

Skepticism about Ought *Simpliciter* – DRAFT

Derek Baker  
Lingnan University  
[derekbaker@ln.edu.hk](mailto:derekbaker@ln.edu.hk)

**DISCLAIMER: THE PAGINATION IS MISSING ON A FEW CITATIONS; I WAS WRITING THIS AWAY FROM MY UNIVERSITY LIBRARY**

What ought I to do? A lot of things, and when I look at it closely, too many things. Too many things, because there are too many *oughts*. Morally I ought to give to charity, prudentially I ought to invest. Epistemic reasons may demand that I begin to doubt my friend’s innocence, even if loyalty forbids it. Different normative standards, or different kinds of values, point cross-purposes. So in some cases it is impossible to satisfy all of these oughts.<sup>1</sup> A natural thought in response to this kind of situation is to ask ‘what ought I *really* to do?’ or ‘what ought I to do *simpliciter*?’ But this natural thought, I will argue, is incoherent: there is no coherent notion of an ought *simpliciter*, an ought *full stop*, an *all-things-considered* ought, or what Philippa Foot called “the free and unsubscripted” sense of ought (1972/1977: 169).<sup>2</sup>

This is not to deny normativity altogether. There may be facts about what you morally ought to do. There are almost certainly facts about what you rationally ought to do and what you prudentially ought to do. But there is no ought that has the job of adjudicating conflicts between these other oughts. It follows that there are no facts about what you ought to do *simpliciter* or *full stop* or *all-things-considered*, because we have no coherent concept of such an *ought*.

---

<sup>1</sup> I will talk in this paper about multiple *oughts* and multiple *senses* of ought. None of this should be interpreted as a commitment to polysemy (i.e., massive ambiguity of meaning) about the word ‘ought’. I am sympathetic to recent contextualist accounts (e.g. Dowell 2012 and 2013; and Finlay 2009 and 2014) which attempt to give a unified theory of different uses and senses of ought. Everything I say in this paper is intended to be compatible with such accounts.

<sup>2</sup> The quote is from the footnote 15 added in 1977. Also see (Tiffany 2007: 232 and 233). Note that Foot wrote that “I have never found anyone who could explain the use of the word in such a context” (1977: 169).

The first section will discuss David Copp (1997) and Evan Tiffany's (2007) arguments for the same conclusion. The second section argues that the most obvious characterization of the special normative status of an ought *simpliciter* is either hopelessly metaphorical or circular. The third section will argue that the ought *simpliciter* is both theoretically and practically dispensable. The fourth section will answer Judith Jarvis Thomson's argument that the ought *simpliciter* is the only sense of ought.

### 1. Precedents: Copp and Tiffany

Arguments for skepticism about an ought *simpliciter* start from the apparent plurality of the kinds of normative demands and considerations we face. As noted earlier, it may be that morally I ought to give to charity, but self-interestedly I ought to spend the money on myself. Or perhaps instead the conflict is between impartial morality—I ought to donate the money to charity—and the obligations that come with special relationships—I ought to put the money in my children's college fund.

The plurality of evaluative standards and senses of ought is familiar. There are norms of morality, prudence, etiquette, and positive law; there are moral values, aesthetic values, values of authenticity, of self-interest, of personal achievement, and of scientific endeavor. At times these harmonize; at other times they compete. As noted, it's natural, upon realizing that these norms and values can compete to look for some further standard or value, one which adjudicates among them in the case of conflict. But another response has been to doubt that any standard could serve as the final arbiter.

Evan Tiffany's (2007) argument begins with the variety of kinds of considerations we

take to be reasons. When offering reasons to justify our actions, we cite, “desires, legal statutes, social norms, aesthetic value... moral value, norms of formal etiquette, future interests, to name a few” (Tiffany 2007: 239). Perhaps there is some way of reducing all of these to a single kind of consideration, but that requires considerable theoretical interpretation. On the face of it, there are distinctive kinds of reasons which don’t share a common justificatory source (ibid).<sup>3</sup>

But if the kinds of reasons we cite are plural, how do we combine them to reach a conclusion about what to do, especially when they compete? What would be the common scale on which considerations of morality, desire satisfaction, aesthetic value, and etiquette could be compared? Actually, there is no real mystery here, and on Tiffany’s account it is a mistake to think there would be one. We are psychologically disposed to give one kind of consideration more weight than another in our reasoning (241ff.) Given these dispositions, a set of considerations of distinct kinds can still lead to a single output, in terms of an act. The question of how we combine potentially competing pluralistic reasons is one about our psychology, about what we in fact do, and presumably not every agent will combine them in the same way.<sup>4</sup>

There is a further question of how we *should* combine these reasons. But this, Tiffany argues, can only be answered from a particular normative perspective, of which there are many (241-43). Tiffany argues that while this “deliberative pluralism” is not logically entailed by pluralism about reasons, it is the most natural consequence: “[I]f some standpoint is capable of

---

<sup>3</sup> It’s worth noting here that attempts to show that these are all considerations of a single kind—all desire based, or all resting on indirect consequentialist considerations—fit poorly with the phenomenology of choice and our practices of justification, and inevitably seem unable to capture all of the kinds of reasons we cite. About the only exception would be reasons fundamentalism, which establishes that all these reasons are considerations of a single kind by making reasons into *sui generis* class. That is, it simply insists that these are considerations of a single kind, rather than explaining how (and what’s more, denies that any explanation is possible).

<sup>4</sup> Tiffany talks about an agent’s “standards of practical deliberation” (241), but it is clear that these standards can be realized by inarticulate psychological tendencies to choose one way or another as much as by consciously held principles to treat one kind of consideration as weightier than another.

generating genuine contributory reasons, why could it not also serve as a legitimate source of deliberative evaluation?" (247). Once we acknowledge the variety of normative considerations that are out there, it looks extremely unlikely that there could be some way of adding these considerations up that isn't guilty of some degree of arbitrariness in its weightings. Consequently, there will be a plurality of (equally arbitrary) ways of combining these considerations. We can criticize one way of combining reasons from another standpoint, but that standpoint is itself equally criticizable from others, and none deserve the status of "reason as such" (240).<sup>5</sup>

One can, nonetheless, hold onto the conviction in the rightness of one's own standards:

Just as one may be a partisan supporter of the Canucks over the Maple Leafs—perhaps even seeing support for the Leafs as a character flaw, admittedly non-culpable for those raised in greater Toronto—without thinking that there is some deep metaethical truth backing up one's partisanship; so too can one be similarly partisan toward, e.g., morality, prudence, or authenticity. (244-5)

What Tiffany's pluralism rules out is establishing the rightness of one's standards through philosophical argument, or recognizing it through noetic insight into the truth. Coming to see certain standards as right is ultimately a matter of "existential choice" (243-45).

Calling this an argument from pessimism is not intended as a criticism. Indeed, I think that even if the skeptical argument I will offer here is defeated, we are still owed grounds for the apparently widespread optimism about the possibility of a non-arbitrary standard for weighing

---

<sup>5</sup> The phrase is used by Tiffany but originally introduced in (Copp 1997).

seemingly different kinds of reasons against one another.<sup>6</sup> I think, however, a stronger form of skepticism is available. Tiffany gives grounds for skepticism that any normative standard could exist which satisfies our concept of *reason as such* or which issues prescriptions satisfying our concept of an ought *simpliciter*. My argument will give grounds for skepticism about the coherence of the concept itself.

