

## How Reasons Determine Moral Requirements

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### *1. Introduction*

Supererogatory acts are morally better, sometimes much better, than other morally permissible options, but they are morally optional rather than required. Even though some philosophers think that there are no supererogatory acts, nonetheless an account of the nature of moral requirements that does not rule out their possibility seems *prima facie* more attractive. In this paper, I discuss how the view that moral requirements are determined by reasons is to be worked out in a way that accommodates the possibility of supererogation. I am not the first one to ponder this question. But my aim is to develop and defend a novel version of this view that, as I argue, does a better job than its theoretical competitors in doing justice to the ways in which the relevant reasons can compete, collude, and normatively interact in yet other ways in determining an action's overall moral status.

While supererogation can come in different forms, the most common examples are heroic deeds that involve considerable sacrifice on the part of the agent. Arguably, such actions have something morally weighty in their favour, and they would be morally required if they did not involve sacrifice. This is why the possibility of supererogation has been taken to suggest the view, or something in the vicinity of it, that normative reasons play two different roles in determining moral requirements and that these roles can come apart: that of making actions morally required, and that of preventing reasons that can make actions morally required from doing so. While there are reasons that can play both of these roles, there are also reasons that

can only play the latter, i.e., there are reasons that can prevent reasons from making actions morally required, while they are not able to make actions morally required themselves. This is precisely what seems to be going on in cases of heroic supererogation.<sup>1</sup>

But, as I argue, there is a third and distinct role that reasons play in determining moral requirements. This has significant implications for how an explanation of moral requirements in terms of reasons is to be construed. As I suggest, reasons that are not themselves able to make actions morally required nevertheless can play an essential role in making it the case that an action *is* morally required (Section 2). I elaborate the resulting account of the roles that reasons play in determining moral requirements in some detail (Section 3), and I show how this account can be made the basis of reasons-based explanations of moral requirements, and of heroic supererogation, that are true to the details of the relevant normative mechanisms (Section 4).

As it turns out, the ways in which reasons interact in determining the overall moral status of actions can be rather complex even in relatively simple cases. This is why, with a view to readability, I have decided to work primarily with cases that involve only two mutually incompatible options (an action  $\varphi$  and one incompatible alternative to  $\varphi$ ) that exhaust all possibilities. I assume that a reason against  $\varphi$  is nothing but a reason for not- $\varphi$ , i.e., in the two-option cases that I will be primarily concerned with, a reason for the only incompatible alternative to  $\varphi$ .<sup>2</sup> But I show how the view about how reasons determine moral requirements that I defend for two-option cases can be made to carry over to more complex cases as well.

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<sup>1</sup> See, esp., Portmore (2011: Ch. 5, 2021: Chs. 4 & 5), and Muñoz (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Here and in what follows, I use the term “action” broadly, as to include omissions and disjunctive actions. – When it comes to two-option cases, which I focus on in this paper, the assumptions that not- $\varphi$  is a – or, rather: the only – incompatible alternative to  $\varphi$  and that a reason against  $\varphi$  is a reason for not- $\varphi$  are straightforward. But when applied to three- or more-option cases, the view that a reason against  $\varphi$  is nothing but a reason for not- $\varphi$  is not uncontroversial (see, e.g., Greenspan 2005 and Snedegar 2018). While I think that it can be defended against recent criticism, nothing hinges on this with respect to the goals of this paper.

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

In this section, I lay the foundation for the account of how reasons determine moral requirements that I propose in Section 4 by first introducing the standard view, according to which reasons play two different roles in determining overall moral status, and then showing that there is a third role that reasons can hereby play.

Assume that Ann could, by taking some action  $\varphi$ , save Ben from great pain. This is a rather weighty reason for  $\varphi$  that, plausibly, would make  $\varphi$  morally required if there were no other reasons present. In what follows, I call such reasons *moral reasons*. A *non-moral reason* for an action  $\varphi$ , by contrast, is a reason that does not morally favour  $\varphi$  and that, in particular, would not make  $\varphi$  morally required if there were no other reasons present.<sup>3</sup>

Moral reasons against an action  $\varphi$  might prevent moral reasons for  $\varphi$  from making  $\varphi$  morally required. A textbook case: Ann has promised to meet Ben for lunch but encounters someone in urgent need of her help along the way. Thus, there is a moral reason for Ann to meet Ben (namely that she has promised to do so), and there is another moral reason against doing so, and for providing much-needed help instead. If the latter reason is weightier than the former, then it plausibly prevents the promissory reason from making it morally required to keep the promise, and it makes helping morally required instead. Hence, moral reasons cannot only make

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<sup>3</sup> Fixing terminology in this way has two noteworthy implications: first, I disregard that there might be moral enticers, i.e., reasons that deserve to be called “moral” but that would not make actions morally required even if there were no other reasons present. As I indicate below, this does not affect the generality of the account I suggest (see note 16). Second, since I work with a notion of moral reasons that is spelled out in terms of the notion of morally required actions, my paper is no contribution to the buck-passing project of explaining overall normative notions in terms of contributory ones (on this project, see Bedke 2011, Snedegar 2016, Metz 2020).

actions morally required, but they can also prevent other moral reasons from doing so. These are two different roles that need to be distinguished from one another, even though moral reasons can, as in the case just considered, play them simultaneously.

Moral reasons against an action  $\varphi$  are not the only reasons that might prevent moral reasons for  $\varphi$  from making  $\varphi$  morally required. Cases of heroic supererogation suggest that non-moral reasons can do this as well. Consider the following case:

*Case I.* There is a moral reason  $M^+$  for  $\varphi$  and an equally weighty non-moral reason  $N^-$  against  $\varphi$ .

