

Not by Reasons Alone

by

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Thesis Abstract

My thesis is a sustained argument that the practical reason is not a suitable master concept in ethics, let alone the only ethical notion we need.

In Chapter One, I defend the idea that desires have irreducible and pervasive normative significance. More particularly, I defend reasons internalism – the claim that desires are a necessary condition on practical reasons – by developing a new version of this thesis. In this version, desires serve to veto practical reasons, which are in turn grounded in objective values. I argue that this compatibilist picture provides an account of self-interested reasons which is intuitively superior to its purely objectivist rivals.

In Chapter Two, I argue that evaluative notions are distinct from prescriptive notions, which reasons talk is meant to encode. According to my account, it is partly constitutive of wickedness (an evaluative notion) that the wicked person lacks moral reasons – understood as the basis for potentially apt prescriptions – to mend his ways. For some people, I suggest, are deaf to moral instructions in something close to a literal sense. I argue on this basis that the distinction between evaluative and prescriptive ‘oughts,’ and the attendant possibility of iterating them, vindicates internalism about moral reasons too. A solution to Chisholm’s paradox is a welcome fringe benefit.

In Chapter Three, I begin to develop an alternative to prevailing reasons-based conceptions of ethics, by focusing on social relationships, such as friendship. I argue that agents can behave decently by being guided by implicitly normative concepts like friendship, which contain codes of conduct like “Friends help each other out,” and “You don’t snitch on your friends.” Such ‘do’s and don’ts’ and the corresponding concepts enable agents to behave well instinctively, even when they believe they have no reason to do so. I argue further that recognizing who someone is – i.e., the social relationship in which they stand to you – can be action-guiding and even mandating. I argue that this kind of social awareness is a viable alternative to positing intuitive responsiveness to reasons, and defend the idea that it underwrites a form of practical necessity worthy of the name.

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