The Triplism of Practical Reason

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Draft 1.1

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There can be reasons for belief, for action, and for feeling. In each case, knowledge of such reasons requires non-empirical knowledge of some truths about them: these will be truths about what there is reason to believe, to feel, or to do – either outright or on condition of certain facts obtaining. Call these a priori truths about reasons, ‘norms’. Norms are a priori true propositions about reasons.

It’s an epistemic norm that if something’s a good explanation that’s a reason to believe it. It’s an evaluative norm that if someone’s cheated you that’s a reason to be annoyed with them. There are many evaluative norms, relating to a variety of feelings. Equally, there may be various epistemic norms, even though in this case they all relate to belief. My concern here however is with practical norms: a priori truths about what there is reason to do.

I have a suggestion about what fundamental practical norms there are, which I would like to describe and explain. It is that there are just three distinct kinds of practical norm governing what there is reason to do – three categories or formal sources of practical normativity, one may say. I’ll call them the Bridge principle, the principle of Good, and the Demand principle – Bridge, Good and Demand for short. Much more could be said about this suggestion (I may have said at least as much about it, elsewhere, as anyone would want to hear1). Here my aim is simply to summarise for purposes of discussion. I’ll set out the three practical norms and then discuss some questions to which this ‘triplism of practical reason’2 gives rise. In particular, since these norms are about practical reasons, not about morality, a question I’ll touch on is how moral obligation comes onto the scene.

1. The Bridge principle
Sentimentalism about practical reasons says that reasons for action are grounded on the feelings. A currently influential way of developing it is that of Hume, or ‘neo-Hume,’ on reason and the passions. Neo-Humeanism says that there cannot be reasons for feelings; however one’s actual feelings constitute reasons for actions. This may not have been what Hume really thought, since it’s not clear that he thought there were (really) reasons for actions either. However that may be, it is not this kind of sentimentalism that I want to consider and in part accept. The idea that interests me is that reasons for action can be based on reasons for feeling. It is closer to Adam Smith, in The Theory of the Moral Sentiments. Smith holds that we approve or disapprove of sentiments according to whether we think them ‘proper’ to their objects. Or as I would say, the way we judge whether there is reason for someone to feel something is by considering the relation of the feeling, including its strength, to its object. So, for example, there is good reason to feel proud of winning a difficult competition, but no reason to feel proud of staying in bed long after the alarm clock has gone. There is reason to be annoyed with the person who cheated you (though perhaps not very annoyed, if the cheating was small), but not with the person who through no fault of their own disturbed your reverie.

If there’s reason to be annoyed with the cheat, there’s reason to remonstrate. There’s reason to remonstrate because there is reason to be annoyed, whether or not one actually is annoyed – the reason in question is the fact that one has been cheated. This is an instance of a general pattern which I call the Bridge principle.3 We could say that the principle forms a bridge from what there is reason to feel to what there is reason to do.

All feelings tend to manifest in characteristic behaviour. In particular, many feelings dispose

1 In my book, The Domain of Reasons, Oxford 2010. Hereafter referred to as Domain. This paper summarises some main themes in its ethical section, esp. chs 11, 13 & 14.
2 Thanks to Roger Crisp for this phrase.
3 I’ve proposed this principle on two previous occasions at this conference, once in discussing Sidgwick’s dualism, and once in discussing the notion of a person’s good. My excuse for presenting it again is that here I’m considering its role within practical reason as a whole.
to intentional actions that are distinctive to the particular feeling. This does not apply to all feelings; joy, for example, doesn’t seem to prompt to any characteristic action, as against involuntary behavioural expression. The Bridge principle applies to that narrower class of feelings which have a characteristic propensity to prompt one to some type of intentional action. A first stab at it is this:

(1) If there’s reason for \( x \) to feel \( \phi \) there’s reason for \( x \) to do what feeling \( \phi \) characteristically disposes one to do—the ‘\( \phi \)-prompted action’.

Here are some examples. Out of sheer goodness of heart, someone does me an unrequested good turn. That fact certainly gives me reason to feel grateful. And because I have reason to feel grateful to him for his good turn, I have reason to act from that gratitude, for example by thanking him or giving him a present or by returning the favour. These are various forms of the characteristic intentional action to which gratitude prompts. Suppose on the other hand that he did me some undeserved harm. In that case I have good reason to feel resentful. And because I have reason to feel resentment I have reason to express that resentment, by recrimination, insistence on apology or even by seeking amends. Likewise, if there’s reason to be frightened of something then there’s reason to avoid it; if there’s reason to be bored by something then there’s reason not to attend to it. Avoidance and attention-withdrawal are the characteristic actions prompted by fear and boredom. Fear may also root one to the spot, boredom may make one yawn; but these are involuntary responses, not intentional actions. (Yawning intentionally would be an action for which there might be reason, such as drawing attention, somewhat discourteously, to the fact that one is bored. But that is not a practical reason generated by the Bridge principle for boredom.)

