How Reasons Determine Moral Requirements

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1. Introduction

• Aim

I develop and defend a version of the view that moral requirements are determined by reasons. My version of this view, as I argue, does better justice to the different roles that reasons play in determining overall moral status than its competitors.

• Three roles of reasons (rather than two)

According to a widely held view, the possibility of heroic cases of supererogation suggests that we need to distinguish two roles that reasons play in determining moral requirements:

> Some reasons can make actions morally required.
> Some reasons can prevent reasons that can make actions morally required from doing so.

There are reasons that can do both of these, and there are also reasons that can prevent reasons from making actions morally required, while they are not able to make actions morally required themselves.

I argue that there is a third role that reasons can play here:

> Some reasons can play a role in making it the case that an action is morally required, even though they are not able to make actions morally required themselves.

This has significant implications for how an explanation of moral requirements in terms of reasons is to be construed.

2. Three roles of reasons: the core of the view

• Moral vs. non-moral reasons

'Moral reason': a reason that can make actions morally required.
'Non-moral reason': a reason that cannot make actions morally required.

• The standard view: two roles of reasons

Case I. There is a moral reason M^+ for ϕ and an equally weighty non-moral reason N^- against ϕ.
  (Assume e.g. that if A performed ϕ, then this would save B from great pain, but cause great pain for A.)

Cases of this sort suggest that non-moral reasons are able to prevent moral reasons from making actions morally required. Accordingly, we need to distinguish two roles of reasons: the role of making morally required, and the role of preventing from making morally required.

(Nothing depends on whether you share my first-order intuitions. Here, and in what follows, what matters is that certain structural types of cases are possible.)

- A third role of reasons

Case II. There is a non-moral reason N^- against ϕ and an equally weighty non-moral reason N^+ for ϕ. (Assume e.g. that if A performed ϕ, then this would cause great pain for her now, but save her from great pain later.)

Since there are no moral reasons in Case II, ϕ is morally optional.

Case III. There is a moral reason M^+ and a non-moral reason N^+ for ϕ, and there is a non-moral reason N^- against ϕ. The reasons are equally weighty. (Assume e.g. that if A performed ϕ, then this would save B from great pain now and save A from great pain later. But it would cause A great pain now.)

Case III can be thought of as the result of adding the moral reason M^+ for ϕ that was present in Case I to Case II. Plausibly, this makes it the case that, in Case III, ϕ is morally required (see Figure 1).
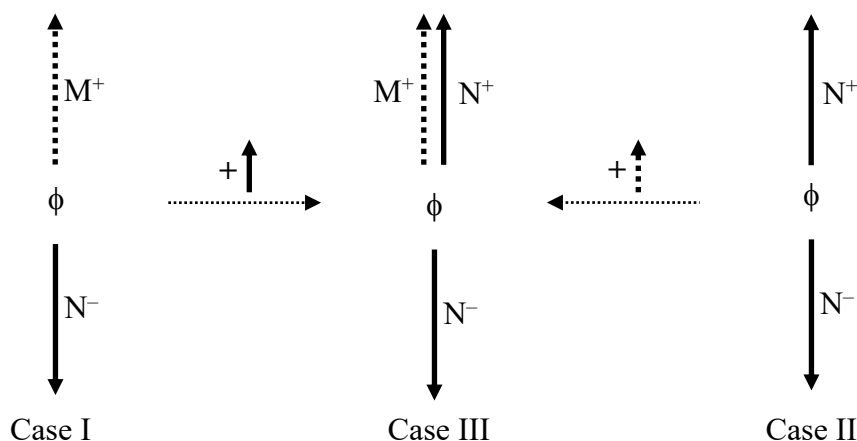

Figure 1. Two ways of setting up Case III
(upward arrows: reasons for; downward arrows: reasons against;
dotted arrows: moral reasons; continuous arrows: non-moral reasons)

But Case III can also be thought of as resulting from adding the non-moral reason N^+ for ϕ to Case I. Since this is so, and since ϕ is not morally required in Case I, whereas ϕ is morally required in Case III, the non-moral reason for ϕ plays a role in making it the case that ϕ is morally required. How can this be? I suggest:

> *Non-moral reasons for an action ϕ can prevent non-moral reasons against ϕ from preventing moral reasons for ϕ from making ϕ morally required* (*they can, as I will call this, prevent non-moral reasons from 'defusing' moral reasons*). This is precisely what happens in Case III.

