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MAKING ROOM FOR OPTIONS: MORAL REASONS, IMPERFECT DUTIES, AND CHOICE*

By Patricia Greenspan

I. Introduction

The notion of an imperfect obligation or duty, which contemporary moral philosophy takes from Kantian ethics, affords a way of mitigating morality's demands while recognizing moral obligation as "binding" or inescapable, in Kant's terms: something an agent cannot get out of just by appealing to ends or priorities of her own. A perfect duty, as Kant puts it, allows no exception in the interest of inclination.[1] It tells us precisely what we must do, with no option of putting it off until some other occasion. By contrast, an imperfect duty leaves open crucial features of the required act. Understood in this way, as duties of indeterminate content, imperfect duties such as the charitable duty to aid those in need leave leeway for personal choice. We get to choose whom to aid and when and how much. We may be obligated to meet a certain threshold, but we will be exceeding what is required of us if we go beyond that. Imperfect duties therefore allow us authority to shape our own lives, balancing concern for others with our own particular projects and concerns. But imperfect duties interest me, in the first instance, in connection with practical reasons.

The term "practical" here just means "having to do with action." Reasons are understood as facts, not as mental states, and practical reasons are facts that count for or against action, in contrast to theoretical reasons, which concern belief. Similarly, "practical rationality" entails action in accordance with one's overall structure of practical reasons, as distinct from believing what one has reason to believe. The term "practical rationality" can be used for a property of agents, in which case it implies awareness of the relevant reasons, but it also sometimes refers to a system of norms for assessing action in light of reasons, analogous to morality but also including logical and instrumental considerations. On this latter

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[1] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), ed. Thomas E. Hill, Jr., trans. Arnulf Zweig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. p. 222n. (Akademie edition, vol. 4: 421n.). Below I note some departures from Kant's account, along with other interpretations of imperfect obligation.

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use, practical rationality requires, say, taking the means that are actually necessary to one's ends, not just the means one thinks are necessary.

Since my concern in this essay is solely with practical reasons and rationality, I often omit the term "practical," taking it to be understood. I treat moral reasons as a subtype of practical reasons, which also include whatever reasons are entailed by pursuit of self-interest or by our particular personal projects or concerns. But the precise import of many of my central terms here—including "reasons," "rationality," and for that matter, "morality"—is the subject of ongoing philosophical debate, so these definitions should be taken merely as rough guides to my meaning in what follows.

Now, on what I take to be the common conception of practical reasons, implicit in much of the literature, they are essentially prima facie requirements of action, possibly overridden or undermined by opposing reasons, but otherwise constraining rational choice.[2] On this account, then, it would be irrational to take some reason as one's strongest and yet make no attempt to act on it. If I have a reason to aid a certain famine victim, say, then I am required to aid him, unless I have just as weighty reasons to aid other victims instead or to do something else with the same resources. A moral reason would yield a binding obligation, on this account, just insofar as it outweighs competitors.

However, in a case where there happens to be some best or most effective way of fulfilling an imperfect obligation, and our reason for a certain option counts as our strongest reason, what happens to our leeway for choice? I mean to be working from objective notions of obligation, and reasons, and of morality and rationality as systems of norms, according to which their content is independent of what the agent knows or is in a position to know. But in that case, when we supplement moral with instrumental reasons, or morality with rationality, there might seem to be particular victims we are required to aid, whether or not we can tell who they are. For surely we have a moral reason to aid any given victim, not just victims generally. So if we can best satisfy our imperfect obligation by aiding certain victims, then we really are required to aid them, in particular, after all.

I have a different interpretation of practical reasons that will let us retain our options for discharging an imperfect obligation, with obligation understood in terms of reasons, and without denying that we have a moral reason to aid each of the needy. I call this the "critical" conception

[2] This view emerges in Charles Larmore, "Reflection and Morality," elsewhere in this volume. Cf. also the "motivation requirement" put forth as a widely accepted starting-point in R. Jay Wallace, "Three Conceptions of Rational Agency," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 2, no. 3 (1999): 217–42, at pp. 217–18; and the account of a similar view as granted by all parties to the current debate about reasons, in Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut, "Introduction," in Cullity and Gaut, eds., *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 1–27, at p. 3.

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of practical reasons, or the normative function of practical reasons, since it understands a reason as normative just insofar as the reason offers or answers criticism of some act or other practical option.[3] An obligation or other practical requirement has to be based on criticism of alternatives to the required act, so that mere reasons in favor of action will not be enough to support a requirement, contrary to the common conception.

Elsewhere, in a complex argument whose key points will be explained more fully below (as they apply to imperfect obligation), I maintain that we are rationality permitted to *discount* reasons in many everyday cases: to set them aside, or ignore them, as influences on our choice.[4] We can discount their underlying criticism, for instance, by waiving our objections to a certain action, as when we set priorities for ourselves that emphasize some of our concerns over others. But the reasons that underlie moral obligations are binding on us insofar as they rest on criticism from the standpoints of other persons, which we lack the authority to discount unilaterally.

However, in cases of imperfect obligation, it might look as though we are entitled to discount certain moral reasons: those based on criticism from potential beneficiaries we choose to pass over. I want to argue that there is a better way of describing such cases, in terms of the critical conception, a way that distinguishes our specific moral reasons from the indeterminate critical reason underlying our imperfect obligation. I may have a reason to aid a particular famine victim, say, but if I have done or am going to do enough for others, I am not required to aid that victim. Even if my reason to aid him is stronger than any reasons I have for other ways of satisfying my obligation, but assuming that it does not count *against* those alternatives, my reason does not ground a practical requirement.

The general project from which this essay is drawn is an attempt to defend a conception of practical reasons that I think is better suited than the common conception to deontological morality: the approach to morality that takes "ought" and related notions of right (such as "duty" and "obligation") as basic moral concepts, rather than explaining them solely in terms of the promotion of good consequences or the expression of good

[3] Note that "critical," as I use the term, implies no reference to Kant's *Critiques;* cf. the notion of a "critical conception of practical reason," in Onora O'Neill, "Vindicating Reason," in Paul Guyer, ed., *A Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). My plural term "practical reasons" refers to particular considerations for or against action, whereas "practical reason" in the singular, without the indefinite article, refers to a faculty of the mind or a system of norms (sometimes capitalized as "Reason").

[4] See my "Practical Reasons and Moral 'Ought'," in Russ Schafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics,* vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 172–94. "Discounting" is sometimes used more broadly, to cover any reduction in the weight assigned to a reason, on the model of the temporal "discount rate" for value, as in George Ainslie, *Picoeconomics: The Strategic Interaction of Successive Motivational States within the Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). As I use the term, discounting might be seen as the limiting case of this broader notion, with weight reduced to zero.

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character ("virtue"). If the fact that something is good gives us a reason for doing what is needed to attain it, the common conception of practical reasons as prima facie requirements would seem to saddle us with a requirement to attain the maximum good. What I want to do in this essay is to show how the critical conception of practical reasons instead can serve to set limits on how much can be required of a particular moral agent.

