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For Better or Worse

Commendatory Reasons and Latitude

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1. Introduction

For many of us, a striking feature of the life of practical agency is the substantial latitude it includes. Reasons do not always back us into a corner; we can encounter opportunities to pursue value without being required to do so. For instance, many believe that morality allows of supererogatory actions—actions that are supported by moral reasons but not morally required. Extending to rationality more generally, many endorse what Joseph Raz (1999) calls the "basic belief"—the idea that much of agency is about choosing between different actions that are each rationally eligible. A key intuition of both claims is that the life of agency is shot through with robust latitude.

There are various proposals for explaining how latitude is possible in a world full of reasons.[1] But one intriguing suggestion, and the topic of this paper, is the idea that such latitude may point to pluralism in the very way that reasons favor. Theorists often depict reasons as issuing a *pro tanto* requiring force: absent sufficient justification, one is irrational (immoral, imprudent) not to follow their lead. But a number of theorists have recently been arguing that an important class of reasons favor without issuing any requiring force at all. Jonathan Dancy (2004), Stephen Darwall (2013), T. M. Scanlon (2014), Patricia Greenspan (2005, 2010), and Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons (2010) are among those who have endorsed the existence of such reasons.[2] Variously

[1] See for example, Raz (1975, 1999); Gert (2004); Portmore (2012a); Dancy (1993); Ferry (2013); Wolf (1982); Hurley (1995).

[2] For others who are attracted to the idea of commendatory reasons see Kauppinen (2015); Kolodny (2003); Portmore (2012b); Drier (2004). See also Little (2013), a paper that expresses

referred to as "merit-conferring," "enticing," "purely positive," "optional," and "commendatory," such reasons give one reason to pursue an action without putting one in need of justification to decline doing so. While some reasons favor deontically, other reasons are content only to commend.

If they exist, such reasons would seem to offer a promising approach to redeeming the latitude of supererogation and the basic belief. After all, optionality is built into their very nature: they favor actions while giving us normative permission to decline. And indeed, Horgan and Timmons appeal to such reasons to explain the latitude of supererogation in the moral life (2010). Dancy defends their use to recover latitude in the face of values like fun (2004). Patricia Greenspan endorses their contribution to latitude in both the moral and non-moral realms (2005, 2010). If the idea of commendatory reasons is of interest, then, it is in part because it seems to offer an account of why and how the life of agency includes a generous measure of latitude.

On reflection, though, there is a critical question about the ability of commendatory reasons (as we will call them henceforth) to underwrite the type and scope of latitude under question. For there is a critical question about the *comparative lives* of such reasons. Presumably, such reasons admit of different strengths, and are thus capable of ordering options, sorting actions into better and worse. But if this is true, then without further exploration it is unclear that they will end up recovering the kind of latitude we seek. After all, as David Schmidtz (2004) says in another context, it's one thing to secure the fact that an option is worthy, but if another option is *more* worthy, it's hard to see how the lesser is still a viable candidate for pursuit. One might have latitude to decline following the direction of a reason that merely commends, that is; but once we face two or more such reasons that offer competing recommendations, only the action supported by the better reason is a candidate for action. Call this the *challenge from comparative dominance*.

a view developed jointly with Macnamara. Joshua Gert (2004) also defends a category of reasons he calls "purely justificatory"; while we also believe that his theory gets at something importantly right, we do not include him as a proponent of commendatory reasons in the sense meant here. Gertian justifying reasons are not so much normative favorers in the traditional sense as normative permitters. Justification, for Gert, is justification in the defensive sense. For more on permitters, see e.g. Hurka and Schubert (2012).

Faced with this challenge, proponents of commendatory reasons could decide that such reasons in fact rarely order the options they support. Perhaps we should deny that such reasons carry strength in the first place; perhaps the values they are grounded in display widespread incommensurability; perhaps the support that is offered turns out to be equal to one another. On any of these strategies, latitude over options exists only where we deny incidence of the better.