General normative rationale: whether an action is morally required is, as far as the non-moral side of things is concerned, a matter of the overall non-moral costs – and these costs are a function not only of the non-moral reasons against the action, but also of the non-moral reasons for it.

3. Three roles of reasons: additional details

● Additional details on the standard view

According to the standard view, non-moral reasons can defuse moral reasons. But moral reasons can do this as well (even though they often play this role and the role of making actions required simultaneously – as does M^- in Case IV shown in Figure 2).

A moral and a non-moral reason that would not defuse individually might be able to do so in combination (see Case V shown in Figure 2).

Case IV   Case V

Figure 2

● Additional details on the third role (I)

Non-moral reasons are principally unable to prevent moral reasons from defusing moral reasons (consider Case VI vs. Case VII shown in Figure 3). This is because moral reasons against an action ϕ, as opposed to non-moral reasons against ϕ, do not count towards ϕ's overall non-moral costs.

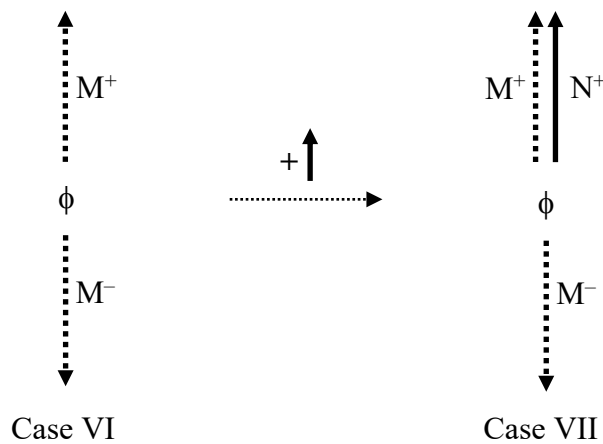

Case VI   Case VII

Figure 3

● Additional details on the third role (II)

Non-moral reasons can prevent combinations of moral and non-moral reasons from defusing, provided that the moral reason in the combination needs the help of the non-moral reason for the combination to be able to defuse (see Case VIII shown in Figure 4). This is because whether such a combination defuses then depends on the action's overall non-moral costs, and these are a function not only of the non-moral reasons against the action, but also of the non-moral reasons for it.
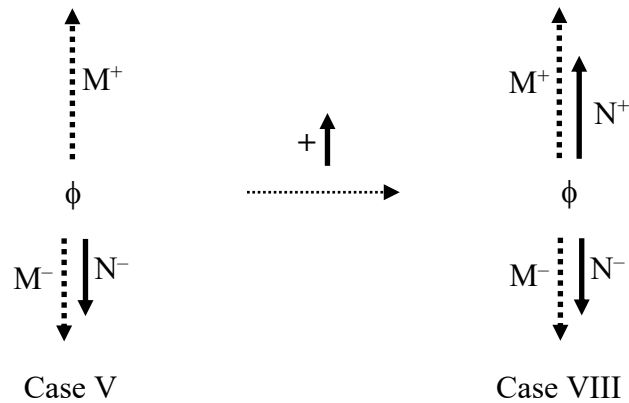
M^+ M^+ N^+
ϕ $+$ ϕ
M^- N^- M^- N^-

Case V   Case VIII

Figure 4

● Taking stock

Moral reasons …
        … can make actions morally required;
        … can prevent moral reasons from making actions morally required (i.e., they can defuse moral reasons).

Non-moral reasons …
        … cannot make actions morally required;
        … can prevent moral reasons from making actions morally required (i.e., they can defuse moral reasons);
        … can prevent combinations of moral and non-moral reasons from defusing (but only if the moral reasons in such a combination really need the help of their non-moral partners in getting the combination to be able to defuse);
        … cannot prevent moral reasons from defusing moral reasons.

4. A general account of how reasons determine moral requirements

• Sets of reasons, rather than individual reasons

In what follows, 'M$^+$', 'N$^-$' etc. are to be understood as referring to sets of (moral or non-moral) reasons, rather than to individual reasons. I use 'MN$^-$' to refer to the union of the sets of moral reasons M$^-$ and of non-moral reasons N$^-$ against an action.

I assume that making required, defusing, and preventing from defusing is done by sets of reasons.