The Bridge principle is stated in terms of specific reasons, not overall or sufficient reasons. It’s not true, for example, that if there is sufficient reason to be frightened there is sufficient reason to run away. There may be all sorts of other reasons not to run away. Equally, there may also be reasons to do the \( \phi \)-prompted action other than the one captured by the Bridge Principle. For example there is often reason to thank just because thanking is an ‘expression’ of gratitude. It is not true, by contrast, that there is a reason to run away because running away is an ‘expression’ of fear. Running away is not usually an expression of fear, in this sense of ‘expression’. That is, it is not done in order to convey to others that one is afraid. The extra reason, in the case of gratitude, is that conveying that one feels the sentiment can be an appropriate thing to do in its own right—an important part of social reciprocity and co-operation. In the case of resentment, or boredom, the very same consideration may give reason not to express, show, what one feels. In all cases however the reason that comes via the Bridge Principle remains.

(1) is a conditional. It does not entail

(1a) the fact that there’s reason for \( x \) to feel \( \phi \) is a reason for \( x \) to do what feeling \( \phi \) prompts one to do.

Is this stronger claim true? Consider a gratitude-blind person: the emotion of gratitude is simply absent from his emotional repertoire and he thus has no conception of what a reason for gratitude is. Is there nevertheless reason for him to do a gratitude-prompted thing such as saying ‘thank you’? There might be other reasons for him to do that, for example of prudence, but he could not act on the Bridge-based reason, namely, the practical reason based simply on the fact that there is reason to be grateful.

There is Bridge-based reason to thank because there is a reason to feel grateful—in virtue of there being reason to feel grateful. That is not quite captured by (1a). It is not, for example, the mere existential fact that there is reason for me to feel grateful that constitutes a reason for me to say thank you. The facts that you have done me a good turn is both a reason to feel grateful and a reason to thank you: it is a reason to thank you in virtue of being a reason to feel grateful to you. I know it’s a reason to thank you because I know it’s a reason to feel grateful. Thus we have the following statement of the Bridge Principle:

(2) (Bridge principle): Whatever facts give \( x \) reason to feel \( \phi \) give \( x \) reason to do the \( \phi \)-prompted action, in virtue of being a reason to feel \( \phi \).

(2) entails (1) but not vice versa. According to (2) the facts in question would not be a Bridge-based reason for \( x \) to do a \( \phi \)-prompted action if they were not a reason for \( x \) to feel \( \phi \). They constitute the practical reason in virtue of constituting the evaluative reason. In general a Bridge-based practical reason exists in virtue of the existence of an underlying evaluative reason.

What is the status of the Bridge principle? I submit that it is a priori but I do not claim that it is true by any definition. Rather, for each action-prompting feeling or sentiment, \( \phi \), to grasp the nature of \( \phi \), in particular its proper intentional object, is to grasp the principle for that instance. Our understanding of the nature of feelings and their essential relation to their objects is ineliminably

\[ \phi \]

\[ \]
though of course not wholly, normative. Emotions have their own hermeneutic principles, constitutively linking the reasons for them and for the actions they prompt with their intentional objects.

This is how practical reasons are grounded in evaluative reasons (when they are). One knows that these facts are a reason to thank someone by understanding what gratitude is, hence knowing them to be reasons to feel grateful and understanding the link between gratitude and thanks. What we discuss in ordinary conversation when we discuss Bridge-based practical reasons is not the Bridge Principle—that is too obvious to interest us; what interests us, typically, is exactly what there is reason to feel.

What then about the epistemology of evaluative reasons? I take the epistemic ground of pure propositions about reason relations of all three kinds—epistemic and practical as well as evaluative—to consist in spontaneous or natural psychological dispositions. They are dispositions to believe or act in the case of epistemic or practical norms, dispositions to feel in the case of evaluative norms. This is a psychologistic, as against an intuitionistic, epistemology of the normative. What a person feels, what that person would feel under various conditions, the circumstances in which others would be disposed to feel similarly—these are the ultimate criteria of what there is reason to feel that we appeal to, and there are no others. Analogously for epistemic and practical norms. The epistemology of the normative is the epistemology of a reflective equilibrium of spontaneous dispositions reached through discussion with others.

In calling this epistemology psychologistic, as against intuitionistic, I mean that is eschews any appeal to a purported receptive faculty of intuition by means of which we know pure truths about reason relations. However, it is not psychologistic in the sense of being reductive. Dispositions are the ultimate criteria, or epistemic grounds, of what there is reason to believe, feel or do—they do not constitute what there is reason to believe, feel or do. Nothing constitutes reason relations. They do not have a ‘constitution’, as naturalistic realists about the normative would think they have to have. Propositions about reasons relations are not propositions ‘about’ psychological facts—but neither are they propositions ‘about’ substantive non-natural facts.5

2 Impartiality.

One might hold that the Bridge principle is the sole source of practical reasons. That would be a kind of sentimentalism about practical reason as such (and not just about value), though quite different to the ‘neo-Humean’ kind. To highlight the difference, we can distinguish two theses about sentiment and reason:

a. Practical norms determine what there is reason for you to do irrespective of what you actually feel.

b. Practical norms determine what there is reason for you to do irrespective of what there is actually reason for you to feel.

Unlike neo-Humean sentimentalists I accept (a). But unlike Kant (who believed in reasons to feel no more than Hume did), I reject (b), since I endorse Bridge. However that is not to disagree with a very important positive doctrine in Kant’s ethics: namely, that as well as sentiments there is such a thing as will, and unconditional willing. If we accept that we must accept that sentimentalism cannot give a full account of practical reasons, even if it gives us a full account of aesthetic and ethical value. For we now have to take into account the normative significance of dispositions of the will, in particular, unconditional or disinterested dispositions of the will.

