A normative reason is a consideration that supports a certain action, belief, or attitude. While normative reasons usually are contrasted with explanatory reasons—why a person should \( \phi \) versus why a person does \( \phi \)—normativity has seemed puzzling.\(^1\) It is not obvious whether normative reasons in general, on their own merits, can compel us to \( \phi \). Nor is it clear how widely normative reasons apply in similar circumstances, to all persons or perhaps only to some. These issues arise even on a conception of persons as rational agents.

Morality is often thought to provide normative reasons: that doing \( x \) is morally wrong would be a reason not to do \( x \). If we are rationally required to do what morality requires, the “binding” nature of morality could not depend on any contingent feature of a rational agent’s psychology. Yet there are persons—call them amoralists—who believe they are rationally entitled to ignore the claims that morality makes. To amoralists, moral considerations seem to provide no more reason for action than nonmoral interests provide. If there is contingency in what persons can have reason to do, despite morality’s claims, amoralists would not necessarily be irrational. Whether particular persons have reason to do what morality requires would depend on what they happen to care about.\(^2\)

T.M. Scanlon has proposed a challenging account of moral normativity that some commentators believe shares a commitment to the

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\(^*\) I am grateful to David Copp, Erin Kelly, Doug Lavin, and Angela Smith for comments and discussion that significantly shaped the final version of this paper.

\(^1\) My topic is normative reasons. So the “reasons” I refer to will be normative reasons, not explanatory reasons and not whatever a person might take to be normative reasons.

rationalist view that “motivation to act in accord with reasons is entailed by rationality.”

3 In fact, Scanlon’s account is ambiguous: its loyalties seem divided between the rationalist notion that all persons have moral reasons, which by themselves motivate insofar as persons are acting rationally, and the rejection of rationalism. I explore this tension and defend a resolution that fits with my doubts about the plausibility of a rationalist account of normativity. Specifically, I argue that there can be reason to do what morality requires, where this does not depend on any contingent feature of a particular person’s psychology—without this entailing that everyone is rationally bound by morality’s claims or at least has moral reasons.4 The rejection of rationalism does not threaten the normativity of morality. This normativity comes from the bona fide reasons that morality provides. Furthermore, practical features of moral life—which include reactive attitudes, moral criticism, and punishment—are viable even if all rational persons do not have moral reasons. The problem of normativity is not as formidable as the contemporary philosophical debate would lead us to believe.

I

A good place to start is by stepping back from an approach that has us think in terms of the question of normativity. Such an approach is found in Christine Korsgaard’s The Sources of Normativity.5 “When we seek a philosophical foundation for morality,” Korsgaard writes, “we are not looking merely for an explanation of moral practices. We are asking what justifies the claims that morality makes on us. This is what I am calling ‘the normative question’” (ibid., pp. 9–10).

“The normative question” is not easy to pin down, and much of the difficulty can be traced to slippage between agential perspectives. To ask, as Korsgaard does, “Why should I be moral?” seems straightforward (ibid., p. 9). This question points toward an account of the reasons “I” have, if any, without obviously addressing how widely shared these reasons are. Korsgaard also asks how it could be that moral


4 I do assume that persons who accept that they have reason to act morally are disposed to act accordingly. This might make me an “internalist,” at least on some understandings of internalism. See, for example, Michael Smith, The Moral Problem (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994). As Smith roughly describes internalism, “Believing I should [do what morality requires] seems to bring with it my being motivated to—at least absent weakness of the will and the like” (p. 60).

standards “make claims on us” and that “when we invoke them, we make claims on one another” (ibid., p. 8). Of course, “we” often refers to a collection of individuals under some description (for example, rational beings), where there is no assumption or requirement that they share certain values or commitments. But Korsgaard’s “we” is stronger: she collectivizes persons in a way that represents a distinctive, first-person perspective. The implications of such a move are critical. She cites Kant’s view that “when we judge something beautiful we not only take pleasure in it, but demand that everyone do so” (ibid., p. 8, note 8). Translating this thought from aesthetics to morality, when I judge that an action is right, I would be demanding that everyone do it (ibid., p. 8). Korsgaard thus seems to go further than raising the question “Why should I be moral?” such that if an answer can be given from one’s own perspective as a rational being, then any other rational being is in a position to answer likewise. The idea is not simply that the answer is available to all rational beings, for this would not warrant talk of a demand that everyone share one’s own judgment and act accordingly. Rather, Korsgaard offers an account of rationality in relation to morality that would resolve the ostensibly different questions of normativity she raises: “Why should I be moral?” and “Why should everyone be moral?” become versions of the same question.

