesis is about the relation
between moral reasons and agent psychology:

THE CONSTITUTION ASSUMPTION: If moral reasons are mind dependent, then they
depend constitutively on features of agent psychology. 99

99 Mark Schroeder calls this common assumption the “No Background Conditions” assumption. Mark
Schroeder, Slaves of the Passions, Ch. 2.
The Constitution Assumption takes for granted that whatever motivational piece of agent psychology makes a moral reason practical does so in virtue of its being a part of that reason. For example, if Ronnie has a moral reason to go to his friend’s party, he has that reason because he has a mental state, like a desire to dance, that is a part of that reason. Without that psychological part, the consideration in favor of going to the party would not be a moral reason at all. All moral reasons are like Ronnie’s moral reason to go to the party: they depend constitutively on a psychological feature of the persons whom they bind to a course of action.

In this section I will identify the places where internalists explicitly invoke the Constitution Assumption. Then I will argue that their use of the Constitution Assumption is problematic for two reasons. First, the claim that mental states are parts of reasons is logically stronger than the claim that mental states are necessary conditions for the same reasons. This would be all well and good, of course, if the logically stronger view had something additional to recommend it. Indeed the internalist presumes that the logically stronger view can secure the practicality of moral reasons while the logically weaker view, that mental states are simply necessary conditions for moral reasons, cannot. (By logically weaker, I simply mean that the view entails and is entailed by fewer logical commitments.) Pace the internalist, I will argue that the Constitution Assumption does not actually ensure that moral reasons are practical. If I am

The use of “constitution” and “parthood” talk in this meta-ethical debate hardly aligns with the uses of the same terms in metaphysical debates about mereology. In the meta-ethics literature theorists use “being a constituent” or “constituting” as synonymous with being a mereological part of something which is a sum or aggregate of parts. This is Mark Schroeder’s extended example in Slaves of the Passions.
right, then the theoretical virtue of modesty demands that we fall back on the logically weaker view of the relation between moral reasons and mental states.

Second, the Constitution Assumption prematurely excludes other kinds of dependence relations from consideration. I will explicate two such relations, both of which prove to be good candidates for the mind-dependence relation, drawing on Aristotle’s notions of matter and form. The material dependence relation is understood as dependence of one thing’s discrete or individuated existence on another thing, and the formal dependence relation is cashed out as the dependence of one thing’s content or qualitative identity on another thing. I will argue that we can use these Aristotelian dependence relations to model the mind dependence of moral reasons in such a way that a mind-dependent moral reason could, in principle, meet the objectivity and practicality demands at once.

These points, taken together, tell us that not only do we have reason to be skeptical of the Constitution Assumption; we can also do equally good theoretical work without it. The alternative conception of mind dependence inspired by Aristotle’s notions of matter and form show the Constitution Assumption to be gratuitous and overpriced. I will take these claims to justify resistance to the assumption that mind dependence must be constitutive dependence.
2.2.1 The Internalist’s Use of the Constitution Assumption

The prominent defenders of internalism who flesh out what the dependence relation between normative and moral reasons and psychology is indicate that it is a constitution relation.\textsuperscript{102} Michael Smith and Philip Pettit argue in their 1990 article “Backgrounding Desire” that any normative practical reason must have in the background an agent’s desire, and what it is to be in the background is for the desire to be “part of” the reason but not mentioned explicitly in the premises that guide the agent’s reasoning.\textsuperscript{103} As I noted in the previous section, philosophers writing on this topic a decade ago, such as Dancy and Darwall, used talk of mental states “being a part of” or “constituting” normative practical reasons or moral reasons. An archetypal defender of externalism, David Brink, takes the internalist view his arguments target to be summed up by the claim that beliefs and/or desires “constitute explanatory reasons…or justifying reasons for action.”\textsuperscript{104} Another externalist, David Enoch, voices a standard worry about Humean internalism also taken up by Mark Schroeder in Slaves of the Passions: “You may be worried that Humeans must think of our relevant desires as always being a part of our reasons, and that this is

\textsuperscript{102} And perhaps those who are silent on the issue think the notion that mental states go towards constituting reasons is innocent until proven guilty. Derek Parfit, in \textit{On What Matters: Volume One}, gestures towards the prevalence of ambiguous claims about dependence on desires and aims. There, he says, “According to subjective theories, some facts give us reasons in a way that depends on our having some desire. This dependence is normative…This reason’s normative force is claimed to derive from the fact that I have this desire, so this reason is desire-based” (p. 68). He goes on to say that many who self-identify as subjectivists do so mistakenly because they really hold the view that a “reason may causally depend on our having this desire…but this reason would not normatively depend on our having this desire.” Unfortunately, all Parfit has to say about causal, as opposed to normative, dependence is summed up in these two quotations and then fleshed out in a pair of examples in which an agent has a reason “only because” she has some desire. I am attempting to argue that more needs to be said about the distinction for it to be of real use in the debate.

\textsuperscript{103} Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, “Backgrounding Desire,” pp. 568, 590.

\textsuperscript{104} David Brink, \textit{Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics}, 39.
implausible.”105 Schroeder helpfully catalogs the places where internalists imply that mental states like desires are parts of reasons.106 Schroeder calls this traditional Humean form of internalism the “no background conditions” view.

Admittedly, a fair number of internalists remain vague about what the dependence relation is exactly. For instance, Kate Manne writes, “Reasons internalists endorse a claim to the effect that an agent’s normative reasons for action are constrained in some interesting way by her desires or motivations.”107 And throughout her latest defense of Kantian internalism, Julia Markovits goes no further than to say that reasons justify actions “in virtue of the relationship they show it to stand in to our… ends.”108

Although some internalists have not been forthcoming about the precise nature of the dependence relation, since those who do discuss it in more detail claim that it is a constitutive relation without meeting any resistance from their compatriots, it is fair to say that the mind-dependence relation is supposed to be a kind of constitutive dependence relation. It is possible, of course, that the reticence of some parties in the debate is not tacit consent to the constitutive dependence view. I would welcome that possibility, and in fact it would be better for my argument for the conclusion that we should move away from this assumption if fewer people were committed to the Constitution Assumption. But my main aim in what follows is to cast

106 Schroeder, Slaves of the Passions, Ch. 3
doubt on the predominant view that has been made explicit, and then to invite internalists and externalists alike to consider the Aristotelian alternative.

We can extract a charitable definition of constitutive dependence from the classical argument for the view. Proponents of internalism say that a consideration does not qualify as a moral reason for an agent unless the agent has a motivating mental state that would be served by acting on that reason. This is because normative practical reasons generally, and moral reasons specifically, are analyzed partly in terms of their practical function—they can effect deliberation and intentional action. The other side of that coin (the side more often emphasized) is that if reasons are able to effect intentional action, then they will also be able to explain intentional action. But some motivating mental state is always part of an explanation of the agent’s intentional action. So if a reason must be able to explain an agent’s intentional action, and part of the explanation must be a motivating mental state, then it would naturally follow that a motivating mental state is part of a reason. Therefore, any normative practical reason or moral reason that potentially explains an action will at least have a potentially motivating psychological state as a part. An ecumenical definition of the dependence relation on the standard internalist view, then, is this:

CONSTITUTIVE DEPENDENCE: x constitutively depends on y if and only if y is a part of x.

109 As Williams states famously, “The deliberative process can add new actions for which there are internal reasons, just as it can also add new internal reasons for given actions…this agent, with this belief, appears to be one about whom now an internal reason statement could truly be made: he is one with an appropriate motivation in his S.” Williams, “Internal and External Reasons,” p. 104.
This broad formulation captures variants of internalism ranging from the radical pole, according to which a reason is composed of a motivating mental state and no more, to the conservative pole, according to which a motivating mental state only partly constitutes a reason.

2.2.2.Counterexamples to the Constitution Assumption

The first reason against adopting the Constitution Assumption starts with an uncontroversial methodological point: When considering the merits of two views, one logically stronger and the other logically weaker, theoretical modesty pushes us in the direction of the logically weaker view, ceteris paribus. We would have reason to opt for the view with more logical baggage only if something additional could be said on behalf of that view. I hope to show that the Constitution Assumption is a logically stronger view of the dependence relation than alternatives, and that contrary to popular belief, it does not have an additional virtue to recommend it over weaker views.

The defenders of the standard mind-dependence thesis hold a view of the dependence relation that is logically stronger than alternatives. These theorists go beyond the claim that certain mental states such as desires are necessary conditions for moral reasons, asserting the more substantive claim that mental states are parts of moral reasons. This latter claim is the logically stronger view, obviously, since the latter logically entails the former but not vice versa. In Slaves of the Passions, Mark Schroeder suggests that the claim that mental states like desires are parts of reasons should arouse suspicion first because it “denies a distinction with respect to
reasons that is a perfectly good distinction in many other domains." Schroeder then offers two
examples to illustrate the conceptual distinction between necessary conditions and parthood.
Inauguration is a necessary condition for a person’s being president of the United States, but it is
not thereby a part of the president of the United States. Similarly, the fact of something’s having
grown on a maize plant is a necessary condition for that thing’s being a piece of corn on the cob,
but it is not itself part of the corn on the cob. “The piece of corn on the cob is just the yellow,
buttered, and salted tasty morsel itself,” he says. Schroeder is right to home in on the
conceptual difference between necessary conditions and parts. And to say that moral reasons
constitutively depend on mental states is to make a stronger logical commitment than to say that
moral reasons depend on mental states as necessary conditions.

Pace Schroeder, I do not think that internalists run roughshod over this distinction; rather,
aware of the distinction, they think there is good reason to maintain the logically stronger view.
They knowingly endorse the Constitution Assumption— that psychological features or states are
parts of reasons—and that this assumption explains why psychological features are necessary
conditions for those reasons.

What could recommend the view that mental states are necessary conditions for reasons
in this narrow way? If the Constitution Assumption served an additional purpose for the
internalist theory of reasons, we might be persuaded to adopt it despite its being logically
stronger than alternatives. When we revisit the dialectic in which the view surfaces, we see that

110 Schroeder, Slaves of the Passions, 24.
111 Ibid.
internalists use the standard mind-dependence thesis to distinguish their position from externalism. Internalists complain that externalism cannot meet the demand of practicality for an account of moral reasons, but their position can. So it is plausible to think that internalists adopt the Constitution Assumption because they believe it will secure the practicality of moral reasons. In sum, the logically stronger view is justified only if it guarantees the motivational efficacy of moral reasons.

The high bar set for justifying use of the Constitution Assumption exposes internalist views making use of that assumption to the following objections. First, if there is a case in which the mental state constituent of a moral reason does not guarantee the practicality of that moral reason, then the Constitution Assumption does not guarantee the motivational efficacy of moral reasons, and is unjustified. Second, if there is a view that does not make use of the Constitution Assumption but secures the practicality of each and every moral reason, it should be preferred as it does so more cheaply—without the hefty logical commitment. So the Constitution Assumption is unjustified.

For the first objection to succeed, there need be just one counterexample to the claim that having a mental state as a part of a moral reason ensures the practicality of that reason. If there were some principle explaining why such a counterexample is possible, however, the objection would be stronger. What I want to argue now is that not only can we undermine the justification for the Constitution Assumption by counterexample, but we can also see why in principle, the existence of all the parts of a moral reason including the psychological part might be insufficient to make that reason practical for the person it binds. For example, Ronnie can have the mental
state that would qualify as a part of his moral reason to go to the party, and all of the other parts of the moral reason might obtain, and still, the consideration in favor of his going to the party can still fail to be practical for Ronnie. If I am right, then the internalist who endorses the Constitution Assumption takes a logically stronger line than is warranted.

We can imagine a series of counterexamples to the idea that the psychological constituent of a moral reason fails to secure the reason’s practicality. Assume that a moral reason for Audrey to go to Megan’s house has two elements—the fact that Megan is lonely and needing company and Audrey’s desire to be present with Megan when she is in need. The Constitution Assumption tells us that the presence of the mental element, namely Audrey’s desire, will be enough to make the moral reason for Audrey to go to Megan’s house practical as long as the other element also obtains. Now, imagine the following scenario:

**UNDISCLOSED ILLNESS:** Megan is home sick by herself, feeling lonely and in need of company. Audrey desires to be there for Megan when she is in need. Megan’s illness, though, is the result of alcohol poisoning, and she has not disclosed to Audrey that she is sick because she is embarrassed about drinking too much the previous night. Audrey thus remains unmoved to go visit Megan.

In Undisclosed Illness, Audrey’s motivational mental state—her desire to be there for Megan—exists, and the fact that Megan is in need of Audrey’s company obtains. Despite the existence of both elements of the moral reason for Audrey to visit Megan, that reason fails to be practical for Audrey. Since Audrey does not have the right beliefs, her desire is not sufficient to make the reason something she could take up in deliberation and act on at the moment.

The first purported counterexample might not convince, as one might object that a belief-desire pair is the necessary constituent of Audrey’s moral reason, not just the desire. We can
change the example to accommodate the objector’s idea. Imagine another scenario on the first of April:

APRIL BLIZZARD: Audrey has a desire to be present with Megan when she is in need, and Megan is in need because she is home sick by herself. Megan lives about thirty minutes away from Audrey. Audrey reads on her twitter feed from several local friends that the rain outside is supposed to turn into a horrible blizzard within the hour. Audrey believes that Megan is sick and in need of company; however, her wariness of getting caught in the blizzard keeps her from considering going to Megan’s house to cheer her up. Unbeknownst to Audrey, the blizzard tweet is an April fool’s day prank.

In April Blizzard, all of the requisite mental states, including the belief-desire pair, are present. Yet they are not configured in such a way as to make the moral reason to visit Megan practical for Audrey. It is not something she can take up in rational deliberation and act on the basis of; in fact, it might be irrational for her to visit Megan if she believes she will get caught on the road in a blizzard. This additional belief undercuts the practicality of the moral reason to visit Megan.

2.2.3 Why Not To Fall Back on Ceteris Paribus Clauses or Pro Tanto Reasons

A sect of internalists—those following either W.D. Ross or particularism—might reject the claim that all of the elements that constitute a moral reason for Audrey to visit Megan are present in April Blizzard. In this context, they would say, the two elements that are normally sufficient to compose that moral reason are not sufficient. While the presence of Audrey’s desire to provide Megan company and Megan’s need for company compose a pro tanto moral reason for Audrey
to visit Megan, or they compose a moral reason ceteris paribus, they do not in the April Blizzard circumstance because of Audrey’s (false) belief that there is a blizzard.\textsuperscript{112}

The particularist strand of this objection comes from a conviction about reasons holism. According to the particularist, the conditions on some consideration’s being a moral reason are not fixed across different scenarios. For instance, that the conditions on Audrey’s having a moral reason to visit Megan in a wide swath of scenarios are (i) that Megan is in need of company and (ii) that Audrey desires to spend time with Megan, does not entail that (i) and (ii) are the conditions for the application of the concept “moral reason” in every scenario. Instead, if we want to know what moral reasons someone like Audrey has in a particular scenario, we must look at the whole picture, taking into account all the fine-grained features to determine whether there is such a moral reason. In other words, we must be holistic in our approach to figuring out what moral reasons there are.\textsuperscript{113}

We might wonder, first, whether the objector can adopt the Constitution Assumption unconditionally, given that particularists typically do not accept the inference from “x is a

\textsuperscript{112} I distinguish the Rossian line from the particularist line because some philosophers have appropriated Ross’s notion of prima facie obligations and reasons without denying, like Ross himself, that there is a function by which one can map on prima facie reasons to all things considered ones. Henry Richardson notes that Ross himself provides one way to think about this function: “Despite Ross’s denial that there is any general method for estimating the comparative stringency of \textit{prima facie} duties, there is a further strand in his exposition that many find irresistible and that tends to undercut this denial. In the very same paragraph in which he states that he sees no general rules for dealing with conflicts, he speaks in terms of “the greatest balance of \textit{prima facie} rightness.” This language, together with the idea of “comparative stringency,” ineluctably suggests the idea that the mapping function might be the same in each case of conflict and that it might be a quantitative one. On this conception, if there is a conflict between \textit{prima facie} duties, the one that is strongest in the circumstances should be taken to win.” See Henry Richardson, “Moral Reasoning” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2014), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/reasoning-moral/>.

\textsuperscript{113} This is the line I imagine Jonathan Dancy, Margaret O. Little, and Garrett Cullity would take.
constituent of y in C” to “x by itself accounts for the normative valence of y in C.” What blocks such inferences, on many particularist views, is normative variantism: for any finite description of the world, whether that same description counts in favor of or against an action varies depending on context or the particular person acting. Now, if variantism about the normative valence of a descriptive state of affairs is true, how could the Standard Mind-Dependence thesis also be true? Even if in numerous cases, a mental state like a desire composes a moral reason (leading to a normative valence of the description that includes the mental state), that fact does not ground a further claim about all moral reasons having mental states as constituents. For the normative variantist should say that she cannot predict with certainty that a mental state of a person will always contribute to a moral reason for or against some action for that person, or to there being a moral reason for her at all, for that matter. To say that some desire of Audrey’s is always and in every case going to contribute to a consideration’s being practical for Audrey and to it counting in favor of, or against, a certain action, is just to deny normative variantism. To hold onto normative variantism, then, the particularist of this sort cannot endorse the Constitution Assumption except selectively. In some cases, the moral reason must have a mental state as a component because that mental state guarantees the reason’s being practical, though not necessarily in all cases.

However, seeing as not all particularists are committed to normative variantism, some particularists can get behind the Constitution Assumption wholesale and re-raise the objection. The particularists I have in mind now claim that there are some general principles that explain how moral reasons behave in different contexts. They think of this as consistent with holism.
about reasons, and treat holism as the hallmark of their view. One of the general principles about moral reasons could well be the Standard Mind-Dependence Thesis: that in any case, a moral reason must be composed at least partly of a conative mental state. We can imagine, then, that the objector is a particularist who believes first, that mental states must be among the components of moral reasons (the Constitution Assumption); second, that these mental state constituents account for the practicality of moral reasons they compose (the standard justification for the Constitution Assumption); and third, and that we cannot determine whether certain mental states and facts compose a moral reason in a given circumstance without looking holistically at the whole case (particularist reasons holism).

The objection launched from this perspective is more hard hitting. According to this objection, the counterexamples I have proposed are not counterexamples at all; in Undisclosed Illness and April Blizzard, there is no moral reason for Audrey’s desire to help constitute. And so the Constitution Assumption would stand unchallenged by these cases.

Now there are two lines of response, and which line we should take depends on whether the particularist we are imagining takes on the Constitution Assumption to secure the practicality of reasons. If she does not think the constitution relation to mental states specially secures the practicality of moral reasons, then parsimony demands she go in for the logically weaker assumption that mental states are merely necessary conditions for moral reasons. If she does think the constitution relation to mental states secures the practicality of reasons, then she will

need to show this to be consistent with her holism. (My suspicion is that it is not.) Let’s consider each reply in turn.

If we are to be charitable to the particularist objector, I think we ought not presume that she believes a moral consideration’s having a certain mental state as a part entails that the moral consideration is practical. For particularists who count holism a foundational part of their view, it would seem problematic to assert that some desire or other mental state by itself makes a consideration practical, and so qualified as a moral reason, in a given case. This goes against the spirit of holism, which tells us that nothing by itself determines anything normative. The particularist approach avoids taking some features in isolation from other features of a case to settle some normative question, like whether a consideration counts as a moral reason in favor of or against an action. So, there seems something strange about being an isolationist about the feature of a moral reason that allows it to meet the practicality demand on the one hand, and holding firmly to the idea that the normative significance of a description of a situation supervenes on not any one part but the specific integration of those parts, on the other hand.

Returning to the example, there seems something strange about saying that the presence of the parts of the reason in the ordinary case is not sufficient to compose the reason for Audrey to visit Megan in April Blizzard or Undisclosed Illness, while also saying that the presence of one of the parts, namely Audrey’s desire to provide for Megan, is sufficient in the ordinary cases to make the consideration in question practical for Audrey. Since it would be uncharitable to attribute this kind of hypocrisy to the particularist regarding her holism, we might believe instead that she has
not backed the Constitution Assumption because she thinks it guarantees in all cases that moral reasons will be practical.

If this is right, then my earlier argument from parsimony applies. When we have two theses that support the same extension of conclusions but one is logically stronger and the other is logically weaker, we ought to opt for the logically weaker thesis. As the Constitution Assumption is weaker than the assumption that mental states are always necessary conditions on there being moral reasons for action, and it is plausible that the particularist does not, and should not, take the Constitution Assumption to be doing special work in giving a moral reason status as practical, the particularist should drop the Constitution Assumption in favor of the weaker assumption.

Imagine the holist particularist does think that for any moral reason, there must be some or other desire a person has in a circumstance to make the consideration practical for her, and so a moral reason for her. Can she also maintain along with her holism that the desire does all of the work of making the moral reason practical? In other words, is it consistent with reasons holism to maintain that for any moral reason a person has, the desire element of that reason alone makes the moral reason practical for her?

I do not think that the particularist can provide warrant for the Constitution Assumption and maintain reasons holism at once. Concealed within holism is the idea that the normative import of any mental state, like a desire, is going to be owing to the other features of a situation that go towards explaining the existence and shape of that desire. And so I suspect that for the holist, features of the case other than or in addition to the psychological constituent either give
rise to the desire or enable it do its practical work; these features would then jointly account for
the moral reason’s practicality, not the mental or psychological feature. To see why, first
consider that reasons holism centers on the idea that the fact that some elements compose a
moral reason in one circumstance does not necessitate that those elements compose the same
moral reason in another circumstance. Put another way, “a feature that makes one action better
can make another one worse, and make no difference at all to a third.”115

On an ordinary day, Audrey’s desire to keep Megan company secures the practicality of
the consideration in favor of visiting Megan, so Audrey has a moral reason to visit Megan. In
April Blizzard, the holist might say, there is no desire Audrey has in April Blizzard that can
make the consideration in favor of visiting Megan practical, and so there is no moral reason for
her to do so. What holism conceals, in these cases, is that the desire’s power to make a
consideration practical is itself dependent on other things. On an ordinary day, the presence of
other desires, beliefs, and circumstantial features enable the desire to accompany Megan to be
motivating. And because of the desire’s com-presence with other desires and beliefs, and the
circumstantial features in which the desire appears, the desire makes the consideration in favor of
visiting Megan practical for Audrey. Therefore, the mental constituent of a moral reason alone
cannot be what guarantees its being practical. Rather, the mental constituent relative to other
mental facts and circumstantial features is what makes the reason practical. So much for the
particularist holist objection.

The next objection, which parallels the particularist holists’ in significant ways, makes use of W.D. Ross’s view on prima facie obligations. This objection goes that Audrey has a prima facie moral reason to visit Megan that is simply overridden by another consideration. Perhaps the psychological constituent of that prima facie reason does do the motivating work when the reason is not overridden. Or, the Rossian internalist might say, there is a pro tanto moral reason to visit Megan. If so, then the internalist would be warranted in undertaking the logically strong commitment to the Constitution Assumption, as it guarantees the practicality of moral reasons *ceteris paribus* or pro tanto moral reasons. And in fact, this is a line many internalists want to take when it comes to competing aims, undercutting beliefs, or ignorance.

My reply to the Rossian will bear similarities to my response to the last argument of the particularists we considered above. Either the mental part of a pro tanto moral reason always suffices to make that moral reason practical, or it does not. If it does, the Constitution Assumption is justified. But the Constitution goes unjustified if not. What I want to do is show that it is not plausible to think that the all-things-considered moral reason will be practical if its pro tanto counterpart is practical, and that it is not even clear that when its pro tanto part is practical, it owes this practicality to its mental or psychological part.

On the first point, a pro tanto moral reason is often not identical to the all-things-considered moral reason. This work is concerned with the analysis of all-things-considered moral reasons. Thus, if we grant the Rossian that mental components of pro tanto moral reasons make them practical, the real question is whether that practicality is transitive, or transferrable to the all-things-considered version of that reason. Suppose Audrey has a pro tanto moral reason to
visit Megan in April Blizzard and Undisclosed Illness. In these cases, that reason is overridden by Audrey’s false belief and lack of belief. Now, imagine a case in which the pro tanto moral reason is identical to the all-things-considered moral reason for Audrey to visit Megan – there are no defeaters or considerations that undercut or outweigh that reason. Is Audrey’s desire to keep Megan company when she is in need doing the work of making the reason practical? It seems that something blocks the pro tanto reason from being undercut or defeated in that case, and it has to be something other than the desire itself. For the desire is present in April Blizzard and Undisclosed Illness, and there the pro-tanto reason is undercut or defeated, according to the Rossian. So whatever staves off the undercutting or defeat in the ordinary case must not be the desire Audrey has to keep Megan company when she is in need. The pro tanto reason fails to be practical for Audrey in April Blizzard and Undisclosed Illness because of her false beliefs and the circumstances in which they arise. It is reasonable to think, then, that what blocks the undercutting or defeat in the ordinary case are the features of the circumstances or Audrey’s beliefs distinguished from those in April Blizzard and Undisclosed Illness. If that is right, then other features of the circumstances and Audrey’s beliefs have just as much to do with the moral reason’s being practical for Audrey as does her desire. Therefore, we should not think the desire or conative mental component by itself does all the work in securing the practicality of the moral reasons there are.
2.2.4 Constitution Does Not Guarantee Practicality

We would do better here to appreciate not just that there are counterexamples to the internalist’s claim, but the principle that explains why we can come up with such counterexamples. The principle is that the existence of all the parts that normally compose a whole is not sufficient to give the whole its qualitative identity; instead, it gets this qualitative identity from something which unifies the parts, and that is not itself a part. In short, constitution is not (qualitative) identity.

Since the qualitative identity of a consideration that is a moral reason includes its practical function, this principle helps us understand why the existence of a psychological state as a part of a consideration would not suffice to make the consideration practical, and so a moral reason. For instance, even if one of the parts of Ronnie’s moral reason to go to the party is his desire to dance, the existence of that part does not account for the consideration’s having a certain practical function, and so for its qualitative identity as a moral reason. Similarly, we can grant that Audrey has a desire to be a comforting presence to Megan and that her desire composes the moral reason she has to visit Megan, but the consideration in favor of visiting Megan does not get its practical function, and so an aspect of its qualitative identity as a moral reason, from the existence of that psychological constituent.

What I want to do now is look at a compelling argument for our principle that Aristotle gives in the *De Anima*.\textsuperscript{116} Aristotle is interested to show that constitution is not identity. In his

\textsuperscript{116} I attribute the thesis and argument to Aristotle mostly because his argument is prior in time to similar
terminology, the qualitative character of a whole, or the “what it is” (ti esti) cannot be reduced to
the elements that constitute that whole. Once we see how the argument for the general principle
works, we can support the derivative principle that the constitution of moral reasons does not
confer practicality on moral reasons.

One need not accept the general thesis that constitution is not identity, however, to buy
into the more particular claim that in the case of moral reasons, constitution is not practical
identity. So after explaining the Aristotelian argument for the general thesis, I will offer my own
argument, appropriating Aristotle’s strategy, for the thesis that the motivational constituent of a
moral reason will not alone explain the moral reason’s being practical. Having shown that the
Constitution Assumption does not serve the unique purpose of securing the practicality of moral
reasons, then, we will have strong justification for exchanging it for a logically weaker
assumption.

In De Anima I. 4-5, Aristotle opens fire on the view that constitution is identity in the
case of what he calls “the soul.”117 First, he argues that because parts can be subtracted or added
in such a way that the soul continues to exist though its parts undergo change, the soul must not
depend for what it is on the parts. Second, he notes that parts of an object can be spread out or
divided in such a way that the object undergoes change without any of its parts undergoing
change: “It is a fact of observation that plants and certain insects go on living when divided into

arguments made by Johnston, Baker, Wiggins, Kripke, and Lewis, among others. For instance, David Lewis makes a
similar argument in his “Survival and Identity,” The Identities of Persons, ed. Amelie Rorty (Berkeley: University of

throughout, translations are mine.
segments.” If we take seriously a datum like this, it stands to reason that what makes an object what it is cannot be its parts, since when the parts are spread out through time or space in certain ways, the object the parts once composed will go out of existence or undergo fission, and so no longer be numerically identical.

Consider an example: Let’s say that my car constitutively depends on an engine, a frame, and an interior. The existence of all of the parts of the car cannot make my car what it is, especially if this is specified functionally. For when the engine, frame, and interior are dispersed through space in time, the parts all exist but the car is no longer a car, in its functional sense. But if all it were for my car to be what it is were for it to have that engine, frame, and interior as its parts and for those parts to exist, then we would have to say my car exists when its parts are dispersed. And that would be absurd. With its parts spread throughout spacetime, it is not a vehicle for transporting humans and objects. Certainly the existence of all the parts cannot be a sufficient condition on my car’s being a car in the sense of having its transportational function. Thus, it seems to follow that the existence of the parts of the car does not make my car what it is.

Someone might observe that what my car is can change while the parts remain identical to themselves; suppose that my car is manufactured in a Honda factory and the original model is a Civic, but during the process Toyota buys Honda and says that all Civic models will be known as Toyota Municipals. The car that began its life as a Honda Civic will not change parts, but will emerge from the factory as a Toyota Municipal. The properties of the car change while the properties of each of its parts remains the same. Again, the qualitative identity of the car must not be parasitic on the identity and existence of its parts. The existence and qualitative identity
conditions of the whole do not co-vary with the existence and identity conditions of the parts. Therefore we have good reason to think that an object’s qualitative identity—“what it is”—cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts.

When we apply the Aristotelian insight to the case of moral reasons, we see what is wrong with saying that the psychological part of a moral reason is what is essential to a moral reason’s practicality. We can rearrange the parts of a moral reason into various configurations—whether that be taken more literally, as in, rearranging the parts in space-time, or figuratively, as in, rearranging the parts in relation to other features of a situation. When we rearrange the parts, then suddenly, the existence of those parts does not guarantee that what is composed is a moral reason. This articulates more perspicuously the reasons holist’s point, I believe: parts of reasons come to compose the wholes of which they are parts not just in virtue of their existence and qualitative identities, but also in virtue of their arrangement both within a circumstance and in space and time. This is why the psychological state—Audrey’s desire to keep Megan company—does not by itself determine whether the consideration in favor of Audrey’s visiting Megan is practical and so a moral reason for her. This is especially true of functional items, like moral reasons. In the absence of the belief that Megan is sick, as in Undisclosed Illness, or in the presence of the belief that there is a storm coming, as in April Blizzard, the consideration in favor of visiting Megan cannot function in Audrey’s deliberation and intentional action as moral reasons do. This just goes to show that isolating a psychological part of a moral consideration and identifying it as a constituent of a moral reason does not actually ensure that the consideration will be practical and so will be a moral reason.
Consider one last example to illustrate the Aristotelian point. Imagine we have a whole—a moral reason for Elea to go to her friend Zan’s birthday party—and grant that Elea’s desire to dance is the psychological part of that whole. The standard internalist line is that Elea’s desire to dance partly constitutes her moral reason to go to Zan’s party, and the Constitution Assumption is warranted because that desire makes the moral reason what it is—practical for Elea. But imagine that on the day of the party rolls around and Elea has become totally fixated on the Parmenidean puzzle about change; it so vexes her that she forgets about Zan’s birthday party. As long as Elea’s desire is not salient to her, or the time or day is not salient, it remains unclear how it could make the consideration in favor of going to Zan’s play a role in her her practical deliberation about going to the party or an intentional action—going to the party or not going to the party. Again, the presence of Elea’s mental state and its being a constituent of a consideration we want to call a moral reason does not entail that that moral consideration will have the practical function that moral reasons have, in the sense the internalist standardly assumes it will be.

In view of these counterexamples and the principle supporting them, we can conclude that the proponent of the Constitution Assumption puts forward a logically stronger claim than is necessary or warranted. To say that a psychological state of a person is part of a reason is logically stronger than functionally equivalent claims like, psychological states are necessary conditions on the existence of moral reasons or they are part of the explanation for the existence or qualitative identity of these reasons. And as I argued earlier, the internalist would be justified in undertaking the logically stronger assumption only if it did extra work for her, ensuring the
practicality of moral reasons. Taking a cue from the Aristotelian idea that the identity and existence of an object cannot be wholly determined by the identity and existence of the object’s parts, I have attempted to show that either the property of being practical is a property of a moral reason that cannot be determined by the existence of the psychological component of that reason. As the Constitution Assumption does not guarantee that an account of moral reasons meets the practicality demand, the assumption lacks a proper justification.

2.2.5 The Constitution Assumption and the Problem of Moral Relativism

In this section, I will argue that the Constitution Assumption is partly to blame for one of the objections frequently leveraged against internalism; namely, that internalism opens the door to moral relativism. It is in large part because of the internalist’s difficulty blocking the possibility of moral relativism that it fails to adequately meet the demand of objectivity. If the Constitution Assumption perpetuates this problem, then the internalist should be happy to be rid of it.

Externalists arguments against internalism often feature as a penultimate premise that if internalism is true, moral relativism might be true; they proceed to conclude that internalism is false. Consider, for example, David Brink’s formulation of the argument.\(^{118}\) The first two premises express basic commitments of internalism:

1. To be under a moral obligation to do x, one must have a reason to do x.
2. One has a reason to do x just in case x would contribute to the satisfaction of one’s desires.

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\(^{118}\) David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, 55-56.
Brink writes, “(1) typically, and certainly in Mackie’s and Harman’s cases, rests on internalist assumptions. (2) is the familiar Humean idea that all reasons for action are desire-dependent.”

Then he follows the implications of internalism on this point:

(3) Hence, one can have a moral obligation to do x only if doing x would contribute to the satisfaction of one’s desires.
(4) Not everyone has the same desires.
(5) Hence, there is no single set of moral requirements that applies to everyone; there will be different moral requirements that apply to different people in virtue of their different motivational sets.

The denial that there are moral reasons all agents have (5)—follows neatly from the premises.

Brink and other externalists turn the above argument into a reductio of internalism:

(6) But there is a single set of moral requirements that applies to everyone.
(7) Internalism is the view that combines (1) and (2) and entails (5).
(8) So internalism is false.

Brink’s objection to internalism turns on its association with moral relativism.

While Brink never makes the Constitution Assumption explicit, the argument requires that assumption to go through. If internalism were just the view that what moral reasons one has depends on having some desire that would provide motivation to act on those reasons, then it would not follow from the fact of people’s having different desires (4) that there is no set of moral requirements or reasons that apply to everyone (5).

\[\text{Ibid. p. 53.}\]
Mark Schroeder has argued for an alternative, Hypotheticalism, that does not make use of the Constitution Assumption and so can dodge the derivation of (5) from (2). According to Schroeder, as long as a person has some desire or another that would be even weakly promoted by performing the action the moral reason requires, then that person will have that moral reason. On Schroeder’s account, any desire whatever, and no matter its strength, promoted by φ-ing can ground a person’s moral reason to φ. Schroeder argues that probably, for every moral reason we want to say that there is, every person has a desire (however weak or indirectly connected with the action) that will be promoted by acting on that reason, so every person will have that moral reason. Hypotheticalism “can guarantee universality to certain reasons even if they are grounded in different desires in different agents, as long as anyone having any desire at all is guaranteed to have at least one desire that can ground the relevant reason.”  

What Schroeder has shown is that without the Constitution Assumption, the datum that people have different desires (4) does not get the internalist on the hook for moral relativism (5).

When we add the Constitution Assumption to the formulation of internalism in (2), however, as I suspect Brink does implicitly, then the internalist position does entail moral relativism (5) with the addition of the desire datum (4). The Constitution Assumption adds that for every moral reason, that reason is composed of psychological states such as desires. A moral reason for a person to be friendly with one’s neighbors composed of the desire to avoid prison is qualitatively distinct from the moral reason another person has to be friendly with one’s

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neighbors composed of the desire to get a free dinner. Since it is not true on this view that these
moral reasons are the same, we cannot infer that there is some set of moral reasons that are
identical and apply to everyone. In other words, moral relativism would be plausibly correct.

The internalist who supposes the truth of the Constitution Assumption will not be able to
avail herself of Schroeder’s and other similar responses to the challenge of relativism. Here is a
more tight argument for that claim. First, assume that moral reasons constitutively depend on
agent psychology. Second, define moral relativism as the view that there is not a set of moral
reasons that apply objectively— to every individual independently of her commitments, aims, et
cetera. If moral relativism is necessarily false, then necessarily, there is at least one moral reason
that applies to all persons. Third, the Constitution Assumption tells us that a person’s conative
mental states partly constitute her moral reasons. Fourth, according to standard internalism, it is
contingent whether there is a piece of psychology is had by any given person. Since it is
contingent whether there is some potential psychological constituent all persons have, it is
contingent whether there is some moral reason that applies to all persons. Therefore the truth of
moral relativism is compatible with the truth of standard internalism because it relies on the
Constitution Assumption.

In support of the fourth premise, externalists imagine agents who fail to have the right
desires. Russ Shafer-Landau gives three examples of this sort: Sadist, Torturer, and Bystander.¹²¹
Sadist takes pleasure in others’ pain and has no desire that would be served by seeing others

gratified. Torturer fails to be motivated to not inflict pain on potential victims. Bystander sees a child run in front of a car, and although she need only reach out a hand to help the child (at no risk to herself), she would prefer to watch the child die in front of her. We can conceive of a world in which standard internalism is true, but because these persons do not have the desires, commitments, or other motivating mental states that would compose one and the same moral reason against, say taking pleasure in others’ pain, torturing, or failing to act in the face of danger to others. In such a world, moral reasons fail to be suitably objective.

While Brink does not build the Constitution Assumption into his argument against internalism, he notes that the fact of peoples’ diverging interests and desires cannot by itself establish moral relativism; Shafer-Landau’s counterexamples and Brink’s argument really get their bite from the Constitution Assumption. Brink admits, “The indisputable fact that people have different desires does not establish that there is no single set of moral requirements that everyone has reason to comply with, since it may be true that there is a set of (otherwise plausible) moral requirements whose fulfillment would satisfy at least one desire of every agent.”

Only if moral reasons depend for what they are on their parts, and one of their parts is a piece of a person’s psychology, will there fail to be moral reasons that are the same for all persons or apply to all of them in virtue of their having differing psychologies. For instance, suppose that Torturer has a desire to eat dinner for free, and if he quits torturing people in his neighborhood, then his neighbors will start inviting him over for dinner; in that case, his desire

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122 Brink, Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics, 55.
for a free dinner composes his moral reason to not torture his neighbors. The moral reason composed by his desire for dinner will differ from the moral reason for Bystander not to torture her neighbors, however, if Bystander does not share the desire for free dinner. Perhaps Bystander’s moral reason to not torture her neighbors depends on her desire to not be imprisoned. Since Torturer’s moral reason depends on his desire for dinner and Bystander’s moral reason depends on her desire to avoid prison, and these desires have different persistence conditions, Torturer’s and Bystander’s moral reasons will have different persistence conditions, so it is not the same moral reason that applies to both of them.

I suspect that the deeper issue is that internalism, when built on the Constitution Assumption, would support indexical, rather than non-indexical, moral relativism. Indexical moral relativism (according to James Beebe’s recent characterization) is the view that “central normative terms of normative ethical judgments are indexicals” and “the contents that get expressed by ethically normative terms are determined by the ethical standards in place at the contexts in which those terms are used.”\(^{123}\) The first part of the definition proves more germane, so I will focus on this part. The meaning of the normative term “moral reason” will be fixed by certain contextual features in which it is used. Internalists who think of moral reasons as constitutively dependent on a person’s psychological states often treat the meaning of the term “moral reason” as also constitutively dependent on those psychological states. And as a result, the meaning of the term gets fixed in part by the psychological states either of the speaker or of

the subject of the reasons. Many internalists who embrace relativism take the attributor’s motivational states to determine the conditions for application of the term “moral reason.” On the most recent articulation of Gilbert Harman’s view, for instance, when someone attributes a moral reason to herself or others, the meaning of the term “moral reason” depends on the moral framework she has. To have a moral framework, Harman says, is “being motivated to do one’s duties, evaluate situations, people, virtues, and actions in accord with that moral framework.”

On the more common internalist picture, one of the application conditions for the term “moral reason” is the subject’s motivating mental states and moral framework. As the term’s meaning is relativized to the motivational profile of the subject, the term must be an indexical. And given how unlikely it is that two speakers have the same mental states and moral frameworks, the meaning of “moral reason” when we speak of the moral reason one person has versus the moral reason another has will differ, since the parts that compose them will differ. Even if we can truthfully say that each one has a moral reason to φ, where the statement looks the same in both cases on the surface, the underlying meaning differs because the term “moral reason” is indexed to the psychology of the particular person to whom the reason applies.

The Constitution Assumption fits internalism for indexical moral relativism of this sort. For thinking about the term “moral reason” as a function, the psychological variable in that function is bound by the subject of the moral reason. By contrast, an internalism built on a weaker assumption about the relation between moral reasons and psychology might make the

psychological element of the function a free variable. Then, any person’s motivational mental state which would do the same practical work could be plugged into the function, so that the term “moral reason” would have the same meaning across contexts. If it is the Constitution Assumption that ties internalists to the less cogent indexical relativism, then she should be glad to let it go.

I hope to have illustrated that plausibly, assuming the constitutive dependence of reasons on mental states further entrenches the problem of moral relativism and cuts off promising avenues of response to externalist challenges. This fact strengthens the broader case I have been making against the Constitution Assumption, since, as we saw in the previous section, it does not always secure the practicality of moral reasons. Even if the internalist acknowledges the trouble the Constitution Assumption makes for her view, however, giving up the assumption is only a tenable move if there is another way to hold onto the central thesis of internalism—that moral reasons are mind dependent. In short, the internalist needs to be able to lay hold of an alternative kind of dependence relation which moral reasons might bear to agent psychology if she is to let go of the Constitution Assumption. In the next section I show that there are several other promising candidates for the dependence relation; consequently, the move away from constitutive dependence is a prudent one.

2.2.6 Other Ontological Dependence Relations

The third issue I want to take up against the Constitution Assumption is its status as a bald assumption. There is a burgeoning literature on ontological dependence in contemporary
metaphysics, but it has had surprisingly little influence in the debate about mind dependence in
metaethics. Internalists take for granted the constitutive dependence relation without serious
consideration of alternatives. In what follows, I hope to show that this recent work on ontological
dependence actually reveals the wide array of kinds of dependence relations moral reasons could
bear to agent psychology. To plump for constitutive dependence without exploring these other
dependence relations would be imprudent, especially given that constitutive dependence faces
the problems I laid out above.

After briefly discussing several of the distinctive dependence relations mentioned in the
metaphysics literature, I explore in more detail two types of dependence relations that have their
roots in Aristotle—material and formal dependence—which I will use in developing my positive
proposal in the final section of the chapter.

In a 2013 article, Avram Hiller catalogs the variety of ways metaphysicians have recently
analyzed ontological dependence: “Ontological dependence has been understood in terms of
(Correia 2005, 2008), temporal modal dependence (Schnieder 2006), and essential function
relating two things (Lowe 2009).”\textsuperscript{125} Hiller also notes the common recognition that “there is more
than one relation which falls under the notion of ontological dependence.”\textsuperscript{126} Moreover, several
of the relations countenanced cut across the constitutive/non-constitutive distinction. For
example, in an early account, Lowe proposed that $x$ depends on $y$ iff $x$ exists because $y$ exists. It

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 35.
is possible that \( y \) is a part of \( x \), but we can imagine a case in which \( y \) is not a part of \( x \) but \( x \) depends on \( y \) in Lowe’s sense: a child depends on its parents since a child exists because its parents exist—but the child is not a part of its parents. Kit Fine provides definitions for three types of dependence relations in an early article on ontological dependence. “Existential construal of dependence” is a construal of the dependence relation exhibited when the existence of an object depends on something else or on its parts; alternatively, he says, an object could depend for what it is, its “identity” on its parts or some other object; and third, according to the “modal construal of dependence,” if one item has “being” then necessarily, so does the other.\(^{127}\)

Again, these dependence relations can obtain between parts and wholes or between two wholly distinct items. Finally, Benjamin Schnieder raises an additional distinction between permanent and historical dependence; the child’s dependence on its parents exhibits a historical, rather than permanent, dependence relation which actually excludes the possibility of constitutive dependence according to Schnieder: “\( x \) depends on \( y \) iff \( x \) is not identical to \( y \) and \( y \) does not exist necessarily and it is not the case that \( y \) is a part of \( x \).”\(^{128}\) Perhaps historical dependence precludes constitutive dependence because it seems that to be an originator of something, an item must be distinct from the item it generates.

The metaphysics literature brings to light the variety of ways of characterizing the dependence relation between moral reasons and psychology without recourse to constitutive

dependence. It would reach beyond the scope of this project to provide a comprehensive list of the types of dependence relations that could be used at this place in a mind-dependent account of moral reasons. However, as I mentioned earlier, to sufficiently motivate internalists to abandon the Constitution Assumption we merely need to show that there are steep costs to that assumption and that there are viable alternatives. If any of the characterizations of ontological dependence mentioned by Hiller fit the bill, then the internalist can leave behind the Constitution Assumption in good conscience.

I suggest that we try on a couple of the dependence relations that make appearances repeatedly in the metaphysics literature. Gail Fine, Kit Fine, Avram Hiller, Kathrin Koslicki, Michael Rea, Benjamin Schnieder and Christopher Shields all employ a distinction between an item’s depending for whether it is—its existence—on something else and an item’s depending for what it is—its qualitative identity—on something else in their accounts of ontological dependence. This distinction has its roots in Aristotle’s discussions of the relations between substance, matter, and form. As Koslicki, Rea, and Shields argue, the Aristotelian idea that an item or “substance” depends in one way on something which plays the role of “matter” and in a different way on something which plays the role of “form” proves to be a fruitful approach to the subject of ontological dependence. Following this lead, I want to turn our attention to these Aristotelian dependence relations and then consider whether they might be put in the service of a thesis about moral reasons and agent psychology.129

2.2.7 Material Dependence

The first relation is that which a substance exhibits in relation to its matter, according to Aristotle: material dependence. On the Aristotelian view, \( y \) plays the role of matter in relation to \( x \) when \( y \) individuates \( x \) from other items with the same form.\(^{130}\) We can take on the idea that material dependence is a genuine kind of dependence while remaining agnostic about the Aristotelian metaphysical picture; we need not countenance the existence of forms, matter, and substances. For the key idea here is that whatever things we do have in our ontology (if it is not a monist ontology) will have individuation conditions.\(^{131}\) So on whatever metaphysics we adopt, there will be a place for material dependence in our analysis of the things that exist. Since metaethicists already accept that there is a plurality of moral reasons, whatever they are, identifying the individuation conditions for moral reasons can yield fruit in our analysis of them and whether they are possibly mind dependent.

Aristotle’s idea is that for something to exist, there must be something that distinguishes that thing numerically from other things of the same species or type. Because an object cannot exist as numerically distinct without something individuating it from others with the same qualities or properties, an object is dependent on the thing which individuates it—the thing which plays the role of matter.\(^{132}\)

\(^{130}\) Ibid., 19. Also, see Aquinas’s *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics* V.8.876.

\(^{131}\) Even if it is a monist ontology, the monist will need some apparatus to explain the appearance of the many, and so she can use material dependence as a term in her fictionalist account of the many.

\(^{132}\) Aristotle offers a more controversial example of the dependence of something on its matter in the *De Anima*:
MATERIAL DEPENDENCE: \( x \) materially depends on \( y \) iff \( y \) provides the individuation conditions for \( x \).

For instance, a statue of Hermes is made a distinct object by the marble that overlaps exactly with the statue. Imagine an introductory sculpting class in which all of the students are asked to sculpt a statue of Hermes; Anastasia uses one chunk of the slab of marble and Basil uses another chunk of the same slab. Even if the statues look identical, what individuates Anastasia’s statue from Basil’s statue is the particular chunk of marble each one has used to fashion her statue. In short, if one thing depends for its distinct existence on a second thing, the second thing is playing the role of matter. So we can say that the first thing materially depends on the second thing.

We can qualify material dependence further by the modal profile of the dependence relation. Aristotle uses the notions of matter and form to explain change: for an object to undergo a change, there must be something that is replaced or generated, but also something that underlies the change. Matter is always that which underlies the change. In the case of the Hermes statue, order for change to occur—for it to become a particular statue of Hermes—there must be something that takes on the shape of Hermes which did not have that shape before, but which persists through the change. Whatever underlies the change, taking on a new shape, will be the thing that plays the role of matter. In the example, the marble plays the role of matter since it has

Animate beings seem to depend for their existence on their bodies. He says that Socrates does not exist, for example, before the material that will develop into Socrates’s body comes into existence. The matter—in this case, the fetal material—is nothing other than something that has the potential to be Socrates (or perhaps some other human). The fetal material might, in turn, depend for its existence on something else that plays the role of matter. We might think that some sperm and egg together make up the matter that individuates this particular fetal material, or the region of space-time taken up by the fetal material could play the role of matter.
a block shape initially and then takes on the shape of Hermes after the sculptor spends days and weeks chiseling it.

Sometimes, there is only one thing that can play the role of matter for a particular object. In such a case, the material dependence relation is necessary. If only one set of genetic material could support Daniel Tammet’s genius, for instance, then his mind will depend necessarily on that genetic material. More often, though, an item materially depends on something else contingently. Suppose that I am baking a few cakes for friends; I pour the batter into three different pans and stick them in the oven. The pans obviously provide the individuation conditions for each cake because without multiple of them, I would just have one giant cake rather than three distinct cakes. But I could have used any old set of pans to bake the three cakes, so not one of the cakes exhibits necessary material dependence on the particular pans.

Generalizing from these examples, we can distinguish between two sorts of material dependence: necessary and contingent. For the necessary kind of material dependence, $x$ materially depends on $y$ necessarily iff nothing other than $y$ can give the individuation conditions for $x$. On contingent material dependence, $x$ materially depends on $y$ contingently iff $y$ gives the individuation conditions for $x$, but something other than $y$ can give the individuation conditions for $x$. So far, then, we have two variations on the material dependence relation. With these definitions in mind we can ask whether moral reasons might materially depend on agent psychology, whether necessarily or contingently.

In order to play the role of matter with respect to a moral reason, some piece of personal psychology will have to be able to individuate a moral reason and to underlie a kind of change.
To flesh this out, first, consider what it would mean for a moral reason to be individuated. The reason would have to be made distinct or separate from other facts, reasons, considerations, or even mental states. Imagine a Kantian account of reasons on which a moral reason to be beneficent is indistinguishable from the moral reason to help my neighbor, because nothing besides the structure of reason itself provides the existence conditions for these moral reasons. That is, since one and the same thing provides the individuation conditions for a moral reason to help my neighbor and a moral reason to be beneficent, they are not numerically distinct.

Alternatively, a Kantian might think that in different circumstances in which considerations of beneficence arise, the circumstances provide individuation conditions for the reasons such that there is a distinct moral reason for me to be beneficent to my neighbor and for you to be beneficent to your coworker.

Consider Kant’s claim that the moral law applies to all rational beings. If moral reasons materially depend on rational mental structures, but are not partly composed of those mental structures, then perhaps multiple kinds of minds will be able to sustain the existence of moral reasons—human minds, alien minds, angelic minds, or God’s mind. As long as there is something with rationality to whom moral reasons apply, those reasons can continue to exist as reasons with a certain authoritative, action-guiding function. They won’t pop in and out of existence with the beings to whom they apply if their persistence conditions are parasitic on the existence of any person with a rational mind, just like my pathos plant doesn’t pop in and out of existence with the coming and going of old and new cells. And here is an additional advantage: This sort of view is compatible with the notion that the moral reason that applies to angels is the
same moral reason that applies to humans in ancient Greece and in 21st century America. That is, the view makes more probable that such agents have shared reasons. By denying that particular mental states or structures are components of moral reasons, we allow the possibility for their being objective or applying objectively.

