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SYMPOSIUM ARTICLE

What are Duties? A Reasons-First Relational Account

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Abstract
What is the difference between a reason to do something and a duty to do it? This paper develops a relational account of duties, locating the distinction between duties and nonduty reasons in how others should react to the agent's will: duty-contrary willing deserves distinctively diminished respect from others, when compared to the respect owed to willing contrary to nonduty reasons. It is also a "reasons-first" account, revealing a duty (and indeed a right) to be composed of a specific nexus of reasons for the agent and for others. The account has important implications for how to understand duty-creation in promising and legislation.

Keywords: duties; directed duties; rights; reasons; will; promising; legislation

What is the difference between having a *reason* to do something and having a *duty or obligation* to do it?[1] Duties have a tight conceptual relationship to wrongdoing, while "mere reasons" do not: failure to fulfil a duty constitutes wrongdoing, while failing to act in accordance with one's nonduty reasons does not.[2] But what exactly is meant by "duty" and "wrongdoing" here? How do these concepts relate to the idea of a reason for action?

This paper develops a new account of duties, building on insights from earlier work in the rationalist and sentimentalist traditions. It is a relational account, locating the distinction between duties and nonduty reasons in how others should react to the agent's will: *duty-contrary willing* deserves distinctively diminished respect from others, when compared to the respect owed to *willing contrary to nonduty reasons*. It is also a "reasons-first" account, revealing a duty (and indeed a right) to be composed of a specific nexus of reasons for the agent and for others.

1. The Variety of Duties and the Variety of "Mere Reasons"

Duties are a varied bunch, and the challenge is to find an account that can identify the underlying thread. In this Section I mention seven aspects of duties, and then ask which are unique to duties and which pertain also to nonduty "mere reasons":

I. Most duties are *pro tanto* (i.e., defeasible): duties that in appropriate contexts can justifiably be infringed in order to ensure that more important things are done. Examples include

[1]I take "duties" and "obligations" to mean the same thing in this paper.

[2]Failure to fulfil a *pro tanto* duty that is justifiably outweighed—"infringing" the duty (Thomson, 1990, 122)—constitutes *pro tanto* wrongdoing. Failure to fulfil an all-things-considered duty constitutes wrongdoing all things considered.

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many promissory duties and duties to do one's best in one's role. But in any context, there will also be some things one is, *all things considered*, duty-bound to do or not to do. These normally include duties not to kill, torture, assault, or show disrespect.[3]

II. Some duties are of great importance, such as—again—duties not to kill, assault, torture, and further duties correlating with basic human rights.[4] Other duties are unimportant, such as trivial promissory duties, duties not to fuss and grumble, or duties created by time limits for parking spaces, deadlines for returning library books, or park bye-laws forbidding ball games.

III. We can distinguish duties by the form of normativity within which they fall. Some are moral, some prudential, some legal, and it is not clear whether or when these classes overlap. Are there distinctively aesthetic or epistemic duties?

IV. Duties can be borne by persons, by corporate entities (businesses, states, and clubs), and perhaps by some nonhuman animals (e.g., dogs and horses are given commands that arguably constitute duties). But it seems mistaken to see duties as borne by will-less entities like plants, rocks, or cars, or by abstract entities like the color blue. Further, there are many nonhuman animals with a will, but without the necessary capacities to bear duties: butterflies, deer, haddock, and spiders.[5]

V. Some duties are permissibly enforceable, such as duties not to kill, assault, torture, contractual duties, and duties of emergency rescue, while others are not, such as duties of gratitude, of romantic fidelity, or duties not to fuss and grumble.[6] (In later sections, I will argue that there is a technical sense in which *all* duties are permissibly enforceable, and that this is a distinctive type of enforceability which "mere reasons" lack. But this is not our everyday notion of enforceability. In our everyday sense, duties not to kill are enforceable, but duties of gratitude are not).

VI. Some duties are "directed" or "owed to" others, such that their violation is not just wrong but wrongs a particular party.[7] Examples cut across the distinctions above: "directed" duties include duties not to kill, duties of gratitude, promissory duties, contractual duties, and duties of romantic fidelity. Other duties are arguably undirected—though this is controversial. Typical examples include duties not to damage the unliving natural world (e.g., rock formations), and duties of general beneficence.[8] Furthermore, among the duties that are "directed," some correlate with rights (e.g., duties not to kill and promissory duties) while others do not: gratitude seems to be a directed duty, owed to a particular party, but it seems mistaken to say that the relevant party has a right to be thanked.[9]

VII. Some duties are created, such as legal duties or the duties constitutive of games, carparking systems, or library bye-laws; others are not, such as fundamental moral duties. Among

[3]I say "things" plural because I am not a consequentialist. So, I think one is normally *all-things-considered* duty-bound not to murder, or do countless other terrible things, but so long as one does not do them, there is no further single thing one is all-things-considered bound to do. Note, of course, there are often circumstances (e.g., wartime) where one has *all-things-considered* duty to kill or assault. By allowing that duties can be *pro tanto*, I disagree with Wallace, 2019, 170–173.

[4]By "importance," I mean some combination of the effort one should put in to fulfil the duty, and the duty's weight in overriding competing considerations. These can come apart (Kamm, 1996, 321–322)

[5]What about Artificial Intelligence systems? This needs a different paper.

[6]Theorists dispute whether any duties correlating with "positive" human rights—for example, to education or health care—are morally enforceable. My own view is that they are (Cruft, 2019, 176–191). But there are clearly some important duties that are not, including duties of gratitude and romantic fidelity (see Barry & McTernan, 2022).

[7]Thomson, 1990, 62–63; Thompson, 2004; Wenar, 2013; Wallace, 2019.

[8]See O'Neill (1996) on imperfect duties. For argument that all seemingly undirected duties are actually owed to someone, compare Wallace, 2019, 201–233 and Kramer, 2024, 99–177. Kramer holds that while all duties are directed and correlate with rights, some of these rights are "held disjunctively" (e.g., by potential beneficiaries of my benevolence) (120–121).

[9]Cruft, 2019, 80–83. For doubts that being owed a duty is necessary for being wronged by its violation, see Cornell, 2015; for attempted refutation of Cornell, see Kramer, 2024, 135–177.