Dispositions to action often arise from affective dispositions, which prompt the will to action by giving rise to feelings. Corresponding at the normative level to this psychological sequence we have the Bridge principle. If there are other practical norms, norms that escape a sentimentalist account, their epistemic basis can only be the spontaneous dispositions of a will insofar as it is not influenced by sentiment. These unconditional or disinterested dispositions provide, I believe, the epistemetic grounds of two fundamental norms of impartiality—Good and Demand.

Sentimentalists have always had trouble with impartiality. Not that sentimentalism excludes agent-neutral reasons as such: patient-neutral sentiments such as admiration and blame, for example, give rise to agent-neutral practical reasons via the Bridge principle. It makes sense to talk about impartial admiration, and impartial blame, and the requirement that practices of reward and punishment should be impartial is founded on the patient-neutrality of these evaluative reasons. The difficulty is, rather, that the more ‘cosmopolitan’ impartial standpoints rightly highlighted by Kantians and utilitarians—universal and impartial respect, or concern—do not seem to be underpinned by any such

5 I defend these assertions in *Domain*, Part IV.
patient-neutral sentiment. Sympathy is not impartial, however wide. Benevolence, taken literally, is not a sentiment but a disposition of the good will.

It is in impartial standpoints such as these that rationalism is at its strongest. That some element of ‘cosmopolitan’ impartiality features in our evaluative and practical thinking is undeniable, even though fixing its role is a much more debateable matter. How then could a sentimentalist provide epistemic grounds for it? A possible route is to argue that impartial principles are not fundamental. Impartial reasons must rather be introduced at a derived level, for example through a contractarian or eudaimonist route. But for familiar, if controversial, reasons I do not think such derivations of impartiality can succeed. We should simply accept that the epistemic ground of impartiality is not sentiment but disinterested will.6

Kant’s Universal Law Formulation contains a famously suggestive idea that can help us. It is the idea of what you can will:

Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.7

I shall bypass, with a loud gulp, an enormous amount of discussion about what Kant did mean, or should have meant, by the idea of what you can will. I’ll read it psychologically as simply denoting what you can, in fact, will, what the dispositions or powers of the will actually are. And I’ll add the assumption that you can, in fact, will unconditionally (i.e. not via dispositions of feeling leading to dispositions of the will) and thus disinterestedly – that the will has this power.8

We can approach the idea of a disinterested will by asking whether there is anything, and if so what, that one can will without knowledge of the content of reason-supported ends, one’s own or those of others, to work on. If there is something that would be willed in these circumstances, then it would still be willed by anyone who wills disinterestedly, even when knowledge of their particular reason-supported ends (the ones derived by the Bridge principle) is fed back in.

The question can be illustrated by a thought-experiment. You are contemplating a world of people that does not include you. All you know about them is that they are pursuing some objectives they should pursue, in ways they should follow. (So by the categoricity of morality, discussed in section 6, they are not seeking to do anything morally wrong.) You have some green buttons you can press, one per person, to assist them to achieve their ends. You have some red buttons you can press, one per person, to frustrate their pursuit. Pressing any of these buttons has no other effect. You know nothing else; in particular you know nothing about who these people are or any relation they might have to you, or about your own current inclinations. Is there anything you can will? Is there anything there is still reason for you to will?

I think there is a spontaneous disposition to press as many green buttons as you can, chosen at random if you can’t press them all, and not to press any red buttons. Furthermore this disposition is in harmony with a corresponding normative disposition – to take that as what there is reason to do. This is the kind of normative harmony that plays into the reflective equilibrium I appealed to above.

If this is so, then that is what a self-determining will can will purely as disinterested, before any further material is brought in that might give it further reasons for action. Putting it another way, the self-determining will accepts that achievement by anyone of their reason-supported goals has value not just for them, agent-relative value, but agent-neutral value, value ‘in itself.’ It is good in itself that people should achieve their reason-supported goals. There is agent-neutral reason to press the green buttons, chosen impartially.

6 Smith makes room for impartiality. The famous impartial spectator is not a hypothetical construct but the ‘imagined man within’. This is a departure from the sentimentalism of the Bridge principle: in effect disinterested will is brought into play by one’s own impartial or detached reflection: ‘the imagined man within’ is the voice of one’s own conative disposition.

7 Groundwork, IV 421

8 It is plausible that Kant himself made these assumptions, and further, that he thought that a free or self-determining will is by definition a will capable of disinterested willing (capable of freeing itself from its own affective interests). If that is right it helps a little to make sense of his claim that the Categorical Imperative follows by “mere analysis of the concept of freedom” (Groundwork IV 447; cp the Critique of Practical Reason, V 31), though the step from disinterested to good will, and even more obviously, to substantive moral principles, remains non-analytic. To be sure, in a naturalistic psychology (as against Kant’s transcendental psychology), talk of ‘the’ will and its powers is something we have to justify, presumably by an idealization on the wills of empirical individuals and their particular powers that gives us the notion of a human ethical disposition. This is another issue I’m bypassing.
Compare the view of Sidgwickian rational egoists. In this thought-experiment, they will say, there is no reason for you to press any buttons at all, green or red. They agree, to be sure, that your interests have no absolute importance just because they are yours. But that is because they deny that anything has importance in that sense – an importance that is not agent-relative. Your interests have rational importance for you; my interests have rational importance for me. There are no agent-neutral ends.