If we assume that moral reasons are practical, then we should be on the lookout for a piece of psychology that could individuate items in a person’s deliberation. A good candidate for the matter of a moral reason is something that would enable an agent to treat as that reason as a distinct consideration in her practical reasoning. What could play the role of matter in deliberation might depend on the agent’s context. For instance, initially we might be inclined to think that Audrey’s desire to help her friend Megan and her awareness that Megan is feeling down as pieces of psychology that enable her to treat a consideration in favor of visiting Megan as a reason in deliberation. But in April Blizzard, those two pieces of Audrey’s psychology may not be able to play the role of matter for the moral reason to go visit Megan, especially if Audrey believes the roads are about to become impassible. The very same desire and belief pair Audrey has ordinarily may not be able to play the role of matter for the moral reason to visit Megan in April Blizzard, though, if we add to her psychology the belief that the road conditions are bad and she cannot make it to Megan’s. That is, the desire to help Megan and the belief that Megan is lonely may not suffice in April Blizzard for enabling Audrey to take as a distinctive possibility going to visit Megan. Not only does material dependence seem to be a conceivable dependence relation moral reasons could bear to personal psychology; but it is also promising if it allows the
defender of mind dependence to skirt around the worry with constitutive dependence I raised earlier.

2.2.8 *Formal Dependence*

The second dependence relation in the Aristotelian framework is that which substance bears to form—what I will call formal dependence. In Aristotle’s view, form is that which gives substance its characteristic qualities. It provides an answer to the question, *ti esti*, or *What is it?* Again, we do not need to adopt Aristotelian metaphysics, making forms a part of our ontology, to appreciate that this is a useful model for analyzing those things that are already in our ontology.

It may be useful to think about forms as properties of something in one’s ontology. Forms on the Aristotelian view are those characteristics that are replaced or generated, which some matter/individuated thing will receive, during a change. Michael Rea defines a form in contemporary terminology as the sole intrinsic property for $x$ that unifies other powers or properties of $x$ (and which is not itself grounded by any other property intrinsic to $x$). While Rea’s translation of form as property is helpful, his conception of forms is more stringent than Aristotle’s.\(^{133}\) One elegant feature of Aristotle’s theory of forms is that it is not so metaphysically loaded. In Aristotle’s metaphysics, a substantial form unifies and characterizes a fundamental being, but such beings also come to have and shed other properties, or accidental forms.

\(^{133}\) Rea only allows what Aristotle calls “substantial forms” to count as forms on his analysis.
Thinking of forms in terms of properties, we can spell out the idea this way: there are many ways of being an F, where F is some kind of object, and there are many other properties ascribable to x’s that are F. Certain properties might be central to or follow from a particular object’s being F, and other properties are less central, or have very little to do with x’s being F. I have the properties of being a human, rational, animal, a philosopher, married, and brunette. A few of these properties, on an Aristotelian picture, are essential to my being Anne—namely, my being human, being rational, and being an animal. But other of these properties are properties I can come to have or lose without ceasing to be Anne—namely, being a philosopher, being married, being brunette. When I go gray, for instance, I will retain most other of the properties that make me identifiable as Anne. The properties I retain might serve as the matter or that which underlies the change, individuating me as the same person through the change. My hair will be the matter that underlies the change when the property of being a brunette is replaced by the property of having gray hair. Now, if I were to lose the property of being human, I might hardly be identifiable as the same object. So perhaps the property human is playing the role of form, providing the answer to the “what is it” question.

The general take-away is that just as I can fall under many different descriptions, and particular items or objects can fall under diverse descriptions. When we want to analyze some x that is F under a particular description, certain of x’s forms/properties will come to the foreground and other of x’s forms/properties will remain in the background. For instance, when we consider me under the description “wife,” we see that I fit that description in virtue of properties like having a husband and being a woman, and under ordinary conditions (if I had not
met my husband in philosophy courses) my being philosopher would have nothing to do with the analysis of me as “wife.” Notice that we can remain agnostic about a theory of properties. All we need is the notion that objects have properties that determine what, qualitatively, they are, and properties can be more or less central or essential to what an object is.

Let’s elucidate the idea with a few more examples. A statue may be said to exist and to be distinct from other hunks of marble and the ground beneath it in virtue of the marble of which it is made, but in virtue of what is does it fall under the description “statue,” or more specifically, “statue of Hermes”? Whatever plays the role of form in the statue provides an answer to this question. When considering the statue example, Aristotle remarks that the sculptor provides the form of the statue because she envisions the shape that will be imposed on the marble, making it a statue of Hermes; he thinks that all artifacts depend for their form or properties in this way on the artisans who make them. Nature, too, can confer a form on an object; for example, a particular genetic sequence makes something an aloe plant rather than a cactus or a palm tree, and natural selection may be responsible for the aloe plant coming to have that form. But since a thing cannot said to be without having properties, and a thing’s form is whatever provides these properties, a thing will depend on its form in the following way:

FORMAL DEPENDENCE: \( x \) formally depends on \( y \) iff \( y \) provides the conditions for \( x \) being qualitatively what it is.

In a nutshell, if one thing depends on a second for its being \( F \), then the second is playing the role of form with respect to the first thing; and the first thing exhibits formal dependence on the second.
When considering the notion of formal dependence in application to moral reasons and psychology, the result is promising. Recall that the form of a thing can always be given as an answer to a *ti esti* question—a question about what the thing is. In chapter 1, I argued that the answer to this question in the case of moral reasons is a consideration that counts in favor of or against an action in light of a moral standard. So perhaps what gives a consideration its quality, being a moral reason, is that it is an authoritative guide to action in this sense. But on the Aristotelian picture we can analyze objects under a variety of descriptions, since there are diverse properties an object might have that determine the sort of thing it is. Thus, while we might say that every reason in the genus of moral reasons shares one form, like being an item in reasoning that counts in favor or against an action in light of a moral standard, we can analyze specific moral reasons under aspects those reasons do not share with other reasons in that genus. It could be that specific psychological features provide formal conditions that differentiate certain kinds of reasons from others. For it is a familiar Aristotelian thought that a genus or type may be a set characterized by a property that is had in common between all of its members, like the property of “humanity” which is had by all members of the set of humans, but a species or token instance may be characterized by a different property, which provides distinctive ways of analyzing what makes a particular human like Socrates what he is. Although a consideration may fall under the genus “moral reason” in virtue of its being a consideration that counts in favor or against something in light of a moral standard, it may have a distinctive property partly in virtue of some piece of psychology. One such suggestion would be to analyze a given particular moral reason according to its content—what it is a reason to do, believe, feel, etc.—and then explain
that it owes to some other property or set of properties that it falls into the category of moral
reasons. To see the plausibility of the proposal, let’s return to the case of Audrey. In an
ordinary case, Audrey has a moral reason to do is to go visit Megan; so the specific qualitative
identity of the reason in the sense I am suggesting is “to go visit Megan.” Now we should ask
whether some piece of Audrey’s psychology might play the role of form in determining that
specific qualitative identity for the reason. It is not far-fetched to think that Audrey’s desire to
help Megan and her belief that she can help Megan by going to visit her would provide that
content on the ordinary day. Perhaps in April Blizzard, Audrey’s desire to stay out of the nasty
road conditions provides the content of a reason to stay off the road; or perhaps Audrey’s
additional belief in that she will not be able to visit Megan causes her to reroute her deliberation,
and in doing so she forms the belief that she can help Megan by giving her a call. Then, perhaps
Audrey’s mental states would play the role of one form that differentiates one reason to help
Megan, by visiting, from another reason to help Megan, by calling. There might still be a more
generic moral reason for Audrey to help Megan whose form is provided by Audrey’s persistent
desire to help Megan or keep her company.

Of course, this is just a sketch of what one might be able to do using the notion of formal
dependence. I have only tried to lend some initial plausibility to the idea moral reasons could
formally depend on agent psychology. However, whether things would work out so nicely in the
cases as I have imagined them will depend, of course, on what pieces of personal psychology an
account claims make a difference to one’s moral reasons. That is a question I want to take up in
the next section.
To recap, so far the discussion has focused on the dependence relation itself and the common assumption that moral reasons depend constitutively on personal psychology. I have argued that the Constitution Assumption holds a privileged place in the current debate about mind dependence, but it is not deserving of that place. Not only is its ability to secure the practicality of moral reasons tenuous, but it also worsens the problem of moral relativism for the internalist. Finally, the Constitution Assumption is gratuitous for the internalist, since there are other dependence relations, like material and formal dependence, moral reasons might bear to agent psychology.

2.3 The Conative State Assumption

The standard mind-dependence thesis rests on another assumption concerning the features of agent psychology on which moral reasons depend:

THE CONATIVE STATE ASSUMPTION: If moral reasons are mind dependent, they depend on conative mental states like desires, goals, and ends.

I dispute the Conative State Assumption first, by noting its implicit bias in favor of the controversial Humean theory of motivation. Second, I rehash a classic objection called the “too few reasons” objection and show that it targets the Conative State Assumption. Third, I exploit an ambiguity in the trusted maxim that “ought implies can” and argue that conative mental states are not the only psychological features that could ground an agent’s ability to act on a moral reason. Appealing to a distinction which tracks Aristotle’s distinction between first and second potentiality, I argue that moral reasons may well depend on what we would call mental structures.
rather than mental states. This final criticism brings to light another candidate for the psychological relatum of the dependence relation—mental structures. Once this option is in place I will be in a position to sketch my positive proposal for what I call Aristotelian mind dependence.

2.3.1 The Humean Theory of Motivation

As I noted in chapter 1, internalism often appears to be of a piece with a controversial Humean doctrine about motivation. Internalists often assume that the features of agent psychology that make a difference to their reasons are those mental states Hume claims are the springs of human motivation: desires and aims. Alan Goldman, for example, asserts that “a necessary condition for a consideration’s being a reason is that it relates to an existing concern or desire of the agent.”\textsuperscript{134} Other internalists reference “what agents care about.”\textsuperscript{135} What all of these mental states have in common is that they are conative, rather than cognitive. But this assumption ties the fate of standard internalism to one particular theory of motivation. Because an account of moral reasons would do better not to artificially limit the possible theories of motivation with which it is compatible, I will argue that there is already some reason to discard the Conative State Assumption.

Internalists make use of the Conative State Assumption—the assumption that desires, goals, or commitments motivate and so moral reasons must depend on them—when trying to

\textsuperscript{134} Alan Goldman, “Reasons Internalism,” p. 505.
\textsuperscript{135} For instance, see Connie Rosati, “Internalism and the Good for a Person,” \textit{Ethics} 106 (1996): 297-326.
meet the demand of practicality. In order to be practical, a moral reason must be able to motivate an agent to act; further, motivation is a matter of goals or desires; therefore, in order to be practical, a moral reason must be related in the right way to an agent’s commitments, goals, desires, or some other conative mental state.

The second premise in this classic argument betrays the underlying commitment to a Humean picture of motivation. As Hume says, reason is motivationally inert, but the passions are the springs of human motivation. Buying this line, or something in the ballpark, internalists assert the argument outlined above for the standard mind-dependence thesis.

By relying on the Conative State Assumption, the internalist puts all of her eggs in the Humean basket. Her internalism will only be as successful as the Humean theory of motivation. But the Humean theory of motivation is by no means uncontroversial. In fact, those who come to the internalist/externalist debate without many preconceived ideas about the nature of moral reasons but who are decidedly against the Humean theory of motivation seem to get quickly deported to externalist shores. Given that there exist plenty of other plausible, philosophically respectable pictures of moral motivation, it would be wiser for the internalist not to let her view be held hostage to the Humean theory of motivation.

It stands to reason that an internalism without the Conative State Assumption would have broader appeal than an internalism that relies on the Conative State Assumption, as the latter is only as plausible as the Humean theory of motivation. Take the view Julia Markovits puts forward in her recent book, *Moral Reason*, as an example. Markovits defends what she calls a Kantian form of internalism, so called because the reasons she countenances are universal.
However, the account is not purely Kantian, for she falls back on a “desire-based account of what reasons are.”136 Were Markovits to accept that something besides desires can motivate agents, perhaps she would be able to offer a pure Kantian account that would attract those who think of ends not strictly in terms of desires.

Not only does the Conative State Assumption narrow the appeal of internalism; it also makes it less stable than accounts that are more neutral with respect to moral motivation. For the contemporary literature at the intersection of cognitive science and moral psychology threatens to undermine the Humean picture of motivation, and with it, the internalist views resting on the Conative State Assumption. Nomy Arpaly’s and Timothy Schroeder’s In Praise of Desire makes the case against the view that intrinsic desires, which are involved in moral reasons and virtuous action, have the features so often attributed to them by those in the Humean camp. Their arguments are instructive on this point and so worth considering in more detail.

Against the common view, Arpaly and Schroeder argue that desires are not causes of actions and that intrinsic desires need not have motivational and emotional effects often associated with them to be desires. With respect to the first point, they maintain that “dispositions of bodily movements are neither sufficient nor necessary for the existence of desires” by pointing out first that habits are not intrinsic desires, but habits are often sufficient to cause action.137 Their evidence for this comes from the reasonability of saying “I didn’t want to

do that, I just did it out of habit” and the fact that one can excuse oneself for an action performed out of habit but one cannot excuse oneself for an action performed because of an intrinsic desire.\textsuperscript{138} Arpaly and Schroeder also cite Dennis Stampe’s case of self-defeating causes of action as another consideration against the idea that desires are necessary and sufficient motivators and causes of action. In Stampe’s case, a tennis player who faults on her first serve and desires to serve successfully so as not to double-fault becomes so anxious that she has a tendency to double-fault. Surely, the tennis player does not desire to double-fault; but this would be the result of a Davidsonian view on which desires and the reasons they compose cause actions.

The second wave of criticism of Humean views comes from what Arpaly and Schroeder think is an unwarranted association between pleasure felt or anticipated from an action and intrinsic desires. They argue on this point that feelings of pleasure and pain do not simply track the satisfaction of intrinsic desires; after all, someone’s desire to avoid pain in the long run might lead her to go to the dentist, but that experience certainly does not produce visceral pleasure we might expect to co-travel with or be produced by desire satisfaction. Instead, Arpaly and Schroeder argue, pleasant and painful feelings are a function of intrinsic desire satisfaction relative to visceral expectations, and visceral expectations are formed by the way we represent the content of the desire (what it is a desire for). We can misrepresent what a desire is a desire for, and so form faulty expectations. This explains why sometimes desire satisfaction does not co-vary with pleasure. Finally, Arpaly and Schroeder maintain that desires aim to represent facts

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
about the world, although they are limited in their ability to do so (especially when it comes to long-term desires). Pleasure and displeasure thus bear a structural similarity in our consciousness to sensations like warmth and cold, both representing facts about changes in the world; pleasure and pain represent changes in intrinsic desire satisfaction. Thus, since pleasure and pain represent changes in intrinsic desires and desire satisfaction, it is just wrong-headed to view pleasure and pain as constitutive of desire or desire satisfaction.

Marshaling evidence from cognitive science and psychology, Arpaly and Schroeder offer a competing account of desires that casts doubt on the Humean theory of motivation. According to what they call the Reward Theory of Desire, “intrinsic desires can exist while failing to cause their familiar effects on motivation or feelings or thoughts, or while causing excessively strong or weak forms of their familiar effects.” The reward system in the brain represents certain things as rewards and others as punishments and then generates positive reward learning signals based on a calculation of an actual reward less the predicted reward. Arpaly and Schroeder argue persuasively that this system, especially the learning involved in it, performs all the functions performed by intrinsic desires, so plausibly, an intrinsic desire is what constitutes some object or state of affairs as a reward. This view distinguishes desires from habits, explains how intrinsic desires often fail to be causally efficacious, and how someone like an addict could be extremely motivated to act in ways that do not cohere with their intrinsic desires either due to habits or

139 Ibid, 127.
another cognitive systems or physical impairments that interfere with the function of the reward system.

If this is among the most realistic theories of moral motivation on offer, given our best cognitive and neuroscience, then the Humean theory of motivation could be in jeopardy. And the Conative State Assumption only does work for an internalist if a Humean view that desires are necessarily motivating mental states is also true. Given the shaky ground on which the Humean view stands, and given the other more plausible theories of motivation on offer, it would be better if internalism did not rest on the Conative State Assumption so that it would not rise or fall with the Humean theory of motivation.

2.3.2 The Too Few Reasons Objection

A second worry raised by objectors to internalism is that it countenances too few reasons. In this section I want to explain how the Conative State Assumption makes internalism an easy target for this objection.

On the Conative State Assumption, desires, goals, and other motivating mental states of agents constrain which considerations count as moral reasons for those agents. But we know from living in the real world that many agents lack desires and goals we think they should have. Consider, for instance, the radical dictators of ISIS who have no desire to treat some of their subjects with special respect and dignity. In many instances, their politically-charged desires and goals render them unable to be motivated by considerations of human dignity that would motivate normal agents. According to the Conative State Assumption, moral reasons depend on
conative mental states like desires and goals. If radical dictators have no desires or goals that would be served by treating certain of their subjects with respect and dignity, then there will not be moral reason for them to do so. This example illustrates that the impoverished motivational psychology of individual agents will severely limit what we can say about what they have moral reason to do. So goes the externalist complaint that internalism gives us “too few reasons.”

A corollary to the “too few reasons” objection is that when applied to certain cases, internalism yields verdicts that fly in the face of tutored common sense. (The most infamous example cited in the literature is whether Hitler has a moral reason against committing genocide.) Recall more recent example, which I used in chapter 1, of Narendra Modi. Modi’s parochial interests, desires, and plans exclude the welfare of Muslims from the province of his concern. His prejudiced position leads him to feel no regret when the genocidal riot breaks out against Muslims in Gujurat while he is Chief Minister there. In such a case, the Conative State Assumption tells us that Modi does not have a moral reason against allowing or perpetuating genocide, since he lacks the requisite motivational mental states that would be satisfied or served by his putting an end to the riots. Standard internalism leaves us with such unsavory conclusions in such cases without offering as a concession some sort of error theory for why we would expect there to be a moral reason where we do not find one. Again, we see that a disadvantage of standard internalism—its inability to render verdicts that sit well with us in such cases—is tightly wound up in the commitment to the Conative State Assumption.
2.3.3 First and Second Potentiality

The Conative State Assumption makes a certain molehill—the “too few reasons problem”—into a mountain because it blocks the internalist from either providing a compelling error theory for counterintuitive verdicts or countenancing some moral reasons, though not the ones we might expect, that apply to persons like Modi. First, imagine that internalism ends up failing to countenance moral reasons where common sense tells us to expect them. If the internalist had a convincing story that explained both why we expect there to be moral reasons in these cases and why the persons in question fail to have them, this would soften the blow to our intuitions. An internalist could say, for instance, that as important as the intuition that no one should be morally, rationally permitted to allow a genocide is the dictum that “ought implies can.” But “ought implies can” will show us that certain persons are so far gone in the way of vice that they will not have the moral reasons that apply to your average person. That is why we expect there to be a moral reason against allowing genocide for someone like Modi, but also why we must deny that he has one—he is too distant from a more psychologically normal person to have the moral reasons that one normally has. Unfortunately, the Conative State Assumption prematurely settles on a reading of “can” in “ought implies can” and so blocks the internalist from providing such a story.

This leads to the second worry. An internalism that denied the Conative State Assumption would leave open what mental states or psychological features play the role of enabling a person to act on a consideration, such that it counts as a moral reason for her. Remember that the mark of internalism is that it meets the practicality demand, showing all
moral reasons to be considerations on which a person can act. This is to say that the internalist accommodates the principle that “ought implies can.” Without the Conative State Assumption, the internalist can remain fairly neutral about her theory of motivation—what enables persons to act on considerations. It could be that what makes true that a person can φ is not so much a desire that would be immediately satisfied by φ-ing as a more general mental trait or structure that makes her the kind of being that would be drawn to φ-ing. In any case, the Conative State Assumption prematurely cordons off a particular set of mental states as those relevant to reasons’ practicality.

We can avoid these problems if we pay more attention to the different senses of “can” that might be operative in both “ought implies can” and in the practicality demand. I will argue below that an Aristotelian distinction between what he calls first and second potentiality provides two different readings of the “ought implies can” principle. What we stand to learn from Aristotle’s discussion is that in ordinary language, we deploy two slightly different (though related) concepts under the same name, “can.” Once we disambiguate these two senses, new options for the psychological relata of the mind dependence relation emerge as ways of meeting the practicality demand.

The line Aristotle takes with respect to the term “can” in his De Anima will sound familiar to readers of his other texts: “can” is said in many ways.140 The first sense of “can” refers

140 “One must also draw a distinction concerning potentiality and actuality. For we have just now been speaking of them without qualification. In the first case, something is a knower in the way in which we might say that a human knows because humans belong to the class of knowers and to those things which have knowledge; but in the
to more distant possibilities, and the second to more proximate ones. The first is called “first potentiality”:

**FIRST POTENTIALITY**: \( x \) is potentially \( F \) in virtue of an actual structural or kind-relative feature \( x \) possesses.

A more terse (though less perspicuous) way to explain first potentiality is the ability to take on a form or property something has in virtue of already having certain properties or forms that are suitable to receiving that form or property. For example, a coffee mug is a surfaced object, and because it is surfaced, it is suited to become painted a particular color, like green. My coffee mug is able to be green in the first potentiality sense because its being surfaced makes it the sort of object to which paint will adhere, even if I have no designs to paint it green or do not have any green paint handy. Aristotle illustrates the meaning of first potentiality in discussing what it means for a human being to be “grammatical” (*grammatikon*). In order to be potentially a user of language, one must have a mind structured in such a way that, in certain configurations, it will engage in linguistic activity.

First potentiality is not the only thing we aim to represent when we attribute an ability or potential to something, however. A child may be a potential speaker of language not simply because her genes code for a brain that, when actively firing neurons, forms linguistic patterns, but because she is activating those neurons and forming particular mental acts, like the acts that enable her to speak Mandarin. These second kinds of specific mental states make it the case that second case, we say directly that the one who has grammatical knowledge knows. These are not in the same way potential knowers; instead, the first one because *his genus and matter are of a certain sort*, and the other because he has the *potential to contemplate whenever he wishes, so long as nothing external hinders him*” (Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Christopher Shields, manuscript, 417a).
at any instant, she can speak Mandarin. When we say that the same child is potentially a speaker of Mandarin, we ascribe to her more than first potentiality; we ascribe to her what Aristotle calls second potentiality:

SECOND POTENTIALITY: $x$ is potentially $F$ in virtue of the actualization of a first potentiality by $x$ possesses in absence of external obstacles.\footnote{See especially 417a in Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Christopher Shields (manuscript).}

When a child actually exercises her first potentiality to learn language in a context in which others are speaking and teaching Mandarin, she starts to learn Mandarin specifically. Once she learns Mandarin she has actualized her first potentiality to be grammatical, and she is thereby in a state of second potentiality with respect to speaking Mandarin as she can, at any moment, actually use that language. In the example of an object like my coffee mug being potentially green, a particular mug might be potentially green in this second sense if it is both actually surfaced and there is an actual can of paint and painter nearby.

One need not accept that these two kinds of potentiality are metaphysically robust to appreciate the importance of the distinct meanings that the one term “can” might have, and how that bears on our reading of the ought implies can principle. If one does not accept Aristotle’s view that an $x$’s properties in the actual world ground claims about its modal profile metaphysically, one can still deploy the distinction using possible world semantics. For instance, we can say that the first sense of potentiality picks out all of those worlds in which something with a particular kind of structure—e.g. a surface or a “grammatical” brain—exists actually. The second sense of potentiality picks out a subset of those worlds—only those in which the structure
is being put to work—e.g. the surfaced structure is being painted some color or the brain is
learning some language. The point is that, independently of one’s theory of modality, we must
recognize that the same modal term might refer to either different concepts, or a graded concept
without wearing that gradation on its face. And for our purposes, recognition of this point is key
as the ambiguity in the term “can” creates room for multiple interpretations of the ought implies
can principle.

Both sides in the debate about the mind dependence of moral reasons proceed as though
there is one univocal sense of “can,” and that conative mental states are the appropriate truth-
makers for attributions of the form “a person A can act on reason R.” The Aristotelian distinction
between first and second potentiality, however, suggests that this is wrong-headed. The
standard mind-dependence thesis assumes the relevance of the second sense of potentiality, not
the first sense, and assumes that conative mental states that actually do the motivating ground the
truth of second potentiality claims. Consequently, we see a heavy focus on motivating mental
states.

142 The range of possibilities correctly attributable to me in the sense of first potentiality is much wider than the
range of possibilities attributable to me in the sense of second potentiality. With regard to the former, I am
potentially a doctor, a painter, a violinist, a soccer player, or a philosopher—(though perhaps because of my build,
not a UFC champion). On the latter picture I am potentially a philosopher, and maybe a soccer player, given the
state of my mind and body at present.
2.3.4 Putting the First/Second Potentiality Distinction to Work

I want to consider what the mind-dependence thesis would look in absence of the Conative State Assumption, which takes a certain set of mental states that ground attributions of second potentiality as central.

While it is true that for some person to act on a moral reason, she must be motivated to act on that reason, it does not follow that a person’s ability to be motivated to act on a moral reason solely depends on her current desires or goals. For we can analyze her ability to act on a moral reason in several ways. First, some versions of internalism reliant on the Conative State Assumption tell us that the analysans of the ability to act on a moral reason is an actually motivating mental state. That is, they analyzes “x is potentially F”—a person is potentially motivated to φ for a moral reason r—in terms of the very thing that makes it the case that “x is actually F”—the actual motivation φ for r. This should now seem quite odd and unhelpful. A second way to analyze a person’s ability to φ for r takes “ability” in the second potentiality sense: a person is potentially motivated to φ for r because she has psychological properties at this moment that, if actualized and unconstrained by external forces, will result in her φ-ing for r. As I said in the last section, many internalists who adopt the Conative State Assumption take for granted that the only psychological properties relevant for making someone able to be motivated to φ for r in the second potentiality sense are desires, ends, and goals. But other psychological features could conceivably play that role (especially if Arpaly and Schroeder are right about intrinsic desires and habits). Third, one might interpret “ability” in “ability to be motivated to φ for r” to refer to first potentiality. On this reading, a person is able to be motivated to φ for r just
in case she has a kind-relative or general structural feature in virtue of which she might acquire a property that makes her able, in the second potentiality sense, to be motivated to φ for r.

In light of the multiple meanings we can assign to “potentiality” or “ability” or “can,” the inference from “moral reasons are practical by nature” to “moral reasons depend on conative motivating mental states” is obviously on shaky ground. For a person’s ability to act on a moral reason need not be ability in the sense of second potentiality, and so moral reasons need not depend on a person’s current or pre-existing desire or end to be mind dependent. Instead, we might think it plausible that moral reasons depend in some way on a more general structure that, when put to work, gives rise to specific acts, just as the feature of being a speaker of language depends on mental structures that, when put to work, issue in the learning of particular language and potential to speak that language. We might also think that more specific moral reasons depend on particular mental acts that enable, in the second potentiality sense, a person to take up a consideration in her deliberation and act on the basis of it at a moment’s notice.

We can put to work the first/second potentiality distinction to aid us in thinking about what moral reasons might depend on besides conative mental states. I will argue in what follows that mental structures or mental activities that enable motivation, rather than motivations themselves, are good candidates. When mental capacities—which make taking up moral reasons in deliberation and intentional action possible in the first sense of potentiality—are actualized and result in discrete mental acts, those mental acts make particular intentional actions and our deliberation about them possible in the second sense of potentiality.
Human reasoners have long been regarded as moral agents in a way that non-human animals have not because of certain mental structures particular to us. While non-human animals may be moral patients, and so in some limited way a part of the moral community, moral theorists have yet to count non-human animals as being bound by moral reasons as human animals are. While our best neuroscience and cognitive science do not provide decisive evidence that differences between mental structures of human and non-human animals accounts for our ability to engage in moral reasoning, this is a live hypothesis. Many scientists have made the case recently that either through socialization processes, or through individual experiences that do occur only in humans, humans do develop cognitive modality special to intelligent human beings at present that accounts for the ability to engage in distinctive kinds of thought, such as practical and moral thought. Plausibly, the cognitive system unique to humans makes possible a range of activities and operations including, but not limited to, “language; thought; understanding of others; attention; planning and decision-making; emotion; memory; prediction; and awareness itself.” These sorts of systems are what I have in mind when I refer to mental structures: features of our psychology that we have in virtue of being members of the human species.


When we attribute to someone an ability to be motivated to act on a moral reason, “ability” may well have a first potentiality meaning, referring to the fact that the person has the distinctive human cognitive structures mentioned above. If I say, “Modi is able to be motivated to act on a moral reason to stop genocide,” it is quite natural to read “able” as meaning that Modi’s cognitive systems are set up to engage in moral reasoning and respond to considerations like the consideration in favor of stopping genocide, even if he has not actualized that capacity in a way that makes it possible for him to appreciate that particular consideration at present in his deliberation. Suppose these mental structures do make it the case that human beings with them are the sorts of beings suited to engage in moral reasoning about the badness of genocide. Then, if we interpret “ought implies can” as meaning “ought implies is-the-kind-of-being-with-this-cognitive-structure,” Modi would satisfy the consequent and we could assert that he morally ought to stop the genocide without violating ought implies can. Or, if the practicality demand is read in the second potentiality sense, then a moral reason to stop genocide would be practical for Modi. Here, then, we have one alternative way of meeting the practicality demand and accommodating ought implies can without taking the Conative State Assumption on board.

What would this proposal have to say about human persons who lack components of this basic structure due to genetic defects or neuronal disorders? Being a member of a kind is not sufficient for sharing, down to the minute details, structures characteristic of that kind; one must have the requisite material, genetic or otherwise, in which that structure can be housed and operate. So there may be some human agents who, because of severe cognitive disabilities or loss, do not have the mental structures that enable one to be responsive to and able to be
motivated to act on moral reasons in the first potentiality sense. Even having such a mental structure does not guarantee that the potential processes will be actualized and so that one will have the particular moral reasons we might be inclined to attribute to her. To draw a parallel, a kindergartner in China may never learn English and so never read Macbeth, but her mental structures are no less suited to her being the sort of person who could read Macbeth. Perhaps a person with a genetic defects or a cognitive disorder affecting these mental structures that enable moral reasoning, or a person whose life ends before these structures are fully developed, has some more distal capacity in the sense of first potentiality to be a moral reasoner and be motivated to φ for r if, in another environment or in the presence of more advanced technology, she is structured such that she would be able to acquire properties that give her these cognitive structures for moral reasoning.

Mental structures of some sort seem fitting as truthmakers for claims about what agents can be motivated to do in the sense of first potentiality, but when it comes to whether a person is able to be motivated to act on a particular moral reason at this moment, the sense of “ability” that seems more apt is second potentiality. If we want to know whether a moral reason to φ is practical for a particular person at a particular moment—whether we could realistically predict that she would φ for r at the next moment in this circumstance—we will likely be more interested in the second potentiality reading of “ability.” And here, focusing on the mental activities in which she has been recently or is presently engaged is more useful than looking at generic mental structures. Analogously, if I want to know whether a kindergartener in China is potentially a reader of Shakespeare in the sense second potentiality, I cannot simply look at her
mental structures to answer the question. Particular mental states would be more apt truthmakers for capabilities in the sense of second potentiality. For now, let’s say that a mental state is some current actualization of a mental structure at a particular time. At the very least we can safely say that determinate desires, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, thoughts, and perceptions probably fall into this category.

As a gloss on mental act, we can say that a mental act is an actualization of a mental structure that occurs at a particular time and functions to open up the possibility of other mental acts. Determinate acts like believing, desiring, judging, emoting, and perceiving probably fall into this category. Mental acts ground attributions of second potentiality because, even if they are not sufficient for action, they account for the fact that at any moment a person who engaged in that act would be in a position to engage in the further action of considering, actually being motivated to act on, and initiating an action in light of some particular moral reason. Mental acts have the added bonus of being functional items, rather than states that we posit but which may be unable to play any functional role because they are not being acted upon or salient to the person. If the Aristotelian picture of modality is onto something right, then mental acts may be the sorts of psychological features we really need to capture the practicality of moral reasons.

Building on the metaphysical distinction between first and second potentiality, we can construct another modification of the ought implies can principle: if someone ought to φ, then

145 I don’t want the success or failure of my account to depend on assuming any specific position in the philosophy of mind, so I will leave the question of what mental states are deliberately open-ended. I am indebted to Gideon Jeffrey for this suggestion.
her current mental activities put her in a position to consider and be motivated to act on the basis of a moral reason to φ barring any external obstacles. An advantage of this reading of “ought implies can” is that, in combination with the general claim that moral reasons are mind dependent, the net of moral reasons is cast more widely since many different kinds of mental acts or activities could place someone in a position to decide to φ for a moral reason r. This is less limiting than saying that one must have a desire to φ or a desire that would be satisfied directly by φ-ing.

One upshot of both the possibilities sketched above is that they would allow an internalist to claim that moral reasons are mind dependent without running into the too few reasons problem. The too few reasons problem gets going in large part because the mental states identified by the Conative State Assumption place serious restrictions on what could qualify someone to have a moral reason. By broadening our understanding of what psychological features of a person could enable her to be motivated to act on a moral reason, we lift that restriction and forestall the problem. The first potentiality reading of the practicality demand and ought implies can do especially well with this problem, as it allows persons who have distinctive human mental structures to have moral reasons even if they are not presently employing those mental structures in reasoning. If one thinks that this produces too many moral reasons, however, one might opt for the second potentiality reading on which mental acts or activities of any kind that make one susceptible to considering some moral fact in her reasoning and action suffices to make her a target of moral reasons. These possibilities will be discussed at length and more thoroughly in chapters to come. But the takeaway here is that doing away with the Conative
State Assumption may allow internalism to skirt around the “too few reasons” problem, meeting the demand of objectivity more readily.

Let’s pause to take stock of where we stand. I have argued against the standard mind-dependence thesis in two ways. First, I argued (contra the Constitution Assumption) that not all mind dependence is constitutive dependence. In the course of arguing against constitutive dependence, I suggested material dependence and formal dependence as two relations that moral reasons might bear to agent psychology, each of which looked promising. Second, I have just argued (against the Conative State Assumption) that motivating mental states are not the only features of agent psychology relevant to agents’ moral reasons. What the Aristotelian first/second potentiality distinction has to teach us is that more widely shared mental capacities—what I am calling “mental structures”—can ground attributions about what it is possible for an agent to consider or do. Once we have broadened our notion of potentiality to include this first sense and allowed that multiple kinds of mental activities could satisfy the second sense, we have a way of avoiding critical problems normally plaguing internalism.

2.4 The Aristotelian Mind-Dependence Thesis

When we loose ourselves from the grip of the Constitution Assumption and the Conative State Assumption, several alternative characterizations of the dependence relation and the dependence relata emerge, as we saw above. In what follows, I want to briefly sketch a kind of mind-dependence thesis that incorporates these options and does not undermine the objectivity or
practicality of moral reasons. I call the alternative I consider the “Aristotelian Mind-Dependence Thesis” (so called because of the metaphysical framework borrowed from Aristotle).

2.4.1 A Sketch of the Aristotelian Mind-Dependence Thesis

I have already set the stage for Aristotelian mind dependence by discussing the attractive features that material dependence, formal dependence, and the distinction between mental acts and mental structures have to offer independently of one another. Together, they form a powerful thesis about moral reasons:

ARISTOTELIAN MIND-DEPENDENCE THESIS: Moral reasons materially depend on mental structures (that enable them to function in deliberation and action in the first potentiality sense), and formally depend on mental acts (that enable them to function in deliberation and action in the second potentiality sense).

According to this thesis, whatever mental structure enables a person to take up a consideration in her deliberation and intentional action in the sense of first potentiality provides the material condition for the existence of a moral reason. And whatever mental activities at a given moment make a person able to consider a fact in light of the moral standard and in relation to a course of action or practical option, those activities will go to characterize the moral reason, giving it its shape, so to speak.

To get a grip on the thesis it will be helpful to imagine one way the first part of this thesis, about material dependence on mental structures, might go. Suppose that we rely on something like the dual-process systems of the brain (the intuitive/rational and affective/cognitive) to engage in deliberation, moral judgment, and decisions involving moral
judgments. While a particular person, like Audrey, may not be activating these systems at a particular moment, her possession of these cognitive systems might provide the individuation conditions for the discrete existence of moral reasons that apply to her. Her moral reason or reasons to care for Megan would not be numerically identical, and could thereby be qualitatively different from, my moral reason to care for Megan just because the cognitive systems that sustain the first potentiality for us to take up those reasons in deliberating are discrete and actually exist. In absence of the existence of a person with these dual-process systems, no such moral reason can exist in actuality. On this view, moral reasons would be mind dependent in at least the sense that for a consideration to exist qua moral reason, there must be a person who qualifies as a moral reasoner in virtue of a set of cognitive structures: the dual-process system.

We should also sketch out more fully what the second part of the thesis might tell us, once we take a position on which mental acts enable a person to be motivated to act on a moral reason in the second potentiality sense. Continuing on the supposition that the dual-process systems of the human brain account for the ability to deliberate and intentionally initiate action in the sense of first potentiality, we might think that discrete activities of those systems, like the making of a moral judgment or formation of emotions like disgust or attraction, enable someone

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146 The dual-systems account of moral judgment and motivation has been growing in popularity and shows promise, according to the recent arguments of Cushman, Young, and Greene in “Our Multi-System Moral Psychology: Towards a Consensus View,” The Moral Psychology Handbook, ed. John Doris (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), 47-71. Holly Smith defends the view that moral responsibility and blame are appropriate where System 1 processes produce an action; and as this is more difficult to establish and controversial than the claim that we are morally responsible and blame/praiseworthy for actions produced by System 2, it is a short and easy road to defending the latter claim. See Holly Smith, “Dual-Process Theory and Moral Responsibility,” The Nature of Moral Responsibility, eds. Randolph Clare, Michael McKenna, and Angela Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 175-208.
to be able to be motivated to act on a moral reason in the sense of second potentiality. So now imagine that Audrey gets news that Megan is sick and home alone, then glances at her twitter feed and sees that there is supposed to be a blizzard this afternoon. A complex configuration of different mental activities, both intuitive and rational, cognitive and affective, now puts Audrey in a certain psychological position with respect to the consideration in favor of visiting Megan: she judges it to be imprudent to go visit Megan today, and plans to visit tomorrow. On the picture under consideration, the mental activity of judging it to be better to visit Megan tomorrow makes her able, in the sense of second potentiality, to be motivated to plan to visit Megan tomorrow and unable to be motivated to visit Megan today. And this complex series of mental activities makes it practical for Audrey to actually make plans to visit Megan. Perhaps the web of mental activities also enables Audrey to consider plans she had for tomorrow and take steps to reschedule plans that conflict with visiting Megan tomorrow. These mental activities then go on to en-form her moral reasons, on this toy view. Her moral reason to help Megan may take on a property like favoring checking her calendar for conflicts, or picking up the phone in order to ask Megan if she can visit tomorrow. Of course, these are just a few ways of envisioning a broad range of options for how her moral reasons might depend for their qualitative identities or what they are reasons to do on Audrey’s current mental activities.

I will not try to give a full defense of the Aristotelian Mind-Dependence Thesis here. Instead, I am setting the stage for a defense of the version of this thesis I think Aquinas holds. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I shall sketch how Aristotelian mind dependence would
work in a case that would normally pose problems for internalism, and then explore how it offers new replies to old objections to standard mind-dependence thesis.

2.4.2 Applying Aristotelian Mind Dependence

To see that the view I am proposing also has intuitive force when applied to cases, consider an example. Suppose that Narendra Modi in 2002 has a desire to support Hindus in his state in Gujarat, a commitment to suppressing the voices of Muslims in India, judges that oppressing large numbers of constituents can lead to the loss of political power, and believes that allowing radicals to conduct anti-Muslim raids, burning places of worship, killing Muslims, and abusing Muslim women and children, serves his commitment to decimating the Muslim voice so he will not have to cater to their wishes if re-elected as a democratic official. Grant that the psychological states present during the violence in Gujarat make several actions show up as live options to him, including refusing to call in the national police, keeping media from outside the region in the dark about the violence, figuring out ways to pacify future constituents, and protecting those he deems innocent. According to the Aristotelian Mind Dependence thesis, Modi may have a general moral reason to do good or to avoid killing innocents. As long as he does not realize that the Muslims in Gujarat being attacked are innocents or had no psychological activity that would put him in a position to think about the innocence of those Muslims, he will not have a reason whose form is “to protect Muslims in Gujarat.” However, other mental acts like considering how to please future constituents might put him in a position to start thinking about the interests of the Muslims in Gujarat. So he may have a moral reason to consider how to
please future constituents, and because of evidence he takes to be significant that some of his 
constituents will still be Muslim, he may then incur a moral reason to consider how to please his 
future Muslim constituents. If he failed to take up these considerations, and so ended up 
continuing to allow the violence to go on in his province, he would be violating moral reasons, 
just not a reason to call in the national guard.

An account of moral reasons that makes use of Aristotelian mind dependence is not 
forced to concede that there is no moral reason Modi has because he lacks desires or goals that 
would be furthered by acting morally. According to the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis, 
there may be a moral reason for Modi to do something in virtue of the mental structures he has—
those mental structures that make possible moral deliberation and intentional action. The very 
structures that make Modi a moral reasoner also partly ground the fact that he has moral reason 
to do something or other in response to the raids. The internalist relying on Aristotelian mind 
dependence can assert that there is a moral reason for Modi to do something in response to this 
situation, and she can ground that assertion in the fact that Modi has the mental structures that 
make him a rational agent. (Notice that this already does more than standard internalism can to 
close the door to moral relativism). So long as those mental structures are in place, the existence 
conditions of some moral reason or another are met.

What Modi has a moral reason to do—the shape or form the moral reason takes—will be 
delineated by the mental activities in which he is engaged at a given moment. These delineate 
what considerations can come up in his reasoning and what he is able at the moment to do 
deliberately. If there are multiple routes of action open to him, we might appeal to moral
principles to settle which course of action he has reason to undertake, such as substantive principles the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis allows but does not itself supply. For example, let us stipulate that it would be morally appropriate for Modi to either call in the national guard or issue a statement to the local police to stop the riots, given some substantive moral principle or standard according to which considerations count in favor of those actions. At present, imagine that his ministry advisors give him information that the Human Rights Watch is giving negative media coverage of the riots and calling for international intervention. Coupling this with Aristotelian mind dependence thesis, we might say that Modi is able in the sense of second potentiality to listen to his advisors’ advice; and if he considers their advice seriously, that mental act will open up a host of other potential (again, in the second sense) courses of action for him such as calling for the police to intervene or calling for national aid. Then, it could be that Modi has a moral reason with the following disjunctive property: it favors either calling on the local police or the national guard for assistance. Such moral reasons would be practical for Modi in that he can take them up in his practical deliberation and act on them at the present moment in virtue of prior mental activities.

Admittedly, Aristotelian mind dependence does not tell us he has a moral reason to stop the genocide right now, or to have preemptively stopped the genocide. But in contrast to internalist views wedded to the Conative State Assumption, this view does have a story to tell about why the moral reasons Modi had did not have the property of favoring stopping the genocide. This story goes back to the mental activities that enable him in the second sense of potentiality to take up certain facts in his deliberation and action. And happily, it offers an
explanation for why we would normally expect to him to have that moral reason: for a moderately virtuous, or simply unbiased, person would have mental activities that would shape one’s moral reasons in such a way as to make them moral reason against allowing genocide. We can therefore trace back Modi’s responsibility for the genocide to some previous moral reason he had, perhaps to listen to pleas from his constituents for peace, that he failed to act on which led to the mental activities preventing him from seeing a certain consideration as a reason at the time of the genocide.

On the Aristotelian mind dependence view, the identity of the reason need not be totally fixed by Modi’s mental acts, but it will at least partly depend on them. This is why we can bring in other moral principles or facts about values to provide additional shape to moral reasons.

Another advantage of describing Modi’s reasons in this way is that if he ends up stopping the genocide, we can trace this action back to something he has done, evincing a connection between his moral reasons and his actions. The theory need not be self-effacing or run contrary to common sense, the way so many other theories are. Modi’s reasons will play not only a justificatory role but also an explanatory role if we allow their identity to be constrained by actual mental activities. That Aristotelian mind dependence does not issue the exact verdict we might expect should be seen as a feature of the view, rather than a bug. For it allows us to capture the practicality of moral reasons even better than the standard mind-dependence thesis, and it allows us to pinpoint a normative cost of being a certain sort of person: one will not engage in the mental activities that enable one to have moral reasons we would expect to attribute to a decent human being. Finally, it allows us to maintain the intuition that Modi has a
moral reason to do something, and the psychological resources that go into the existence and qualitative character of that moral reason will go well beyond the desires he happens to have.

2.4.3 Aristotelian Mind Dependence and the Objectivity Demand

The Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis does not undercut our ability to affirm the objective nature of moral reasons. This is so because it does not worsen the problem of moral relativism or the “too few reasons” problem as the Constitution Assumption undergirding standard mind-dependence has been shown to do. The strong intuitions fueling our belief in the objectivity of moral reasons come from cases like Sadist, Torturer, and Bystander in which we think the agents have moral reasons that would not serve any of their present desires or aims. Three features of Aristotelian mind dependence make it able to accommodate this intuition. I will discuss each briefly in turn.

For one thing, Aristotelian mind dependence permits moral reasons to depend non-constitutively on something besides conative mental states. On the Aristotelian view, whatever mental activities turn out to make acting intentionally and deliberating about a reason possible, those will partly determine what the reason is a reason to do. Because more mental states and activities may play this role, it is more probable that even the content of a set of moral reasons will be the same for many agents. The probability of a person having performed mental acts that enable someone to be motivated to act on a reason with the same content increases because all human reasoners have the ability in the sense of first potentiality to engage in the same mental activities. We might even expect convergence, if two persons engage in the same moral
imaginative activities or discussions and then are faced with similar choices in similar circumstances. This is due to the fact that the common basic mental structure in virtue of which they are rational agents also make deliberation and intentional action possible. By contrast, on the standard mind-dependence thesis, in order for a moral reason to be shared by multiple persons, the constituents of the reason would have to be the same; and it is quite unlikely that many agents will have same motivating mental acts that could serve as parts of a shared reason.

Second, the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis countenances reasons for retrograde agents like Sadist, Torturer, and Bystander by appeal to their mental structures. The absence of particular mental states does not preclude them from having moral reasons, the way it would on the standard view. Rather, though these retrograde agents may have no desires or goals that would be served by acting in one particular morally worthy way, nevertheless, they have the mental structures that make them agents in the first place. They have the capacity in the sense of first potentiality to consider some or other moral reasons in their practical deliberation and intentional action, and these capacities partly ground the existence of moral reasons, though they do not provide the properties that determine the content of those reasons. In other words, if their mental structures make them the sorts of beings who could appreciate moral reasons, then their present immoral desires and aims do not rule out the possibility that they have moral reasons. Thus the Aristotelian can be more confident that moral relativism is false, since all agents, in virtue of the mental structures that make them agents, meet the existence conditions for the genus of moral reasons.
Third, Aristotelian mind dependence can secure the objective authority of moral reasons without introducing something so metaphysically suspicious that the objectivity is not worth the cost. The Aristotelian account spells out in detail the metaphysics of moral reasons and the manner in which they are grounded partly by actual agents. Internalists have been using the standard mind-dependence thesis to dispel metaphysical worries; the Aristotelian account can hijack these same arguments to defend her view against objections of metaphysical queerness.

2.4.4 Aristotelian Mind Dependence and the Practicality Demand

Aristotelian mind dependence can also support the idea that moral reasons are practical. Determining what particular actions or range of actions one has reason to perform—what the reason is a reason to do—appears to be a matter of second potentiality and so a matter of mental acts, as I said above. For what an agent has moral reason to do at a particular point in time, if that reason is to be action guiding, seems to depend not only on circumstances but also on her mental acts. So one way to pick up on the practicality requirement for moral reasons is to claim that they formally depend on agents’ mental acts.

The constraint need not be based on desires or other conative states, either. So it is not wedded to a Humean picture of motivation. Rather, it can draw from a wealth of psychological resources agents presently have. For example, if Sadist, Torturer, and Bystander presently have beliefs that would lead them to reconsider the choices they are making, then what their normative reasons are reasons to do may be to use those beliefs in practical deliberation. If Sadist has a family member who has told her she ought to see a psychiatrist, and as a result Sadist has the
beliefs that there might be something wrong with her and that a psychiatrist might provide a solution, those beliefs have the potential to guide her practical reasoning. The conclusion of that practical reasoning may well be her decision to go to a psychiatrist. While it is unrealistic to think that Sadist will be (and should be) converted at the moment her family member raises the issue, it is plausible to think that she will form beliefs on the basis of what her family member says, and that those beliefs could enable her to deliberate differently about speaking with a professional. So, we see that the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis may open up a path to meeting the practicality demand more satisfactorily than does the standard mind-dependence thesis.

Aristotelian mind dependence creates room for maneuvering in places where internalism has been stuck due to its narrow construal of mind dependence. Aristotelian mind dependence promises theoretical benefits of internalism at a lower theoretical cost. Not only does it sidestep worries about metaphysical strangeness and violating ought implies can, but it also avoids the pitfalls of moral relativism. Notice, I might add, that nothing in my positive proposal excludes the possibility that a particular account of psychology, such as Humean psychology, is correct. In fact, the thesis as it currently stands is neutral with respect to what sorts of mental states are suited to play the role of giving moral reasons their identities. So the neo-Humean could easily appropriate this view, as could those who think that beliefs or cognitive states can motivate. These features count in favor of the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis over the narrow mind-dependence thesis of standard internalism.
2.4.5 *A Promissory Note About Thomistic Mind Dependence*

I want to hold off on giving a full-fledged argument for Aristotelian mind dependence because, as we will see in the next chapter, we can glean resources for constructing such an argument from Aquinas’s treatment of conscience in the *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*. For now, I hope that what I have said about the theoretical virtues and vices of Aristotelian mind dependence has lent enough plausibility to the thesis to justify further pursuit of the Thomistic version of the thesis in chapter 3.

Whether or not we should adopt the Aristotelian account, the distinctions it employs have independent theoretical appeal. They sharpen our understanding of the relation (or lack thereof) between moral reasons and agent psychology that is the subject of so much debate. My hope is that reasons externalists and reasons internalists will deploy these conceptual tools to articulate more clearly what it is they think should be rejected and what should be adopted when it comes to mind dependence. For, as we have seen, to insist that moral reasons are wholly mind independent is to reject many under-explored alternatives, and similarly, to contend that moral reasons are mind dependent is not yet to say much about the relation between agent psychology and morality.

The next chapter will feature a closer examination of a promising version of the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis. I shall argue that Aquinas holds a version of the thesis that
is attractive both in its own right and on the basis of the arguments for that thesis he provides in his discussions of conscience, a kind of mental act, and synderesis, a kind of mental structure. On my reading, Aquinas a mental structure he terms synderesis is necessary for the existence of what we would call moral reasons, and that particular judgments of conscience can specify the content of moral reasons.\footnote{On my reading, Aquinas a mental structure he terms synderesis is necessary for the existence of what we would call moral reasons, and that particular judgments of conscience can specify the content of moral reasons.}
In chapter 2, I argued that the standard varieties of internalism and externalism about reasons have been held hostage to a narrow conception of how moral reasons might depend on personal psychology. The two assumptions about mind dependence—Constitution Assumption and the Conative State Assumption—obstruct, rather than aid, efforts to construct an account of moral reasons that meets both the objectivity and practicality demands. I aimed to show that an account of moral reasons shaped by an alternative conception of mind dependence—the Aristotelian conception—boasted the potential to accommodate the objectivity and practicality of moral reasons. I ended the chapter on a promissory note that a particular species of the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis held by Aquinas does in fact secure the practicality and objectivity of moral reasons without undermining our commonsense intuitions or ought implies can. In other words, it meets all four formal conditions on a solution to the puzzle about moral reasons.

The purpose of this and the next chapter is to make good on the claim that Aquinas holds a version of the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis which provides a good solution to the puzzle. In this chapter I explicate Aquinas’s view of how moral reasons are mind dependent and show that his thesis about mind dependence is indeed a version of the promising Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis. I aim to show that on Aquinas’s view, moral reasons materially depend on a mental structure he calls
“synderesis,” which is a habit that enables us to recognize and use certain first principles like “good is to be done” as starting points for our moral and practical reasoning. Instead, moral reasons formally depend on the mental act of concluding something from our practical and moral reasoning—an act he gives the name “conscience.” This view of moral reasons and mind dependence fits the structure of the Aristotelian view since synderesis makes a person able, in the first potentiality sense, to act on a moral reason as such, and conscience makes a person able, in the second potentiality sense, to act on the particular moral reason it formally shapes.