Nonetheless, I understand the limits on moral obligation to be compatible with the assumption of some of our duties by the state, even though this effectively takes back some of the leeway for choice that morality grants us. In cases of global need such as famine relief, large-scale (and coercive) coordination may sometimes be needed to respond adequately. I will argue later (in Sections V and VI) that this should not be conflated with enforcing fulfillment of our individual obligations, though it does carry a cost in moral freedom. It removes some of the indeterminacy of our imperfect moral duty, at least to the extent of assigning particular contributions to individuals and pinning down the recipients of aid (even if not the recipients of any individual's contribution). For the moment, though, I want to ask how we can make sense of imperfect obligations in the first place in terms of practical reasons.

II. Pinpointing the Problem

Let me first backtrack a bit to bring out more fully the motivation for questioning the reasons behind imperfect obligations such as the duty to give aid. In general, explaining obligation in terms of practical reasons seems promising as a way of demystifying deontological ethics, the ethics of moral duty. It replaces talk of properties on the order of "intrinsic wrongness" with a notion that is clearly essential to our everyday understanding of action. Reasons of the sort that yield moral obligations can then be distinguished as "binding" by denying an agent the authority to set them aside. The distinctiveness of these reasons will thereby be explained not by appeal to metaphysics, but just by appeal to structural features of practical reasoning.

However, the notion of imperfect obligation is important to a commonsense deontological approach precisely as a limitation on morality's binding demands. We need only contribute a reasonable amount of aid to the needy, say—at some vaguely specified level, possibly rather high, but still leaving us leeway to choose when and to whom and how much we contribute, and hence how much we have left over to devote to the pursuit of our optional ends. This is in contrast to extreme versions of utilitarianism—and also to Kant's view—which would have us contribute as much as we can, compatibly with fulfilling other, equally serious prac-

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tical demands.[5] We seem to have a moral reason, though, to aid any individual who needs aid. In a case where aiding a particular individual happens to be our most effective way of aiding the needy, if our reason to aid that person cannot just be set aside, what happens to our leeway for choice? Though we may not know or be able to determine whom we have most reason to aid, on an objective notion of reasons there may still be such a person—someone starving in a remote area, or perhaps a particular homeless person we pass on the street every day. (More likely, it is a group of people, but let me keep things simple.) Assuming that the suffering we would be alleviating if we acted on the reason is more significant than whatever we would be giving up by doing so, and assuming that our reason to aid that particular person counts as our strongest reason, we would seem to be required to aid him in particular. But this would defeat what I take to be the point of our imperfect obligation. Adding instrumental requirements to moral obligation seems to narrow our options here to one.

Of course, we can grant that it is not morality alone, but only morality in combination with instrumental rationality, that seems to require acting on our strongest moral reason in such cases. Morally speaking, we have further permissible options for fulfilling an imperfect obligation, so we would not be blameworthy for declining to take our most effective option, even when it is clear to us which option that is. But I take it that our common-sense view goes beyond this, to allow us multiple options for discharging our imperfect duties that count as morally *and* rationally permissible. We are not required, simpliciter, to give everything we can to famine relief (or whatever should turn out to be the most pressing charitable concern). Nor are we required to aid some particularly needy famine victim, or the one we can aid most effectively.

Before suggesting a way to get what we want here, let me pause briefly for some further terminological clarifications. There are different ways of interpreting imperfect obligation, some of which come up in my discussion later in this essay, but it should already be apparent that I am working from an interpretation in terms of indeterminate specification. I might add, though, that what is left to the agent's choice is whether or not to satisfy the obligation in a given instance—on a certain occasion, toward a certain person, to a certain degree—not just whether she should satisfy it in a certain way. After all, we can distinguish different ways of satisfying virtually any positive obligation: a borrowed book can be returned in

[5] For utilitarian arguments requiring maximal contribution to famine relief, see esp. Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (1972): 229–43; and Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Kant's insistence on doing as much as we can surfaces, e.g., in his application of the formula of humanity to the duty to aid those in need (see Kant, *Groundwork,* 231 [4: 430]). The point of imperfect duties, on his account, is apparently just to eliminate the possibility of conflicting obligations.

person or in the mail, say, but that does not make the duty to return it imperfect.[6] We might even think of a prohibition as satisfied in different ways to the extent that different acts might be substituted for the one that is forbidden: firing a gun into the air versus merely twiddling one's thumbs instead of shooting someone, for instance. Though there would be no problem if my suggestions in this essay extended beyond imperfect duties, I think we can draw at least a fuzzy line cordoning them off from duties that leave us only morally insignificant choices.

Note, too, that imperfection in the relevant sense does not amount to a *defect* in an obligation. For another use of the term "imperfect" just to mean "unfinished," consider its use in grammar: "past imperfect" and so forth. The project of shaping our moral lives is ongoing, and the unfinished aspect of imperfect obligation helps to make it so.

I should also mention a logical or semantical feature of the term "obligation" that is obscured by its use to supply the missing noun form for "ought." Unlike "ought," "obligation" does not appear to be closed under logical or causal consequence: strictly speaking, that is, we do not have an *obligation* to do everything required to fulfill our moral obligations, even if we ought to, and even if we have a moral reason to do so that amounts to our strongest reason in a certain case. It is not quite right to say, for instance, that someone who promised to return a book has an obligation specifically to mail it, even when mailing it happens to be the only way of returning it. "Obligation" seems to be tied fairly closely to the description under which an act is required, and mailing was not part of the deal.

Instead, we may say that the agent here has an obligation that *requires* her to mail the book back to its owner. I also follow standard practice in using "obligation" interchangeably with "duty," though there may be some differences here as well. But let us speak of the result of combining rationality with morality to derive something more specific as a *requirement,* rather than an obligation or a duty. We may then think of "binding" force as applying primarily to the moral reasons underlying such requirements.

In a nutshell, then, the question that imperfect obligation poses is how we can see some moral reasons as nonbinding, or optional, even when they outweigh all competing reasons. I think the solution depends on challenging the common conception of practical reasons as themselves prima facie requirements. The usual assumption seems to be that, if I have a reason to do *A,* then I am required to, unless I have at least as strong a reason for doing something else instead. Indeed, that may be part of what makes reasons seem an appropriate basis for moral obligation, as a species of requirement. Along with some other recent authors, though, I

[6] Cf. Roderick M. Chisholm, "Supererogation and Offense: A Conceptual Scheme for Ethics," *Ratio* 5, no. 1 (1963): 1–14.

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advocate loosening the tie between reasons and requirement, in the first instance to allow for optional nonmoral reasons in everyday cases.[7] But my approach depends on an overall conception of practical reasons in terms of criticism that it can sometimes be rational to discount, or set aside. To allow for imperfect moral obligations, I need to make sense of exceptions to the ban on discounting moral reasons.