In disagreeing with that response, I am certainly not claiming that reasons can be shown to be fundamentally agent-neutral – for example by deriving that conclusion from the very notion of a reason (as Kant may have thought it was possible to do). Nor do I believe that they are so. Once you bring knowledge about your inclinations and relations to other people back into the picture, you will almost certainly bring back agent-relative reasons. Your Bridge-based reasons represent the claims of ‘particularity’ – the reasons particular to the emotional being you are. So I am by no means claiming that the self-determining will only acts from agent-neutral reasons. What I do claim, however, is that when we focus on whether there is anything that a self-determining will can will purely unconditionally, without reference to further facts about its own evaluative reasons, we find that there is indeed still something it can will, and that something is the achievement of any being’s reason-supported ends as such. This is what it is still disposed to will when it abstracts from its own particular concerns.9 The moment of impartiality that is (on this view) contained in the will exercises a constraint or counter-influence of some form on our pursuit of our other reason-supported ends.

Among the spontaneous dispositions of a self-determining will there are disinterested dispositions which in certain circumstances can structure or frame all other practical dispositions. That, we can now say, is the sense in which we should ask whether we can will our maxim to be a universal law: we are asking whether we can will it in the presence of those pure or disinterested dispositions, which are the spontaneous disinterested dispositions of a self-determining will as such.

3. The principle of Good.
Our thought-experiment exhibits the epistemic ground of a principle of Good as consisting in certain purely disinterested dispositions of a self-determining will. I shall suggest in the next section that a distinct principle underlying rights also has an epistemic basis in certain other such dispositions, but for the moment let us focus on Good.

For this it will be useful to introduce some terms. An end is a state of affairs which there is (neutral or relative) reason to ‘promote’ – i.e. to produce, bring about, maintain, protect. If the fact that an action will promote a state of affairs is a complete reason to do it, that state of affairs is a final end. Where the final end is a state of affairs that can be said to hold more or less, to a greater or lesser amount, degree, extent, etc. then by definition of ‘final end’ there is more reason, pro tanto, to promote a greater amount than a lesser. Thus if happiness (be it yours, or everyone’s) is a final end, there is specific reason to produce more rather than less.

Finally, the fact that an action will promote a final end is a telic reason to do it.

Not all reasons are telic. Consider saying thank you, or clapping. There can be a complete specific reason to thank or clap, even if there is no reason to do so in order to promote some state of affairs. Suppose there is indeed reason to admire. Then that is a complete reason to clap but not a telic reason. I am not clapping in order to bring about the final end of my having expressed my admiration, any more than when I do something to keep a promise I am doing it to promote the final end of my having kept a promise. There can be telic reasons to clap: I might clap because your parents will reward me if they hear me clapping your performance, and being rewarded by them contributes to one of my final ends. Or again I might clap in order to make someone happy, that being my final end.10

There are many other examples of non-telic reasons. In particular, an action done purely out of respect for others’ rights is done for a non-telic reason. Respect for others’ rights is not, in the sense we have just introduced, based on an end; it is, as will be argued in the next section, based on a demand. True, I may do or avoid doing something in order not to violate a right; but I don’t thereby do

9 Note that the thought-experiment is not an appeal to what a ‘rational’ agent would choose behind a veil of ignorance. It directly elicits a conative disposition: the disposition of the good will.

10 Could we say that clapping (e.g.) is bringing about the state of oneself clapping, and that whenever one claps intentionally, one does it in order to bring about that state? It is false that α-ing is bringing about the state of oneself α-ing. Suppose I push a button which activates a mechanism that causes me to clap, in order to bring about the state of myself clapping. That action (pushing the button) is not redescribable as clapping. As the example indicates, bringing about a state is doing something that causes that state to obtain. But clapping is not doing something that causes the state of oneself clapping to obtain. A fortiori, it is not doing something in order to bring about the state of oneself clapping.
it in order to bring about the end-state of my not violating a right. An agent may have telic reasons not to violate rights: for example I might be trying to show you that I’m capable of not violating some particular right, in order to promote some end I have. But respect for rights as such is not a telic reason.

Bridge-based reasons can be telic or non-telic. The Bridge-based reason to clap an admirable performance is non-telic; but (to take a salient case) a Bridge-based reason to seek the satisfaction of one’s reason-supported desires is telic. Reason-supported desires generate final ends that there is agent-relative reason to pursue, so these are telic reasons.

In the green/red button experiment, the will pursues agent-neutral final ends. Now let’s call the system of agent-neutral final ends, that is, of agent-neutral telic reasons and their strengths, the Good. In calling it a system I assume no more (but no less) than that some states of affairs are Better than others, i.e. that total incommensurability does not prevail, and that that is often enough true to make evaluating the relative overall Goodness of outcomes a frequently important element in correct practical deliberation, rather than always a pointless one. In other words, I assume that possible outcomes of actions fall often enough into an ordering by the Betterness relation to affect what one should do.

A welfarist view of Good states that the good of any individual is an agent-neutral final end and that nothing else is; further, that no one individual counts more than another in determining the Good. Welfarism is (I believe) the plausible core of the utilitarian tradition. Of course, when we seek to fill it out things rapidly get more controversial. There are various views of the substantive content of personal good, and various accounts of how the strength of welfarist reasons is determined. Impartiality does not dictate any one particular distributive structure. Welfarism only says that Good is some positive and impartial function of the good of all individuals and of nothing else. It accommodates a broad class of positions.