David Copp's (1997) argument is closer to mine in its aims. If reason as such is to play the role of adjudicating between competing normative perspectives, it must have a special normative authority that they lack. Copp aims to show that any attempt to explain this authority, however, forces us to embrace a contradiction.

Copp starts with a familiar thought: self-interest and morality can conflict. Gyges would be better off as king, whatever Plato thought, but betrayal and murder are morally wrong. So, Gyges ought self-interestedly to kill the king, but morally he ought to refrain. But which of the two oughts should he listen to? Or, as Copp puts it, which of these two standards, self-interest or morality, is "normatively more important" (93ff.)? Well presumably we ought self-interestedly to listen to the ought of self-interest, and morally we ought to heed the moral ought. Morality is morally more important, and self-interest is prudentially more important.

What we need is an independent standard from which to assess these two competing demands. This standard, moreover, must be the normatively *most* important standard: "We want to know whether moral reasons override self-grounded reasons period, not merely whether moral reasons are overriding as assessed by some standard or other" (94).

But how could there be a normatively most important standard, or a standard of reason as such? After all, it seems that assessments of the importance of some standard can only be made

---

<sup>6</sup> See (Chang 2004) for an example of how one might defend this optimism.

from the perspective of some standard. Copp explains:

Hence, the claim that the candidate [standard] *S* has the property of supremacy is the claim that it is normatively more important than any other standpoint, as assessed from a relevant authoritative standpoint. That is, if *S* is normatively the most important, then there is some authoritative standard *R* that yields the verdict that *S* is normatively the most important standpoint.

(101)

Copp argues that this leads to a dilemma: “either standard *R* is identical to *S*, or it is not” (ibid.). But if *R* and *S* are identical, then *R* cannot serve as the standpoint from which to establish *S*’s normative supremacy. “For a standard cannot be normatively the most important in virtue of its meeting criteria that it *itself* specifies as criteria to be met by standards” (101-2). After all, morality tells you to listen to morality; self-interest tells you to listen to self-interest.<sup>7</sup> Self-endorsement is unimpressive.

On the other hand, if *R* is some standard other than *S*, we run into absurdity. It won’t do if *R* is just some normative standard or another—if self-endorsement is unimpressive, the fact that there is *some* other normative standard giving *S* the thumbs-up is also unimpressive. We don’t want to know whether *S* is most important, according to some arbitrary standard *R*. We want to know if *S* is most important *full stop*. But that means *R* would have to be the normatively most

---

<sup>7</sup> Karl Schafer argues (2016) that in some cases morality might be self-effacing, in the sense that it recommends heeding the prudential ought and not the moral ought. Cases like this may exist, but note that this allows us to adjudicate between conflicts between prudence and morality without presupposing that an ought *simpliciter* exists—in fact, there might not even be a conflict, if morality recommends you heed the deliverances of prudence. The best case for the ought *simpliciter*, then, is one in which you morally ought to listen to the moral ought, and prudentially ought to heed the prudential ought.

important standard. But then  $S$  is not the most important standard. This contradicts our initial assumption (102).

Copp summarizes:

The incoherence can be displayed in two sentences: The claim that a standard  $S$  has the property of supremacy is the claim that it is normatively the most important standard as assessed in terms of some other standard,  $R$ , which is the normatively most important standard. But only one standard could be normatively the most important.

(103)

The argument I will offer will have obvious affinities with Copp's; nonetheless, I don't think his version works.<sup>8</sup> The problem is in the assumption that  $S$ 's normative supremacy must be explained in terms of the supremacy assigned to it from some standpoint.  $S$ 's supremacy, however, could be normatively primitive.

From which point of view would reason as such be assessed as normatively most important? From its own.  $R = S$ . Copp's mistake is assuming that the philosopher who says this must go on to *explain*  $S$ 's normative supremacy on the basis of the normative importance  $R$  assigns it, and thus must say that  $S$  is "most important *in virtue of* ... meeting criteria that *it itself* specifies as criteria to be met by standards" [italics mine]. But it could be that  $S$  is most important in virtue of nothing at all (McLeod 2001: 274, and 286). Taking on brute primitives is

---

<sup>8</sup> For other criticisms of Copp's argument, see (McLeod 2001: 284ff.; and Dorsey 2013: **pagination needed**). Note that Dorsey argues, however, that if we grant Copp's starting assumptions, his argument goes through (**pagination needed**). I disagree.

of course a mark against a position, but consider the theoretical landscape. If normative non-naturalism is correct, then whichever normative properties are most fundamental—the property of being a reason, say—admit of no further explanation. Once we’ve said this, it doesn’t seem like much more of a theoretical burden to go on and add that the status of certain normative facts or properties as normatively most important is primitive as well. On the other hand, if some variety of naturalism about the normative is true, then the normative supremacy of *S* presumably does hold in virtue of something else, but that something else is not itself a normative standard; rather it will be, for example, *S* reduction base, or something similar.<sup>9</sup>

So, the importance of morality and self-interest are justified in terms of the verdicts of *S*, or reason as such, and its importance is not justified at all. It may have no explanation whatsoever, or if there is an explanation, it is a metaphysical explanation of the nature of normative importance. In either case, only one standard would be normatively most important.

## 2. The Grounds for Skepticism

Let’s say the following is true of Gyges: he ought prudentially to kill the king, but morally he ought to refrain. Or we can think up other conflicts. Morally I ought to donate large portions of my income to Oxfam, but from the point of view of fatherhood I should put the money in my children’s college funds. Zach Snyder ought self-interestedly to direct *Batman vs. Superman*, but from the perspective of aesthetic value he ought to decline. In all these cases the oughts are in conflict.

Perhaps in such cases the conflict is resolved by what I ought to do *simpliciter*, or *full*

---

<sup>9</sup> My answer here is influenced by Pekka Väyrynen’s (2013) account of normative explanation, and the contrast between justificatory and metaethical explanations.

*stop*. But the initial conflict resulted from too many oughts, not too few. So how does adding another ought help, instead of multiplying the number of conflicts? Let's say Gyges ought *simpliciter* to kill the king. Refraining from murder remains, by stipulation, what he ought morally to do. The choice remains immoral, even if he ought full stop to do the immoral thing. Alternately, if the ought *simpliciter* prescribes acting morally and refraining from murder, that choice is still imprudent. This extra ought we've added in simply advises that Gyges be a sap or a sucker, but it doesn't make him any less of a sap or sucker. In short, at first glance an ought *simpliciter* simply adds an additional conflict; it's unclear how it resolves anything.

If the conflict is resolved, it is because the prescriptions of the ought *simpliciter* trump<sup>10</sup> other prescriptions, or are overriding,<sup>11</sup> or have greater normative authority<sup>12</sup> than the demands of self-interest, or the ought *simpliciter* tells you what you *really* ought to do; or the ought *simpliciter* is *robustly* normative;<sup>13</sup> or the ought *simpliciter* has *normative force*<sup>14</sup> whereas the rival ought does not (or possesses less of it).