We want to present a different response. In our view, commendatory reasons are interesting precisely because they have the ability to defend, in the cases we care about, the moral and rational acceptability of doing the *less* worthy. In this paper, we present a novel account of the comparative life of commendatory reasons, one that admits of widespread rankings of better and worse while underwriting widespread latitude. As we will see, the theory so described includes identification of specific limits to pursuing the lesser; but the limits are surprisingly modest, and are at any rate fully consistent with the scope and type of latitude of interest.

Of course, whether commendatory reasons exist, or offer the best view of supererogation and the basic belief should they exist, are much larger questions. Our goal here is to argue that such reasons, if they do exist, can provide a distinctive and coherent strategy for recovering meaningful latitude in the lives of agency.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first half of the paper describes the core idea of commendatory reasons, their *prima facie* account of supererogation and the basic belief, and the comparative challenge to that account. In the second half of the paper, we argue that a proper understanding of commendatory reasons provides an answer to the challenge.

2. Commendatory reasons and practical latitude

On one classic conception, reasons for action are by their very nature deontic.[3] If one faces a reason in favor of an action, then one would be wrong not to follow its lead absent sufficient countervailing justification. Depending on the type of reason, the wrong in question may be the

[3] Certain paragraphs from this section are taken from Little (2013).

wrong of immorality, or imprudence, or just the generic wrong of practical reason. And of course, countervailing justification one may well have. Still, to understand something as a practical reason necessarily brings with it a kind of deontic vulnerability: one who faces such a reason now stands in need of adequate justification to do other than it directs, on pain of going wrong.

On this view, all practical reasons have a requiring force. Indeed, on many views, reasons just *are*, as Dancy puts it, considerations that it is "wrong not to act on in the absence of any opposition" (2004, p. 92). Reasons for actions are normative entities inherently on their way toward being all things considered deontic oughts.

But a number of theorists have recently defended the idea that some reasons favor actions in a gentler fashion. It is not just that they survive the scrum of deontic competition and emerge as reasons on which one may permissibly act: they never place you in need of justification to decline in the first place. As Scanlon puts it, "Reason can render an action rationally eligible without making it rationally required in the absence of some countervailing reason" (2014, p. 107). Or, to paraphrase Dancy, not all reasons are in the wrong-making business.

On this view, we should distinguish two modes of favoring. One mode in which reasons can favor performing an action is by issuing a *pro tanto* requirement—of morality, prudence, or garden-variety rationality, as the case may be. Only *pro tanto*, for another consideration could require yet more strongly, or in some other way provide a defense against the requiring force.[4] Deontic (or "peremptory," as Dancy nicely calls it) favoring functions to place one in need of adequate justification not to act as it directs; the strength of the force determines how much justification is needed to preclude a verdict of wrong.

Commendatory favoring, in contrast, provides asymmetrical justification. Such favoring justifies one in pursuing an action without placing one in need of any justification to decline. Put the other way round, one can pass by the commendatory reason, even as it would make sense to accede and act on its behalf. Commendatory favoring provides a basis of acting by rendering an action consistent with, rather than necessitated by, reason. They provide a robustly intelligible basis of action—one that

[4] For instance, by serving as a permitter. See Hurka and Shubert (2012).

serves as a rational explicans of an action if followed—that one does not need to earn one's way out of.

Reasons, on this view, can carry either deontic *or* commendatory favoring force. It is also possible for one and the same reason to have some of each—to carry a certain level of requiring force, for instance, and a commendatory force that extends yet farther.

Just when it is that reasons are deontic versus commendatory is a substantive question that different theories will decide differently. For instance, the fact of being in a relationship or special role, say, or facts about how an idealized contract might go, may attach a consideration to us deontically, with the merit of the action becoming, as it were, our *pro tanto* job to achieve. And of course, one can take on personal commitments, which bring their own deontic structures.[5] The key claim is that the normative force one confronts with commendatory reasons, when one does, does not in its own right place us in danger of going wrong.