It is a substantive view which can be contested: one might hold, for example, that the preservation of great works of art or of natural beauty is a final end, irrespective of the good of individuals. Or that excellence is. To me, however, such views seem implausible once the distinctions appropriate to a sentimentalist account of value have been made. Works of art, works of nature, human beings, can be admirable by virtue of their beauty or excellence. They are then admirable in themselves, irrespective of any contribution they make to other valuable things. If a thing is admirable there is reason to admire it. That generates reasons to act appropriately via the Bridge principle. It does not follow that it generates any final ends – states of affairs there is telic reason to promote. Beauty, as against the experience of beauty, is not in this sense a final end unless it links into something there is reason to desire and thereby generates telic reasons. Likewise excellence is admirable, but unless it also becomes desirable there is no reason to pursue it.

Thus a welfarist conception of the Good seems to me to be correct, and firmly founded in the disinterested disposition of good will, together with an account of personal good in terms of what there is reason to desire. However our discussion here does not require us to accept or reject welfarism as such. The essential point is only that there is such a thing as the Good – i.e. that there is a system of agent-neutral final ends sufficient to generate a value ordering of states of affairs that is often applicable to the question what to do.

We can then state the principle of Good:

\[ \text{(Principle of Good)} \text{ the fact that } \alpha \text{ promotes Good is a complete reason to } \alpha \text{, proportionate in strength to the degree to which } \alpha \text{ promotes Good.} \]

I take this principle to be, along with the Bridge principle, one of the basic normative sources of practical reasons. (Given the definition of Good, the only substantive claim this formal principle makes is that Good exists. “If the Good exists there is reason to promote it” is analytic.)

Pure utilitarianism, understood as a doctrine about practical reasons, says more than this. It holds that the principle of Good (in some concrete version of it or another) is the one and only normative source of practical reasons. Hence the sole fact that gives sufficient reason to \( \alpha \)-ing promotes most Good. The best, most choice-worthy action is the one that promotes most Good, taking

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11 We can say that my 'aim’ is to avoid violating a right. Every action has an aim, in that neutral sense, even though not every action (pace Aristotle) is done ‘for the sake of some end’. My aim in clapping is to convey my admiration; it is not done (usually) in order to bring about the state of my having conveyed my admiration.

12 Mill, for example, would have lost little that mattered to his ethics (as against his historical and political self-image) had he explicitly given up the hedonist and total-maximising elements of his position. But he would have been a very different kind of moral philosopher if he had given up a welfarist idea of the Good – or the specifically utilitarian conception of the role of the Good in practical reason that we are about to consider.
into account objective propensities of actions where these exist, in whatever is the right way to do so (and allowing that there may be more than one best action).

This very strong view says that all practical reasons are Good-based, that is, that when spelled out they are instances of the principle of Good. We have already disagreed with it, by accepting that some practical reasons are Bridge-based.

4 The Demand principle.

However we have still to consider the fundamental moral category of rights - and that brings me to my third and final principle of practical reason: the Demand principle. It too is an impartial principle, epistemically based on the disinterested will. And because rights consist in the permissibility of demands, it is the normative source of the theory of rights. The Demand principle says that if it is morally permissible for a person to demand that others act in a certain way that very fact is a sufficient reason for them to do so, unless they have the person’s permission not to.

The notion of demand features systematically in our moral thinking. Suppose, for example, that this is your computer and you have not given me permission to use it. In that case I shouldn’t use it without asking you. Equally, it is morally permissible for you to demand that I do not use it without asking you. (Absent special circumstances – let’s take that for granted.) Likewise, when I have promised to meet you at a given time, you are permitted to demand that I do. Suppose, in contrast, that you would like me to meet you even though I have not agreed to do so (and I am not your employee, etc.). You are permitted to request but not permitted to demand that I do. Or suppose that your computer has broken down and I happen to know how to mend it. In some circumstances, where your need is great and the distraction from my own projects small, I may even have a moral obligation of assistance to come over and mend it. But most of us would say that you are not permitted to demand, as against request, that I do. To issue a demand where the other has at most a moral obligation, as against a right-based duty, is, precisely, presumptuous: presuming to a right you do not have.

A demand is thus something stronger than a mere request. Demand is conceptually linked to the permissibility of some form of compulsion or exaction: a permissible demand is a request that it is morally permissible to enforce. I do not mean that it is actually possible to enforce it; we may intelligibly demand the return of hostages even if we have no power to enforce it. And of course enforcement, compulsion, exaction don’t necessarily take the form of physical coercion. Even to say that you demand something is already to exercise a certain degree of exaction; demand is a form of enforcement, compulsion, exaction don’t necessarily take the form of physical coercion. Even to say that you demand something is already to exercise a certain degree of exaction; demand is a form of command. You don’t demand, as against request, things in polite company, even when you have a right to do so. To demand is to imply that enforcement would, if necessary, be permissible; that given that it’s been requested, it is something the other person has no moral option but to do.

Of course permissible enforcement must be proportionate to the seriousness of a right-infringement. Hence, just because demanding is already a form of enforcement, when a right is sufficiently trivial it may be disproportionate even to make demands. Suppose that we have previously agreed to have lunch together – and you have not pressured me unacceptably into that agreement. Then you have a right to expect me to be there, a right to be told in advance (if possible) that I can’t come, and a right to remonstrate if I fail to turn up without bothering to tell you and without any excusing reasons. But, as often with small rights, it might well be foolish or petty-minded to act on these rights, by actually remonstrating, let alone demanding compensation.