So the problem is this. The addition of an ought *simpliciter* into Gyges' dilemma only resolves that dilemma if the ought *simpliciter* possesses some special property. Otherwise we've simply added one more ought into the mix, and the dilemma, to repeat, resulted from too many oughts, not too few. But what is this special property? The above characterizations, while evocative, are also obscure.

Talk of normative force is, to put it bluntly, completely metaphorical (Baker 2016). The claim that the ought *simpliciter* is the ought that *really* tells you what you ought to do relies on

---

<sup>10</sup> (McLeod 2001: 271). Note that McLeod explicitly discusses the *moral* ought as trumping the prudential.

<sup>11</sup> (Copp 1997; McLeod 2001: 271).

<sup>12</sup> (Copp 1997: 101; Tiffany 2007: 248).

<sup>13</sup> (McPherson 2011: 233; Broome 2013: 11 and 26-27). Broome contrasts "true normativity" with normativity in a wider sense.

<sup>14</sup> (Parfit 2011: 35).

the table-thumping sense of ought (*ibid*). In the literal sense, the prudential ought really—that is, just as genuinely and accurately—tells you what to do as any other ought. “Overriding” and “normative authority” rely on metaphors of political power, or they are simply vague ways of gesturing at some normative property which needs clearer characterization. Talk of one ought trumping another is a metaphor referring back to card games.

These metaphors and table thumbs need interpretation. The most natural interpretation is that one *ought* to act as the ought *simpliciter* prescribes, rather than the prudential ought. But this is a normative characterization.<sup>15</sup> On this interpretation the initial conflict, moreover, will reappear at the level of which ought we ought to heed. We ought in some sense to heed to the ought *simpliciter* when it conflicts with the prudential ought; but obviously one ought prudentially to heed to the prudential ought, otherwise one is a sucker or sap. This conflict forces us to ask whether this new sense of ought—the one telling us we ought to heed the ought *simpliciter*—is overriding or not. If it is, our attempt to characterize overridingness non-metaphorically makes tacit appeal to the original metaphor.<sup>16</sup> If not, invoking such an ought could not resolve our original dilemma.<sup>17</sup>

Alternately, certain oughts might be psychologically overriding:<sup>18</sup> that is, the agent’s conclusion about what this ought prescribes determines what the agent will in fact do. If Gyges judges he ought full stop to refrain from murder, then the conflict is settled in the sense that he

---

<sup>15</sup> Jack Woods argues (in correspondence) that it could be a conceptual or constitutive claim. It could, but it is still a normative characterization—it explains what the special feature of the ought *simpliciter* is in terms of how one *ought* (perhaps as a conceptual matter) to respond to the ought *simpliciter*. Conceptual claim and normative characterization are not mutually exclusive categories.

<sup>16</sup> “The relevant notion of authority is difficult to characterize non-circularly” (Tiffany 2007: 248).

<sup>17</sup> There are obvious similarities to Copp’s argument described above. The key difference is that I am not asking for an explanation of normative authority or normative force but rather a clear account of the property in a manner free from metaphor. Also see (Baker 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Finlay (2007) explicitly cashes out notion of authority and normative force in psychological terms (especially p. 236).

will act in compliance with the moral ought and not the prudential. But cashing out “overridingness” in psychological terms seems to change the subject. If all we meant by resolving the conflict was making a choice in the face of a conflict between different flavors of ought, it is unclear why a further ought would be needed at all. Gyges’ personal preferences would have worked just as well. (Admittedly, a Humean about reasons might endorse this kind of psychological reduction, and insist it doesn’t change the subject. My response will have to wait till section 2.7. Humeans, I think, should simply jettison the notion of an ought *simpliciter*.)

So this is my case against an ought *simpliciter*. This ought is supposed to have some special property in virtue of which it resolves conflicts between other flavors of ought. The characterization of that special property is typically metaphorical or otherwise hopelessly vague and ambiguous. Attempts to eliminate this vagueness face a dilemma: either they characterize the special property in more familiar normative terms, leading to vicious circularity, or they are psychological characterizations that seem to change the subject.

But perhaps there is another characterization that will do better.

## 2.1. The Ought that Settles What to Do

Let’s say that the ought *simpliciter* (or any other ought) is the one which *settles what to do* (or feel, or believe).<sup>19</sup> But here the ambiguity between a normative and a psychological reading is obvious. We could mean that this ought settles what one *ought* to do, or we could mean that it

---

<sup>19</sup> (Wedgewood 2007: 25; Schroeder 2011: 9, fn. 11; Joyce 2001: 50). It should be noted that Schroeder uses the phrase “settles what to do” as a way of characterizing the *deliberative* ought, which may not be the same as the ought *simpliciter*. (The moral and prudential oughts could potentially be deliberative oughts as well.) Schroeder also describes the deliberative ought as “the right kind of thing to *close deliberation*” (9; italics in original). Joyce describes the ought of most practical reason as the one that emerges from reasoning about “what is to be done” (2001: 50).

settles what one *will* do. On the former reading, we have failed to identify anything special about the ought *simpliciter*. It is clear triviality that ought in any sense settles what one ought in that sense to do. The ought *simpliciter* settles what one ought *simpliciter* to do, just as the moral ought settles what one ought morally to do, and the prudential ought settles what one ought prudentially to do.

The second reading, on the other hand, seems to change the subject. We wanted an ought that serves as the solution to the practical dilemma faced by Gyges. On this reading, the specialness of the ought *simpliciter* is the fact that it causes an action. So the sense in which this ought solves the dilemma seems to be simply that it causes Gyges to act in the face of said dilemma. But if all that Gyges needed to resolve the conflict is to act, it is unclear why a special sense of ought would be needed at all. What he needs is motivation.

It's worth clarifying here what skepticism about ought *simpliciter* is not. The skeptic can happily agree that we sometimes deliberate about what one ought to do, and that one then does something *because* one judged one ought to do it. This much is common ground. What the skeptic holds is first, that we have no reason to believe it is always the same sense of ought that causes each agent to act (recall Tiffany's personal standards of deliberation); and second, that even if there were a sense of ought judgments which were specially connected to action, that this by itself would explain any special normative standing of that sense of ought, as opposed to a special psychological standing.

## 2.2. The All-Things-Considered Ought

Another thought is that the authority of the ought *simpliciter* consists in its status as the *all-*

*things-considered* ought.<sup>20</sup> Other oughts are based on a partial and incomplete collection of the relevant considerations. The ought *simpliciter* is special in that it is comprehensive—based on all of the considerations in favor and against.

There is actually an ambiguity built into the notion of an all-things-considered ought. We could mean that it is a prescription based on the total state of things—there is no further fact about how the world is that would show this ought is mistaken. If one likes, one can think of this as the ought issued as a bit of advice by an omniscient guru, who considers *all the things, in some way or another*. In contrast, by the all-things-considered ought one might mean the all-things-considered-as-they-ought-to-be considered ought.