In short, “the normative question” can depend for its meaning on the presuppositions that may be attached to “I” and “we.” Korsgaard shifts from the first-person perspective of a rational agent, who must value his own humanity, to a universal perspective of persons who, by virtue of their rationality and common humanity, must value the humanity of one another. This is supposed to show that certain actions are obligatory for all rational beings, and that persons who fail to recognize this and to act accordingly are irrational due to inconsistency. My proposal is that the “I” and “we” questions do not necessarily yield a unified answer.

We can proceed by roughly distinguishing two questions that correspond to the first-person and the universal perspectives:

(1) Do I have reason to do what morality requires?
(2) Does every person have reason to do what morality requires?

Although I may seem to have reason to act morally, whether all rational persons have reason would remain to be argued. Persons who

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acknowledge no commitment to morality feel that its claims lack normative force for them. An answer to the second question would therefore need grounding in a source of obligation that is independent of a person’s commitments (insofar as those commitments do not come merely, perhaps unwittingly, from the fact of rational agency). Morality’s claims, whether they motivate all rational persons, could then be binding on all rational persons. Some moral skeptics deny that an independent source of obligation can be identified, and they think that no one has moral reasons without it. Moral philosophers who are baited by this skepticism respond by trying to show that everyone has reason to act morally.

Despite the appeal of answering the second question of normativity, answering the first is more important. The first question poses the troubling skeptical threat. If we can credibly answer this question, the second should not haunt us theoretically. Those of us who are not disinterested in morality believe that a person can have reason to act morally, even when morality conflicts with that person’s nonmoral interests. We can resist the first-person skeptical challenge, since the question it raises can be addressed by appreciating why morality can prove compelling. Kant gives an answer that seems simple: that an action is right is a reason for a person to do it, given that ostensible moral reasons dictating rightness are bona fide reasons for action. We do not have to be Kantians about the content of morality to accept Kant’s answer to the first question. But we do need some understanding of why moral reasons are bona fide reasons; we do not simply assume that there is reason to care about doing “the right thing.” Call this the dogmatism worry. We are looking for bona fide moral reasons, as compared to whatever considerations someone might think are moral reasons (for example, that a religious figure has issued decrees), because the former are the basis for taking morality seriously.

Bona fide reasons are not restricted to moral reasons. Prudential reasons, for example, count as bona fide reasons as well. Moral reasons will reflect considerations that morality is characteristically responsive to, including respect for persons and concern for their welfare. To fill out this idea, Thomas Nagel’s defense of altruistic reasons can be generalized and modified: the circumstances that moral reasons would have us care about regarding the lives of others are circumstances that those others already have reason to care about from a self-interested point of view.\textsuperscript{8} There is disagreement, no doubt, about how exactly to specify such circumstances. Nevertheless, they broadly en-

\textsuperscript{8} See Nagel, \textit{The Possibility of Altruism} (Princeton: University Press, 1970), p. 16. I am not endorsing Nagel’s “general thesis” that “one has a \textit{direct} reason to promote the
ter into an explanation of why moral reasons are bona fide reasons. This shows how the substance of moral argument can help to break the spell that moral skepticism may have cast on persons otherwise disposed to care about morality. The target audience is persons who believe that morality has some authority but are in doubt about the content of moral requirements and how much weight they carry. Moral argument cannot reach persons who are determined to believe that morality is for suckers or is of no special importance relative to their nonmoral priorities.