III. Reconceiving Reasons

What makes a fact a reason, on the approach I propose, is a relation to criticism: reasons either offer or answer criticism of some act or other practical option. The usual approach starts from a relation of *favoring* action, but the critical conception reverses our normal way of talking about reasons by treating negative reasons—reasons counting *against* action, what we might call "critical" reasons—as primary. One might think of this move as similar to the move in Newtonian physics away from the Aristotelian view (and our intuitive view) of the motion of objects as a departure from a state of rest that requires an outside force to explain it, and toward a view that treats motion as the natural state and coming to rest as what needs explanation. As agents, our natural state is activity: we flail about, doing this and that, often with a motive but with no need to cite a reason in the normative sense featured here (a fact that serves to justify what we do) until we encounter an objection. Reasons in favor of our action then become relevant, in response.

Critical reasons, on my account, represent a possible action (or other practical option) as in some way objectionable, subject to criticism. They offer criticism of various things we might do, rather than serving in the first instance to counter reasons in favor of things we might do. On my account, reasons in favor, positive reasons, are understood primarily as responses to other reasons. They serve in the first instance to *answer* potential criticism, by citing some valuable feature of the act in question. So their primary normative role might be said to be defensive. They may play a more important *motivational* role than critical reasons, as enticements toward action, with a commendatory function in cases where they exceed what is needed to answer applicable criticism. But their basic normative function is derivative from that of critical reasons. Critical reasons serve to set up a standard of correctness, ruling out acts that fall short, whereas positive or "favoring" reasons essentially serve to buttress an act against any such attempts to rule it out.

[7] For some other attempts to capture optional reasons, see Joseph Raz, *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 90–117; Jonathan Dancy, "Enticing Reasons," in R. J. Wallace, P. Pettit, S. Scheffler, and M. Smith, eds., *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 91–118; and Joshua Gert, *Brute Rationality: Normativity and Human Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. 19–39 and 62–84.

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This reversal of our ordinary way of thinking about reasons will, of course, seem counterintuitive. Its justification will lie in its results: for present purposes, in the way it lets us retain our options for fulfilling an imperfect obligation. At this point, however, before getting to moral reasons, I want to say more to illustrate the general distinction between positive and negative reasons. My aim here is not to motivate the distinction but instead just to spell it out more clearly, making evident rather than minimizing its clash with intuition.

First, as a simple example of a negative or critical nonmoral reason, consider the reason usually cited against smoking cigarettes, that smoking increases the risk of lung cancer. This fact can be said to offer a criticism of smoking—an entry on the "con" side of the ledger, when we assess the considerations for and against taking up or continuing the habit—even though it is stated in positive grammatical form, as a fact about what smoking does, rather than something it fails to do, such as promoting or protecting good health.

Now, perhaps we would be likely to consider reasons against an acquired habit like smoking only if we were antecedently aware of some reasons in its favor, but on the objective notion of reasons featured here, what matters is not our awareness of a reason but just how it bears on some practical alternative, something we might think of doing, whether or not we are likely to do it. Whether or not anyone has an urge to smoke, reasons against it can, in principle, be entered on the "con" side of the ledger before there is anything on the "pro" side: i.e., a positive reason, in favor of smoking, such as the fact that a particular agent who already has taken up the habit would no longer be distracted by the craving for a cigarette if she smoked one. I have purposely stated this positive reason in negative grammatical form, rather than citing the fact that some agent would get pleasure from smoking, to make it clear that what is in question in calling a reason positive also need not be the form of the statement expressing the reason, but rather its bearing on action.

Of course, a positive reason also can be cited without the need to respond to any criticism (meaning any criticism that has been offered or is likely to be offered), but simply to justify one's choice of a particular option. On my account, however, the point of a positive reason is to defend the choice against *potential* criticism: it is well to have an answer to criticism "in the bank." Consider a case of competing positive reasons, reasons in favor of incompatible options. Among the various blazers in my closet, one may be most flattering, even though several others would be reasonable choices too. Green is my best color, let us suppose, but blue looks good enough. Suppose I have no particular need to look my best, and no other factors tip the balance against either choice: both blazers are in good shape, neither has been worn more frequently, and so forth. Then either choice will be rational, in the sense of "rationally permissible," or "within reason." For, by hypothesis, my reason for choosing the green

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blazer implies no significant criticism of choosing the blue one. Instead, on the present account, it serves in the first instance to defend the choice of green against potential criticism. If no criticism is applicable, it commends but does not require choosing the green blazer.

In cases where we do have a practical requirement, it is likely to be stated in positive grammatical form, though it depends on criticism of alternatives to what is required. In that sense, requirements rest on negative reasons. To avoid confusion, however, I prefer the term "critical reasons" in what follows. Requirements typically also involve positive—or, as I shall now say, "favoring"—reasons, as needed to answer criticism of the required act; but what makes something a requirement rather than a mere recommendation is what it rules out. This point is familiar in connection with moral obligation, which is often explained as applying to acts to which all the alternatives are wrong. If the fact that others need aid, say, gives rise to an obligation to provide them with aid, that fact counts *against* letting them suffer, as well as answering criticism from those with competing claims on our resources: our creditors, our dependents, ourselves.

I have characterized positive or favoring reasons as answering criticism, but they do so in a particular way, by citing valuable features of the act or option in question. There are other ways of answering criticism: by undermining it (for instance, showing that it or some criticism at least as strong also applies to alternative options), or by *discounting* it (setting it aside, or "bracketing" it) as an influence on choice. In the cases on which my defense of optional nonmoral reasons turns, discounting involves appeal to higher-order reasons, reasons ruling out attention to certain first-order considerations—or, to use Joseph Raz's term, "exclusionary" reasons.[8] It is important that discounting in this sense does not involve denying that the first-order considerations count as reasons, or reasons applicable to the agent, though we sometimes talk that way. For instance, T. M. Scanlon cites a higher-order reason for discounting personal considerations in competitive contexts: for not worrying about a friend's hurt feelings if we defeat him in tennis, or for not preferring our friends in assessing fellowship applicants.[9] In such cases, we might well say that friendship is no reason to let the friend win. But if we treat the ban on personal considerations as a higher-order reason, it need not cancel the rational bearing of those considerations on action, but just the assignment to them of any deliberative weight. We would be acting inappropriately, but not irrationally, in these contexts, if we did give special consideration to a friend.

[8] Cf. Joseph Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990)—though Raz's own account of optional reasons in *Engaging Reason* rests, instead, on appeal to the incommensurability of first-order reasons.

[9] See T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 50–55.

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My own preferred examples of discounting involve setting optional priorities for oneself. For instance, I might decide to ignore objections to working long hours in order to focus single-mindedly on work—as a matter of personal decision, presumably because of reasons I have for getting work done, but not necessarily because I consider those reasons more important than the objections to overwork, or weightier in some sense independent of my decision. In deciding what weight to *assign* to my first-order reasons, I essentially *declare* some of them more important to me.

Elsewhere I consider a case of turning down a lure of administrative power as a reason to serve on university committees.[10] To sum up the case very briefly: all I am doing, when I decide to turn down the lure of power in order to focus on research, is setting my own priorities, not legislating for relevantly similar moral agents. Nor must I be legislating for agents with the same priorities, or even very strictly for my future self, to the extent that my priorities may be nonstringent, allowing for occasional deviations. I do acknowledge a reason to pursue power—that it would offer me some benefits (or perhaps count as a benefit in itself)—though it may be a reason I do not need to act on, if my current level of power is adequate. The prospect of greater power—and for that matter, my competing ideal of single-minded intellectual focus—here amounts to a reason that can be discounted *without* a further reason, just because I decide to set it aside. As a purely positive or favoring reason, it does not imply significant criticism of alternatives, so action on it is optional: I can simply turn it down.