The former interpretation—on which what we mean is the all-things-considered-in-some-way-or-another ought—is unacceptable. Whatever overridingness or normative authority amounts to, it cannot simply be the fact that *more* considerations go into the relevant prescription. Assume for argument that there is an all-things-considered ought. Notice that another normative system could take into account all the same considerations that serve as inputs to what one ought *all-things-considered* to do, but assign them radically different weights, resulting in a different prescription.

In fact, we are already familiar with oughts that take all the facts under consideration but assign them radically different weights, namely the moral ought and the prudential ought. It is not as though prudence is blind to the fact that donating to Oxfam would help distant strangers, or even that it is morally obligatory. It simply treats these facts as of no or very little importance. Likewise, what would be good for Gyges is obviously a fact that serves as an input into the prescriptions of morality. Morality just assigns this reason considerably less weight. What you

---

<sup>20</sup> (Wedgwood 2007: 24); this also seems to be the characterization found in (Stroud 1998: 175).

morally ought to do supervenes, presumably, on the full state of the world, as does what you ought to do prudentially. So simply considering everything is not enough to explain what overridingness or authority amount to.<sup>21</sup>

“All-things-considered” must mean, then, “all-things-considered-as-they-ought-to-be-considered.” But this is a normative characterization. So once again, we have a problem of circularity.<sup>22</sup> We could mean all-things-considered-as-they-ought-morally-to-be-considered, or all-things-considered-as-they-prudentially-ought-to-be-considered, or all-things-considered-as-they-ought-*simpliciter*-to-be-considered. Presumably we mean the last—but what do we mean by the last?

As a final strike against this characterization of normative authority, widening the class of considerations does not always make a prescription more authoritative, at least insofar as I have intuitions on the matter. The epistemic ought seems more authoritative with respect to belief than prescriptions based on both epistemic and pragmatic considerations. The epistemic ought could not be in any obvious sense an all-things-considered-ought, however, precisely because it leaves practical considerations out.

### 2.3. The Categorical Ought

Perhaps we can say that the distinctive feature of the ought *simpliciter* is that it is the categorical use of ought (or a categorical imperative), as opposed to all the others which are hypothetical

---

<sup>21</sup> But see (Schafer 2016: 243) for the argument that some normative systems, such as morality, may be modest, in the sense that they recognize they do “not capture *all* of the considerations to which all-things-considered deliberation ought to be responsive.”

<sup>22</sup> But see (Chang 2004: 11ff.) for the claim that we should leave room for the normative judgment of “What values *should* be at stake in an all-things-considered judgment?”

uses (or hypothetical imperatives).

Unfortunately “categorical ought” is ambiguous (Foot 1972; Joyce 2001; and Baker 2016). Kant’s original example of a categorical imperative was an ought-judgment that remains valid even when one lacks subjective desires that would be furthered by following it. But, notoriously, the ought of etiquette and the legal ought remain valid even if one doesn’t care about etiquette or the law, and so demonstrate this kind of categoricity.

On the other hand, if we mean that these oughts entail the existence of *reasons*, we are again giving a normative characterization. This might not seem obviously problematic. At least we are not characterizing the ought *simpliciter* in terms of a further ought, or in terms of vague bit of philosopher-speak, but rather in terms of a distinct and familiar normative notion, namely, reasons.

The problem is that other oughts entail the existence of reasons in some sense. If you morally ought to do something, then there are moral reasons to do it. If you prudentially ought to do something, there are self-interested reasons in its favor. If etiquette requires something, there are reasons of etiquette to do it. This is just to note that for any normative standard, we can specify why, in these particular circumstances, this particular action (or attitude) is prescribed.<sup>23</sup> But when we say that categorical oughts entail reasons, we presumably mean reasons *simpliciter*.<sup>24</sup> But what distinguishes reasons *simpliciter* from other kinds of reasons? More importantly, for our purposes, if the moral reasons and prudential reasons point cross purposes, how does adding reasons *simpliciter* into the mix help resolve the dilemma? Do the reasons

---

<sup>23</sup> Compare this with Joyce’s discussion of *institutional reasons* (2001: 39ff.). Stephen Finlay’s end-relational account of reasons would make similar predictions (2014: 84ff.), see especially his brief discussion of perverse reasons (109).

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Stroud (1998: 172-3), for example, distinguishes reasons of social climbing from reasons *simpliciter*. Only the latter have “force” in practical reasoning.

*simpliciter* possess normative force? Are they the reasons one ought to heed (or has most reason to heed)? We are merely pushing the bump in the rug.

#### 2.4. The Ought of Rational Criticizability

Perhaps an agent who fails to do what she ought *simpliciter* to do is irrational; or perhaps an agent who fails to do what she *judges* she ought *simpliciter* to do is irrational (e.g., Korsgaard 1986; Smith 1994; Hubin 1999; Wedgwood 2007; Kiesewetter 2011; Broome 2013; Dreier 2015).<sup>25</sup> Either way, this would establish something special about the ought *simpliciter*: it is connected to rational criticism in a way that other senses of ought aren't.

But the agent who fails to do what she ought morally to do is immoral. The agent who acts contrary to prudence is imprudent. The agent who acts contrary to etiquette is rude. It cannot simply be, then, that the ought *simpliciter* is overriding in the sense that it is tied to criticism. After all, the tie to criticism is not unique to the ought *simpliciter*. It must be that there is something special about *rational* criticism, as opposed to moral or prudential criticism, or criticism of one's manners.

But as Donald Hubin asks in a similar context: “what, exactly, is it about the charge of irrationality that makes it carry more weight ... than that of immorality? It is certainly not that being irrational is *morally* worse than being immoral” (1999: 40).

From Hubin's question we can draw two distinct points. First, it is not obvious that being

---

<sup>25</sup> Of these, John Broome (2013) most explicitly uses this test to identify the special authority of the ought *simpliciter*: “My test for the central ought is that the rational requirement of Enkrasia... applies to it. It clearly applies to the unqualified ought... On the other hand, Enkrasia does not apply to any qualified ought, so no qualified ought is the central one” (28).

irrational is worse than being immoral, or that the charge of irrationality is a more significant kind of criticism than the charge of immorality. In fact, if we were to ask people in general, many, maybe the majority, would say it is worse to be immoral.<sup>26</sup> But then the tie to rational criticizability could not serve as a characterization of anything like the overridingness of the ought *simpliciter*. Second, as Hubin points out, it is obviously *morally* worse to be immoral. But then what sense of “worse” do we have in mind when we ask whether it is worse to be immoral or irrational? Presumably we want to know whether it is worse *simpliciter*.

Now we can run the argument again. Morality and prudence conflict. Now, it is morally worse of Gyges to do what he prudentially ought, but it is worse *for Gyges* to do what he morally ought. We have a conflict. Now let us add that it is worse *simpliciter* if Gyges listens to self-interest, and kills the king. But our problem resulted from too many evaluations, not too few, so how does adding a third evaluation help? The conflict still remains. It must be that there is something special about evaluation *simpliciter*, in virtue of which it resolves the conflict. But what could that be? Overridingness? Evaluative weight, as the corollary of normative force? Once again, we have merely moved the bump in the rug.