More than a few philosophers will remain troubled. Ultimately, they seem to have in mind the second question of normativity and its universal perspective. They do not want to know merely why I or you, from a first-person perspective, may have reason to act morally. They want to know, further, what may justify the demand that everyone do what morality requires. In the background is often the assumption that morality is so important that we cannot opt out if we are rational, that the legitimacy of morality’s claims would otherwise be undermined. I am arguing that the assumption is gratuitous: a credible account of moral normativity is no worse off without it.

II

The failure of some people to take morality seriously should not drive philosophers to exasperation. Kantians, for example, charge amoralists with irrationality. Yet amoralists might well be capable of leading functional lives and accommodating themselves to the reality that other people take morality quite seriously. Strong rationalism, as I will refer to it—the view that we are rationally required to do what morality requires and, hence, that we are irrational in failing to do so—seems either descriptively false or tendentiously true. Indifference to morality’s claims is distinctively and most straightforwardly a moral failure demonstrated, for instance, by willingness to free ride on the good will of others. The putative inconsistency displayed by free-riding amoralists who would value their own humanity and self-interestedly hope that it is valued by others, without generally valuing the humanity of others, is not inherently at odds with the prudential pursuit of their own aims.

Unlike strong rationalists, Scanlon is prepared to refrain from charging amoralists with irrationality. He accepts that we are not rationally

interests of others—a reason which does not depend on intermediate factors such as one’s own interests or one’s antecedent sentiments of sympathy and benevolence” (pp. 13–16).
required to grant morality importance: while the kinds of consider-
ations that morality is characteristically responsive to may not resonate
with some persons, a failure of rationality cannot necessarily be attrib-
uted to such persons, though they may be lacking in other, significant
respects. At the same time, Scanlon rejects strong rationalism en
route to a different type of rationalism: he believes that a person’s
sense of moral obligation and her accompanying moral motivation
can derive solely from her acknowledgment of moral reasons, reasons
that all rational persons have. I will argue that Scanlon’s approach to
normativity would be more convincing and less misleading if he re-
jected rationalism generally—that is, any view according to which all
rational persons have and can be directly motivated by moral reasons.
We need not accept rationalism in order to take the idea of moral
reasons seriously. Nor are our moral practices threatened in denying
that a person’s moral motivation can be explained solely by appealing
to her acknowledgment of moral reasons.

A nonrationalist approach to normativity, as I will call it, can main-
tain that morality provides reasons rather than only expresses pro
or con attitudes. Mill suggests such an account. What he calls “the
internal sanction of duty” is “a feeling in our own mind; a pain…
attendant on violation of duty, which in properly cultivated moral
nature rises…into shrinking from it as an impossibility. This feeling,
when disinterested and connecting itself with the pure idea of duty,
and not with some particular form of it, or with any of the merely
accessory circumstances, is the essence of conscience…..”9 Implicit
here is the view that for those of us who possess a moral sensibility, the
reason we have not to violate duty is that doing so would be wrong.
This bears a striking similarity, mutatis mutandis, to Kant’s view.10 Mill
goes on to explain how people may come to care about morality and
have the feeling of conscience: the force of morality’s claims reso-
nates through “the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures,
which is already a powerful principle in human nature…” (ibid.,
p. 32). He does not argue that everyone must have this desire. Persons
who are motivated by morality recognize reasons that can roughly be
described as agent-neutral but not universal.11 These reasons would
yield an answer to the first question of normativity: I have reason to
do what morality requires because moral reasons are reasons that

10 Mill does emphasize that conscientious persons experience the wrongness of vi-o-
lating duty as painful. This does not mean, however, that the wrongness consists in or
originates in the violation disturbing our conscience.
11 My reading of Mill might seem idiosyncratic. But a similar approach to moral
normativity can be found in other utilitarians. J.J.C. Smart, for example, observes that
persons who have the desire to be in unity with others have, and I am such a person. “Undoubtedly this sanction has no binding efficacy,” Mill writes, “on those who do not possess the feelings it appeals to.... On them morality of any kind has no hold but through the external sanctions” (*op. cit.*, p. 29). Thus the answer to the second question of normativity would be no: everyone might not have reason to do what morality requires.