Before beginning, I want to note for the reader that I have crafted the exegetical argument of this chapter with two distinct challenges in mind, the first having to do with translating Aquinas’s discussions of moral obligation, or binding, into the language of moral reasons. The issue of translation motivates a lengthy discussion of the concepts of binding, obligation, and law in Aquinas’s broader moral theory. Only by appreciating what Aquinas himself reports about his use of these concepts can we be confident that his concept of binding maps onto our contemporary notion of a moral reason. A question I leave somewhat open is whether his talk of binding and law goes far beyond the contemporary concept of a moral reason and extends into our notion of normative practical reasons. While I am inclined to think that his view actually collapses the distinction between moral reasons and practical reasons, this is not the place to pursue the line of inquiry that would support that claim. In this dissertation I have purposely forestalled such questions in hopes of providing a view on moral reasons as mind

148 In responding to an objection in ST Ia.79.12 Aquinas explains that synderesis, is a habit that causes acts but is not itself identical to an act, and there he says that the act of conscience takes its shape from “the habit of first principles, which is called synderesis.”
dependent that will be the subject of overlapping consensus before moving on to claims about the relationship between moral reasons and normative practical reasons.

The second challenge comes from a traditional, perhaps even standard, reading of Aquinas which does not agree with mine. What we might call the received reading of Aquinas’s moral theory does not take his discussions of conscience and obligation to be central to the theory. This leads me to offer a philosophical argument in favor of my reading. I make the case that Aquinas’s statement that even an erroneous conscience binds is a metaethical statement about the nature of how authoritative action guidance—the function moral reasons perform—relates to personal psychology as a conceptual matter. However, the received view treats the principle that conscience binds as one normative moral principle among many, not as something that lays bare something fundamental about the structure of morality and its dictates. It may be that the textual evidence underdetermines what we say on this particular point. I aim to demonstrate the credibility of my reading by showing it to be more charitable than the received reading, as the view the received reading attributes to Aquinas faces a kind of regress problem and is less theoretically powerful than the view my reading attributes to him.

The case for my reading, I believe, is only strengthened by the arguments in chapter 4. There I aim to establish that the mind-dependence thesis I attribute to Aquinas preserves objectivity, practicality, ought implies can, and commonsense intuitions about

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149 It is worth a mention that some interpreters of Aquinas resist making moral obligation central to his theory. Notably, Brian Davies claims that “[Aquinas] does sometimes speak of people having an obligation (obligatio), and he says that an obligation implies that a deed should be performed or refrained from (ST 2a2ae.89.7). But he does not have a notion of moral obligation at the heart of his ethical theory concerning human beings,” (Davies, *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 61). I find this claim in tension with not only the frequent use of talk of binding and obligation in the *Treatise on Happiness, Treatise on Law, Disputed Questions on Truth,* and *Commentary on the Sentences,* but also Aquinas’s insistence that reason is a rule and a measure of human acts, a rule which is binding (ligare).
ordinary cases and so provides a satisfactory solution to the puzzle about moral reasons. If the received reading and my reading really turn out to be on a par when it comes to textual evidence, and my reading allows the discussion of conscience to fit neatly within the broader moral theory—both the discussion of virtue and the discussion of natural law—then perhaps the philosophical import of my reading will tip the balance in its favor.

The success of the controlling argument of the dissertation, however, does not rest on the defensibility of my interpretation of Aquinas as the correct one. For it might be that Aquinas did not say, but should have said, what I attribute to him regarding conscience. Nevertheless, the exercise of thinking about the kind of moral theoretic picture fitting for what I call the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis morality is worthwhile if this thesis really turns out to be uniquely successful in solving the puzzle about moral reasons.

3.1 Moral Reasons Require Cognition

The contemporary concept of a moral reason, with its functional characterization as an authoritative guide to action, has a counterpart in Aquinas’s moral theory: that which binds or obligates human persons to action. In order to head off the objection that it is anachronistic to see Aquinas as having an account of moral reasons, I first explain why a moral theory like his must have a place for something that has the same functional role as a moral reason. Then, I turn to Aquinas’s discussion of the mechanics and moral import of binding, where we can see that obligations, as binding considerations, play the role we would assign to moral reasons.
Interestingly, Aquinas’s analysis of what it means for a consideration to morally bind a person already begins to address the question of whether binding considerations (moral reasons) are mind dependent. So in the latter part of this section, I explicate Aquinas’s take on the mind dependence question. On his view, while objective facts can have moral significance without our desiring or believing anything in particular about them, by themselves they lack the power to bind us, and so to count as moral reasons. Instead, a conceptual requirement on a consideration binding a person in his view is that it must make cognitive contact with that person. Since moral reasons are just those considerations that are binding on a person, moral reasons are dependent on our cognition for Aquinas.\footnote{It would be too long a digression to explicate what Aquinas means by \textit{scientia}—knowledge. But we can note a few remarks earlier in the \textit{Summa Theologica} (\textit{ST}) that make clear he is not referring to the contemporary justified true belief account. Consider his claim in \textit{ST Ia} 79 article 10 that knowledge is either an act of the intellect or a habit—cognition in first actuality: “The name ‘intelligence’ properly signifies the same act of the intellect which is to understand… sometimes it is in first act, which is knowledge, and thus it is said that intellect is in habit; other times however it is in second act, which is to consider, and thus is said that the intellect is in act.” This passage indicates that there are a range of cognitive activities and habits, which we might be tempted to call knowledge, proper to the intellect. I will be referring to the whole range as “cognition” for simplicity’s sake.}

(\textit{It will be the task of the sections that follow to explain what psychological features of a person allows a consideration to make that contact and so meet the conditions for being a moral reason for her.})
3.1.1 Obligations and Moral Reasons

Obligations in the Thomistic system have the same normative function as moral reasons in contemporary discussions. This is a reasonable claim to make about his view, not so much because Aquinas comes out and states that obligations are authoritative guides to action or considerations that count in favor of or against some course of action, but rather because his view assumes a tight connection between morality and rationality, and because the ubiquitous use of the concept of obligation bears out that it has the function of our term “moral reason.” What I will do briefly, here, is to lay out parts of his moral theory that make the assumption a safe one, in particular, what he has to say about the moral nature of human action, the way human reason serves as a rule and measure of human acts, and the mechanics of binding. These discussions illuminate first, that there is a clear place for moral reasons in his theory, and second, that where we would expect to find talk of moral reasons on a contemporary view we find talk of obligation and binding on Aquinas’s view.

For Aquinas, morality—moral good and bad—has to do exclusively with human persons, habits, and actions. He conceives of a human being as rational animal, “an intellectual being with free decision and the power to move himself,” and it is in virtue of reason that humans are subject to moral obligations. But the primary target of obligation is human actions. Aquinas is careful to distinguish actions humans perform from the actions that are uniquely human, and the appropriate subject of moral evaluation—what we can be obligated to do or refrain from doing. He says that “a human differs from irrational creatures in this, that he is the master of his own acts; wherefore

\[151\] ST IaIlae Prologue
only the actions of which a human is master are properly called human actions. Man is the master of his actions through reason and will."

On his account, it is because we have both reason and will working together that we can make decisions freely. He goes on to explain that this power resultant from our having reason and will marks our actions as susceptible for moral evaluation: “And because, as Ambrose says (in On Luke), morals are said to be proper to humans, moral acts are sorted into their species by their end, for moral acts are the same as human acts.”

Aquinas insists that for our moral evaluations and practices to make sense at all, we must be the sorts of rational creatures with free decision. In ST I question 83, he writes:

Man has free decision; otherwise counsels, exhortations, precepts, prohibitions, rewards, and punishments would be in vain. As evidence for this we should consider that certain things act without judgment, as a rock moves down… however certain things act with judgment but not freely, as brute animals. For the sheep, seeing the wolf, judges, “this is to be fled,” by natural judgment and not freely, because it judges this not from comparison but from natural instinct. And similarly with any of the brute animals. But man acts with judgment, because through cognitive power he judges that something is to be fled or to be followed. But because that judgment is not from natural instinct in a particular operation but from a certain comparison by reason, he makes this judgment freely, able to be born off in diverse directions. For reason about contingents has the power of opposites.

What distinguishes a human being’s action from the action of, say, the sheep, is the free judgment the human being has that allows him to perform his act with a kind of knowledge, and so voluntarily. Human practical reason, he says, is free to shift attention

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152 ST IIaIae 1.1  
153 ST IaIae 1.3  
154 ST IaIae 6.1  
155 ST Ia.83.1
to diverse things. And since what we do do as the result of free decision, unlike other creatures, we can be morally bound or obligated to perform actions.

Obligation comes into the picture through the moral standard for human actions, which, for Aquinas, is a person’s reason. “Reason,” he says in ST IaIIae question 90, “is a rule and a measure of human acts.” Human reason provides a standard against the background of which certain considerations will count in favor of actions, and others against actions. And it is in light of one’s reason that she is obligated to perform or avoid certain acts. Aquinas explains that what reason is for human acts, law is for acts more generally: “Law is a certain rule and measure of acts, according to which someone is induced to something to be done or is restrained from doing something; for “law” is so-called from “ligando” (to bind) because it obligates (obligat) one to something to be done. However, the rule and measure of human acts is reason.” Just as a person is bound to a certain action by law, which serves as a standard for politically right action, so too a person is bound to a certain human action by reason, which serves as a standard for rationally, morally right action.

Since Aquinas holds that actions performed from free decision will be either morally good or morally bad, and that how well an action aligns with one’s reasoning will go towards determining an action’s moral goodness or badness, he has to have

156 ST IaIIae 90.1
157 Martin Rhonheimer rightly points out that many interpreters of Aquinas on Natural Law miss the crucial element of “reason” and focus nearly exclusively on “order.” But Aquinas holds that “the measure and rule of this will, the constitutive principle of its very goodness, Thomas says, is the reason—and this is not only as the rule of subjective morality but also as an objective measure. This is because reason is not only the measuring and regulating ‘factor,’ in the sense of the application of a measure; rather, reason is the measure itself, and thereby the norm of morality,” (Rhonheimer, Natural Law and Practical Reason, 15). For an excellent discussion of the role of reason in Aquinas’s moral theory see Rhonheimer, Natural Law and Practical Reason, trans. Gerald Malsbary (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).
158 Ibid.
something in the theory which plays the role we would expect moral reasons to play: that which makes an action morally rational or morally irrational. And in fact, we see that the obligations produced by comparing a given course of action to the rational standard play just this role. Obligations make human acts either morally rational, and required or morally irrational, and so prohibited.

3.1.2 The Conceptual Analysis of Moral Binding

For Aquinas, moral obligation is a species of binding, or the imposition of necessity on one thing by another. The closest thing to a definition of obligation we get from Aquinas’s texts is the following: “an obligation refers to something which is to be done or to be avoided.” But perhaps more illuminating, if we wish to understand his view on what an obligation is, is Aquinas’s analysis of the general concept of binding.

Because for Aquinas the very concepts of binding and obligation involve claims about the psychology of persons bound or obligated, we cannot gather further evidence to support my translation of obligation and binding talk as moral reasons talk without plunging ahead into the question of mind dependence. On the Thomistic picture, to obligate is to render a human action morally necessary. But in order to do this, a consideration must bear a certain relation to the psychology of the particular person it binds.

We might expect Aquinas, as a theist whose moral view has been characterized as “theonomous” and “divine rationalist” to allow that some considerations, such as the fact that God wills that one should not commit adultery, are sufficiently binding on their own,

\[159\] ST IIaIIae 89.7
independently of any psychological features of the persons they bind.\textsuperscript{160} If anything were to qualify as an objective obligation, surely a divine command would.

However, Aquinas’s analysis of binding, as well as his application of that analysis in the case of law and conscience, would have it that such a view is conceptually confused. For any action to be rendered \textit{morally} necessary for a person, it must be incorporated into that person’s reason, which is the rule and measure of human acts. We shall see that on the account of binding Aquinas argues for, this cognitive contact is a crucial condition for any consideration—a divine command, a divine willing, or any other normative fact—to bind.

Binding is a kind of necessity that differs from natural necessity because it is imposed on one thing by another. “To bind,” he explains in the \textit{Disputed Questions on Truth (QDV)}, means “for one thing to impose necessity on another thing.”\textsuperscript{161} The kind of necessity indicated by binding differs from natural necessity in that it is not “internal” to the thing in question. For example, a rock has an internal property of having mass, and so being subject to gravitational pull. So when the rock falls downward toward a center of gravity, we do not say that the rock is bound to fall, but rather that it necessarily falls given its structural features. Aquinas contrasts the sort of necessity exhibited by the rock with necessity that is conditional, “that is, from supposing an end.”\textsuperscript{162} Imposed necessity happens through some action, such as when as a result of a child’s action of picking up and slinging a rock towards a river at an angle, the rock necessarily skips.

\textsuperscript{160} Rhonheimer, \textit{Natural Law and Practical Rationality}.
\textsuperscript{161} QDV 17.3
\textsuperscript{162} QDV 17.3
He goes on to argue that when it comes to the will, necessity obviously cannot be imposed on it by physical contact. While physical binding requires contact, spiritual or moral binding requires something that plays the same role as contact in the physical case, and this is, he contends, the subject’s knowledge. At first glance, it appears to be an argument from analogy that is based on the similarity between physical binding and spiritual binding:

Thus, just as it is the same force by which contact acts and by which the power of the agent acts, and while contact would not act unless through the power of the agent, neither does the power of the agent act unless mediated by contact; so too the same force is that by which a precept binds and by which knowledge binds, and while knowledge would not bind unless through the power of the precept, nor would the precept bind unless through knowledge.\(^{163}\)

The idea expressed in the passage above seems to be that spiritual binding operates analogously to physical binding. For physical binding to take place requires that the agent binding contact the thing being bound. So too, for spiritual binding to take place requires that the precept binding contact the agent being bound, and this happens via knowledge.

While it is fair to read what Aquinas is doing here as an argument from analogy, since he explicitly states he is using a physical “metaphor,” it is just as likely that he is applying a general metaphysical principle about externally imposed necessity to the specific case of moral action and that the only thing metaphorical is “contact.” The metaphysical principle is that when \(x\) comes to be \(F\) necessarily not because of its own condition but because of a condition generated by some other thing, \(y\), \(x\) and \(y\) must be in a relation of contact for \(y\) to put \(x\) under that condition. In the moral case, if a person comes under the normative necessity to \(\varphi\) not because of her own condition but because

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\(^{163}\) Ibid.
of a condition generated by some precept $p$, $p$ must be in a relation of contact to that person in order for the person to come under the condition that makes it normatively necessary that she $\varphi$’s.

In either case, the argument works by showing that at least in the physical case of binding, when one thing imposes necessity on another, that necessity is conditional on the first object’s power to move the second and the contact of the two with one another. As a conceptual matter, binding depends not only on the properties of each object, but also on contact between the two objects. Contact between a consideration with normative power and a human person who has the power to be put under normative authority of a consideration happens through cognitive contact. In the case that the first thing is a precept, this contact is called knowledge, since knowledge is the cognitive achievement appropriate to primary and necessary truths like precepts. Aquinas concludes the argument, “Just as in physical matters the physical agent does not act unless through contact, so in spiritual matters a precept does not bind unless through knowledge.”

Thus we get three conceptual conditions on something’s being binding, whether in the physical or spiritual case: (i) the ability of some agent to initiate a patient’s $\varphi$-ing, (ii) the ability of the patient to $\varphi$, and (iii) on the contact of the agent with the patient that $\varphi$’s.

At this point we might wonder why Aquinas insists that in the case of a person being morally bound to an action by a precept, that precept must make cognitive contact with the person in order to be binding. Again, precepts seem like the paradigmatic case of considerations with such objective moral authority that they need nothing further to obligate human persons who, we saw Aquinas thinks, are subject to moral norms. We

\[164\ QDV\ 17.3\]
also might think the argument he has given to establish that claim very odd; why should we think that spiritual binding requires “contact” just because physical binding does, especially if we are tempted to treat the concept of physical binding as equivocal, and at most analogous, to spiritual, moral binding?

To make sense of the argument, it will be helpful to think carefully through a case of physical binding and then see whether we can naturally extend the principles governing that case to the moral case. Suppose Sarah wants to make a rock skip across a river. There is some single power to make the rock skip across water, and this power is jointly activated both by the contact of Sarah with the actual rock and by Sarah’s ability to skip the rock. If the rock were out of Sarah’s reach, or if she decided not to pick it up, then the rock would not be able to be skipped across the river by her (in the sense of second potentiality). Her actual contact with the rock makes it possible for her to then skip the rock. But the rock would also be unable to be skipped across the river (in the sense of second potentiality) if Sarah were unable to skip the rock, say, because her arm muscles had atrophied. So, that the rock is skipped across the water is made necessary by something besides the rock’s nature: Sarah’s actual contact with the thing that has the ability to be skipped. That is, even though Sarah will not skip the rock across the river in all the possible worlds where we hold fixed properties intrinsic to the rock, the river, and Sarah, she will skip the rock across the river in the smaller subset of those worlds where she, making the motion of swinging the rock towards the river, makes contact with the rock.

Generalizing, we can say the following: the imposed necessity of some motion $\phi$ depends on the three conditions I outlined above: (i) the ability of some agent to initiate a
patient’s φ-ing, (ii) the ability of the agent to φ, and (iii) on the contact of the agent with
the patient that φ’s. In order for binding to take place, that which is bound must stand in a
certain relation to that which binds it. Otherwise, it would be hard to see how the concept
“imposed necessity”—what Aquinas says obligation and binding is—applied.

For, consider the view that the rock necessarily skips across the river just in case
(i) and (ii) obtain, but not (iii). Suppose Sarah is able to initiate the rock’s skipping across
the river and the rock is able to skip across the river. Is it sensible to say that Sarah’s
ability imposes necessity upon the rock to skip across the river? If the rock necessarily
skipped across the river, but Sarah never touched the rock, then we would be hardly
justified in thinking that it was Sarah’s ability to toss the rock that made it necessary that
the rock was going to skip across the river. It would be more rational to think that the
necessity was not imposed but intrinsic to the rock all along.

In order to justifiably believe that the rock necessarily skipping is a genuine case
of “binding” or imposed necessity, we need qualification (iii), that Sarah contacts the
rock. The contact makes sense of the necessity being imposed from without. Otherwise, it
would be unclear why Sarah’s ability in particular, rather than the ability of some more
distant person, the lake into which the river flows, or any other object, is that which
imposes the necessity on the rock.

3.1.3 The Cognition Requirement

At this juncture, Aquinas’s answer to the mind dependence starts to shine through, if I am
right to think of obligation as tantamount to our concept of moral reasons. In the case of a
moral consideration, Aquinas wants to say, contact occurs through that consideration
being cognized by persons bound by the consideration. Thus, for a moral consideration to bind and so to be a moral reason, the person whom it binds must cognize it.

The end of the argument by analogy explaining what binding is in the spiritual, or moral, makes a person’s psychology part of the concept of what it is to bind. For convenience, I will refer to this thesis as the Cognition Requirement on moral reasons:

COGNITION REQUIREMENT: For a person to be bound by a consideration, that consideration must make cognitive contact with the person it binds.

We can paraphrase the final stage of his argument for the Cognition Requirement as follows. For some person to be morally bound or obligated to φ, some other person or precept must have the normative power to make that person φ and that person or precept must contact the person under the obligation. Just as Sarah must have the physical power to make it the case that the rock skips across the river, so some precept or consideration must have the normative power to make it the case that another person is morally required to perform some action. But the consideration or precept must also successfully make contact with the subject she purports to bind. Contact between a consideration or precept and a person happens through communication and cognition of the content of that consideration or precept. Thus, cognition on the part of the person being bound is one of the conditions on a consideration’s being binding.

Using the example of a ruler imposing a command on a subject, he says, “Someone is not bound from a command of some king or lord unless the command reaches the one commanded by it (nisi imperium attingat ipsum cui imperatur).” The ruler has normative power to make it the case that a subject ought to φ in the sense of first

\[165\ QDV\ 17.3\]
potentiality. However, unless the ruler can “reach” the subject with the command to φ, the normative power of the command fails to obligate the subject to φ. The ruler’s command does not have the normative power to change the obligations of a subject in the sense of second potentiality without successful communication of the content of the command. Aquinas asserts that a ruler’s command reaches the subject to whom it applies, and so binds the person, “through knowledge.”

The discussion of binding in De Veritate is not the only place where Aquinas invokes the Cognition Requirement in a conceptual analysis of moral binding. In his analysis of law, we saw that he argues that it is part of the concept of law that it be made known to subjects. The analysis of law begins with an argument that part of what it is to be a law is to obligate or bind. In an argument from etymology, he writes that law (lex) comes from the root of the verb to bind (ligare); therefore it is central to the very concept of law that functions as something that binds. In ST I.IIae 90.4 he argues that a law binds, and so counts as a law, through its being made known. Aquinas’s technical term for a law’s being made known to a subject is promulgation (promulgatio). He insists that promulgation is part of the concept of law in ST I.IIae 90.4, giving the familiar rationale that in order for something to be law—to be binding—it must be applied to an appropriate subject. It is also part of the concept of law that it regulates and measures, functioning as a standard of evaluation for actions. In order for a law to regulate and measure someone’s action, it has to be applied by her being notified (notitia). Since promulgation is the only way to apply a law to a subject, and applying the law is

166 Ibid.
necessary for a law to function as a law by binding, promulgation of a law is necessary for a consideration to be a law.

Later in the Treatise on Law, Aquinas argues that only beings with reason are regulated by laws, properly speaking; this is because having reason is a prerequisite to being the sort of thing to which a command can be made known or promulgated. Aquinas writes that even though there is a law that regulates the activity of all creatures, it is not properly speaking a law, and so binding on the actions of the creatures whom it regulates, unless those creatures have reason. He reasons for this claim as follows: Creatures without reason are fashioned by God to conform to a certain concept (an “intellectual form”) he has in mind when he creates them, which we call natures. The necessity of a non-rational creature’s activities is not imposed from without, but comes from within, via its nature. It cannot in principle be imposed on them because they do not have intellects by which a lawgiver could communicate what was required and effectively necessitate certain movements. This is precisely what we should expect Aquinas to say here. For binding is just the imposition of necessity on one thing by another, and as we saw earlier, in order for $x$ to impose necessity on $y$, not only must $x$ have a certain power, but $y$ must be constituted such that it also has the power to be acted upon by $x$. In the case of law, the lawgiver needs normative power to give a command, but the subject of the law must also be structured such that she can be put under a command. And for Aquinas, this requires

167 ST IaIIae 93.5 ad. 2: “Sicut membra corporis humani moventur ad imperium rationis, non tamen participant ratione, quia non habent aliquam apprehensionem ordinatam ad rationem, ita etiam creaturae irrationales moventur a Deo, nec tamen proper hoc sunt rationales.” And regarding rational participation in law he says ad. 1: “ad primum ergo dicendum quod hoc modo se habet impressio activi principii intrinseci, quantum ad res naturales, sicut se habet promulgatio legis quantum ad homines, quia per legis promulgationem imprimitur hominibus quoddam directivum principium humanorum actuum.”
that the subject have reason so that she can cognize the command when cognitive contact is made. Actual cognition requires potential cognition. Potential cognition is grounded in something’s having reason. Thus, what we might be tempted to call a “law” in non-human creatures “is not able to be called law except by similitude.” Aquinas further illustrates this idea with discussion of a sheep whose nature is to be meek: the sheep that is not meek falls short in relation to a standard of divine reason, but considered apart from the designs of divine reason, it is not defective. Had God not designed the sheep’s meek nature, that nature would have no normative force on the sheep’s activities. So the sheep’s natural inclinations only appear to function as a law for the sheep per similitudo.

The actual cognition of rational creatures like human beings is crucial to their participate in the law. Human beings participate in law rationally; their natures enable them not just to be measured and ruled by God’s reason, but also to engage in measuring and ruling themselves and others by their own reason. Aquinas puts it this way: “Among these, however, the rational creature is subject in the most excellent way to divine providence, insofar as it happens to participate in providence, providing for itself and others.” Therefore, he concludes, it is our rational capacity to know what we ought to do and be—our capacity to regulate and measure ourselves and our actions—that enables considerations to function as laws that bind human persons. Without cognition of the moral standard which is to regulate our actions, any action that conformed to that standard would do so coincidentally. In order for an action to count as obedience to the law, what the law prescribes must be known. So cognition of the law is something

\[168\] \textit{ST} IaIIae 91.6
\[169\] Ibid.
\[170\] \textit{ST} IaIIae 91.2
without which the law fails to obligate, and so fails to be a law. The contrast between God’s law for rational and non-rational creatures provides more evidence of Aquinas’s view that there is a cognitive constraint on binding.

Finally, the Cognition Requirement harmonizes with what Aquinas says in *ST* IaIIae question 90 about the nature of law, which binds persons under them to actions more generally (not human acts). In article 4 of that question, he counts as one of the formal conceptual conditions on a consideration’s being a law that it be “promulgated,” or made known. And his justification goes back to the very nature of binding: “a law obtains its binding character which is proper to law in being applied to humans who ought to be regulated by it. However, application takes place insofar as this is deduced in their knowledge through its promulgation.”\(^{171}\) In short, even laws which bind persons to action in a community operate as laws—as binding—only insofar as they are made known to those to whom they apply. Aquinas responds to the objection that it would seem the natural law (given by God) would not need to be made known or promulgated to be binding by pointing out that the natural law has in fact been made known, since, in his view, “the promulgation of the natural law is from this: that God inscribed it on the minds of humans to be cognized naturally.”\(^{172}\) From these passages it should be fairly clear that on Aquinas’s view, the Cognition Requirement is built into the account of spiritual binding and moral obligation.

As additional proof that an apt translation of obligation is “moral reason,” we might consider the fact that Aquinas is being forced to tackle the issue of whether such

\(^{171}\) *ST* IaIIae 90.4

\(^{172}\) Ibid. ad. 1
considerations must bear any relation to the minds of those they bind. The medievals were certainly not naïve to questions about whether morality more generally and moral requirements specifically were constructed by the mind or external to us. Peter Abelard, who precedes Aquinas by nearly two hundred years, famously endorsed the “intentionalist” theory of ethics on which moral goodness and badness of action and an agent depends entirely on the intentions of the person acting. The account a person gives herself of what ought to be done is therefore constitutive of what matters, morally. Only by knowingly failing to act according to what is good by one’s own lights, or intending to do wrong by one’s own lights, can one violate one’s moral obligations.173 Fast forwarding to the early thirteenth century, Aquinas’s teacher Albert the Great proposed that there are universal reasons in ethics, necessary moral truths about what human beings ought to do, given their end.174 Aquinas enters right into the debate about whether morality is necessary and mind independent or in some way mind dependent, then, via his discussion of obligation, much like contemporary meta-ethicists enter this debate via a discussion of moral reasons.

3.1.4 Objection: Why Would Binding Require Actual Cognition?

One might object that the Cognition Requirement sets the bar for contact too high. It would be sufficient for making contact for a ruler to communicate a command, or for a

174 Albert the Great, Super Ethica III.9; quoted in Stanley Cunningham, Reclaiming Moral Agency: The Moral Philosophy of Albert the Great (Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 2008), 83-84. Albert’s interest was to vindicate ethics as a genuine science in the Aristotelian sense, and since science requires demonstration of necessaries, for ethics to be a science there must be necessary ethical propositions.
precept to hold, which the person *ought* to know or cognize. And in certain places in the text, Aquinas seems to endorse such a view.

To see the attractiveness of the proposal, imagine that the state government of Texas has, in past summers with low rainfall, put a ban on the use of automatic lawn sprinklers. This summer Texas is experiencing a drought worse than it had in those summers past. So the government decides that the citizens ought to know that the government will be restricting the use of automatic lawn sprinklers during the summer drought. Isn’t it sufficient for the citizens being obligated to not use their sprinklers that they are obligated to know that they should not use their sprinklers?

While initially alluring, the proposal is not philosophically appealing because it lands in a vicious regress of reasons. Call the act of knowing that one ought not run the automatic sprinklers during the drought “ψ.” On the objector’s view, the condition for a person’s having a moral reason to φ is her having a reason to ψ. Now, the condition for her having a moral reason to ψ would just be having a reason to know that she ought to ψ – call the act of knowing that she ought to ψ “ω.” In order to have a reason to φ, the person must also have a reason to ψ, in which case she must also have a reason to ω. This would presumably go on ad infinitum, or until one reached a properly basic reason.

It would be objectionably ad hoc, though, to say that a reason to know that one ought to know that one ought to know that one ought to φ, or some such iteration, is a properly basic reason. Thus this view must either rely on a vicious regress of reasons to explain the reason the citizens have to not turn on their sprinklers, or it will be forced to state as a brute fact that there just is a reason for the citizens to know that they ought not use the automatic sprinklers. This does not sound like a promising account, especially
when compared with an alternative that stops the regress by maintaining that what suffices for contact is an actual psychological act or state, not a reason for being in such a state or performing that cognitive act.

In *De Malo* (*DM*) question 3, Aquinas makes remarks about ignorance being a moral failure that might tempt us to thinking he holds the view above.\(^{175}\) We can get this impression from two statements he makes, the first about ignorance of what one ought to know in article 7 of question 3: “That ignorance in which someone ignores that of which he is bound (tenetur) to know, is not without sin.”\(^{176}\) First, he explicitly countenances a moral reason to know some consideration: the person in question is bound to know, and failure to do so is a moral failure. Second, he says one is not off the hook for ignorance of that consideration if one is bound to know it. It might look like Aquinas is committed to the view that since one is morally on the hook for ignorance that she should φ, one is also morally on the hook for φ-ing.

The second statement that might lead us to read Aquinas as holding the view above surfaces in the reply to the seventh objection:

This is what Augustine says: ‘Fault is not imputed to you if you are unwillingly ignorant.’ And this by which he adds, ‘but if you neglect to know,’ he gives us to understand that ignorance has that which would be sin from preceding negligence, which is nothing other than not applying the mind to what is to be known about that which one ought to know.\(^{177}\)

In this passage, Aquinas again affirms that ignorance can be a sin, an instance of moral wrongdoing, and so that one can have a moral reason against ignorance, or a moral

\(^{175}\) I am grateful to Tobias Hoffmann for drawing my attention to the parallels between the view I consider above and the one Aquinas discusses in *De Malo*.

\(^{176}\) *De Malo* Question 3, Article 7, cor.

\(^{177}\) *De Malo* 3.7. ad.7
reason to know. Here is an example Aquinas uses to illustrate the idea: a person shoots an arrow in some place where people usually pass by. He ought to know that shooting the arrow is a bad idea. Since he is bound to know that shooting the arrow is a bad idea, we can call his failure to know a failure of moral rationality.

In order to get from the archer having a moral reason to know he should not shoot to the archer having a moral reason to not shoot, even where he is ignorant of this, we need a bridge principle. Without such a principle, the passages above only show that Aquinas is committed to the existence of moral reasons that favor having cognition of a consideration. The principle would have to make moral wrongness transitive, such that the moral wrongness of the ignorance can then be transmitted to the moral wrongness of actions performed in ignorance. The question is, does Aquinas have a bridge principle like this? I will argue that he does not. He is only committed to the weaker claim that one can have moral reasons to know, and so that a failure to know can be an instance of moral irrationality, or moral wrongdoing.

3.1.5 Aquinas’s First Reply: Against Moral Transitivity

Evidence that Aquinas does not endorse the view under consideration comes in the very next article of DM question 3 where he explains that ignorance takes away the voluntariness which is requisite for an action to be an instance of moral wrongdoing. He begins, “Since it is part of the account of sin that it be voluntary, inasmuch as as ignorance makes excuse for sin totally or in part, so much it takes away voluntariness.” And having stated that sin must be voluntary, he goes on:

When the cognition of the intellect is undermined by ignorance, the act of the will
is carried off; and thus the voluntariness is taken away as regards that which is unknown. Wherefore, if in the same act, there is something unknown and something known, it is possible for it to be voluntary as regards that which is known: nevertheless it is always involuntary as regards that which is unknown.\footnote{\textit{De Malo} 3.8 co.}

According to Aquinas, then, without cognition, a person’s action cannot be voluntary properly speaking. But voluntariness is part of the concept of sin, or moral wrongdoing. Someone cannot act contrary to what she has moral reason to do involuntarily. A person suffering from ignorance may have acted contrary to a moral reason she had to acquire cognition, as the archer who fails to consider that the path he shoots on is well traveled. Nonetheless, once the archer is in a state of ignorance regarding who is walking on the path, his shooting someone on the path cannot be voluntary. And thus he cannot have a moral reason against shooting the arrow at the person on the path. It looks like actual knowledge or cognition of a consideration is still a condition on someone’s having a moral reason for or against an action, like shooting an arrow in the direction of a person on the path. This is consonant with saying that the archer has a moral reason to know that he should not shoot the arrow as long as Aquinas denies a bridge or transitivity principle, which he seems to do above.

Aquinas’s own illustrations on this point prove helpful. He gives two examples of persons acting in ignorance. Then he explains that, under one description, their actions are voluntary, based on what they do know, but under another description, their actions are not voluntary because of what they do not know.

Whether the deformity of the act is unknown (consider someone who does not know that fornication is a sin; he voluntarily commits fornication but does not voluntarily perform a sin), or whether the circumstance of the act is unknown, as when someone approaches a woman he believes to be his [wife] he voluntarily...
approaches a woman, but he does not voluntarily approach a woman who is not his wife.\textsuperscript{179}

In the first case, the person knows that his action is an instance of φ-ing but does not know that φ-ing is wrong, or a sin. What he can be said to be doing voluntarily is φ-ing. But he cannot be said to be voluntarily φ-ing under the description “wrong” or “sinful act” because of his ignorance that it is a sinful act. Aquinas thinks that the wrongness of fornication is a moral precept one ought to know because it is part of the Decalogue, and, as he writes in the previous article that “all humans… are obligated to know the Ten Commandments.”\textsuperscript{180} If the condition for having a moral reason against fornication were merely that one has a moral reason to know that he ought not fornicate, then this condition is met by the fornicator in the example. But Aquinas denies that the ignorant fornicator has a moral reason against fornicating, which he violates. Thus it must not be the case that the condition for having a moral reason to φ is just that one has a moral reason to know that one ought to φ.

Finally, there are two arguments from silence that lead me to reject this model as Aquinas’s. First, it would be uncharacteristic of Aquinas to omit an explanation of how a moral reason to know binds one to act on that knowledge; but we do not get any such explanation in the text. Second, nowhere in the text does Aquinas say that what the ignorant person is morally bound to do is to perform the action she would have performed had she possessed knowledge. What are we to make of the statement in \textit{QDV} 17.3 where he says that one who is ignorant of a precept is not bound to act according to the precept except insofar as he ought to know the precept? I think the “insofar as”

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{180} De Malo 3.7 co.
(quatenus) should signal to us that what the person is bound to do with regard to the precept is relative to what the person is in a position to know about the precept, given what he actually knows.  

3.1.6 Aquinas’s Second Reply: Universal versus Particular Cognition

There is another way out of conceding that something other than actual cognition of a consideration, like having a reason to know or cognize a consideration, is required for binding to take place. Aquinas draws an important distinction between two types of knowledge—universal and particular—following Aristotle, that allows him to say that someone might be bound to perform an action type without being bound to perform a token of that type in a given circumstance. Since much of what we either ought to know or know by nature is knowledge of the universal kind, this distinction helps us to appreciate how he can say at once that the fornicator can be bound to know that fornication is wrong and still not bound to avoid fornication in the instance when she does not realize fornication is wrong, or that the act she is about to perform is an act of fornication.

In ST IaIIae question 77 he explains that a person can have knowledge of a universal without having knowledge of a particular instance of that universal. For instance, he says, "It may happen that someone has universal knowledge, thinking that in no case should an act of fornication be done; but nevertheless he does not think in

\[\text{\small \footnotesize 181} \]

I shall argue that if there is a precept the person is bound to know, it will show up in the content of her reason, which will be wide in scope. What the person in such a scenario will have reason to do is to either not act contrary to her conscientious judgment or to change that judgment, so that she judges correctly regarding the precept.
particular that this act, which is fornication, should not be done.” While the objector from earlier might be inclined to attribute a moral reason against this particular act of fornicating to the subject under discussion, Aquinas’s view is that the fornicator can have a moral reason against the generic action type, fornication, without having a moral reason against the particular instance which falls under the description of that action type, unbeknownst to the fornicator. He goes on to say that in matters of action, particular knowledge has more motivating force than universal knowledge. Thus, if a person has universal knowledge but fails to see the relationship between a particular and that universal, then the person will fail to be able to be motivated by the universal knowledge she has. Aquinas seems to hold that particular knowledge, not just universal knowledge, is relevant in determining what the person is bound to do or not do. That is, what her moral reason is a reason for or against doing seems to depend on particular, not just universal, knowledge about an action. Cognitive contact with the particular consideration is required for binding.

Aquinas’s discussion of the content of natural laws in *ST* IaIIae question 94 also suggests that we should not assume that universal knowledge—knowledge about action types—is sufficient to bind a person to perform or avoid a particular token of that action type. If every person with knowledge of a universal principle were in the same epistemic position with respect to the particular conclusions that followed, we might expect universal knowledge to suffice for binding persons to particular actions. But Aquinas says that practical reasoning is not similar to speculative reasoning in this regard. Speculative reasoning is about necessary truths and the former is about contingent truths.

\[^{182} ST IaIIae 77.2\]
Since speculative reasoning is about necessary truths, the particular conclusions follow deductively from universal principles, and so those who know universal principles are in a position to know the particular conclusions of those principles.\footnote{ST IaIae 94.4} By contrast, practical reasoning is about contingent matters, so there is no guarantee that those who start with the same universal principles will reason to the same particular conclusions.\footnote{Ibid.}

Under some conditions, he says, a general principle may not hold because the action it prescribes will not bring about the proper end.\footnote{\textquoteleft\textquoteleft For it is right and true for all that one should act according to reason. From this principle it follows almost as a particular conclusion that what is deposited should be returned. And indeed this is true in the majority of cases, but it is possible for it to happen that in some case it would be harmful, and so it would be irrational if what were deposited were returned; consider for instance someone who asks [for what has been deposited] to fight against one's country. And thus this principle will be more deficient the more we descend into particulars; consider for example if what was said was that goods deposited were to be returned with such and such cautions, or in such a way, and the more particular conditions were lumped onto this, the more ways it would be able to be deficient, so it might not be right either to return or to not return the goods\textquoteright\textquoteright\ (ST IaIae 94.4).} A variety of obstacles can impede a person from reaching the correct conclusion in practical matters: one can fail to reason well “because of an exterior occupation, or because of some infirmity of the body,” or because “the passions impede consideration [of the particular thing which he knows in universal form].”\footnote{ST IaIae 77.2} Sometimes the passion that impedes practical reasoning is the result of sin, but in other instances it is involuntary and so exculpates the person from making the mistake.\footnote{ST IaIae 77.6} Because persons draw such diverse conclusions in practical reasoning from the same universal principles, Aquinas says that “in practical matters, however, truth and rightness are not the same for all with respect to particulars, but only with respect to what is common, and where those things which are right in particular are

\begin{footnotes}
\item[183] \textit{ST} IaIae 94.4
\item[184] Ibid.
\item[185] \textquoteleft\textquoteleft For it is right and true for all that one should act according to reason. From this principle it follows almost as a particular conclusion that what is deposited should be returned. And indeed this is true in the majority of cases, but it is possible for it to happen that in some case it would be harmful, and so it would be irrational if what were deposited were returned; consider for instance someone who asks [for what has been deposited] to fight against one's country. And thus this principle will be more deficient the more we descend into particulars; consider for example if what was said was that goods deposited were to be returned with such and such cautions, or in such a way, and the more particular conditions were lumped onto this, the more ways it would be able to be deficient, so it might not be right either to return or to not return the goods\textquoteright\textquoteright\ (ST IaIae 94.4).
\item[186] \textit{ST} IaIae 77.2
\item[187] \textit{ST} IaIae 77.6
\end{footnotes}
the same, they are not equally known by all.” Since Aquinas asserts here that the rightness of particular actions varies because of the differences in particular practical conclusions drawn by persons, it is plausible to interpret him as saying that universal knowledge is not sufficient for one to be bound to a particular action.

There is one other facet of Aquinas’s notion of knowledge relevant to our discussion. In *ST IaIIae* question 77, he says that “it is possible for one to have correct knowledge in singulars, not only in universals, but nevertheless not to actually consider it.” This failure to bring particular knowledge to mind can result in a person’s failure to act on the knowledge she has. Here we see that for Aquinas, knowledge does not need to be salient at the moment of deliberation in order to be considered knowledge. The same obstacles we listed earlier—exterior occupations, bodily infirmities, and passions—can distract a person from a relevant consideration she knows so that the knowledge is not brought to bear on her action. We learn from this passage that for a consideration to be made known to a person does not guarantee that the person actually entertains the consideration in her practical reasoning. Another way to put the idea is to say that a person may have knowledge potentially or actually. Having knowledge potentially means having previously affirmed a proposition but not currently using it or attending to it.

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188 *ST IaIIae* 94.4
189 In this article, Aquinas argues against Socratic intellectualism by claiming that one can have knowledge but fail to be motivated by that knowledge either because one lacks particular knowledge or because one’s passions or external circumstances distract one’s attention from the object of knowledge. Pursuing what is pleasant but inordinately is not necessarily the result of ignorance. Instead, one may have knowledge that excessive pleasure is to be avoided, but one’s passion causes one to focus on the principle that one should pursue the pleasant and so one fails to argue and conclude from the first principle—that excessive pleasure is to be avoided—and instead argues and concludes under the second principle—that pleasure is to be pursued. As long as one is under the influence of a passion, he says, one will make judgments from the second principle rather than the first. In this case we would either excuse the person if her passion is involuntary or blame the person for sustaining the passion that leads her to the false conclusion.
Having knowledge actually means having affirmed a proposition or presently attending to it.

3.1.7  The Error Theory: Moral Reasons Against Ignorance

Laying aside the interpretive issue for a moment, suppose someone objects that the Cognition Requirement is just not philosophically tenable. The more advantageous view, the objector might say, is the view on which moral reasons must meet a normative cognition requirement: a consideration is binding on a person only if that person ought to have cognized that consideration. So if Aquinas didn’t hold this view, he should have.

There is a compelling philosophical argument to be made in defense of the Cognition Requirement against this objection, which can be made using resources from Aquinas’s account of the morality of ignorance. Aquinas can handle the objection by providing an error theory that explains why we might be inclined to attribute a moral reason to a person who fails the Cognition Requirement. In addition, his detailed account of the three types of ignorance can also help to explain how different kinds of failure to meet the Cognition Requirement have different moral valences, which track commonsense intuitions. I will close this section by discussing how the distinctions between three kinds of ignorance bolster the error theoretic response to the objection.

To respond to the objection, we first need to delineate those cases in which we tend to attribute moral reasons to someone who fails the Cognition Requirement, and those in which we tend to excuse the ignorant person. When someone acts out of ignorance, but “could not have known any better,” we usually extend a moral excuse for the person’s behavior. For instance, we do not think that a US policy-maker in the 1950’s
who pushes for getting plastic utensils in every school cafeteria is morally irrational. Because data about plastics and the effects of carbon emissions used in its production was not available to the policymaker, we grant him an excuse. A meta-ethicists could say that there is a pro tanto moral reason against pushing for the widespread use of plastic utensils that gets overridden by the policy-maker’s lack of knowledge. But when we are talking about one’s all-things-considered moral reasons—the moral reasons that make an action morally right or wrong—even the theorist who wants to say there is a pro tanto reason the policy-maker violates will not cede that there remains an all-things-considered reason in this case. When someone acts in ignorance that is excusable, then, we do not expect there to be an all-things-considered moral reason she violates. By contrast, we tend to ascribe responsibility and blame to a person acting in ignorance who “should have known better.” Imagine that a businessperson has one too many glasses of wine at an important dinner meeting with clients, and as a result of being fuzzy on the details of the offer her company is ready to make, she misrepresents this information to the client. We might count her lying about the company to the client a failure of moral rationality. If her fuzziness on the details came about because an employee from a competitor company slipped a drug into her drink early in the evening, we would certainly not think her lying was morally irrational. So something about the origin of the ignorant condition that leads to the action turns out to be relevant to our commonsense intuitions about whether someone does or does not have a moral reason for action when ignorant. The objector would likely say that if someone has no part in the ignorance that contributes to the action, she is not morally irrational if she fails to act on a consideration we would
otherwise count as a moral reason. However, if someone is the source of her ignorance, or should have known better, then she has a moral reason for action even when ignorant.

The second step in the argument is to show that there is a way to countenance that moral badness of the actions performed in ignorance of the second type without also making actions performed out of the first type of ignorance morally irrational. We can do this on a broadly Thomistic view by appealing to the moral reasons someone has to know or be aware of certain considerations, which turn out to be more weighty if a failure to act on them results in more harm to others. Imagine that someone acts contrary to her moral reason to be moderate in her drinking. On the Thomistic view, even this reason must meet the Cognition Requirement, so the person in question must know that she should only have, say, two glasses of wine at the party. She drinks one too many glasses of wine, acting contrary to her moral reasons. If she then gets in the car to drive home, we count her even more morally irrational. In fact, we will want to say that whether or not the drunk driver hits anyone on her way home is a matter of luck, and so her moral irrationality is equal whether she hits or does not hit someone on her way home. The Thomistic account can explain this intuition as follows. The drunk driver had a moral reason against drinking too many glasses of wine that was weighty precisely because drinking too much, she knows, puts her in a condition that enables her to do great harm to others, especially on the road. Once she is drunk, it would be ridiculous to say that she acts in a way that is morally irrational, because she is acting involuntarily. And we do not consider involuntary actions subject to evaluation on the moral, rational dimension. But

nonetheless, her driving drunk is bad, and she can be faulted for the drunk driving
precisely because it came about as the result of her failing to act on her moral reason to
stop drinking after two glasses of wine. Note that this error theoretic explanation of our
moral intuitions also helps support the luck intuition—that she should be counted no less
morally irrational if by luck, she hits no one on the way home. So there may even be
advantages to going the error theoretic route, rather than insisting on there being
additional moral reasons that the unlucky drunk driver does, or the lucky drunk driver
does not, fail to act on once she is in a condition of ignorance.

The response to the objection, then, is this. A person can have moral reasons
against getting herself into a condition of ignorance. When she does have such moral
reasons, and she acts contrary to them, then the actions she performs are just those that
we tend to not excuse. We want to count the person who acts in ignorance, when she had
moral reasons against being ignorant, morally irrational. The person is in fact morally
irrational—has failed to be morally rational in some way, but just not with respect to the
action performed in ignorance. Instead, the moral reason against ignorance will turn out
to be very weighty, because of the actions she will perform in such ignorance. And so we
will take the actions she performs in ignorance as further indication of a moral failure that
was actually present in her all along, since the point at which she failed to act on her
moral reason to know.

Aquinas has the resources to forge the above response in his extensive treatment
of the different types of ignorance and the different moral evaluations ignorant persons
should (or in some cases, should not) receive. The first important distinction is between
what he calls “nescience” and “ignorance” proper.¹⁹¹ Not every case of not knowing is a case of ignorance, because ignorance is a kind of natural failure. But the cognitive perfection of a human being, he thinks, does not involve omniscience or anything close to it. There are some things we cannot know, because of our nature. For instance, in ST I question 12 he says that “no created intellect is able to attain that perfect mode of cognition of the divine essence.”¹⁹² Not knowing the divine essence is not a natural failure for beings like us, who are cognitively limited. By contrast, ignorance is a failure of our natural cognitive capacities. Thus for Aquinas, the first place to look to see how we might have moral reasons to know is his discussion of ignorance.

Aquinas distinguishes ignorance from mere not knowing about what one is not able to know by nature; but the culpable kind of ignorance—negligence—turns out not to be coextensive with ignorance about which one is able to know by nature, interestingly. In ST IaIIae question 76, Aquinas defines ignorance as “a privation of knowledge about things one has a natural capacity to know,” distinguishing ignorance from “nescience” which captures any absence of cognition but not due to any failure of natural cognitive faculties.¹⁹³ A person can be ignorant either about things she ought to know or about things she is able to know by nature but is not obligated to know, but only in the latter instance does ignorance constitute a moral wrong, or sin: “It is manifest, however, that whoever neglects to have or do that which he ought to have or do, sins a sin of omission. Wherefore negligence, ignorance of those things which someone ought to know, is sin.

¹⁹¹ I draw on the discussion of these two types of ignorance in DM 3.1 and also Tobias Hoffmann, “Aquinas and Intellectual Determinism: The Test Case of Angelic Sin,” Geschichte der Philosophie 89 (2007), 122-156.
¹⁹² ST Ia.12.7
¹⁹³ ST IaIIae 76.2
However, negligence is not imputed to a person if he does not know that which he is not able to know.”¹⁹⁴ This closing remark about what does not count as negligence should be puzzling in light of the way Aquinas defines ignorance. For if ignorance is distinguished from nescience by being about things which a person has a natural capacity to know, and what discounts an instance of not knowing from being negligence is an inability to know, then we might expect that ignorance and negligence are coextensive—every instance of ignorance qualifies as an instance of negligence by definition. If, however, there is a kind of ignorance that is not negligence, then in such cases of ignorance the person is both able to know and not able to know that about which she is ignorant, which seems absurd. To resolve this apparent tension, we need to attend carefully to the Aristotelian framework within which Aquinas is working.

Recall from chapter 2 that on the Aristotelian view, there are two ways of using possibility language. The second sense of potentiality is used to describe powers something has that can be actualized at that instant so long as there is no impediment hindering activation. The first sense of potentiality denotes a range of capacities something has due to the kind of thing it is—capacities that, when actualized, give rise to capacities in the second sense of potentiality. Aquinas’s use of the phrase “natural capacity” when describing the objects of ignorance serves as our first clue that he is invoking the Aristotelian notion of first potentiality, rather than second potentiality, in the definition of ignorance. Ignorance is a failure to know that which we have the ability to know in the sense of first potentiality. But the claim about negligence is best read as a claim about what a person is able to know in the sense of second potentiality.

¹⁹⁴ ST IaIIae 76.2
The upshot of the distinction between culpable ignorance—negligence—and other types of ignorance about that which one is able to know by nature is that sometimes one does not have a moral reason to be cognizant of things that she is able, in the sense of first potentiality, to know. So even moral reasons to know have to meet the Cognition Requirement. To illustrate, consider the following case of ignorance which Aquinas would not count as negligence but which is of something a person is able by nature to know:

BUS DRIVER: A bus driver has the natural ability to know that driving into an intersection perpendicular to another car will put the lives of her passengers at risk. As she approaches the intersection at First and Independence Avenue, the bus driver does not see the drunk driver about to barrel through a red light perpendicular to her. So she is not able to know at this instant driving through the intersection will put the lives of her passengers at risk.

We would not call the bus driver negligent since she is not able in the second sense of potentiality to know the result of her action; but we would say that she exhibits ignorance, not mere nescience, since she is the sort of creature who is able to know in abstraction what result her driving through an intersection at the same time as another car perpendicular to her path will have. Only negligence counts as moral wrongdoing, or “sin,” on Aquinas’s view. On this reading, then, one is bound to know some proposition that bears on the end of her action, \( q \), only if one has the ability to know \( q \) in the sense of second potentiality. And the ability to know \( p \) in the second sense of potentiality is grounded in a first actuality of knowing something prior, like the conjunction of \( p \) and if \( p \) then \( q \). The cognition of that conjunction would perhaps suffice for the consideration in favor of believing \( q \) to meet the Cognition Requirement, and so to count as a reason.