My defense of optional nonmoral reasons ultimately rests on this idea, of a favoring reason as a reason that serves to answer criticism without implying significant criticism of alternatives. This represents a departure from maximizing conceptions of rationality. A similar notion has been defended in detail in recent work by Joshua Gert on justifying versus requiring roles (or "strengths") of reasons.[11] Gert's notion of a "purely justificatory" reason captures the kernel of what I have in mind by a purely positive or favoring reason, though my terminology and my explanation in terms of criticism are meant to extend to moral reasons. Gert confines moral reasons to a separate domain, whereas, on my account, "criticism" is meant to cover moral criticism as well as prudential and other forms of criticism. Moreover, besides merely justifying action—defending it as permissible, rationally or otherwise—a favoring reason that does more than answer applicable criticism also serves to recommend action.[12] But I share with Gert the denial that strong enough favoring reasons must yield a practical requirement.

[10] See my "Practical Reasons and Moral 'Ought'."

[11] See Gert, *Brute Rationality*, e.g., p. 137.

[12] It also might be said to confer merit on the act, and thereby on the agent, to accommodate the notion of supererogation on the kind of account offered by Terry Horgan and

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The notion of a purely positive or favoring reason might at first seem to violate the logic of reasons, since any reason could be said to imply a criticism (namely, a criticism of whatever would prevent action on it). However, I count criticism as significant only when it makes out the option in question as itself in some way objectionable. While any reason in favor of action also counts against failing to act, we can treat the negative formulation as trivial where it merely restates information from the "pro" side of the ledger.

Consider again my choice between green and blue blazers. Unless I have some particular reason to look my best, the fact that wearing the blue blazer would keep me from wearing the green one, and hence from wearing my most flattering color, is no real objection to it. As a reason against wearing the blue blazer, the fact that the green one would look better has no serious weight, assuming that the blue one looks good enough. In general, what a favoring reason tells us is that a certain option is permissible (and perhaps even commendable), but not that it is required. We need to apply this notion to moral reasons in order to capture imperfect obligation.

IV. Combining Optionality and Bindingness

Moral reasons of the sort that yield requirements—critical moral reasons—are off-limits to discounting to the extent that they rest on moral criticism issued from personal standpoints other than the agent's. On the critical conception, this is what gives our obligations to others binding force. An agent is in a position to waive only her own criticism, or criticism presupposing her optional ends or evaluative frameworks. But in cases of imperfect duty, we might seem to be entitled to discount criticism from potential beneficiaries whom we decide to pass over.

Insofar as we have moral reasons to benefit particular individuals in such cases, however, I think we should treat them as favoring reasons: nonbinding moral reasons, of a sort that can serve to answer criticism without offering any.[13] Such reasons figure in ascriptions of moral virtue beyond what is required. Similarly, in a case of imperfect duty, aiding a particular individual may be commendable without being required, even if it is favored by one's strongest applicable reason. The reason I have to give some money to a homeless person I pass on the street, say, supplies

Mark Timmons, "Untying a Knot from the Inside Out: Reflections on the 'Paradox' of Supererogation," elsewhere in this volume.

[13] One might think my reason for action in such a case would offer a criticism of failure to act, e.g., that a certain potential aid recipient will suffer unless I aid him. But note that this criticism is not really applicable unless no one else is in a position to alleviate the suffering in question. Strictly, the criticism applies to the surrounding community, or to some collective body including myself, which may indeed be subject to requirements in such cases, as will be evident in my later discussion of political issues.

an answer to criticism I might be subject to if I do give him something (e.g., criticism for my failure to give that money to others, or to use it to further other valuable ends). But I am not subject to *moral* criticism for failing to aid that particular individual, even if aiding him was my best option for aiding the needy, as long as I satisfy the general duty to aid the needy in enough other ways. Thus, I need not appeal to a higher-order reason to justify discounting my reason for aiding him, but can do so simply on the basis of (morally unobjectionable) personal preference.

This is not to say that he cannot object to my failure to aid him, but his complaint would not amount to a moral criticism. I would not need to take it into account unless it undermined some further end I happened to have, such as a desire to avoid his resentment. Insofar as it yields only a nonmoral reason, I could legitimately discount it by appeal to higher-order reasons, such as reasons for disregarding personal pressure in distributing aid.

I take moral criticism to be criticism of the sort that grounds blame, as distinct from simple resentment.[14] Where aiding a particular individual is my best option for discharging my general duty, my failure to aid him might instead be subject to *rational* criticism, for failing to take the best means to my morally required ends. But the force of any objection here still depends on reference to an optional end (namely, the end of satisfying my duty most effectively, which is not morally required). Moreover, a charge of rational imperfection would be analogous to what we might say about my failure in the blazer case to choose the color that looks best on me. I am required only to take *some* effective means to satisfying my obligation, not to take the *most* effective means. Falling short of a more demanding rational ideal would be compatible with rationality in the broad sense presupposed here—"rationally permissible," or "within reason"—unless we smuggle in maximizing assumptions.

What yields a requirement in the case of our imperfect duty to aid would seem to be a reason based on *indeterminate* criticism—criticism of an agent's failure to contribute enough to the needy, leaving occasions, recipients, and amounts of aid unspecified. This reason is supposed to be binding in its own terms, though its terms are loose, so that (among other things) it is not tied to the standpoints of particular beneficiaries. The relevant criticism issues from a more general, but still personal, standpoint: at a minimum, the collective standpoint of the needy. What is important is that this standpoint of criticism is independent of the agent's standpoint, so that she is not in a position to discount a reason based on it.

[14] Cf. the accounts of moral obligation in John Skorupski, "Moral Obligation, Blame, and Self-Governance," and Stephen Darwall, "'But It Would Be Wrong'," both elsewhere in this volume. But I would not make the link to emotional blame or other reactive attitudes an explicit part of the definition of moral obligation, if pinning down the relevant sort of practical criticism can do the job. It is essentially criticism that tends to make one unworthy of others' personal regard, or of relationship with others.

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This is not to say that an agent has to recognize such a reason—has to accept others' criticisms as reason-giving for her—but only that, if she does recognize both the reason and its basis in an independent personal standpoint of criticism, she cannot consistently think she is in a position to discount it. Note that this interpretation of binding force does not depend on a claim about the comparative *weight* of moral and other reasons. The Kantian position on binding force is often interpreted as a claim that moral reasons necessarily outweigh all others, but we need not suppose that even the slightest moral consideration outweighs personal concerns, however serious. The need to concentrate on completing a manuscript or other important project, say, might be enough to justify paying a bit less attention than one should to others' everyday needs.[15] What it would not justify is a decision to assign their needs no weight in deliberation.