## 2.5. The Ought We Cannot Question

Perhaps the special authority of the ought is that “it is not available for legitimate questioning” (Joyce 2001: 51). In other words, whereas for any other ought-claim, a claim about what I morally ought to do or a claim about what I prudentially ought to do, it is sensible for the person to whom it applies to ask, “Why should I?” this question is unintelligible for the ought

---

<sup>26</sup> Nico Kolodny’s question, “Why be rational?” is relevant here (2005). Note that the general problem brought up here need not suppose any particular account of rationality.

*simpliciter* alone. This is because I am asking for a reason to do what I have most reason to do—in other words, I am already implicitly granting the authority of reasons in my very question (Joyce 2001: 49ff.; Velleman 2005). We could also put it this way: I am asking if I ought (*simpliciter*) to do what I ought *simpliciter* to do, thereby conceding the authority of the very prescription I am challenging.

Let's grant that the questions, "Why should I do what I should do?" or "What reason do I have to do what I have most reason to do?" are self-undermining. As Joyce puts it: "...[T]o question practical rationality is unintelligible—it is to ask for a reason *while implying that no reason will be adequate*" (51, italics mine).

But consider instead the question "Why morally ought I to do what I ought *simpliciter* to do?" This question does not imply that *no* reason will be adequate. It implies that a moral reason will be adequate. Someone could even fill her challenge in like this: "I get that I ought *simpliciter* to X. But I don't care about that. I'm a moral fanatic. So you need to give me some moral reason to X, or I'm not going to do it."

Joyce addresses this possibility (*ibid.*), but claims that insofar as one accepts moral reasons one accepts practical reasons. His reasons for this, unfortunately, are not entirely clear. Intuitively, the moral fanatic or committed egoist, who couldn't care less about what the reasons *simpliciter* favor, and is only moved by her duty or his own interest, is a fully conceivable agent. But then reasons *simpliciter* are challengeable.

In short, the whole trick to showing challenges to reasons or the ought *simpliciter* self-undermining seems to rest on putting self-undermining words in the challenger's mouth. "What reason do I have to do what I have most reason to do?" is a self-undermining challenge. But so is "What moral reason do I have to do what I have most moral reason to do?" This isn't anything

special about reasons *simpliciter* or ought *simpliciter*. On the other hand, “What reason do I have to do what I have most moral reason to do?” is not self-undermining; but neither is “What moral reason do I have to do what I have most reason *full stop* to do?” All this shows is that it doesn’t make sense to challenge a kind of consideration or a sense of ought in terms of that very same kind of consideration or sense of ought. So don’t imagine that those who would challenge the ought *simpliciter* would phrase their challenges that way!

## 2.6. The Uniquely Normative Ought

Dale Dorsey (2013) answers David Copp’s skepticism about the existence of a supremely authoritative normative system—i.e., “reason as such”—as follows. Only practical reason is normative. Morality and prudence have no independent normative standing. To the extent that the deliverances of either have normative import, it is derivative. In other words, what one ought morally or prudentially to do is only normative because, and to the extent that, we have a reason of practical reason to act morally or prudentially (2013: **pagination needed**).

So perhaps what we can say about the ought *simpliciter* is that it is the only basically normative ought. That would allow the ought *simpliciter* to settle the conflict, and let us out of the trap of distinguishing authoritative normativity from non-authoritative normativity. Rather, the distinction is between normative and non-normative uses of ought. This allows to say there is something special about the ought *simpliciter*, but without the burden of cashing out metaphors or resolving ambiguous claims.

This answer, I would argue, merely challenges the terms in which the skepticism here has been phrased. It doesn’t challenge the grounds for the skepticism. Now the skeptic is entitled to

ask, what do we mean by *normative*. We can no longer identify it by saying that normative claims are claims about what you ought to do, about what you have reason to do, about what's valuable; that normative claims are not falsified by non-compliance, because they involve standards which one can meet or fail to meet, and failures don't disprove the standard but license criticism of the person who falls short; that common examples involve claims about what's right and wrong, or about what's good or bad.<sup>27</sup> Instead we have to identify normative claims as those using *ought, reason, good or bad* in their special *normative* sense; that it's special in that failures to comply license a special kind of *normative* criticism. But what distinguishes normative senses of ought, or reason, from non-normative senses? We've once again moved the bump in the rug.

## 2.7. Accepting Psychological Characterization

Perhaps we should accept a psychological characterization of the ought *simpliciter*'s special authority. One could easily imagine a Humean at this point saying, "Of course you can only characterize it in terms of psychological dispositions to be motivated: that's what we've been trying to tell you!"<sup>28</sup> Maybe certain kinds of constitutivists about practical reason would say something similar (e.g., Velleman 2008). The ought *simpliciter* is the one for which a motivational internalist constraint holds.<sup>29</sup> It is the ought that makes up the content of those

---

<sup>27</sup> These are features characteristic of what Tristram McPherson identifies as *formal* normativity, in contrast to *robust* normativity (2011: 226, and 232ff.); also see John Broome's contrast between "true normativity" and other senses of normativity (2013: 11 and 26-27).

<sup>28</sup> See, for example (Finlay 2007).

<sup>29</sup> (Wedgwood 2007) could also be read as offering such a psychological account; see (28). But it is probably more accurate to read him as identifying the ought *simpliciter* as the ought tied to rational criticizability: "any judgment of the form 'I ought to  $\phi$ ,' ... *rationaly commits* the thinker to intending to  $\phi$ " (80; also see 25ff.). Wedgwood holds that agents must meet a basic threshold of rationality to be agents with the relevant concepts, and hence the rational characterization of the ought *simpliciter* leads to a psychological characterization, on which agents typically do what they judge they ought *simpliciter* to do.

ought-judgments that are by their nature motivating. This is what its special authority consists in.

This position could be seen as a kind of “conceptual retreat” about normative authority, motivated by skeptical worries. On one reading Hume, for example, he can be seen as deploying skeptical arguments to motivate similar conceptual retreat about causation or moral vice. Ideas are based on impressions for Hume, and terms must express some idea to be meaningful. Now, if causation were a kind of necessary connection or power or force, the term ‘cause’ would be meaningless, as we have no impressions of necessary connections or powers or forces, and so could have no idea of them either. If moral wrongness were some property out in the world, the term ‘vicious’ would be meaningless, as we have no impression of a property of vice out in the world, and so could not have the corresponding idea. But the more conservative response is to realize that ‘cause’ means something of which we do have impressions, perhaps *regular succession*, or perhaps one’s feeling of being compelled to imagine the effect upon encountering the cause; ‘vicious,’ likewise corresponds to one’s feeling of disapproval, or the disapproval one imagines an impartial spectator feeling.

By analogy, if normative force were anything other than some species of psychological force, we would have no clear concept of it at all. So the conservative response is to identify normative force with some variety of psychological force.

My objection to this move is that first, unlike ‘cause’ or ‘vicious’ (or ‘morally wrong’) the notions of an ought *simpliciter* and normative force are not folk terms with day-to-day familiarity, but philosophers’ terms of art. Therefore there is no general reason of conservatism to accept the conceptual retreat, when we can just jettison the terms.