Scanlon cites with approval the connection Mill makes between moral duty and moral motivation. This connection bridges the gap between having reason to act morally and wanting to act morally. “What we need to do, then,” Scanlon writes, “is to explain more clearly how the idea that an act is wrong flows from the idea that there is an objection of a certain kind to people’s being allowed to perform such actions, and we need to do this in a way that makes clear how an act’s being wrong in the sense described can provide a reason not to do it” (*op. cit.*, p. 153). In particular, Scanlon observes that his contractualist idea of wanting to be able to justify our actions to others is similar to Mill’s idea of the desire to be in social unity. But Scanlon rejects Mill’s account of moral motivation, which is to say that Scanlon rejects Mill on the internal sanction of morality: “[T]here is no need to appeal to a special psychological element to explain how a person could be moved to avoid an action by the thought that any principle allowing it would be one that others could reasonably reject. This is adequately explained by the fact that people have reason to want to act in ways that could be justified to others, together with the fact that when a rational person recognizes something as a reason we do not need a further explanation of how he or she could be moved to act on it” (*op. cit.*, p. 154).

Part of Scanlon’s criticism of Mill is fair. Mill’s appeal to the desire to be in social unity does not affirm that morally salient considerations support having the desire. Although he tells a story about how we may come to have the desire to be in social unity, he does not state that the desire is an appropriate source of motivation for a rational person. However, Mill could accept that morally salient considerations support having the desire; he is not tied to brute desire in explaining moral motivation. His focus is on describing an ordinary process of socialization that leads, in normal cases, to persons acquiring a moral sensibility. Mill does hold that reasons by themselves cannot motivate, and

this would include what Scanlon identifies as reason to want to be able to justify your actions to others: you would have to care in the first place about such an aim. Now, Scanlon agrees that reasons by themselves cannot motivate. He emphasizes that reasons can motivate only when they are acknowledged by a rational agent. But this does not establish his distinctive claim that a rational person who acknowledges moral reasons will be motivated to act on them (barring, say, weakness of will). In general, for a rational person to acknowledge certain reasons is not necessarily for her to endorse them on grounds that would have everyone, including her, who acknowledges the reasons be guided by them.

Consider origami, which I recognize is an art. Because art is worth valuing, there is reason for me to care about origami. Yet my resources are limited. There are many more things that there is reason to care about than I can pursue. Human beings, with our finite lives and capacities, must have priorities. Scanlon does allow that some reasons have “subjective conditions,” which leave room for variation in how persons respond to such reasons. He also believes that if something is worthwhile, we have reason to have a positive attitude toward it. While I would not have reason to become an origami connoisseur, I should acknowledge a reason that motivates me at least to adopt an attitude of respect toward origami and those persons who do particularly care about it. The problem is this falls short of the more robust sense in which Scanlon thinks that all rational persons have moral reasons. He does not believe that normal variation in our responses is so wide as to permit a rational person somehow to respect moral reasons without being motivated to act on them.

Instead, Scanlon believes that morality is special. The binding nature of moral reasons for a rational person who acknowledges them, he maintains, is captured by “the great importance of justifiability to others and to the particular interests that moral principles protect,” and also by the idea that “the other [nonmoral] values, properly understood, have a built-in sensitivity to the demands of right and wrong” (op. cit., p. 166). Morality, in contrast to things like origami, structures fundamental aspects of our interactions with other people. If you acknowledge moral reasons, you cannot treat them as optional. Yet the argument that moral reasons, being special in this sense, can directly motivate us does not flow from a general claim about the motivation that a reason can supply by itself for rational persons who acknowledge it. Rather, the argument flows from Scanlon’s more

12 See, for example, Scanlon, p. 370.
specific claim about the priority of moral reasons and their accompanying motivational force for *reasonable* persons, that is, for persons who care about being able to justify their actions to one another. This leaves open the possibility that some rational persons could acknowledge that there are moral reasons without granting these reasons priority.