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> created duties, we can distinguish between those that are morally justified and those that are not. We can also distinguish between those created duties generated or annulled by the direct reflexive exercise of duty-creating or duty-waiving powers (such as promissory duties, or legal duties created by formal legislative acts, or the waiving of duties through consent or forgiveness), those created duties generated or annulled by human actions that are not aimed at duty-creation or waiver (such as the unplanned emergence of conventions or habits, or the unplanned conception of a child), and those created duties whose existence or annulment are the result of events in the nonhuman natural world triggering prior conditions on general duties (such as an asteroid impact generating duties of rescue).[10]

Can the seven distinctions above be drawn similarly in relation to "mere reasons?" My view is that distinctions (I)–(IV) apply as readily to nonduty "mere reasons" as to duties, while it seems that distinctions (V)–(VII) pertain only to duties. Let me explain. First: many nonduty reasons are *pro tanto*, but sometimes reasons can stack up such that ϕ, for which one has a nonduty reason, is what *all things considered* one should do.[11] Second, some nonduty reasons are more important than others, and some are very trivial.[12] Third, we can distinguish moral from prudential from aesthetic from epistemic nonduty reasons, and can distinguish nonduty reasons within created realms of normativity, such as law, etiquette, and games.[13] Fourth, like duties, "mere reasons" can be borne by humans, by corporate entities, and potentially by some nonhuman animals, but not by rocks, plants, or colors.[14]

By contrast, I doubt that any consideration that amounts to just a nonduty "mere reason" is permissibly enforceable, at least in its guise as a "mere reason." A legislature might decide to make some nonduty "mere reasons" enforceable through law, but in doing so, it transforms the relevant "mere reasons" into duties. *As "mere reasons,"* the relevant considerations are not enforceable. Further, moral considerations that look like enforceable reasons independently of legislation—for example, reasons not to assault, or to respect one's contracts, or to care for one's children—all seem to look already like moral *duties*. I will not spend long on this; if it is correct, then a distinction between the enforceable and the unenforceable can be drawn only within the realm of duties, as all "mere reasons" are unenforceable while they have the status of "mere reasons."

Similarly, it seems to me that no "mere reason" is directed or owed to someone—or at least not in the quasi-juridical way that duties can be. This is a controversial claim, and I do not intend to rule out the possibility of "mere reasons" that are directed in some alternative sense.[15] Of course, there can be "mere reasons" constituted by particular people's wellbeing or autonomy: your thirst is a reason for me to bring you a cup of tea; your desire to visit the library is a reason for me to give you a

[10]On reflexive creation, see Chang, 2020. On emergence of conventional duties, see Ullmann-Margalit, 1977, Valentini, 2023; on habits see Owens, 2012, 76–85. On natural events creating duties, see Kramer, 2024, 83–87 on "quasi-powers." Note also that even *uncreated* duties are, arguably, dependent on the existence of the kind of agents—humans, perhaps some animals—that can bear duties. In this sense, they are also dependent on such natural events as the evolution of humans.

[11]This is, of course, compatible with my earlier claim that in the same scenario one has an all-things-considered *duty* not to kill or assault, etc.

[12]A tough question is whether a "mere reason" could in some cases outweigh *pro tanto* duties; I suspect not, but this is a matter of debate. (Some of Williams's 1981 "moral luck" examples perhaps illustrate how following "mere reasons" in infringement of duties can turn out all-things-considered justified; but I am doubtful.)

[13]See Section 7 below for an important qualification: nonduty reasons within authoritatively created normative realms like law or games are, it turns out, necessarily derivative.

[14]Does the cut between those entities who are and those who are not capable of bearing duties fall in the same place as the cut between those capable of having reasons and those who are not? I will assume so.

[15]I have heard arguments countenancing the possibility of directed "mere reasons" in conference presentations and drafts since 2024 by Dmitry Ananiev, Singa Behrens, Andrew Lichter, and in conversation with Simon May and Quinn White.

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lift; these really are "*mere* reasons" rather than duties for me. (Further, such "mere reasons" based on your good might themselves bear a tight relationships to directed *duties* owed to you: e.g., duties owed by me to you to give the mere reasons appropriate weight in my reasoning, and duties of apology owed to you if I fail to do so.) But I believe that nonduty "mere reasons" grounded in the good of particular people are not themselves directed reasons in the special way that duties can be directed. It is well known that a duty can pertain to a particular person, or be morally grounded in their good, or involve action entwined with them and their good, while nonetheless being directed or owed to someone else. Raz notes that the British state's legal duty to make child benefit payments is owed to parents, such that they are wronged if the payments are withheld, but the child's well-being is the ground of the duty, and the child is the core party to whom the duty pertains.[16] I do not believe that we can make sense in the case of nonduty "mere reasons" of any contrast like that between (a) the party to whom a duty is owed, that is, the party who is wronged by its violation, and (b) parties whose good grounds the duty or to whom the duty pertains or with whom the duty is somehow bound up. In the relevantly quasi-juridical sense captured by (a), there seem to be no distinctively directed "mere reasons." This is reflected in the absence of any linguistic marker of such directedness for "mere reasons": duties are "owed to" those to whom they are directed, while by contrast it is unidiomatic to regard reasons as "owed to" anyone (except in the sense that one sometimes has a *duty* to explain one's reasons to another). On the same basis, I think there are no "mere reasons" that correlate with rights—where this would mean reasons that do not amount to duties, but whose nonfulfillment in itself necessarily constitutes an infringement of a right.

Our analysis of duties needs to explain the asymmetry above: why there are no enforceable or directed "mere reasons" while some duties are enforceable and some are directed. There are theorists who make the contrast sharper by claiming that *all duties* are enforceable and directed, while *no "mere reasons"* are.[17] I have some sympathy with these views, though I do not endorse them. A key question—ultimately addressed in Section 6 below—is why some duties are enforceable and directed, while no "mere reasons" are.

2. Created and Uncreated Duties and "Mere Reasons"

What about the final contrast (VII)? Can there be *created* nonduty "mere reasons?" There is a tough question here. The easy part is this: of course both nonhuman and human events can create "mere reasons" through triggering conditions on prior general reasons: I have a general reason to respond to others' needs when I can, and a volcano, a phone call, or a hungry stomach can trigger more specific reasons to provide funds to support a rescue, to listen to someone and to feed them, "mere reasons" that often do not amount to duties.

The tough question is whether nonduty "mere reasons" can be created through intentional reflexive willing: willing "that some consideration be a reason, where that willing is that in virtue of which the consideration *is* a reason" (Chang, 2020, 292).[18] Such a reflexive process is how promises, legislation, and commands create moral, legal, and military duties, and how consent and forgiveness work to annul duties. It is debatable how many people's wills must be involved for the relevant

[16]Raz, 1994, 50. Consider also Hart's famous third-party beneficiary case (Hart, 1955, Section IC); and see Wenar's discussion of the rights of role-bearers, most of whom are owed duties that help them serve others (2013, 211–217). Note the complication that uncreated naturally directed duties are always grounded in the good of the party to whom they are owed (see my Section 6b below). But this does not generalize across all duties including created ones like the state duty to pay child benefits.

[17]For the view that all and only duties are enforceable, see Mill, 1991 [1861], 184, and discussion in Section 4 below; for the view that all duties are directed, see Kramer, 2024 and n. 8 above. Wenar claims that all duties correlating with rights are enforceable, but allows that there are also unenforceable directed duties: duties which, because they are unenforceable, do not qualify as rights (2013, 214).

[18]Compare Anscombe on the mysterious "hereby" in the act of promising (1981, 98).