The resulting position on binding force would not satisfy Kant, or a Kantian reading of "inescapable" moral reasons as necessarily conclusive. For that matter, if the explanation of binding force limits the ban on discounting to critical reasons with sources outside the agent's standpoint, it would extend to Kantian "duties to oneself" only if these duties are interpreted as based on criticism from others. Perhaps others in the agent's circle could be seen as adversely affected by a decision to neglect her duties to herself.[16] But one might instead represent such duties as rational requirements, arguing that no higher-order reason an agent could cite would be adequate to justify discounting certain basic criticisms of her own of self-neglect, compatibly with rationality.

In any case, the indeterminate moral reason corresponding to an imperfect obligation to others has to rest on criticism from a personal standpoint besides that of the agent, though not that of a specific beneficiary of obligation. The relevant standpoint can be seen as interpersonal, or personally inclusive, rather than impersonal.[17] Simply alluding to "the moral standpoint" as an impersonal source of criticism would not provide a satisfying explanation of the limits on what the agent can discount, for there are other impersonal standpoints that one can be justified in setting

[15] For less everyday examples, cf. esp. the case of Paul Gauguin's pursuit of his art by leaving his family and moving to Tahiti, discussed in Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 20–39; and other cases discussed in R. G. Frey, "Goals, Luck, and Moral Obligation," elsewhere in this volume.

[16] I owe this suggestion to Michael Weber.

[17] Cf. Darwall's account of what he calls "impersonal" reasons in "'But It Would Be Wrong'." The term derives from P. F. Strawson's treatment of reactive attitudes in Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): 1–25, where it indicates that an attitude is not a reaction just to a slight to oneself. In application to standpoints of criticism, however, "impersonal" suggests independence of persons generally. I want to distinguish moral reasons from others, such as aesthetic reasons, that might be thought to rest on criticism from an impersonal standpoint. "Interpersonal," in any case, seems a better fit with the interpretation of moral obligation in terms of "second-personal" demands that Darwall advocates, in an account with which I am broadly in sympathy.

aside. I can acknowledge aesthetic criticism of the arrangement of computer equipment on my desk, say, but discount it as irrelevant to my purposes in setting up a computer. If moral criticism is different, we want to be told why.

Besides the collective standpoint of potential beneficiaries, one might suggest that all moral agents are in a position to lodge criticism of the failure of any one agent to fulfill an imperfect obligation. Among their other duties, agents have a perfect obligation of fairness, particularly in cases like the duty to aid, where what is in question is a shared social burden. A shift to the standpoint of the moral community would also extend the ban on discounting to general moral duties that are not owed *to* anyone, such as the duty not to pollute the environment. Even where someone's failure to shoulder a social burden does not actually increase the burden on others, others are in a position to criticize her for doing less than they do. But I now want to turn to questions about what happens when the burden, or part of the burden, is taken over by the state. When the government uses our taxes to provide aid to the needy, is it essentially enforcing the fulfillment of our imperfect obligation? To the extent that the government specifies the amount and recipients of aid, what happens to our leeway for choice?

V. Political Specification of the Duty to Aid

It was Kant's "natural law" predecessor Samuel Pufendorf (1632–1694) who introduced imperfect duties into the modern literature, and he took them to be unenforceable by definition. I have been working from a version of the familiar interpretation of imperfect obligations in Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) as obligations whose content is incompletely specified. The content of an imperfect duty includes a rough threshold of adequacy, I would add, thus allowing for supererogatory satisfaction: donating more to famine relief than duty requires, say. Though Kant did not intend this reading, it fits his reference to imperfect duties as "meritorious," along with his later treatment of them in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) as "duties of virtue."[18] They can be seen as pulling into the realm of duty an ideal of virtue, extending higher than ordinary agents are required to satisfy, as well as involving a motivational component that cannot be compelled. There is also a narrower reading of the notion of imperfect duties, as in John Stuart Mill's treatment of justice in *Utilitarianism* (1863)—and perhaps more familiar in

[18] See Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), for the treatment of imperfect duties as requiring direct concern for the beneficiary (which for Kant does not entail undergoing a feeling, but just the adoption of an end). I note that John Rawls also holds that duties of virtue include perfect duties that require action for the right reasons; see Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

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rights-based political theory—on which it is particularly the beneficiary of an imperfect duty that is left unspecified, so that no right is correlative to the duty.[19] However, I take an obligation to be imperfect if it simply fails to specify precisely how much is owed to others, even in a case where it is owed to someone in particular.

Consider, for instance, the duty to care for elderly parents or for a child. Here the beneficiary is specified, but the requisite amount of care is not. Such cases also make it clear that our imperfect moral duties may be as stringent as any other duties, if the term "stringent" refers to the seriousness of a violation rather than to the level of required satisfaction. The requirements for satisfying our imperfect duties may be rigorously imposed on us, even if they are only loosely spelled out. But while a duty to "care" entails appropriate concern and thus cannot be enforced by law, sometimes we had better ensure at least a minimum standard of overt action rather than letting individual motivational resources determine what gets done. Thus, the law steps in to enforce child support, even if it cannot thereby force anyone to provide it from the right motives. The resulting legal duty will be perfect insofar as it specifies the requisite level of support, presumably at or around the threshold for satisfying the moral duty.

For famine relief and similar global forms of aid, we may also need to sacrifice some of the moral quality of individual motivation in order to enlist the enforcement powers of the state. Individuals may lack enough control over what is done with their contributions (as well as how many other people join them in contributing) to make a real difference, and sometimes even large-scale voluntary organizations may not be up to the job. However, even apart from worries about individual moral worth—since taxation tends to evoke a grudging attitude rather than love and concern—having the state step in serves to limit the leeway for choice that imperfect duties provide. We may still be able to afford to contribute more on our own after taxes, but we have lost direct control over how the state-mandated portion of our contribution gets distributed: for example, we cannot directly control how much relief goes to victims of famine versus victims of hurricanes, earthquakes, or tornadoes; nor can we directly decide whether to give priority to national disasters, or to disasters that affect a certain subgroup, or to spread our efforts evenly across the world.

I do want to allow for the role of the state in these matters—and also in correcting extremes of poverty via taxation—despite the regard for individual autonomy embodied in my use of the notion of imperfect obligation. Taxation to reduce inequalities in the distribution of wealth is seen by natural rights libertarians as violating our rights where the inequalities are not a result of past wrongs. I focus here primarily on the less controversial case of responding to natural disasters, where the state's use of our

[19] See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1863) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 94.

tax dollars for that purpose might be seen as limiting our right to decide how to discharge our duty to aid. But since I share the skepticism recently expressed by Thomas Nagel about treating all economic inequalities as instances of injustice, what I say may be applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to redistributive issues as well.[20] What if we recast non-rectificatory redistribution of wealth as a relief measure, a response to another sort of disaster (or possibly a preemptive response to a foreseeable disaster) for those in poverty, and potentially for society as a whole?