(Assume, for instance, that if  $A$  performed  $\varphi$ , then this would save  $B$  from great pain, but cause  $A$  great pain.)

Even though  $N^-$ , unlike  $M^+$ , is a non-moral reason, its presence plausibly makes it the case that  $\varphi$  is morally optional, rather than required, such that  $\varphi$  ends up being supererogatory. In order for this to be so,  $N^-$  needs to be able to prevent  $M^+$  from making  $\varphi$  morally required.

Thus, the two roles that reasons can play in determining moral requirements that I have distinguished before can come apart. Moral reasons, in the sense of the term introduced above, are able to make actions morally required and to prevent reasons that can make actions morally required from doing so. But cases such as Case I suggest that non-moral reason can do the former, while they are unable to do the latter: they can prevent moral reasons from making actions morally required, even though they cannot make actions morally required themselves. As a consequence, there is an important sense in which non-moral reasons can be morally relevant, even though they are not moral reasons themselves.<sup>4</sup>

In my discussions of Case I and of the other cases that I work with in what follows, I of course hope that you share my first-order views about the actual examples that I suggest –

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed defence of the view that non-moral reasons are morally relevant in this sense and that, as a consequence, moral reasons are not overriding, see Portmore (2011: 120–136).

including my views about which of the specific reasons I use as illustrations are moral and which are non-moral. But as far as my argumentative goals in this paper are concerned, nothing ultimately depends on whether this is so. All I need you to agree to is that cases of the structural sort I discuss, including the first-order judgements about them that I suggest, are possible.<sup>5</sup>

That reasons can play two different normative roles in determining moral requirements is a relatively common view held by a number of authors working in the field.<sup>6</sup> What follows is not. As I now argue, non-moral reasons can play another role, distinct from that identified before, in determining an action's overall moral status. Thus, there are three roles that reasons can play here, rather than two.

Consider the following case:

*Case II.* There is a non-moral reason  $N^-$  against  $\varphi$  and an equally weighty non-moral reason  $N^+$  for  $\varphi$ . (Assume, for instance, that if  $A$  performed  $\varphi$ , 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,  $\varphi$  clearly is morally optional. Now consider the following case, which can be thought of as the result of adding the moral reason for  $\varphi$  that was present in Case I to Case II:

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<sup>5</sup> You might even hold on first-order grounds – e.g., if you are a consequentialist – that there are no supererogatory acts of the sort for which, as I suggest,  $\varphi$  in Case I is an example and that, more generally, there are no cases in which non-moral reasons prevent moral reasons from making an action morally required. But the possibility of such cases should not be ruled out on conceptual grounds (as also stressed, amongst others, by Darwall 2012: 349).

<sup>6</sup> In addition to Portmore (2011, 2021) and Muñoz (2021), mentioned in note 1 above, this assumption or a close relative of it is accepted, e.g., by Gert (2007), Parfit (2011: Ch. 6), Archer (2016), Lazar (2019), and Tucker (2021).

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

Since there are no moral reasons present in Case II, and since the non-moral reasons in Case II balance each other out, adding a weighty moral reason for  $\varphi$  plausibly makes it the case that, in Case III,  $\varphi$  is morally required.

While I have introduced Case III as resulting from adding moral reason  $M^+$  for  $\varphi$  to Case II, Case III can also be thought of as resulting from adding non-moral reason  $N^+$  for  $\varphi$  to Case I. I have depicted these two ways of setting up Case III in Figure 1, using a method of representation that I work with later in the paper as well: upward arrows represent reasons for  $\varphi$ , downward arrows represent reasons against  $\varphi$ ; continuous arrows stand for non-moral reasons, dotted arrows for moral reasons; the length of an arrow corresponds to the respective reason's weight; horizontal arrows indicate how Case III can be set up on the basis of Case I and Case II, respectively.

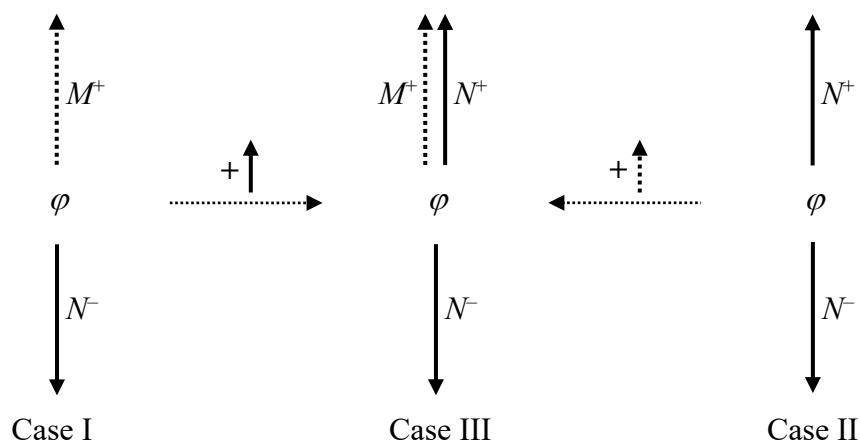


Figure 1. Two ways of setting up Case III

Recall that  $\varphi$  is not morally required in Case I, but is morally required in Case III. Since this is so, and since the only difference between Case I and Case III is that  $N^+$  is present in the latter, but not in the former,  $N^+$  plays a role in making it the case that  $\varphi$  is morally required in Case III. This role needs to be accounted for in a way that is consistent with the fact that  $N^+$ , qua non-moral reason, does not make  $\varphi$  morally required. The solution is to hold that non-moral reasons for an action  $\varphi$  can prevent non-moral reasons against  $\varphi$  from preventing moral reasons for  $\varphi$  from making  $\varphi$  morally required and that this is precisely what happens in Case III. In order to avoid clumsy wording, I will put this by saying that non-moral reasons for an action  $\varphi$  can prevent non-moral reasons against  $\varphi$  from “defusing” moral reasons for  $\varphi$ .<sup>7</sup>