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change to be effected: must my promise be accepted by its addressee if it is to generate a new duty—and is the same true when consent waives a duty?[19] It is also debatable how deliberate and knowing the relevant agents must be to qualify as engaged in appropriately reflexive willing. However these questions are answered, in each case a single-person/multiperson, transparently-deliberate/less-intentional communicated will-to-change-a-duty effects the relevant change simply in virtue of the act of communicated will. While I trip you, wounding your ankle, I might tell you that I am doing this in order to place myself under new duties of medical care for you, but my will-plus-telling is not here what effects the change in duties: the change is effected by my creation of your new need. By contrast, if I promise to provide you with new medical care and you accept this promise, our valid communicated acts of will are enough on their own to create the new duty.[20]

My question now is this: is a similar process of reflexive willing able to create (or annul) nonduty "mere reasons?" Some think so.[21] But on inspection, it is unclear, and we need a good theory of the distinction between duties and "mere reasons" to help clear things up. Candidate processes for reflexively creating new nonduty "mere reasons" include *inviting, requesting, assuring*, and perhaps *creating new games*; one might also think of *offering*, *suggesting*, or *encouraging*; on the "annulling" side, one might think that sometimes *consent* waives a "mere reason" rather than a duty. But a close look at these processes is indecisive: the cases can, I suggest, plausibly be analyzed as reflexively creating or annulling only duties and never "mere reasons."

For example, when I invite you to a party, I exercise a power of permission, allowing you to attend when otherwise you would have been duty-bound not to; the invitation also typically expresses my desire that you attend. But it seems mistaken to think of my invitation as itself a reason to attend: when wondering whether to go, it would be appropriate for you to consider whether I want you to be there, whether you want to attend, what goods—friendship, neighborliness, love, and fun—are bound up with attendance, and what the opportunity costs are. But it would be inappropriate for you to consider the fact that I invited you as an *additional* reason to attend, beyond those mentioned. The invitation makes it appropriate to consider the reasons listed, which would otherwise not be considerations for your attention (given your general duty not to attend parties uninvited). But the invitation is not itself an extra reason. By contrast, if you had promised to attend, then the fact that you promised would itself be a ground for a duty to attend. Of course, in *accepting* the invitation, you are typically promising attendance, so your acceptance creates a duty to attend. But prior to or independently of acceptance, the invitation creates no new reason to attend. And acceptance creates a new *duty*, not a new "mere reason."

The same point seems to apply to other processes that look at first glance to involve the reflexive creation of nonduty reasons: when I issue a *request*, I offer the person subject to the request the opportunity to place themselves under a duty to satisfy my request by accepting it.[22] Perhaps before they have accepted my request, we might think it has generated a new "mere reason"—either to accept or reject the request. But is this simply a nonduty reason? Or does the relevant person have a *duty* here, namely, a duty of respect for my request and a duty to decide whether to accept it?

[19]See the citations about the "uptake" condition on promising in Habib, 2022. I like Gilbert's account, which requires a joint commitment from promisor and promisee to pursue a plan specifying action for the promisor (Gilbert, 2018, 203–206). I am tempted by a similar multiparty approach to consent, and to other processes that seem at first glance to involve normative changes made unilaterally by one party.

[20]See similar pairs of cases in Tadros, 2020, 303–304. There are complications about validity conditions. And while Tadros makes normative powers explicitly about altering "rights and duties," Chang, 2020 writes of altering "reasons"—but most of her examples are of duties. Those that are not (e.g., exercising a power to make my overweightness into a reason to avoid sugar) look less like reason-creation and more like intending to act on considerations that already amount to reasons. Note also that in the jargon, the relevant reflexive processes involve "content-independent" authority.

[21]See Lewis, 2018, Schaber, 2021.

[22]For a similar picture of requesting that ties it to a joint commitment account, see de Kenessey, 2022, 881.

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The discussion above is indecisive, but it is enough for now to present a sharpened challenge. At the end of Section 1, we concluded that we need an account of duties that explains why "mere reasons" cannot be enforceable or directed, while duties can. We should add that our account ought in addition to explain why, although some duties can be created simply through a reflexive communicated will-to-create the relevant duties, it is *more doubtful* that "mere reasons" can be so created (or perhaps annulled) simply through a reflexive act of will.

3. Sentimentalist and Rationalist Accounts of Duties

In the literature, there are two prominent accounts of the nature of duties: first, "sentimentalist" or "accountability" approaches, and secondly, "rationalist" or "constraint" approaches.[23] I will argue that both approaches capture important truths but require supplementation to address shortcomings and to meet the challenges outlined in Sections 1–2 above.

Sentimentalist-accountability approaches define duties in terms of the attitudes or actions their violation justifies. According to one version of this approach, a duty is defined as a normative consideration whose violation would (absent excuses) justify blame, guilt, resentment, punishment, apology, and potential forgiveness: attitudes not justified by failure to act on "mere reasons."[24] According to a related approach, a duty is a normative consideration whose existence justifies actions of demanding or claiming—either by the moral community, or by the specific person to whom the duty is owed—that are not justified by a "mere reason."[25]

There are technical problems for sentimentalist-accountability approaches.[26] But the core idea seems to address our key question about duties and nonduty "mere reasons": when *duties* are violated or infringed, distinctive accountability attitudes and demands are plausibly triggered, attitudes and demands inappropriate to the violation or infringement of "*mere*" *nonduty reasons.*

My unoriginal worry is that there is no noncircular way of distinguishing the attitudes and demands definitive of duties from the attitudes and demands definitive of nonduty "mere reasons."[27] My neighbor has a reason—but no duty—to paint their gray exterior walls so that they are less ugly for the street. If my neighbor ignores their neighborly aesthetic reasons without justification, then I would be justified in making an adverse judgment of my neighbor's will, could ask my neighbor for an explanation, and I could justifiably feel heated, difficult emotions that are phenomenologically, motivationally, and functionally identical to those involved in resentment. Because my response is justified merely by the ignoring of a nonduty reason rather than the violation of a duty, it might be said that it does not qualify as resentment proper, but phenomenologically, motivationally, and functionally, it could be identical; we could call it resentment*.

[23]For the "rationalist" and "sentimentalist" labels, see Kieswetter, 2026 (focused on all-things-considered moral duties). For the "accountability" and "constraint" labels, see de Kenessey, 2024 (focused on directed duties).

[24]Gibbard, 1990, 42.

[25]Darwall, 2012; compare Gilbert, 2018.

[26]One task is to show that appropriately similar reactive attitudes and demands define legal and prudential duties; the approach has been developed so far primarily in relation to moral duties. Another task is to show how the attitudes and demands appropriate to unjustified duty violations are continuous with attitudes and demands appropriate to justified infringement of *pro tanto* duties. When I break my promise to meet you for lunch because I have to rush my neighbor to the hospital, you are not justified in blaming me or resenting my action, nor in demanding that I turn up for lunch; and it is not clear that I need to apologize. De Kenessey therefore argues that the "accountability" aspect of duties picks out a separate concept to the "constraint" aspect (de Kenessey, 2024, 921), as only the latter can accommodate infringed *pro tanto* duties. I disagree. Proponents of the "accountability" approach can handle infringed duties, for example, by saying that while resentment of infringement is unjustified, distinctive demands for *explanation* are justifiable, as are *quasi-apologies* (De Kenessey rejects this response, but I remain persuaded (ibid.)). Note that similar moves are necessary if the sentimentalist-accountability approach is to accommodate cases of "purely nominal" legal duties that are on the books but not enforced (Kramer, 2001, pp. 74–78).

[27]For broadly similar concerns, see Kieswetter 307–308, who notes that Wallace, 2019 circularly characterizes the relevant attitudes as involving the "belief that some moral *obligation* has been violated" (37, my emphasis). See also Owens, 2012, 86–87, for the argument that it is circular to use the distinction between requests and orders to explain what duties are.