In thinking about this issue informally over the years, I have been inclined to take the state as having duties of its own, insofar as it has resources and powers that individuals or voluntary organizations may lack.[21] After all, institutional entities can be bearers of obligations: a corporation, for instance, has obligations not to pollute the water, to treat its employees fairly, and so on. These are, of course, perfect duties. Even if they ultimately have to be explained in terms of the duties of individuals, they need not have quite the same content: some of the individual duties will involve setting up an institutional structure designed to prevent, detect, and punish violations, often in ways that individuals could not manage or should not attempt on their own. Similarly, the state, even if set up for other purposes, might be said to incur some duties, in virtue of its size and resources, to do more than we could otherwise accomplish in fulfilling our imperfect duties, such as the duty to give aid. We are therefore required to see that the state is endowed with appropriate structures to discharge such duties as can be transferred to it in this manner.

More strictly, perhaps I should speak not of the state but of the community—the collective body whose instrument the state is—as the bearer of obligations, insofar as it is organized by a state. The important point is just that political enforcement of measures that satisfy the imperfect duties we have as individuals need not amount to enforcing their fulfillment by individuals, as in the case of child support. To put it roughly but simply, my suggestion is that the state instead assumes or takes over some of our duties, possibly modifying them in the process—and that the state *should* assume them or take them over, and that we have an obligation to equip it to do so. Instead of forcing us to discharge our duties, the state forces us to participate in a coordinative arrangement designed to accomplish the same ends.

Now note that, in cases involving nearby emergencies, we seem to have a *perfect* duty of mutual aid, or what might be distinguished as a duty of

[20] See Thomas Nagel, "Justice and Nature," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 17, no. 2 (1998): 303–21. I should note that my ensuing remarks were written before the various economic disasters of September 2008. I am reminded of a fortune cookie I once got: "Today's philosophy is tomorrow's common sense."

[21] Philip Pettit has done systematic work along these lines. See, e.g., Pettit, "Responsibility Incorporated," *Ethics* 117, no. 1 (2007): 171–201.

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rescue.[22] I do not have moral leeway, say, to pass by an accident victim whom no one else is available to help, on the grounds that I have given or plan to give enough aid elsewhere. But the difference in size and scope between individuals and states, along with the duties states have to distribute goods fairly, would seem to mean that some duties of charity *become* duties of rescue, when they are transferred to the state. A tornado in the midwestern U.S. counts as "nearby" from the national perspective, though perhaps not from mine; and for a sufficiently powerful state with global reach, the same might be said of an epidemic in Africa or a tsunami in the Far East.

Thus, the transfer of our obligations to the state will modify some of them, making imperfect obligations perfect, or more nearly so, but not simply by pinning down the level of required contribution, as with child support laws. The larger scale of societal obligations transforms our individual obligations to the point where it no longer makes sense to see the state as enforcing them, as opposed to substituting something else with the same purposes. Besides issues of geographical proximity, a shift to the collective level may mean that there is no one else in a similar position to help some subset of the needy whose relief a particular individual might be justified in leaving to others. There are also further obligations of fairness that apply to a state distributing aid. Within broad limits, an individual is free to give preference to a special subgroup: those she regards as her own fellows or those suffering from misfortunes that move her or simply happen to catch her eye. I might be within my moral rights, for instance, to fulfill my own duty to aid those in need by directing my contributions to organizations aiding women, preferring female victims whose lives are not in danger over males whose lives I might save. I do not need to claim that I am doing more long-term good thereby, or correcting a worse social problem. Nonetheless, of course, we would be indignant if state officials gave preference in relief efforts to some particular subgroup of victims, even without a sexist or racist or other morally objectionable rationale.

In some cases, if the state's greater power and scope turn charity into rescue, it may also have to take *more* from us as individuals than we would otherwise be obligated to provide. From my perspective, donating money to victims of a particular hurricane or tornado may be more than I am morally required to do, but the state may have a perfect duty to use my contributions, pooled with those of others, for particular relief efforts. At this level, we might even grant that a particular victim is *owed* aid—that moral criticism is warranted from his standpoint if the state fails to

[22] Proximity affects the stringency of duty, including imperfect duty, in part by helping to set a threshold of minimally adequate virtue: unresponsiveness to perceptible suffering on the part of others is, in general, a worse trait than ignoring distant suffering. Cf. Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," which denies the relevance of distance, along with degrees of bindingness of obligation.

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aid him—contrary to what I argued above with respect to individual agents' imperfect duties.

Thus, assigning some of our imperfect obligations to the state may indeed mean sacrificing something as individuals. According to what I have suggested, this cost is imposed on us by another sort of requirement: to set up the state along lines that enable it to respond to emergencies effectively, when occasions arise in which individual efforts, or the efforts of voluntary groups, are not adequate. This seems to amount to a rational requirement conditional on morally obligatory ends—relocating, to the level of political organization, the combination of rationality and morality that concerned me earlier in application to moral reasons. Instead of being required to aid specific needy individuals, we are required to see to it that the state is in a position to take over some of our duty to aid—with results that may limit our leeway for choice in similar ways.

If we prefer to think of the community as the bearer of our collective obligations, rather than the state, we might speak instead of granting the state a permission—authorizing it—to do what is needed to fulfill community obligations.[23] That might seem to allow us to impose constraints on its authority, by analogy to a private firm set up to distribute our pooled donations to charities of its choosing. The only obligation of such a firm, presumably, would be to use the money we gave it for the purposes prescribed. It would not take on further obligations or permissions in virtue of the size of our pooled resources, and it could discount criticism from needy individuals it passed over, albeit not on morally objectionable grounds. Nor would such a firm be empowered to make us give more—we might even ban it from asking us for more—if unforeseen emergencies arise.

I assume, however, that there are more fundamental constraints in play here. We are required to set up or reform the state to allow for its effectiveness in satisfying our collective charitable duties, as noted. At least where aid to its own citizens is in question, a better analogy might be to a mutual aid society, understood to have as its defining purpose the provision of specified forms of aid to its members, so that it owes aid to those members who need it and should be authorized to charge enough in membership dues to fulfill their needs.

The imperfect duty on which my argument has focused is assumed to be satisfiable via taxation, rather than by enlisting individuals for labor or other nonmonetary contributions, which would raise harder issues of individual autonomy. Some proposals of the latter sort are not unthinkable, at least where they leave adequate scope for individual choice: for instance, the suggestion one occasionally hears that a period of national service should be required of everyone before settling into a career. But

[23] This is my restatement of a suggestion made by Christopher Morris, to whom I owe the analogy that follows.

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anything more long-term, or demanding more specific forms of service (most notably, military service), would be worrisomely intrusive. Even if governments were in a better position than we are as individuals to decide what jobs we would find most satisfying and would perform most effectively, for instance, it would take more to justify surrendering to governments the authority to choose our careers. It is not inconceivable, though, that we should sometimes have to deal with conflicting obligations arising from our dual status as morally autonomous individuals and members of a political community.