The view that non-moral reasons can play this role in determining moral requirements is supported by reflecting on certain cases that should not be ruled impossible on conceptual grounds. Moreover, it makes good sense of – and thus is backed up by – a view that cases of heroic supererogation arguably suggest: whether an action is morally required is, as far as the non-moral side of things is concerned, a matter of its overall non-moral costs, with these being a function not only of the non-moral reasons against the action, but also of the non-moral reasons for it.<sup>8</sup>

Note that accepting that non-moral reasons can play this additional role is forced, on pain of incoherence, on anyone who thinks that, in Case I,  $N^-$  defuses  $M^+$ , i.e., prevents  $M^+$  from making  $\varphi$  morally required, and that  $M^+$  is not defused in Case III. In order for this to be so, there has

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<sup>7</sup> A moral reason that is defused in the sense of this term just introduced is neither “silenced” (McDowell 1979), nor “excluded” (Raz 1990: 39), nor “disabled” (Dancy 2004a: Ch. 3), to mention three of the concepts that have been suggested in the literature to describe the sorts of things that can happen to reasons. If a moral reason is defused, it morally favours the relevant action in the same way as it did before – it is merely prevented from making the action it morally favours morally required.

<sup>8</sup> The view that there is a sense in which the overall moral status of an action is a matter of (amongst other factors) its non-moral costs is endorsed by all of those mentioned in note 6 above.

to be something in Case III that prevents  $N^-$  from defusing  $M^+$  here. And  $N^+$  is the only candidate for the job.<sup>9</sup>

Douglas Portmore has defended a view about the conditions under which an action is morally required, and about the roles that reasons play in generating moral requirements, that is similar to the account suggested in this paper both in structure and in terminology (see, in particular, Portmore 2011: Ch. 5; 2021: Chs. 4 & 5): he also introduces “moral reasons” as reasons that are able to make actions morally required, and he argues in detail that non-moral reasons are morally relevant, since they can prevent moral reasons from generating moral requirements. Moreover, his “meta-criterion of rightness” entails that non-moral reasons for an action  $\varphi$  can make a difference with regard to whether  $\varphi$  is morally required.

But Portmore has not seen that holding all of this requires one to accept the view that non-moral reasons can not only prevent moral reasons from making actions morally required, but also prevent other non-moral reasons from preventing moral reasons from doing so. As a consequence, his account falls short of offering an explanation of how reasons determine overall moral status that does justice to the roles that reasons play and to the intricacies of the ways in which they normatively interact.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> To be sure, one might hold that  $N^+$  does this by way of reducing  $\varphi$ 's overall non-moral costs. But then one still needs to acknowledge that, in this case,  $N^+$  prevents  $N^-$  from doing something that  $N^-$  does in other cases. In order to make the notion of non-moral costs the core of an account that is an actual competitor to the view suggested above, one needs to hold that non-moral costs potentially or actually defuse, and that these costs are, across the board – and in Case I in particular –, to be distinguished from non-moral reasons. But developing a view according to which non-moral costs are not shorthand for something that can be unpacked by looking at the normative mechanics of the relevant reasons, but in which non-moral costs, as opposed to reasons, do the relevant explanatory work, is not straightforward and certainly not something that has been attempted in the literature.

<sup>10</sup> In fairness, I should note that Portmore's explanatory ambitions are somewhat limited: even though as indicated above he does make claims about the normative roles that reasons play in generating moral requirements, his



### 3. Three roles of reasons: working out the view

In this section, I work out the view that reasons play the three roles described in Section 2 in determining overall moral status, by filling in some additional details and by generalising it such that it covers a larger class of cases. I proceed in four steps.

First, recall that, according to the standard view introduced in Section 2, both moral reasons as well as non-moral reasons against an action  $\varphi$  are able to defuse moral reasons for  $\varphi$ . Could they also do so in combination? Consider the following case (see Figure 2):

*Case IV.* There is a moral reason  $M^+$  for  $\varphi$ , and there is a moral reason  $M^-$  against  $\varphi$ . Moreover, there is a non-moral reason  $N^-$  against  $\varphi$ .  $M^+$  is weightier than each of  $M^-$  and  $N^-$ . (Assume, for instance, that if  $A$  performed  $\varphi$ , then this would save  $B$  from great pain, but it would frustrate  $C$ 's expectations that  $A$  has intentionally caused. Moreover, if  $A$  performed  $\varphi$ , then this would cause some pain for herself.)

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official meta-criterion of rightness, META, does not involve any views about this but merely states a necessary and sufficient condition for an action being morally permissible:

S's performing  $\varphi$  is morally permissible if and only if there is no available alternative,  $\psi$ , 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)

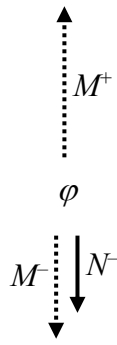


Figure 2. Case IV<sup>11</sup>

Assume that if one of either  $M^-$  and  $N^-$  were removed from Case IV, then  $\varphi$  would be morally required, i.e., that neither  $M^-$  nor  $N^-$  individually would succeed in defusing  $M^+$ . Even so, it plausibly is possible for them to, as it were, pool resources and successfully team up against  $M^+$ , such that the joint presence of both  $M^-$  and  $N^-$  makes it the case that  $M^+$  is prevented from making  $\varphi$  morally required.<sup>12</sup> Thus, I assume in what follows that, over and above individual moral reasons and non-moral reasons, *sets* containing moral and non-moral reasons are able to defuse as well.