So much for the difference between demand and request. Now we can state the underlying normative source of rights, which I’ll call the Demand principle:

(Demand principle) If it is morally permissible for \( x \) to demand that \( y \) as, the fact that it is is a complete reason for \( y \) not to fail to \( x \) without \( x \)’s permission.

There is (it seems to me) a remarkable degree of system, clarity and convergence in our substantive convictions about what rights people have, that is, what demands on others they can permissibly make. This substantive system of rights is an extremely important part, though by no means the whole, of ordinary morality. Though it is not pertinent to our task here to articulate that system substantively; it is certainly pertinent to be aware of its normative strength and importance.\(^{14}\)

\(^{13}\) In saying this I rely on a definition I’ve defended elsewhere: X has a right to Y against Z if and only if it is morally permissible for X or X’s agent freely to demand that Z does not take Y from X, or does not prevent X from doing Y, or delivers Y to X (as appropriate), and to demand compensation for X from Z in the event of damage resulting from Z’s non-compliance. See Domain, 12.6.

\(^{14}\) The formal Demand Principle is supported by a substantive system of permissible demands, just as the formal principle of Good is supported by a substantive system of final ends. (I sketch what I take to
But does Demand provide an independent normative source of practical reasons? That it’s not derived from Bridge is obvious. Could it however be derived from Good?

People living together are better-off as a whole if they mutually limit their freedom by a system of rights. However the fact that people would be better-off if they generally acted on the Demand Principle does not entail the Demand Principle. This is simply a special case of a general point about rule-utilitarianism: to say that there would be Good consequences if people in general followed a rule is not to say that there is reason for them – in particular a Good based reason – to follow the rule. (If we have actually agreed to a rule there is Demand based reason to follow it; but this does not help the rule-utilitarian.)

It seems to me plausible that no right is strictly absolute, in the sense that it is never permissible to infringe it (perhaps with compensation). But this does not subordiante the Demand principle to the other two. Demand-based reasons may be outweighed in specific cases by Bridge or Good based reasons; in most normal cases however they outweigh them. Furthermore they cannot be derived from Good or Bridge based reasons. The principle underlying rights – Demand – is distinct from the principle of Good and the Bridge principle. It is a practical-normative source in its own right.

5. Demand and the disinterested will.
Presumably, then, it has a distinct epistemic basis in the dispositions of the disinterested will. How is that so?

Demand falls outside the scope of sentimentalism, just as Good does. Its epistemic basis, as with Good, lies in the phenomenology of the will; specifically, in the existence of a disinterested will. But whereas the epistemic basis of Good is a disinterested will to act in certain ways, the basis of Demand is a disinterested will that everyone act in certain ways.

Spontaneous dispositions of will are the criterion of what there is reason to will. Also, reasons are universalisable. But that does not mean that reference to everyone gets into the content of what is willed, i.e. that any disposition of the will is a will that everyone does something. For example, a spontaneous disposition to seek one’s own happiness provides an epistemic basis for the belief that there is outright reason to seek one’s own happiness. To think that there is outright reason to seek one’s own happiness is to think that (x)(there is reason for x to seek x’s happiness). In this sense one can say that spontaneous willing is universally normative: it is the epistemic basis for a universalisable practical norm.

However although I do will to seek my happiness, and my willing, insofar as it supports a reason, implies a universal maxsil, I do not will that everyone seeks their happiness. Other people, that is, do not enter into the content of my will. It’s just that if this disposition gives me ground to hold that I have reason to seek my happiness, then it ipso facto gives me ground to hold that everyone has reason to seek theirs. It is only in this sense that all willing is universal willing.

To get to Demand we need a stronger notion of willing something to be a universal law: namely, the idea of a will whose content is that people in general do something. To will is to be disposed to act; to will that people in general do something is to be disposed to make them act. (As in ‘willing someone on’.) It is a disposition to will, in this sense, that everyone α that provides the epistemic basis for principles specifying reasons to make others α – that is, reasons to demand that others α. Such principles will be of the form (x)(there is reason for x to demand that everyone α.) A demand on others will feature in the content of the willing.

In the case of Good, Bridge-based dispositions of the will give way to a disinterested will to pursue the good of anyone, impartially, and this moment provides the epistemic basis for the principle of Good. The epistemic basis for the Demand principle involves the same moment of disinterestedness, of detachment from the standpoint of one’s sentiments. It detaches from the disposition to pursue Bridge-based reasons (including one’s own good). In this moment there is no demand from the standpoint of your sentiments to will that this or that person does something, or that people in general do something. Yet there remains a disinterested will, disposed to issue a general demand.

Further: it is a second-order demand – a demand that people do not make certain demands.

This second-order demand is suspended only when, in virtue of some facts about a person, the person’s


15 Although, as ever, demand-based reasons can be the object of reason-supported sentiments. If the garage has failed to comply with the terms of its servicing contract there’s reason for me to be annoyed with it. It has failed to do something there was demand-based reason for it to do. That does not derive its demand-based reason from my reason to be annoyed: the latter presupposes the former.
demand that others do something is a sufficient reason for them to do it. When that is so the 
disinterested will demands that everyone does what the person in question demands, unless that person 
allows them not to. For example the fact that this is your computer disposes the disinterested will to 
accept your demand that others don’t use it without asking you, and to will that everyone complies with 
your demand.