Note that our reasons for authorizing a state to do some of what is necessary to discharge our duty to aid need not rest on the possibility that we will, at some point, need aid ourselves. Rather, we might decide to authorize a state to assume some of our duties because we suspect that we would fail to meet the threshold for satisfying some of our imperfect moral duties if left to do so on our own. Those arguing against taxation to relieve poverty sometimes reproach its defenders for not being more charitable in private contexts themselves, but transferring some responsibility to the state is defensible as a way of ensuring fulfillment of our charitable obligations. At a particular time when aid is urgently needed, I might turn out to be unable to contribute, perhaps because of conflicts of duty that could have been avoided with better planning. Or I may have satisfied my imperfect duty unwisely, giving so much to tsunami relief that I am caught short when a hurricane comes along. What is in question here, once again, is a rational requirement that we have in light of our moral obligations, though in this case it depends on acknowledging tendencies to violate the obligations, unless we take special measures for long-range self-control. If such tendencies were rare, it might be selfish to want to make up for them by transferring our obligations to the state, thereby imposing costs on others; but, of course, such tendencies are quite widespread. By authorizing the state to tax us in order to make up for them, we are essentially letting it tie us to a moral mast. In what follows, I do want to acknowledge grounds for keeping a hand free, but my discussion will also bring out a further reason for assigning this role to the state.

VI. Priorities

Let me now take a further look at some of the moral-psychological issues raised by binding ourselves to morality via the state, from the standpoint of an individual balancing moral and personal priorities, apart from any political commitments or constraints. I hope in the course of a somewhat looser discussion in this section to reconnect my argument to the general view of practical reasons and discounting outlined earlier, pausing to answer some objections to the view. In the end, my discussion

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will suggest that even our freedom to pursue our personal priorities can be made to speak in favor of the transfer of some of our charitable obligations to the state. For we need the state to put appropriate limits on the level of individual contributions to the satisfaction of large-scale collective obligations, if doing so involves discounting moral reasons in the way my approach suggests. But I want to begin by acknowledging at length some of the moral costs of the transfer. My aim in this area is to seek a sensitive balance between conflicting considerations rather than the elimination of conflict with a single stand pro or con.

Transferring imperfect obligations to the state means losing some of the leeway for personal choice allowed by an imperfect obligation.[24] But we might also be said to lose something that is both morally and personally valuable if we thereby dispose of our moral obligation. While farming a job out to others may take a load off our minds and get the job done better, it also tends to make our own contributions a matter of mere routine. Even if we can discharge the duty to aid without feeling love and concern, the moral worth of what we do presumably depends on some thought about the problems we are alleviating. If nothing else, satisfying an imperfect duty normally at least involves attention to the task of assessing others' needs and figuring out what to do about them. We pay a moral cost, then, if our attention is redirected toward satisfying the tax collector.

For that matter, the value we place on relationships—bonds to particular persons, on the usual understanding—as components of the good life, can also be seen as extending to obligation, as a relationship of being bound to particular goals, tasks, or concerns. Think of the resistance many of us feel to retiring from our jobs. Being obligated means being harnessed, when all goes well, to the good. (Sometimes the relationship is imposed on us, but the same is true of relationships with persons.) It may be just as well, then, if there are limits to how much of this the state can take over.

Of course, an individual would still be free to exceed the threshold required to satisfy the duty transferred to the state, meeting a higher standard of virtue. But the minimum required by a "*duty* of virtue" (to use Kant's later term for imperfect duties) prompts us at least to try on the states of mind that motivate virtuous behavior, in a way that an ideal of virtue, a standard of perfection, may not. In the terms introduced in my initial discussion of reasons, what is at issue here is the difference between a critical reason and a favoring one. An ideal of virtue may inspire greater efforts (when it does manage to inspire), but it is optional, whereas criticism of an agent, for not meeting the threshold set by a duty of virtue,

[24] In addition to my own account here in terms of optional reasons, see the argument in Lauren Fleming, "Imperfect Duties, Moral Latitude, and Constructing Moral Agency" (unpublished) that the "strong latitude" involved in imperfect obligations is essential to self-definition and responsible moral agency.

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makes a demand on her. I take rationality to require that someone who acknowledges a criticism as legitimate must either answer it or act to avoid it, and the attempt to decide which course to take requires attention. We can get around this in particular cases, cultivating habits of satisfying our duties more or less automatically, but even this typically requires thought, perhaps especially for imperfect duties. Barring conflict, it is only in complex cases such as those that involve questions of fairness that we may have to think at length about how exactly to satisfy a perfect duty—there is no question of *how much* to satisfy the ban on breaking promises, say; nor is there any problem with satisfying it automatically—whereas an imperfect duty provides a nudge in the direction of virtue. This is what we lose if the state assumes the duty, even if we still have the opportunity to do more.

I say all this as someone who is not primarily focused on the aim of helping others. The distinctive feature of imperfect duties, as duties of virtue, is the fact that they do not really require virtue, but rather just a touch of it: a decent amount, not precisely specifiable, perhaps enough to find onerous at times, but clearly short of the ideal. They are thus able to leave room, not just for personal preferences as to *how* to satisfy them, but also for competing nonmoral priorities that we set for ourselves. I am free to contribute to Smile Train, for instance, which finances operations on facially deformed children, rather than giving the same amount to Oxfam for famine relief, but I am also entitled to earmark some of my available funds, beyond the threshold for satisfying my imperfect charitable duties, for contribution to local art galleries, or even just for the development of my own abilities or appreciative capacities, without having to defend my choice as ultimately promoting the good as much as its charitable alternatives.

If I knew I could do the most good by contributing to famine relief, I might be said to be acting against my strongest reason, and hence irrationally, if I instead donated my available funds to Smile Train and the arts. But remember that, on the critical conception, my reasons for satisfying an imperfect duty to aid in particular ways, or beyond the required minimum, are merely favoring reasons: reasons that imply no significant criticism of alternatives, but instead serve to justify action by answering potential criticism. I can discount these favoring reasons simply as a matter of personal preference. On the account I outlined earlier, "less than ideal" does not count as a significant criticism, so either choice may be justified, and either reason may be strong enough to act on, even if one of them counts as stronger.[25] The critical conception thereby removes a kind of pressure toward the best that emerges from the common conception of

[25] Cf. Raz, *Engaging Reason,* 102–4; and Joshua Gert, "Normative Strength and the Balance of Reasons," *Philosophical Review* 116, no. 4 (2007): 533–62, for alternative arguments based on comparison of the two reasons in terms of a univocal measure of strength.

practical reasons as prima facie requirements. The comparative strength of reasons no longer dictates rational choice.

In some such cases, my competing nonmoral reason might even have the force of a requirement. In deciding, say, to pursue a certain career, I lay myself open to criticism (if only self-criticism) for failing to follow through. The fact that I have decided to do something yields a critical reason, that is, even if the decision itself is made just on the basis of favoring reasons ascribing value to the activities in question. The answer to criticism for failure to follow through that would be provided by a strong enough *moral* favoring reason would justify the failure to follow through, but would not yield an opposing requirement, even on the assumption that it concerns matters of greater importance or value. I do not have to give up my personal commitments, in short, or even tolerate a distraction from them, in order to save a life, assuming that what is in question is not a duty of rescue but just the fulfillment of an imperfect charitable duty.