Now for the second step. Recall that, as I have argued, non-moral reasons are not only able to defuse moral reasons, i.e., to prevent them from making actions morally required, but that

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<sup>11</sup> In this figure,  $N^-$  is depicted as less weighty than  $M^-$ . This is an optional feature of the case.

<sup>12</sup> Here is an additional consideration in support of the view that a moral and a non-moral reason against an action  $\varphi$  might *together* make it the case that a moral reason for  $\varphi$  is defused. Think about a case like Case IV, the only difference being that now both reasons against  $\varphi$  are non-moral. Assume that, in this case, the reasons against  $\varphi$  do not make it the case that the moral reason for  $\varphi$  is defused individually, but that they do so together. Assume now that the status of one of the two reasons against  $\varphi$  is changed from non-moral to moral. This transforms the case into Case IV. It is hard to see why that should matter with regard to whether the set of the reasons against  $\varphi$  makes it the case that the moral reason for  $\varphi$  is defused, provided that nothing else changes in the transition from one case to the other.

they can also prevent other non-moral reasons from defusing moral reasons. In view of this, and given that moral reasons also can defuse moral reasons, a natural question to ask is whether non-moral reasons can prevent *moral* reasons from defusing as well. Consider the following two cases:

*Case V.* There is a moral reason  $M^+$  for  $\varphi$ , and there is an equally weighty moral reason  $M^-$  against  $\varphi$ . (Assume, for instance, that if  $A$  performed  $\varphi$ , then this would save  $B$  from considerable pain. But it would massively frustrate  $C$ 's expectations that  $A$  has intentionally caused.)

*Case VI.* There is a moral reason  $M^+$ , and there is an equally weighty moral reason  $M^-$  against  $\varphi$ . Moreover, there is an equally weighty non-moral reason  $N^+$  for  $\varphi$ . (Assume, for instance, that if  $A$  performed  $\varphi$ , then this would save  $A$  and  $B$  from considerable pain. But it would massively frustrate  $C$ 's expectations that  $A$  has intentionally caused.)

Since the only reasons present in Case V are equally weighty moral reasons for and against  $\varphi$ ,  $\varphi$  plausibly is morally optional. The view about the roles of reasons introduced above suggests that this is so since  $M^-$  prevents  $M^+$  from making  $\varphi$  morally required, and  $M^+$  prevents  $M^-$  from making refraining from  $\varphi$  morally required, i.e., from making  $\varphi$  morally impermissible.

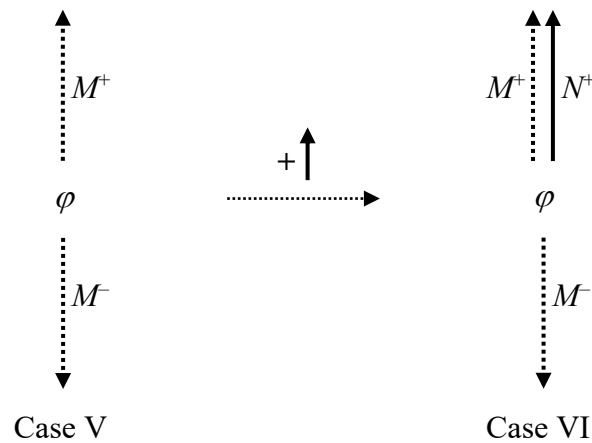


Figure 3. Setting up Case VI on the basis of Case V

Case VI can be thought of as the result of adding the non-moral reason  $N^+$  for  $\varphi$  to Case V (see Figure 3). Note that it is structurally similar to Case III, and recall that, as I have suggested, in Case III  $N^+$  prevents  $N^-$  from defusing  $M^+$ , such that  $M^+$  makes  $\varphi$  morally required. Can  $N^+$  in Case VI play the somewhat analogous role of preventing  $M^-$  from defusing  $M^+$ , such that  $\varphi$  ends up being morally required in this case as well? If  $N^+$  did have this normative effect in Case VI, then it would be possible for an action to be morally required, even though the moral reasons for it are not weightier than the moral reasons against it. But this, I submit, is conceptually impossible. Thus, in Case VI,  $N^+$  cannot prevent  $M^-$  from defusing  $M^+$ . More generally, while non-moral reasons for an action  $\varphi$  can, as I have argued, prevent *non-moral* reasons against  $\varphi$  from defusing moral reasons for  $\varphi$ , they are unable to prevent *moral* reasons against  $\varphi$  from defusing moral reasons for  $\varphi$ .

Now to the third step of completing the view outlined in Section 2. As I have argued, moral reasons, non-moral reasons, and sets of moral and non-moral reasons against an action  $\varphi$  all can defuse moral reasons for  $\varphi$ . Moreover, non-moral reasons for  $\varphi$  can prevent non-moral reasons against  $\varphi$  from defusing, but not moral reasons against  $\varphi$ . In view of this, a natural question to

ask is whether non-moral reasons can also prevent *sets* of moral and non-moral reasons from defusing. Consider the following case:

*Case VII.* There is a moral reason  $M^+$  for  $\varphi$ , and there is a moral reason  $M^-$  against  $\varphi$ . Moreover, there is a non-moral reason  $N^+$  for  $\varphi$  and a non-moral reason  $N^-$  against  $\varphi$ .  $M^+$  is weightier than each of  $M^-$  and  $N^-$ . (Assume, for instance, that if  $A$  performed  $\varphi$ , then this would save  $B$  from great pain, but it would frustrate  $C$ 's expectations that  $A$  has intentionally caused. Moreover, if  $A$  performed  $\varphi$ , then this would cause some pain for her now, but save her from even more significant pain later.)