Seeing that Aquinas is likely invoking the Aristotelian conception of potentiality adds clarity to the question of whether cognition is required for binding as a conceptual
matter. At the very least, an ability to know \( p \) in the sense of second potentiality is required for a person to be bound to know \( p \). So when a person fails to \( \varphi \) because person is ignorant of \( p \) but the person is bound to have known \( p \), that person has an ability to know \( p \) in the sense of second potentiality. The further question is whether what the person is bound to do is to \( \varphi \) and to acquire cognition of \( p \), or simply to acquire knowledge of \( p \). I will now argue that Aquinas’s discussions of ignorance as a sin and voluntary ignorance provide evidence (although not decisive evidence) that on his view, the negligent person is only bound to acquire knowledge of \( p \), not bound to do what she would have done had she possessed knowledge of \( p \).

In Aquinas’s estimation, negligent ignorance is a “sin of omission” because it can be traced back to an act of will on the part of the person. The omission is a failure “to say or do or desire what one should in order to acquire the knowledge one ought to have.”\(^{195}\) So minimally we can say that on his view, negligent persons have moral reasons to acquire knowledge of those things of which they are ignorant, and these are the moral reasons their negligence violates thus rendering their negligence morally bad.

What he says in response to an objection clarifies what he thinks about the nature of these moral reasons for cognition. The objector contests that if ignorance were a sin—if it violated a moral reason—then a person who is ignorant will be continually sinning—constantly violating that moral reason—which seems absurd. Aquinas responds, “A person actually sins only at that time when the positive precept binds… For the ignorant person does not sin continually but only the time when he should be acquiring the

\(^{195}\) Ibid.
knowledge he ought to have.” In the first half of the response, he lays out the principle espoused earlier that a positive precept binds always but not at every instant (*semper sed non ad semper*). For example, if a person is morally bound by the precept “take care of your neighbor’s property,” she is not required to be caring for her neighbor’s property at every moment. Aquinas explains that positive precepts have negative precepts “annexed” to them entailed by the positive prescription. “Do not damage your neighbor’s property” is entailed by “take care of your neighbor’s property” since it is impossible to care for your neighbor’s property while doing damage to it. The prohibition against damaging your neighbor’s property can be satisfied at each moment by not acting so as to damage the property. Not acting to damage your neighbor’s property—not trampling on her flowers, for example—differs from acting so as to not damage your neighbor’s property—grabbing her loose dog so it doesn’t trample the flowers, for example, and while the former kind of requirement binds persons at every point in time, the latter only binds at points in time when certain conditions are satisfied. Failing to acquire knowledge, Aquinas says, is more like failing to follow a positive precept at the moment when certain conditions make it binding. That the person who is negligent does not continually violate a standing moral reason to acquire knowledge of some *p* tells us that the moral obligations or reasons that bind her are temporally finite, functioning as moral reasons to know *p* only under certain conditions. Once those conditions no longer obtain, the moral reasons no longer exist as binding considerations—as moral reasons.

\[196\] *ST IaIIae 76.2 ad. 5*  
\[197\] *ST IaIIae 71.5*
The picture which emerges from this passage militates against the interpretation on which a moral requirement to be cognizant of \( p \) where cognition of \( p \) would lead one to be able to \( \varphi \), and so is sufficient for being bound to \( \varphi \). To see why, imagine the following timeline:

T1: Agent S has the ability to acquire knowledge of \( p \) by \( \psi \)-ing and has a moral reason to know \( p \), but fails to \( \psi \).

T2: As a result, agent S no longer has the ability to acquire knowledge of \( p \).

T3: S \( \varphi \)s because she does not know \( p \).

Supposing the weaker version of the cognition requirement, according to which one only needs to have the ability to know \( p \) in the sense of second potentiality in order to have a moral reason to act on \( p \), we can say the following. At t1 S has a moral reason to know \( p \) and has the ability to come to know \( p \) in the sense of second potentiality by \( \psi \)-ing. At t2, the consideration that favored \( \psi \)-ing no longer binds S as a reason, since S does not have the ability to know \( p \) in the sense of second potentiality. For S’s \( \varphi \)-ing to violate a moral reason against \( \varphi \)-ing, then, that moral reason against \( \varphi \)-ing must be generated by the moral reason to know \( p \) at t1, since the moral reason to know \( p \) does not last until t3 and so cannot generate a moral reason against \( \varphi \)-ing that only applies at t3. The weaker version of the cognition requirement thus does not stand up under scrutiny.

Aquinas’s discussion of the three categories of failures to know what one either ought to have known or could have known is helpful, and on his view each category leads to a differing moral evaluation of the actions resulting from ignorance: antecedent ignorance, concomitant ignorance, and consequent ignorance. I want to show in what follows that they well set him up to give an error theory of the sort I am envisioning.
In *ST* IaIIae question 76 he begins by explaining that ignorance makes the action which it causes involuntary, but that different kinds of ignorance can do this in different ways. “Ignorance has in itself that which makes an action of which it is the cause involuntary.” That is, if ignorance of $p$ causes S to $\phi$, then S’s $\phi$-ing is involuntary. The account of causation here is a counterfactual one: “Ignorance causes the action which opposing knowledge would have prohibited. And such an action, if it had been known, would have been contrary to the will, hence the name involuntary.” So ignorance of $p$ causes S to $\phi$ just in case if S knew $p$ S would not $\phi$. But not every case of ignorance causes a person’s resulting action to be involuntary. Consider the following scenarios that illustrate the different causal relations involved in diverse cases of ignorance:

**WILL:** Will is backing his truck out of his driveway one afternoon and feels the back of the truck hit something. Unbeknownst to him, his neighbor’s child has run out behind the truck into Will’s blind spot as he is backing out and is run over. Had Will seen the child, he would have braked immediately, saving the child’s life.

**OSCAR:** One evening, after a heated quarrel with his girlfriend, Oscar wakes up and thought an intruder had entered his residence and was locked inside his bathroom. He fires four gunshots through the bathroom door. Unbeknownst to Oscar, the person behind the door, who dies within minutes of the shots being fired, is actually his girlfriend. But because of his rage over the quarrel, had Oscar known it was his girlfriend behind the door, he would have still fired the shots.

**PHILIP:** Philip has been in and out of rehab for heroin use, and in the past, he has used after drinking too much. After a wild night of partying, he shoots up and dies of an overdose. Had Philip not had too much to drink, he would probably not have decided to use. Even if he had lucidly decided to use, he would have lowered the dosage.

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198 *ST* IaIIae 76.3
Each of the persons in these scenarios performs an action whose outcome or end he does not predict. Aquinas says that for some act to be voluntary it must be done for the sake of an end, and thus “knowledge of the end is necessary.” So we might think that all three persons’ actions are involuntary due to their lack of knowledge of the ends brought about by their actions.

Will’s scenario models what Aquinas calls “antecedent ignorance,” which does totally absolve a person from moral blame for actions done in ignorance. Ignorance is antecedent either when the lack of knowledge is “invincible”—not something one can overcome through study or a natural process of learning—or when it is “about something which one is not bound to know.” Will’s failure to acquire knowledge that the neighbor’s child has run behind his truck is not something he is morally required to know. Remember that for a person to be required to know \( p \), she must be able in the sense of second potentiality to know \( p \). Since the child is in Will’s blind spot, supposing Will has checked his rearview mirrors and listened for noises outside the car, Will is not in a position to know at that instant that the child is behind his truck. Will has no moral reason to know that backing up the truck will bring about that end, so he does not violate any moral obligation or reason when he fails to acquire knowledge of that end. We might ask whether the action performed in ignorance, though, is still blameworthy. Aquinas insists that “every sin” (moral wrong) “is voluntary” and that “it is clear that ignorance which totally excuses one from sin, because it totally removes voluntariness, does not diminish

\[ 199 \text{ ST IaIIae 6.1} \]
\[ 200 \text{ The threefold distinction can also be found in ST IaIIae 6.8.} \]
\[ 201 \text{ ST IaIIae 76.3} \]
sin but takes it away altogether.” ST IaIIae 76.4 This is a more radical position than we might otherwise attribute to Aquinas. The moral reason against performing the action done in antecedent ignorance is totally absent, so there is nothing from which to exculpate the person. In Will’s case, Will does not have a moral reason against backing up the car which we then excuse him from violating. Instead, there is no moral reason against backing up the truck at all because he lacks the knowledge that would make the consideration against backing up the truck a binding moral reason.

We might be tempted to assume that whenever a person lacks knowledge of the end, then, she will be totally absolved of moral responsibility for what happens following her ignorance of the end. However, Aquinas argues, when the end is something the person wishes for, “the privation of knowledge caused by ignorance does not make the person unwilling, but not willing,” so ignorance of this kind—concomitant ignorance—does not fully excuse the person from moral blame. ST IaIIae 76.4 Let’s suppose that Oscar has a moral reason against being willing to kill his girlfriend, and under normal conditions he has a moral reason against actually willingly killing his girlfriend. In Oscar’s scenario, his ignorance about who is behind the bathroom door undermines Oscar’s ability to willingly kill his girlfriend at that moment. That is, killing his girlfriend is not an end he can have in mind when shooting as long as he has a false belief about who is behind the bathroom door. As it is impossible for Oscar to knowingly adopt the end of killing his girlfriend, the consideration against shooting her fails to meet the Cognition Requirement and so does not constitute a moral reason against shooting her. But it is still possible for

202 ST IaIIae 76.4
203 Ibid.
Oscar to knowingly adopt the end of being willing to kill his girlfriend, should the occasion arise, when he is ignorant about who is behind the bathroom door. Therefore, while Oscar’s ignorance undermines the voluntariness of killing his girlfriend, it does not undermine the voluntariness of being willing to kill his girlfriend. As long as he has a moral reason against being willing to kill his girlfriend, then, we can still attribute moral blame to him for what he is willing to do. In sum, what the concomitant person’s moral reasons are moral reasons to do are not reasons against acting as she does when she is ignorant, but rather reasons against willing or wishing what comes about in her ignorance.

What Aquinas says about persons with the third type of ignorance—“consequent ignorance”—furthers the idea that persons who are ignorant of some particular proposition bearing on their action can still have moral reasons, but the content of those moral reasons differs from what we would initially expect. Here is what he says about consequent ignorance: “Sometimes ignorance does not totally excuse from sin, and this happens in two ways. In one way, on the part of the thing known; ignorance excuses from sin only insofar as it is unknown that something is a sin. It may happen that someone ignores some circumstance of a sin… but there remains some knowledge in him through which he knows that the act is a sin.” A person might have a true belief about the badness of eating too much cholesterol in a day, but upon seeing and smelling a greasy burger is tempted to eat it and diverts her attention away from that belief. She would have what I called above potential knowledge, but she does not actualize that knowledge and so can be said to be ignorant due to willingly shifting her attention.
The second way consequent ignorance can happen is when ignorance is voluntary “on the part of the ignorance itself, because the ignorance is voluntary either directly, as when someone zealously wishes not to know something, in order to sin more freely; or indirectly, as when someone because of a deed or some other occupation neglects to acquire that through which he would be restrained from sin.” The case of Philip, who fails to acquire knowledge of the end his shooting up heroin will bring about because of a previous action—getting drunk, or perhaps gets drunk in order to act less voluntarily and so with less accountability—exemplifies this path to consequent ignorance. Aquinas argues that even consequent ignorance “diminishes sin” by “diminishing the account of the resulting sin.” Philip, for example, is impaired in his judgment and what he is able to know in the sense of second potentiality when he is drunk. His cognitive impairment limits the range of ends he is able to know and so choose for himself. Thus, while he may be able to know that heroin is in the syringe he picks up and that he will get some kind of high from injecting it into his arm, he is not able to know that this amount of heroin will result in his death. In other words, what he can have moral reason to do is severely limited by his cognitive impairment. Even if we suppose that he had moral reason to acquire knowledge about the fatal dosage of heroin at one point in the evening, and had a moral reason against shooting up later in the evening, he does not meet the conditions for the consideration against overdosing to be a moral reason. We cannot impute moral blame to Philip for overdosing, though we can morally blame him for getting drunk and using heroin.

204 ST IaIIae 76.4 ad.2
205 Aquinas has his own example of a person who kills another person while drunk: “The inebriated
Persons like Philip find themselves performing actions under one description in ignorance and so involuntarily, but under another description voluntarily. Philip voluntarily renders himself out of control, but because of his ignorance he is unable to will “overdosing-by-getting-out-of-control.” He may be blamed or punished for what results from his ignorance—overdosing—but since the overdosing is not voluntary, it does not violate any moral obligations or reasons, so any blame or punishment will not be moral blame or morally merited punishment but rather what is “expedient.” Aquinas echoes Aristotle’s idea that the punishment merited by an action which causes ignorance, like getting drunk, may be more severe than the punishment merited by actions performed in ignorance as they are more dangerous: “More harm is done by the drunk than the sober.”

In heading off the objection that a moral reason to know, rather than knowledge itself, is sufficient for a consideration to bind, we have drawn up a more detailed image of the epistemic position in which a person must be for a consideration to bind her to act. We can formulate the Cognition Requirement more precisely: In order for a consideration to bind a person as a moral reason, not only must the consideration must have normative power in the sense of first potentiality; the subject of must have a cognition of the person deserves twice the blame because he commits two sins: becoming inebriated and the sin which follows from his inebriation. Nevertheless, inebriation, for the reason that it makes him ignorant, diminishes the sin that follows, and makes more weighty the sin of inebriation itself, as has been said” (ST IaIIae 76.4 ad.4).

206 ST IaIIae 76.4 ad.4. This seems to me to come remarkably close but not identical to Scanlon’s recent distinction between blameworthiness, judgments of blameworthiness, the action of blaming, and who has standing to blame. See Scanlon, Moral Dimensions (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

207 ST IaIIae 76.4 ad.4
particular consideration, whether or not that cognition is salient, for the consideration to bind her.

Accompanied by an error theory, this view goes a long way to appeasing the objector who wants to attribute moral reasons to a person who does not, but ought to, meet the Cognition Requirement on those reasons. When the person has partial knowledge or cognition, she may have moral reasons to do something but not to act as she would if she had full knowledge or information. We saw Aquinas affirming this in the case in *De Malo* 3 where he says that the man approaching a woman whom he thinks is his wife would not be morally irrational to approach a woman who is not in fact his wife since he is ignorant that the woman is not his wife, though he is fully morally rational in approaching a woman. If a person lacks knowledge because of a deliberate choice, she may be morally blameworthy for the action that constitutes an omission—not cognizing—but not for the action caused by the lack of knowledge. Finally, if a person is ignorant that her action is going to bring about some bad end, but she wishes or is willing to bring about the end, she may be violating a moral reason against wishing or being willing to bring about the end even though she does not have a moral reason against the action she performs that accidentally brings about that end. By making moral reasons as fine-grained in their content as a person’s knowledge, the Thomistic account is able to capture senses in which ignorant persons may still be acting contrary to moral reasons and so be morally blameworthy despite the fact that ignorance diminishes the volunteriness some actions.
3.1.8 An Independent Argument for the Cognition Requirement

Apart from what Aquinas says about the Cognition Requirement and the kind of error theory we can construct using his discussions of the morality of ignorance, is there more to say to support the claim that cognitive contact is required as a conceptual matter for a consideration in favor of or against an action to be binding? I want to offer one independent rationale for thinking that the Cognition Requirement is meritorious in its own right, not just because Aquinas defended it or has the resources to defend it. I will argue that it is fruitful to think about moral reasons or obligations as imposing normative necessity on an action precisely through contact with the subject’s mind.

In the abstract, actions performed by humans do not have any moral character: for instance, dropping an apple core on the ground is an action that is intrinsically neither morally good nor morally bad. A law renders an action morally necessary, and so generates a moral reason to perform the action, by making the action necessary for the person to achieve some end. Suppose, for example, that a community has adopted the end of maintaining clean streets to promote tourism and the reputation of the community. If the community’s governing body decides that in service of that end, they are going to outlaw littering, they bring the action of dropping an apple core on the ground into a relation with the ends of keeping the community clean, promoting tourism, and maintaining a good reputation. But absent awareness of some institutional setup like this or awareness of some contingent connection between a moral end and tossing apple cores on the ground, it is hard to imagine a person could have moral reason strictly prohibiting the tossing on the ground of apple cores.
The case of law illustrates how the general phenomenon of obligation works by contact with the mind of the subject’s mind. While we might describe obligation in the abstract as one person imposing necessity on another through the first person’s own normative power and the second person’s ability to be moved by the first person, when we look at concrete instances of binding we notice that the normative power is always a normative power to make some particular action or another required for an end. The second person must be able to be moved to perform that particular action, but she must not be moved perform that action on her own absent the first person, otherwise the necessity would not be imposed by the first person—it would not be an instance of obligation. Just as we look for a connection between the subject and the command in the case of law, if we side with Aquinas in thinking that persons should be morally evaluated on the basis of what they do willingly rather than what their bodily movements happen to bring about as a matter of chance, then it makes sense to look for a connection between moral reasons we use to evaluate persons and the persons’ wills. But again, the connection should not be so tight that persons cannot fail to act according to moral reasons, for then the moral reason would not be the source of the necessity of the actions. The connection to persons’ wills needs to be strong enough to explain how reasons could make it the case that a person ought to act a certain way, but tenuous enough that having a reason does not always result in acting according to it. Aquinas’s theory manages to do just this by locating the connection in a person’s cognitive faculties. Law imposes moral necessity on actions by putting subjects in an epistemic position to judge that an action is necessary for achieving an end, but not by putting them in a motivational position such that they cannot help but follow the law. The Cognition Requirement helpfully brings that
necessary connection between binding considerations like laws and the subjects whom they bind to the fore.

The plausibility of Aquinas’s view also becomes visible when we consider what makes a person able to perform one particular action rather than another. To perform an action under a definite description, the person must be able to distinguish between actions under different descriptions. For example, if a student hears a teacher demand something, but cannot make out just what the teacher was demanding, the demand will not be able to make the student take out a sheet of paper rather than put her notebook away rather than stand up and push her chair under the desk. The student’s mental capacity for interpreting the demand proves crucial to the binding procedure.

Putting it more generally, then, it makes sense that for a consideration to morally necessitate that a person to perform a particular action, that person must be in an epistemic position to take up that consideration in her practical reasoning. This is because, on Aquinas’s view, actions have their character or “species” from their end. In other words, what an action is is determined primarily by what the action is for. If the first person fails to communicate an end to the second, she will fail to impose normative necessity on the right sets of actions—those conducive to the end she purports to communicate. The first person must communicate to the second a command with a particular end for the second person to be able to apply it to her reasoning, and let it serve as a standard for what she ought to do. As Sarah will not be able to make it physically necessary that the rock skip across the water unless she actually tosses the rock, and the rock is able to be tossed toward the river, a superior’s command will not be able to render
it morally necessary to achieving some given end that the subject perform a particular act unless the subject knows for the sake of what end the superior has commanded her to act.

3.1.9 Finer Details: Wide-Scope and Narrow-Scope Binding

Grant for the sake of argument that I have discharged the argumentative burden of the Thomistic view, and that the binding a moral reason does is indeed a kind of imposition of necessity through cognitive contact. One final point about Aquinas’s conception of binding remains to be discussed. On his view, binding can happen in two ways, though the binding force and authority is the same in both cases—accidentally and intrinsically (per accidens and per se).

What a moral reason is a reason to do depends on whether the binding taking place imposes necessity because of the intrinsic properties of the action and the consideration or rather because of an accidental relation between an action and a consideration due to a person’s reasoning. When a moral reason binds per accidens, the reason is wide in scope, while when a moral reason binds per se, the reason is narrow in scope.

The first kind of moral necessity, he says, holds in virtue of a relation that an act bears to an end because of the nature of the end and the nature of the act, while another kind of moral necessity holds in virtue of some accidental relation an act bears to an end. Think back to the physical case of binding. Sarah’s touching the rock only necessitates the rock’s skipping across the river as long as the condition of Sarah’s intending to skip the rock obtains, which creates an accidental relation between Sarah and the rock. But consider a contrast case: when an electron approaches another electron, in virtue of the
charge of each electron and the distance between the two, the electron will take on a particular velocity necessarily.\textsuperscript{208} The necessity of the electrons moving at a particular velocity does not depend on a third condition obtaining, whereas the necessity of the rock skipping does depend on a third condition—namely Sarah’s intention to toss the rock towards the river at a particular angle. Because the necessity in either case is imposed, there is already one sense in which it is conditional. But among conditional necessities, some hold as conditional necessities conditionally, while others hold as conditional necessities unconditionally.\textsuperscript{209}

We can illustrate the distinction in application to actions and ends using a non-moral example before extending it to the moral case. Suppose that Kevin sets himself the goal of entering the NBA; and in order to do this he must practice playing basketball regularly but also must play at least one year in the NCAA, according to the NBA regulations. We can imagine, though, that the NBA rules could be different without fundamentally altering the goals of the league. For instance, when LeBron James entered the NBA there was no college requirement, so LeBron entered the pros straight out of high school. While it is necessary for Kevin to play in the NCAA in order to enter the NBA, this necessity is not due to anything intrinsic about the action of playing in the NCAA, since some players like LeBron James do not need to play college basketball to be able to compete at the pro level, nor anything intrinsic about the end—entering the NBA—since it was once possible to enter the NBA without playing NCAA basketball.

\textsuperscript{208} According to classical mechanics, that is. I borrow the example from Gideon Jeffrey, “Final Causation and Its Discontents,” (manuscript).

So while Kevin has a requiring practical reason to play NCAA basketball as long as he wants to join the NBA and the NBA has this regulation, if the NBA were to change the regulation back, Kevin would no longer have a requiring reason to play for the NCAA. Absent that condition, it is no longer necessary for achieving his long-term goal that Kevin play in the NCAA for a year. By contrast, given the nature of the NBA, there is a relation between the action of practicing basketball and the end of entering the NBA that obtains independently of other conditions, like the NBA’s current regulations. Without practicing basketball, Kevin will certainly not achieve the end of entering the NBA. So Kevin’s requiring practical reason to practice basketball exists not simply under certain conditions but simply speaking, to use Aquinas’s terminology.

Aquinas says that some actions are required to achieve morally good ends unconditionally—just as Kevin’s practicing basketball is required for entering the NBA—while others are required only as long as certain conditions obtain—like Kevin’s reason to enter the NCAA. A morally necessary end imposes necessity on an action intrinsically related to that end simply, or without condition. But a morally necessary end might come to be in relation to an action accidentally, or not on account of any feature of the action taken on its own or the end taken on its own. The example I proposed earlier regarding the municipal regulations of public education is an instance of a conditional relation between a certain course of action and an end. When the municipal government issues a law that all guardians who want to publicly educate their children must send their children to the school inside their district. Since some contingent condition rules out certain routes to achieving the more final end as impermissible, as long as that contingent condition is in place, one has a requiring moral reason against taking the routes toward
that end ruled out by the law. In other words, when it comes to a course of action that is only extrinsically or accidentally related to an end, the requiring moral reasons for or against that course of action exist only as long as the condition remains in place.

The contemporary distinction between wide-scope and narrow-scope requirements neatly tracks the distinction Aquinas makes in *QDV* 17.4. Because the wide/narrow-scope semantic apparatus is designed and thus well-suited for talk about reasons, it is worth hijacking the apparatus and recasting what has been said so far using it. A requirement is wide in scope if it operates on a complex proposition, like a proposition that includes a disjunction, a material conditional, or a conjunction. For instance, suppose Kevin has a wide-scope reason to play one year in the NCAA as long as the regulation obtains and he has the end of entering the NBA. We may formalize the wide-scope requirement, letting R stand for a requirement of practical rationality, E stand for “has as his end playing in NBA,” N stand for the NBA regulation, and I stand for “play in the NCAA one year”:

\[
\text{WIDE-SCOPE (W)} : \ R \left\{ [E \land N] \rightarrow I \right\}
\]

Contrast the wide-scope requirement with the narrow scope requirement to intend to practice basketball frequently, letting P stand in for practicing:

\[
\text{NARROW-SCOPE (N)} : E \rightarrow R(P)
\]

While there is generally a presumption against letting the rational requirement distribute over the individual parts of the proposition, or “detach” in a wide-scope requirement, there is no need to distribute or detach in the narrow-scope requirement. To see why we

\[210\] The idea of wide and narrow scope requirements comes from John Broome’s “Wide or Narrow Scope,” (2007). The semantics I will use have been utilized and developed by Broome, Kolodny, Reisner, Schroeder, Titelbaum and Wallace.
cannot infer from the antecedent (E & N) that the consequent I is required, consider the example again. While Kevin might have as his end to play in the NBA and the NBA might require that all entering players have played one year in the NCAA, Kevin might decide that he does not have the time or the money to go to college and so give up on his dream to play in the NBA. He has the option of reneging on the end, and it does not seem unreasonable of him to do so upon realizing what having that end would require of him.

A wide-scope reason is a reason to φ in certain conditions rather than a reason to φ. Kevin’s having the end of playing in the NBA along with his belief that φ ing is necessary to achieve that end make it necessary for Kevin to φ to play in the NBA, rather than making it necessary for Kevin to φ, independently of his goal of playing in the NBA. But narrow-scope requiring reasons do not rely on conditions to obtain to have their force. It will always be the case that someone who wants to play in the NBA has a reason to practice frequently. Even players who are in the NBA but injured have to be able to practice frequently before they get the green light to get off the bench and play in the NBA. So the narrow-scope requirement is what Aquinas would call “semper et ad semper”—one that holds always and everywhere.

Hopefully, now that we have a clearer picture of Aquinas’s positive view about binding, we see that he does endorse some internal psychological constraint on the concept of a moral reason. For Aquinas, it is part of the concept of a moral reason that it be binding, where binding is understood as one thing imposing necessity on another through contact. The imposition of moral necessity on a person’s course of action happens through a specific kind of contact, expressed in the Cognition Requirement: for a
moral consideration to bind a person and so for it to be a moral reason, the person it binds must actually cognize that consideration.

While the Cognition Requirement tells us that, at the very least, the Thomistic account holds that moral reasons are mind dependent, it does not yet tell us what psychological features of persons allow them to meet the Cognition Requirement and so on what moral reasons depend. To fill out the picture of Thomistic mind dependence, then, we will need to look at the relata of the dependence relation more closely.

3.2 Moral Reasons Depend on Practical Judgments

In this section I aim to show that on the Thomistic account, one way moral reasons meet the Cognition Requirement is through potential and actual judgments agents make in the course of practical reasoning. The paradigm case appears in the text on conscience. I’ll begin by working through Aquinas’s account of the nature conscience, which is based on two arguments. The first argument highlights that the definition of conscience is a functional one, and the second of which draws attention to the connection of conscience with the Cognition Requirement. With Aquinas’s conception of conscience as a moral judgment in mind, I will go on to point out the passages where Aquinas claims that moral reasons depend on conscience, shedding light on one kind of psychological feature necessary for meeting the Cognition Requirement and hence one kind of psychological feature on which moral reasons depend.
3.2.1 What Conscience Is Not

Aquinas acknowledges that there is a multiplicity of ways one might think about conscience, and so he needs to provide reasons for thinking that his account is the right one. First, one might conceive of conscience as a supernatural inclination that motivates persons to do the right thing. On this picture, conscience is an infallible guide to moral action. It always prompts persons to do what is in fact morally right and proscribes what is in fact morally wrong. What accounts for this infallibility is its supernatural source. And since it is an inclination, it is necessary but not sufficient for motivation to do what it inclines us toward. We might be, in Dancy’s sense, “moved” but not “motivated” to perform the right action. So it would account for the fact that persons are able to perform morally good actions but do not always do so, as other inclinations compete with this one.

Alternatively, one could think of conscience as being infallible but having both a conative, motivating component and a cognitive component. On such a view conscience would dispose a person to produce unerring judgments about morally right and wrong action, and also to produce an emotional reaction that would lead the person to follow

211 Peter Lombard considers this view in the Sentences, Book 2 Distinction 24; he says that on one view, human beings have two wills, one which enables them to do right and one which enables them to sin or do wrong. The first will is the “spark of conscience” On another view he proposes, conscience just is divine will acting through a human agent, whose distinct will can only be the source of wrong action because of the fall. God’s grace is manifested in an agent’s conscience, then, being the only thing which enables her to choose to do good.

Bonaventure attributes this conative function to synderesis, which is an etymological descendent of the Greek word for conscience, synéidesis. (See Colavecchio, Xavier G. 1961. Erroneous Conscience and Obligations. Catholic University of America Press.)
that judgment when acting.\textsuperscript{212} The advantage of making conscience both cognitive and conative is that it would explain persons’ ability to have moral knowledge as well as their ability to have moral desires that motivate action.

Aquinas plumps for a different account of conscience on etymological grounds as well as considerations about the uses of the term in ordinary language.\textsuperscript{213} We will examine each of these arguments in turn.

3.2.2 \textit{The Ordinary Language Argument}

In his \textit{Commentary on the Sentences} (SS), he defends this definition of conscience beginning with the observation that typically, speakers use the term “conscience” to indicate something morally binding, or to imply that conscience makes the weight of sin heavier for the person sinning. Then, he argues that both binding and burdening happen as a result of the person actually considering the idea that some particular action ought to be done or ought not to be done. That is, what functions to bind and burden persons is a kind of reasoning the person participates in. For instance, for Huck Finn’s conscience to chastise him for helping Jim to abscond, Huck must have previously considered the action “helping Jim abscond” as something that ought not be done by him. Therefore, conscience must be that act of considering something to be done or not to be done that can result in a person’s feeling burdened or in a person’s being bound:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
He borrows the conception of conscience from his teacher, Albert the Great, who was the first of the scholastics recorded as claiming that conscience is an act of practical reasoning. (\textit{Summa de creaturis}, II. q. 72, a. 1 (quoted in Crowe, \textit{The Changing Profile of the Natural Law} (Hague: Nijhoff, 1977), 134 n. 75). Unlike Albert, however, Aquinas provides several arguments for this bold assertion.
\end{quote}
According to its use in speech, conscience is said to bind (*ligare*) or make sin heavier. But nothing is bound to something to be done unless it were to consider this thing to be done; wherefore a certain actual consideration of reason, by conscience, thus is commonly understood by those speaking. Therefore it must be seen that it is that actual consideration of reason.\(^\text{214}\)

Aquinas thinks that when we deliberate not just about what to do but about what ought to be done, our reasoning progresses as though by syllogism. We rely on certain judgments or beliefs in order to form new ones. Huck Finn, for example, makes use of his belief that helping a slave run away from his or her owner is a crime, and his belief that Jim is a runaway slave, in coming to form the judgment that it would be a crime to assist Jim. Further, Huck seems to think that committing crimes constitutes sin or immoral behavior, and so that his assisting Jim would be immoral. Whether or not Huck’s reasoning explicitly follows a syllogistic structure or not, it is clear that in order for him to come to believe that assisting Jim is immoral, such a belief needs to be part of a web of beliefs or judgments about crime, helping runaway slaves, and immoral behavior.

Aquinas’s argument for the claim that conscience is a mental act of moral judgment rests on this idea about practical syllogisms:

As the Philosopher\(^\text{215}\) says in *Ethics* VI, reason in choosing and fleeing uses a certain kind of syllogism; but in a syllogism there is a trifold consideration, and accordingly three propositions, two from which the third is concluded. Therefore, it is contained in the proposition, provided that reason in its operation accepts from universal principles a judgment about particulars. Universal principles of duty pertain to synderesis… Synderesis in this kind of syllogism supplies the quasi-major premise, whose consideration is the act of synderesis. But either higher or lower reason can supply the minor premise, whose consideration is an act itself. But the consideration of conclusion of choice— this is the consideration

\(^{214}\) *SS* II d.24 q.2 a.4 co.

\(^{215}\) Aquinas refers to Aristotle as “the Philosopher” here and throughout his texts.
of conscience.\textsuperscript{216}

Although the picture he paints may be over-intellectualized, the argument can succeed without taking for granted that persons’ practical reasoning explicitly or self-consciously takes the form of a syllogism. We simply need to agree that the formation of some judgment about what one ought to do is made possible by at least one moral belief or judgment whose content is more general than the conclusion and by at least one belief or judgment that allows the person to see some act as an instance of, or not an instance of, the action type referenced in the content of the general belief.\textsuperscript{217} The mental state that results from drawing a conclusion from these two belief or judgment like states is what ends up enabling persons, synchronically, to feel guilt about an action, to feel prompted to perform an action or abstain from doing so, to feel burdened, or to consider performing or not performing an action. Whatever performs the function of drawing such conclusions, therefore, we label “conscience.”

The example Aquinas offers helps to illustrate the plausibility of the definition. He puts forward the following as a syllogism-like chain of reasoning in which a person might engage:

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{216}] Sciendum est igitur, quod, sicut in 6 Ethic. Philosophus dicit, ratio in eligendis et fuciendis, quibusdam syllogismis utitur. In syllogismo autem est triplex consideratio, secundum tres propositiones, ex quarum duabus tertia concluditur. Ita etiam contingit in propositio, dum ratio in operandis ex universalibus principiis circa particularia judicium assumit. Et quia universalia principia juris ad synderesim pertinent, rationes autem magis appropriatae ad opus, pertinent ad habitus, quibus ratio superior et inferior distinguishing; synderesis in hoc syllogismo quasi majorem ministrat, culus consideratio est ipsius actus; sed consideratio conclusionis elicitae est consideratio conscientiae.
\item[\textsuperscript{217}] Note that Aquinas goes beyond Albert’s account and rejects the idea of previous thinkers that conscience supplies human agents with what is necessary to will the good. He will go on to say that synderesis, not conscience, provides agents with the right starting points of practical reasoning and what is needed to take the good as the object of one’s will.
\end{itemize}
1. Evil is to be avoided (synderesis)
2. Adultery is evil because unjust or dishonest. (lower reason)
3. This act of adultery is to be avoided. (conscience)

A conclusion put forward by conscience, like “adultery is to be avoided,” is not
temporally indexed (indifferenter sive sit de praesenti vel de praeterito vel future), he
adds. For this reason, conscience can either speak against something already done or
dictate that something should not be done. Hence, Aquinas shows that his definition of
conscience can account for each of the several roles it plays in ordinary language.

3.2.3 The Etymological Argument

The next argument he uses to support the idea that conscience is the act of concluding in
practical reasoning is etymological. He concisely states argument in SS II.24: “It is said
that ‘conscience’ (conscientia) is almost something ‘with’ ‘knowledge’ (cum alio
scientia), because knowledge (scientia) of universals is applied to a particular act, or even
because through it someone is conscience of the things which she has done, or intends to
do, and because this is said to be a judgment or a dictate of reason.”

According to
Aquinas, the word ‘conscience’ (conscientia) can be broken up into two parts, the former
of which—con— denotes the prefix cum meaning ‘with,’ and the latter of which—
scientia— means ‘knowledge.’ It seems, then, that ‘conscience’ evolved from a
conjunction of ‘with’ and ‘knowledge’ and thus its crudest definition implies rendering
something ‘with knowledge,’ whether the knowledge is about something prospective,
present, or retrospective.

218 SS II d.24 a.2 co.
Over a decade later, Aquinas reverses the order of these arguments and then ties them together in *ST* Ia 79 article 13. He begins with the etymological argument. In the first premise he says that the word ‘conscience’ originates from conjoining ‘knowledge’ (*scientia*) and ‘with’ (*cum*).\(^{219}\) Secondly, for something to be ‘with’ knowledge—for knowledge to be applied to something—is a kind of act. He concludes that ‘conscience’ must name some kind of act by which knowledge is applied to something. The argument from ordinary language follows on the heels of the etymological argument in the body of the same article: “Conscience is said,” he says, “to testify, to bind or urge, and even to accuse, burden, or rebuke.”\(^ {220}\) It testifies by giving a person an account of whether she has or has not performed some action; in this case, the person is evincing propositional knowledge about her own actions to herself. With respect to binding, Aquinas says, “Through our conscience we judge something as to be done or not to be done, and according to this, conscience is said to urge or bind.”\(^{221}\) And finally, conscience accuses, weighs down, or rebukes in virtue of knowledge a person has about whether what she did was well or poorly done. Since each of these three functions involves the act of drawing a conclusion based on information, it seems that conscience implies a mental act of applying some knowledge to something.

One might notice that the talk of the practical syllogism we saw in *SS* has dropped out in the arguments in *ST*, and so justifiably wonder whether the omission signals a change in Aquinas’s mind about what sort of act conscience is. Is it possible that the claims Aquinas makes in his arguments in *SS* are not relevant to the later, more

\(^{219}\) *ST* 79.13 co.  
\(^{220}\) *ST* 79.13 co.  
\(^{221}\) Ibid.
developed account of conscience in *ST, SCG* and *QDV*? While it is true that in the later works Aquinas spends more time in these texts elaborating on the idea that conscience can err while synderesis cannot, devoting two articles in *ST* and a question comprised of five articles in *QDV* to issues about conscience binding, nevertheless, in *QDV* especially, he revives the language of “resolving conclusions from principles” and “investigating conclusions from principles” in various kinds of practical reasoning—“taking counsel with ourselves,” “judging,” and “examination.” Additionally, Aquinas uses the idea of the practical syllogism in explaining the role of synderesis (*ST* IaIIae 94), which provides us with the first premises of practical reason’s syllogisms (*ST* IaIIae 90.1 ad. 2). The discussions of conscience and synderesis, that postdate the arguments of *SS* thus underwrite rather than undermine the idea first put forward in *SS* that conscience is the mental act of considering or drawing a conclusion in practical reasoning.

If the exegesis so far has been successful, we can now see that for Aquinas, conscience is a mental act that can serve various purposes, but one of those purposes is that it communicates the content of some consideration to a person in a way that results in knowledge that the consideration bears on an action. The consideration of some conclusion of practical reason can enable a person’s awareness that she has acted wrongly or acted well; it can recommend a certain course of action as to be pursued or to be avoided; it can also cause the person to accuse herself of wrongdoing or rebuke herself. The act of conscience results in a state of knowledge applied to a particular action. In other words, conscience is one psychological mechanism that enables a

\[\text{222 QDV 17.1 co.}\]
consideration to meet the Cognition Requirement for moral reasons.

3.2.4 Conscience As a Relatum of the Dependence Relation

Since the overarching goal of the present chapter is to show that Aquinas holds a version of the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis, we should pause here to consider whether the mental acts involved in the act of conscience might be suitable candidates for the “mental act” relatum of the mind-dependence relation. I want to provide some weak, initial support for the idea that it can, but leave for later the argument that it in fact does.

Recall that if some $x$ formally depends on $y$, then $y$ provides $x$ with the conditions for being what $x$ is, such that if a moral reason were to formally depend on conscience, then conscience would provide that reason with its content, determining what it is a reason to do. If we want to know whether conscience is the sort of mental act that could provide the form of a moral reason, then, this is equivalent to asking whether, in principle, conscience could supply content to a moral reason.

One way the mental act of conscience might provide content to a moral reason is by transferring the content of the judgment or conclusion drawn to the content of the moral reason. As it turns out, we can model and envision this quite naturally. Consider the earlier example of a conclusion of conscience: “Adultery is to be avoided.” Surely, one could have a moral reason to avoid adultery. Let’s consider judgments of conscience that take a different form, like “I ought to donate to charity.” The action-for-the-sake-of-an-end complex in the judgment seems amenable to becoming the content of a moral reason—a reason to give money for the sake of charity.
One might object that it is more plausible that a moral reason would formally depend on the facts that make a conclusion of conscience true than on the judgment of conscience itself. One reason to think that the appropriate relatum could be the person’s conscience rather than the facts that lead her to form the judgment of conscience is this: sometimes, there are multiple ways a person can act on a general moral reason, as in the case of donating to charity, but the person’s actual judgments seem to determine what the appropriate way of fulfilling the general duty is.

FAEQUA: Faequa knows she ought to donate to charity but is only acquainted with Oxfam. She has five-hundred dollars that are unbudgeted in her bank account, and Bread for the World would give more of this money directly to the people they serve than Oxfam. If Faequa had done more research—read fewer philosophy papers mentioning Oxfam and read more papers on policy effectiveness in hunger relief—she might have been able to bring to mind the intermediate end of donating to Bread for the World rather than Oxfam. But given that Faequa believes Oxfam is an effective way to donate to charity and has no beliefs about Bread for the World, without a change of mind it would seem more morally appropriate for Faequa to donate to Oxfam than to donate to Bread for the World. Donating to Bread for the World without having any knowledge about its ability to meet peoples’ needs would be irresponsible even if it luckily produced a good outcome in this case. What accounts for the moral appropriateness of donating to Oxfam is Faequa’s actual reasoning that leads to her conclusion that Oxfam is a worthy cause. Second, given what we learned about the Thomistic account of negligence, Faequa may have had a moral reason to acquire knowledge about Bread for the World in the past, and so may be morally blameworthy for not having done so when she had the chance. Third, that certain facts were unknown to Faequa—say, if she were unaware that she had an extra five-
hundred dollars in her bank account or that people in Bengal will benefit more from her donating to Bread for the World than from her donating to Oxfam—softens the blow to any initial intuition we have that she has a moral reason to give five hundred dollars to Bread for the World. The judgments about actions for the sake of ends that Faequa has presently made could reasonably be thought to determine what exactly she has a moral reason to do. That is, it is plausible to say that moral reasons might formally depend on the mental state Aquinas labels conscience. We will return to this in a later section.

3.3 Moral Reasons Depend on Synderesis

In chapter 2, we learned what I take to be a valuable lesson about first and second potentiality: if someone is able to φ in the sense of second potentiality, that is true because of the actualization of some first, or less proximate, potentiality. If we are right to think of Aquinas as holding that moral reasons depend on a person’s ability to engage in reasoning and judging in the sense of second potentiality, then we should ask what first potentiality, when actualized, makes such reasoning and judging possible. For Aquinas, the answer to that question is a natural habit he calls synderesis.

3.3.1 Synderesis Enables Practical Reasoning

In the *Treatise on Law*, he asserts that synderesis is the habit that enables human persons to distinguish between moral goodness and moral badness: synderesis is “the light of
natural reason, by which we discern what is good and bad.” Elsewhere he describes it as a habit of the mind by which we grasp the first principles of practical reason.

In *ST Ia* 79 article 12, he argues that this habit must be natural because without this mental capacity being guaranteed by nature, we could not engage in the kind of practical reasoning characteristic of human beings:

Therefore it must be that we are endowed naturally, with principles regarding theoretical reason as with principles regarding action. However the first principles of the theoretical reason naturally given to us do not pertain to… a certain special habit, which is called the understanding of principles, as appears in Ethics VI. Wherefore the principles regarding action naturally given to us do not pertain to a special power, but to a special natural habit, which is called synderesis.

Since a thing’s nature is what differentiates it from other species and we know that something about human reason distinguishes us from non-human animals, what gives a human person her nature will have to do with her reason. The particular acts of human reasoning that differentiate us from non-human animals, like the sort of voluntary moral judgments Aquinas described in his discussion of free choice, depend on a unique mental habit or structure that makes possible the regular performance of those particular acts. This is the mental habit he terms synderesis. So synderesis must be a natural structure or habit.

The second thing to note about synderesis on Aquinas’s account is that it is a habit for grasping the starting points of practical reasoning, from which particular acts of conscience proceed. Drawing on Albert’s insight that conscience is a conclusion of practical reason, he explains that just as theoretical reasoning can only take place if the

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223 *ST IaIIae* 91.2
224 *ST IaIIae* 79.12
225 *QDV* 17.1 ad. 7
reasoner has certain speculative principles or starting points from which she reasons, so too practical reasoning can only take place if the reasoner has in mind certain practical starting points.

Aquinas delves into more detail about the sorts of starting points this mental habit must grasp to play the role in personal psychology he has carved out for it; namely, enabling practical reasoning about moral matters.

Now just as being is the first thing to fall within apprehension absolutely speaking, so good is the first thing to fall within the apprehension of practical reason, which is ordered toward action. For every agent acts for the sake of an end, which has the description of a good. And so the first principle in practical reasoning is what is founded on the notion good, which is the notion: the good is what all things desire. Therefore, the first precept of the law is that good ought to be done and pursued and that evil ought to be avoided. And all the other precepts of the law of nature are founded upon this principle.\(^{226}\)

Just as theoretical reasoning has to start somewhere, like from the law of non-contradiction, practical reasoning has to start from the basic notion of the good and of ends for which we act. Without an ability to lay hold of the truth of these starting points, a person cannot engage in theoretical or practical reasoning. Even if these truths were self-evident in the sense of being analytic, were they not self-evident to us, they could not serve as jumping off points for our actual reasoning. The principle of non-contradiction, for example, is an idea grasped by everyone who has the most basic faculties of speculative reason; and without such a natural grasp of this idea, a person could not perform any acts of theoretical reasoning whose conclusions depend on that principle. So too in practical reasoning, we need claims that function as jumping off points for our reasoning about what we ought to do. But given the structure of human actions—that

\(^{226}\) ST IaIIae 94.2
humans are motivated to act for the sake of ends we think are good—the starting points from which we reason about what actions to perform must involve ends that appear to us to be good.

According to Aquinas, the principles we grasp through the habit of synderesis are universal. “Now as is clear from Physics I that it belongs to reason to proceed from what is universal to what is particular,” he says, “It is evident that universal principles, whether of theoretical or practical reason, have the same truth and rectitude for all and are known equally by all.” To put it simply, since what enables us to perform particular acts of reasoning are judgments about universals—claims that hold in all cases over a domain, we can infer that principles that are grasped by that enabling habit are universal in their content. It is partly in virtue of the fact that each human person shares a mental structure that enables her to understand the same content that we can correctly call human reasoning one species or type of thing.

The analogy with theoretical reason is instructive in two ways. It shows that the natural knowledge all human beings have of the first principles of natural law is nothing unique to practical reason; we also have a natural mental capacity to grasp basic principles of theoretical reason, like the law of non-contradiction. Second, it points out an important feature of the first principles of natural law—their universality both in content and in cognition. First principles of natural law are, by definition, known to all rational persons. The mental habit of synderesis is the natural feature all human persons share that guarantees some shared basis of knowledge.

227 ST IaIIae 94.4
3.3.2 The Stability Arguments for Synderesis

A third statement Aquinas makes repeatedly about synderesis is that it cannot be “extinguished.” In essence, he contends that synderesis is a stable mental habit entailed by human nature, rather than something that must be acquired or can be lost by human persons. In article 6 of question 94, he takes up the canonical question first asked by Jerome of whether synderesis can be “wiped out of a man’s heart?” He responds that when it comes to universal principles, the natural law cannot be erased from the minds of human persons, although certain conditions may thwart a person from actualizing her capacity to grasp a principle.

The body of the response does not address why this is the case; instead it gives an error theory for why we would be inclined to believe that human persons can lose their grip on the first principles of natural law. Perhaps he takes this strategy because he thinks he has established that a person cannot be a human person strictly speaking without this habit, since the habit is natural to humans. In any case, he claims that just because a person does not act in accordance with a universal first principle does not prove that she cannot grasp it: “It cannot be erased with respect to particular actions insofar as reason is impeded from applying a universal principle to a particular action,” and this can happen for several reasons—“sensual desire, or some other passion… because of bad arguments or because of depraved custom and corrupt habits.”228 Sometimes, a bad habit or misshapen desire will either keep someone from formulating the rest of a chain of reasoning that would follow from a first principle. For instance, an intemperate desire for sweet wine may thwart one’s reasoning from “I should avoid gluttony” to “I should not

228 ST IaIIae 94.6
drink more wine” by redirecting one’s attention from the amount of wine being drunk to the pleasure of tasting sweet wine. But the tendency to err in these ways does not yet give us evidence to think that the knowledge of general principles has been lost. So, the burden of proof remains on the objector to show that we do not in fact have a grip on the first principles that enables us to perform particular acts of practical reasoning.

In *QDV* 16 article 2 Aquinas offers a positive argument that synderesis cannot err. He says that “all movable things are reduced to some first immobile thing” and so for human actions to have some rightness, there must be some “permanent principle, which has immutable rectitude, by which human actions are examined.” Since without an unchanging and firm first principle, we could not come to fixed or firm conclusions, and we need to be able to come to firm conclusions to be able to act rationally, there must be some firm or unchanging practical principles we can use as platforms for our practical reasoning.

We can reconstruct another positive argument for the stability of synderesis taking as a cue Aquinas’s statement that “nature nonetheless is more essential to man, and is thus more permanent.”\(^{229}\) First, we know that God gives a nature to each kind of creature that specifies how that creature is to resemble God. Each nature functions as a kind of law for that species. Second, the only beings for whom natures function as a genuine law are rational beings, since the concept of law pertains to reason and binding can only happen by reason ruling and measuring. Therefore, in order for a created thing’s actions to be bound by a law, that created thing must have reason—the ability to impose rules and measures. But without the first principles of practical reason, a being cannot get

\(^{229}\) *ST* IaIIae 6 ad. 2
reasoning up and running, so to speak, and so cannot impose rules and measures. Such a being would not have the nature suitable to law. Therefore, only if a human being has a grasp of first principles is that human subject to natural laws as laws. And part of what makes a human being human is that she is able to perform human acts—acts subject to natural laws. So, as long as a human person remains fully human, she will have the mental habit of synderesis.

3.3.3 Moral Reasons Depend Materially on Synderesis

The upshot, for our purposes, of the passages we have looked at on synderesis is that not only are moral reasons constrained by persons’ actual epistemic position in relation to moral considerations, due to their actual reasoning and judging. Moral reasons, to bind and thus to be moral reasons, depend on persons having a more rudimentary ability to grasp the starting points of practical reason. It is only the actualization of the habit of synderesis that enables persons to reason about particular moral considerations, and so for those considerations to have a grip on them.

Suppose that moral reasons indeed depend on synderesis. On the one hand, synderesis as a mental structure might make a poor candidate for the formal dependence relatum of the dependence relation because on its own, it does not have content. For instance, Aquinas seems to think that human infants have synderesis but simply do not have the means to exercise it. Thus, he calls it a habit rather than a power. What remains a live option is that moral reasons depend materially on synderesis.

\[230\] Ibid. ad. 3
We saw earlier that Aquinas includes in the very concept of a law, or a rule of reason that binds a person, which I have been calling a requiring moral reason, that it be promulgated. Let’s take a second look at the promulgation requirement:

I respond that it should be said that, as it is said, a law is imposed on something else by way of rule and measure. But a rule and measure is imposed by the application to the things ruled and measured. Wherefore, it follows that a law obtains power to obligate, which is proper to law, by being applied to the human beings who ought to be regulated according to it. But insofar as there is an application, it happens through [a law] being brought to the knowledge of those [to whom it is applied] from its promulgation. Wherefore promulgation is necessary for a law to have the binding power proper to it.\textsuperscript{231}

From this passage, we learn that the subject’s knowledge of some consideration’s being a law serves as a necessary condition for that consideration imposing moral necessity on some course of action. I argued above that for a law to be promulgated is for the subject of the law to have knowledge of the content of what is required, whether she is presently considering that content or not. So promulgation can be defined as a law’s being made public, where publicity consists in knowledge of those within the law’s jurisdiction.

Knowledge for Aquinas, remember, spans a range of mental states from general awareness to fully articulate assent. If my earlier interpretation of the text is correct, then we can put this condition on laws or moral reasons, more precisely, as follows: a consideration $p$ functions as a law that requires $S$ to $\phi$ only if, for some agent $S$, $p$ is promulgated to $S$, and correlatively, $S$ has knowledge that $p$. While it might be argued initially that it would be strange for one single law to effect diverse requirements for different subjects depending on their epistemic positions, consider how natural the view turns out to be. What a law requires a subject to do is always to some degree

\textsuperscript{231} ST IaIIae 90.4
indeterminate, hence the need for officials to interpret the law, like judges and police officers. If a subject misunderstands a component of a law through no fault of her own, she may be exculpated; for instance, if a foreigner does not know that tossing apple seeds on the ground constitutes littering in a particular jurisdiction, and her ignorance is not a fault of her own because it is not stated anywhere and in her own city tossing seeds on the ground for birds to eat is common, a police officer might decide to give her a warning, for she is not expected to know that what she did constituted littering given her position. The police officer would likely not write up a simple warning for a citizen of that town, though, as she would be accountable to the understanding that throwing seeds on the ground constitutes littering. If the foreigner could have been told by her friends who live in that town that tossing apple seeds on the ground constituted littering, the police officer or a judge might hold her accountable as if she was required not to litter simply to punish her violation of a reason to find out what the laws are. If we allow that non-moral blame may be an effective deterrent, or that the spirit of the law might include the requirement to inform oneself of the particular law and so one who fails to do so is punishable, this analysis of law fits naturally with actual cases.