A serious enough personal commitment might even outweigh the general moral reason one has to contribute an adequate amount to those in need. I interpreted the latter reason as binding, not because it necessarily outweighs nonmoral reasons, but rather because it would be inappropriate for an individual agent just to set it aside, failing even to raise the question of comparative weights. Note, too, that the comparison will depend on more than how much good one could accomplish by acting on one reason rather than the other: there might be a case, say, where a group of agents would be able to provide enough aid without the help of one of them who would otherwise be prevented from following through on a central project of her own.

As I understand it, the decision involved in the setting of personal priorities essentially *enacts* a critical reason against failure to follow through, a reason that may apply only to the agent but that would seem to be important enough to rational planning and coordination with others, as presupposed by moral agency, that it deserves others' respect. In light of this, one might want to ask whether it is conceivable that *others* could sometimes discount moral criticism on an individual agent's behalf, even if the agent herself is not in a position to do so. I suggested earlier that an appropriate source of criticism for failure to fulfill an imperfect obligation (such as the duty to give aid) might be the broader moral community, including fellow moral agents as well as potential beneficiaries, if we add in an obligation to do one's fair share in satisfying a collective obligation. For that matter, one might say that all moral agents are "potential" beneficiaries of the duty to aid, since anyone could come to be in the situation of those in need. So while an individual may not be entitled to discount others' criticism unilaterally, might there be some sense in which the moral community could do so on her behalf? After all, where an imperfect duty is in

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question, this will not amount to cancelling the criticism of specific others who would be wronged by a failure to fulfill it. If we see the moral community as the source of criticism, it will just be withholding criticism of its own.

Something like this might be true informally of the moral community as an aggregate of individuals, but it is hard to see what an act of discounting on the part of a community could amount to, except insofar as it is organized by a governing body charged with allocating social burdens. There are obvious risks in allowing the state such discretionary powers, though. We do sometimes let people off the hook in special cases, demanding even less of them than the minimum required of others so that they can concentrate on other activities, presumably activities that are of more than merely personal value, even if they are not morally required. Think of the exemption of students or fathers of young children from the military draft during the Vietnam war. However, to answer concerns about fairness, it is important that an individual's role in fulfilling the collective duty in question make no heavier demands on him than the pursuit of the relevant activities.

Instead of special dispensations for some, one might think we all deserve some relief from charitable duties, just to the extent of having it publicly recognized when we have contributed enough. The price of giving a donation to a private charity, once it becomes a big business using modern marketing techniques, seems to be an immediate and unending stream of appeals for more, replacing with guilt, annoyance, or simple indifference the kind of caring attitude that ideally accompanies meeting the threshold set by an imperfect duty. In giving anything, one risks being made a "mark." To handle these pressures in a caring but untroubled fashion requires a moral personality whose development, while it may be admirable, exceeds our moral duty.

Some might want to object that one *ought* to feel guilt in such cases: it would be morally unworthy, at best, simply to pass by a homeless person or to spurn appeals for charitable funds without a tug of discomfort, even if one has indeed given enough on other occasions. But I have argued at length elsewhere that we can allow for the appropriateness of guilt and similar attitudes in such cases without the corresponding belief that one is guilty of a wrong.[26] Justifying an emotion requires only enough reason for making the corresponding thought an object of discomfort, as is needed to hold it in mind. Such discomfort plays an important moral role as a counter to the tendency to put off fulfillment of an obligation.[27] For that matter, feelings of guilt may sometimes be morally required of us to meet

[26] See esp. my *Practical Guilt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Let me thank Bruce Langtry for pressing this objection in discussion.

[27] I argue this in terms of discounting in my essay "Craving the Right: Emotions and Moral Reasons," in C. Bagnoli, ed., *Morality and the Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

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a minimal standard of virtue.[28] But it does not follow that we are required to *act* as those feelings suggest we should.

We may need the state, then, not just for more effective fulfillment of some of our moral duties, but also to put some systematic limits on how much can be asked of us in their name. Discounting, in the sense I distinguished—depriving certain considerations of weight in deliberation, while still acknowledging them as reasons—would seem to require an agent capable of reflection. While a community may have priorities, it cannot set any, except insofar as it is organized for reflection and action by some sort of governing body.[29] To avoid being completely at the mercy of others' needs (unless I simply harden my heart against them), I thus may have to let the state take some of my leeway for choice off my hands.

VII. Conclusion

Let me sum up very briefly the main lines of my argument in this essay. My primary aim was to use a conception of practical reasons in terms of criticism to make sense of imperfect obligation, a notion that can limit the moral demands on an agent by leaving her leeway for choice. But it was unclear how the relevant reasons could then still supply the binding force attributed to moral requirements. I proposed loosening the tie of reasons themselves to requirements and distinguishing two sorts of reasons by their relation to criticism: (1) reasons offering criticism (including moral and other requirements), and (2) favoring reasons. In the case of our imperfect duty to aid those in need, we have a critical reason against failing to contribute enough to the needy generally. But the reasons in favor of benefiting a specific individual imply no significant criticism of failure to aid him in particular, and in that sense are merely favoring reasons. Both reasons count as moral, but only the critical reason has binding force, as a consideration that the agent has to take into account, to the extent that she accepts it as offering criticism from an interpersonal standpoint that she is in no position to set aside unilaterally. By contrast, even moral favoring reasons, whatever their strength as reasons, are sub-

[28] See my "Guilt and Virtue," *Journal of Philosophy* 91, no. 2 (1994): 57–70. Acting on a requirement to feel an emotion would depend on some degree of control over what we feel, but on that point see my "Emotional Strategies and Rationality," *Ethics* 110, no. 3 (2000): 469–87.

[29] Note that not everything we refer to as "setting priorities" involves the sort of discounting of competing concerns that is at issue in my account. Sometimes, "prioritizing" a particular concern just amounts to assigning it priority in our plans to reflect its pre-given weight or importance. I take it that ordinary talk in political contexts of setting social priorities fits this mold and hence is unproblematic on the common conception of reasons as prima facie requirements. In allowing for priority-setting in light of optional reasons, my own account is also meant to accommodate decisions to modify the pre-given weight of one's reasons. I discuss this in application to free will issues in "Reasons, Decisions, and Free Will" (unpublished).

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ject to discounting, since their normative role in the first instance is simply to answer criticism.

Sometimes the state may be in a better position than individuals to aid those in need and may tax us for that purpose, but we should not see it as thereby forcing us to fulfill our imperfect duties. Instead, it assumes them; or, more precisely, the community organized by a state assumes them and should authorize the state to do what is necessary to fulfill them, where the state's power and resources put it in a better position to fulfill them adequately. However, transfer to the state will tend to make an imperfect duty less imperfect, by pinning down and sometimes altering the amount of our individual contributions and the beneficiaries of our pooled contributions. The state's larger scope and capacities can turn duties of charitable aid into duties of rescue. Transferring an imperfect duty to the state involves an obvious cost in terms of individual freedom of choice, but there is also a moral cost to individuals in replacing the virtuous motives of charity with those that tend to accompany paying taxes. Nonetheless, I note that, with modern marketing techniques, charity as big business can exert a kind of relentless pressure that also would tend to undermine virtuous motivation. A compensating feature of state involvement is the fact that its more precise demands come with limits.

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