Case VII can be thought of as the result of adding the non-moral reason  $N^+$  for  $\varphi$  to Case IV (see Figure 4).

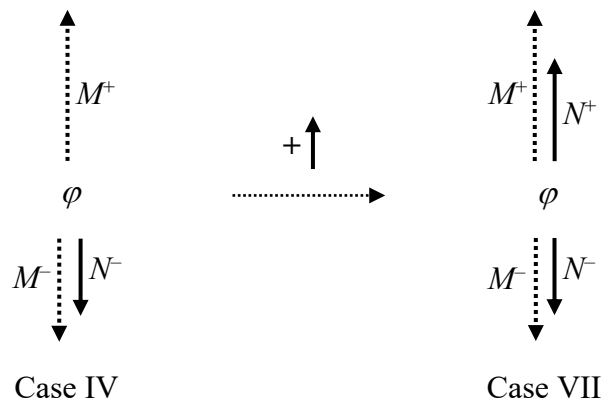


Figure 4. Setting up Case VII on the basis of Case IV<sup>13</sup>

Assume that, in Case IV, neither  $M^-$  nor  $N^-$  individually defuses  $M^+$ , but that they do so together – i.e., that they would do so in Case VII if  $N^+$  were not present. Is it possible that, in Case VII,  $N^+$  prevents the set of  $M^-$  and  $N^-$  from defusing  $M^+$ ? Plausibly, it is. After all, as per the

<sup>13</sup> In this figure,  $N^-$  is depicted as less weighty than  $M^-$ , and  $N^+$  is depicted as weightier than  $N^-$ . These are optional features of the case.

description of the case, neither  $M^-$  nor  $N^-$  is able to defuse  $M^+$  individually, so both  $M^-$  and  $N^-$  each need the help of the other in order for them to be able to do so jointly. But since a non-moral reason for  $\varphi$  is able to prevent a non-moral reason against  $\varphi$  from defusing, it is plausible that  $N^+$  also is able to prevent  $N^-$  from, as it were, contributing enough of what it takes for the set of  $M^-$  and  $N^-$  to defuse  $M^+$ . The point generalises: non-moral reasons for an action  $\varphi$  are able to not only prevent non-moral reasons against  $\varphi$  from defusing, but also to prevent *sets* of moral and non-moral reasons from doing so.

But this view needs to be qualified. To see why, consider a variant of Case IV in which  $M^-$  does defuse  $M^+$  without the additional help of  $N^-$ . In this case, the set containing  $M^-$  and  $N^-$  cannot be prevented from defusing  $M^+$ , since, plausibly, a non-moral reason can prevent a set of a moral and a non-moral reason from defusing only if the non-moral reason in the set is not idle, i.e., only if the moral reason needs the help of the non-moral reason in getting the set to be able to defuse. Only then does  $N^-$  play, as it were, an indispensable role in  $M^-$ 's and  $N^-$ 's joint potential to defuse  $M^+$ , and only then is it possible for  $N^+$  to prevent the set of  $M^-$  and  $N^-$  from defusing  $M^+$ .

This completes my account of the roles that reasons play in determining overall moral status in cases in which one could either take, or refrain from taking, an action  $\varphi$ , and in which there are maximally four reasons: two moral reasons, and two non-moral ones – one of each kind for and against  $\varphi$ . The paradigm case is Case VII: here,  $M^+$  can make  $\varphi$  morally required,  $M^-$  and  $N^-$  can, individually or in combination, defuse  $M^+$ , i.e., prevent  $M^+$  from making  $\varphi$  morally required, and  $N^+$  can prevent  $N^-$  or the set of  $M^-$  and  $N^-$  from defusing  $M^+$  – the latter only provided that, in this set,  $M^-$  is not able to defuse all by itself.

On to the fourth step, which is to generalise the account such that it covers two-option cases in which there are more than four reasons. There is a straightforward way of doing so. All one needs to do is to assume that sets of reasons can do the relevant normative work not only in the

specific cases discussed above, but quite generally, i.e., that sets of reasons are able to make required, defuse, or prevent from defusing. This is a plausible assumption to make: after all, it sometimes takes two or more moral reasons together to make an action required, while none of them would have done so individually; and analogously for the other normative roles of reasons distinguished before. (When individual reasons are construed as singletons, i.e., as sets of reasons with only one element, then the generalised account also covers cases of the sort discussed before.)

Assuming that the normative roles of reasons introduced before are played by sets of reasons also allows us to deal with the worry that extending the account to cover cases with more than one reason of the respective sort might lead to an implausible proliferation of the different roles that reasons can play. Consider, e.g., a case in which an action  $\varphi$  is favoured by a moral reason  $M^+$  and a non-moral reason  $N^+$ , and disfavoured by a non-moral reason  $N_1^-$ . The question of whether  $M^+$  makes  $\varphi$  morally required comes down to the question of whether  $N_1^-$  is able to defuse  $M^+$  and, if so, whether  $N^+$  prevents it from doing so. Assume that  $N^+$  does indeed prevent  $N_1^-$  from defusing  $M^+$ , such that  $M^+$  makes  $\varphi$  morally required. But now suppose that another non-moral reason  $N_2^-$  against  $\varphi$  is added. Plausibly, this might make it the case that  $\varphi$ 's overall moral status is morally optional, rather than required. But how? One worrisome thought is that  $N_2^-$  might be able to play a role that I have not introduced yet: that of preventing  $N^+$  from preventing  $N_1^-$  from defusing  $M^+$  – and that, in a similar vein, further roles need to be assumed when even more non-moral reasons are added. This would be an unattractive view.