So where \(x\) and \(y\) are distinct individuals, we have 

(i) a disinterested demand that \(x\) does not demand that \(y\) \(\alpha\)s except in certain circumstances, 
\[C(x)\]
(ii) a disinterested demand that everyone \(\alpha\)s when \(C(x)\) unless \(x\) refrains from demanding that 
they \(\alpha\).
(iii) a disinterested will to \(\alpha\), given a disinterested demand that everyone \(\alpha\)s.

These disinterested dispositions are the epistemic basis of Demand. Specifically, a disinterested will 
that everyone \(\alpha\)s is the epistemic ground for the claim that there is sufficient reason for everyone to 
demand that everyone \(\alpha\)s.

Next, I claim that a demand on anyone’s part is morally permissible if and only if there is 
sufficient reason for everyone to demand that it be obeyed. (This is not a definition; it is a substantive 
claim.) Disposition (i) is then the epistemic basis for 
\(x\) is not morally permitted to demand that \(y\) \(\alpha\)s except in \(C(x)\)

Dispositions (ii) and (iii) yield 
If, when \(C(x)\), \(x\) is morally permitted to demand that \(y\) \(\alpha\)s, then when \(C(x)\) there is sufficient 
reason for \(y\) to \(\alpha\), unless \(x\) refrains from the demand.\(^{16}\)

Now in note 13 I gave a definition of rights in terms of morally permissible demands. In 
effect, then, a substantive theory of rights is a theory of what circumstances constitute \(C\).

I conclude that the disinterested will is the epistemic basis of both Good and Right. The 
construction of both a system of Good and a system of Right must assume, for its epistemic grounding, 
that in its disinterested moment the will still retains dispositions. The principle of Good and the 
Demand principle are the formal element in these systems, governing a multiplicity of reasons of good 
and reasons of right, just as the Bridge principle governs a multiplicity of reasons grounded in the 
sentiments.

6. Moral judgement
If there are three practical-normative sources in play, the question naturally arises of how they interact. 
How do they combine to produce overall reasons for action? How do they give rise to moral 
obligations?

In order to proceed, I must say something about the domain of the moral. I believe that the 
way to characterise the moral concepts, and in particular moral wrongness, is in terms of what there is 
sufficient reason to blame. ‘Blame’ here refers to the sentiment which is the core of blame, so that the 
sufficient reason we are talking about is an evaluative reason. There is much to say about this 
sentiment, its connection with other sentiments – guilt, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation – and its 
difference from yet others – shame, disdain, resentment, fear. I leave all that to one side. I also leave to 
one side discussion of how to spell out the connection between a judgement of moral wrongness and a 
judgement of blameworthiness. It may be that we are flexible in the way that we make the connection, 
so that any exact formulation will miss out some of that flexibility. However I’ll take it that to say that 
it is or would be morally wrong for an actor to do something is to say that if the actor were to do it on 
the basis of beliefs that he actually had warrant for in that situation, and without extenuation, he would 
be a proper object of blame.

Now to judge a person’s action blameworthy, I have elsewhere argued, is to judge that there 
were sufficient reasons not to do it – of a kind to give sufficient reason to blame anyone who 
knowingly fails to act on them.\(^{17}\) The point arises from the very nature of the blame sentiment and its 
proper object; it is intrinsic to the content of that sentiment that there can be no reason to blame 
someone who acted from sufficient reason, any more, for example, than there can be reason to be 
annoyed with someone who was simply trying to be helpful. Thus we derive the categoricity of the

\(^{16}\) Where it is permissible for a person to demand something, \textit{refraining} from demanding is often what 
requires positive expression. Thus, in the case of your computer, you do not need to express the 
demand that I don’t take it, but if you want to permit me to take it you must express that permission.

\(^{17}\) See e.g. \textit{Domain}, ch 12. (What sort of reasons not to do it – reasons proper, warranted reasons, 
reasons conditional on the agent’s beliefs? The last I think, though lack of care in forming one’s beliefs 
can also be blameworthy.)
moral from a sentimentalist account of the concept of moral wrongness: if an action is morally wrong there is sufficient reason not to do it.\(^{18}\)

This is a buck-passing account of moral wrongness. Where an action is morally wrong the agent has sufficient reason not to do it – but it’s not the fact that the action is morally wrong that gives him reason not to do it. Rather, there are reasons that suffice for not doing it, which are such that to ignore them would merit blame. True, for many people the fact that an action would be blameworthy is another reason not to do it, inasmuch as it combines with a reason-supported desire not to incur blame, or to be a person of integrity etc. These admirably human reasons, however, are bridge-based reasons – they would not, so to speak, apply to the holy will. (So I take it Kant is also a buck-passer about morality …)

Now to the question of assessing practical reasons. In both non-moral and moral cases we weigh reasons and come to conclusions about what to do, or what someone else should do, or what we or someone else should have done. Nothing could be more common, and in many cases more effortless. But of course there are cases which are far from effortless. What goes on? How do practical reasons combine?

We should not assume that there must be some single principle that determines how they combine. That would be a “rationalistic conception of rationality,” to quote Bernard Williams.\(^{19}\) There is no such principle. No higher combinatory principle regulates how practical reasons on any particular occasion consolidate into a conclusion about what there is sufficient reason to do.