Of course, properly defending a distinctive mode of commendatory favoring would take extensive work; the debates here will surely be rich. In particular, those who favor what Raz (1999, pp. 47–9) calls a "rationalist" conception of agency will find little to intrigue them. On a rationalist view, agency is about responding to the determinations of reason, and reasons don't determine until they normatively necessitate. On this sort of view, the idea of non-deontic reasons is a nonstarter. In contrast, defenders of commendatory reasons align with "nonrationalist" conceptions of agency. On these views, the will is the capacity for reasoned self-movement, which is understood to include the capacity to make decisions in light of non-necessitating reasons.[6]

Elsewhere, we have argued that commitment to a commendatory mode of favoring is in fact implicit in many views of practical reason (Little 2013). But our interest in the present paper, again, is not to defend the existence of commendatory reasons, but to explore more fully their potential capacity to offer a distinctive account of latitude for those who do defend them.

Turn, for instance, to Horgan and Timmons' (2010) account of supererogation. Horgan and Timmons explicitly appeal to the idea of optional reasons as a way of underwriting the supererogatory nature

[5] For a particularly nuanced view of these structures, see Richardson (2004).
[6] See Little (2013) for further discussion.

of many small kindnesses. To adapt their example: you find out that your elderly neighbor, an avid baseball fan, recently lost her husband. You find out that her favorite team is playing its arch-rival this coming Saturday afternoon. You issue an invitation to take her to the game. For defenders of supererogation, this looks like a good example of an action that it would be good to do, but not wrong not to do. And the idea of purely commendatory reasons seems to give us a simple and clean explanation of this. That it would help your elderly neighbor is, in this context for you, at least, purely commendatory. Extending the invitation is worthy and hence good to do; that said, one is normatively free not to, for the reason does not issue any, even *pro tanto*, requiring force.

Or again, take a classic case of heroic supererogation: you could save three lives by rescuing people from a burning building, but only at substantial risk to your own. Here, we might well believe that there is *some* deontic stick in the offing: if you were in a position of being able to rescue three people and there were literally no burden or cost to your helping, you would be morally wrong not to do so. That said, given the facts at hand, such justification is ready to hand: that it would risk your dying means you would not be wrong to stay put. Still and all, you might well decide to go ahead and run into the building—and for the very reason that it would save three lives. That reason is still very much in view, as a reason, as something still able to render reasonable a decision to risk one's life.

Advocates of commendatory reasons seem to have a ready account of what is happening here. The reason in favor of attempting the rescue carries both deontic and commendatory elements. The risk of losing your life provides the sufficient defense to meet the *pro tanto* deontic challenge posed by the possibility of rescuing lives, but the commendatory force in favor of saving them persists. Here, the commendatory outstrips the reach of the peremptory.

Beyond morality, the idea of commendatory reasons also seems to provide an elegant account of what Raz calls the "basic belief"—that most reasons in life serve largely to make multiple options rationally eligible. You are trying to decide what to do for the evening—read a trashy novel or go to the opera. For advocates of the basic belief, this looks like a paradigmatic example of latitude in life: each option is rationally (morally, prudentially) eligible; either choice is consistent with reason. And the concept of commendatory reasons seems to provide

an account of why. In this scenario, the reason in favor of each option is merely commendatory. They render each option reasonable to do, but something one needs no justification to decline.

For those who endorse commendatory reasons and widespread latitude, then, the former seem to offer a key source of the latter. One reason that latitude is so widespread is because many of the reasons we encounter in the life of agency are non-deontic.

3. The challenge from comparative dominance

But it turns out that advocates of commendatory reasons cannot move so quickly. To understand whether the idea of commendatory reasons can provide an adequate and distinctive account of supererogation and the basic belief, it turns out, we need to address the comparative life of such reasons.

On the above, commendatory reasons underwrite an account of supererogation and the basic belief because they involve value-based reasons that commend without requiring, even *pro tanto*, that one follow their lead. The action is worthy, and is hence reasonable to pursue, but not in a way that places one in danger of going wrong. One has permission, without need of justification, to simply decline.