But if the relevant normative work is being done by sets of reasons of the respective type, then there is no theoretical need for assuming that there are any such additional roles. In the pair of cases just considered, for instance, the addition of  $N_2^-$  can straightforwardly be

considered as a change in the set of the non-moral reasons against  $\varphi$  that potentially defuses.<sup>14</sup>

The account entails that it is because of this that adding  $N_2^-$  might affect  $\varphi$ 's overall moral status – and plausibly so. There is no need for yet another role of non-moral reasons.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the view that reasons play the three normative roles introduced above is, I submit, a sufficiently complete and detailed account of the ways in which reasons normatively interact in determining moral requirements in two-option cases.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> While the relevant sets in the original case are  $\{M^+\}$ ,  $\{N^+\}$ , and  $\{N_1^-\}$ , they can be construed as follows when  $N_2^-$  is added:  $\{M^+\}$ ,  $\{N^+\}$ ,  $\{N_1^-, N_2^-\}$ . Thus, assuming that we are talking about sets of reasons, both cases can be seen as instances of Case III.

<sup>15</sup> Analogous remarks apply to cases that result from adding a moral reason for an action to a case where another moral reason for the action was already present. Consider, e.g., a case in which an action  $\varphi$  is favoured by a moral reason  $M_1^+$  and disfavoured by a non-moral reason  $N^-$ . Assume that  $N^-$  defuses  $M_1^+$ . Now assume that an additional moral reason  $M_2^+$  for  $\varphi$  is added. Plausibly, this might make it the case that  $\varphi$ 's overall moral status is morally required, rather than optional. How can this be explained? One might be tempted to consider the view that  $M_2^+$  is able to prevent  $N^-$  from defusing  $M_1^+$ . But when the relevant sets of reasons are considered, there is, again, no need for this assumption: in the original case, the relevant sets are these:  $\{M_1^+\}$ ,  $\{N^-\}$ ; and when  $M_2^+$  is added, they are these:  $\{M_1^+, M_2^+\}$ ,  $\{N^-\}$ . When construed in this way, the addition of  $M_2^+$  results in a change in the set of the moral reasons for  $\varphi$  that potentially makes  $\varphi$  morally required. Thus, both cases can be considered as instances of Case I.

<sup>16</sup> In developing this account, I have disregarded the possibility of moral enticers, i.e., of reasons that morally favour actions, but that are not in the business of making them morally required. The view that there are enticing reasons that favour, but that are not ought-makers, is controversial. (It has been introduced and defended by Dancy 2004b; for a critique see, e.g., Robertson 2008). But even if there are enticing reasons and, in particular, if there are moral enticers, then this would not affect the substance of the view just defended. For it is implausible that enticing reasons play any further role, or roles, in determining moral requirements, over and above the three roles distinguished above. If there are enticing reasons, then this would therefore not affect the above account of the different ways in which reasons normatively interact. If there are moral enticers, then this would, of course, suggest relabelling the different sorts of reasons involved in determining overall moral status in a way that does justice to



#### *4. Reason-based explanations of moral requirements and of supererogation*

In this section, I suggest general accounts of how reasons determine moral requirements, and how reasons make it the case that actions are supererogatory, that reflect the different roles that reasons play in this.

Recall that, as I have argued, moral reasons can make actions morally required; moral reasons, non-moral reasons, and combinations of these, can defuse moral reasons, i.e., prevent them from making actions morally required; and non-moral reasons can prevent non-moral reasons and combinations of moral and non-moral reasons that can defuse moral reasons from doing so (subject to the proviso that a combination of moral and non-moral reasons can be prevented from defusing only if the non-moral reasons are not idle in this). In all these cases, it turned out to make sense to assume that sets of the respective reasons do the relevant normative work, in order to allow for cases in which individual reasons are not able to do it all on their own.

In view of this, the basic structure of a principled account of how reasons determine moral requirements is straightforward:

(MR<sub>1</sub>) An action  $\varphi$  is morally required if, and only if, and because it is favoured by moral reasons that are not defused (i.e., prevented from making morally required), i.e., either the reasons against  $\varphi$  are unable to defuse them, or they are able to defuse them, but are prevented from doing so by non-moral reasons for  $\varphi$ .

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the fact that moral enticers plausibly are moral reasons, even though they are not able to make actions morally required.

Here is how this can be stated in a more precise way:

(MR<sub>2</sub>) An action  $\varphi$  is morally required if, and only if, and because the set of moral reasons  $M^+$  for  $\varphi$  is non-empty and it is not defused, i.e., either (i) the set  $S^-$  of all (moral and/or non-moral reasons) against  $\varphi$  is unable to defuse  $M^+$ , or else (ii)  $S^-$  is able to defuse  $M^+$ , but  $S^-$  can be prevented from defusing (i.e., the moral reasons in  $S^-$  could not defuse entirely on their own), and the set  $N^+$  of non-moral reasons for  $\varphi$  prevents  $S^-$  from defusing  $M^+$ .<sup>17</sup>

This principle is an account of how reasons determine moral requirements that makes adequate room for the possibility of heroic supererogation – i.e., of actions that are not morally required, even though they are morally better than other morally permissible alternative options, and that would be morally required if they did not involve sacrifice. It can be seamlessly complemented by an account of such actions that takes up, and makes precise, their informal characterisation:

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<sup>17</sup> Two clarificatory remarks: first, from a logical point of view, the second conjunct in condition (ii) is redundant. Even so, it makes sense to separately note the condition that it is possible for  $S^-$  to be prevented from defusing; for this is not so if  $S^-$  only contains moral reasons. In this case, the question whether there are non-moral reasons that prevent  $S^-$  from defusing can be ignored. Second, here and in what follows I disregard the possibility that subsets of the sets referred to in (MR<sub>2</sub>) can do the relevant normative work. (Think, e.g., of a case of normative overdetermination in which  $\varphi$  is favoured by two moral reasons, each of which would suffice to make  $\varphi$  morally required.) Extending the account such that it covers these cases is philosophically straightforward, but requires adding technical details that it makes sense to avoid here, given the aims of this paper and its already significant complexity. The main issue is that once one allows for subsets of the sort just referred to play the relevant normative roles, one needs to make sure that the account does not return incorrect results in cases in which a set of reasons is less weighty than at least one of its proper subsets (for an example of this phenomenon, see Dancy 2004a: 15–16).