According to this condition, a law’s domain—the cases in which \( p \) functions as a genuine law—is the set of persons who satisfy the promulgation condition. Additionally, a law cannot be a law at all without a domain of application, according to the argument we looked at above. So a consideration’s ability to function as a law, or as a requiring moral reason, depends upon its being made cognitively available to a person.\(^{232}\)

\(^{232}\) That the promulgation condition is understated in the literature can be seen from the minimal treatment it receives in major expositions of natural law, even though it is, according to Aquinas, part of the
In my earlier discussion of promulgation what I did not make explicit is that in order for a person to know the content of a law, the person must have the ability to appreciate moral law more generally; namely, that some actions are morally good and some actions are morally bad. The epistemic access of the person thus not only depends on her actual present beliefs and judgments but in the sense of first potentiality, on her rational capacity to grasp normative judgments more generally. The mental feature that plays that psychological role on the Thomistic theory is synderesis.

In the article on the promulgation condition Aquinas considers an objection that natural laws, or moral reasons, seem not to depend on promulgation, even though human positive law does, so promulgation must not be essential to law. In reply, Aquinas says that natural laws are indeed promulgated, but that their promulgation is obscured because it happens by being instilled in us by nature, rather than revealed in writing or through word of mouth: “Promulgation of the natural law is from this: that God has seared onto the minds of human beings what is to be known naturally.” This statement clues us into the fact that Aquinas takes the natural law to depend in some way on synderesis in that it concept of law and a necessary condition for the normative power of a law. As Mark Murphy has pointed out to me, the promulgation requirement tends not to be read so strongly as I am suggesting, so it would appear less controversial and thus less deserving of an extensive defense. It receives mention twice in Mark C. Murphy, “Natural Law Theory,” The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Law and Legal Theory, eds. Martin P. Golding, William A. Edmundson (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2005), 17. In Brian Bix’s survey of the modern natural law tradition, it receives one mention in a footnote quoting Aquinas on the four elements of law. See Brian Bix, “Natural Law Theory: The Modern Tradition,” Oxford Handbook of Jurisprudence and Philosophy of Law, eds. Jules L. Coleman and Scott Shapiro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), fn 53.

That promulgation has been misunderstood can be seen from treatments of promulgation that do not touch on what this means for the subjects of law. For instance, Jeffrey Stout emphasizes that this means law must have a promulgator, and the promulgator must have the authority to override all other systems of law; but if we attend to other passages on promulgation, Aquinas focuses on the persons to whom the law is promulgated. Even in the passage above, the persons to whom the law is promulgated are central to the very notion of promulgation. Jeffrey Stout, “Truth, Natural Law, and Ethical Theory,” Natural Law Theory, ed. R.P. George (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 72-73.

233 ST IaIIae 90.4 ad. 1
furnishes us with the ability to reason about moral considerations in the sense of first potentiality.

What Aquinas has to say about the promulgation of the natural law gives us insight into how he thinks requiring moral reasons relate to synderesis. He defines a natural law as the participation in eternal law by human beings and explains that what accounts for the multiplicity of distinctions between natural law and eternal law—the natural law’s changeability and eternal law’s immutability, the natural law’s limited domain and the eternal law’s unlimited domain, the natural law’s temporal finitude and the eternal law’s eternity—is not necessarily its content. In fact the natural law, which is the set of moral reasons that apply to human persons, often contains reasons with similar or the same content as eternal law. While eternal law “emanates” from “divine reason’s conception of things,” the natural law comes from the minds of creatures which have a “share of eternal reason” imprinted on them. He explicitly states that “the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is bad,” which is just synderesis, “is nothing but an impression of divine light in us.” And Aquinas goes on to deny the claim of an objector who says that the natural law would be superfluous, since the eternal law provides all the precepts we need for action. Since Aquinas distinguishes between eternal and natural laws, and he states that the central difference is the original location, or whose mind it comes from, we can see that the natural law depends for its

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234 ST IaIIae 91.2. The ineffable nature of the mind of God, and hence eternal law, on Aquinas’s view, makes it difficult to know what we should say here regarding content of the eternal law and even natural law. Talk of the spirit of the law seems to imply inarticulate content; perhaps the doctrine of analogy can be invoked here to explain the similarity between the eternal and the natural law.

235 Ibid.
distinct existence on the human habit of synderesis.\textsuperscript{236} The first principles of natural law are located in the human mental habit of synderesis while the first principles of eternal law are located in the mind of God; the material difference makes for a formal difference. God’s mind being eternal, immutable, unerring, and comprehensive suits eternal laws for being eternal, immutable, and the like, whereas human minds are not suitable material for unchanging, eternal, comprehensive laws. Thus, synderesis plays the role of matter in moral reasons in that it individuates them from divine reasons.

Moreover, Aquinas says repeatedly regarding natural laws that the universal precepts or first principles of natural law bind all human persons in every case precisely because they are inscribed on our minds through synderesis. In his explanation for the inextinguishable nature of the natural law, he again invokes the idea that the first principles of natural law are universal and known by all human persons, presumably through syneresis. He says that “Indeed, in the first place there are the most common precepts pertaining to natural law, which are known to all; however there are secondary precepts that belong to the majority, which are conclusions of proximate principles. Therefore regarding those common principles, a law of nature regarding universals is in no way able to be deleted from the heart of a human being.”\textsuperscript{237} Aquinas goes on to argue that while human persons cannot fail to be able to know the most common or universal principles regarding what actions ought to be done or avoided, they can fail to grasp how

\textsuperscript{236} Note the difference between Aquinas’s position on this issue and the traditional line in natural law theory dating back to Cicero’s de Legibus. Cicero, in book I of de Legibus, argues that divine reason and human reason are the same, and so the law of virtue for human beings is the same as the law of virtue for God. Aquinas rejects the sameness of human right reason and divine reason and it follows that the law that results from the mind of each kind of agent is different.

\textsuperscript{237} ST IaIae 94.6
those principles apply in particular cases. And when this happens, for example “by means of depraved customs and vicious habits, among some persons, theft and even vices contrary to nature were not held to be sinful.” Thus, while one’s conscience may err in particular matters, such a person is never completely removed from the domain of requiring moral reasons, for as long as she has synderesis she has knowledge of the first principles and so the ability to reach conscientious judgments about universal actions that bind her, like “justice is to be done.”

If these passages illustrate that moral reasons depend on synderesis to be specified and differentiated from eternal laws, and that moral reasons cannot function as genuine laws without persons having the knowledge provided by synderesis, then we can conclude that synderesis provides the material conditions for particular moral reasons’ existence.

As we discussed in the previous chapter, on the Aristotelian picture, moral reasons depend materially on mental structures in the sense of first potentiality. Mental structures are well-suited to play the role of matter in moral reasons because while they do not give reasons content, or form, they seem to be necessary for the reasons’ individuated existence as reasons—as considerations that militate in favor of or against some course of action. Synderesis, as a habit that when actually present in a person makes possible in the sense of first potentiality her grasp of particular reasons seems similarly well-situated to play the role of matter in requiring moral reasons. So it should not be a surprise that on the Thomistic picture moral reasons depend materially on synderesis.

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238 Ibid.
3.4 Moral Reasons Formally Depend on Practical Judgments

The discussions of what synderesis and conscience are help us to piece together a Thomistic thesis about the relata of the mind-dependence relation. Moral reasons depend on the habit that makes it possible in the sense of first potentiality for persons to know the moral considerations that bear on their actions. And moral reasons depend on the actualization of that habit in practical reasoning in a way that enables persons to know the content of those reasons in the sense of second potentiality. Already the distinctiveness of the Thomistic conception of mind dependence is coming to light: the relata of the mind-dependence relation are cognitive features of persons’ psychology rather than conative features. The reason cognitive features end up constraining moral reasons on the Thomistic view is because the rationale for mind dependence in general stems from the Cognition Requirement, and the cognitive features of practical judgments and synderesis are best suited to meet that requirement. We also have discerned that synderesis plays the role of matter in moral reasons, individuating moral reasons from other kinds of reasons and such as God’s reasons and meeting the Cognition Requirement in the sense of second potentiality.

That Aquinas makes persons’ actual practical judgments a necessary condition for moral reasons does not do much to tell us how moral reasons depend on actual reasoning and judgments. For as we saw in chapter 2, there are a variety of relations that can hold to make something a necessary condition for something else. What I want to do now is to
elucidate how, on the Thomistic picture, moral reasons depend on persons’ practical reasoning.

I’ll begin with the question of how moral reasons depend on the reasoning and judgments of persons. I’ll take conscience as the paradigm again, and use the text on conscience to work up to a more general thesis about the dependence relation. What we find in Aquinas’s defense of his claims about moral reasons and conscience is that the content of persons’ moral reasons depends on the persons’ reasoning; in other words, moral reasons formally depend on persons’ practical reasoning and judgments.

3.4.1 The Conscience Principle

Aquinas begins to explain how moral reasons depend on conscience in two passages, one from the *Summa Theologica* and another from *De Veritate*. This is where the model of mind dependence Aquinas is working with most clearly comes to light. Let’s begin, then, by taking a look at the first passage.

In *ST* IaIIae question 19 article 5, Aquinas is defending the idea that persons always have moral reasons against acting contrary to their conscience, or reason and so each action that violates conscience is morally bad. This idea is what scholars have called the Conscience Principle. It is typically formulated in the following way:

CONSCIENCE PRINCIPLE: Every act of will contrary to reason is morally bad.

The Conscience Principle is controversial because it asserts that persons’ reasoning always bears on her moral reasons. He introduces his position by distancing it from the view—let’s call it the Restricted Conscience Principle view—on which a person’s conscience can only give one moral reasons if it is correct, if there are no other moral
reasons for or against what she judges she ought to do or not do, or if the set of actionable options is incommensurable and so what one ought to do is underdetermined. Here is what he says about the Restricted Conscience Principle view:

While conscience would be a certain dictate of reason (for it is a certain application of knowledge to an act, as was said in the first part), to ask whether the will discordant with erring reason is bad is the same as to ask whether erring conscience obligates.

About this, some have distinguished between three kinds of act: for there are the good kind, the indifferent, and the bad kind. Therefore they say that, if reason or conscience were to say some [act] is to be done where that act is the good kind, it is not in error there. The same would be true if it were to say that some [act] were not to be done where the act is the bad kind, since it is by the same reason good [acts] are prescribed that bad [acts] are prohibited.

But if reason or conscience were to say to someone that a human agent is required by precept to do those [acts] which are bad, or that those [acts] which are good are prohibited, reason or conscience would be erring. And similarly, if reason or conscience were to say to someone that something indifferent, as to lift up a straw from the ground, were prohibited or required, reason or conscience would be erring. They say therefore that reason or conscience erring about indifferent acts, whether that they be required or that they be prohibited, obligates, and thus the will discordant with such an erring reason would be bad and sinful. But reason or conscience erring in requiring those things which are bad in themselves, or prohibiting those which are good in themselves and necessary for salvation, does not obligate, wherefore in such case a will discordant with erring reason or conscience is not bad.

But this is said irrationally. For in indifferent acts, the will discordant with erring reason or conscience is bad by some mode belonging to the object, from which the goodness or badness of the will depends, not however on account of the object according to its nature, but according to its accidental apprehension by reason as ‘bad’ or ‘to be done’ or ‘to be avoided.’ And because the object of the will is that which is proposed by reason, as has been said, from something’s being

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240 ST IaIIae 19.5 co.
proposed by reason as bad, the will that is borne in that direction falls under the description ‘bad.’ This, however, obtains not only in indifferent [acts], but even in those which are good or bad in themselves. For not only is one able to fall under the description ‘good’ or ‘bad’ accidentally on account of reason’s apprehension of an object for the [act] which is indifferent; but even that which is good is able to be described as bad or that which is bad, as good, on account of reason’s apprehension of it.

Consider for instance, to abstain from fornication is a certain good, nevertheless the will is not borne toward it except by its being proposed by reason. If therefore it were proposed as bad by erring reason, the will would be carried toward it under the description of badness. Wherefore the will would be bad, because it wills the bad, not indeed that which is bad in itself but that which is bad accidentally on account of the apprehension of reason. And similarly to believe in Christ is in itself good, and necessary for salvation, but the will is not carried toward this except as it is proposed by reason. Wherefore if it were proposed by reason as bad, the will that did so would be bad, not because it is bad in itself, but because it is bad accidentally according to reason’s apprehension of it. And thus the Philosopher says, in Ethics VII, that it should be said that the incontinent person who does not follow right reason, accidentally however, does not follow false reason. Wherefore it should be said simply that every will discordant with reason, whether right or erring, is always bad.\textsuperscript{241}

By reading Aquinas’s rationale for resisting the Restricted Conscience Principle view, we get a sense of the underlying reasoning for adopting the Conscience Principle without limiting its domain.

The Restricted Conscience Principle view has some initial appeal because it doesn’t threaten to make a moral theory subjectivist or relativist, and it doesn’t create moral dilemmas. These are two dangers of adopting the Conscience Principle wholesale it seems. First, endorsing the Conscience Principle without limiting its domain of application entails that, if there is a case in which a person has an objective moral reason to $\varphi$, but the person has an opinion or interest that leads her to believe she should not $\varphi$,

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid.
the Conscience Principle tells us the person has a moral reason against φ-ing. Consider an example:

**MARGOT:** Margot and her romantic partner are sexually active and have been contemplating whether or not Margot should take birth control. Margot decides that because they are not in a position financially to provide for a child, she should avoid getting pregnant, and the best way to do this will be to taking birth control pills. But unbeknownst to Margot, she and her partner are both about to receive substantial raises that would allow them to easily support a child. Also unbeknownst to Margot, it is morally problematic for her to take the birth control pills she is on; from an objective viewpoint she should not be taking them. A few months after making the decision, Margot has baby fever and feigns forgetting to take the pills for a week.

If the Conscience Principle holds in cases like Margot’s when there are objective moral considerations to perform some action, then a person who is mistaken, like Margot, has a moral reason that swamps the considerations to perform that action. She has a moral reason from her mistaken conscience against not taking birth control. Now either the view that endorses the Conscience Principle goes totally off the rails and embraces subjectivism or relativism, claiming that there is no moral reason given by the objective moral facts, or the view insists that there is still an objective moral reason for not taking birth control, despite Margot’s conscience, and in addition to the reason from her conscience against not taking birth control. The latter route places Margot in a moral dilemma—she has moral reasons for and against not taking birth control.

By limiting the domain of the Conscience Principle to just those cases where there are no existing moral reasons for or against an action, a view guarantees that persons will not have moral reasons that conflict with objective moral reasons. It is only up to the person’s personal beliefs, judgments, and whatnot whether she has a reason to φ when there is no objective fact of the matter about whether she ought to φ in the first place. So the moral reasons a person has because of her conscience will never conflict with her
objective moral reasons on such a view. Secondly, the Restricted Conscience Principle view holds that objective moral considerations do give persons moral reasons, absent what they happen to judge at the moment. So it successfully evades moral relativism or subjectivism, which would seem to allow arbitrary and mistaken interests and opinions to constrain a person’s moral reasons.

Despite these attractions, Aquinas thinks the Restricted Conscience Principle view gets it wrong. To argue against it, he capitalizes on that view’s assumption that there is something morally wrong with a person’s acting contrary to what appears to her to be right in cases of indifference and shows that the rationale for this claim should be extended to all cases. There is no principled difference, he will argue, between the cases in which there are already objective moral considerations that favor or proscribe an action and cases in which there are no such considerations. This argument gets to the heart of Aquinas’s view that we are bound to moral reality through the way that reality appears to us. The main idea he puts forward is that if the appearance to a person of some course of action as morally good or morally bad can be sufficient to give the person a moral reason against acting contrary to her judgment in limited cases, the same must be true, from an objective perspective, in cases with more determinate moral considerations. So the moral reasons a person has always depend in some way on her judgments about the moral quality of the action under consideration.

We can break down the Object of the Will Argument into the following premises and conclusion. Suppose, as the proponents of the alternative view do, that in matters of indifference— when there are no moral reasons for or against a particular action φ— a person has a moral reason to not φ only if the person thinks that not φ-ing is morally
required, and that she has a moral reason to φ only if she thinks that φ-ing is morally required. What would best explain the change from the absence of a moral reason against φ-ing to the existence of a moral reason against φ-ing? The most plausible explanation, Aquinas thinks, is that the mistaken person has a new moral reason against φ-ing simply because if she were to φ while perceiving φ-ing as prohibited, what she would be aiming at the bad \textit{de dicto}, even though unbeknownst to her, \textit{de re} the object of her will is morally indifferent. And the act of aiming at something under the description of a prohibited act is morally defective. There is no principled reason to restrict the idea that the object of the will determines the moral quality of the act of will to cases of indifferent action, as the Franciscan view would have us do. So, we may conclude, every time a person acts aiming at the \textit{de dicto} bad, her will is bad.

Consider an example that will bolster the second and third premises. If I think that the sandwiches on the university lawn are for purchase, but I’ve decided to do something mischievous today and so I take a sandwich, this intentional action seems morally bad whether or not it turns out that the university is providing free sandwiches on the lawn today. Since the badness of the action remains the same whether or not the state of affairs brought about is bad from an objective perspective, the badness of the action cannot depend on the external state of affairs, and hence the need to invoke personal psychology. Now, we can support the fourth premise. If the person’s moral judgment about what ought to be done can, independent of the external states of affairs brought about by the

\footnote{Defenders of the Franciscan view decidedly reject the Abelardian position that the mere judgment that one ought to φ suffices to make φ-ing morally required, or even morally good. So they will have to say more about why the agent’s judgment that she ought to φ makes a difference to her actual moral reasons in the cases of indifference.}

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action, make an action morally bad, then her moral reason against performing that action depends on her moral judgment. It is the badness of the object of my will—that I want to do something I think is mischievous—that makes it the case that I have a moral reason to avoid that course of action.

Aquinas draws the general conclusion that for any action, if a person thinks that action is morally prohibited and the person wills to perform that action, then the object of her will falls under one of two descriptions regardless of the intrinsic moral quality (or lack thereof) of φ-ing. If the person thinks φ-ing is morally required, then if she aims to not φ, she is aiming at something under the description “morally bad” or “morally prohibited.” If the person thinks that φ-ing is morally bad or prohibited, and she aims to φ, then she is aiming at something under the description “morally bad” or “morally prohibited.” The object of her action is bad de dicto, even if it happens not to be bad de re. The very position that defenders of the competing view tried to carve out for cases of indifferent action rests on the notion that an act of will aimed at something morally bad de dicto is morally bad. There is no in principle reason to restrict this model to actions that are not, in the abstract, supported or prohibited by moral reasons. Therefore, we ought to let the model range over all types of action.

This argument against the Restricted Conscience Principle points us in the direction of Aquinas’s discussion of objects of the will. For it rests on the claim that we always have moral reasons against doing what appears to us to be morally bad and avoiding what appears to us to be morally required. When Margot comes to the conclusion that taking birth control pills daily is morally required of her, she comes to have a moral reason against avoiding taking her birth control pills. What makes it the
case that the reason is a reason against avoiding taking birth control pills rather than some other course of action is what Aquinas calls the object of the will. His discussion of objects of the will sheds more light on the dependence relation between moral reasons and persons’ practical reasoning, so let’s turn to that discussion now.

3.4.2 Moral Reasons Formally Depend on Objects of the Will

Aquinas has a careful, although lengthy and somewhat tortuous, positive argument for the claim that moral reasons depend on persons’ reasoning that stretches from \textit{ST} IaIIae 18 article 2 to 19 article 5. It begins with a thesis about goodness generally and then, applying this thesis to human action specifically, concludes that the moral goodness of human actions must depend primarily on the object proposed by a person’s reason, and so what persons have moral reason to do is largely determined by their judgments. Using the terminology I developed in chapter 2, moral reasons formally depend on persons’ rational judgments.

In the first stage of the argument, he reminds us of a thesis about goodness and being he establishes earlier in the \textit{Summa}: goodness and being are the same in referent but different in sense. Specifically, he contends that God is both the good and being itself, one nature under two descriptions.\textsuperscript{243} Creatures do not instantiate being in the absolute, unqualified way God does. Neither do they, consequently, exhibit absolute goodness. Instead, each creature instantiates being in a mode delimited by its nature—properties

and capacities that belong to it because of the kind of thing it is created to be. To the extent that a creature realizes those properties and capacities, it has a qualified kind of being and correlatively, a qualified kind of goodness. It is good as a thing of that kind. For instance, a duck instantiates being appropriate to its kind by growing feathers, swimming, eating, etc. Growing feathers is good, but not good absolutely; it is good for the duck. If a human being started growing feathers, it would not be good for that human being since growing and having feathers is not a property of human nature. (That is not in God’s blueprint for human beings, so to speak.) So to find out what makes something of a kind good, we need to know first what properties and capacities belong to that kind of thing.

In ST question 18 article 2, Aquinas uses this general thesis about goodness to explain how the goodness of any human action depends on the object of that action. First, he says, what makes a human action what it is as a human action—its genus—is that it is ordered by reason toward some end.244 “Things are called human actions,” he writes, “or moral actions, insofar as they are according to reason.”245 But reason’s involvement can’t be adequately described in abstraction; a person’s practical reasoning always includes some determinate content. So any particular human action has a more determinate species, like “taking what belongs to one” based on the content of the person’s reasoning, and this is what Aquinas calls the object of the action.246 The object of the action, provided by a person’s reason, makes any given action the kind of action it is. Based on

244 ST IaIIae 18.1 ad. 3.
245 ST IaIIae 18.5
246 ST IaIIae 18.2: “An action has its species from its object.” ST IaIIae 18.2 ad. 2: “The object is not the matter from which it is, but the matter about which, and so it has the character of a form [for an action], insofar as it gives it its species.”
the more general thesis about goodness, we can infer that to the extent the action realizes the properties and potential it has in virtue of its object, the action is good. And failure to realize those properties and potential that belong to the action because of its object makes the action deficient as an instance of that kind of action.

What does this mean for moral reasons? It tells us that in general, moral reasons are reasons to do a, or to do b rather than c, or c because of d, and the like, in virtue of the object of the action. The object of the action though, comes from the persons’ reasoning. Therefore, what a moral reason is a reason to do depends on the person’s reasoning—moral reasons formally depend on the persons’ reasoning.

3.4.3 Narrow- and Wide-Scope Moral Reasons, Revisited

There is another respect in which moral reasons depend on a persons’ judgments: moral reasons depend for whether they are wide or narrow scope requirements on whether the person’s judgments are correct or in error. When explaining how correct and erring conscience binds, Aquinas sheds light on how this difference in the content of a person’s reasoning can make a difference to the form the moral reason takes.

According to Aquinas, a correct conscience binds unconditionally, so the moral consideration it turns into a reason is narrow in scope; it is not just something that one must follow when certain conditions are in place, but something one is bound to act on the basis of at every instant. “A correct conscience binds unconditionally because it binds absolutely and in all circumstances. For if one’s conscience tells him to avoid adultery, he cannot change that conscience without sin, since he would commit a serious sin in the very error of changing such a conscience. Moreover, as long as it remains, it cannot
actually be set aside without sin. Thus, it binds in all cases.”

Remember that for a moral reason to be narrow in scope, there must be a per se relation between the action and the end that accounts for the moral necessity of the action imposed on the person through her knowledge. The action is not just necessary under some circumstances or under some conditions for the end, but rather it is always necessary for achieving the moral end. One cannot fail to perform the action without also failing to pursue the end. When a person’s conscience correctly concludes that some action is morally required and to be done, the relation she perceives between that action and the end “doing what is required” or “acting morally” is a per se, rather than a per accidens, relation. So the moral reason to perform that action is a narrow-scope reason to perform that action. And similarly, when a person correctly concludes that some action is morally prohibited and ought not to be done, per hypothesis the relation between the action and the end “doing what is required” or “acting morally” is a per se relation. Thus, the moral reason to refrain from the action in question is a narrow-scope moral reason to do just that—to refrain from performing the prohibited action in question.

For example, in Aquinas’s view there is a natural relation between committing adultery and the end of human happiness: adultery is not the sort of action that could contribute to a person’s happiness. Once a person is in an epistemic position to know that this is the case and she concludes that committing adultery with this person is not to be done, that judgment imposes the moral necessity of not committing adultery with this person on her. Aquinas thinks that if it is truly the case apart from the person’s judgment

\[QDV\] 17.4

I’m grateful to Alex Pruss for helpful conversation and correspondence about how this might work.
that not committing adultery with this person is necessary for her happiness, once the
person is in a position to know this she will not be able to throw her reasoning into
reverse without a moral mistake. For instance, changing her mind might require that
she be negligent and so forget that she’s come to the conclusion that it would be morally
wrong for her to commit adultery, or it might take her succumbing to a lustful habit that
results in shifting her attention from the badness of adultery to the goodness of sex with
this person who is not her spouse. In any case, the idea is that there will be some moral
reason against performing the action or having the desire or shifting her attention in a
way that would take to change her mind. Therefore, since she has a moral reason against
changing her mind, there is no real sense in which changing her mind is a morally live
option for her. But moral reasons work by imposing moral necessity on a course or set of
courses of action. A wide-scope moral reason imposes the necessity of satisfying at least
one of the disjuncts or satisfying the antecedent and consequent of a conditional when the
antecedent is true. But one cannot have a moral reason to act immorally, at least prima
facie. So if one of the disjuncts—changing her mind—is an action she has reason against
performing, then it is not more meaningful to say that she has a wide-scope moral reason
to either change her mind or not commit adultery than it is to say that she has a narrow-
scope reason to not commit adultery. Of course, some logic might allow us to add
anything as a disjunct to the content of a moral reason and make it a wide-scope moral
reason, but such logic would invite at least a few incredulous stares. (For instance, a
moral reason to \( \varphi \) is equivalent to a moral reason to \( [\varphi \text{ or } \psi] \) reading the “or” inclusively.)

I borrow the phrase “throw one’s reasoning into reverse” from John Broome, “The Unity of

249 I borrow the phrase “throw one’s reasoning into reverse” from John Broome, “The Unity of
But what we are interested in is what is the most informative way to model the content of moral reasons, and since adding a variable that makes the reason wide in scope does nothing to change the evaluation of what is ultimately morally permissible or required, it would seem that calling such a reason wide in scope would be pointless. Thus, I will proceed on the assumption that if there is a narrow-scope reason against some action φ for a person, and there is no narrow-scope reason to not ψ, any wide-scope reason for a person to either [φ or ψ] is better read as a narrow scope reason for the person to ψ.

One might object to the plausibility of the account on which once one arrives at a correct moral judgment, one is “locked in” to that judgment.250 I want to suggest that a knee-jerk reaction against the idea may be the product of residual intuitions from an externalist or restricted-externalist position. From an externalist or restricted-externalist viewpoint, it is easy to see action types as strictly required or strictly prohibited in all cases, or perhaps all but a few, since nothing about the person’s psychology matters to the morality of the action. Having previously believed that fully general moral principles or reasons apply to every token of a type of action could dispose one to think that, even on Aquinas’s mind-dependent view, if one has reached a general or universal judgment about an action type, then that suffices for a judgment about each token of the type. For instance, if I have reached the judgment that killing is morally prohibited, this would constitute knowledge that the act of killing this enemy soldier in combat is morally prohibited. However, the objector wants to say, even if I am right that killing is morally prohibited, this judgment doesn’t seem like the sort of thing that I would be morally mistaken to question the validity of when I am deciding what to do in combat. In defense

250 I am grateful to Mark Murphy for pressing this objection.
of Aquinas’s view, I would remind the objector that, as I mentioned earlier, Aquinas explicitly denies that many universal principles lead deductively to the same particular conclusion in every circumstance or case. Instead, he thinks that universal judgments are useful in political society, since it would be dangerous for each individual to question what ought to be done in each case (each individual being liable to make a wide variety of mistakes), and that universal judgments admit of exceptions. If I were to arrive at the judgment that taking life from another human being is always morally prohibited, I may well be mistaken, for there may be exceptions such as self defense or defense of country in just war. So the first reply to the objection is that we may make far fewer correct judgments of conscience than we think.

Secondly, Aquinas does not think that universal knowledge is the same as particular knowledge. At the beginning of the chapter we looked at the passage from the Summa in which he explains that knowledge of particulars, rather than of universals, is required for a consideration to bind one to a particular course of action. The second line of response to the objection, then, is to say that even when one makes a correct universal judgment, that judgment does not constitute a correct judgment of conscience regarding a particular instance of that universal; the person must draw the additional conclusion that the action fits under that universal description for the universal principle to bind her in a token case.

While correct conscience renders a person’s reasons narrow in scope, erring conscience gives a person moral reasons that are wide in scope. Aquinas puts in this way: “A mistaken conscience does not bind except conditionally because it is under a certain condition. For that person whose conscience dictates that he is bound to fornicate, is not
bound to fornicate in such a way that he is not able to dismiss conscience without sin, except if in his present condition this conscience persists. However, this condition is able to be removed without sin. Wherefore such a conscience does not bind on all occasions; for it can happen that someone puts down conscience, by which happening someone is not bound any longer.\textsuperscript{251}

In the case of erring conscience, the real relations between an act and a moral end go unseen by the person. The person either fabricates a relation between an act and a moral end in her reasoning, and so thinks an action is morally required that independently of her has no bearing on her moral ends, or she fails to see that there is any such relation between an action and a moral end and so thinks that the action is morally permissible, or perhaps optional, when it is in fact impermissible, or required. The result is that there is a perceived relation between an act and a moral end which is, for the person, phenomenologically indistinguishable from the perceived relation in cases of correct conscience. A person is in principle unable to see her judgment about an action and end as false; as soon as she does, it is no longer what she judges. So a person cannot in principle distinguish between a correct and a false conscience. As soon as she takes a judgment of conscience to be false, it is no longer what her conscience judges. If the perception is sufficient to impose the moral necessity of the action in the case of correct conscience, the perception will also be sufficient to impose the moral necessity of the action in the case of mistaken conscience. However, with a mistaken conscience, because the relation is perceived per accidens rather than per se, the necessity of the action is itself conditional on the person continuing to hold onto that judgment, but there is no

\textsuperscript{251} Ibid.
moral reason blocking her from changing her judgment. She can reconsider the beliefs that served as premises in the reasoning that led to the conclusion she currently endorses without moral mistake, and so she is morally permitted to either not act contrary to her judgment or to change her mind. Thus, we say that the moral reasons from a mistaken conscience are wide in scope. They are reasons to (either not act against what one judges to be morally necessary or change one’s mind).

The truth-functional evaluation of the contents of persons’ practical judgments make a difference to the scope of their reasons on the Thomistic model. True practical judgments make for narrow-scope moral reasons because there are moral reasons against the actions needed to change one’s mind. Suppose S judges that \( p \) where \( p \) is true. Suppose further that \( p \) is a consideration against S \( \varphi \)-ing. According to the Cognition Requirement, then, S has knowledge of \( p \) that suffices for S to have a moral reason to act on \( p \). If S has a wide-scope reason to [not \( \varphi \) or believe not-\( p \)], then correlatively, if she judges that \( p \) she must \( \varphi \) in order to avoid violating that wide-scope reason. That is, she would have a reason to [if she judges that \( p \) then not \( \varphi \)], and the antecedent being satisfied, the only way to satisfy the conditional in the second reason is to not \( \varphi \). Without \( \varphi \)-ing, the only way to satisfy the first wide-scope reason is to believe not-\( p \). But she judges that \( p \). So the only way to satisfy the reason is to believe contradictory propositions. It is safe to say that on any good moral theory, there are never moral reasons to form contradictory beliefs. So the only way to satisfy the wide-scope reason is to not \( \varphi \). If the content of the moral reason is to be informative about what she is permitted to do without moral mistake, then, it will be narrow in scope: S has a moral reason to \( \varphi \).
We can thus derive a narrow-scope reason to φ from what would have otherwise been a wide-scope reason to (φ or change one’s mind about φ-ing). By contrast, false practical judgments leave morally open the possibility of changing one’s mind, since there are not moral reasons against doing what would take to change one’s mind. In fact, there are probably reasons that favor doing what it would take to change one’s mind. Therefore moral reasons that depend on false judgments are wide in scope. We can conclude from this that moral reasons formally depend on persons’ judgments not only because the content of the judgments supplies the reason with its content, but also because the truth-functional evaluation of the content determines the form the content takes—whether it is wide or narrow in scope. Though the scope may differ, the normativity of the reason does not. The difference is a difference in the content or form—what it is a reason to do.

3.4.4 Ignorance (Again) and Excuse

Aquinas’s rich discussion of mistaken conscience—the various ways error can come about in reason and how this bears on the moral evaluation of the person with the mistaken conscience—lines up neatly with our earlier discussion of ignorance. It also will help to deepen our understanding of the overall theory to see what he says about ignorance of conscience.

First, Aquinas takes a person’s reason to ground a second potentiality to shift her attention to different objects in practical reasoning, which lends credibility to the idea that one is not just morally free but also able to change one’s mind when one has a wide-scope reason. Recall the brief argument we saw from the *Summa* where Aquinas puts
forward his doctrine about free decision (*libero arbitrium*) according to which humans, unlike other animals, have the unique capacity to bring actions under a variety of descriptions. To highlight this exceptional human ability he contrasts the case of a sheep being frightened by a wolf and a human being frightened by a wolf. While the sheep cannot help that the wolf appears fearful to her, and so cannot help perceiving that “fleeing” is to be done, the shepherd can reason about what she perceives. When a human person acts, what she does is up to her in the following way: what description of the action she fixates on and so what she thinks she ought to do is a matter of her practical reasoning, which she is able to throw into reverse. For instance, if a shepherd sees a wolf and judges that the wolf is fearsome, she can either conclude that she ought to run away from the wolf, or she can revise one of the premises that would lead her to that conclusion and conclude that she should stand up to the wolf and protect the sheep. The conclusion that she should run away from the wolf might rely on the premise that one should run away from fearsome creatures; but if the shepherd, looking first at the wolf, then at the innocent sheep, thinks “one should fight fearsome things when it will protect the innocent” then she will have another premise on which to base a different conclusion; namely, that she ought to fight the wolf to protect the sheep. The shepherd’s reason allows her to alter her judgment and the intention that follows on its coattails.

Granting that human reasoning is free in that we can shift our attention to and consider actions under an assortment of descriptions, let’s think about the implications for a person with a mistaken conscience. Aquinas defines ignorance as not a mere lack of

\[252\] As well as in the text we have been looking at: “Acts are called ‘human’ or ‘moral’ insofar as they come from reason.” ST IaIIae 18.5

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knowledge, but a “privation”: a “lack of knowledge about what one has a natural capacity to know.” He holds that if ignorance results directly or indirectly from free decision, ignorance does not excuse the person who acts contrary to a moral consideration in ignorance, but if the ignorance is itself involuntary, then it does excuse the person who acts in it by rendering the action not subject to moral appraisal.

Imagine a case where the ignorance of a moral consideration is a direct result of a free decision:

VERA: Vera is a parent of an elementary-aged child and is worried that vaccinating her child will increase the probability that her child will develop autism. In her mind, taking her child to be vaccinated for school would be voluntarily risking great harm to her child. But Vera also has seen the headlines about the CDC’s recommendations to vaccinate. Still, she firmly believes it is in her child’s best interest to not receive vaccines.

In this case, it might seem obvious that Vera has at least one moral reason: it is bad for herd immunity for her child to go unvaccinated. But if Vera is unaware of this fact because she refuses to read any articles that are pro-vaccination, the moral considerations in favor of vaccinating will not be moral reasons for her on the Thomistic view. Aquinas argues that a person like Vera who is in an epistemic position to get more information is morally blameworthy for her failure to acquire knowledge from the CDC about vaccinations and autism. We might attribute non-moral blame or punishment to Vera for the actions that proceed from her ignorance, just as Aquinas suggests we do to the drunk who commits manslaughter, because it will protect the community. We can imagine that Vera might have had a moral reason to read an article about vaccines early on in her deliberation process, but after considering the good of reading the article and gaining

\[253\text{ ST IaIIae 76.2}\]
more information, she shifted her attention to something else entirely. So her negligence
would have led her to no longer be in a position to have knowledge of the moral
considerations in favor of vaccinating. Since her negligence would have been voluntary,
though, and since she was in a position to know she should not be negligent, we can say
she violated a moral reason against being negligent. The violation of that moral reason
early on resulted in her ignorance, and so Aquinas would call this kind of ignorance
negligence. When a person is negligent, she has a moral reason against holding to the
mistaken premises that lead to the faulty conclusion in her reasoning, and so we can hold
her accountable for violating those moral reasons.

In other cases, the ignorance is directly willed, such as when someone decides she
does not want to know something; and here the ignorant person’s wide scope moral
reason can be coupled with another moral reason to draw a related conclusion that she
has failed to act on. Suppose that Vera’s friend Vivian also does not want to have her
child vaccinated. But Vivian is ignorant of the moral considerations in favor of
vaccinating because she does not want to know what the CDC or other healthcare
professionals have to say. She thinks it would be better to have her child lick a lollipop
with Varicella on it to build up her immune system. So Vivian willingly fails to know
that it is both bad for herd immunity and bad for her child’s health to not get her child
vaccinated. In a case of ignorance like this, again, Aquinas says, since the person is in a
position to get into a position where these moral considerations are knowable to her and
willfully turns her reasoning in the opposite direction, she violates a moral reason for
gathering information from the CDC or a healthcare professional and is blameworthy for
not acting in light of those moral considerations because of her willful ignorance.
Unlike ignorance that results from negligence or wanting to avoid knowing what one ought to know, involuntary ignorance is not ignorance for which one is morally on the hook, as we saw earlier. This kind of ignorance is involuntary because it is not able to be brought under the consideration of the person’s reason and changed. Thus, the action that the person performs is not subject to moral reasons in the normal way and so does not count as a human, moral action. Instead, it is more like the action of the sheep that flees from the wolf out of instinctual fear. Both the person with involuntary ignorance and the sheep cannot help but see the object of their action as they do—the wolf as to be feared or the action as to be avoided, let’s say. It is only in virtue of an action’s object being subject to reason that an action is an appropriate subject of moral appraisal. Therefore, actions done in involuntary ignorance cannot be appropriately evaluated as morally good or morally bad (even though they may be naturally bad for the human person or naturally good for her). There are no moral reasons for or against actions done in ignorance or performed non-rationally, just as there are no moral reasons for or against actions performed by non-rational animals.

3.4.5 Taking Stock

To recap, thus far I have attempted to show that Aquinas holds that moral reasons depend on two cognitive features of persons: their practical judgments and the mental structure that makes possible those judgments—synderesis. Moral reasons depend materially on synderesis. Moral reasons depend formally on practical judgments even when they are mistaken. When a practical judgment is true, the moral reason that depends on that judgment for its content is narrow in scope. But when a practical judgment is false, the
moral reason that depends on it is wide in scope. Sometimes persons have moral reasons to perform acts of reasoning—acts that put them in an epistemic position to be bound by certain moral considerations. When they fail to perform such actions, the result of violating those moral reasons is that the actions they perform in ignorance are actions we can fault them for. But when persons have no moral reasons to reason differently, and they find themselves in ignorance about a moral consideration, they are excused for the actions they perform out of that ignorance.

3.5 Why Moral Reasons Formally Depend on Judgments

The defenders of other views about mind dependence at this point will probably be dissatisfied with the Thomistic account of mind dependence and the arguments I have reviewed for that thesis thus far. The proponent of the Restricted Conscience Principle, for instance, can easily retreat from her position and take shelter under the eaves of an objectivist moral theory without a substantive principle like the Conscience Principle. Why not assert that it is the *de re* object of the will, not the *de dicto* object of the will *proposed by reason*, that determines the content of the moral reasons for or against an action? Putting the challenge in contemporary terms, once it becomes clear that defending the mind dependence of moral reasons in a limited domain is untenable, she can just as easily give up on the idea of mind dependence altogether as she can adopt mind dependence wholesale. And so since the restricted mind-dependence account and the universal mind-dependence account Aquinas wants to develop are not exhaustive of
the options, Aquinas’s arguments against the restricted mind-dependence position cannot serve as a knockdown argument in favor of his own view.

While Aquinas does not succinctly and clearly state a positive justification for adopting the kind of formal mind dependence I am suggesting he endorses, an argument can be reconstructed on his behalf using the major theses of his general moral theory and remarks he makes about reason in *ST IaIIae* question 19. In what follows, I attempt to piece together such an argument in order to illustrate why on his view moral reasons must be mind dependent in the way he has described. We’ll start with what Aquinas says about human happiness, work our way down to what role he thinks human actions play in achieving our happiness, and then look at why on this picture moral reasons for action depend for their content on persons’ judgments.

### 3.5.1 The Substantive and Formal Accounts of the Good

Aquinas holds a twofold theory of the good. First, he has a formal account of the good on which the good is what is desirable. Here he follows Aristotle’s famous argument from *Ethics*: If everything desired were desired for the sake of something else, then nothing would be able to satisfy the person desiring, and desiring would be unintelligible. But desiring is intelligible. So there must be something desirable that ultimately satisfies desires and so makes desiring intelligible. That is what we call, formally, the good.\(^{254}\)

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\(^{254}\) *ST IaIIae* 1.5.6. See also *SCG* III.3.3. This conclusion appears in the premises of the argument for the central metaethical thesis in *ST IaIIae* 1.5: “The account of the good consists in this, that it is desirable in some way; hence the philosopher (Aristotle), in the first book of the Ethics, says that the good is that which all things desire. It is clear, however, that every thing that is desirable is, accordingly, perfect, and all
Aquinas’s substantive account of the good goes beyond Aristotle’s, however, in at least two, related ways: first, for Aquinas the ultimate good is God himself, and second, as a consequence of this, the human good consists in exercising one’s capacities in order to enter into union with God. On Aquinas’s view, that which satisfies all desires and is most desirable is God himself. His arguments for this claim are diverse and various, and for our purposes we need not repeat them here. But the important point is that God creates the universe such that every activity moves creatures back towards their creator—that is the actuality for which God designs each individual creature with the potential.  

The substantive account of God as the good leads Aquinas to argue that the proper operation of reason, although reason is the characteristic activity of human persons, will only lead to imperfect happiness in this life. No finite good in the present world can fully satisfy our desires and so make desiring intelligible. Since human beings in this life are always vulnerable to illness and fortune, no human is able by her actions to secure finite goods so as to not be able to lose them; nor can any one individual finite good fully satisfy human desire; thus we cannot attain the good—the ultimate satisfaction of desire—in this life. God alone can completely satisfy human desires. Since the human good is the attainment of our proper end through deliberation and choice, and our proper

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255 The structure of the Summa even reflects this return (reddito): the Prima Pars considers the nature of God himself, God’s creation, and His providence over creation; the Secunda Pars treats of human beings’ movement towards their end, which is God; and the Tertia Pars introduces Christ’s work to bring all of creation including human beings back to God himself. See ST IaIIae 1.6.1. See also SCG III.3.6.

256 SCG III.2.3, 37.1, 8; ST IaIIae 1.6, 8; In Sent. II.38, 41

257 SCG III.48, 63
end on the substantive account of the good is to be united with God, the exercise of our rational capacities must aim at being united with God in order to be excellent.\textsuperscript{258}

On the Thomistic account, a human person’s being united with God consists in knowing and loving him, unlike other created beings whose unity with God consists merely in resembling other aspects of God:

For the final end of man and other rational creatures is to know and love God, which is not possible for other creatures, which acquire their last end insofar as they participate in some likeness to God according to their being or living or even cognizing.\textsuperscript{259}

Resembling God in the manner appropriate to human beings involves exercising the capacities for deliberation and choice to know and love God, as God knows and loves himself.

Here the account would seem to face an obvious problem, for knowing and loving God requires seeing him and knowing what he is, which humans cannot do by sheer force of will and intellectual effort. As Aquinas scholar Josef Pilsner says, “no means lying within a human person’s power can possibly achieve his final end.”\textsuperscript{260}

3.5.2 Friendship with God Is Necessary for Happiness

Aquinas solves this problem by proposing that our final end can be participated in imperfectly in this life through the exercise of our natural capacities, but that the perfect

\textsuperscript{258} One could argue that Aristotle’s conception of contemplation and perfect happiness in Book X of \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} says as much, and so Aquinas does not differ with Aristotle on this point as I portray him. The questions surrounding interpretation of Book X are vexed and the subject of much disagreement, so I will not attempt to engage with them here. If it turns out that Aristotle and Aquinas agree on this point, so much the better for the view. At the very least, we can agree that Aristotle does not think friendship with God is the aim of human life.

\textsuperscript{259} \textit{ST} IaIIae 1.8

attainment of our final end is made possible only by the gift of God’s friendship and our preparing our wills to receive it:

Just as nature does not make man deficient in what is necessary, though it did not give him arms and clothes like the other animals because it gave him reason and hands with which he is able to acquire these for himself, so it did not leave him deficient in what is necessary, though it did not give him some principle by which he would be able to achieve happiness; for this would be impossible. But it gave him free decision, by which he is able to turn to God, who is able to make him happy. ‘For what we are able to do through our friends, we are able in some sense to do through ourselves,’ as it says in Nicomachean Ethics III.261

So on the one hand, we can achieve imperfect happiness in this life insofar as we turn to God by exercising our natural capacities, but on the other hand, we do not have what it takes to achieve perfect happiness without God’s grace. Though nature does not give us everything we need to achieve our final end, nature does give us capacities to enter into friendship with God. And God, as a gracious gift to those who do enter into friendship with him, helps us attain our final end not in this life but in the next, when we can see him face to face. This union with God will slake our thirst completely and so deserves the name “perfect happiness,” while the partial friendship with God we attain by turning to him in this life does not satisfy all of our natural desires and should accordingly be called “imperfect happiness.”

Human persons’ final end is to enter into friendship with God, and the only way to enter into this friendship is to fit our wills for receiving it as a gift from God. Now the question is what actions accomplish this. Aquinas says that “it pertains to the concept of friendship that the friend want for the desire of the other to be fulfilled, insofar as the friend wishes the other’s good and perfection; for this reason it is said that it belongs to

261 ST IaIIae 5.5 ad.1
As it is part of the concept of friendship that friends will the same thing, friendship requires that when the friends are considering some object of their wills under the same description, they not will opposing things with respect to the object.

Our wills must conform to God’s will for it to be fit for friendship with him; so when considering something to be done, we cannot be friends with God if we will the opposite of what he wills regarding something under the same description. Return to the example of Margot for a moment. Margot is considering the action “taking birth control to avoid irresponsibility.” Her attention is focused on what harms would result if she and her partner were to have a child without having stable incomes and appropriate financial support for a child. Now, we can imagine that God takes the same attitude towards irresponsibility as Margot; that is, he does not want, when considering some action as irresponsible, that the action be done. However, it is problematic for friendship with God if Margot takes a contrary attitude towards an action under the same description, such as when she considers the badness of not taking her birth control pills and endorses the action under that description—a description under which God would not endorse the action, even if in the absence of that description, God would want that Margot not take birth control. What is morally problematic, then, about failing to will an action that

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262 *SCG* III 95.5
263 *ST* IaIIae 19.10 ad. 2
264 Mark Murphy has pressed the point that Aquinas’s picture in *ST* IaIIae 19 of friendship with God does not seem to be a shared will conception, as I have been suggesting here. But if we accept that friendship, consisting in unity with and love for the beloved, comes in degrees, and that two agents can have friendship even while being at odds in some respects or misunderstanding one another here and there, the ideal toward which they strive is complete unity. Thus, when I speak of friendship with God as the sharing of wills or willing the same things under the same descriptions, I am invoking the ideal degree of friendship rather than the kind of friendship required for God to give human beings grace, which is just not
accidentally, because of mistaken reasoning, falls under a good description is that it puts
the person’s will at odds with God’s will. And given the conception of friendship on the
table, her will’s being at odds with God’s will regarding something under the same
description impedes her will from being prepared for friendship with God. The ultimate
reason that the appearance of some action as good or bad makes a difference to the
content of an person’s moral reasons for or against that action is that it is the person’s
willing an action under a specific description, not just willing the action in the abstract,
that affects her prospects for happiness.

3.5.3 A Narrow-Scope Moral Reason Against Willing the Bad De Dicto

When it comes to friendship with God, Aquinas thinks that more often than not, we
cannot be expected to know what God wills in particular. This might appear to be an
enormous obstacle to fitting our wills for friendship with God and so doing what is
necessary to achieve happiness. Additionally, given the Cognition Requirement on
binding, it would seem that the moral considerations that bear on actions that contribute
to or detract from the goodness of our wills would thus not be moral reasons for us
unless, by some revelation or lucky reasoning procedure we found ourselves in a position
to know something God wills in particular. However, Aquinas contends, we are in a
position to know what God wills universally. “We are able to know what God wills,
according to a universal description, as such. For we know that God wills whatever he
wills under the description ‘good.’ ”265 Because God gives us synderesis, we have the

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265 ST IaIIae 19.10 ad. 1
ability know that God wills the good, or more generally that we should pursue things under the description ‘good’ and avoid things under the description ‘bad.’ That is, all human persons with synderesis meet the Cognition Requirement for at least one moral reason, and that is the moral reason against willing what appears to be bad and not willing what appears to be good.

Remember that for Aquinas, there are two ways a moral reason can bind: conditionally and unconditionally. If a moral reason binds conditionally, its content is wide in scope; and if a reason binds unconditionally its content is narrow in scope. The analysis he gives of narrow-scope reasons is this: when the moral necessity imposed on a person to perform an action φ for an end E is due to a relation that holds in virtue of the nature of E and the nature of φ, the person has a narrow scope moral reason to perform the action φ. What we have just learned about the nature of our final end, union with God, and the nature of willing what appears to be bad to us, or de dicto, suggests that we have a narrow scope moral reason against willing the bad de dicto. It is part of the nature of the end of our union with God that we not will the opposite of what God wills under the same description. And it is part of the nature of willing the bad de dicto that it is the opposite of what God wills under that description, since God always wills everything under the description “good.” The relation that the act of willing the bad under that description bears to the end of union with God is not accidental but due to the nature of the act and the end. And synderesis facilitates our knowledge that we ought not will what appears to us as bad. So the consideration against doing what appears to one to be bad binds persons semper et ad semper; it is a narrow-scope moral reason.
Aquinas confronts the question of whether it makes sense to claim that, even though human persons cannot achieve their final end without grace, they are still morally bound to do what is necessary for receiving grace—enter friendship with God—in the Summa Contra Gentiles. He explains that while we are unable to achieve our final end, we are able to thwart ourselves from that final end through free decision. And given that we are free to decide whether or not block ourselves from receiving the grace of God’s friendship by deciding whether or not to will what appears bad to us, it is sensible to blame persons who develop wills that cannot receive God’s grace.

Although it is possible neither to merit nor call for divine grace through a movement of free judgment, nevertheless it is possible to impede oneself from receiving it [through free judgment]: for it is said in Job 21 verse 14, ‘Who have said to God, depart from us, we do not wish for knowledge of your ways’ and in verse 13, ‘they have been rebels to the light.’ And since this ability to impede the reception of divine grace or to not impede it is in the power of free judgment, blame is not unwarranted when imputed to the one who puts up an impediment to receiving divine grace.266

Subsequently he explicates how God actual offers “in advance” help to those who would block themselves from receiving God’s grace, by “turning them away from the bad and toward the good.” Again, he is reiterating the role of synderesis in making the consideration against willing what appears to be bad as such a moral reason that binds persons. Finally, he contends that human persons can get themselves into a position, through repeatedly choosing what is bad under that description, from which they become unable to stop resisting God. He responds that “although those who are in sin would not be able to get rid of their own power to place an impediment in the way of grace, as has been shown, without the help of grace, nevertheless fault is nonetheless imputed to them.

266 SCG III.159.2
because this defect remains in them due to a preceding fault, just as when an intoxicated man is not excused from the fault he incurred for committing homicide while intoxicated.” Here Aquinas is reiterating the line about ignorance we saw him towing in the discussion of moral reasons and mistaken conscience. All human persons have a narrow-scope moral reason against willing the bad de dicto. And so when a person does will the bad de dicto and as a result, finds herself unable to take up other moral considerations in her reasoning about other particular actions, she is morally blameworthy for those actions. Even when she has no moral reasons against performing them, the absence of those reasons is attributable to her violating the moral reason which, had she acted in accordance with it, would have put her in a position to be bound by considerations against those actions. Therefore we can call her blameworthy for the actions that follow in the wake of her failure to act on her prior moral reasons.