But note that the kind of latitude we care about is rarely just the latitude to decline acting in response to a reason. Most often, it is about latitude to decline one action in *favor* of pursuing another. For instance, the basic belief, as Raz defines it, is the intuition that multiple competing options can each be rationally eligible *to* pursue. It's not just that one may decline to attend the opera, it's that one can decline the opera and read the trashy novel instead. Similarly with many paradigmatic examples of supererogation. It's not just that one can decline to take one's neighbor to the ballgame: it's that one can choose to treat oneself to a mani-pedi instead. Or again, it's not just that you may decline to rush into a burning building to save the lives of others, remaining on the sidelines of action, as it were. It's also that you have latitude to run as fast as you can out of the room, if you are already in the building, rather than stay to rescue others. These examples involve *comparative* choices.

But this means we cannot assess commendatory reasons' contributions to latitude without addressing the comparative life of commendatory reasons. And here we run up against a critical question. What happens

in these pair-wise comparisons if one of the commendatory reasons is *stronger* than the other? For instance, one might intuitively have thought that, even if going to the opera and reading the trashy novel are eligible, the former is a worthier choice, supported more strongly by value. Performing a kindness and getting a mani-pedi are both supported by commendatory reasons, but one might have thought the commendatory reason in favor of the kindness is stronger. Or again, even if one has permission to run out of the burning building, staying to rescue three others is, on the whole, the worthier option. But if going to the opera is more *strongly* commended than reading the trashy novel, then how does pursuing the latter in this choice situation have rationality's stamp of approval? If performing the kindness is *more* morally choiceworthy, then how is pursuing the spa treatment in this choice situation morally countenanced?

There is, it turns out, a second kind of challenge to defending supererogation and the basic belief, and one that seems to arise even if we defend the existence of commendatory force. On a standard view of the comparative life of reasons, nothing is more obvious than the following: an action is rationally (morally, prudentially) eligible if and only if it is supported by the balance of those salient reasons.[7] That is, whatever else we say about the mode in which a reason favors—commendatory or peremptory—on a standard view of the comparative life of reasons, a stronger favorer outweighs or otherwise defeats a weaker competing favorer. It is contrary to reason (or morality, or prudence) to act on a weaker reason.

If this is right, though, then it calls radically into question whether commendatory reasons provide much in the way of meaningful contribution to explaining or underwriting the latitude in which we are interested. Faced with a commendatory reason, we can decline its invitation without need of justification. But conditional *on* acting, one cannot choose to pursue a lesser option. Faced with an array of choices each supported by a commendatory reason, one can only choose the option supported by the strongest such reason. One can decline the best,

[7] That balance might not involve quantitative measures or a single scale of value. What it does mean, it is standardly thought, is that if one act is favored by a reason but a competing act is supported by a stronger one, the first is not supported by the balance of reasons, and hence is not rationally eligible. See Chang (2002) for discussion.

but one cannot pursue the lesser. Latitude exists only in deciding whether to pursue or decline the best or dominant option; the lesser falls out as an ineligible option.

Faced with this challenge, those eager to defend the eligibility of both options in our examples might decide to join the ranks of those who radically limit judgments of better and worse. Perhaps commendatory reasons support robust latitude because they rarely order the options they support. Defenders of commendatory reasons could follow Joseph Raz (1999) and argue that the options in question enjoy incommensurable support, or Douglas Portmore (2012a, 2012b) in defending the widespread equality of options, or Sergio Tannenbaum (2007) in arguing that moral and prudential reasons form dual perspectives that cannot be judged against one another from any unified perspective.

Such strategies face their own well-known challenges.[8] For purposes of this paper, though, the point to make is a different one. Appealing to such strategies to explain latitude calls into question much of the interest of defending commendatory reasons. Those strategies, after all, were initially developed to try to explain how latitude is possible when we conceive of reasons as always and everywhere deontic. If we have to appeal to them even where reasons are commendatory, it's not clear how much of interest the category of commendatory reasons adds to the discussion. Certainly, such a conclusion would be a disappointment to those whose motivation for endorsing commendatory reasons was precisely a desire to defend latitude without endorsing something like widespread incommensurability.[9] More broadly, for many drawn to the idea of commendatory reasons, the intuition was that there is something about the nature of these reasons themselves—the *kind* of optionality they carry—that provides an account of latitude.