• Three steps towards a general account

(1)   An action ϕ is morally required if, and only if, and because there is a set of moral reasons M$^+$ for ϕ that is not defused, i.e., either
      (i)   MN$^-$ (i.e., the set of all moral reasons and of all non-moral reasons against ϕ) is unable to defuse M$^+$; or
      (ii)   MN$^-$ is able to defuse M$^+$; but it is possible for it to be prevented from defusing M$^+$, and there is a set of non-moral reasons N$^+$ for ϕ that does in fact prevent it from defusing M$^+$.

Plausibly, MN$^-$ is unable to defuse M$^+$ if, and only if, M$^+$ is weightier than MN$^-$. (Under this condition, and only then, is M$^+$ is guaranteed to win out against its competitors.)

If MN$^-$ is able to defuse M$^+$, then it is possible for it to be prevented from doing so if, and only if, M$^+$ is weightier than M$^-$. (Otherwise, M$^-$ would be able to defuse M$^+$ on its own, and moral reasons that are able to defuse principally cannot be prevented from doing so.)

Assuming that MN$^-$ is able to defuse M$^+$, and that it is possible for it to be prevented from defusing, N$^+$ prevents MN$^-$ from defusing if, and only if, the union of M$^+$ and N$^+$ is weightier than MN$^-$. (Under this condition, and only then, is M$^+$ weightier than what remains from MN$^-$ once N$^+$ is factored in, so to speak.)

(2)   An action ϕ is morally required if, and only if, and because there is a set of moral reasons M$^+$ for ϕ that is not defused, i.e., either
      (i)   MN$^-$ is unable to defuse M$^+$ (i.e., M$^+$ is weightier than MN$^-$); or
      (ii)   MN$^-$ is able to defuse M$^+$; but it is possible for it to be prevented from defusing M$^+$ (i.e., M$^+$ is weightier than M$^-$), and there is a set of non-moral reasons N$^+$ for ϕ that does in fact prevent it from defusing M$^+$ (i.e., the union of M$^+$ and N$^+$ is weightier than MN$^-$).

Principles (1) and (2) apply to two-option cases. But the account can straightforwardly be generalized to cover three- and more-option cases:

(3)   An action ϕ is morally required if, and only if, and because there is a set of moral reasons M$_\phi$ for ϕ that is not defused, i.e., for all incompatible alternatives ψ to ϕ, either:
      (i)   MN$_\psi$ (i.e., the set of all moral reasons and of all non-moral reasons for ψ) is unable to defuse M$_\phi$ (i.e., M$_\phi$ is weightier than MN$_\psi$); or
      (ii)   MN$_\psi$ is able to defuse M$_\phi$, but it is possible for it to be prevented from defusing M$_\phi$ (i.e., M$_\phi$ is weightier than M$_\psi$), and there is a set of non-moral reasons N$_\phi$ for ϕ that does in fact prevent it from defusing M$_\phi$ (i.e., the union of M$_\phi$ and N$_\phi$ is weightier than MN$_\psi$).

5. Related views

● Muñoz' account

According to Daniel Muñoz, the relevant work is not done by two kinds of reasons, but by "just one kind of reason – which tends to favor, justify, and require" and by "*prerogatives*, which […] have weights, like reasons, but their sole function is to justify acts that would otherwise be wrong" (Muñoz 2021: 702). He suggests

> *The Prerogatives Principle*
> An option *x* is obligatory just if, for any alternative *y*, there is more reason to choose *x* than there is *combined* reason and prerogative to choose *y*. (Muñoz 2021: 702)

But this is inconsistent with the possibility of reasons for an action ϕ that play a role in making it the case that ϕ is morally required, even though they are not themselves in the business of making actions morally required.

● Portmore's account

The core of the relevant part of Douglas Portmore's view account is his 'meta-criterion of rightness':

> META S's performing ϕ is morally permissible if and only if there is no available alternative, ψ, that S has both more *requiring reason* and more reason, all things considered, to perform, where a requiring reason is just a reason that has some moral requiring strength. (Portmore 2011: 137)

Provided that an action is morally permissible if, and only if, there is no incompatible alternative that is morally required, and provided that what Portmore calls a 'requiring reason' is what I call a 'moral reason', my principle (3) entails META.

But the converse does not hold: (3), as opposed to META, not only states individually necessary and collectively sufficient conditions for an action being morally required, or permissible, but is also a detailed account of the normative roles that different sorts of reasons can play, and of the conditions under which they do play them, in determining an action's overall moral status.

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