3.5.4 The Thomistic Version of Aristotelian Mind Dependence

In this chapter, I have aimed to demonstrate that Aquinas holds a thesis about the mind dependence of moral reasons that is a version of Aristotelian mind dependence. On the Aristotelian view, moral reasons formally depend on mental states that enable persons to act in the sense of second potentiality and moral reasons depend materially on mental structures that enable persons to act in the sense of first potentiality. As I have argued, for Aquinas moral reasons formally depend on cognitive mental states, and in particular, on practical judgments and conclusions of practical reasoning. Additionally, Aquinas maintains that what allows a person to perform a human action is her capacity for free 

\[267 SCG III.160.5\]
decision through practical reasoning. So what enables a person to act in the sense of second potentiality is her practical reasoning about a particular consideration. Moreover, on Aquinas’s view moral reasons materially depend on synderesis, the mental habit that enables persons to grasp that the good should be done and the bad should be avoided. This habit is what furnishes persons with the possibility of moral action in the sense of first potentiality. Thus, the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis neatly fits the sketch of mind dependence provided by the Aristotelian conception.

Throughout this chapter, I have reviewed Aquinas’s arguments for the various claims he makes about mind dependence as a way of further supporting my reading. Several of these arguments hang on controversial theses about goodness, being, God, and humans’ final end. So the reader might be tempted to step off the Thomistic train early on. While I myself am inclined to find the deep justification for the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis I explored in the last section of this chapter one of the most compelling reasons for adopting it, I recognize that most moral theorists are more interested in issues raised by the puzzle about moral reasons and would be more likely to be persuaded by a view’s ability to satisfying the criteria I laid out for a good solution to that puzzle. In the next chapter, then, I will establish the final premise in the abductive argument for the plausibility of the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis, which is independent of the contentious premises on which Aquinas’s arguments for his thesis rest.
A Thomistic Solution the Puzzle

This work has been preoccupied with a certain longstanding theoretical problem with the idea that a moral reason is essentially an authoritative guide to action. How can moral reasons be both authoritative in virtue of being objective, and action-guiding, or practical, by definition? As I explained in earlier chapters, there are good reasons for pessimism about supplying an adequate answer to that question. And in light of those reasons, most moral philosophers nowadays have opted for a revisionist conception of moral reasons as either objective, or practical, but not both. What becomes hotly contested is which way the revision ought to go. And the debate has shown few signs of progress as on either side remain firmly committed to at least one of four seemingly conflicting theses about moral reasons—the first two being that moral reasons are objective and that moral reasons are practical, and the second two being that even amoralists and retrograde agents are bound by moral reasons and that moral reasons respect the ought implies can principle.

While I sympathize with those who think the debate has ended in a stalemate, I think it is too early to abandon hope for a better solution. We have left unexplored a way of looking at the problem that opens up a strategy for solving it without revision of the concept of a moral reason. In chapter 1, I presented the problem in the form of a puzzle about moral reasons’ objectivity, practicality, and mind dependence. I insisted on incorporating the standard line about mind dependence a part of the puzzle because its
acceptance is ultimately responsible for the cognitive dissonance we feel when reflecting on the concept of a moral reason that is by definition both practical and objective. And by treating it as a third, movable piece of the puzzle, we create new room for maneuvering while leaving untouched the claim about moral objectivity and the claim about moral reasons’ practical function. As I explained in chapter 1, a solution that could accommodate all four of the core commitments of those engaged in the debate would have exceptional appeal in virtue of its ability to reach across the traditional party lines, so to speak. So, making the accommodation of each commitment a formal condition on a good solution to the puzzle, I suggested that if there is such a solution, we ought to take it seriously.

From that point on, I have been building up the abductive argument for Aquinas’s account of the way moral reasons are mind dependent, by showing other going views to fail to meet all four formal conditions on a good solution and by presenting the Thomistic alternative in stages. I now want to deliver on the promises of previous chapters and establish the final premise in the abductive argument for the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis by showing how it fits an account of moral reasons with all it needs to satisfy each of the four formal conditions.

4.1 The Argument So Far

Before delving into the argument for the final premise of the abductive argument, it will be useful to pause and review in more detail the earlier premises of the argument and the support I have offered for them. We began with the question of how to reconcile the
claim that moral reasons are necessarily objective with the claim that moral reasons are
necessarily practical, or action-guiding. In chapter 1 I argued that the puzzle is not just
about objectivity and practicality, but about the way each of these claims about moral
reasons relates to a further implicit premise about mind dependence. Philosophers have
taken objectivity and practicality to be two features that cannot be housed
simultaneously, and with the same modal strength, in moral reasons because they
presume that for a moral reason to be practical for an agent it must depend on her existing
ends, desires, and commitments. This kind of mind dependence just won’t square with
moral reasons’ remaining objectively binding, since they seem to gain their authority
from subjective psychological states that might be either arbitrary or easily changed.
Standard responses to the problem leave the mind dependence part of the puzzle virtually
untouched and plump for revision of the concept of a moral reason, letting either
objectivity or practicality fall by the wayside. The major controversy now centers around
which direction the revision should go. And as the arguments for revisionist accounts
proceed from parochially accepted premises, rather than shared commitments, and as
there are no agreed upon criteria for a satisfactory account of moral reasons, the
arguments lead to a stalemate.

By setting formal conditions on a solution to the puzzle that are as acceptable to
those who want to preserve moral reasons’ objectivity as they are to those who want to
defend moral reasons’ practicality, we can make genuine advances in the dialectic. To do
this, we have to subject to scrutiny the third piece of the puzzle—the conditional thesis
that if moral reasons are mind dependent then they must depend on agents’ desires,
commitments, and ends. Since the central commitments on both sides of the debate have
been well supported by arguments, a solution to the puzzle that leaves those commitments intact is preferable to one we are forced to just “pick,” as though from a menu of equally good options.

The foundational premises on which philosophers from both sides have based arguments for particular revisionist accounts of moral reasons are well supported, and no one is likely to let go of them anytime soon—the premises about moral reasons’ objectivity, practicality, respecting ought implies can, and fitting commonsense intuitions about prominent cases. We can treat the accommodation of these premises as formal conditions on a satisfactory solution to the puzzle—one that should be equally appealing to all those with skin in the game. In addition to preserving the core commitments of philosophers on each side of the dispute, such a solution avoids the theoretical costs associated with revision of the concept of a moral reason. If there is such a solution, then it is well worth our attention.

In chapter 2, I started work on finding such a solution by casting doubt on the standard mind dependence thesis that produces the tension between objectivity and practicality. The first assumption I argued against is the idea that for moral reasons to be practical they must be constituted by some psychological feature of agents or a fact about agent psychology. However, as I argued, there are other dependence relations besides the constitution relation that a moral reason could bear to agent psychology, and upon further examination, the constitution relation is not best suited to secure the practicality of moral reasons. The second assumption implicit in the standard mind dependence thesis I took to task is that moral reasons must depend on a conative mental state such as an agent’s desire or commitment in order to be action guiding for that agent. Not only does this
assumption prematurely close the door on certain plausible theses about moral motivation, I argued, but since its support depends on the truth of a controversial theory of motivation (the Humean theory of motivation), it is only as plausible as the controversial theory of motivation is. In the second half of that chapter I proposed an alternative, Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis, that does not make use of either of these problematic assumptions. On the Aristotelian picture, if moral reasons depend on agent psychology, they depend for their existence on the existence of certain mental structures that all practically rational agents share in which those considerations could function as reasons, and for what they are reason to do on discrete mental acts of actual agents. I ended on the promissory note that at least one version of the Aristotelian mind dependence thesis actually allows an account of moral reasons to meet all four formal conditions on a solution to the puzzle.

Chapter 3 focused on a particularly powerful version of the Aristotelian mind dependence thesis, found in Thomas Aquinas’s moral theory. On Aquinas’s view, moral reasons depend for their existence on a mental structure, called synderesis, that enables an agent to form judgments of the form “do good and avoid bad” and in virtue of which someone counts as a moral agent. Moral reasons depend for what they are reasons to do on the particular practical judgments Aquinas calls conscience, and for whether they leave agents latitude to throw their reasoning into reverse on mind independent normative facts. The arguments Aquinas puts to work in defense of this view both lend plausibility

268 We should not confuse the point that moral reasons for acting on principles are materially dependent on synderesis with the claim that the principles or precepts themselves are materially dependent on synderesis; they are so only incidentally. I am grateful to Tobias Hoffmann for pressing this point.
to the view and explain why it would be the case that things that count as moral reasons on this view exist in the actual world.

This chapter will feature a defense of the claim that a theory of moral reasons built on Aquinas’s mind-dependence thesis is one on which moral reasons are objectively authoritative, have a practical function, respect ought implies can, and jive with commonsense intuitions about important cases. The four sections that follow detail how these formal conditions are met, considers objections, and offers replies to objections. Specifically, in section 4.2 I show that it ensures that moral reasons are action-guiding in the sense I highlighted in chapter 1—they are functional as considerations that make a difference to agents’ deliberation and intentional action. Section 4.3 reiterates the distinction between meeting the practicality demand and respecting the ought implies can principle, and then illustrates that on the Thomistic account, moral reasons necessarily comply with ought implies can. In section 4.4 I explain that the Thomistic account gives moral reasons those features that, we saw in chapter 1, lead philosophers to think of moral reasons as objective. And finally, in section 4.5 I look at the account as applied to the cases widely discussed in the literature and explain how it avoids undermining our commonsense intuitions about those cases. The Thomistic mind-dependence thesis thus provides a solution to the puzzle that is uniquely satisfying, as compared with going revisionist responses to the puzzle. If I am right, then by the end of this chapter we will have a complete abductive argument for the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis.
4.2 Meeting the Practicality Demand

On the Thomistic analysis, moral reasons are practical in the sense that, for each agent they bind, the consideration that counts as a moral reason for that agent can make a difference to her deliberation and intentional action at the moment it binds her, and a failure to act according to that consideration is a failure of practical rationality. We can see why this is the case painting with broad-brush strokes: On the view I have put forward, what a moral reason requires an agent to do is delimited in part by her practical judgments about what she ought to do or what would be good for her to do. It is precisely in virtue of having made such a judgment that she has the ability to intentionally do what the moral reason requires—to act for that moral reason. When there is some moral consideration that counts decisively in favor of my φ-ing, that consideration is a moral reason for me to φ only if I judge that φ-ing is something to be done by me or that it would be bad for me to avoid φ-ing. Without having made such a judgment, or making a judgment in the past that gets me in the habit of φ-ing, it is hard to see how, if I φ, I am φ-ing for the moral reason I have to φ, or that I have φ-ed for that reason intentionally. And conversely, in the case where I have formed the judgment that I should φ, I have what it takes to intentionally φ for the reason that applies to me.

4.2.1 Practicality As Functionality

The sense of practicality on which I am operating, remember, is the one we derived from the arguments philosophers make in support of the claim that moral reasons must be practical. As we saw in the first chapter, some philosophers talk as though for a moral

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reason to be practical, it must actually motivate the agent to whom it applies; others imply that only ideally rational agents need be motivated to act on a moral reason for it to count as practical. I specified an ecumenical way of thinking about what makes a moral reason sufficiently practical: identify the motivations for taking up the practicality demand in the first place.

I concluded in chapter 1 that the impetus behind the practicality demand comes from two directions: First, moral reasons are a kind of reason for action, so if an agent fails to be moved to φ when she has a reason to φ, then she should thereby be practically irrational. But we do not think that agents are practically irrational when they fail to be moved by considerations they are unable to survey. I illustrated this with the example of the person burning coal to power a train in the 1920s, having no means of knowing how the widespread use of coal would impact future generations vis-à-vis climate change. Their failure to avoid excessive use of coal in trains obviously was not a failure of practically rationality. Examples like this tell us that intuitively, for a consideration to be a reason for an agent it must be a consideration on the basis of which the agent could be motivated to act, and so if moral reasons are a kind of practical reason, such that the person who acts contrary to her moral reasons is practically irrational, then moral reasons must be considerations on the basis of which those agents could be motivated to act.

The second line of support for the practicality demand, I said, comes from the idea that morality takes action to be its primary target, and moral reasons serve a function—telling agents with the ability to make and carry out rational life plans what actions should be done or avoided. Unless moral reasons systematically fail to perform their primary function, then we should assume that success conditions are built into the
idea of a moral reason—that being able to succeed in guiding agent’s action is a criterion for being a moral reason.\textsuperscript{269}

I noted that these arguments leave latitude for interpreting the sense of “practical” in the practicality demand. On the one hand, we could modestly conclude that moral reasons are the kinds of considerations that would motivate perfectly practically rational agents.\textsuperscript{270} This conclusion’s modesty lies in its assuming nothing about morality’s ability to have a grip on agents like \textit{us}—agents plagued by weakness of will and fits of irrationality. By setting the bar for practical rationality high, this theorist can explain away the fact that moral reasons are not action guiding for us by arguing that we are practically irrational.\textsuperscript{271} On the other hand, we could ambitiously conclude that each and every moral reason is the kind of consideration that can motivate actual agents like us. This version of the conclusion would have us suppose that the practical irrationality of acting immorally is the result of having the motivational resources to act on our moral reasons within our grasp and squandering them.

\textsuperscript{269} There is another route one might take here, and that is to assert that moral reasons are a species of practical reasons because the only satisfactory answer to the question “Why be moral?” is grounded in practical reason. This path requires for its defense contentious claims about the extension of moral reasons. For example, one who takes this route needs a response to the problem of the Hobbesian fool, who gives the appearance of being perfectly rational but exempt from moral requirements that apply to others.

\textsuperscript{270} This is just a restatement of the argument for moral rationalism. See Michael Smith, \textit{The Moral Problem}; Mark Schroeder, \textit{Slaves of the Passions}, and “Internalism v. Externalism.”

\textsuperscript{271} In chapter 1 of \textit{What We Owe To Each Other}, Scanlon argues for a narrow conception of irrationality by way of pointing out that not every mistaken belief is one that it is irrational to hold; if someone is misguided or mistaken, then she may be open to rational criticism, but this does not make her irrational full stop (Scanlon, \textit{What We Owe To Each Other}, 26). Scanlon also, like me, thinks that there is a small but important gap between accepting the major and minor premise in an argument like “S ought to avoid all future pains” and “S ought to avoid pain on future Tuesdays.” Since there is not a strict rational requirement to accept the latter if one accepts the former (suppose, for instance, that one does not see the connection between the former and the latter) one cannot be irrational for failing to judge that one should avoid all pain on future Tuesdays, though one may be open to rational criticism. I agree with Scanlon that we ought to preserve the term “irrationality” to mark the special case in which one outright violates a rational requirement, and to distinguish this from other kinds of cognitive failure.
I defend the ecumenical position that the practicality demand insists on moral reasons being functional items: they play a part in our deliberation and intentional rational action. In general, functional items do not need to be actively performing their functions to be what they are, but they do need to be ready to perform those functions once a process is started. So too with moral reasons.²⁷² For a consideration to be a functional item in an agent’s deliberation and rational action requires that the consideration be something on which the agent can draw upon at a moment’s notice, but the agent need not be considering it at every moment. Therefore, for a moral consideration to be a moral reason, it must be able to be taken up in deliberation and effect intentional action in the sense of second potentiality. This is the sense of practicality that is reasonable to require an account of moral reasons to satisfy, and the sense in which moral reasons are practical on the analysis underwritten by the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis.

²⁷² To get a grip on the contrast, let’s consider a non-normative example. It is not enough for a curved piece of scrap steel to be a functional road bike derailleur that in some distant possible world, a person finds that scrap, melts it down, and reshapes it into a derailleur in that world. A Shimano 4600 derailleur stripped off a road bike and sitting in a bike store is a functional derailleur despite the fact that it is not now being used as one because at any moment, if I purchase that piece of hardware I can install it on my road bike and it will actively function as a derailleur. Similarly, that a consideration is the sort of thing that would bear on a flawlessly rational agent’s deliberation or on the deliberation and action of a hypothetical version of oneself in a far off possible world is not sufficient for the consideration to be functionally defined by that use. That a consideration is available to me because it is information stored somewhere in my mind, ready to be used in syllogistic reasoning about what I ought to do, does make the consideration functional as a reason. In sum, moral reasons are necessarily practical because they are functional, so the practicality of a moral reason is captured by its ability to be put to use at any moment by the agent who has that reason.
4.2.2 How Material and Formal Dependence Ensure the Practical Function of Moral Reasons

With this understanding of practicality in mind, we can spell out in more detail how the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis neatly fits a theory of moral reasons with the resources to meet the practicality demand. Recall that the Aristotelian features of the Thomistic mind dependence thesis—the material and formal dependence relations, in particular—call for the agent psychological features that serve as the relata of the mind dependence relation to have certain modalities. The base of the material dependence relation must be a structure that enables agents to engage in practical reasoning in the sense of first potentiality and the base of the formal dependence relation must be a mental act that accounts for an agent’s ability to take up some particular consideration in her deliberation and intentional action in the sense of second potentiality. Because the modalities of the mental relata are built into the Aristotelian picture of moral reasons’ mind dependence, the analysis of moral reasons it spits out will capture the practicality of moral reasons in precisely the sense we care about.

More perspicuously, on the Aristotelian analysis a moral reason exists only if it has something that plays the role of form, conferring an identity or kind on the reason, and something that plays the role of matter, individuating it as discrete from other instances of that kind of thing. Whatever serves as the matter for an object enables it to “receive” the form it has and whatever serves as the form of an object enables it to perform particular functions. Aristotle illustrates the relationship between object, its form, and its matter using the example of a linguistic syllable: a syllable “AB” must have letters to exist as a discrete syllable, and in this way the syllable materially depends on
the letters; it also must have a form—the lexical order in this case—that distinguishes its kind or identity from other items with the same material components, like the syllable “BA.” The letters’ existence make the syllable able to exist in the first sense of potentiality, since, when written they then have the potential to form a syllable (either “AB” or “BA”). When the lexical structure is imposed on the letters, then the syllable is primed to be taken up as a syllable in the sense of second potentiality—able to be actualized as a syllable barring momentary external hindrances.

I invoked the same schema for moral reasons, explaining that for moral reasons to exist they must be housed in some mental structure that enables them to function as such in the sense of first potentiality. But there are no amorphous moral reasons on the Aristotelian picture (and this comes as no surprise, as there can be no amorphous objects, e.g. prime matter, in the world so conceived at all). A moral reason is a moral reason of a particular kind—a moral reason to φ, ψ, etc.—in virtue of the present mental acts that account for an agent’s present disposition to take up that consideration in her practical reasoning and its conclusion in an intentional, rational action at a given time, again, barring external impediments.

On the Aristotelian analysis there is a necessary connection between moral reasons and those pieces of agent psychology that are relevant to reasons performing their proper function as authoritative guides to action. And on the ecumenical assumption that the practicality demand requires that moral reasons be functional as guides to action, the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis constrains the existence and identity of reasons so as to guarantee that function. Thus, an account of moral reasons that hangs its hat on the
Aristotelian mind dependence thesis will meet the practicality demand.

4.2.3 How Dependence on Synderesis and Conscience Secures Practicality

Aquinas’s version of the Aristotelian thesis takes a stand on what mental structures and mental states play the roles of matter and form in moral reasons. In his view what makes a consideration a moral reason is that it is a binding consideration that makes morally necessary a particular course of action for an agent. For a consideration to bind, there must be an agent who is answerable to that consideration because of the knowledge she has of it. But to have knowledge of a particular moral consideration requires two things. First, it requires knowledge of general moral principles such as “pursue good” and “avoid bad.” This general knowledge makes moral reasoning and intentional action on moral reasons possible in the sense of first potentiality. Aquinas’s name for the mental structure human beings have that accounts for their grasp of these first principles is “synderesis,” derived from the Greek, *suneidesis*, for conscience.

For Aquinas, particular knowledge of a moral consideration regarding an action—knowledge that this action is good and so to be done, or that that action is bad and so to be avoided—enables an agent to put that consideration to work in deliberation and intentional action in the second sense of potentiality. Aquinas denominates this mental feature of applying universal knowledge of the good or bad to a particular action “conscience.” According to the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis, for a consideration to be functional as a moral reason R for a subject S to φ is just for S to be able to φ for R in virtue of a conscientious judgment that φ is to be done and for S to know that the good is to be done.
Aquinas gives theological reasons for thinking that universal knowledge of the
good and its particular application are relevant to what moral reasons an agent has, as we
saw at the end of chapter 3; but even if we do not accept the theological explanation he
gives, we can defend the idea that universal knowledge of the good is the right sort of
thing to play the role of matter in reasons using philosophical arguments Aquinas makes
elsewhere. For instance, begin with the idea that moral actions are performed
intentionally, that is, with moral ends in mind. To start with a conception of moral action
involving intention may well leave consequentialists cold, of course, but let the
consequentialist engage in a bit of picture thinking for the moment about moral rational
action—moral action done for reasons—leaving to the side whether moral action has to
be rational. Acting morally requires being able to see actions as achieving moral ends,
and this in turn requires being able to view ends as moral. In other words, someone can
only be a moral agent—someone who performs moral actions—if she can act for the sake
of some moral good. Aquinas maintains, I think rightly, that there is no sense in calling
someone a moral agent who has no grasp of the idea that she ought to pursue the good
and avoid the bad. Such an agent would not be able to act for the sake of the good or for
the sake of avoiding the bad intentionally, since she cannot hold in mind “the good” or
“the bad” as ends for the sake of which she is acting. If, then, intentional moral action
requires a grip on moral ends in the thinnest sense possible, or what Aquinas calls the
starting points of practical reasoning, it is no wonder that moral reasons materially
depend on that thin moral knowledge.

A thin grasp of the good’s to-be-pursuedness, though, will not suffice to enable a
person to perform a particular action for the sake of the good. Aquinas concedes that
universal knowledge is to some extent motivationally inert. Universal knowledge must be put to work in practical reasoning about particular actions for an agent to be motivated to perform an intentional moral action (an action the agent would describe as ‘for-the-sake-of the good’). We saw in chapter 3 that Aquinas uses the syllogism to model how an agent engages her universal knowledge to form a judgment about a particular action. For example, if an agent has available to her the principle “murder of innocents is to be avoided” and knows that pulling the trigger on her gun at this moment will result in the murder of the innocent person in front of her, she can conclude that pulling the trigger at this moment is to be avoided. The drawing of this conclusion—conscience—partially puts the agent in a position to act for the sake of an end under the description “to be avoided” or “bad.” I say that such a conscience partially puts the agent in this position because Aquinas thinks something else is psychologically required for the agent to be able to act for the sake of a bad end voluntarily. He adheres to the psychological “guise of the good” thesis according to which every agent acts, to the extent that he or she acts intentionally, for the sake of ends that appear to him or her to be good in some way. On this view, our prospective murderer needs to be able to view her pulling the trigger and murdering the person in front of her as good in some way (for Aquinas, this means that she views the act as useful, pleasant, or fitting). But for it to be an intentional morally bad action, she must also view pulling the trigger as bad or to be avoided in some way.

The full Thomistic mind-dependence thesis secures the practicality of moral reasons because it makes the existence of any particular moral reason dependent on those psychological states and structures necessary and sufficient for intentional moral action. Summing up the argument, the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis states that a moral
reason R for S to φ exists as such if and only if S has thin moral knowledge that serve as her starting points for reasoning about whether she ought to φ and a practical judgment that φ is to be done or to be avoided. A moral action φ is an action that is done for the sake of a moral end. For an agent S to φ for R it is necessary and sufficient that she has a moral end in mind and sees φ-ing as conducive to that end. In other words, once she forms the practical judgment that connects φ to her universal knowledge of the good, she has the ability in the sense of second potentiality to φ for R. For R to be practical for S just is for R to be functional in S’s practical reasoning and subsequent intentional action. Therefore, the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis guarantees that any extant moral reason R for S to φ is practical for S.

4.2.4 The Objection from Coercion

One might reject the argument above because of a general skepticism about the moral importance of intentional action, given that so much of what we do as agents is influenced and impeded by external forces beyond our control. If one is pessimistic about the ability of most or all agents to pull off the actions they intend, one might think that being able to intend to perform an action for a reason goes almost nowhere towards making one able to actually do what one has moral reason to do. Then the argument I put forward above will be unconvincing. Even if moral reasons on this view are action guiding because they depend for their content on practical judgments that enable an agent to deliberate about and intend to φ, the objector will doubt that deliberation and intention are sufficient conditions for the agent being able to φ because of the possibility of being thwarted from the outside. Since on the Aristotelian view, a property enables S to φ in the
sense of second potentiality as long as S is configured such as to \( \varphi \) at any moment 

*barring external impediment*, the view seems unable to anticipate this kind of out-of-the-gate objection. Briefly put: even if a moral reason is mind dependent in the Thomistic sense, it will fail to be practical if something outside the agent’s control keeps her from performing the action she judges she ought to perform, or forces her to perform an action she judges she ought to avoid performing. Therefore, the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis does not guarantee the practicality of moral reasons.

I want to argue now that Aquinas supplies a compelling line of response to this objection in his account of how different types of ignorance make a difference to what an agent has moral reasons to do. Additionally, the distinction he draws between interior and exterior acts can help us draw the same distinction when it comes to what we have moral reason to do—whether we have reasons to try, or will, or complete an action. Together these two responses adequately defend against the objection.

As we saw in chapter 3, ignorance, like many other types of external impediments, can modify what an agent’s moral reasons are reasons to do because it narrows the field of practical judgments the agent can form. Calling to mind the scenario in which Will backs his truck into his neighbor’s child, who runs into his blind spot, we said that Will does not, and in fact cannot at present, have in mind the end of striking his neighbor’s child when he decides to back up the car. And the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis tells us that the form his moral reasons take depends on the content of his practical judgments. Thus, Will’s moral reasons are constrained by those circumstances that constrain his practical judgments: if he is ignorant of a consideration, that consideration cannot figure in his practical judgment and so cannot dictate what he
has reason to do. In cases like Will’s, where the agent is unable to pull off an intention like “back out of the driveway safely” because of some circumstance of which he is unaware, the agent actually has no moral reason to perform the action he intends due to ignorance of the circumstance.

We saw that this principle generalizes even to cases in which the agent is at fault for her ignorance or the circumstances in which he finds himself, as in the case of Philip from chapter 3. For Philip to have a moral reason against overdosing after the party requires that Philip has knowledge at that time that his shooting up will result in his overdosing. Because Philip is too drunk after the party to make that judgment, he cannot have a moral reason against overdosing that binds him at the time he shoots up and overdoses. He may have had a moral reason against getting too drunk to make judgments about shooting up after the party, but once he has drunk himself into inebriation that consideration is no longer binding, no longer a moral reason for him. So there is no moral reason that binds such an agent at a time when, because of his prior actions or circumstances over which he lacks control, he is unable to judge that some consideration counts in favor of or against a particular course of action.

The objector might reply that there remain counterexamples to the view in which the external impediment does not at all affect the agent’s judgments but do curb her ability to act effectively on those judgments. Consider, for instance, the tyrant and subject in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* III.i. The subject S is in a position to judge that he ought not φ, namely, obey the tyrant, but the tyrant says that if S does not obey him, he will have the S’s family killed. S has active knowledge that she ought not φ, which suffices for the consideration against φ-ing constitutes a moral reason on the Thomistic
account. But that reason is not one S can in a meaningful sense act on in the coercive situation we are imagining. Thus, we have a counterexample to the claim that Thomistic moral reasons are necessarily practical.

The Thomistic view can block counterexamples like these by exposing the subtle mismatch between the correct description of the action the subject performs under coercion and the content of the purported moral reason the agent has. Aquinas follows Aristotle in claiming that only actions that are performed voluntarily can be the subject of appropriate moral evaluation. For the agent to be the genuine source of her action, she must have knowledge of the action’s relation to an end. Thus, the description of an action that is of interest when we are evaluating the morality of an action is picked out by what the agent performs voluntarily. And this description is cashed out in terms of what the agent takes herself to be doing and for what end she does it. For any action, then, the description under which we appropriately assess the morality action is the description that captures what the agent takes herself to will given her knowledge about the relationship between what she is doing and a particular end.

Aquinas’s way of dealing with ignorance brings out this strategy for identifying morally evaluable actions under correct descriptions. In the Will scenario, for instance, a condition for voluntariness (knowledge) is not met for an action under one description—

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273 The agent’s willing the action and knowing the end constitute the two jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for voluntariness of an action. Aquinas, we saw in chapter 3, has an additional, theological reason for maintaining that moral action must be voluntary. On his account there is one and only one good work necessary for human beings to “receive happiness from God”— “rightness of will…the right order of the will to the last end” (ST IaIIae 5.7). This one moral action requires both that the agent be the source of her action and that she have knowledge of the relation of her action to her final end. He explains, “And thus it is said that the voluntary is, according to the definition of Aristotle and Gregory of Nyssa and the Damascene, not only the thing whose principle is intrinsic, but also with knowledge. Therefore, since a human being above all would be cognizant of his own operation and move himself, in his actions above all is voluntariness is found” (ST IaIIae 6.1).
striking the child by backing up the truck—and so we must adjust the description of what the agent is doing or has done to reflect this. Since Will would not have backed the truck out of the driveway had he known the child was behind him, his ignorance is said to be the counterfactual cause of the action described as Will striking the child by backing up the truck. The description of what Will does as the source of his action, however, is simply backing the truck out of the driveway. And there is nothing morally impermissible about this action type. Aquinas would say that there is no wrong to be excused in such a case, because what agents have moral reason for and against doing are voluntary, deliberate actions. Even if Will has a moral reason against striking the child with his car, it is a reason against his doing so willingly—in other words, it is a reason against backing up the car with the end of striking the child in mind. But Will has not willingly struck the child, or backed up the truck with the end of hitting the child in mind; thus, he has not violated any moral reason against willingly striking the child by backing the truck out of the driveway.

Generalizing, the strategy for dealing with purported counterexamples is this: Look at an agent’s judgments to discover what she has moral reason for or against doing. If the agent sees no relationship between a particular action φ and an end or good E, then the content of her moral reason cannot require or prohibit the performance of φ-for-E. Moreover, any voluntary action an agent performs cannot be appropriately described as an instance of φ-ing-for-E, since that would require her to will φ for E and so to be cognizant of the relation between φ and E. Finally, no involuntary action φ that results in outcome E can constitute her φ-ing-for-E since that per hypothesis cannot be her aim. In the purported counterexamples, since the agent’s voluntary action correctly described is
not contradictory to the action we would expect her to have a moral reason to perform, and her involuntary action is not properly speaking attributable to her, neither her involuntary nor voluntary action constitute violations against the moral reasons that apply to her.

Using this insight we can give a response to the supposed counterexample of Aristotle’s tyrant. The subject S, who is commanded to φ on pain of losing his family at the hands of the tyrant, does not willingly φ full stop. He is not the cause of his φ-ing, simply. Instead, the tyrant’s command and threat of killing his family counterfactually causes S to φ (for absent those circumstances, S would not φ). Describing S’s voluntary action more perspicuously, we would say that S φ’s-for-end E in circumstances C, where E is the end of saving his family and C is the necessitation of the tyrant. Supposing with the objector that S’s moral reason is a moral reason against φ-ing, since S does not φ full stop, but φ’s-for-E-in-C, S’s action does not straightforwardly violate his moral reason against φ-ing. Of course, we can ask further questions about whether S has a moral reason against φ-ing for E in C. For S to have such a reason would require S to form the judgment that she ought not φ for E in C, or that it would still be morally bad to φ even for E in C. The point is that having knowledge that one ought not φ may be sufficient for having a moral reason against φ-ing, but it is not sufficient for having a moral reason against φ-ing for E in C. Thus, it would require further argument to show that ψ-ing, where ψ-ing is φ-ing for E in C, constitutes a violation of a moral reason against φ-ing. The subject does not have a moral reason on the basis of which she is not able to
intentionally act. Thus, the counterexample to the claim that Thomistic moral reasons are practical fails.\textsuperscript{274}

We can offer a second, related response to the objection on Aquinas’s behalf using his distinction between interior and exterior acts. For Aquinas, a human action is a composite of an interior and exterior act: the interior act is an act of the will and the exterior act is the matter in which the interior act is undertaken.\textsuperscript{275} If I choose to steal a loaf of bread from the store, for instance, the interior act of my will—the choice to remove the bread from the store without paying for it—serves as the form of the act; but my bodily movements of physically lifting the bread off the shelf constitute the material conditions for my performing that act. Sometimes we see the interior act misfire, for instance, if I reach out to take the loaf of bread and am prevented from taking it by my friend, who sees that glint in my eye but does not want me to be caught. For Aquinas, the

\textsuperscript{274} Tobias Hoffmann has helpfully pointed out that this is not exactly Aquinas’s and Aristotle’s view. For Aristotle, and Aquinas following him, what we might deem a coercive circumstance is a circumstance of “necessitation” (\textit{anankasanta}). They both call these actions “mixed” rather than fully involuntary. Our dispute is mostly terminological here. Where Aristotle and Aquinas would only subsequently identify which description of the action picks out the voluntary act and which picks out the involuntary one, I want to do this first, and then count all instances where the description of the action is one the person would not do in free circumstances, coerced.

\textsuperscript{275} DM 2.2. ad.13. See also \textit{ST} IaIIae 18.6 ad. 3, where he states that the interior act of the will “is compared to the exterior just as form is to matter.” I am in agreement on this point with Stephen Brock and Kevin Flannery, who take the \textit{materia circa quam}—that matter about which a human action is—to be the physical embodiment of the action. Martin Rhonheimer puts forward the view that even the exterior act has formal determinants from reason, but the text does not point to one reading over another decisively, to my mind. The philosophical advantages of reading “\textit{materia circa quam}” Brock’s and Flannery’s way as well as its coherence with the account of voluntariness are important points in favor of that reading.

interior act can always be completed even when the complete action, with its exterior matter, cannot. Interior acts are always voluntary and not subject to hindrance.  

“Therefore we can have the voluntary without an act, sometimes without a certain exterior act, but with the interior, as when one wills to not act.”  

Relying on this crucial distinction, we can say that moral reasons for interior acts do not become impractical even when a person is subject to coercion, since interior acts are immune from violence; and the conditions for a moral reason for an exterior act or composite act will not be met when a person is subject to coercion. First, someone who is being coerced may well have a moral reason to perform an interior act of will—such as to will to save one’s family from being killed—even when one cannot perform the exterior act that would complete the human act of saving one’s family from being killed. The subject can be hindered from helping his family but not from wanting to help. There is no external impediment that can keep a person from willing or wishing to perform an act when she has knowledge, so meets the Cognition Requirement. Second, suppose someone has a moral reason against the composite human act—letting one’s family be killed. When the subject wills that his family be saved, then the human action composite of the exterior act and the interior act does not satisfy the description “letting one’s family be killed”; only the exterior act falls under that description. But the exterior act is only morally evaluable, on Aquinas’s view, when it is a material part of the human act. In ST IaIIae question 18 article 6, he makes this claim in discussing how to evaluate human acts in general: “Exterior acts do not have a moral account, unless they are voluntary.”  

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276 In De Malo 2.2 ad. 11 Aquinas explains that the moral valence of the whole human action depends on the interior act.  
277 ST IaIIae 6.3
other words, what makes an action subject to moral evaluation is its having a certain character because of its relation to an interior act of the will. When there is no interior act, say, of willing that one’s family be left to die at the hands of a tyrant, then there is no voluntariness in the exterior act of letting one’s family die, and so the subject does not perform a full human action that would count as a violation of his moral reasons.

4.2.5 The Objection from Akrasia

Another reason one might be inclined to reject my argument for the idea that the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis allows an account of moral reasons to meet the practicality demand is that it proves too much. On the Thomistic view, moral reasons bind agents even when they are unmotivated by their practical judgments because of weakness of will (akrasia) or depression. For the akratic and depressed agent by definition have beliefs or judgments that certain actions are to be performed or avoided, and so the material and formal conditions for moral reasons binding those agents to a certain course of action are met, but certainly by definition those agents are unable in some sense or at some times to act on the basis of the reasons that apply to them. If this is right, then the akratic and depressed agents serve as counterexamples to the claim that all Thomistic moral reasons are action-guiding in the sense of being able to make a difference to the intentional action of the agents they bind. Moreover, given the ubiquity of these conditions in reality, one might reasonably doubt that practical judgments do enable agents to act on the considerations they thinks bear on what they ought to do.

I will argue that we should be careful not to attribute to the akratic agent complete helplessness. And if we do avoid this attribution, then the phenomenon of akrasia does
not jeopardize the claim that Thomistic mind-dependent moral reasons are practical. To support my argument I will borrow an argument from Aristotle to show that if we want to maintain the conceptual distinction between akrasia and a vice like intemperance, we must accept that the akratic agent is able to intentionally act on the reasons she takes herself to have, and so those reasons are practical in the sense of second potentiality.

First, let’s take a closer look at how the objection works. The objector highlights the failure to be motivated by judgments that is characteristic of the agent who experiences akrasia. Then she notes that an akratic agent meets the criteria the Thomistic thesis puts in place for her having moral reasons. Finally, she concludes that since those reasons are not practical for the akratic agent, Thomistic mind-dependent reasons are not always practical for the agents to whom they apply since they are not practical for akratic agents. Thus, the Thomistic thesis fails to satisfy the practicality demand.

We might think that the objection can be stated even more strongly when we consider the condition of prolonged akrasia experienced by a depressed agent. According to the objector, a depressed agent is just an agent who lacks the motivation to act on her reasons. Depression per hypothesis deprives an agent of the motivations that would render her reasons practical under ordinary psychological conditions. A depressed agent can still make practical judgments about what she ought to do, though, rendering the considerations that favor or counter actions the depressed agent is unmotivated to perform or avoid full-fledged moral reasons on the Thomistic account. Thus, the moral reasons of the depressed agent constitute counterexamples to the claim that Thomistic mind dependence secures practicality.
We can respond to this objection first by noting that there is an independent consideration that militates in favor of the view that depressed or akratic agents have moral reasons. Akratic agents exhibit a rational defect in their agency precisely because they do not act on the reasons that apply to them. We do not call someone who is blind to the facts that bear on the morality of her actions “akratic”—we call her foolish or daft. So notice that to maintain the distinction between akrasia and foolishness requires an appreciation of considerations that make it the case that those considerations rationally bind the akratic agent. The akratic agent is irrational, but the irrationality of the akratic agents must be a failure to act on reasons she has, not simply a failure to draw conclusions about those reasons like the foolish or daft agent. Given the need to maintain this distinction, we can agree that we want to be able to say that the akratic agent has moral reasons.\textsuperscript{278} If the Thomistic view says that akratic agents do have moral reasons, then, this is not by itself a mark against the theory. The objector needs to show more; namely, that akratic and depressed agents do not have the ability in the sense of second potentiality to act on their moral reasons on the Thomistic account.

Adapting argument from Nicomachean Ethics VII, we may shift the burden of proof from the Thomistic theory to the objector. The argument begins with the observation that there is some notable difference between an intemperate person and an incontinent, or akratic, person.

TAMARA: Tamara is a shopaholic when it comes to fashionable clothes. Every time she goes into a boutique, she compulsively buys the most appealing item in the store without giving a second thought to whether the merchandise in the store was produced in offshore factories by children or underpaid workers, or whether

\textsuperscript{278} Alan Goldman has a helpful discussion of the trilemmatic problem that the phenomenon of depression puts to reasons internalists of the Humean variety in \textit{Reasons from Within} (98-99).
that money might be better spent elsewhere. She just thinks, “That piece would look great on me; I should buy it!” And that judgment motivates her to buy it.

NASIA: Nasia also finds herself shopping at high-end clothing stores, unable to leave without purchasing something. But by contrast, Nasia often buys clothes despite having judged that the clothing was probably produced by children or underpaid workers in an offshore factory, or that she could spend her money more wisely and ethically. Overwhelmed by the aesthetic appeal of the clothes, she buys them anyway.

Tamara and Nasia both act like shopaholics when they walk into high-end clothing stores. But we can spot a difference between Tamara’s and Nasia’s activities. Tamara exhibits intemperance because her impulses bypass deliberation about the goodness of the pleasure she would get from wearing the beautiful clothing; this results in her buying the clothes in the store. Nasia displays a different characteristic—akrasia—because unlike Tamara, she forms the correct judgments about the value of the pleasure of wearing the clothes as compared to the harm it does to others, but finds herself acting contrary to those judgments. Her action is not the result of deliberation about the comparative goodness of the pleasure she will get from wearing the clothes being bypassed or absent.

Aristotle explains that the psychological difference between acting contrary to a practical judgment and acting impulsively without practical judgment results in three differences in abilities. First, the akratic can readily show remorse whereas the intemperate cannot; second, the akratic acts badly intermittently while the intemperate acts badly routinely; third, the akratic is conscious of her wrong behavior and so can reform while the intemperate is not.\(^{279}\) So already we see three capacities the akratic person has by contrasting her with the intemperate person. Finally, Aristotle argues that

\(^{279}\) NE VII.viii 1422-1425. See also Aquinas’s *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* Book VII Lecture 8.
the intemperate person is morally worse than the akratic person because the intemperate person is simply akratic—she has chosen to give in to her passions in general, or in every case, rather than deliberate about the comparative value of, say, the pleasure of wearing certain clothes. The akratic person has not resolved to give way to her passion generally. Rather, she only gives way to her passion in particular cases; this betrays that she still retains the ability to deliberate and choose in such particular instances. If we want to maintain this important distinction between the akratic Nasia and the intemperate Tamara, we must accept that there are capacities in the sense of second potentiality that akratics have and intemperate persons do not.

The objector who thinks that the akratic agent does not have the ability to act on her reasons makes the mistake of conflating akrasia with intemperance. The person who is unable to willingly act on her reasons, to make a choice, in the face of pleasure or passion lacks this ability because she has resolved not to deliberate or form judgments about her reasons. She is an intemperate agent. But the akratic agent has not made such a general resolution. So should she find herself in a particular instance acting contrary to her reasons, but not doing so without deliberation, her deliberation reveals that she is not so far gone as to be intemperate. She still chooses to act contrary to her judgment, and retains the ability to act according to her judgment.

So now we can reply to the objector directly. If there is a difference between an akratic and an intemperate agent, the practical judgment of the akratic agent accounts for the difference. For an intemperate agent puts herself in a position from which she cannot help but act on her impulses, short circuiting deliberation and practical judgment, while an akratic agent is able to resist her impulses or act contrary to her present motivational
state in virtue of her ability to deliberate and form practical judgments. Akratic agents maintain the ability to act on their reasons in virtue of the practical judgments they form. So on the Thomistic account, akratic agents’ moral reasons are nonetheless functional considerations even though the akratic agent, during her akrasia, leaves them on the shelf, so to speak. Because the important sense of “practical” picked out by the arguments for the practicality demand is “functional,” and moral reasons are functional for the akratic agent, the fact that a moral reason is not actually functioning when the akratic experiences weakness of will is not enough to undermine the claim that such a reason is practical.

4.2.6 The Objection from Psychological Implausibility

So far I have argued that the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis will secure the practicality of moral reasons for any account predicated upon it since it ties moral reasons conceptually to the mental activities of agents that make it possible for them to deliberately act on those reasons. At this point, an objector might complain that the account of motivation needed to underwrite that claim is controversial, perhaps as controversial as the Humean theory of motivation that I complained in chapters 1 and 2 unduly restricts other accounts of moral reasons.

It would seem that Thomistic mind-dependence thesis needs to secure the practicality of moral reasons without presuming a very controversial psychological picture of motivation for two reasons. The first is that my argument against other internalist views in part rests on the objection that those views are wedded to a Humean picture of psychology that involves highly contestable premises, such that beliefs and
desires are separate entities, causally isolated from one another. My argument would lie open to a companion-in-guilt response should the alternative account I propose also need to presuppose contestable psychological claims.\textsuperscript{280} Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, if the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis must tether itself to a substantive psychological thesis to work, then if the psychological thesis can be undermined, the mind-dependence thesis can be undermined.

Before responding, let me point out that the full-fledged objection to standard internalism was not merely that it is tied to a specific psychological theory of motivation. Rather, in tethering her view to the Humean psychological theory, the internalist not only takes a controversial position about motivation, but she also loses out on theoretical advantages like countenancing the objectivity of moral reasons and accommodating commonsense intuitions on account of that position. The Thomistic view of moral reasons is not open to the same charge, as will become clear in the remainder of this chapter. Plainly put, if the Thomistic analysis of moral reasons can do more work than its Humean competitor, yielding a higher profit overall, then even if it turns out that the Thomistic view must presuppose defensible claims about motivation, we should prefer the Thomistic view to the Humean view that rests on beliefs about motivation that are just as, if not more, contentious.

With this caveat in mind, I want to respond to the form of the objection that targets the Thomistic view specifically, not in comparison to Humean views. Suppose the

\textsuperscript{280} Paul Hurley writes, “…Many philosophers have come to reject the claim…that desires are somehow given prior to reason, hence prior to rational assessment. Warren Quinn, Joseph Raz, and T.H. Scanlon, for example, all argue that the desires of rational agents, even basic desires, involve evaluations, and that as a result of this involvement they are dependent upon rational assessment.” (Hurley, “Desire, Judgment, and Reason,” pp. 438-439).
objector finds it implausible that human beings have the grasp of first principles of practical reason—the habit Aquinas calls synderesis—upon which the existence of a moral reason is supposed to depend. The first thing to say here is that the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis offers an analysis of what must be true for a consideration to be a moral reason. So, if the material conditions for the existence of moral reasons is not met because there are no agents with a mental structure that enables them to see that good is to be done and bad is to be avoided, that absence merely shows that there are no extant moral reasons on the analysis. It does not by itself show the mind-dependence thesis to be false. Of course, the objector might reply that we know that there are extant moral reasons, so any analysis on which that claim turns out to be false should be rejected. But then the objection boils down to a worry about the ontology of moral reasons—what reasons there are—rather than a worry about the analysis.

A more pressing concern, however, is whether the tenets about agent psychology that allow the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis to guarantee moral reasons’ practical function are defensible in their own right. The Thomistic view rests on three assumptions about the psychology of action. First, for an agent to have any moral reasons whatsoever she must have a general grasp of the notion that good is to be done and bad is to be avoided, so it must be psychologically plausible that moral agents do have this capacity. Second, agents who do not actually act on their practical judgments must be able, in the sense of second potentiality, to act on them. And third, practical judgments make a difference to practical reasoning and intentional action. I will argue that each of these statements turns out to be supportable by multiple psychological theories (unlike the
claims of our Humean internalist opponents), and so defensible in their own right. Thus, the Thomistic theory withstands the critique from psychological plausibility.

Let’s start by considering challenges to the idea that the agents whose actions we think are the appropriate subject of moral evaluation have knowledge that the good or goods ought to be pursued and the bad or bads ought to be avoided. It could be argued that we have no good evidence from cognitive science that tells us human beings have any neurobiological properties that would give rise to a distinctive capacity for moral reasoning, so if the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis rests on such a claim, so much the worse for the thesis. The burgeoning literature in the intersection of moral psychology and cognitive science has not produced consensus on whether human beings have any distinctive cognitive faculties, not shared by other primates, that give rise to moral thought. Among the best minds in these fields have defended hypotheses that fall on either side of this debate, so the matter is far from settled against the Thomistic view by cognitive science. While prominent scientists like Tomasello and Racozy have made the case that socialization plays more of a role in the development of any uniquely human cognitive abilities, Ray Jackendoff has argued that the individual’s experience of inner speech or language is a cognitive modality special to intelligent human beings and provides us with the ability to engage in a distinctive kind of thought. On the latter end of the discussion, we see evidence such as that presented in “Darwin’s Mistake” by Derek Penn, Keith Holyoak, and Daniel Povinelli, that the differences between the basic

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cognitive structures of human beings and those of non-human animals make for a deeper functional difference in thought and reasoning than most of us of late have imagined.\textsuperscript{282} The proponent of the Thomistic thesis can respond to the objector by showing her claim to be not just contestable, but thoroughly contested by the contemporary scientific community. She can offer an even more robust response by pointing out that the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis offers only the contours of some mental act or state that plays a functional role in intentional action, giving it the label ‘practical judgment,’ without coming down on what material or immaterial elements of a mind such a state or act would be. So if the objector were to assert that the Thomistic view wrongly identifies what makes reasons practical with the wrong mental state or act because that state or act does not play that function, the objector will have launched the criticism at the wrong target. The Thomistic view takes for granted a functional definition of the mental “state” or “act” of making a moral judgment, remaining silent on what process, whether neurochemical or immaterial, carries out that function.

The other psychological claim on which the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis rests is a form of cognitivism: practical judgments can make a difference to deliberation and intentional action. In general, critics of cognitivist views will say that the cognitivist fails to show the “motivational power of normative claims,” as Scanlon puts it.\textsuperscript{283} Looking at motivation in terms of causal efficacy, it may appear that non-cognitivist theories on


\textsuperscript{283} Scanlon, \textit{Being Realistic About Reasons/} Locke Lectures Lecture 3 Manuscript: 1. For another defense of the idea that practical judgments have motivational content see Thomas Nagel (1975)110-111.
which reasons are or are composed of or depend on desires do better than cognitivist theories when it comes to showing that reasons are motivating. Scanlon responds, rightly in my view, that while desires may be felt as impulses to act more often than beliefs about reasons are so felt, neither a desire to act nor a belief that one has reason to act causally explains the agent’s acting. Instead, an underlying neural process, not directly experienced by the agent, accounts for the agent’s action. Desires are thus no better as candidates for causally efficacious motivating psychological states than are normative beliefs or judgments. Once we have established that desires and normative beliefs or judgments are on a par when it comes to causal efficacy in motivation, we can move on to ask whether on another conception of motivation one or the other of these types of mental states is better suited to the job. I have already argued that practical judgments have explanatory power when it comes to intentional action because, for one thing, they provide us with the description of an agent’s intentional action. When an agent acts without basing her action on a judgment that something is to be done, to be avoided, good, or bad, the action is not the appropriate subject of a moral evaluation; it is best explained by physical or neurobiological processes. (This is not to deny that all unintentional action has no connection to moral evaluation; if the action performed because of a neurobiological inclination without deliberation is something we would appropriately blame an agent for, as in the case of Philip’s overdosing, this is likely

284 “Neither in the case of desires nor in that of beliefs about reasons is this experience of ‘impulse’ a direct experience of a cause. This feeling is simply an element of our momentary experience. If such experiences are generally followed by action this is because of some underlying neural mechanism that is equally causal in the two cases and in neither case an object of experience” (ibid).
285 Here I’ll part ways with Scanlon and his constructivism, as it relies on the notion of an ideal rational agent who is motivated by normative judgments to forge the relationship between normative judgments and motivations. The Thomistic view I’ve proposed is more radical in that it appeals to no such ideal but the abilities (in the sense of second potentiality) of the actual agent in her present circumstances.
because there was a prior action the agent performed contrary to a practical judgment he made, and so the crude physical act is seen as the outcome of an intentional action.) Practical judgments figure in the explanation of intentional actions by supplying the description of the action: what act it was (the action type), what it was for (the end), and in what context it was done (circumstances).

We can further support the plausibility of the idea that practical judgments make a difference to deliberation and intentional action by noting that it is compatible with a wide range of psychological theories, even those on which desire plays a central role in motivation and desires and beliefs are necessarily distinct. Suppose one thinks that desires have a world-to-mind direction of fit and beliefs or judgments have a mind-to-world direction of fit. One might still argue that the judgments that have a mind-to-world direction of fit play a practical role in the adjustment of attitudes with a world-to-mind direction of fit. This approach has been argued for in the literature, so I take for granted that those arguments provide prima facie plausibility to the idea that judgments impact affective states and attitudes, thereby making possible action that accords with those judgments.286

The Thomistic account does not exclude the possibility that beliefs and desires are distinct entities and desires do the primary work of motivation; for even supposing that agents cannot be motivated to φ absent a desire to φ, the defender of the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis could say that practical judgments supply the content or object, like φ-ing, of desires. And so an agent’s being motivated to φ, rather than to ψ, is made possible

286 For an excellent, thorough defense of the claim that moral judgments have a part to play in motivation through the revision of affective attitudes, see Sigrun Svavarsdóttir, “The Practical Role Essential to Value Judgments,” Philosophical Issues 19 (2009), 299-320.
by a practical judgment that connects φ-ing to some valued object, subsequently resulting in φ-ing being folded into the content of the agent’s desire.