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The distinction between the resentment* appropriate to the ignoring of nonduty "mere reasons" and the genuine resentment appropriately triggered by duty violations (or infringements) is a distinction that, I believe, can only be defined circularly: the genuine, nonasterisked reactive attitudes at the center of the sentimentalist-accountability approach are simply those reactive attitudes justifiably triggered by *duty violations (or infringements)* as opposed to those triggered by overlooking "mere reasons."

Some theorists—notably Darwall—are happy to accept this conclusion, taking duty, blame, accountability, and demandability as forming an inter-definable circle (Darwall, 2009; Darwall, 2012). It is a problem for those who seek a noncircular account that distinguishes duties from "mere reasons" on the basis of the reactive attitudes or actions that duties distinctively justify.[28] I believe a noncircular account is achievable and illuminating—but only if we supplement the sentimentalist approach with something different.

The standard further approach is a "rationalist-constraint" view that defines duties by the distinctive role they should play in the agent's reasoning. For some, duties are "constraints" or "trumps" whose action-demanding force requires that they sometimes be respected even at the expense of the greater good (Nozick, 1974, 28–30; Dworkin, 1984; Kagan, 1998, 72). For others, duties "silence" certain considerations that would otherwise speak against the duty-required action (McDowell, 1998, 91–93), or duties "exclude" certain countervailing reasons from consideration, or from being acted on (Raz, 1975, Ch. 2; Scanlon, 1998, 156–157).[29] Each position enables the theorist to claim that what distinguishes the reactive attitudes or demands appropriate to *duty* violation or infringement is that they are accountability responses appropriate to special reasons of the relevantly constraining kind—to trumps, silencers, or excluders. "Mere reasons" by contrast, are plausibly less complex, possessing only weight or importance.

I mention two shortcomings of the rationalist-constraint approach, before examining the challenges of Sections 1–2. First, the proposals from rationalist-constraint theorists seem heterogeneous: trumping and constraining differ from excluding which (on at least some readings) differs from silencing. It would be satisfying to explain the unity within this heterogeneity, especially as different duties fit some of the approaches better than others: your moral duty not to kill one innocent person seems to *outweigh* the countervailing fact that in so doing you could save three other innocent people from similar killing. But does it *silence* that fact or merely *override* or *trump* it? I am uncertain whether saving three innocents from a similar fate is a genuine reason to kill the one—a reason that is *outweighed*, and on which I should not act, but a reason nonetheless. By contrast, your duty not to kill one innocent person more plausibly *silences* the fact that in doing so you would gain an inheritance. The inheritance, while perhaps a genuinely "greater good" to you from the killing, is no reason at all to kill. When we consider unimportant morally justified duties, matters seem different: *prima facie* it is doubtful that my duty not to park on a double yellow line silences anything. It excludes from my consideration reasons such as the inconvenience of having to walk further to the shops, without rendering these countervailing reasons nonexistent or silent. Furthermore, some reasons seem to be exclusionary without qualifying as duties: Raz mentions that a financially expert friend's advice might be an exclusionary reason for me to invest in certain ways, but it is no duty (Raz, 1975, 77). What unifies the kinds of trumping, silencing, or excluding that are definitive of duties and not of "mere reasons?"

[28]See Gibbard, 1990, 48.

[29]Compare Wallace's reference to a "dominance model" of obligations—which he does not endorse (2019, 30). A related rationalist-constraint view says that duties are "categorical," where this "means that the requirement holds irrespective of the duty-bearer's prevailing personal goals" (Gardner, 2018, 21–22). But categoricality so described is not unique to duties, and I am unsure it can be pinned down in the right way. "Mere reasons" apply independently of their bearer's goals: whether I want to or not, I have aesthetic reasons to paint my gray house and etiquette-based reasons to use a fork in my left and a knife in my right hand.

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Secondly, some genuine duties seem too trivial to have a trumping, silencing, or exclusionary character. Consider a very unimportant conditional promise: I promise "to give you my spare blank sheet of paper unless doing so carries any direct cost, opportunity cost, or inconvenience for me or others." This is a genuine promise that creates a genuine duty. But it demands only a trivial action, and the slightest inconvenience is allowed to work as a countervailing reason against fulfillment. The promise has still created a genuine duty, but what reasons does this duty exclude, silence, or outweigh for me as the promisor?

Where have we got to? I have said that there is truth in the sentimentalist-accountability view that duties distinctively trigger reactive attitudes and demandability, but that we need to supplement this approach to avoid circularity. A rationalist-constraint supplement adds that duties are distinctively trumping, silencing or exclusionary, but we need more to explain the unity underlying the different ways that duties constrain, to explain why some "exclusionariness" (as in reasons to follow my financially expert friend's advice) is not constitutive of duties, and to explain how very trivial duties constrain (where even important nonduty "mere reasons" do not). Such a further account should also answer Section 1's questions by explaining why constraints of the relevant sort are potentially enforceable and directed, while nonduty "mere reasons" are not, and Section 2's question by explaining why relevant constraints are creatable through reflexive willing, while it is less clear whether "mere reasons" are.

The rationalist-constraint approach as sketched so far does not answer these questions: it is unclear why having a trumping or exclusionary character should be necessary for a reason to be enforceable, directed, or reflexively creatable. To get this clear, we need more. In particular, we should look not just at how my duties constrain me, but also at how *my* duties constrain *others'* actions in relation to me. In the literature, the sentimentalist-accountability approach is relational, focusing on how duty violation by me justifies attitudes and actions in others: I suggest that for a full account of duties we need a similarly *relational* rationalist-constraint approach.[30]

4. A New Millian Account: Duties as Will-Silencing Reasons

My proposal is that a duty to ϕ is a reason for the agent to ϕ that silences the significance for others that would normally attach to that agent's will-not-to-ϕ.[31]

> **Duties as Will-Silencing Reasons:** an agent A is subject to a *duty* to ϕ if and only if A has a reason to ϕ whose nature makes it the case that *A's contrary will (i.e. A's will-not-to-ϕ)* in itself constitutes no reason for some other(s) not to make A ϕ.

This is a relational rationalist-constraint analysis of duties. It makes the distinction between duties to ϕ and nonduty "mere reasons" to ϕ depend on precisely how the agent's *decision about ϕ-ing* is others' business. It says that A's duty to ϕ is a reason for A to ϕ whose nature silences for (some) others the weight they should normally attach to respecting A's will as such. In particular, the idea is that when A has a "mere reason" to ϕ, A's decision not to ϕ deserves some respect from others simply as an expression of A's will, giving others *pro tanto* reason to back off and allow A to ϕ. By contrast if A has a *duty* to ϕ then this is a reason for A to ϕ whose nature silences what would

[30]Kieswetter (2026) offers a relational rationalist-constraint approach different from mine. It accounts only for *all-things-considered moral* duties, and it says that to have such a duty to ϕ is to have a decisive reason to ϕ that also gives others sufficient reason to expect the agent to ϕ. To make this plausible, Kieswetter develops a "prescriptive" conception of "'expect," a technicality that brings a whiff of circularity to the analysis; I believe my account of duties in the next section can help Kieswetter neutralize that whiff, but that is a task for a separate paper.