(Sup) An action  $\varphi$  is heroically supererogatory if, and only if, and because (i) the set of moral reasons  $M^+$  favouring  $\varphi$  is weightier than the set of moral reasons  $M^-$  against  $\varphi$ , and (ii) there is a set of reasons  $S^-$  against  $\varphi$  that defuses  $M^+$  (i.e.,  $S^-$  is able to defuse  $M^+$ , and  $S^-$  is not prevented from doing so).

Here is how this account reflects the elements of the informal characterisation of heroic supererogation. First, if (Sup) entails that an action  $\varphi$  is heroically supererogatory, then doing  $\varphi$  is morally better than refraining from  $\varphi$  in an obvious sense: the moral reasons for  $\varphi$  are weightier than those against  $\varphi$ . Second, (Sup) entails that a heroically supererogatory action  $\varphi$  is morally optional: since the moral reasons for  $\varphi$  are defused,  $\varphi$  is not morally required; and since the moral reasons against  $\varphi$  are not weightier than the moral reasons for  $\varphi$ ,  $\varphi$  is not morally impermissible. Third, (Sup) entails that non-moral factors play a crucial role in making it the case that an action  $\varphi$  is heroically supererogatory: since (Sup) entails that the moral reasons  $M^+$  for  $\varphi$  are defused, and the moral reasons  $M^-$  against  $\varphi$  (if there are any) are less weighty than  $M^+$ , these plausibly are not able to defuse all on their own, but need the help of non-moral reasons against  $\varphi$ .<sup>18</sup>

In suggesting (Sup) as an account of heroic supererogation that complements (MR<sub>2</sub>) in a way that is true to the relevant phenomena, I have relied on the view that normative relations

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<sup>18</sup> If there are no moral enticers (see note 3 above), then (Sup) covers all types of supererogation. If there are moral enticers, then there is a structurally different category of supererogation that plausibly encompasses, e.g., acts of small kindnesses. Since these do not involve great sacrifices, one might hold that the moral considerations favouring such actions do not make these morally required, even if there are no sufficiently weighty opposing factors such as sacrifice or effort. Horgan & Timmons (2010) go as far as claiming that the moral reasons involved in cases of supererogation always are of this kind. But this is at odds with what goes on in cases of heroic supererogation in which the action would be morally required if it did not involve effort or sacrifice (as pointed out, amongst others, by Archer 2016: 460).

such as “is morally better than” and “is able to defuse” can be spelled out in terms of the relative weight of the relevant reasons. As I now suggest, this view can also be used in further working out (MR<sub>2</sub>).

Plausibly, the set of reasons  $S^-$  against an action  $\varphi$  is not able to defuse the set of moral reasons  $M^+$  for  $\varphi$  if, and only if,  $M^+$  is weightier than  $S^-$ .<sup>19</sup> If the set of reasons  $S^-$  against  $\varphi$  is able to defuse  $M^+$ , then  $S^-$  can be prevented from doing so if, and only if, the moral reasons in  $S^-$  could not defuse all by themselves, i.e.,  $M^+$  is weightier than the moral reasons in  $S^-$ .

Assume now that the set of reasons  $S^-$  against  $\varphi$  is able to defuse  $M^+$ , and that it is possible for  $S^-$  to be prevented from defusing. When does the set of non-moral reasons  $N^+$  for  $\varphi$  in fact prevent  $S^-$  from defusing? Plausibly, this is so if, and only if, the union of  $M^+$  and  $N^+$  is weightier than  $S^-$ , since then, and only then, is  $M^+$  weightier than what remains from  $S^-$  once  $N^+$  is factored in, so to speak.

Complementing (MR<sub>2</sub>) with these views about when the relevant conditions are fulfilled results in the following principle:

(MR<sub>3</sub>) An action  $\varphi$  is morally required if, and only if, and because the set of moral reasons  $M^+$  for  $\varphi$  is non-empty and it is not defused, i.e., either (i) the set  $S^-$  of (moral and/or non-moral reasons) against  $\varphi$  is unable to defuse  $M^+$  (i.e.,  $M^+$  is weightier than  $S^-$ ), or else (ii)  $S^-$  is able to defuse  $M^+$ , but  $S^-$  can be prevented from defusing (i.e.,  $M^+$  is weightier

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<sup>19</sup> Here, and in what follows, I assume that the “weightier than”-relation holds between sets of reasons. (This assumption reflects the fact that it often is appropriate to hold, e.g., that “the reasons for  $\varphi$  are weightier than the reasons against  $\varphi$ ”.) Strictly speaking, I assume that the “weightier than”-relation is a partial ordering on sets of reasons (as suggested by Schroeder 2007: 127). This assumption is not tied either to the view that it is always possible to compare two sets of reasons with regard to weight, or to specific, and potentially controversial, views about reason aggregation.

than the set of moral reasons in  $S^-$ ), and the set  $N^+$  of non-moral reasons for  $\varphi$  prevents  $S^-$  from defusing  $M^+$  (i.e., the union of  $M^+$  and  $N^+$  is weightier than  $S^-$ ).<sup>20</sup>