We could put this point another way: why doesn’t the advocate of psychological characterizations simply become an eliminativist about normative force, or authority? There is an

action-determining sense of ought. It has the philosophically interesting property of being the content of those normative judgments that actually (perhaps necessarily) cause action.<sup>30</sup> This allows it to resolve conflicts between other oughts, albeit in the minimal sense of causing the agent to side with one or the other. No other senses of ought have these properties. This seems like enough. What else do we gain by hanging onto metaphors about authority or overridingness when what we really mean is *causes*, or tends to cause?

### 3. Lack of Theoretical or Practical Utility

My case against an ought *simpliciter* is that such an ought would have to have some special normative property, but that property cannot be characterized except in normative terms that invoke the very same property (e.g. ‘the authoritative ought is the one you ought (in the authoritative sense) to heed’), or in psychological terms that fail to identify anything normatively special about this ought.

This argument for skepticism may seem to trade on an open-question-type problem facing the normative in general: namely, the apparent impossibility of giving a satisfying definition of normative terms in anything except further normative terms. It may seem I am demanding an analysis of a normative term, then complaining that that analysis is either in further normative terms, and so circular, or else in non-normative terms, and so a violation of the

---

<sup>30</sup> Donald Hubin’s (1999 and 2001) position, while not exactly like this, is similar enough to merit note (see especially his 2001: 465ff.). Hubin accepts a Humean, instrumentalist account of practical rationality. Practical rationality does not possess normative superiority over, say, morality, however. There is a sense in which practical rationality is just one more normative standard among many. Nonetheless, practical rationality is of special philosophical interest because it defines what an agent should do from that agent’s own evaluative point of view.

My suggestion here is similar. Certain uses of ought may be philosophically and psychologically interesting—because they are more immediately action-guiding, for example. But none of this amounts to anything like normative authority, which we could just as well do without.

Moorean ban on defining the normative in terms of the natural. But such an argument would prove too much—that we should be skeptics about the coherence of normative concepts in general.

This misrepresents the problem, however. The normative terms which Moore denied could be analyzed non-normatively were familiar terms of everyday use, with which we could all claim fluency: ‘ought’, ‘reason’, ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘permitted’, ‘forbidden’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’. Therefore, we can claim an implicit understanding of what they mean, even if informative definitions elude us. By contrast, terms such as ‘normative authority’, ‘normative force’, ‘overridingness’, and ‘ought *simpliciter*’ are philosophers’ terms of art. What I am asking for is some characterization of these terms of art in something besides further terms of art.

There may still be two reasons why even this demand is illegitimate, however. First, one might point out that in other domains of philosophy, and in theoretical inquiry in general, we accept new terms of art that cannot be defined in more familiar, day-to-day terminology. Metaphysicians have by and large accepted a relation of metaphysical *grounding*, for example, a relation which according to these metaphysicians cannot be defined in more familiar terms. Philosophers have been able for the most part to grasp what this relation is without such a definition—there does not seem to be widespread perplexity in what the relation of grounding is even supposed to be. Second, one might claim that ‘normative authority’ is a term to express a concept that we already deploy implicitly, but for which we lack a distinctive word. The evidence that we deploy such a concept is presumably deliberative practice. Sometimes we face conflicting oughts, and we make a further judgment about what we ought to do, or we ask for advice about the same. What sense of ought could we be deploying in these cases, besides the one that resolves the dilemma?

In response to the first point, assessing the case for and against the use of a notion of grounding in metaphysical theorizing is beyond the scope of this paper; however, if the case for grounding really is the same as the case for an ought *simpliciter*—we can only indicate what this relation was supposed to be through metaphor, for example—then we should be skeptics about grounding as well. To the extent that we should accept grounding, it is because the cases are not analogous. First, grounding is linked to a familiar concept we obviously have—*explanation*. Second, advocates of the relation have put in considerable work to show the theoretical utility of this concept, mostly in giving a more perspicuous characterization of existing theoretical debates, and have further argued that this theoretical work cannot be done by some more familiar relation, such as supervenience (e.g., Fine 2001; Schaffer 2009; Rosen 2010). The theoretical utility of the relation is a reason to accept it, even if a reductive definition in more familiar terms cannot be offered.<sup>31</sup>

In the case of the ought *simpliciter*, by contrast, we lack any sort of link to a more familiar theoretical notion. Instead, we have vague but evocative phrases (‘normative force,’ ‘what you *really* ought to do’) that gesture at it. More importantly, the notion lacks theoretical utility. There is, to put it simply, no theoretical problem that the ought *simpliciter* solves, or helps us to characterize more perspicuously. Consider our initial case. Gyges ought self-interestedly to kill the king, and he ought morally to refrain. This is how the world is. There is no mystery here crying out for explanation.<sup>32</sup>

The real problem which the ought *simpliciter* might seem to solve is: *how is he to resolve*

---

<sup>31</sup> But see (Wilson 2014) for arguments against the theoretical utility of grounding.

<sup>32</sup> But see (McLeod 2001: 274ff.) for an enumeration of possible theoretical uses of the concept. Constraints of space prevent me from addressing all of these, but the most substantial—that the concept has deliberative utility—is addressed in the following paragraphs.

*the conflict?*<sup>33</sup> But this is not a *theoretical* problem; it is a *practical* one. That is to say, there is no mystery about how the world is which this sense of ought solves (Gyges is the unfortunate position of not being able to pursue self-interest and morality at once); rather, there is practical dilemma for Gyges about how he should act, given this conflict between morality and prudence. And there is no need to assume that the practical problem admits of any solution. Every theory of practical reason must allow that some possible problems admit of no solution: if only because there must be conceivable circumstances in which the reasons favoring option *A* tie with those favoring *B*. There could be no solution to these problems, in the sense of some further fact that makes one decision to *A* or to *B* non-arbitrary.

But even if such problems can't be solved, they can be *resolved* in the minimal sense already discussed: the agent *As* or the agent *Bs*, in either case arbitrarily. But once we see that everyone must accept that some decision problems admit of no solution, and instead must be resolved arbitrarily, there are no grounds for assuming that a given practical dilemma must be solvable. The skeptic about ought *simpliciter* simply thinks that dilemmas like this are more common, but she is not alone in holding they exist.

This means that, first, there is no worry that without an ought *simpliciter* we will be frozen, or somehow unable to act. There must be some general capacity agents have for acting arbitrarily. (In fact, given the possibility of akrasia, people can even act *contrary to* their ought judgments.) We don't need any special sense of ought to allow Gyges to act. And second, admitting the existence of unsolvable dilemmas is not some extra theoretical burden unique to the skeptic alone.

What if instead of theoretical or practical utility we appeal to familiarity? It is true that

---

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, (Stroud 1998: 175; McLeod 2001: 278-9; Kiesewetter 2011: 2-3).

ought *simpliciter* is a philosopher's *term* of art, but it doesn't follow that we only learn the *concept* through philosophical theorizing. It may simply be that there was no special word for this concept, perhaps because we didn't need one. The ought *simpliciter* is a philosopher's name for the default sense of ought we deploy in advice-giving and deliberation, or so the thought goes. The metaphors and table thumps aren't there to help gesture at some new concept; they're to help one focus on a sense of ought that's already familiar.