[31]I also think a duty to ϕ is a reason to ϕ that silences the significance that her will-not-to-ϕ should have *for the agent herself*, but I set that aside for a separate discussion building on earlier nonrelational rationalist-constraint theories; I focus on the relational aspect in this paper, and this already gives us an accurate analysis that is needed to supplement anything nonrelational.

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otherwise be others' reason to respect A's will-not-to-ϕ and back off. This means that when A has a duty to ϕ, the agent's will-not-to-ϕ can permissibly be overridden by (some) others who can thereby "exact" or "enforce" A's ϕ-ing, *if* there are no countervailing reasons against doing so.

The picture is complicated by the fact that there are very often independent countervailing reasons not to make people do their duty. My view is prefigured by Mill, though in its detail his view differs from mine because he fails to clarify that it is only *the agent's duty-contrary will* that is no impediment to "exaction":

> It is a part of the notion of Duty, in every one of its forms, that a person may rightfully be compelled to fulfil it. Duty is a thing which may be *exacted* from a person, as one exacts a debt. […] Reasons of prudence, or the interest of other people, may militate against actually exacting it, but the person himself, it is clearly understood, would not be entitled to complain. (Mill, 1991 [1861], 184, italics in original, quoted in Setiya, 2022, 1123)

This quotation from Mill does not quite get things right, because a person bound by a duty is sometimes justifiably entitled to complain about its exaction simply because the exaction has some harmful effect on that person themselves or on wider values, rather than on others or on the exacting party. In Section 5, we will see cases where values of political equality and romantic love prevent a duty's exaction. We need to qualify Mill's view so that it holds only that the agent bound by a duty necessarily has no entitlement to complain about being made to fulfil it if the cost to the agent and others is *only the overriding of the agent's will.*[32]

I think this is an attractive rationalist-constraint relational basis for the distinction between duties and nonduty "mere reasons." When I am faced with a nonduty "mere reason," my decision to ignore this reason is, qua my will, itself a reason for others not to intervene and to allow me to act, even if my decision is foolish, dangerous, silly, or morally questionable. Consider examples like my neighbor's decision not to paint her gray exterior wall to beautify the street, or my decision not to bring you a cup of tea when you are clearly in need of one. Simply as a choice, as an expression of autonomous will, such a decision deserves respect from others. Or at least this is true insofar as the decision conforms to or contravenes a nonduty "mere reason." By contrast, when I am faced with a duty, my contrary decision or will does not deserve such respect from at least some of those who would otherwise have had to respect it: willing contrary to duty is no reason in itself for some others not to intervene to ensure that I do my duty. There are often further reasons for nonintervention by others, but my duty-contrary will is no such reason, as it would be were I facing only a "mere reason."

This thesis that duties are will-silencing reasons addresses the questions left hanging for rationalist-constraint accounts at the end of Section 3. It provides a unifying feature, in that *all* duties, whether functioning from the duty-bearer's perspective as variously "trumping outweighers," as "silencers" or simply as "exclusionary," necessarily stop the bearer's duty-contrary will from functioning as a reason for (some) others' respect. Across the cases mentioned in Section 3—my duty

[32]My account of duties has been inspired by the idea of "simple making" that Setiya uses in his account of morality and of rights (Setiya, 2022, 2025); he defines being "simply made" to ϕ as: "being made to ϕ by minimal, direct intervention, without negative side-effects. If you like, imagine a form of mind control or magic spell that intervenes in someone's will to make them ϕ without further effects on them or anyone else" (2025, 108). For my purposes, we should take "simple making" as *making someone ϕ where the only negative side-effect (causal or constitutive) is the overriding of the person's will.* Given this definition, my analysis can be restated as the view that a duty to ϕ is a reason to ϕ whose nature makes it the case that the agent's choice-not-to-ϕ is no reason for some other(s) not to "simply make" the agent ϕ. Note that both here and in the definition in the main text, I refer not to the agent's will-not-to-ϕ constituting pro tanto *permission* for ϕ's exaction, but only to that willing constituting *no reason not* to exact ϕ. It is important not to refer to "permission" to avoid a circular analysis. Permission is the absence of duty, so referring to permission would make the analysis say: A's duty to ϕ is *a reason for A to ϕ whose nature makes it the case that A's will-not-to-ϕ in itself gives others no duty not to make A ϕ*. My reasons-first aspirations for the analysis disallow such circularity.

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not to kill you to save three, my duty not to kill you to gain an inheritance, and my duty not to park on a double-yellow line—my contrary will to kill or to park constitutes no reason in itself for others' respect. Of course there are often further reasons for others not to make me keep off the double-yellow line (or indeed for others not to make me refrain from killing), but my mere *will to park on it* is no good reason in itself for anyone to back off and allow me so to park—as it would be if I had only a "mere reason" and not a duty here.

Furthermore, the thesis that duties are will-silencing reasons also explains why some "exclusionary" reasons are not duties: my decision to ignore my financially expert friend's investment advice, despite the exclusionary reason not to do so constituted by the friend's expertise, deserves respect from others as my will—even if there are further will-independent reasons (e.g., having to do with my family's wellbeing) for others not to respect my decision. My advice-contrary will would not deserve such respect qua will if my exclusionary reason were a duty.

Finally, I think that even the most trivial duties satisfy the "Will-Silencing" condition, such as my weak conditional *promise to give you a sheet of paper unless so doing carries any costs.* Were I to decide not to give you the paper despite it being utterly convenient to do so, that decision in itself gives you no reason—no reason of respect for my decision as a decision—not to "simply make" me hand it over, if such a thing were possible with no causal or constitutive side-effects other than the overriding of my will. That is the nature of duties. Of course, there will normally be additional reasons not to intervene; Section 5 below clarifies this.[33]

Have we now reached the point where I address my core questions by showing how this relational rationalist-constraint view explains why duties are potentially enforceable, directed, and creatable through reflexive willing, while nonduty "mere reasons" are not? Not quite. We will get there, but first we need a section on apparent counterexamples, for I am sure readers have doubts.[34]

5. Unenforceable Duties and Liberalism

One concern is that the proposal—"Duties as Will-Silencing Reasons"—cannot accommodate rights to do wrong; another is that it cannot accommodate overridden *pro tanto* duties. Showing how it handles such cases generates a third concern: that it makes duties surprisingly "small" in their practical implications.

Rights to do wrong involve the agent being permitted to act contrary to duty. Following Jørgensen, Setiya mentions as examples the agent's rights to be insufficiently beneficent and the

[33]On "simple making," see note 32 above. My account of duties as will-silencing reasons explains two theses that Setiya develops using his concept of "simple making." First, Setiya claims that an act is morally wrong if "simply preventing" the agent from doing it would not violate their rights—where "simple" prevention involves no costs beyond the overriding of the agent's will (2022). Compare Tadros's similar claim that "[a]n act is wrong because […] respecting the value that provides a decisive reason against performing the action makes it inappropriate to [allow or respect] the action as an expression of autonomous agency" (Tadros, 2016, p. 43, my amendment bringing it closer to Setiya). Theses like these are true, I think, but not because of the nature of morality; they are true rather because morally wrong acts necessarily violate or infringe moral *duties*, and "Duties as Will-Silencing Reasons" tells us that there is—by dint of the general nature of duties—no reason based in respect for the agent's will for some not to "simply make" the agent do their duty. Setiya's second thesis—a reciprocity relation between rights—turns out similarly to be true because of the nature of duties: B's right against A that A ϕ does indeed, as Setiya claims, entail that A has no right against B not to be "simply made" to ϕ. But this is because claim-rights entail correlative duties, and thus B's right entails A's duty to ϕ, and this duty—so "Duties as Will-Silencing Reasons" tells us—entails that *A's will not to ϕ* gives some no reason not to "simply make" A ϕ.