In my argument leading up to principles (MR<sub>1</sub>)–(MR<sub>3</sub>), I have, for presentational reasons, discussed cases in which one faces the choice between taking, or not taking, some single action  $\varphi$ . But the account can straightforwardly be made to cover more-option cases. In order to do so, it should be assumed that the reasons that potentially defuse the set of moral reasons for an action  $\varphi$  are not only the reasons against  $\varphi$  (i.e., the reasons for not- $\varphi$ ), but the reasons for any incompatible alternative to  $\varphi$ . Accordingly modifying (MR<sub>3</sub>) yields:

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<sup>20</sup> According to this view, the set of moral reasons for an action makes the action morally required – i.e., is not defused – if, and only if, it wins out against all its competitors. This entails that only one of two competing sets of moral reasons can make an action required. This, in turn, rules out the possibility of moral dilemmas, if these are understood as cases in which two incompatible options both are morally required.

I find this an attractive feature of the account. It results from the fact that the account, as I have introduced it, comes with a relatively strong conception of what it takes for moral reasons to make an action required, and, correspondingly, with a relatively liberal conception of what it takes for moral reasons to be defused: in order for a set of moral reasons  $M$  to be defused by a set of reasons  $D$ , it just has to be the case that  $M$  is not weightier than  $D$ . Thus, for a set of moral reasons  $M$  to be defused, it is sufficient that the competing set of reasons  $D$  is, weight-wise, incomparable to, or on a par with,  $M$  (on incomparability vs. parity, see Chang 2002). This observation suggests that there is a less liberal conception of defusing (and, correspondingly, a stronger conception of making required) that those who want to leave room for the possibility of moral dilemmas might want to embrace. According to this conception, a set of moral reasons  $M$  is defused only when the defusing set of reasons is at least as weighty as, or weightier than,  $M$ . When conjoined with this conception of defusing, the account does not rule out moral dilemmas, provided that it is possible for two competing sets of moral reasons to be, weight-wise, incomparable or on a par. In such a case – assuming that no other reasons are present – neither of the two sets of moral reasons defuses the other, and each makes the action it favours morally required (this generalises and reformulates a point made by Sinnott-Armstrong 1985).

(MR<sub>4</sub>) An action  $\phi$  is morally required if, and only if, and because the set of moral reasons  $M$  for  $\phi$  is non-empty and it is not defused, i.e., for each incompatible alternative  $\psi$  to  $\phi$ , either (i) the set  $S$  of (moral and/or non-moral reasons) for  $\psi$  is unable to defuse  $M$  (i.e.,  $M$  is weightier than  $S$ ), or else (ii)  $S$  is able to defuse  $M$ , but  $S$  can be prevented from defusing (i.e.,  $M$  is weightier than the set of moral reasons in  $S$ ), and the set  $N$  of non-moral reasons for  $\phi$  prevents  $S$  from defusing  $M$  (i.e., the union of  $M$  and  $N$  is weightier than  $S$ ).<sup>21</sup>

Principle (MR<sub>4</sub>) is an account of moral requirements that covers all types of situations. To be sure, (MR<sub>4</sub>) leaves open substantive normative issues, but this is as it should be. The ambition of this paper was to come up with a principled view about how reasons determine moral requirements that is sufficiently textured to reflect the different roles that reasons play in

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<sup>21</sup> Principle (MR<sub>4</sub>) entails Portmore's principle META quoted in note 10 above. For obvious reasons, the converse does not hold: (MR<sub>4</sub>), as opposed to META, not only states individually necessary and collectively sufficient conditions for an action being morally required, but is 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.

A close relative of Portmore's META is Daniel Muñoz' "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)

Muñoz' principle also does not involve explanatory claims. And like Portmore's META, it can be interpreted such that it is consistent with, and indeed an implication of, my (MR<sub>4</sub>). In order for this to be so, the weight of a prerogative to choose  $y$ , rather than  $x$ , would need to be made a function of the non-moral reasons for  $y$  and those for  $x$ . While this is one possible way to go in principle, it is inconsistent with Muñoz' view that, when it comes to determining an option's overall moral status, the relevant work is not done by two kinds of reasons, but by "just one kind of reason – which tends to favour, 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).

determining overall moral status, but that also is sufficiently uncommitted to cohere with as large a class of first-order ethical views as possible.

## *5. Conclusion*

In this paper, I have discussed how to work out the view that moral requirements are determined by reasons, and I have introduced and defended a novel version of this view that involves a detailed account of the different normative roles that reasons play in determining the overall moral status of actions.

While other, related accounts work with the assumption that, when pursuing this project, one needs to distinguish two different roles of reasons – a requiring and a preventive one – I have argued that there is a third role of reasons that one needs to take into account: while non-moral reasons cannot make actions morally required, they can nevertheless play an essential role in making it the case that an action is morally required. They can do so since they can prevent reasons that are able to prevent moral reasons from making actions morally required from doing so.

Starting out from these views, I have worked out a detailed account of the different ways in which reasons can normatively interact in determining overall moral status. On the basis of this, I have suggested and defended an account that specifies the conditions under which, and the normative mechanisms because of which, moral reasons make actions morally required or else are prevented from doing so.

Further working out the view that I have suggested involves showing that it adequately covers cases that are more complex than the relatively straightforward ones I have discussed in

this paper,<sup>22</sup> and that it can be coherently embedded in a more comprehensive account that covers other normative phenomena as well, including, in particular, the all-things-considered practical ought. I am optimistic that this can be done.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Here, I specifically have in mind several puzzling cases involving supererogation, in particular the ones described by Kamm (1985), Dorsey (2013), Horton (2017), and Muñoz/Pummer (2022).

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