In the second half of this paper, we offer a response to the challenge from commendatory comparative dominance. Properly understood, we will argue, the variable strength of commendatory reasons can and often does result in sorting relevant options into worthier and less worthy, but such comparative facts themselves do not, in the cases we care about, alter the rational eligibility of the less worthy option. In particular, appreciation of the asymmetrical justification that marks commendatory

[8] On widespread incommensurability, see, e.g. Chang (1997) and Gert (2004).
[9] E.g. Dancy (2004).

reasons helps illuminate how thoroughly they are carrots rather than sticks, and why a dominant commendatory reason does not on its own mind the business of a subordinate one. Commendatory reasons, we believe, are an important and distinctive candidate for recovering latitude precisely because they can challenge that second threat to meaningful latitude—the idea that only options supported by the balance of reasons can be rationally pursued. As it turns out, that depends on the type of reason being balanced.

To disentangle the economy of the deontic from the commendatory, we will need to do two things. First, given how easy it is to tacitly import reasoning and properties of deontic reasons when using the language of balancing, it will be helpful to move to the more neutral language of dominance and rational (moral, prudential) eligibility. Second, we will need to slow down. In particular, we will remember that assessments of rationality (morality, prudence) can refer to either objective or subjective notions. Roughly speaking, assessments of objective status assess the eligibility of an *act-type*. That is, they assess the normative status of an act as causally individuated, independent of whether an agent in fact knows about it, how she reasoned about it, what maxims she based a choice on, or anything internal to an agent's conception of why she is acting. Assessments of subjective status, in contrast, assess actions as *undertaken for a specific reason*, relative to what an agent reasonably believed. Of course, not every stripe of philosopher cares equally about each level. That said, intuitions and questions about comparative dominance and rational eligibility can come from either level; and to understand the comparative economy of commendatory reasons, and the ways in which it differs from the comparative economy of the deontic, we will need to take them one at a time.

4. Commendatory dominance and objective eligibility

On a familiar and widely accepted view, there are two conditions for an act-type to be objectively rationally (morally, prudentially) eligible. (For convenience, henceforth we will use "eligibility" *simpliciter* when the claims at issue apply irrespective to the domain.) The first condition, obviously, is that the act-type cannot be impermissible. It cannot be ruled out as forbidden or wrong, immoral or irrational: think murder, or selling one's future financial security for a fleeting moment of pleasure.

The candidate act-type cannot, as it were, be on the "No Fly List" of act-types.

While necessary, this condition is not yet sufficient for eligibility. After all, the fact that something is not ruled out does not mean there is any reason *to* do it. To get on the airplane, one also needs a ticket to fly. To be eligible as an act, then, an option also needs to have a reason that speaks in its favor—that the act would be kind, say, or at least fun.[10] It must in some measure be *choiceworthy*. Further, it must be supported by an *undefeated* favorer. The fact that doing a favor for a friend would help her makes doing so *pro tanto* choiceworthy; that it would enable her dependency means that it is *pro tanto* harmful. If the latter outweighed or otherwise dominated the former, the act is not all things considered (henceforth *atc*) supported by reason.

There are, then, two conditions which must be met to secure an act as objectively *atc* eligible: (1) the act-type must not be ruled out as impermissible and (2) there must be an undefeated favorer that supports it.

To many, a clear outcrop of this is that an act-type is eligible if and only if it is objectively supported by the balance of reasons. That balance might not involve quantitative measures or a single scale of value. What it does mean, it is standardly thought, is that, where two reasons support competing options, and one reason is stronger, the other act-type is not objectively eligible.