The skeptic is entitled to ask what the evidence is that we deploy such a concept. It's not enough to say that we do come to a decision about what we ought to do in the face of conflicts from different normative domains. It is enough for that that we are, as Tiffany put it, partisans of one normative domain or another. Some people care about morality more than self-interest, others about self-interest more than morality. Some people care about morality more, but only a little bit more, so they will they will sacrifice some self-interest for morality's sake, but might allow themselves minor wrongs when the personal stakes are high. An ought *simpliciter* is unnecessary, because we are constituted to care about some oughts more than others when they conflict.

A better case for such an ought is offered by Judith Jarvis Thomson (2001: 46):

Suppose that Alfred is ill, and that only a dose of a certain medicine will cure him. It tastes truly awful, however. Alfred asks us "Ought I really take it?" It is a wildly implausible idea that we can reply only: "Well, your taking it would be very unpleasant, so in one sense of 'ought,' it's not the case that you ought to take it, namely the 'ought<sub>enjoyable</sub>' sense of 'ought.'" But your taking it would be good for you, so in another sense of 'ought', you ought to take it, namely

the ought<sub>goodness-for-Alfred</sub>’ sense of ‘ought.’” It is likely that Alfred will repeat his question: “But ought I take it?” It surely won’t do to reply: “Are you deaf? I just told you that in one sense you ought to and in another sense it is not the case that you ought to, and that’s all the advice that anyone can give you.”<sup>34</sup>

Alfred’s question is intelligible. And that looks like a problem for the skeptic. There is not some obviously relativized ought that Alfred is asking for information about. Nor could Alfred plausibly be asking us what Alfred ought to do according to Alfred’s personal deliberative standards—how would we know, or at least, how would we know better than Alfred? So here we have a *prima facie* case of the use of a non-relativized ought shared in common by both Alfred and ourselves, an ought *simpliciter*.

To see the skeptic’s answer, we have to first remember that the skeptic agrees that sometimes we make judgments about what we ought to do, and sometimes this causes us to act. But sometimes it doesn’t. When it doesn’t, this might be because what Tiffany calls my personal deliberative standards are silent on how to resolve this particular dilemma. It could also be instead that my deliberative standards do tell me what to do, but they fail to move me on this occasion (that can happen—I don’t always live up to my commitments, whether conscious or tacit). In a situation like this, I might try to imagine the options and competing values in a variety of ways, from a variety of perspectives. I might read Epictetus, or Emerson, and try to get fired up. I might ask a friend for advice. Maybe I can take what they tell me I ought to do as an indication of what they would do, and that might be enough to move me. Maybe my friend is

---

<sup>34</sup> Also see (McLeod 2001: 272ff).

good at getting me fired up. Maybe I already know what I'm going to do and just want a thumbs up first. People ask for advice for lots of reasons.

Williams noted that “Practical reasoning is a heuristic process, and an imaginative one, and there are no fixed boundaries on the continuum from rational thought to inspiration and conversion” (110).<sup>35</sup> The skeptic about ought *simpliciter* should accept this, since there is an awful lot of thinking leading up to decision-making that cannot plausibly be seen as the working out of what's required by one's prior deliberative standard or desires. But if we accept this about the intrapersonal case, it should be true in the interpersonal, advice-giving case as well. So when we ask for advice we may be asking what some normative standard (morality, self-interest, authenticity, our own personal deliberative standards, our interlocutor's standards) favors doing. But we may be asking, instead, that our interlocutor convert us to a standard, or inspire us to live up to some standard we already accept, or to help us construct a new standard—while converting and inspiring us in the process.

In short, the skeptic can say that Alfred is asking us to supply an ought-claim that will move him to act. The oughts that initially invoked don't do this, so Alfred wants us to offer another one, maybe with some more effective rhetoric behind it. Of course Alfred has no special sense of ought in mind in advance: he doesn't know in advance which ought will move him. He's hoping we might have one in mind that he hasn't thought of yet, or might invent an attractive (to him) way of weighing dissimilar kinds of considerations on the spot.

---

<sup>35</sup> Also see (Hubin 1999: 42): “I think that we are often engaged not in practical reasoning but in a precondition for practical reasoning. And this precondition is not the discovery of a preexisting conative structure with which to define our evaluative point of view. We are not trying to discover our evaluative point of view; we are creating it. Just as we entertain a hypothesis to draw out its implications and (sometimes) to see the world as we would if we believed it, we at times ‘try on’ normative stances. If I am right, this can be more than a process of gaining knowledge of our values; it is sometimes an act of self-creation.”

By way of analogy, consider when you ask your friend to suggest which restaurant you both eat at that night. One reason you might ask her is none of the options you have thought of strike you as attractive, and so you are asking to see if she can think of one you can't call to mind, but which, once it's mentioned, you'll endorse. Sometimes we do the same with oughts.

#### 4. Denying Multiple Senses of Ought

Thomson offers another argument on behalf of the ought *simpliciter*—it is the only sense of ought that we have (2008). In other words, ought cannot be understood as prescribing relative to some normative system or kind of consideration. Thomson's argument is simple: if there were relativized oughts, no sense could be made of an ought *simpliciter*. But we can make sense of an ought *simpliciter*. Therefore, there are no relativized oughts (2008: section X.2.).

Thomson, then, can be seen as accepting the validity of the basic argument here,<sup>36</sup> but concluding that the correct use of such an argument is to apply *modus tolens*, not *ponens*. The question, then, is what it is more reasonable to give up on: an ought *simpliciter* or various relativized oughts.

Thomson's primary case in her (2008) is intuitive. She regards it as extremely implausible that there is no ought *simpliciter*:

I draw attention, first, to the intuitive implausibility of the following conclusion that the argument issues in: that there is no such thing as the proposition that A ought to  $V_{act}$ . (Just as there is no such thing as the proposition that A is taller.)

---

<sup>36</sup> Thomson's argument is simpler than mine, however. Roughly, if any uses of ought are relativized, than an unrelativized use of ought would be ill-formed (168).

But this argument is weak. First, the skeptic agrees that sometimes claims of the form “A ought to  $V_{act}$ ” are true. She simply holds that they are elliptical, and so, in conjunction with context, they denote a proposition of greater complexity than the surface grammar of the sentence reveals. Thomson’s argument here depends on our possessing highly reliable intuitions not simply about the surface grammar of acceptable claims, but also about whether the meaning of these claims possesses any hidden structure. It is very doubtful, however, that we have reliable intuitions directly about such matters. The recent wave of contextualist treatments of ‘ought’ argue that, as a modal verb, ought-claims possess considerable hidden structure (e.g., Dowell 2011 and 2012, Finlay 2008 and 2014).<sup>37</sup> These accounts may be right or wrong—but if they are wrong, this is shown by demonstrating that they are inadequate to explaining our intuitions about various ought-claims in various contexts (or incapable of being integrated into our overall semantic picture, etc.). The brute intuition that ought-propositions are simpler than that is not something such accounts should be expected to answer.