It could still be that practical reasons always combine to yield consistent and determinate strengths of overall reason for all actions in any choice set of any person. Although this does not follow from anything I’ve said, I think it’s true. It’s a stronger claim yet, however, to say that they do so in such a way as to be representable by an ordering of choiceworthiness over actions suitable for representation by a utility function. And even if they can be so represented, representation is not philosophical theory. It is not a demonstration, in any interesting philosophical sense, that practical reason is purely teleological, and it certainly does not provide a rule for, or a way of telling, what to do. It does not guide; it merely represents. (If we’ve promised to meet you for an important discussion, but you haven’t turned up, after what interval of waiting is there good enough reason to leave? Don’t waste our time by saying: ‘when it maximises your expected utility’ What maximises your ‘utility’, in this sense, depends on the pre-existing balance of reasons.)

These considerations apply in general, across all practical reasons. What now of the special case of moral judgement?

In moral judgement two things are going on: assessment of reasons for action in the given situation, and assessment of what reasons it would be blameworthy to fail to respond to in that situation. Moral principles, so far as they exist, provide general and defeasible guidance governing reasons for the sentiment of blame; hence, guidance for moral judgement. It is the task of moral judgement to determine when a combination of independently given practical norms results, in a particular case, in reasons for action that it is blameworthy to ignore.

We can find cases in which reasons of any one of the three kinds seem to be outweighed, in many people’s judgement, by reasons of one or both of the other kinds. Considerations stemming from Good or from Demand can certainly outweigh Bridge-based reasons – for example reasons stemming solely from what is best for you or for members of your family. On the other hand, common sense also says that Bridge-based reasons can outweigh Good-based ones. Many would say, for example, that parental love and commitment can be the source of sufficient reason to protect one’s own children in some cases where doing so fails to produce most Good. Similarly, many would say that there are cases in which Demand-based reasons do exactly the same – in which Right trumps Good.

In a certain sense, it is true, Demand-based reasons cannot be outweighed: because a permissible demand constitutes a sufficient reason. However that is only because the weighing of reasons must have already been done in the assessment of the permissibility. It is for example not permissible for me to demand that you do not take my bike – even though it is mine, not yours – if you need it for an urgent rescue mission.

Furthermore, a permissible demand made on me is not just a sufficient reason for me to act but always a morally salient one. When one is warranted in thinking that a permissible demand exists it is morally wrong to ignore it. Nonetheless, simple personal inconvenience can defeat the permissibility

\(^{18}\) Obviously the converse of the principle does not hold. There may be sufficient reason to stop waiting for a bus and get a taxi, but going on waiting probably isn’t morally wrong, even when it’s not very sensible.

\(^{19}\) The conception that “two considerations cannot be rationally weighed against each other unless there is a common consideration in terms of which they can be compared” (Williams 1985: 17-18.)
of a demand; the defeater does not have to be some countervailing moral consideration. If you have promised to meet me for lunch but you find that the only way you can keep your promise, through no fault of your own, is by buying a first-class air ticket to get there quickly enough, it would very likely not be permissible for me to demand that you keep it. Your only duties of right are to ring me up (if possible) to explain the situation, perhaps to apologise.

Demand has special connections with morality that the other two sources do not have — but that does not mean that we can give a full account of morality appealing only to the Demand principle. And if a purely Demand-based theory of morality is inadequate, it is still more obvious that a purely Demand-based theory of practical reasons is. Quite obviously not all my practical reasons arise from other people's permissible demands.

In contrast, many people do not find it so obvious that they do not arise purely from Good, or purely via Bridge. Utilitarianism and sentimentalism have strong attractions just because they are comprehensive theories of practical reasons. The utilitarian's teleological idea is that the best action — in the sense of the one there is most reason to do — must be the Best in the sense of producing the Best outcome. This is an attractive idea. Surely the fact that $\alpha$ produces the Best outcome is sufficient reason to $\alpha$, whatever reasons not to $\alpha$ apply. If so, an argument from what action is Best always defeats Bridge-based reasons. And it always defeats the prima facie permissibility of a demand that $\alpha$ should not be done. Yet attractive as this idea is I think there is no compelling case for it. Indeed some of the well-known counter-examples strongly suggest that doing the Best thing is sometimes morally wrong. If so, it also follows (by moral categoricity) that in those cases it is not what there is most reason to do.

Finally, a brief remark about Tim Scanlon's contractualism. According to the views presented here, contractualism is neither definitive nor constitutive of the moral. But that does not rule out Scanlon's criterion as a heuristic or method of moral judgement, at least in many cases. Asking whether an action would be ruled out by any principle that no-one could reasonably reject can be a useful aid in settling whether it is morally permissible. Plainly its usefulness depends on how much weight can be rested on the notion of a principle, what reasonableness should be taken to involve, and how much independent leverage on moral deliberation these notions can provide. However it does not seem to me that contractualism can provide the higher combinatory principle that would determine, on its own, how and when practical reasons combine to form a moral obligation. Ethical life is Sittlichkeit.

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20 And obviously the many interesting discussions in What we owe to each other (Scanlon, Cambridge, Mass., 1998) go a long way to answering these questions. It is I think undeniable that the notion of reasonableness is important in morality as it is in law. How long, e.g., could we reasonably be expected to wait for you if you're late for the important meeting? A notion of reasonable expectation, in this case on the part of the person who is late, does useful work here.