[34]A doubt not covered in Section 5 concerns cases where *features of the agent* mean their will-not-to-ϕ should not be respected even though they have no duty to ϕ. Imagine a child choosing not to share sweets with her neighbor. Surely sometimes this choice deserves no parental respect, even if the child has only a "mere reason" to share. But this is compatible with "Duties as Will-Silencing Reasons." For the analysis insists that to constitute a duty, it would have to be *the nature or significance of the child's reason to share* (rather than features of the child such as her preautonomous developmental stage) which silenced parental reasons to respect the child's contrary will.

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right to vote for a fascist political party; he adds the right to break a promise; Barry and McTernan mention the unenforceability of duties of romantic fidelity and of gratitude.[35] In each case, the agent is subject to a duty—to give to charity, to vote for the just party, to keep their promise, and to be romantically faithful and grateful—and yet others seem rightly bound to "back off," to allow the agent to act contrary to her duty. Does this not then show that the agent's duty-contrary will in such cases deserves respect, falsifying "Duties as Will-Silencing Reasons?"

No. In each case, all others have powerful reasons (duties indeed) not to prevent the agent from acting contrary to her duty, but these reasons to "back off" *do not spring from or constitute respect for the agent's will qua will*; instead, they have independent grounds. For example, the fascist voter's will to vote fascistically—to vote contrary to their duties of justice—does not in itself qua will constitute any reason for others' respect. It is rather that values of political equality and democratic fairness give others reason to respect the fascist voter's duty-contrary will. If it were possible to "simply make" the fascist voter vote for a more just party—that is, to make them vote nonfascistically without any side-effects on other values such as political equality or democratic fairness or other interests—then this would be permitted.[36] The trouble is that such "simple making" is not an option, for any enforcement of a nonfascist vote, even through magical overriding of the voter's will, would entail illegitimate unequal political recognition for the relevant voter. Drawing on remarks by Setiya (2022, 1128), we can make the same point about compelling a wealthy person to engage in charitable beneficence: insofar as there are good reasons against compelling such charity, they do not spring from *respect for the uncharitable will* of the wealthy person, but rather from wider considerations about the social value of respect for legal property rights—considerations that rule out the possibility of side-effect-free compulsion of such charity.

In some cases, the impossibility is deeper: what the agent has a duty to do simply cannot be done other than through an autonomous will. Magically making a lover behave faithfully by overriding their will would not get us true romantic love with autonomous commitment to the loved one—instead, it would deliver a simulacrum. The same is true of gratitude. So, making the agent fulfil duties of romantic fidelity or gratitude when they choose not to is deeply impossible: even magically overriding the agent's will fails to deliver what the duty requires in these cases, not because it generates unavoidable costs on other values (as in the earlier cases above), but because the required action can only be performed through an autonomous will.[37]

These reflections support "Duties as Will-Silencing Reasons": in each apparent problem case, the agent's *duty-contrary will* is not itself a reason against making them fulfil their duty; instead, *other reasons* tell against this. Even in the romantic fidelity case, it is not the agent's contrary will qua will that gives others reason not to make the agent behave faithfully—it is, rather, the nature of romantic love that entails that it is impossible to "make" anyone engage in it. In each of the cases listed, the agent really does have a right to do wrong, but one springing from factors other than simple respect for her will qua "wrong will."[38]

A similar response should be made about overridden *pro tanto* duties, and we can be brief here. When I infringe my duty to meet you as promised, in order to rescue someone in dire need instead, it is not *my decision not to fulfil my promise* that gives you and others reason to "back off" and let me perform the rescue: it is, rather, the value of the rescue that gives you and others such reason. Even overridden *pro tanto* duties stop the agent's will as such from deserving respect: it is

[35]Jorgensen Bolinger, 2017, 44; Setiya, 2022, 1127; Barry & McTernan, 2022.

[36]For "simple making," see n. 32 above.

[37]Barry & McTernan, 2022 note that there is nonetheless "something good in complying with your duties of fidelity to your spouse, even if you are forced to do so" (239); whether and how far this "something good" constitutes a reason for making you comply surely varies depending on the case.

[38]Is my analysis of duties inconsistent with *autonomy-based* defenses of the right to do wrong? There might be twisty ways to save such approaches consistently with my analysis, but for independent argument against them see Jorgensen Bolinger, 2017.

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the duty-overriding factors that ask others to respect the agent's will in such cases, not the bare fact of the agent's willing.

A doubtful reader might worry that this reveals the analysis of duties to turn on a "small," overly specific feature: whether the agent's will in itself qua will generates reasons for some others to respect it or not. Making duties "small" is, of course, a price one should expect to pay in developing an account that can encompass trivial promissory and institutional duties. Nonetheless, it is worth highlighting that the will-focused kind of Millian exactability that I have isolated is hardly unimportant. It is at the heart of liberalism and hence of contemporary morality and law to think that an agent's will normally deserves some respect simply qua will, independently of an assessment of the quality of what is willed. If duties mark the point where we depart from this liberal assumption —the point at which the agent's reasons to ϕ are of such a character that they make her choice not to ϕ deserve *no respect qua choice* from at least some other(s)—then duties mark a highly significant feature in normative topology, even if the examples in this section show that it is not always a feature that makes much difference.

In the next section, I return to our initial puzzles and explain the close link between this "will-silencing" feature of duties and enforceability, directedness, and reflexive creatability-at-will.

6. Duties' Enforceability, Directedness, and Creatability

6a. Enforceability

Recall from Section 3 that there is a loose sense in which both duties and nonduty "mere reasons" are enforceable: you can permissibly request an explanation from me for why I am not acting on my nonduty reasons, just as you can demand my fulfilment of my duties, and you can permissibly feel resentment-type irritation at my failure to act on nonduty reasons. But we also noted in Section 1 that there is a stronger notion of enforceability that applies only to some (but not all) of our duties and not to any of our nonduty reasons: the police can permissibly march me to trial and then to prison if I threaten to violate my duties not to assault you, forcibly overriding my will in a way that never has a place in relation to my nonduty "mere reasons." We have now—in Sections 4–5 above—isolated a further form of enforceability, one that is distinctive of all and only duties, and not nonduty reasons: when I have a duty to ϕ my *will not to ϕ* is no reason for some other(s) not to make me ϕ; by contrast it would be such a reason if I were subject to a nonduty "mere reason" to ϕ. Of course, often there will be further factors telling against making me ϕ when I choose not to, as outlined in Section 5: making me ϕ might violate political equality, or prevent me from achieving greater goods. My having a duty to ϕ thus does not entail that anyone can enforce my ϕ-ing in the "police marching me to trial" sense. But it does entail that all duties are exactable in the precise sense that the bearer's contrary will is in itself no impediment to their exaction by at least one other. This makes a difference even in cases where further reasons prevent a duty's enforcement.