There is no further case to be made for the reasonableness of accepting the ought *simpliciter* over various local senses of ought. As noted above, accepting a relation of ought *simpliciter* has no obvious theoretical utility, and instances which support its familiarity in day-to-day deliberative life admit of an alternate interpretation which is more parsimonious (we don’t

---

<sup>37</sup> Finlay’s contextualist account of an ought *simpliciter* is especially relevant here: “s ought to  $\varphi$  ‘simpliciter’ just in case it would be correct and felicitous in the absence of any special context to assert simply ‘s ought to  $\varphi$ ’” (2014: 151). Note that my argument in this paper has nothing to say against such a contextualist interpretation of the ought *simpliciter*. On this interpretation, however, the ought *simpliciter* possesses no special normative standing, just special pragmatic relevance.

need to posit any further special sense of ought with special normative standing). This greatly weakens the case for *tolens*-ing over *ponens*-ing. What's more, insisting that there is only an ought *simpliciter* forces us to attribute very odd normative commitments to people who utter the following, very sensible sentences:

- (1) "Nixon ought to have burned the tapes."
- (2) "Instead of pushing eastward into Russia, Hitler ought to have sent the Wehrmacht south to seize the Romanian oil-fields."
- (3) "The killer should have covered his tracks better."

I submit that these are all perfectly normal things for people to say, and do not imply that the speaker is a committed amoralist, Nazi, or whatever. Someone could utter (1) and still agree that Nixon ought to have handed himself in and confessed his crimes.<sup>38</sup> According to Thomson, this person must have contradicted herself. It is much more reasonable to think that people who utter (1) – (3) are using 'ought' in a sense that implicitly restricts the kinds of considerations in play—to those of self-interest, or desire-satisfaction, or good military strategy, for example.

So, if we have to choose between relativized oughts and ought *simpliciter*, it is the latter that must go.

## 6. Conclusion

A rejection of the ought *simpliciter* would mean a rejection of the practicality of philosophy.

---

<sup>38</sup> Similar examples can be found in (Dowell 2012: **pagination needed**; and Finlay 2014: 50, and 137).

There is no absolute perspective from which different kinds of considerations can be weighed. Individual agents may have their deliberative standards for measuring one kind of consideration against another, but these standards are themselves arbitrary, in the sense that they are simply one more standard among many. Conflicts between self-interest and morality, or any other two normative standards, cannot be resolved by coming to appreciate some philosophical (or everyday) truth. Rather, it is resolved through what Tiffany calls partisanship and existential choice.

Most of moral philosophy will remain in place despite this. Since most of us are partisans of morality (albeit of varying levels of commitment), we naturally have an interest in what morality in fact requires. We can still ask questions about morality's naturalistic *bona fides* and the relation between morality and rationality. But there is one question to which we as philosophers have no special answer, and that's "So what?"

### Works Cited

- Baker, D (2016) "The Varieties of Normativity," in (eds.) T. McPherson and D. Plunkett, *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*, Routledge.
- Broome, J (2013) *Rationality through Reasoning*, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Chang, R (2004) "All Things Considered," *Philosophical Perspectives* 18/1: 1-22.
- Copp, D (1997) "The Ring of Gyges: Overridingness and the Unity of Reason," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14/1: 86-101.
- Dorsey, D (2013) "Two Dualisms of Practical Reason," in (ed.) R Shafer-Landau, *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 8, Oxford University Press: 114-139.
- Dowell, JL (2012) "Contextualist Solutions to Three Puzzles about Practical Conditionals," in (ed.) R Shafer-Landau, *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 7, Oxford University Press: 271-303.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2013) "Flexible Contextualism about Deontic Modals: A Puzzle about Information-Sensitivity," *Inquiry* 56/2-3: 149-178.

- Dreier, J (2015) "Can Reasons Fundamentalism Answer the Normative Problem?" in (eds.) G Björnsson, C Strandberg, R Francén Olinder, and J Eriksson, *Motivational Internalism*, Oxford University Press: 167-81.
- Fine, K (2001) "The Question of Realism," *Philosophers' Imprint* 1/1: 1-30.
- Finlay, S (2007) "Responding to Normativity," in (ed.) R Shafer-Landau, *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 2, Oxford University Press: 220-39.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2009) "Oughts and Ends," *Philosophical Studies* 143/3: 315-40.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2014) *Confusion of Tongues: A Theory of Normative Language*, Oxford University Press.
- Foot, P (1972) "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," *The Philosophical Review* 81/3: 305-16; reprinted with additional footnote in *Virtues and Vices*, University of California Press, 1977: 157-173.
- Hubin, D (1999) "What's Special about Humeanism?" *Nous* 33/1: 30-45.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2001) "The Groundless Normativity of Instrumental Reason," *The Journal of Philosophy* 98: 445-68.
- Joyce, R (2001) *The Myth of Morality*, Cambridge University Press.
- Kiesewetter, B (2011) "'Ought' and the Perspective of an Agent," *The Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 5/3: 1-24.
- Kolodny, N (2005) "Why Be Rational?" *Mind* 114: 509-63.
- Korsgaard, C (1986) "Skepticism about Practical Reason," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83/1: 5-25.
- McLeod, O (2001) "Just Plain 'Ought,'" *The Journal of Ethics* 5: 269-91.
- McPherson, T (2011) "Against Quietist Normative Realism," *Philosophical Studies* 154/2: 223-40.
- Parfit, D (2011) *On What Matters*, vol. 1, Oxford University Press.
- Rosen, G (2010) "Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction," in (eds.) B Hale and A Hoffman, *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology*, Oxford University Press: 109-36.
- Schafer, K (2016) "The Modesty of the Moral Point of View," in (eds.) E Lord and B Maguire, *Weighing Reasons*, Oxford University Press: 241-56.
- Schaffer, J (2009) "On What Grounds What," in (eds.) D Manley, DJ Chalmers, and R. Wasserman, *Metametaphysics: New Essays in the Foundations of Ontology*, Oxford University Press: 347-83.
- Schroeder, M (2011) "Ought, Agent, Actions," *The Philosophical Review* 120/1: 1-41.
- Smith, M (1994) *The Moral Problem*, Wiley-Blackwell Press.
- Stroud, S (1998) "Moral Overridingness and Moral Theory," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79/2: 170-89.

- Thomson, JJ (2001) *Goodness and Advice*, Princeton University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2008) *Normativity*, Open Court.
- Tiffany, E (2007) “Deflationary Normative Pluralism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 37/5: 231-62.
- Väyrynen, P (2013) “Grounding and Normative Explanation,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 87/1: 155-78.
- Velleman, JD (2005) “A Brief Introduction to Kantian Ethics,” in his *Self to Self: Selected Essays*, Cambridge University Press: 16-44.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2008) “A Theory of Value,” *Ethics* 118/3: 410-36.
- Wedgwood, R (2007) *The Nature of Normativity*, Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, J (2014) “No Work for a Theory of Grounding,” *Inquiry* 57/5-6: 535-79.