Alternatively, if one thought that not all desires require articulated content, one could argue that practical judgments make a difference in not just any action but in deliberate, intentional action. The Thomistic mind-dependence theorist who adopts a Humean picture of psychology of this sort could argue that an action does not constitute a deliberate or intentional action absent the practical judgment supplying the object of the desire that precipitates the action. To the extent an agent’s action is morally evaluable, the explanation of that action must include a practical judgment.

If the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis can be made to work with the pet psychological theory of its opponents, as I have just argued, that goes at least part way to supporting the claim that it does not hang on too controversial a psychological premise. Moreover, the psychological claims on which the view rests need not fare better than the psychological claims on which its Humean counterparts rest for the Thomistic account to be preferable overall. This is because views that adopt the Humean theory of motivation close themselves off from certain other theoretical benefits, whereas the Thomistic view does not. If the Thomistic view can accommodate the idea that moral reasons are objective alongside the notion that moral reasons are practical, presupposing a few theses about moral psychology that are no more controversial than the psychological theses that comprise the Humean theory of motivation, and the Humean theory cannot accommodate the objectivity of moral reasons, then adopting the Humean view of reasons would be to settle for a product of less value for the same price.
4.3 Accommodating Ought Implies Can

The Thomistic mind-dependence thesis assures that the moral reasons an analysis spits out do not violate the Ought Implies Can principle because it makes moral reasons dependent on those psychological features that also ground facts about what the agent is able to do at present. For on the Thomistic analysis, in order for a consideration to count as a decisive moral reason for an agent to perform some action φ, the agent bound by the reason must have made the judgment that enables her, in the sense of second potentiality, to φ deliberately—on the basis of the consideration in favor of φ. Thus, if we read the “can” in the Ought Implies Can principle as “able (in the sense of second potentiality) to deliberately φ” then it will be a conceptual truth that moral reasons on the Thomistic view respect the Ought Implies Can principle.

Even though the answer that Aquinas’s view gives to the question of whether moral reasons are practical is related to the answer it offers for the question of whether it respects ought implies can, these two conditions on a solution need to be treated separately. For as I argued in chapter 1, these two conditions come apart conceptually in important ways. Not every view that meets the first will also meet the second. So in this section, I want to underscore the importance for a theory of moral reasons of respecting the ought implies can principle, and then illustrate how the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis supports that principle.
4.3.1 The Conceptual Space Between Ought Implies Can and Practicality

The easiest way to see the conceptual space between the ought implies can principle (OIC) and the practicality demand is to look at a view of moral reasons that meets the latter but violates the former. As we saw in the previous section, there are multiple senses in which a consideration can be “practical,” not all of which refer to the abilities of the actual agent in the circumstances in which the moral reason is supposed to bind her. Suppose, for instance, that for a consideration to be practical just is for an ideal, fully informed counterpart of oneself to be motivated by it; a practical consideration that passed as a moral reason on that account might well bind an agent who is unable to comply with the reason in the actual circumstances she finds herself because she lacks full information or does not have sufficiently rational desires or judgments. So the account would fail to respect the OIC principle.

More important for present purposes, the OIC principle plays a different role in our moral theorizing and argument than does the practicality demand, and it is in virtue of the OIC principle’s role that we ought to treat compatibility with the principle a priority in constructing an account of the nature of moral reasons. The OIC principle serves as a data point from which we begin our theorizing about morality in cases. For example, suppose the DC Mayor demands that the Chancellor of DC Public Schools cut the budget by ten percent while drastically improving the quality of education in elementary schools. Unfortunately, since no amount of wishful thinking would make it possible to carry out such a plan in the DCPS system as it stands, we would never blame the Chancellor for failing because it is impossible for her to fulfill the Mayor’s demand. But morality does not demand the impossible—if morality demands that someone φ, the commonsense
intuition goes—it must be possible for that person to φ. This is why we would not attribute a moral fault to the DC Public School Chancellor for not drastically improving the quality of elementary education on a slimmer budget. In ordinary conversation we use the OIC principle to explain why agents like the DC Public School Chancellor are not culpable for bringing about states of affairs we might otherwise think morally bad to allow or cause. By contrast, the practicality demand is a product of philosophical argumentation, not something relied upon in everyday discussion about right and wrong. That is, while non-philosophers and philosophers alike will appeal to the idea that someone couldn’t have φ-ed to explain why she didn’t have a moral reason to φ, non-philosophers do not point to the need for moral reasons to function as items in practical reasoning and intentional action when explaining why so-and-so didn’t violate a moral reason that seemed to apply to her.

Because the contrapositive of OIC is a deep-seated, widely shared judgment even outside of philosophy, unlike the idea that it is a conceptual truth that moral reasons are practical, one incurs a special burden when she balks the OIC principle. She must give an error theoretic account about the judgment we so often rely on in our practices of moral reasoning, moral evaluation, and argument. The pre-theoretical intuition that OIC and its contrapositive restrict the moral reasons we have also bolsters our theorizing about the practicality demand: the practicality demand emerges as a demand from arguments that often invoke OIC in the premises.287

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287 Williams, for instance, relies on the proponent of external reasons being committed to OIC in his challenge of her claim that there are true, purely external reasons statements. After pointing out that for an
4.3.2 *Why Ought Implies Can Matters*

There are two theoretical costs to rejecting the OIC principle, as I explained in chapter 1—costs that an account should avoid sustaining if possible. First, OIC provides a limit on the moral reasons we can posit, so an account that violates OIC has to deal with the “too many moral reasons” problem. Put crudely, some far-out fact, like the fact that there are aliens on a planet outside our galaxy, could be a moral reason, say, for us to promote their happiness despite our being unaware of their existence and bereft of technology to reach them, and so unable to discharge such a duty to them. The OIC principle blocks such conceptual possibilities, and many going accounts that cash out practicality in terms of counterparts or ideal, fully informed agents can do no better to block such wild consequences. Surely this constitutes an undesirable consequence for a view of moral reasons. Other principles that have been proposed to limit the number of reasons we have either does not get the extension right when it comes to its pronouncement on cases or is less plausible as a principle than OIC.\(^{288}\) This makes for a hefty burden of proof to carry for the one who rejects OIC.

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\(^{288}\) The strategy of “weighting” different considerations differently, but not based on the strength of a desire, is objectionably ad hoc. Since we have yet to see in the literature an alternative principle that does not violate commonsense intuitions, we have little to go on to rationally hope for such a principle to appear.
Secondly, OIC places an ontological constraint on moral reasons, necessitating a metaphorical connection between the moral reasons that exist and the features of the actual world that ground facts about what an agent is able to do. The less discernible and pronounced the relation between moral reasons and facts of the actual world, the more mysterious it is that such items can make demands on agents in that world. How would facts that are wholly other in kind and content from facts about this world or nearby possible worlds effectively restrict the norms that govern practices and activities in this world? The more metaphysically distant from the fabric of reality in the actual world moral reasons are supposed to be, the more pressure will be placed on the question, ‘Why should we be moral?’ For it is unclear why we should care what our counterparts are doing, or what ideal agents who resemble us faintly do—how that matters for our everyday practices and activities.

Given the distinct role OIC plays as a principle or starting point for theorizing, it should be clear that the OIC principle and the practicality demand come apart in important ways, such that if an account meets the latter without accommodating the former, then the value of practicality is much less on that score. Suppose an account grounds moral reasons in what an ideal agent would be motivated to do and claims that such reasons are practical in virtue of the ideal agent being motivated by them. Without a further story about the modal connection between the agents to whom moral reasons apply, the account would violate OIC. It would lose some of its metaphysical plausibility,

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289 I am assuming here, of course, that the reader does not endorse modal realism. Even on ersatz views of modality, the truthmakers for modal claims are abstract objects in the actual world.

for it remains mysterious what the truthmaker would be for propositions about what the hypothetical agents are motivated to do. The account might also come under suspicion for its verdicts on cases in which it is impossible for an actual agent in a particular circumstance to act on a moral reason on which an unhampered hypothetical agent would act.

Suppose the account were modified such that the hypothetical agents were our counterparts in a nearby possible world, but with full rationality and full information. This modified account would be less metaphysically mysterious, as the counterpart theory provides a metaphysical connection between the actual and hypothetical agents. However, the account would still get the extension of moral reasons wrong on cases in which the actual agent is so far removed from having full information or faces the threat of coercion that she could not be made to see the consideration her counterpart would advise her to act on as a reason for herself. The counterpart theory does not place sufficient limits on the idealized version of oneself to adequately answer to our intuitions about all cases in the actual world. What if Oscar’s counterpart knows that his shooting what he thinks is an attacker in his bathroom will result in the death of his girlfriend and his being put on trial for murder; how could Oscar’s counterpart’s knowledge make it rational for Oscar in the actual world to act on the basis of some proposition he either does not currently believe or currently believes is false? The more straightforwardly an account accommodates the OIC principle, the less this will crop up as a worry for the account. All this is to say that the theoretical value of the alleged practicality of moral

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291 Here I am thinking of Michael Smith’s account in *The Moral Problem*, according to which what you have reason to do is what your ideal counterpart, with all the same desires but with full information and rationality, would advise you to do in your circumstances.
reasons will turn on in what sense those reasons are reasons on which actual agents have the ability to act.

4.3.3 Disambiguating Senses of ‘Can’ in OIC

Thomistic mind-dependent moral reasons comply with the Ought Implies Can principle when we give the principle the strong reading, on which “can” in “ought implies can” signifies second potentiality. I argued in chapter 2 that there are at least two senses of ‘can’ that could be operative when we talk about whether agents can act on their reasons. On the first sense, which I have followed Aristotle in calling ‘first potentiality,’ for it to be the case that some x can φ just is for x to be F where F is some feature x has in virtue of its kind that, when manifested, gives rise to a more specific feature G that, when manifested, results in x φ-ing. And on the ‘second potentiality’ sense of can, for it to be the case that x can φ just is for x to be G where G is some feature that, when manifested at definite time t results in x φ-ing at t. On the Aristotelian analysis, the features of actual subjects ground modal facts.

Although we can employ either of these two senses of ‘can’ to interpret the OIC principle, I argued that the weaker first potentiality reading of ‘can’ misfires in important cases, much like the views that ground the practicality of moral reasons in the motivations of hypothetical agents. On a perspicuous formulation of OIC on the first potentiality reading, any agent who has the general feature that makes her responsive to moral reasons in general would be sufficient to ground claims about what particular reasons she can act on. However, there will be plenty of cases in which the intuition that supports OIC tells against an agent having a moral reason in a particular case because the
circumstances do not afford her the opportunity to act on that consideration, or her lack of information does not make it psychologically possible for her to respond to those considerations. Remember the case of Megan and Audrey from chapter 2: Megan is home sick with a cold and needs lunch, and it appears that Audrey, Megan’s friend, has a moral reason to bring her soup. If there is a blizzard happening that day, then it would be hazardous for Audrey to bring Megan soup; in fact, Audrey might not make it to Megan’s without getting into an accident if she attempted to go out in the blizzard. Our intuition about the case is that the circumstance of the blizzard removes the moral reason for Audrey to bring Megan soup, since it makes it impossible for Audrey to act on that reason at the moment. But on the first potentiality reading, it is not impossible for Audrey to act on the reason to bring Megan soup because she has the psychological features that make her responsive to facts about needs as reasons for her and she has the physical features that enable her to go to her friend’s house with soup. That the circumstance of the blizzard makes no difference to Audrey’s moral reason cuts against the common sense intuition that leads us to adopt the OIC principle.

Another way this has been put in the literature is that idealizing alienates reasons from the actual agent. When we look to the counterpart of an agent who has full information, or who never succumbs to irrational habits, when asking whether the agent has a moral reason, it is hard to resist the thought that we have changed the subject.292

The second potentiality reading of OIC is more in sync with the pre-theoretical intuition in this respect and makes the metaphysical benefits accrued by accommodating

292 For a more thorough discussion of this problem, see the dialogue between David Sobel and David Enoch. David Enoch, “Idealizing Still Not Off the Hook: A Reply to Sobel’s Reply” (unpublished); David Sobel (2009).
OIC more desirable. According to the strong reading, an agent does not have a moral reason to φ at time \( t \) unless she possesses actual properties at or immediately prior to \( t \) that, when manifested, would effect her φ-ing. By insisting that for it to be possible for an agent to φ at \( t \), the agent herself at \( t \) must actually possess the properties that in nearby possible worlds lead to her φ-ing at \( t \), we can close the gap between general reasons-responsiveness and responsiveness to particular considerations as reasons in concrete circumstances. Although an agent like Audrey may have the ability to respond to considerations as moral reasons in general because she has the mental structures that serve as a platform for practical thought, she may not, at the time of the blizzard, be in a position to think about and respond to Megan’s being sick as a reason for her to bring Megan soup. Her preoccupation with the storm may keep her from seeing going to Megan’s house in a favorable light, for instance. Or the storm itself may make it the case that the physical features that make her able to walk, bus, or drive to Megan’s in normal conditions are not sufficient to get her to Megan’s during a storm. Just as a steel rod’s tensile strength and specific heat make it the kind of thing that will cut other objects when sharpened but do not guarantee that this particular rod will cut anything in a particular case, so too the features of an agent that make her the kind of being that is able to act on moral reasons do not alone guarantee that she will actually act on particular moral reasons. Second potentiality can be ascribed to a subject only when the first potentiality properties have been manifested in specific form in that subject. The second potentiality reading gives us the results commonsense calls for in scenarios like the blizzard case.

The second potentiality reading of OIC confers the additional theoretical advantage of dispelling metaphysical worries about the existence of moral reasons. This
version of the OIC principle does not make existence conditions of moral reasons so weak that nearly any consideration in favor of or against an action counts as a moral reason for agents simply because they have rational appetites, desires and beliefs, or some other general psychological feature that makes them responsive to considerations as moral reasons. By ratcheting up the conditions that must be met for a moral reason to exist as such and making the conditions connected to what particular agents in actual circumstances are positioned to think and do, it sufficiently limits the number of moral reasons there are.

4.3.4 How The Thomistic View Respects OIC

The degree to which the second potentiality reading of OIC is more favorable than the first potentiality reading will hinge on what an account posits as the properties or features that ground second potentiality claims. In what follows I will argue that the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis accommodates a relatively strong second potentiality reading of OIC, and that an account is better for taking this tack. That the Thomistic thesis is suitably powerful and moderate will become clear when we see how the Thomistic thesis compares to two other Humean positions that also satisfy a second potentiality version of the OIC principle.

Consider first a view on which moral reasons for agents to φ exist as long as those agents have some desire or other that would be served by their φ-ing. In principle, there

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293 Mark Schroeder’s ‘Hypotheticalism’ in Slaves of the Passions (2006). There is another related version of this problem that crops up for views like Nomy Arpaly and Tim Schroeder’s on which all that is needed for an action to be rationalized morally is for the agent to have intrinsic desires for the good (whatever that may be). But an agent’s intrinsic desires, they admit, will often fail to issue in any actual
could be a moral reason for every agent against killing other persons because everyone has some desire that would be served by refraining from killing others. One person may have a desire to not be defamed, and this desire would be served by not being accused of manslaughter or murder. Another person with a plot to kill off the person next in line for a promotion at her work also has a desire to eat chocolate cake. Unbeknownst to her, this competitor is also an extraordinary baker and plans to bring a chocolate cake to the office Christmas party. Thus her desire to eat chocolate cake would be promoted by her refraining from killing off the coworker. Even though the vengeful employee’s desire to eat chocolate cake may be the furthest thing from her mind, and not something that would override her other desires that push her in the opposing direction, the fact she currently has the desire (however weak) is enough for her to satisfy OIC on the proposed reading. This view is obviously too permissive, as it allows a faint, merely logical connection between a consideration and an agent’s psychology to serve as the only condition constraining the existence of moral reasons.

Opponents of this type of view have no trouble constructing counterexamples for this reason. Thomas Nagel generates the example of the person who will be in Rome in six weeks and has desires that will be promoted if he speaks Italian when there; but the traveler will not actually be moved to work on learning Italian until getting into a taxi in Rome when it is too late to learn. Even though nothing could compel the traveler to start learning Italian earlier, maybe because he is not aware that he will be unable to get by
without Italian, as long as some desires would be served by his having learned Italian in advance there could be a reason for him to do so.\textsuperscript{294}

Some proponents of the desire view happily bite the bullet, like Mark Schroeder, who admits that the facts that he desires to be healthy, health is promoted by ingesting iron, and there is iron in his car, together explain that he has a reason to eat his car. Schroeder encourages us to accept the unwanted consequences here as a slight cost for the great theoretical gains his view offers elsewhere. But if an account can offer those same or comparable theoretical gains without incurring such a cost, it would be wise to prefer that account.

At the other end of the spectrum we have views that are too restrictive in what moral reasons they countenance.\textsuperscript{295} Suppose that an account insists that only strong, salient desires enable agents to act on their reasons. What moral reasons an agent has will be only those that serve her present desires, but this prematurely rules out those considerations that might change an agent’s attitudes and desires were she to take them into consideration. For instance:

**ISRAELI COMBATANT**: An Israeli combatant strongly desires to defend her homeland by complying with the military officers’ commands. Her commanding officer has ordered her troop to drop a bomb over Gaza, and she presently agrees with the officer’s rationale for ordering the strike.

On this kind of account, if she sees a child civilian die as a result of their attacks and feels a tinge of sympathy and regret, her present strong desire would not be served by her changing her disposition to engage in fighting. It seems implausible that one never has moral reasons to change one’s desires or attitudes in light of experiences because one is

\textsuperscript{294} Thomas Nagel (1975) 58-59.
\textsuperscript{295} I take it that Steven Finlay’s and David Wong’s accounts fall prey to the worries I articulate here.
“unable” to be motivated to do so. People do change their attitudes, and it seems not as a result of some desire to change that is stronger than the present desires they have. So such a view is too narrow when it comes to the existence of moral reasons.

The Thomistic mind-dependence thesis steers a middle course through these two types of views because it takes a wide range of mental acts and states to be the truthmakers for claims about what an agent is able to do in the sense of second potentiality. Practical judgments, as we saw in chapter 3, allow us to perform acts of reasoning that can go in a variety of directions; we are always in a position to throw our reasoning into reverse, call into question premises that lead to our conclusions, or to draw different conclusions from the judgments we have formed by focusing our attention on some beliefs or desires rather than others.

In the case of the Israeli combatant, the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis only requires that the combatant have formed a practical judgment at some point that it would be bad in some respect to bomb Gaza for her to have a moral reason against participating in the bombing. A mere thought about the effects this has on a child civilian, such as that the bombing harms this child, combined with prior judgments that it is bad to do harm to children, together suffice to enable her to, at the very least, connect the dots and conclude that she ought not participate in the bombing, and at the most—if she has connected the dots—to intentionally not participate in the bombing. So she either has a moral reason to form the judgment that she ought not participate in the bombing, the having of which would make her able to act, and so have a moral reason, to actively avoid participating in the bombing. The Thomistic view, if it can accommodate the OIC principle on this
natural second potentiality reading in addition to securing other advantages, should be preferred to other accounts that weaken the theoretical power of OIC.

Not only does the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis give a second potentiality reading of OIC when it comes to what moral reasons are reasons to do, ensuring that we get the extension of cases right. It also says that the existence of moral reasons in general need not be constrained by particular judgments agents form but rather by the basic mental structure that makes them responsive to reasons as such in the first place. Thus we may say that there are moral reasons for and against actions without specifying what those reasons are reasons to do in advance of knowing what actual agents are in a position to do given their particular judgments. This is an advantage if the view wants to cater to the moral realist who is interested primarily in these sorts of general existence claims about morality.

4.4 Meeting the Objectivity Demand

The kind of mind dependence that moral reasons exhibit on the Thomistic theory poses no threat to their objectivity. On the standard views, mind dependence undercuts moral objectivity because the relatum of the mind dependence relation is a mental state, like a desire, with a world-to-mind direction of fit. If a desire cannot be held to any standard stricter than coherence, we should worry about moral reasons being limited by an agent’s desires. By contrast, moral reasons on the Thomistic account depend for their content on practical judgments, which have a mind-to-world direction of fit. Unlike desiring, judging what ought to be done forces someone to be beholden to the moral and normative facts.
that obtain independently of her particular viewpoint and motivations. These mind-independent facts serve as success conditions on an agent’s practical judgment. Put another way, practical judgments are about objective truths. Because this is so, the grounds for moral criticism are much deeper and the scope of actions that will come under criticism much wider when we make judgments, rather than desires, the delimiting feature of a moral reason.

The reader might stop here and protest that the Thomistic account still has not sufficiently answered to the objectivity demand, because objectivity amounts to more, or something besides, moral reasons being grounded in mind independent facts. This is a fair complaint, because what philosophers mean by objectivity is not always clear, and even less so in the moral domain. In chapter 1 I flagged this as an issue, discussing several conceptions of objectivity that are in the offing (and contending that we ought to reject some conceptions of objectivity as inapt in the domain of moral theory or as insufficiently supported by the arguments). And upon a review of the arguments, it looks as though several distinct notions associated or identified with moral objectivity hold water and are pertinent to an account of moral reasons. The sketch I just gave of why Thomistic mind dependence is compatible with moral reasons’ objectivity only addresses the issue of moral reasons objectivity on a conception of objectivity that has to do with grounds. So the objector is perfectly licensed to complain.

And countless other objectors could complain if they did not agree with the account of objectivity on which I was building my case for the Thomistic solution to the puzzle about moral reasons. So, dialectically I am faced with a choice between two ways of defending the claim that the Thomistic mind-dependent account of moral reasons
meets the objectivity demand: one, I could defend a particular conception of moral objectivity and argue that the thesis fits moral reasons to be objective on that conception, or two, I could shows that the view can meet criteria for objectivity on several viable conceptions of objectivity.

The latter route seems more prudent to me for a few reasons. Chief among these reasons is that my goal is to offer a solution to the puzzle about moral reasons that is viable and powerful enough to extract us from the current dialectical deadlock. The solution on offer has this theoretical benefit in large part because it is not built on premises that are already a subject of controversy. But if I were to rest the case for the Thomistic solution on just a single conception of objectivity its base of support would be more fragile and narrow for it. In addition, I suspect that several characteristics that moral philosophers normally tote around in arguments under the auspices of objectivity have less to do with objectivity, on serious and careful reflection, than we might think.  

Given disagreement among moral philosophers, and even among those who agree that moral reasons ought to be objective, about objectivity is and what the signs of objectivity are, it is best if a solution to the puzzle meets the objectivity demand on several, rather than just one, conception of objectivity. If later we discover that objectivity really has nothing to do with the characteristics once popularly singled out by moral philosophers in our day, then the Thomistic account should still be left untouched. For either we will find

296 In her article “Does Meta-ethics Rest on a Mistake?” Sigrun Svavarsdottir begins by pointing out the opacity of the concept “objectivity” to which both sides of the debate appeal, which leads, in her view, to serious misunderstandings by both sides. While J.L. Mackie’s criticism of moral realism fluctuates between an ontic and a metaphysical understanding of objectivity, Thomas Nagel’s response to that criticism operates out of an epistemological understanding. Confusion ensues.

Hallvard Lillehammer writes, in the same spirit, “It is widely agreed that morality strikes us as objective. It is less widely agreed what moral objectivity amounts to and whether the appearance of objectivity truly reflects what goes on when we make moral judgments,” (Lillehammer, 55).
that such characteristics are still desirable, just not under the name of objectivity, or we will see some of them as unimportant and others as significant. So, by taking the second route we ensure that the Thomistic account dons moral reasons with the appropriate features, whatever they turn out to be. All this is done rather cheaply, as it does not require us to settle which characteristics are genuine markers for objectivity.

In this section I will illustrate how the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis accommodates intuitions about six characteristics or markers that purport to be about moral objectivity. First, if a moral reason is objective then the grounds for its existence are mind independent; more specifically, the fact that moral reasons depend on our practical judgments does not depend on our thinking that this is so because of some peculiar perspective we humans inhabit, or our desires being served by its being so. Second, there can be genuine disagreement about moral reasons because facts about moral reasons are objectively, truth-functionally evaluable. There is a fact of the matter about whether an agent S has a moral reason R to φ which can serve as the subject of appropriate disagreement. This entails that one party in a disagreement can be in error about the facts about someone’s moral reasons, even her own. And the possibility of error is another feature typically thought to co-travel with objectivity. Third, moral reasons that are mind dependent in the Thomistic sense satisfy what I call the principle of intersubstitutability—that principle that is at the heart of the intuition that moral reasons must be impartial. The same moral reasons apply to any agent who judges she ought to φ in circumstances C. Fourth, moral reasons on this view bind agents who seem to have no interest in acting morally—amoralists, most psychopaths, and sociopaths. Fifth, moral reasons are an object of moral knowledge, not mere opinion, because facts about them are
sufficiently mind independent, and so there can be genuine moral discovery, not merely a shift in popular opinions or statistically normal beliefs about moral reasons. Since moral objectivity is a concept cobbled together out of the features listed above, and because whether objectivity actually involves all of these features, they have been identified by moral realists as desirable features of a theory of moral reasons, each of them is important to a solution to the puzzle about moral reasons. That the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis secures these properties for moral reasons is one more reason to believe that it offers a compelling solution to the puzzle.

4.4.1 Stance-Independent Grounds

One root of the worry about objectivity has to do with the source of the authority of a reason. (This is the worry I articulated at the beginning of this section). It seems to some that if moral reasons are dependent on some psychological feature or fact about that feature, their authority over an agent also depends on that feature. Such authority will be contingent and subjective rather than necessary and objective. And any agent can wriggle her way out of or put herself under that kind of contingent, subjective authority; she can bootstrap her way into moral reasons and loose herself from them at will, it would appear.

Some philosophers argue that in order to avoid this worry, moral reasons must have as grounds objective, stance-independent moral truths, for without such grounds the authority of a moral code they bring to bear on action would be illusory or objectionably
Richmond Campbell helpfully characterizes the sense of objectivity these philosophers are leaning on: “A moral truth (or fact) is objective in the sense required by morality when it is ‘stance-independent,’ when, that is, it would hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes, taken collectively, whether we have them now or would have them on reflection under ideal conditions.”

Even if hypothetical agents constructed a moral code that applied to us, we might wonder why hypothetical agents conceived of as having certain features would generate moral standards superior to those another kind of hypothetical agent would generate. Building into one’s account of moral reasons the idea that the basis of moral demands is independent of any peculiar, arbitrarily chosen stance ensures that the account stands a chance of capturing the authority of the morality that applies to us.

The Thomistic view of moral reasons does build in the stance-independence of facts about moral reasons even though the content of the moral reasons and the existence of moral reasons are both shaped by facts about agent psychology. Facts about what moral reasons exist hold independently of the evaluative attitudes anyone takes regarding propositions about moral reasons. For instance, the fact that Nasia has a moral reason

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297 Philippa Foot’s early article, “Morality As a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” for instance, has provoked such a response from robust moral realists.

For examples of theorists on both sides of the debate who discuss objectivity as stance-independence of the facts about moral reasons see Russ Shafer Landau (2003) and Sharon Street (2006).


299 Consider Russell’s statement that “I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I do not like it,” in Russell (1960) pp. 310-311 quoted in Cristina Lafont (2004) 43.

Nicholas Rescher also argues that this problem should drive us into the arms of moral objectivism: Moral relativisms are deeply problematic because they are “caught up in the evident implausibility that any moral code, any set of moral rules whatsoever, is as good as any other for us here and now, in the circumstances in which we find ourselves in interaction with others. Moral nihilism, on the other hand, is caught up in the no less striking implausibility of the contention that no moral code whatsoever is valid, that no code can make a warranted claim to effectiveness in safeguarding the interests of people” (Rescher, 2008: p. 394).
against buying clothes produced by offshore factories does not depend for its being true or false on anyone’s attitude regarding Nasia’s reasons (including Nasia’s). Nasia could believe that she has a reason that would justify buying the clothes in spite of the fact that it would be more ethical to abstain, and the fact about her moral reason against buying them would remain unchanged. No one might have desires or attitudes regarding Nasia’s moral reason at all, and the fact about that reason would persist. Rather, the truth of facts about moral reasons is a function of the facts which cannot be manipulated by individual agents: facts about what practical judgments someone has actually made, the fact that an agent is a human being with a certain capacity for practical reasoning, and facts about what it is good for human beings given their nature. These are all stance-independent matters because they do not not depend on what we happen to believe about them or whether our desires and interests would be served by their being true.

If the basic thrust of the argument here were that moral reasons depend not only on the psychological relatum of the dependence relation—practical judgments—but also on mind-independent normative facts, it would be hard to see how the theory differed from other theories on which moral reasons are mind dependent. For suppose we constructed a view on which moral reasons are given by all and only those mind-independent normative facts about what is good for an agent that happen to align with an agent’s extant commitments and desires. If this view too could boast that it grounded moral reasons in stance-independent facts, it would be unclear what the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis contributes to the solution to the objectivity problem.

But that moral reasons also materially and formally depend on objective moral truths is not the crux of the argument. Instead, the idea is first, that facts about practical
judgments are not manipulable by agents the way other psychological facts are. When something appears to one to be true, one cannot by sheer force of will get oneself to believe it to be false. Judgments are perceptions about the truth of the matter. If giving business to a company that relies on child labor strikes Nasia as a bad thing for her to do, she can of course dismiss the idea or put it out of her mind, so to speak, making it less salient, but she cannot make it the case that she has not judged that she shouldn’t do it. By contrast, Nasia can decide not to care about ethically sourced products, and so if her moral reason were dependent on facts about what she cared about at the moment, she could change the facts about her moral reason by her own decision or some other psychological maneuvering.

Second, facts about having a certain psychological capacity are certainly not up to us in the way desires and commitments would seem to be. On the Aristotelian portrait Aquinas endorses, facts about our psychology are necessary facts about human nature. Insofar as I am exhibiting human nature, I have certain mental structures that enable me to be a practical reasoner. So facts about moral reasons’ existence can depend on our mental structures and still be necessary, unchanging facts of the form, “Necessarily, if S is a human being then S has a moral reason R.” What the moral reason is a reason to do will depend for its scope on stance-independent facts about what is good for creatures of that kind—facts of the same necessary conditional form, “Necessarily, if S is a human being then x is good for S.” And what the moral reason is a reason to do will depend for its particular content, given that scope, on practical judgments not subject to bootstrapping, of the form, “Necessarily, if S is a human being then if S judges that φ is to be done, there is a moral reason R for S to φ.”
Third, and relatedly, practical judgments and the mental structures that enable practical reasoning presuppose the stance-independence of the facts they purport to be about. For a practical judgment to be a judgment, rather than a simple pro-/con-attitude, requires there to be an intentional object the judgment can represent or fail to represent and so be correct or incorrect. For a capacity to be a capacity for reasoning about what is to be done or to be avoided, there must be facts about what is to be done and what is to be avoided that obtain independently of the conclusions of that person’s reasoning process. The facts could be mind-independent facts about the procedure of reasoning that yields truths about what is to be done; or they could be mind-independent facts about what is good for human beings in certain circumstances that will determine the correctness of the outcome of the reasoning, independently of the procedure. The point is that if there were no way of that capacity pulling off a piece of reasoning about what ought to be done or avoided because of an absence of independent facts about what ought to be done or avoided, then we would be incorrect to call it a capacity for figuring out what is actually to be done or to be avoided. Even if we had a capacity for forming conclusions about “socially constructed” or “hypothetically constructed” norms of behavior, if those norms really reduce to non-normative facts about what actual or hypothetical agents do, then what that capacity is a capacity for is detecting non-normative facts about what certain actual or hypothetical agents do and comparing them to our own. If socially or hypothetically constructed norms are no more than codes we regard as authoritative, but intrinsically have no binding power, then we would be incorrect to call our capacity for reasoning about them a capacity for reasoning about what actually ought to be done or
ought to be avoided. This is another way in which the Thomistic account differs from many constructivist theories of moral reasons.

One might worry that the Aquinas’s Aristotelian inheritance regarding a theory of human goodness will undermine the view’s ability to capture the stance-independence of grounds of moral reasons. For a true Aristotelian will hold that the good or best achievement for a human being depends on human psychology. Since facts about what is good for humans ground facts about someone’s moral reasons on Aquinas’s view, then the facts about moral reasons are not grounded by sufficiently objective facts. Take as an example the good of character friendship: Aristotle says that character friendship is good for human beings because we are the sorts of creatures who psychologically benefit from perceiving goodness in others. Absent that psychological idiosyncrasy of humans, character friendship would not be good for an agent. Another way to state the apparent problem is that a fact about human goods on the Aristotelian picture can be expressed in the form of a conditional statement, “If S is a human being, then character friendship is good for S” where S being a human being rests on facts about S’s psychology. Isn’t the fact that the antecedent could fail to hold something that undermines the objectivity facts about moral reasons grounded in such a statement?

Moral and normative facts about human beings on Aquinas’s account are genuinely stance independent even if they invoke the notion of a human being that includes facts about human psychology. This is because for Aquinas, as for Aristotle, human being is a natural kind. The properties that belong to that kind belong necessarily and independently of any agent’s evaluative attitudes. Including in the grounds of a moral reason a fact about human beings is a benefit, as we saw in chapter 1. For unless we
mention a general psychological feature or set of features shared by all human beings as a condition on some x being good for an agent S, we forego the ability to deny that x is good for anything, be it a human being, rabbit, or rock. Character friendship might be good for a human being, but a rock is certainly not worse for its not having any friends of character. But to maintain the needed distinction we must discriminate between the nature of a rock and the nature of a human being, invoking some facts about human psychology that make us the kinds of agents that can act intentionally and rationally. There is nothing problematic in principle about a psychological fact about all human beings figuring in the explanation of some end being good for or bad for an agent. Furthermore, that certain psychological features belong to the class of agents picked out by the natural kind “human” is completely stance independent. So these moral and normative facts about what is good for human beings are perfectly suited to provide the basis for facts about agents’ moral reasons and to be the objects of agents’ practical reasoning and judgments.

One additional advantage the view accrues because of the way it answers the stance-independence challenge is that it can bypass the sorts of worries raised by evolutionary debunking arguments against moral realism. There is plenty of reason to think that the mental faculties and processes that lead to the development of our moral beliefs would fail to track objective moral and normative facts, given our evolutionary history, the debunking arguments begin. So if robust moral realism is true, then we have good reason to think we are hopelessly lost with respect to the moral truth. The Thomistic
view provides two novel responses to this challenge. First, moral reasons only bind those creatures who have a capacity for tracking the normative truth; if the human species does not have that capacity, then we are not the sorts of beings bound by moral reasons, but if someone is bound by moral reasons, that entails that she is in the natural class of beings picked out by the capacity for tracking normative and moral truths. Second, the Thomistic account tells us that if we have a general capacity for tracking normative and moral truths but, due to evolutionary processes, we reason especially poorly about some subset of those truths, then what that subset of truths gives us moral reason to do is to either avoid violating our mistaken judgments or shift our behaviors such that over time we will acquire true beliefs about them. All those behaviors that do not violate our present judgments and would eventually lead us to act in ways that are, from an objective perspective, good for human beings are included in the range of actions that a moral reason would support us performing.

4.4.2 Stance Independence and Aquinas’s Ontology of Moral Reasons

One could accept everything I have said so far and conclude that there are no stance-independent, normative facts about what is good for human beings, so we must not have a capacity for finding those facts or drawing conclusions about them. Because the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis is a thesis about the analysis of moral reasons, not the ontology of moral reasons, this is perfectly fine. An analysis does not come down on the question of whether there are any things in the world that fits it. But someone might

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prefer to be a quasi-realist about moral reasons, even on pain of losing out on moral objectivity, than to be a nihilist about moral reasons. If the Thomistic analysis leads to nihilism about moral reasons because it sets the bar too high for the existence of particular moral reasons, then, such a person might say, so much the worse for that view.

Fortunately, not only does Aquinas’s treatment of the question of mind dependence in his accounts of conscience and synderesis give us an analysis of moral reasons; it provides a robust story about their ontology. To stave off the objection about nihilism that might follow from my defense of the stance-independent grounds of moral reasons, I want to outline how this story goes.

For every being in the created universe, the story goes, that being’s happiness consists in its union with God through the performance of activities characteristic to that being’s natural kind.\footnote{Not only does Aquinas make his commitment to this idea clear in his application of it to the subject of human happiness in \textit{ST} IaIae 1-5; it emerges in his definition of eternal law in \textit{ST} IaIae 93.1 and occupies \textit{SCG} II.45-46 and \textit{SCG} III.16-22.} We can capture this foundational normative fact in a biconditional:

\begin{quote}
N1: S’s φ-ing contributes to S’s happiness if and only if S’s φ-ing is an instance of an activity characteristic of S’s kind and serves the end of S being united with God.
\end{quote}

God creates human beings such that the activity proper to human nature is reasoning, so an action of a human being will not contribute to the human being’s happiness unless it involves reasoning, or:

\begin{quote}
N2: The characteristic activity of a human being is the ordering of her actions, using reason to bring her actions under definite descriptions and willing the actions under those descriptions.
\end{quote}
For a being that has reason and will, being united with God through reasoning requires being of the same mind with God, so to speak. Just as two people cannot be united if they will opposing ends under the same description, so too rational beings and God cannot be united if they will opposing ends under the same description. Together, this platitude, N1, and N2 entail the normative fact that for a human being to be happy she must will what God wills under the description God wills it (and not will what God does not will under the description God does not will it). These three truths do not depend for their truth on their validation by any agents, hypothetical or actual.

A few additional stance-independent facts about human beings end up providing the ultimate explanation for the formal and material dependence of moral reasons on certain psychological features of agents. First, as we saw in chapter 3, Aquinas thinks human beings can be mistaken about what God wills and so about the moral standard that determines what our happiness consists in. But because all human agents have the fundamental moral awareness or habit he calls synderesis, which gives us a grasp of principles like ‘good is to be done,’ all human beings can be expected to know that whatever God wills he wills under the description ‘good,’ and he does not will anything under the description ‘bad.’ Although it is impossible for corrupted human beings like us to actually will everything God wills on our own, God extends grace to those who enter into friendship with him and secures their happiness through friendship. This means

302 Aquinas does not take the horn of the Euthyphro dilemma on which something is good merely because God wills it. Instead, he states that divine goodness is a necessary feature of God and that since goodness and being are the same in reference but difference in sense, God’s willing is constrained by goodness in that, for anything, if it is, then it is good, so it is fitting for God to will it; but it is not necessary for something to be, except God himself, so God is not bound to will everything that would be good if it existed in actuality (See SCG II.28.10).
that what human agents must do to achieve their final end—happiness—is simply to enter into friendship with God. As we know from human friendship, unity with another person comes in degrees, and the bar for friendship is lower than the bar for perfect unity. All it takes for a human being to enter into friendship with another person is to not will the contrary of what one’s friend wills under the same description. Thus for a human agent to enter into friendship with God, she need not will everything God wills and will against everything God hates; she needs only to avoid freely willing what she knows God does not will. With this story in mind we can offer a specification of what is required for human happiness:

\[ HH: \text{For all human agents } S, \text{ S’s } \Phi \text{-ing is necessary for } S \text{’s happiness only if } S \text{ judges that } \varphi \text{-ing is to be done or that not-} \varphi \text{-ing is bad or to be avoided.} \]

HH is made true not by our conceptions of morality nor by our attitudes or desires or the attitudes or desires of a fully informed, fully rational agent (though a fully informed and rational agent would accept HH). Rather N1, N2, and the fact that God extends grace through friendship make HH true.

On Aquinas’s full-fledged account, the set of objective facts N1, N2, and HH serve as the grounds for the mind-dependence thesis and for subsequent facts about particular moral reasons—whether they are wide or narrow in the scope of what they require. N1, N2, and HH justify the placement of the necessity operator that governs the conditional, “for any and all creatures like us, not acting contrary to one’s practical judgments is partly constitutive of one’s happiness.” Imagine a universe in which God creates one world \( w \), but does not populate that world with any rational creatures like us. What would it take for N2, and HH to be true in \( w \)? I see no reason why N1 and a fact about the concept in God’s mind of “human being” would not make N2 and HH true in
w. The antecedent, after all, does not need to be satisfied for the conditional to be satisfied; it need only be the case that in any world where the concept “human being” is instantiated the antecedents of N2 and HH are satisfied.

Because HH expresses a moral standard that fixes facts about moral reasons, as I argued in chapter 3, the Thomistic theory captures the kind of objectivity in its grounds the moral realist seeks. Not only does it state that stance-independent normative facts underwrite facts about moral reasons such that those moral reasons maintain their objective authority; it also furnishes a story about the connection between those facts and existing moral reasons. By establishing a relationship between a substantive final end or best good for human beings and practical judgments of human beings, Aquinas’s account explains why the analysis of moral reasons offered by the Thomistic mind dependence thesis would be satisfied by the kinds of moral considerations we invoke in our ordinary practices. So it preempts an objection that the analysis sets the bar too high for a consideration’s being a moral reason and so leads to nihilism about moral reasons.

4.4.3 Disagreement and Error

Moving away from the interpretation of the objectivity demand as a demand that the grounds of moral reasons be stance independent, we turn to the idea that objectivity alone can preserve the phenomenology of moral disagreement and the possibility of error in moral judgment. The Thomistic analysis of moral reasons fares just as well on this account of objectivity, as there can be genuine disagreements about whether an agent has a moral reason both because someone can be mistaken about whether the agent in question has the practical judgment that would provide the content of that reason and
because someone can be mistaken about the moral or normative facts that would make the moral reason narrow or wide in scope.

When we argue about what moral reasons people have, the realist says, we don’t feel as though we’re disagreeing about what Hume called “matters of taste.” The phenomenological difference can be captured even from an observer’s perspective. For instance, as I mentioned earlier, my friend told me that when she was teaching English in Erzeram, Turkey, she found her students disagreeing with her about the wrongness of cheating. All I needed to do was hear the story for the disagreement to strike me as distinct in kind from a disagreement about whose cuisine was better.

A range of conceptions of objectivity, from truth-aptness to mind independence, could back the phenomenology of moral disagreement. Logically and metaphysically speaking, mind independence is the strongest conception of objectivity that would account for both the phenomenology of moral disagreement and the possibility of error. Despite its immodesty as a theoretical claim, many think mind independence is the best explanation for moral disagreement. If the existence and nature of moral facts, reasons, and whatever other referents of moral statements don’t depend on the minds of persons asserting or denying those statements in moral disagreement, then we have an explanation for both the fact that at least one of the parties is in error and the fact that their disagreement feels more weighty than a disagreement about matters of taste. Mind-independent moral facts provide no guarantee that agents like us have knowledge of them.

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303 See David Enoch, “Why Objectivity Matters,” 1, Sigrun Svavarsdottir, “Objective Values: Does Metaethics Rest on a Mistake?” 145. Enoch does not think the argument works unless we imagine ourselves inhabiting the perspective of one of the persons in the disagreement, but the cheating example suggests otherwise.

304 David Enoch and Russ Shafer-Landua, for instance.
and so introduce the possibility of error. Additionally, they resemble mathematical facts or physical facts more than facts about preferences in virtue of their mind-independent status.

We can just as easily account for these two features of moral disagreement by asserting that moral statements or judgments are truth apt. If statements about moral reasons can be evaluated as true or false, then granting the law of excluded middle, either the denier or the asserter in such a disagreement is in error. What’s more, the truth-aptness of moral statements accounts for the similarity between these statements and statements about mathematical facts, or facts of physics, as their truth values do not fluctuate depending on the asserter’s beliefs about them, idiosyncratic preferences, and point of view.

The analogy with physical and mathematic facts will help us to see how on the truth-aptness conception of objectivity, a judgment or statement can be objective without being a-perspectival. Consider the two statements:

1 Two straight lines intersected by a line segment whose interior angles sum to less than 90 degrees will intersect.

2 The triangle on the left side is larger than the triangle on the right.

We can assess the truth or falsity of 1 without knowing anything about the person who asserts it because the applications of concepts employed in 1, like ‘lines’ and ‘straight,’ do not seem to be relative to the perspective from which the concepts are deployed. By contrast, the truth or falsity of 2 cannot be ascertained without knowing the position of the speaker relative to the two triangles. Imagine that I’ve placed a piece of paper with

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305 See Wiggins 2006: p. 11.
two triangles on a desk and I ask two individuals, at separate times, to look at the paper and assess whether 2 is true or false. Unbeknownst to them, I have asked one to approach the desk from the south side and the other from the north side. The two individuals can come to opposite conclusions about 2 and both be objectively correct. The weak perspective or mind dependence of the truth value of 2 does not intuitively rule out the objectivity of 2. Instead, it reveals that among the concepts that have objective application, some concepts have a built-in relativity to the speaker and others do not. The appropriate method for determining the truth value of, or objective application of a concept within, a statement depends on the kind of concepts the statement employs. If one of the concepts invoked is perspective-relative, like “left” or “right” in statement 2, then we can reformulate the statement by spelling out the conditions for the correct application of the relative concept:

2’ The triangle on the left side is larger than the triangle on the right side from the south-facing perspective.

To see that the method of fleshing out the concepts being deployed is not an ad hoc way to deal with relative concepts, consider what would happen if an alien raised on non-Euclidean geometry (believing space to be curved) was asked to assess the truth of 1. The alien would rightly deny 1 since the concept of curved space the alien invokes to form her concept of a line differs dramatically from the concept of two-dimensional, flat space on which the concept of a line is based for the Euclidean. So again, to avoid disagreements generated by equivocation between concepts we need to know more about the concepts being invoked in even statements like 1.

The geometric example draws out the extent to which statements and judgments may be objective in the sense of truth-functionally evaluable without being totally mind
independent, for the truth or falsity of some statement like “x is F” depends both on the analysis of the concept F—what the conditions for any x being F are—and whether x actually satisfies the conditions for being F. The analysis of a concept F is mind dependent not because we can invent the conditions for something’s being F willy-nilly, but in the sense that a concept signifies conditions in the context of mentally constructed language and thought.\footnote{Christopher Peacocke has a thorough and compelling account of how mind-dependent concepts nevertheless meet a threshold he calls the minimal objectivity for judgments (Peacocke, “The Objectivity of Judgment,” Mind 118 (2009): 739-769). “Minimally objective judgments have contents whose truth is mind-dependent,” he says (740). He goes on to spell out the following condition on minimal objectivity: “If the judgment is true there must be a specification of what the correct way of going on is, where this way is not merely a matter of its striking the thinker as going on the same way, or merely a matter of the thinker’s being disposed to make the judgment in certain circumstances” (745-6). He then explains that non-trivial fundamental reference rules that do not depend on the whimsy of any one individual specify the relation between some concept, its uses, and a paradigm case of an object to whom the concept appropriately refers in order to zero in on the right ontological category of referents for that concept (743). Peacocke’s understanding of the objectivity of judgment fits neatly with the Thomistic idea that rational judgment is the locus of moral accountability. “This is why minimal objectivity and the possibility of rational judgment go hand-in-hand. The philosophical explanation of both of them draws on the same resources, and presupposes the fulfillment of the same preconditions. When rational judgment of a content is possible, there must be conditions to which the correctness of the judgment is answerable, and this implies minimal objectivity for such judgments. Conversely, where there is minimal objectivity, there must be correctness conditions which contribute to the possibility of distinguishing between rational and non-rational judgment.” (747).} This is not to say that individuals cannot get a concept’s application wrong, of course. The Euclidean may be mistaken in her concept of a line because there is nothing in reality that fulfills the conditions of her concept of space, if all space is curved. The truth-aptness notion of objectivity preserves the possibility of error and provides a non-debunking explanation for moral disagreement, then, without eradicating the mental.

We would not be able to preserve the phenomenology of moral disagreement at face value, of course, if we translated all those statements into statements about the attitudes of the agents asserting them.\footnote{The aim of Simon Blackburn’s project is to close the semantic gap with his logic of attitudes, but} To say that the truth-aptness of translated
statements accounts for disagreement would undermine, rather than underscore, the phenomenology by pointing out that the agents engaged in moral disagreements are systematically mistaken about what they are doing. If they were aware that they were just expressing their attitudes or emotional stances regarding moral statements, or regarding others’ attitudes toward those statements, then moral disagreements would not feel so distinct from disagreements about matters of taste. Truth-aptness of moral statements as they stand, however, does explain what moral disagreement feels like without betraying the phenomenology.

As I have depicted the Thomistic view, moral reasons are objective in the truth-apt sense in just the way 2 is objective. Since on the Thomistic view, the concept ‘moral reason’ is relative, to assess the truth or falsity of statements about moral reasons we need to flesh out the relational notion in such statements. We can apply the method to the example of cheating, which was the subject of a moral disagreement between my friend Elizabeth and her Turkish students. We begin with:

3 There is a moral reason against cheating.

Then we modify the statement to reflect the relations implicit in the concept ‘moral reason’:

3’ For all agents who judge that cheating is bad or to be avoided, there is a moral reason against cheating.

Now my friend Elizabeth and her students can have an argument about whether 3’ is true, and either she is correct and they are in error, or she is in error and they are correct. Her thus far the account still faces a number of devastating criticisms. Most recently, Scanlon has leveled an argument against Blackburn’s style of expressivism in Being Realistic About Reasons. Simon Blackburn, “Attitudes and Contents,” Arguing About Metaethics eds. Simon Kirchin and Andrew Fisher (New York: Routledge, 2006), 501-517.
students might believe that the badness of cheating is outweighed by the benefits of getting good marks in their English classes and so deny 3’. On Aquinas’s account, certain normative facts about God’s will for human beings and about human nature that will determine whether 3’ is true or false. If God wills that cheating not be done, then an agent who judges that cheating is bad or to be avoided has formed a correct practical judgment and so her reason for conforming to that practical judgment is narrow in scope. However, if God has no wishes concerning cheating, then the reason agents who form that judgment have will be wide in scope:

4 When an agent judges that cheating is bad or to be avoided, there is a moral reason for that agent to either not cheat or change her mind.

If there were no facts about God’s attitudes towards agents cheating, then Elizabeth’s students would be correct in denying 3’ and Elizabeth would be in error, but 4 would be true.

Let’s suppose there is something bad about cheating because it undermines the development of character virtues like honesty, and, let’s say, God wants humans to develop honesty. Then it is likely that people like her students, who think that cheating undermines honesty and who have ample evidence to conclude that cheating is bad, have moral reason to judge that cheating is bad.

5 When an agent judges that cheating hinders the development of honesty, and that honesty is good or to be pursued, the agent has a moral reason to believe that cheating is to be avoided.

If 5 is true, then Elizabeth’s students may not be violating any moral reason against cheating (3’) since they do not fall under its jurisdiction, but they would be violating their moral reason to believe cheating to be bad (5).
The cheating example illustrates how moral reasons have objective application even though they are mind dependent on the Thomistic view. The underlying normative facts about what God wills, what is conducive to human beings aligning their wills with God, together with N1 and N2 fix, objectively, the application of the concept of a moral reason. I am not arguing here that Thomistic mind dependence conserves the truth-apt conception of objectivity that enables us to explain genuine moral disagreement and error only on the theistic view in which the mind-dependence thesis arises. I only mean to highlight that the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis, when embedded in the right sort of moral theory, does not undercut the truth-aptness of statements about moral reasons or the objective application of the concept of a moral reason. I leave it to the reader to decide whether a non-theistic story, appropriating the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis, could do just as well on this score.