The point of contention here is why Scanlon seems to discount this possibility by arguing that when rational persons acknowledge moral reasons, no further explanation is needed of their motivation to act accordingly. My diagnosis is the following. Moral reasons are supposed to be available to every rational person. Persons who acknowledge these reasons are rationally required to act as morality requires, since moral reasons in particular warrant acknowledgment as reasons of a special type that would obligate and motivate all rational persons. But Scanlon is not entirely comfortable with this position. He realizes that not every rational person will be motivated by morality. Like Mill, he accepts that morality can provide no reasons that motivate for persons who lack the kind of concern for others that moral reasons reflect. More surprisingly, Scanlon also accepts that persons who are not motivated by morality are not necessarily irrational. This sets him apart from strong rationalists. Then, again, Scanlon believes that moral reasons “apply” to amoralists as well. What could this mean? At issue is the significance of the possibility of a rational person acknowledging moral reasons without granting them priority.

I have shown how Scanlon articulates a position that stops short of strong rationalism. He argues that when rational persons take themselves to have moral reasons, their motivation to act accordingly can be *explained* by that fact. This is weaker than the strong rationalist claim that moral motivation is *entailed* by rationality. The explanatory claim allows that not all rational persons must take themselves to have moral reasons. Some commentators have missed this difference between the entailment claim made by strong rationalists and the explanatory claim Scanlon makes. Yet Scanlon seems to endorse a

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13 This is less of a concession than it might seem: Scanlon characterizes amoralists as mistaken or “deficient” if they fail to recognize moral reasons and thus fail to act on them (p. 370).

14 Smith characterizes Scanlon’s position as “externalist” since it rejects “the claim that there is a necessary connection of sorts between moral judgement and motivation” (*The Moral Problem*, p. 12). But Scanlon might accept that there is a connection “of sorts,” namely, when persons are reasonable.

15 See, for example, Copp, pp. 457–58.
version of rationalism when he describes the situation of amoralists. Like the rest of us, they are supposed to have moral reasons, which could directly motivate them: “we must say that the moral reasons that apply to us apply to these people as well…. Failure to care about right and wrong does not make a person irrational…but a person who is left cold by moral considerations does fail to appreciate reasons that apply to him or her” (op. cit., p. 158). Gerald Dworkin finds such a stance troubling, for this sense in which moral principles would apply to rational persons seems to him too weak to account for the ordinary, strong sense in which moral principles would apply.16

When a moral principle is said to apply to rational persons, this suggests that a person who is not motivated by that principle is irrational. By contrast, as Dworkin interprets Scanlon, a moral principle $F$ may be binding on amoralists, or the morally “disaffected,” in that “the principles that specify right and wrong apply to them so that if $F$ says that someone acts wrongly in doing $x$, then a disaffected person acts wrongly in doing $x$” (ibid., p. 478). The principle is binding from the perspective of moral judgment—a perspective that does not depend on the claim that a person who has acted wrongly is thereby irrational. This fits with Scanlon’s view that the case of the disaffected is captured by “the universality of reason judgments”: “their case is quite different from that of people who ‘have different tastes’…. In these cases, the main point of the activities in question is a certain kind of enjoyment; so people who do not get this enjoyment from the activities lack reasons to engage in them. But morality is not aimed at enjoyment, so the reasons to give it a place in one’s life are not conditional in this way” (op. cit., p. 158). Scanlon thinks that the disaffected can be criticized, even though they are not necessarily irrational in failing to be motivated by morality.

Reasonable persons, Scanlon contends, care about the justifiability of their actions to others. A person may be rational, though, and lack this concern. The gap between the rational and the reasonable is possible given a conception of irrationality that “fits better with ordinary usage and has other important advantages”: on Scanlon’s narrow construal, “Irrationality in the clearest sense occurs when a person’s attitudes fail to conform to his or her own judgments…” (op. cit., p. 25). Nonetheless, Scanlon believes that persons who do not care about the justifiability of their actions to others do have moral reasons. The universality of reason judgments would imply more than that we

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can say of a rational yet disaffected person that she acts wrongly. We also can say that she has moral reasons she does not acknowledge. Every rational person has moral reasons, and this is not conditional on wanting to be in a certain kind of relationship or on any other contingent psychological feature.