First, it affects what attitudes one has reason for. If I am in a traditional romantic relationship and my lover is unfaithful to me, I cannot "make" them faithful for the reasons seen in the last section. But their unfaithful will deserves qua will no respect from me: their unfaithful choice should qua choice be "nothing to me" in my determining the appropriate response to their infidelity. By contrast, in a different sort of relationship it might be that my lover had only a nonduty "mere reason" to stick by me in the relevant ways, and if we really are knowingly and fairly in such a relationship, then my lover's choice to act against this "mere reason" deserves some respect in my thinking: respect as "their mistake to make."

A somewhat similar point applies to attitudes toward overridden *pro tanto* duties: if I am the recipient of a justifiably overridden promise, its *exactability were it not overridden* affects what

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attitudes I should hold toward the agent, sometimes justifying hopes for acknowledgement and partial or quasi-apology.[39]

Second, duties' exactability makes them demandable in a distinctive way. The possibility of your "simply making" me do my duty transforms your request that I do it into a demand, by backing that request with force (I follow Skorupski's view of demands as requests backed—in some way—by force).[40] I think this is true even of duties protected by a "right to do wrong." The fact that the agent's duty-contrary will is silenced as a source of reason—for example, the fact that my lover's unfaithful choice deserves no respect from me as their choice—confers a distinctive flavor on requests to fulfil them. These are not just requests but demands, precisely because they assume that no rational weight is conferred by the agent's contrary will. Of course, demanding fulfilment of overridden *pro tanto* duties is unjustified because of the reasons doing the overriding, but demanding fulfilment of nonoverridden duties protected by a "right to do wrong" is often justified: it is genuine *demanding rather than requesting* because of the way the duties make the duty-bearer's contrary will undeserving of respect.

6b. Directedness

One might think that if duties are exactable and demandable in the manner outlined, then when a duty is *owed to* someone, it is owed to whoever has the status to exact or demand it: whoever is given no reason to "back off" by the duty-bearer's contrary will qua will. But this would open problems familiar from the Will Theory of rights by making it impossible for duties to be owed to babies, animals, or others unable to "exact" the duty-bearer's fulfilment of her duty. It would also create new problems, leaving the theorist saddled with the view that, for example, your duty not to murder me is owed not just to me but rather to the many who can justifiably demand that you not murder me. And it would leave no space for undirected duties.

Coupling "Duties as Will-Silencing Reasons" with a version of the Interest Theory of directedness gives a better account, at least of uncreatedly or naturally directed duties. On this view, A's duty to ϕ is naturally owed to B if and only if *B's good* plays a major role in making it the case that A has a "will-silencing" reason-to-ϕ, where this means a reason-to-ϕ whose nature is such that A's choice-not-to-ϕ constitutes no reason in itself for some other(s) C not to make A ϕ (as A's choice usually would).[41] The relevant other(s) C might include B, but in some cases—for example, if B is a baby or a nonhuman animal—they will not. And in other cases, C might include B and many further parties too—as in the case of duties not to murder, which are "exactable" by any member of the moral community but are owed specifically to the potential victim.

This is a relational, reasons-first account of those duties that are naturally or uncreatedly owed to someone. It identifies a distinctive normative relationship that we should be unsurprised to discover is picked out via its own concept (i.e., that of a "direction"): the relationship that obtains when someone's good is sufficiently important to prevent another's will-to-act-contrary-to-that-good from deserving the usual respect owed to the will in itself. This is distinct from "mere reasons" serving or being grounded in someone's good, and makes uncreated directedness a property that only duties can have.[42]

[39]Developing this thought can, I think, answer sentimentalism's problem with *pro tanto* duties, as posed by de Kenessey. See n. 26 above.

[40]"[A] permissible demand is a request that it is morally permissible to enforce […] To demand is to imply that enforcement would, if necessary be permissible; that given that it's been requested, it is something the other person has no moral option but to do" (Skorupski, 2010, 310).

[41]For accounts of the concepts "naturally" and "major role" here, see Cruft, 2019, 7–8 and 118–135.

[42]What about the *created* directionality generated intentionally by promising or law-making, or indeed unintentionally through the emergence of conventions? I argue elsewhere that the general phenomenon of directedness is constituted by norms of first-/second-personal address that are only naturally (uncreatedly) generated when a duty is grounded primarily by someone's good, but which can also be created at will in appropriate circumstances by legislators and promisors (Cruft 2019). Note that if only duties - not "mere reasons" - can be reflexively created at will, this would seem to be one explanation for why created directedness attaches only to duties and not nonduty reasons.

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6c. Reflexive creatability

The seventh feature in Sections 1 and 2 is controversial: can we only reflexively create-at-will duties and not "mere reasons?" The examples in Section 2 seem—uncertainly—to support this, but why? My account of "Duties as Will-Silencing Reasons" can explain this, when coupled with an independently attractive thesis about reflexive reason-creation.

Recall that reflexive reason-creation involves willing "that some consideration be a reason, where that willing is that in virtue of which the consideration *is* a reason" (Chang, 2020, 292). I suggest that so conceived, reflexively created reasons are an extension of and thereby constitute their creators' will—I will call this Principle R:

> **Principle R: reflexively created reasons constitute their creators' will**
> Reasons created by the reflexive exercise of a normative power extend and constitute the will of the authorities who create them. More precisely, when A and B reflexively create a new reason for C to ϕ (through promising, legislation, command, accepted invitation etc.), this reason-for-C-to-ϕ constitutes *A's and B's wills*, and C's will over ϕ therefore has a subordinate status to that of A's and B's; in some respects C's will has the status of a nonagential instrument or tool used by A and B to ϕ. Or at least it does if A and B have legitimate authority over C and hence have exercised a genuine normative power.

This fits with how we think about normative powers: commands express the commander's will, democratic legislation is the will of the people, and promising is an act of will that commits my future will. Those subject to the power (i.e., C) through acting on the new reason, express their respect for the authoritative will of the power-exercisers (A and B). Of course, there are going to be important moral limits to the subordinacy of C's will, and I am assuming that very often—perhaps in every case other than democratic legislation—C is themselves either A or B or both.[43] But the core thought is that every reflexive reason-creating act effectively says that someone is to be the tool of the authoritative reason-creators, their instrument in carrying out their will.[44]

If the thesis above is correct, then coupled with "Duties as Will-Silencing Reasons," we get a satisfying explanation for why nonduty "mere reasons" cannot be created at will through reflexive exercise of powers. The explanation starts with the tenet that when an agent is responding to nonduty "mere reasons," the agent's will deserves respect even when it is silly, ill-advised, or in other respects contrary to what "mere reason" tells them to do. In Section 5, I called this a "liberal" premise. It is a central pillar in the broad idea of respect for persons, for human dignity, and for autonomy. The idea is that whether someone chooses to act in conformity with or instead contrary to nonduty reason, their will or choice is itself a (defeasible) reason for others to "back off," not to hinder them in pursuing their chosen course of action.[45] Now let us argue *reductio ad absurdum:* Suppose A's and B's reflexive act of creation created only a "mere reason" for C to ϕ. Others would then have reason to "back off" if C chose not to ϕ, reason generated simply by C's will. But then C's ϕ-ing would not be a true extension of A's and B's will—C's ϕ-ing would not be simply an instrument or tool within A's and B's will, but would have independent status as an autonomous choice. We would be giving C too much leeway, given C's ϕ-ing's role as A's and B's will. It follows

[43]As before, I prescind from debates about whether reflexive creation can be performed by one person or is always multiperson (e.g., debates about whether promising requires acceptance, etc.). See n. 19 above and main text.