4.4.4 Impartiality & Intersubstitutability

Many theorists invoke objectivity because it seems to entail impartiality. The concept of the moral brings, such theorists say, brings along with it the idea of fairness or equality: morality takes into consideration all agents’ interests equally. This feature of the

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308 Hallvard Lillehammer contends that some statement is objective in the realist sense just in case it does not depend on our practices and attitudes regarding the content of that statement: “Claims are objective in the realist sense just in case their conditions of correct application are fixed by substantial facts or properties that exist independently of the practice of making those claims and the attitudes of those who make them.” See Hallvard Lillehammer, “Constructivism and the Error Theory,” *Continuum Companion to Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 56. The Thomistic account of moral reasons preserves this realist sense of objectivity because it does not let agents’ attitudes about their reasons totally fix the truth conditions of statements about their reasons. In the cheating example, for instance, the Turkish students may be convinced that it is false that they are bound by moral reasons against cheating but still have those reasons because they think cheating is in some respect bad, and they do it anyway, to get ahead or to gain another good.

309 For example, see Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* and *The Last Word* and David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously.*
concept would appear to rule out *ab initio* the possibility of partiality in the application and content of moral reasons, as such partiality threatens to undermine fairness. Another way this has been put is that what chiefly characterizes the moral point of view is that it is impartiality, thus for a reason to be a moral reason it must not cater to or be constrained by parochial preferences, attachments, and interests, ceteris paribus. I will not argue that the Thomistic view captures the objectivity of moral reasons qua impartiality, but rather that it gives moral reasons the more fundamental feature that motivates the interest in impartiality: intersubstitutability of moral reasons. For any claim about an agent’s moral reasons, the same will be true of any other agent who forms the same judgment in the same circumstances; thus, Thomistic moral reasons satisfy the intersubstitutability criterion for objectivity.

Some forms of mind dependence immediately unravel impartiality. On the view that an agent’s desires always figure in the full explanation of what moral reasons she has, for example, if I desire to go to the party and you desire to stay home, it makes a difference to my moral reasons that the desire to go to the party is *mine.* Additionally, if moral reasons depend on our actual motives or preferences, this dependence will provide opt-out clauses for the amoralist, the psychopath, or the apathetic agent. Moral reasons would fail to be sufficiently egalitarian if they demanded more of those with moral motives, desires, or preferences and less of amoralists, psychopaths, and apathetic agents.

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Finally, it seems that any mind-dependent account of moral reasons on which reasons are ineliminably indexical pose this threat to impartiality. Consider a pair of examples:

NAZ: Naz is a Turkish student in Elizabeth’s ESL class. Naz firmly believes that, while cheating in the class would be bad for his character, it is necessary to get ahead in his career as a travel agent.

EMRE: Emre is also a Turkish student in Elizabeth’s ESL class. Emre has been taught that cheating is acceptable when necessary, and thinks that cheating in the ESL class will be necessary to get the marks he needs to serve his future career plans to work in the UK.

If Naz has a moral reason against cheating and Emre does not, and what explains the difference between their reasons is the reason’s reference to a particular, non-substitutable agent, Naz, then there is no argument from the premises that Naz has a moral reason against cheating and that his fellow student Emre is similarly situated to the conclusion that Emre has a moral reason against cheating. Because the implications of such a view are objectionably biased towards some individuals and against others, and because we (many of us at least) associate morality with impartiality, views of this stripe are unpalatable.

The easiest way to escape the problem of partiality is to deny that local perspectives and interests can figure in moral reasons at all by agent neutralizing.\(^{311}\) Agent neutralizing explains any moral reason that has an agent as one of its relata in terms of a more basic reason that does not have an agent as one of its relata.\(^{312}\)

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\(^{311}\) Thomas Nagel has been carrying the banner of this version of objectivity for three decades. He presents a series of arguments for “nonlocal and nonrelative” morality in *The Last Word*.

\(^{312}\) I am building on Mark Schroeder’s discussion of the Standard Model Theory (2004). Nagel explains that “any claim that what is a reason for me is not a reason for someone else to draw the same conclusion must be backed up by further reasons, to show that this apparent deviation from generality can be accounted for in terms that are themselves general. Generality of reasons means that they apply not only in identical circumstances but in relevantly similar circumstances. Ideally, the aim is to arrive at principles that are universal and exceptionless” (Nagel, *The Last Word*, 5).
We might be tempted to assume that Aquinas’s account of moral reasons follows the standard agent-neutralizing model. After all, what accounts for the difference between two agents’ moral reasons on the Thomistic view is a difference between epistemic positions—what each agent is in a position to know about the considerations that bear on her decision. As convenient as it would be to claim Aquinas for the standard view and thereby show that the view accommodates the impartiality concern, I suspect such a strategy is not truly available for Aquinas. If I am right in thinking that the very concept of a moral reason on his view is mind dependent, then most plausibly the truthmaker for an agent-neutral proposition like “there is a reason to φ” is some agent-relative fact like “there is a reason for rational agents to φ,” not the other way around.

This brings me to a point others have made about agent neutrality, which I want to stand by here. The standard agent-neutralizing strategy may have a privileged place in our theorizing because on first blush it seems like the most intuitive way to secure impartiality; but it creates more problems than it fixes. First, if the most fundamental moral reasons are agent neutral, what grounds do we have for denying that these reasons apply to non-rational animals, or even inanimate objects? That is, without a necessary connection between agents like us and moral reasons it is not safe to assume that the moral reasons there are are reasons for us but not reasons for other existing things. Take the moral reason against precipitating the death of human beings against their wills, for example; if all beings in a position to effect the death of a human being has a moral reason against acting in a way that precipitates involuntary death, then it would follow that a boulder tumbling towards a biker on a highway below has a moral reason against falling down onto the biker, and that a bear in the path of a hiker has a moral reason
against attacking the hiker. It is uncontroversial, though, that the activities of boulders
and bears are not governed by moral reasons. To block these hare-brained results, a moral
theory needs to acknowledge that moral reasons are limited to the domain of moral
agents, and some beings, like bears and boulders, fall outside the jurisdiction of moral
reasons because they do not belong to that domain. Once a theory allows this much, and
sees that such a claim does not jeopardize the impartiality concern, we can set aside the
agent-neutralizing strategy.

The argument against agent-neutralizing draws out the acceptability of explaining
agent-relative moral reasons in terms of non-moral differences and moral reasons that are
agent-relative but whose agent-place ranges over the domain of all moral agents. For
instance, there is a moral reason for a Hamas official to not drop a bomb over Tel Aviv,
and a moral reason for an Israeli soldier to not drop a bomb over Gaza, but both reasons
can be explained in terms of the different positions of these agents and the moral reason
all agents share against precipitating the death of a human being against her will. In
essence, on this view all moral reasons of particular moral agents are derived from moral
reasons whose domain of application is universal in that they apply to all moral agents.
Should aliens and artificially intelligent beings be moral agents, then human beings share
with these beings fundamental moral reasons. The impartiality of moral reasons on such a
view is patent, as morality would be deploying a single, invariant standard between
species.

So, can the Thomistic view use this revised strategy to account for the impartiality
of moral reasons? After all, if Aquinas thinks that all beings with reason and will have a
moral reason to will what God wills under the description God wills it, then such a reason
would be universal in scope—applying to all rational agents—and differences in particular moral reasons could be accounted for by non-moral facts, like the epistemic position of an agent due to her particular reasoning. While I do think that for Aquinas, there are moral reasons which are universal (“common” in his terms) among all human agents, the revised strategy still seems to get the direction of explanation wrong. First, the best candidate for a moral reason common to all agents on his view is the moral reason against willing something under the description ‘bad.’ But in order for this reason to perform its proper function in reasoning and so to be a reason, an agent must be considering a particular action—whether it is an interior act of will or a composite act including an interior act of will—that would fall under the predicate ‘bad.’ Remember that Aquinas says that the good in general (in commune) does not have the ability to motivate beings like us. So if I have faithfully interpreted Aquinas as thinking that moral reasons are functional, and that to bind us they must be the sort of thing that could function in our practical deliberation and intentional action, we need more than the abstract thought that the bad is to be avoided to have a genuine, discretely extant moral reason, especially if that reason is to explain the existence of other reasons.\footnote{Since Aquinas does not think that there can be prime matter, and the grasp of the universal (common) good and bad serves as the matter for a moral reason, it seems inept to say that a formless moral reason against willing the bad or for willing the good exists. And supposing that particular conclusions of practical reason of which those propositions are the starting points give moral reasons form, general, formless moral reasons are not the right type of thing to explain other, more determinate, moral reasons.}

Even though Aquinas’s account of moral reasons does not follow the standard model’s strategy, an alternative strategy serves the purposes of impartiality just as well, and that alternative is employed by the Thomistic account. Let’s return for a moment to the theoretical benefit safeguarded by asserting that moral reasons are impartial. One of
the foremost defenders of the importance of impartiality, Thomas Nagel, argues that if moral reasons were partial—if they depended on particular cultural or personal perspectives—then the normative would risk subordination to the descriptive. For example, suppose that a wife’s having a moral reason against submitting to her husband without questioning him depends on her judgments about gender equality or desires to maintain equality in the home. If the best explanation for her having those judgments or desires is not that they latch on to some objective reality but rather that they express contingent historical facts about her upbringing in contemporary Western culture, then it seems that the normative statement, “This agent has a moral reason against submitting to her husband without question” can be reduced to a descriptive statement like, “This agent has been raised to desire not to submit to her husband without question.” Although an agent might be tempted to think that some contingent fact about her culture or history gives rise to her own moral convictions, such as the first-personal desire or judgment against submitting to her husband unquestioningly, Nagel suggests that an agent can always subject her own moral convictions to scrutiny by asking the impersonal question, “What should anyone in my situation do?” The wife in our example will presumably not be put to rest by the answer that she has been raised to think of gender equality as a value or to desire it; she will want to know whether this judgment or desire is justified. And to answer herself she will pose that impersonal question to herself.

The alternative strategy for securing impartiality, then, is not to claim that for any moral reason a particular agent has, every moral agent has that reason in some form or another, but rather to show that for any moral reason a particular agent has, if another

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314 Thomas Nagel, The Last Word, 105.
agent were in the same position she would also have that moral reason. We can put the contrast more precisely in terms of two principles, agent neutrality and intersubstitutability.

AGENT NEUTRALITY: There is a moral reason for a particular agent S in circumstances C for S to φ in C only if there is a moral reason for all agents to φ in C.

INTERSUBSTITUTABILITY: There is a moral reason for a particular agent S in circumstances C for S to φ in C only if, for all agents x, if x is in C, there is a moral reason for x to φ in C.

While the standard model’s Agent Neutrality principle insists upon the independent existence of a moral reason whose domain is universal, the alternative Intersubstitutability principle maintains only that the particular moral reason have a certain feature in virtue of which it is universalizable—it can be universal, should all agents occupy the position of the particular agent S. So morality does not show partiality to S, but context sensitivity. The latter strategy for securing impartiality not only folds in the natural idea (well-articulated and defended by Alasdair MacIntyre among others) that social context and culturally embedded meaning matters morally; it also safeguards impartiality with more metaphysical plausibility as it only posits the existence moral reasons that are at present functional for existing agents.315

Thomistic moral reasons, though they are reasons for particular agents to perform actions in specified circumstances, are impartial because they satisfy the intersubstitutability principle. Here is the argument for that claim: First, the material condition for the existence of any moral reason as a reason is the mental structure that

315 For MacIntyre’s arguments for the claim that moral demands must be embedded in social and cultural contexts, see his “The Magic in the Pronoun ‘My’,” 123-125.
enables agents to perform specific acts of practical reasoning—synderesis. All agents whose actions are morally evaluable have this structure, so all agents have the material condition for the existence of moral reasons. Second, the content of a Thomistic moral reason is filled out by the practical judgment of the agent whose reason it is and by God’s will towards the object of the judgment. If God wills the same end that the agent wills, then the moral reason will be narrow in scope, whereas if God does not will the same end that the agent wills, the moral reason will be wide in scope (it will be a moral reason to either will the end or change one’s mind). God’s will, on Aquinas’s view, is unchanging; he always wills whatever he wills under the description ‘good,’ and he always wills for each human being to be united with him through proper human activity. So what God wills for human agents is a stable set of goods under the description ‘good.’ Now suppose two agents form the same practical judgments. Those two agents will have moral reasons—because they both have the material conditions for the existence of such reasons—with the same content—because the content of the reason is supplied by their practical judgments, which by hypothesis are the same, and by God’s will with respect to the end they have in mind, which is again the same in both cases. Therefore any two agents in the same epistemic position will have the same moral reasons. In other words, Thomistic moral reasons are intersubstitutable.

Consider how the Thomistic model would handle the case of the Israeli combatant considering killing enemies by dropping a bomb over Gaza compared with:

HAMAS COMBATANT: A Hamas soldier wants to protect the land his people occupy in Gaza by launching a retaliatory strike in Tel Aviv. His commanding officer orders that they drop a bomb over Tel Aviv and the combatant fully plans to comply.
An account of moral reasons would fail to preserve morality’s impartiality if it pronounced that the Palestinian combatant has no moral reason against dropping a bomb over his enemy simply because the enemy is Israel, but the Israeli combatant does have a moral reason against dropping a bomb over her enemy because the enemy is not Israel; its failure would be still worse if the account entailed that both agents have a moral reason against dropping a bomb over Palestine just because there is a reason against bombing Israel full stop, not in virtue of a shareable feature of that state. On Aquinas’s account, though, what the Israeli and Palestinian agents have moral reason to do depends not only on their particular practical judgments but on God’s will regarding the ends expressed in those judgments. For Aquinas, God wills that all human agents respect the sanctity of life by not ending the lives of others, for he sees this end as good for human agents. And God also wills that all human agents enter into friendship with him, which requires that they not will the opposite of what he wills under the same description as he wills it. In this case God wills that the Israeli and Palestinian agents not willingly end the lives of others having judged that to be bad. Suppose that each judges that in some respect it would be bad to end the lives of the civilians. If each one knows that bombing Tel Aviv would end the lives of civilians, then, each has a moral reason that is narrow in scope against bombing Tel Aviv, and similarly if each one knows that bombing Gaza would end the lives of civilians, then each has a moral reason that is narrow in scope against bombing Gaza. In fact, any agent in such an epistemic position will have a moral reason with the same formal content.

One could object that it is unlikely for two agents to be in sufficiently similar epistemic positions for them to have moral reasons with the same content and scope. We
can construe the case realistically by modifying a few details. Both the Israeli and the Palestinian agent thinks taking civilian life is bad; let’s say that the Israeli comes to believe this after witnessing bombings in her own state and the Palestinian comes to believe the same after witnessing bombings in the West Bank. The Israeli agent, considering whether to order a strike on Gaza, has available to her the elements of a practical syllogism whose conclusion would be “it is bad to bomb Gaza,” as she knows that killing civilians is bad and she knows that bombs kill civilians. There is the further fact that God wants agents like the Israeli soldier to exercise reason well, and that a failure to draw that conclusion is a failure to exercise reason well. So the Israeli agent may not have a moral reason against bombing Gaza because she lacks the conclusion of conscience that would supply the content of that reason, but she does have a narrow-scope moral reason to change her mind—to form that practical judgment—which she violates by turning her attention away to the beliefs that would lead to that judgment, or letting other conflicting beliefs or inclinations cloud her reasoning. We could say the same for a Palestinian agent who does not think she ought not to bomb Tel Aviv, or any other agent considering ordering a strike or dropping a bomb who has the relevant information to judge that it would be bad, or should be avoided. Hence the intersubstitutability of the agent in the agent-place of the reason relation on the Thomistic account.

4.4.5 Discovery, Moral Knowledge, and Convergence

The objectivity of moral facts, including facts about moral reasons, contributes to the moral realist’s answer to the question, how can we be led to discover moral reasons
through inquiry? This question touches two related but separable issues: First, how do agents like us acquire knowledge of moral facts such that the moral judgments we form can be thought reliable, or at least not systematically mistaken? The objectivity of moral reasons and facts about them would ensure convergence of judgments regarding them when those judgments are formed by rational agents. Second, what justifies the conviction we have that, when we are engaged in practical reasoning about what ought to be done, we are not creating but rather discerning facts that obtained before we began our inquiry? The objectivity of moral reasons also purports to vindicate, as the objective status of moral reasons would guarantee that our thoughts about them have a basis outside the thoughts themselves.

Regarding the question about reliability, The Thomistic mind-dependence thesis on the one hand provides a straightforward answer to the question about the reliability of our judgments, since it posits a close connection between the contents of our judgments and the content of moral reasons that bind us. For any fact of the form “S has a moral reason for/against φ-ing in C” to obtain, according to the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis, the agent in question S must have formed a practical judgment about whether her φ-ing in C would be good or bad. Moreover, even if her judgment about φ-ing in C is mistaken, the content of her moral reason tracks the mistaken judgment. Let’s say Naz mistakenly believes that it would be bad to avoid cheating in his English class because it will keep him from advancing his career. As long as Naz maintains that belief he has a wide-scope moral reason to either avoiding cheating or change his belief. How, one might ask, is Naz to know his moral reason is wide in scope, and that it is morally permissible, even preferable, to change his mind? Remember that on Aquinas’s view, if
Naz has a moral reason to change his mind it is because he has formed some other judgment previously to the effect that cheating is bad in some respect that enabled him to change his mind. And if Naz does not have a moral reason to change his mind, then there is no moral reason he violates by cheating in the English class, as he does so in ignorance of its badness. Probably, there is some previous moral error that led to his false belief; but if not, Naz is not morally irrational.

One might suspect that the Thomistic view makes the connection between moral reasons and thoughts about reasons too close, and thereby devolves into a kind of moral relativism. For if agents like Naz do not have moral reasons we would attribute to other agents like Elizabeth, then how can there be convergence in what rational agents judge about what ought to be done? The full-fledged Thomistic account answers this challenge by pointing out that from the God’s eye perspective (quite literally) from the facts about an agent’s ignorance, prior judgments, and beliefs, and the stable facts about God’s preferences, one can infer what the agent has moral reason to do—both the content of the reason and whether it is wide or narrow in scope. And the facts about an agent’s practical judgments and about the objects of God’s will together constitute “full information” for rational agents. From there, the view says that the agent will have moral reasons to avoid bringing about anything she judges to fall under descriptions like ‘bad’ or ‘to be avoided’, and when mistaken about such descriptions, wide scope moral reasons to either avoid those actions or change her mind; she will have moral reasons against avoiding bringing about what she takes to be good or to be done, as those are the formal objects of God’s will, and when mistaken the reasons will be wide in scope—moral reasons either
to not avoid doing what she takes to be required or to change her mind about the act’s status as required.

There is another way to put the convergence challenge: an account of moral reasons, to be objective, must be such that the moral reasons themselves converge for all rational, fully informed agents. I do not think the robust Thomistic account of moral reasons meets this version of the challenge, but with good reason; I think it is not the kind of challenge a suitably nuanced and realistic theory of moral reasons will meet. On Aquinas’s view, the final end of human beings does converge—so what we all have moral reason to do under the conditions of full information and full rationality in one sense is the same: to be united with God. The experience of unity with God, however, involves active enjoyment of God through the intellect on Aquinas’s picture, and if Aquinas thinks we can forge contingent but meaningful connections between certain activities and this final end through the exercise of our intellects, then what the enjoyment consists in could vary from one rational agent to another given those contingent connections. The eschatological ideal he puts forward is one in which each individual creature plays a distinct role, but one suited to creatures of its kind, in the perfect community of the created world meant to resemble the perfect community of the Trinitarian Godhead. Should each individual rational agent participate in the community by playing a slightly different role, then the overlap in what individual agents’ ends consists in is not perfect, and the moral reasons to do what conduces to those ends will differ in content. I said that I do not take this to be a damning problem for the Thomistic account because monism about value or moral ends seems on its face implausible and unnatural. We know from experience that there are multiple ways to realize finite goods
like health, intellectual activity, and friendship, so there is little reason to think that the final or ultimate good would be realized uniformly in all human lives.\textsuperscript{316} If this thought is compelling, then we should shy away from thinking of rational convergence as demanding not only that all fully informed and rational agents arrive at the same judgments about moral reasons but also that they have identical moral reasons.

An objector can press the general question about the discovery of moral reasons in a different vein, though. It is impossible, the objector will say, for features of our own psychology to make their way into our thoughts about what we ought to do as determinants of the answer to that question. While an agent may think that her own psychology influences the way she reasons about what is to be done or avoided, she cannot hold that her psychological states justify her actions without thereby making her own deliberation incoherent, as Talbot Brewer has argued.\textsuperscript{317} A similar but not identical challenge comes from the idea that the existence of independent moral truths are deliberatively indispensible, to use David Enoch’s phrase, because without such truths deliberation fails to have a point. If first-personal deliberation cannot be undertaken as worthwhile without the real, distinct, existence of moral reasons the agent only discovers, not effects, through reasoning, then it is a mark against the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis if it fails to account for such a discovery.

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317 Talbot Brewer’s argument against internalism turns on the idea that it would frustrate first personal deliberation about what to do if one thought that the grounds for the answer to that question—what ought to be done—were simply a matter of one’s desires. But the argument could be modified to run against a cognitivist version of internalism like the Thomistic view. Talbot Brewer (2002), 443-473.
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We can defend the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis by obliging the objector to look more carefully at the detailed account in action. The mind-dependence thesis does not claim that for an agent to have a moral reason to φ, she must judge that she has a moral reason to φ or that her judgment that she ought to φ constitutes at least a reason to not avoid φ-ing as long as she believes φ-ing should be done. If that were the case, the view would be strangely self-reinforcing. If Tamara has moral reasons to do only what she judges that she has moral reason to do, then it seems she can bootstrap her way into any moral reason. The Thomistic view, though, takes as an important datum that when an agent judges that φ-ing is bad, or good, or to be done or avoided, she takes it to be true that φ-ing is bad, good, to be pursued, to be avoided. That is, the agent must form a judgment about the object’s moral value that is independent of her. On this score it is in agreement with Enoch’s central idea that deliberation cannot be thought worthwhile by an agent unless the agent is under the impression that there are non-arbitrary, non-fictional answers to the questions she takes up in deliberation. Aquinas places such emphasis on practical judgments of the kind delivered by conscience because those judgments reflect the agent’s conception of normative truths about practical matters, and so if God is the truth, then the agent’s attitude towards those normative truths reflects her attitude towards God. The agent must be striving to get the extension of acts that fall under the description ‘good’ or ‘to be done’ and ‘bad’ or ‘to be avoided’ correct for the thought to count as a practical judgment of the kind that matters morally.

Can an agent believe the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis and maintain first order beliefs about what she ought to do without incoherence? Suppose that Emre believes that cheating is bad unless necessary for some other good, but then becomes
He would start to think that as long as he does not form the judgment that cheating is bad in any respect, he will be morally off the hook for cheating. The second order belief about his moral reasons would threaten to undermine the seriousness with which he would otherwise regard those first order judgments about what he ought and ought not do. How can an agent like Emre, who thinks her moral reasons depend on her practical judgments, treat her practical judgments as aiming at the truth, rather than partly constituting it?

This objection hinges on a faulty assumption about beliefs and judgments; namely, that the appearance to S that φ-ing is bad does not suffice for S’s having a belief or judgment that φ-ing is bad. For the objector does not think that cheating never appears bad to Emre, only that the appearance does not move him because of his second order beliefs about moral reasons’ mind dependence. All the Thomistic account needs to respond to this objection is the natural idea that there is no difference from the first-person perspective between the appearance of some action as good or bad and the regarding as true that the action is good or bad. As soon as it seems to Emre that cheating might be bad, he no longer genuinely believes it to be true that cheating is not bad. Because to judge that cheating is bad just is to think it is true that cheating is bad. No bootstrapping can occur on the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis, then, unless an agent were in full control of every mental impression she has. And since there is no argument that persuasively and decisively establishes that agents are in full control of their mental impressions—how things appear to them—it should be uncontroversial that one cannot rid oneself of moral reasons by intentionally failing to meet the knowledge requirement.
or ridding oneself of first order judgments on the basis of a second order judgment about mind dependence.

In sum, the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis handles the second question about discovery in moral reasoning as follows. Moral reasons derive their content from actual practical judgments. Practical judgments that make the reason a reason to do one thing or another must precede the existence of the reason in that form. It might seem that a consideration becomes a reason, then, through deliberation, and that one does not discover reasons in deliberation. But moral reasons need not lag behind judgments in time. If an agent forms a belief that p at t1, and a belief that if p then q at t2, and there is a consideration that favors her belief that q, then at t2 she meets the knowledge requirements for that consideration’s being a reason for her. Similarly, if an agent judges x is bad at t1, and judges that φ is an instance of x at t2, by t2 she at the very least has a moral reason to avoid φ-ing or change her mind, as there is no gap between it seeming to her that φ-ing would be bad and judging that φ-ing is bad. Not only does the reason not lag behind judgments temporally; but the scope of the reason is mind-independent, as it depends on God’s willing or not willing the object or action under consideration. What the agent might be thought of as doing in deliberation, then, is discovering what it is God wills; she aims to discover what actually falls under the description of the good. An agent who believes the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis would not be deterred from deliberating, but might take comfort in the fact that if in deliberation she does her due diligence, attending to features of the action, end, and circumstances within her view, but still takes a misstep, her reason is wide in scope, and so she can not act on the basis of what she thinks should be done but change her mind instead without acting morally.
irrationally.

4.4.6 Amoralists, Psychopaths, and Apathetic Agents

A worry driving the rush to objective ground is that if moral reasons are not objective, then their binding power will be limited to those already subjectively in the grip of such reasons, and we can think of at least three classes of agents who see no reason to be moral: amoralists, psychopaths, and apathetic agents. The final feature associated with objectivity in the literature which I want to discuss, though not in great detail since it bleeds into the next section, is the feature of being able to bind agents like amoralists, psychopaths, and apathetic agents. The Thomistic account gives us the resources to respond adequately to this concern because these agents have the full capacity to make moral judgments that bind them, and so their disordered affections or lack of desire does not excuse them from being under the moral authority of those reasons.

We’ve already seen how the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis deals with depression and apathy: apathetic agents most often are in a position to form practical judgments, and we know that people have the bare ability to be motivated to act on their judgments even when they lack desires for the things they judge to be good for them (e.g. the person who gets up before sunrise to work out can do so without having a desire to

318 The challenge of the “amoralist” populated literature on moral realism in the late 1980s and early 1990s and was used to argue against reasons internalism, as that view entails the impossibility of the existence of an amoralist. See, for instance, Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*, 1994. Scanlon, in *What We Owe to Each Other*, seems to think that we can expect all agents to share an evaluative desire to be in interpersonal relationships, and from this basic motivation we can get off the ground reasons to be moral. Of course, the problem for Scanlon’s view is that the scope of the quantifier over the claim “x has reason to be moral” depends on a contingent feature of agent psychology. To get the universal quantifier, it must be the case that all agents have the evaluative desire to have friends, and we can argue against that premise by ostension: any psychopath or sociopath skilled enough to play Hobbes’s fool fails to have a prudential reason to be moral. (See Travis Reider, Ch. 4).
get up before sunrise or to work out—she just judges that it would be good for her). If Nasia experiences apathy about acting well, that will not change her moral reason against shopping at a store with unjust labor practices today as long as she has formed the prior judgment that it would be bad for her.

The same goes for the amoralist; that she has no interest in morality or desire to be moral does not make a difference to her moral reasons unless these interests at any point lead her to fail to draw a particular practical conclusion that moral agents would draw; in such a case, the amoralist could be non-morally blamed for not acting as she would have had she drawn that conclusion, and will probably be morally blameworthy for having contributed to her current state from which she fails to have the practical judgment that would have given her a reason for action.

The psychopath case is trickier, as it depends on whether she is actually making moral judgments or mimicking moral language without understanding it, as some believe is the case. If the psychopath has a grip on moral goodness and badness, and if she genuinely judges that some course of action is bad, that judgment suffices to give her at least a wide-scope moral reason against performing the action. Suppose that the psychopath forms the opposite of all the practical judgments most normal human agents would form; for each judgment we can explain her forming that judgment either by appeal to some disorder over which she does not have voluntary control, or by appeal to some prior choice. If there is no voluntary action—not even a choice about mental attention—the psychopath has ever previously made that contributed to her formation of the backwards judgment now, then she is genuinely off the hook. But if there is a prior voluntary decision to act contrary to a moral reason (a reason to believe, judge, do) that
contributed to her being in a position from which she forms the backwards judgment, then we may morally blame her for the violation of that reason and perhaps non-morally blame her for the subsequent judgments and actions partly attributable to that violation.

While one might think this makes morality too lenient on psychopaths, and so not sufficiently impartial, I would shift the burden back to the objector by asking whether she thinks it would be fair of morality to demand the same from fully developed, rationally sound agents and from severely mentally handicapped agents and small children. This is a difficult question that demands a complex answer. If the objector can see the pull of the intuition that the drastic differences in mental capabilities of agents can account for a difference in the content of their reasons, then why not think the principle generalizes, and that this sort of constraint based on local or particular features is appropriate rather than objectionable? What the Thomistic view supposes is that if there is some mental dissimilarity, not owing to any decision or prior action, between a chronic psychopath and a fully developed rational agent, then moral reasons will not make the same demands on those two agents without being thereby unfair to those agents. This makes the account able to accommodate intuitions about context sensitivity without derailing the view into a kind of moral relativism.

4.5 Applying the Thesis to Cases
Perhaps because of the nature of the subject, arguments about moral reasons and their relation to the mental are often what Thomas Nagel calls “interpretive” because they do not rest on deductive proofs but on illustrations meant to speak for themselves. Over time, well-known cases that populate the literature have been elevated to the status of
criteria for evaluating a theory of moral reasons. It is a mark against a theory, for instance, if it cannot admit the existence of agents who make moral judgments but are totally unmotivated to act on the basis of them. An account of moral reasons will garner favor if it aligns with tutored, commonsense intuitions about these cases.

Some theorists will push radically revisionist or eliminativist lines against folk moral concepts like moral reasons, precluding such intuitions about cases from counting as theoretical criteria in this debate. There are at least two compelling reasons against doing away with commonsense notions about moral reasons. First of all, we should avoid falling prey to what Rosalind Hursthouse calls the “Platonic fantasy” that philosophers have a privileged standpoint from which to think about the moral; if anything, academic philosophers should worry more that the less we engage in life in the world outside the academy’s walls, the less access to and experience we will have of the facts relevant to our theorizing about moral reasons. Second, the theoretical economy lost by countenancing things like moral reasons in our ontology is more than made up for by explanatory power without having to invent new logic for moral language or speculate about the origin and evolution of cultural and social practices and norms.

As I argued in chapter 1, the puzzle about moral reasons largely rests on the conclusions we draw about cases we want a moral theory to cover without undercutting tutored common sense. In this section I will walk through how the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis, embedded in a theory like Aquinas’s on which there are other determinants of the content and scope of moral reasons, renders verdicts on canonical cases that are not repugnant to common sense.
4.5.1 Traditional Psychopaths

Externalist moral realists often invoke examples involving psychopaths with immoral goals, aims, and desires to illustrate that their opponents’ position is counterintuitive. Recall how Russ Shafer-Landau appeals to commonsense intuitions about three cases to show that moral reasons must not depend on psychological features like goals, aims, or desires: Sadist, Torturer, and Bystander. On traditional internalist views, Sadist, Torturer, and Bystander do not meet the conditions for having moral reasons to not wreak misery, inflict pain, or watch a child be run over. But, Shafer-Landau points out, the moral reasons against sadistic behavior, torturing, and needless suffering and death seem to be the kinds of reasons that most certainly apply to all agents. So much the worse for traditional internalism.

Cognitive mental acts or states, rather than conative states like desires, constrain what moral reasons agents have according to the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis. The Sadist, Torturer, and Bystander cases work as counterexamples to internalism because it limits moral reasons to those that bear the promotion relation to conative mental states. The Thomistic view is not, therefore, in the target range of Shafer Landau’s objection as it stands.

We can rework the objection by adding details about the agents’ practical judgments to the cases. Consider how the Thomistic account would evaluate Sadist if part of his cunning is that he thinks that excessive amounts of pain make sentient creatures’ lives worse off, and he sees making others’ lives worse off as a worthwhile pursuit because it brings him pleasure. The Sadist’s practical judgments can be modeled using two conflicting syllogisms: first, pleasure is good/to be pursued, causing the pain of
others brings me pleasure, therefore causing the pain of others is good/to be pursued; second, making one’s life worse is bad, inflicting pain on others will make others’ lives worse, so inflicting pain on others is bad. The second syllogism begins with a premise to which the Sadist is already committed, as I am describing him for the purposes of the thought experiment, because he inferred the badness of making someone’s life go worse from his own experience of his parents having deprived him of the pleasure he gets from causing pain. On this characterization, if there is a consideration against worsening others’ lives then Sadist meets the psychological conditions for that consideration’s being a moral reason for him to not worsen others’ lives.

We might ask, now, whether he has a moral reason against causing pain to some particular person he has currently taken as his target. The Thomistic view tells us that as long as Sadist has not concluded from the belief that worsening someone’s life is bad and that inflicting pain worsens his victim’s life that it would be bad to inflict pain on this particular victim, the content of Sadist’s moral reason cannot be “to avoid inflicting pain on this person.” At first glance this seems to fly in the face of common sense; of course the Sadist has a moral reason to not cause this particular person pain! If he didn’t, what use would the general moral reason against worsening others’ lives be? Since the case stipulates that the Sadist is clever, suppose he knows the basic rules of logic, like modus ponens, and he is aware of the irrationality of diverting his attention away from the idea he has from his childhood that worsening one’s life is bad so that he does not form a judgment about the badness of causing his victim suffering that is diametrically opposed to his current judgment and wishes. In these conditions the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis can claim that there is a moral reason for the Sadist to change his mind about the
goodness of inflicting pain on this particular victim, since he judges that changing his mind about this would be good in some way or another—fitting, responsible, rational. Moreover, on the general Thomistic view, one cannot change one’s mind about a principle when one is correct without making a moral mistake. If Sadist were to throw her reasoning into reverse, say, and conclude that he must have been mistaken about the badness of worsening another person’s life, he can only do so by violating some other moral reason he has. For instance, he may have a moral reason against discounting his own experience without evidence, and to rid himself of the belief he has about the badness of worsening others lives he would need to discount his childhood experience without having evidence to do so.

Suppose that someone like Torturer fails to have any judgments about the badness of the torturing he is doing on behalf of the authoritarian regime he supports. Imagine that Torturer sincerely believes the dictator he is under rules in the interest of the people, has no misgivings about torturing resisters and enjoys torturing his victims, as he sees himself as meeting out justice. Under these conditions it looks like the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis is cornered into the same tough spot as the traditional internalist view. Two things can be said in defense of the thesis here, the first being that the details about Torturer’s convictions lessen the blow to common sense. Assume, for a moment, that Torturer is a CIA operative in the democratic United States, like Jack Bauer. The facts added to the case about Torturer’s convictions may well weaken the intuition that Torturer is totally immoral for torturing and taking pleasure in making insurgents pay for their purported crimes, since we can imagine someone like Bauer doing what is necessary to save millions of lives by inflicting pain on horrendously malevolent agents who have
the power to disarm a nuclear threat. We might think that it is morally defective to think that torture under such conditions is permissible; and we might think that the person who tortures knowing that it is bad in some respect is immoral; but it seems less likely that the moral mistake Torturer has made is acting in accordance with his firm convictions about justice. Tutored common sense intuition would accept, I think, the verdict that Torturer perhaps has a moral reason to rethink his loyalty to his regime because of the evidence available to him from sources outside his country, or to have more sympathy for his victims given his awareness of their pain and their humanity, though not a moral reason against torturing the particular criminal now under his jurisdiction. The Thomistic mind-dependence thesis locates Torturer’s moral mistake further upstream, and then pronounces that what follows that moral mistake may be blameworthy but not morally irrational. The full-fledged Thomistic account of moral reasons would tell us that, as God wills that human beings not take pleasure in torturing others because he views this as bad, Torturer does not have a narrow-scope moral reason to act on his convictions—only a wide-scope moral reason to either not act contrary to his convictions or to change his mind regarding them. On reflection, it seems natural to think that it is not morally irrational to act on one’s best assessment of the truth about what ought to be done, since under normal conditions virtuous agents must habitually follow through on those judgments. If an agent like Torturer at least disposes herself to acting on her best judgments, then when she acquires true beliefs about what ought to be done she will not be left cold by them. I think this is a point in favor of the Thomistic account.

There is always the possibility, being tested in experimental philosophy of late, that psychopaths like Bystander can mimic talk mentioning moral terms without
understanding and using those terms. Consider a modified version of Bystander in which Bystander truly does not grasp what other human beings mean when they talk about moral demands, but, as a keenly observant agent, has learned the rules for the use of moral terms such he can pass for a full-blown user of those terms. Others have argued, persuasively in my view, that if psychopaths have a neurobiological property that inhibits them from grasping the meaning of moral terms but allows them to learn their extension, then those agents are not morally responsible in the way fully comprehending rational adults are.\footnote{See Manuel Vargas and Sean Nichols, “Psychopaths and Moral Knowledge,” \textit{Philosophy and Public Policy} 14 (2007): 157-162.} As I mentioned at the end of section 1 of this chapter, if we want to exculpate from moral demands those who are so debilitated mentally that they cannot understand what is meant by moral terms, and it turns out that some forms of psychopathy are neurobiologically fixed, then we should be happy to put psychopaths in the category of those to whom moral reasons will not apply. However, it is more likely that agents like Bystander have capacities, although minimal, to grasp a narrow set of moral facts and genuinely make judgments, but that in the majority of cases they must rely on the testimony of others to form judgments about particular moral facts. The Thomistic mind-dependence thesis tells us that their moral reasons will go as far as their abilities take them. If Bystander can form judgments like, one ought to do good, and that agents like him ought to rely on trustworthy experts in moral matters, and if Bystander has previously heard from a person he considers a reliable source of moral knowledge that some kind of duty to rescue exists where the harm caused to the rescuer is minimal, then Bystander could well have a reason to help the child in the street in this scenario as
he would meet the knowledge conditions. Suppose that Bystander decided not to listen to his friend on this occasion, and so goes on thinking that the child if hit will be whisked away into death, which must be better than life as it involves no pain, he thinks. If Bystander failed to form the judgment that it is bad for the child to die prematurely because he did not listen to his friend, say, his violation of the moral reason to rely on this friend barring countervailing evidence turns out to be morally weighty, as his failure to comply with this reason later leads to the needless death of a child. So the Thomistic account does supply a moral reason for Bystander, and even though it is not the moral reason we would expect on first blush for him to have, it makes sense both of our intuitions about the badness of the child dying and about the abilities of the agent.

4.5.2 The Amoralist

There is another kind of agent who has plagued moral debate since at least Socrates’ time. If traditional internalism is true, the amoralist, an agent who has all the right views about what is moral and has no interest served by doing what morality demands of her, can escape the bonds of moral reasons. If externalism is true, then morality has no compelling answer to the amoralist’s question, “why should I be moral?” beyond the dogmatic response, “because morality demands it.” Amoral characters like Plato’s Thrasymachus constitute the “amoralist challenge,” and if a view cannot respond to it, this will be an unfavorable outcome for the view.\(^\text{320}\)

Let’s look at what the full Thomistic account based on the mind-dependence thesis makes of the amoralist who makes moral judgments sincerely, not just employing

\(^{320}\) So-called by David Brink, (1989) and others following.
moral language with the correct extension like Bystander. The response begins with the idea that the source of the general reason to be moral in one’s actions and attitudes is the fact that the final end of each human being is union with God through the exercise of her rational capacities (N1 and N2). For the reason to be moral to apply to an agent, the agent must be a human being and meet the Knowledge Requirement. In Aquinas’s view, the amoralist meets the Knowledge Requirement because she has a grasp of the first principles of practical reasoning—at the very least she knows that good is to be done and bad is to be avoided. So the reason to be moral applies to the amoralist in virtue of that grasp (synderesis). The Thomistic account says more than the externalist, whose commitment to the categorical, unconditioned nature of the reason to be moral rules out this sort of explanation. And because the Thomistic account does not need to appeal to a conative element of the amoralist’s psyche or a fundamental commitment the amoralist has in virtue of which the reason to be moral applies to her, it improves on the traditional internalist response. Recall from chapter 3 that Aquinas does think that every agent desires whatever she desires under the guise of the good, so in a sense all have a desire for the good and thus for God. But Aquinas does not hang his hat on this psychological feature of agents as that which enables moral considerations to bind them. So if it turns out that some agent does not have a desire for the good as such, because she is so morally depraved or left so cold by the idea of the good, but she nonetheless recognizes as true that the good is to be pursued and bad to be avoided, she meets the conditions for being subject to moral reasons.
4.5.3 The Unintelligible Agent

A less alarming kind of agent who crops up repeatedly in the literature on practical reasons is what I will call the unintelligible agent—the agent who spends her days counting blades of glass, making mud saucers, building a nonfunctional rocket ship to Mars in her backyard. We have a hard time seeing what these agents are doing as intelligible, but the worry is that a theory of reasons that are mind dependent will have to countenance bizarre reasons because of these agents’ bizarre psychologies. Since people’s judgments may be as wonky as their desires, it seems that an account that makes use of the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis will fall prey to this same worry.

Consider the figure Rawls depicted as taking pleasure in just one activity: counting blades of grass. While the grass-counter is problematic for hedonist views and mind-dependence accounts on which what one has moral reason to do is a direct function of what brings one pleasure or what one desires, it need not threaten the coherence of the Thomistic view because the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis denies that what generates pleasure or what one desires gives rise to one’s practical or moral reasons. But again, let’s not make things too easy for the defender of Aquinas. Suppose that the grass-counter also thinks that his sole purpose in life is to count blades of grass; does he have a moral reason against avoiding counting blades of grass all day, as that would seem to require him to act contrary to his conscientious judgments? Fortunately, the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis does not commit an account to the claim that every practical judgment constitutes or composes a moral reason and supplies the entire content of the moral reason. We saw in Aquinas’s complete account that the content of a moral reason depends also, for its scope, on other moral facts, namely God’s will regarding the action
and end the agent has in mind. That view can handle the grass-counter case by presuming
that God does not will and see as good the agent spending all of his days counting blades
of grass; moreover, the agent only has a moral reason against doing what he judges to be
bad and avoiding what he judges to be morally required. Thus, only if the grass-counter
thinks it would be bad at this instant to not be counting blades of grass does he have a
moral reason pertaining to the grass counting, and that reason is wide in scope: he has a
moral reason to either change his mind about the necessity of counting grass at this
moment or not willingly avoid counting the blades of grass. Such a moral reason is
innocuous, since it might amount to a narrow scope moral reason to change his mind if he
has a prior reason—because of certain evidence and thoughts he’s been entertaining
lately, perhaps—to believe other than he does regarding grass counting.

We can say the same about agents in similar examples constructed by G.E.M.
Anscombe and Mark Schroeder. Anscombe considers a person who desires a saucer of
mud for its own sake, and hardly seems to us to be acting on reasons if he tries to get
what he desires. She maintains that with further information about the man who desires
the saucer of mud we can make sense of his trying to get the mud as an action of a
rational agent, and the further information that is needed is the practical judgment or
premise from which he reasons that the saucer of mud is desirable (its “desirability
characterization”). Mark Schroeder fabricates the story of Aunt Margaret, who sees a
picture of a rocket going to Mars in a Martha Stewart magazine and desires to reconstruct
it. According to Schroeder, despite its seeming counterintuitive, Aunt Margaret has a

practical reason to build the rocket in her yard; the reason is just not very weighty.\textsuperscript{322} Regarding the man who thinks the mud saucer is pleasant or desirable and therefore good, and Aunt Margaret who thinks that building a rocket in her backyard is worthwhile, most mind-dependent views will say that their desires or judgments do give them reasons for action.\textsuperscript{323} The Thomistic thesis does not force an account to countenance any moral reasons in these cases, again, except in those instances when the agents think that not pursuing the rocket-building or mud-saucer-acquisition would be bad, and even then the moral reason would be weak as it would be wide in scope—a reason to change their minds about rocket-building or mud-saucer-acquisition or to not avoid engaging in those activities at present. Neither is a narrow-scope moral reason to perform the action we would find rationally unintelligible.

4.5.4 The Uncomprehending Agent

In addition to the unintelligible agents, theorists often debate about the moral reasons of uncomprehending agents like Huckleberry Finn. More realistically, we might wonder what we are to say about the moral reasons of people like those in Sierra Leone who think they must mourn those who have died from Ebola by throwing themselves on the body carrying the virus. If an agent’s upbringing or culture has shaped her outlook in a way that distorts her perception of the moral facts, so that what is good—i.e. freeing

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{323} Alan Goldman’s recent defense of internalism sidesteps this problem by leaning on a theory of desire that rules out such inclinations as desires.}
\end{flushright}
Jim—looks bad and what is bad—i.e. turning Jim in—looks good, what does the agent have moral reason to do?

The Huck Finn scenario tends to elicit mixed responses, I believe, in part because Huck is so ambiguous in what he believes. On the one hand, he is described as thinking that he is harming slave-owners like Ms. Watson by helping Jim to escape and so in that respect, helping Jim is bad. On the other hand, Twain depicts him as so deeply conflicted that he thinks he ought to never attend to his conscience because it is hopelessly mistaken. The Thomistic mind-dependence thesis brings us the most fruitful results in such a case when it is integrated in a moral theory like Aquinas’s on which there are general moral facts about what is good and bad for human beings. For assuming that it is bad for human beings to be enslaved, the Thomistic account would tell us that Huck does not have a moral reason to turn Jim in to the authorities on the river. If there is any consensus on this case it seems to be able to be built around this result. What Huck has a moral reason against doing is to not turn Jim in while believing it to be required. But there is no further reason for him to continue believing what he has been raised to believe; in fact, the conflicted view he forms of his own conscience seems to tell against maintaining even the beliefs he has received from his own culture and upbringing, as he thinks he has distorted even the views on which he was raised. Huck may have a moral reason to change his mind in virtue of his deep mistrust of his prior feelings and pangs of conscience, or perhaps to spend some time thinking about what makes some of his judgments more reliable than others. I think the Thomistic view can adequately capture the nuances and perplexities in the case in a way other views do not, showing us that there are certainly some moral reasons Huck is violating even in thinking what he does.
both about Jim and about himself, and moral reasons he violates when he lies to the
officials on the river about Jim thinking he is morally required to tell them, but that what
is wrong with Huck is not what he does but the combination of his actions and his
judgments together.

The general strategy afforded by the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis to deal
with cases of ignorance is to find out what kind of ignorance the agent exhibits—whether
there was a moral reason that applied to the agent which she or he violated, resulting in
her ignorance or whether there was nothing she did or omitted knowingly beforehand that
led to her lack of knowledge. If the agent’s lack of knowledge is inculpable, then what
results from the ignorance is not the sort of action a moral reason counts against in the
first place, as it is not voluntary. And if the lack of knowledge resulted from a violation
of a prior reason, then we have recourse to that violation in explaining why the agent’s
ignorant action can be blamed nonetheless or seen as morally defective. The Thomistic
view simply locates the fault for the defect in the violation of whatever moral reason
existed prior.

4.6 Conclusion

We are at last in a position to review the master argument for the Thomistic account of
the mind dependence of moral reasons.

What internalists and constructivists want most from an account of moral reasons
is that reasons be shown to be practical and not metaphysically dubious or strange
because of violating OIC. What externalists and realists want most is that moral reasons
be objective and not undercut our tutored, commonsense intuitions about the paradigmatic cases. The puzzle, of course, is how moral reasons can be at once objective and practical, as the former seems to militate in favor of mind independence and the latter moves us in the direction of mind dependence.

As I argued in chapter 1, if an account of moral reasons placates the internalists because moral reasons on the account are practical and abide by the OIC principle, and if it satisfies externalists because moral reasons and facts are objective and do not fly in the face of pre-theoretical, deep seated intuitions, it would be unique in that regard. These are the four formal conditions on a good solution to the puzzle about moral reasons I defended in that chapter. If some thesis bolsters an account’s ability to meet all four of these criteria at once, that thesis would be so exceptionally theoretically powerful that it would justify our believing it unless a better thesis came along.

In the second chapter, I gave arguments against the going accounts of how mind dependence must work in order to secure the practicality of moral reasons. Those accounts rest on the problematic Constitution Relation and Conative State Assumptions, neither of which stands up to scrutiny. But we do not need to hold onto these assumptions in any formulation of the thesis that moral reasons are mind dependent.

So in the latter half of chapter 2, I laid out the bare bones of a theory of the dependence relation and relata between moral reasons and the persons to whom they apply. I provided prima facie justification for exploring this possibility—the Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis.

The Aristotelian mind-dependence thesis as I have characterized it is so thin that it can only be shown to be conceptually compatible with the practicality and objectivity
of moral reasons. It does not, by itself, give us reasons for thinking that moral reasons that are mind dependent on the Aristotelian formulation are necessarily objective and practical.

In order to provide a solution to the puzzle about moral reasons, we need a more robust account of moral reason and mind dependence that can be shown to actually (not just possibly) meet both the objectivity and the practicality demand. And I have argued that the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis positively shows us that it is part of the concept of a moral reason that it be functional as an authoritative guide to action—both objective and practical.

Thomistic mind-dependent reasons function in the practical reasoning and intentional action of real agents, thus it is practical. Because the thesis proposes that moral reasons depend on the very same psychological features that enable agents to act on considerations in the first and second senses of potentiality, it secures the status of the OIC principle.

In addition, the thesis does not undermine the thought that moral reasons are objective in the sense that facts about moral reasons are grounded in stance-independent facts and the moral reasons themselves are impartial because the agent-place in the reason relation is intersubstitutable.

Finally, the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis, especially when coupled with a general moral theory like Aquinas’s, issues verdicts on the paradigm cases that sit well with reflective commonsense intuition. The classic cases ranging from the externalist’s Sadist, Torturer, Bystander to the judgment externalist’s amoralist and akratic can all be given an adequate description on the Thomistic view. All of these agents have moral
reasons. And even if they are not moral reasons to do what we expect, so much the better for the theory. For we should expect morality to demand that persons who are in such moral disrepair be acting so as to develop better dispositions and deliberative patterns. From the perspective of these persons, it is hardly rational (in a recognizable sense of that word) for them to do what the perfectly virtuous agent would do. Rather, the Thomistic account of moral reasons will countenance moral reasons for them to shape their perspective so that, if they act on their moral reasons, what they will have moral reasons to do in the future are those actions a good, virtuous person would see reason to do. Arguably, a world of persons whose morally good actions are the product of acquired dispositions and judgments forged by their deliberate action is better than a world of instant virtuous persons, with no history that makes right action make sense to them.

The solution to the puzzle about moral reasons begins with a denial of the standard mind-dependence thesis, and then replacing this with the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis, shows how the practicality and objectivity demands need to be qualified. The practicality demand states that moral reasons are practical only if they depend on the psychology of those they bind. The objectivity demand states that moral reasons are objective only if they are mind independent. And the standard mind-dependence thesis has it that mind dependence is constitutive dependence on conative mental states. Once we loose ourselves from the grip of the standard construal of mind dependence, and adopt the nuanced view of mind dependence inspired by Aquinas, we can see that moral reasons are in some respects mind independent, and so objective. Their scope depends not at all on the psychology of those they bind, and the fact that they are mind dependent in this particular way is not made true by our perspectives, desires, or
beliefs. Rather, as a matter of mind independent fact, moral reasons are authoritative
guides to action based on a moral standard. Because there is no phenomenological
difference to us between what appears to be right or good and what actually is right or
good, morality is structured so that either kind of judgment shapes our reasons. For only
when we act in ways beholden to our best estimate of what is good can we come into a
perspective from which we grasp the truth about the good. At the same time, our own
judgments are just conclusions of our practical and moral reasoning and deliberation;
they are the foundational mental acts that make possible, in the sense of second
potentiality, our acting intentionally (even when our ends are physically thwarted by
coercion or by ignorance). So moral reasons on this view are mind dependent in one
respect, important for practicality, that does not preclude their being mind independent in
the other respect, important for objectivity.

As extant versions of internalism and externalism fail to meet at least one of the
above demands because of the mind-independence and mind-dependence theses on which
they rely either implicitly or explicitly, the Thomistic mind-dependence thesis allows an
account of moral reasons to outdo other views. That an account built on the Thomistic
mind-dependence thesis would satisfy all four criteria for a solution to the puzzle about
moral reasons makes the mind-dependence thesis stand out as a thesis which, at the least,
deserves our further consideration, and less modestly, justifies our believing it as long as
it remains our most viable option.
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