Scanlon’s account of moral normativity is confusing because he insists on a view—namely, all rational persons have and can be directly motivated by moral reasons—that appears to tie him to strong rationalism. He seems to imply that insofar as a person is rational, she will be motivated by moral reasons. But, as we have seen, Scanlon is not committed to this position. He allows that a rational person might not acknowledge moral reasons, which could explain why some rational persons lack moral motivation. (He also allows that some persons might acknowledge moral reasons and not be morally motivated, which he considers a case of the narrow irrationality of failing to do what one takes oneself to have conclusive reason to do.) Moral reasons are sufficient by themselves to motivate only those rational persons who are reasonable in that they acknowledge they have reason to want to live with others on mutually justifiable terms.

So Scanlon is not claiming that we can expect the disaffected, as rational persons, to be motivated by morality. For Dworkin, this is a basis for the following objection: “[If] the disaffected have no reason to act morally (because they do not share our ideal of reaching general agreement, and could not be brought to share it by any mode of reasoning or further experience), then we cannot say that such a person has a reason to not act immorally, only that they are deficient in not seeing that there is such a reason” (op. cit., p. 480). I am doubtful that this poses a genuine difficulty. To illustrate why, I propose drawing a distinction between the idea that there are reasons to φ and the idea that a particular person has reasons to φ. This helps to avoid confusion about perspective in talk of reasons, a problem Bernard Williams has highlighted.17 As Scanlon succinctly describes Williams’s view, “when we speak of the reasons another person has, we are taking that person’s ‘perspective on the situation’ and pointing out what is so, given that perspective” (op. cit., p. 372). The distinction between reasons there are to φ and a particular person having reasons to φ makes perspicuous the perspective of the person in question, without committing us to any specific view about the nature of reasons or what reasons the person should acknowledge. Scanlon does not employ

such a distinction, for he seems concerned that it obscures the universality of reason judgments. Yet his position overall would be better served if he were to respond to Dworkin that indeed the most we can claim—strictly regarding the relation between rational agency and reasons—is that there is reason for the disaffected not to act immorally. The weak sense in which the disaffected might acknowledge moral reasons, namely, as considerations that could motivate a rational person, does not support the claim that the disaffected must act morally if they are rational. They could act rationally if they instead pursue other worthwhile endeavors, despite a resulting conflict with morality.

On the position I am defending, we can hope and expect that people develop the kind of sensibility that would render them receptive to acknowledging and being motivated by moral reasons. But we can give up on the claim that moral reasons must be universally normative: moral reasons might not “apply” to every rational person, except in the sense that, qua reasons, they are available to rational persons. Scanlon is correct that the disaffected are not necessarily irrational. Nothing is added, however, by the idea that moral reasons are “binding” for a rational person who acknowledges them: this idea merely marks the claim that a person who acts immorally acts wrongly. The disaffected fail to do what there is moral reason to do. Yet such a failure, at the level of the relation between rational agency and reasons, is akin to failing to care about origami, in the sense that one would be unwilling to forgo one’s personal interests out of respect for it. Of course, the stakes are much greater in the case of morality. I am arguing, though, that the explanatory claim about moral motivation must presuppose that rational persons who are motivated by morality have a kind of concern for others that grounds their special sensitivity to moral reasons.

Intractable amoralists, by hypothesis, cannot be compelled to accept that they have bona fide reasons to act morally. That they lack a moral sensibility explains why they are not morally motivated. Obviously, this may have practical consequences for how they decide what to do and for how we treat them in response. But the practical consequences do not impugn the status of moral reasons as bona fide reasons that reasonable persons will have. If we resort to calling amoralists irrational, we are in fact representing our judgment about a broader human deficiency that leads them to fail to recognize or be motivated by the reasons there are to do what morality requires. The charge of irrationality will have no greater leverage against amoralists than the distinctively moral judgments we are already able to make about them. Nor does the charge illuminate some inherent inconsistency given what rational persons might value. Dworkin objects that if a
particular person’s having moral reasons is contingent on her having a moral sensibility, “then the authority of such principles for those who do not have such reasons is put more centrally into doubt” (op. cit., p. 482). Yet such a notion of authority is obscure: whatever authority moral reasons have, they will be impotent, in effect, regarding amoralists.