[44]If Principle R is true, then we should adjust Chang's conception of the content of *reflexive* reason-creation: it is not that we will "that some consideration be a reason," as if willing that something normative mysteriously come into existence (compare the Humean worries in Anscombe, 1981); rather, in exercising a reflexive normative power fundamentally we will *that someone C do something*, and respect for our authoritative will subordinates C's will.

[45]Indeed, others have not just a reason but a *duty* to back off, so that their will-to-interfere with someone's reason-contrary choice can itself potentially be permissibly interfered with. See note 32 above for why I do not specify it in these terms to avoid circularity.

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that if Principle R is correct, then our analysis of the distinction between nonduty reasons and duties tells us that reflexively created reasons must always be duties. If they were "mere reasons," then they would not properly constitute the power-exerciser's will.

For example, if it was the will of the people to fund public service broadcasting through a BBC-style TV license, and yet C willed to evade the license fee, then if others were to take C's license-evading will as itself qua will a reason to "back off" they would not be treating C simply as an instrument of the people's will. Of course, there might be many good further reasons to "back off," and in our unjust world, these speak strongly against prosecuting most of those who evade the BBC license fee. But here we are imagining a just world and asking whether C's contrary will deserves respect *simply as C's will.* If it is justifiably subordinate, an instrument of the people's will, then it does not. And if it does not, then the reason created by democratic processes that enact the people's will for C to pay the license fee must be a duty rather than a "mere reason," given our analysis (i.e., given "Duties as Will-Silencing Reasons").

A doubter might note that when you choose to do something (and it is not contrary to duty), your choice gives others reason to "back off" not only to allow you to do that thing but also to allow you *not* to do it if you change your mind. Shouldn't this imply that C's will not pay the license fee gives others reason to "back off" similarly? No. If *the people*—who we are assuming are the authoritative will reflexively exercising a power in this example—choose to change the license fee system, or choose that C need not pay, even for poor reasons or no reason, then so long as this is not contrary to duty, others should indeed "back off" and respect *the people's* will. But when C is subject to the people's legitimate authoritative power regarding the license fee, then the respectful "backing off" owed to the will is owed to *the people's will*, not to C's.

7. Conclusion

What are duties, and how are they distinct from nonduty "mere reasons?" I have argued that both the sentimentalist-accountability view and the rationalist-constraint view are correct but limited: duties trigger distinctive relational reactive attitudes and demands from others that "mere reasons" do not, and most duties also distinctively constrain their bearers in one or other of several ways (trumping, silencing, and excluding) that "mere reasons" do not. I have added to this familiar picture the thesis that all duties—even weak ones that do little to constrain their bearers—involve a relational kind of "exactability" by others that all "mere reasons" lack. While the agent's will to act contrary to a nonduty "mere reason" to ϕ deserves respect from others simply as the agent's will, the agent's will to act contrary to a duty to ϕ does not. Duties silence the significance that would, in the "mere reason" case, attach to the agent's contrary will. In Section 6, I have shown how this gives all duties a distinctive kind of enforceability and demandability that nonduty reasons lack, how it enables duties to be directed in a way that nonduty reasons cannot, and—if I am right about Principle R—why it is only possible to create duties and not "mere reasons" through promising, commanding, legislating, and the exercise of related normative powers.

I end by noting three gaps and an implication. First, my account says that when A has a duty to ϕ *at least one other person* must have no reason to respect A's will-not-to-ϕ. What determines who this "other" is who can "simply make" A ϕ? We saw in Section 6b that it need not be the person to whom the duty to ϕ is owed, and we saw that in many cases—for example, duties not to murder—the relevant "other" is everyone. There is a lot more to say about this.[46]

[46]Some might take the identification of the person able to "make" the agent ϕ as determinative of whether the duty is moral or prudential. Perhaps prudential duties—unlike moral ones—entail only that *the agent herself* owes no respect to her own duty-contrary will. But I am uncertain whether this can be used to draw the relevant distinction. Willing-contrary-to-*prudential*-duty might also constitute no reason for respect from the agent's loved ones: when I decide not to take out a pension plan, my loved ones could, I venture, permissibly "simply make" me do so (if this were possible), and could do this for my sake. Or is this because it is a *moral* duty?

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Second, we saw at the start that duties come in many types: moral, legal, prudential, and game-based. If we can only reflexively create *duties* and not nonduty "mere reasons," then we should expect those normative realms that are wholly reflexively created—for example, positive law and some games—primarily to involve duties and their negation, permissions. Any nonduty "mere reasons" in such realms must be somehow derivative from duties, for in a sense the entirety of such realms consists of extensions of the wills of the authoritative realm-creators. I think this is correct, but cannot defend it here: in support, we might consider how positive law presents itself to ordinary citizens primarily in terms of duties and permissions, and that any nonduty reasons are derivative from these fundamentals.

Third, Principle R applies only to the reflexive *creation* of duties, and not to their *annulment*, *cancellation*, or *waiver* through consent; but it seems likely to me that we can only annul, cancel, or waive duties, not nonduty reasons. We need a further explanation of this, and of the precise scope of Principle R.

Finally, an important implication. My account makes duties a particular type of reason, characterized by the relation that reason has to others' reasons to respect the agent's will qua will. This is a "reasons-first" account of duties. It can be plugged into analyses that say that directed duties or rights are, in turn, duties with a particular characteristic.[47] For an account of natural (uncreated) directed duties, I have already developed this at Section 6b:

> **Reasons-first Analysis of Natural Directed Duties**
> A naturally owes B a duty to ϕ iff B's good plays a major role in making it the case that A has a reason-to-ϕ whose nature is such that A's will-not-to-ϕ does not deserve from someone C the respect (or "backing off" or non-hindrance) that is normally owed to the will qua will.

The relevant C might be B or someone else or all of us—and what determines this is the first of my gaps listed above.

There is much power in such a relational, reasons-first analysis. It helps us approach questions about the universality or parochiality of concepts like rights, duties, and reasons. If my analysis is correct, the duty/reason distinction turns on the respect-worthiness or unworthiness of the reason-facing agent's *will qua will*, while the idea of duties naturally owed to others turns also on the importance of the relevant others' *good* in making choices-contrary-to-such-good unworthy of respect. Must all human societies use these concepts and thereby give this significance both to people's good and to their will?[48]

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[47]For rejection of this "duties-plus" approach to directedness and to rights, see Gilbert, 2018, Pt I. For an approach closer to mine, see Kieswetter, 2026 (and my criticisms at n. 30 above). For my own analyses of rights and (separately) of directedness in terms of duties, see Cruft, 2019, 44–86.

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