Let me be explicit about two respects in which my account of moral normativity is nonrationalist: (1) it denies that all rational persons as such have reason to do what morality requires; (2) it denies that moral motivation can derive solely from a rational person’s acknowledgment of moral reasons. I am not endorsing the sweeping, Human view that reason is a slave to the passions. Rather, to reiterate, I have argued that in order to explain how persons could be morally motivated, we must presuppose that they have a kind of concern for others that renders them receptive to morality’s claims. This can make sense of the possibility that some persons, acknowledging moral reasons and acting rationally, might not grant priority to moral reasons. For persons who do have a moral sensibility, moral reasons may appear to influence directly what they take themselves to have reason to do: they can come to care about doing the right thing for the bona fide reasons they recognize make it right. Such persons, we might say, are reasonable. However, pace Scanlon, this idea of reasonableness does import a “psychological element” into the explanation of moral motivation for rational persons.

Rationalism—whether of the entailment-claim variety (for example, Kant’s) or the explanatory-claim variety (for example, Scanlon’s)—does not seem plausible. There can be contingency in whether a rational person has special reason to value morality and, hence, in what a rational person has reason to do. Nevertheless, along the lines of Mill and Scanlon, I have maintained that reasonable persons will have special reason to value morality and to act accordingly. A person’s disinterest in morality represents a human deficiency broader than irrationality: she might not feel empathy or compassion, or might not have the desire to be in unity with other persons, or might not care about the justifiability of her actions to them. Simply put, amoralists lack a basic regard for the lives of other beings, which is the mark of an essentially antisocial character. But disinterest in morality does not involve a mistake of reason. Or, at least, failure to care about morality is no more a mistake of reason than failure to care about art or any number of other endeavors that are worthwhile.

My defense of nonrationalism returns us to the moralist’s worry about the threat to practical features of moral life. I want to examine
what triggers the notion that rationalism had better be true—that, otherwise, our commitment to morality would be undermined. As Dworkin expresses the worry over amoralists, “The very thing which explains our motivation to act rightly has no motivational force with them, and cannot, given their (defective) appreciation of the value of being in a certain relationship with others. But then not only does [moral] criticism lose its point, so does a whole range of what Strawson calls reactive attitudes” (op. cit., p. 481). Similarly, Michael Smith believes that if we stopped caring or had never cared about morality, we would “rightly come to see” our caring about it “as rationally optional; as “arbitrary; as to be explained rather than justified…simply in terms of when, where and how we were brought up.”

We can ask whether the dire conclusions that Smith and Dworkin draw would follow. After all, reasonable persons can take morality seriously even if some persons do not. The possibility that there could be rational amoralists need provide no impetus for the rest of us to lose interest in morality’s claims. As long as enough people share a commitment to morality, there will be enough people to sustain moral practice: we will have adequate rational grounds to expect that our commitment to morality will be reciprocated. If en masse we were to stop caring about morality, this would indicate a radical change in our view about the kind of beings we are or the kind of social interaction we want. Moral reasons would cease to be reasons we have. But this does not support the inference that we would be obliged to see our caring about morality as rationally arbitrary. Instead, we could see that our caring about morality is contingent.

Moral criticism, directed to reasonable persons like us, does not thereby lose its point. We continue to care about morality and are prepared to avoid acting wrongly. This is not a matter of submitting to the dogmatic dictates of authority figures, tradition, or local custom but, rather, of recognizing the reasons there are to act morally. It is true that we may not be in agreement and may remain in disagreement, after inquiry and discussion, about what morality requires. There is no guarantee that we eventually will converge on a particular account of morality’s content and authority. But we can agree in general that we have reason to do what morality requires. Admittedly, Dworkin, Smith, and others who worry that rationalism had better be true might be impatient with this response. A threat to morality seems to come not from persons already disposed to care about morality, who seek to clarify why morality should motivate them—the threat

seems to come from intractable amoralists. What can we say to amoralists if we have given up the position that moral requirements are categorical requirements of reason?

My rejoinder is that we can only explain to amoralists why there is reason to act morally. We realize that moral criticism will have little chance of convincing them that they should take morality seriously enough to be morally motivated. This is not an embarrassment to morality as a normative endeavor. Moral discourse is appropriate, if not efficacious, even when directed to rational beings who do not share our fundamental values. Amoralists could still be capable of comprehending our commitment to morality: sharing values is not always prerequisite to comprehending those values. Furthermore, amoralists could recognize that there are reasons to act morally, without their having such reasons. Their attitude toward morality might be similar to my attitude toward origami. They might understand and respect why moral reasons motivate other people, while not being motivated by these reasons vis-à-vis their personal interests. In short, amoralists might not be thoroughly beyond the reach of moral reasoning.

Moral criticism can have various purposes. Typically, it is directed to persons who have acted wrongly, or who have expressed beliefs or attitudes that are morally objectionable. The purpose is to prompt the person criticized to reexamine her values or her commitment to them, or to recognize that the values she already accepts properly apply in the context in question. Another purpose is to reaffirm the moral community’s commitment to values that have been violated. In this case, moral criticism might be directed less to the wrongdoer than to the moral community overall, of which the wrongdoer might or might not be member. We want publicly to condemn racial hate crimes, for example, in order to remove any doubt within our society that race hatred is wrong; we might be quite pessimistic that the offender will accept this value. Moral criticism also can have an expressive purpose, giving voice to our felt responses to wrongdoing. Perhaps this offers the best understanding of reactive attitudes such as resentment.

Punishment appears to raise a more serious problem. The imposition of loss, pain, or confinement goes beyond condemnatory words or plain social ostracism. This helps to explain the attraction of the idea that punishment entails the concept of desert. Severe, freedom-infringing treatment of persons when they cannot credibly be said to deserve it is widely viewed as unjust. If wrongdoers do not themselves have reason to avoid acting wrongly, we might wonder whether they can “deserve” punishment at all. How, then, could amoralists—unlike the rest of us, who do have reason to avoid acting wrongly—be eligible for punishment on the grounds of desert? Perversely, their ultimate
indifference to morality might seem to place them not only outside the moral community but also outside the reach of moral judgment that would legitimate severe treatment of them for violating certain moral norms.

This problem could be addressed by showing that the permissibility of punishment need not rely on desert.¹⁹ If such an approach proves too controversial, we could give up conceptualizing freedom-infringing treatment of wrongdoers as “punishment.” Instead, we could say that the practice has the aim of incapacitating or deterring persons who do unwarranted harm to others. Such an aim seems reasonable, and it can sidestep the metaphysics of free will and moral responsibility that animate the issue of desert. While we would prefer that our reasons in defense of the practice resonate with amoralists, its legitimacy does not depend on the morally salient reasons we have being reasons for them. We can admit that the only reasons intractable amoralists would recognize are the prudential reasons they have to avoid being subjected to incapacitating or deterring treatment. The point is that unwarranted harmdoing is generally unacceptable, no matter who does it, given the stakes for individual victims and society.

Thus, rationalism does not need to be true in order for moral criticism or severe, freedom-infringing measures ever to be appropriate. That all rational agents might not be bound by morality’s claims does not mean that our commitment to the values underlying those claims is rationally arbitrary. This explains why the justifiability of our caring about morality is not hostage to the fortune of debate in theoretical ethics about whether there are “moral facts” in a rationalist sense.²⁰ At the same time, we should care whether our moral values have rational or reasonable credentials: we want our ostensible moral reasons to be bona fide reasons. That we feel deeply and strongly about the reasons we take to be moral reasons is not a bulwark against the possibility of dogmatism. We can do better than this by working to develop a fuller account of the values that moral reasons reflect and of the relation between moral reasons and nonmoral values.

LIONEL K. MCPHERSON

Tufts University

¹⁹ For critical discussion of desert with regard to punishment and moral responsibility, see Erin Kelly, “Doing without Desert,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, lxxxiii (2002): 180–205. Like Kelly, I do not take skepticism about desert to rely on or substantiate compatibilism or, more specifically, a Strawsonian account of reactive attitudes.