Now, there is no question but that this is true when the reasons whose balance is at issue are *deontic* ones. Indeed, it is axiomatic to the concept of the deontic and its subsequent notion of strength that, where two competing deontic directives are in force,[11] the act supported by the weaker directive is no longer an eligible option.

The structure is a simple one, and it is worth setting it out.

(1) What it means to be a deontic reason is that it is wrong not to follow its direction absent sufficient countervailing justification.

[10] Favorers can be either achievement or avoidance oriented. A favorer is achievement oriented if following it promotes value. In contrast, that Φ-ing is the only way to avoid doing wrong is an avoidance-oriented favorer. See Little (2013).

[11] For instance, there are no permitters at work.

(2) What it means for deontic reason B to be stronger than deontic reason A is that B provides said justification for not performing A, but the obverse does not hold.
(3) This means that the wrongness of not doing B survives, while the wrongness of not doing A drops out.
(4) A then becomes wrong *to* do, for the simple reason that doing it would be a way of failing to do B.

With deontic reasons, then, comparative dominance by *definition* defeats objective eligibility.

But of course the fact that deontic reasons behave this way does not mean that commendatory reasons do. The question is whether dominance within commendatory reasons similarly removes the objective eligibility of the act favored by a subordinate competing reason. So take two competing act-types, A and B. Stipulate that each is supported by a commendatory reason, that the commendatory reason favoring B is stronger than or otherwise dominates the reason favoring A, and that there are no other relevant reasons pro or con. Does the stronger reason in support of B render A objectively ineligible? Let's take the two conditions of objective eligibility one at a time.

Start with the impermissibility condition. Does the existence of a superior competing commendatory reason render performance of a less worthy act *impermissible*? Does the existence of a stronger commendatory reason for a competing act place the act supported by a lesser such reason on the No Fly List?

Well this one, at least, is easy. No. Recall the structure by which stronger deontic reasons render their subordinate counterparts impermissible. With deontic reasons, the dominant reason survived the scrum and emerged as wrong not to perform. Having lost that battle, the subordinate act became impermissible to do because that would be a way of failing to do what is required. But commendatory reasons never carried any requiring force to begin with. However strong a commendatory reason, it is permissible to give it a miss. With competing commendatory reasons, then, neither reason is capable of generating the impermissibility of the other via the requirement to perform their own preferred act. That there is a worthier option does not render the less worthy option an impermissible act-type—for by stipulation it can't generate the subject of a requirement in the first place.

The more interesting question is presumably about the second condition of objective eligibility. Granted that the less worthy act-type is not impermissible, it is eligible only if supported by an undefeated favorer. Does the existence of a stronger commendatory reason in support of an act-type serve as a defeating condition of a weaker, competing such reason?

One might think so. If two competing options are each favored by purely commendatory reasons, we agree that it is permissible to pass each by. Still, if the commendatory reason to B is stronger than the commendatory reason to A—if B is *more worthy*—then one might well think that A is not *atc* supported by reason. While there is something positive to be said on A's behalf, something that makes it *pro tanto* choiceworthy, the greater worth of B, as it were, tanto's that pro. If that is right, if there is no longer an *undefeated* favorer supporting the lesser, then the option is no longer objectively eligible.

On reflection, though, this is a very strange view. Begin by noticing: no one will think that the value of an *object* or *state of affairs* (as opposed to an act) is extinguished by the existence of something yet more valuable. A beautiful painting is still beautiful even if another is more beautiful; that fun was had at a party is not impugned by the fact that more fun was had at another. When we turn to the *acts* that can be taken on behalf of those values, the *atc* positive value that the lesser act accrues (instantiates, constitutes, promotes) is, similarly, not made less by the competing possibility of an act that would accrue yet more. That a given act would enhance beauty is true even if there is another act possible to a choice context that would have enhanced beauty more.

It thus seems strange then to think that the act of painting something beautiful is excommunicated from the list of objectively eligible actions—that it moves to the No Fly List—just because there is another act—painting that more beautiful painting—it was, unbeknownst to you, possible to do. If the painting is *atc* beautiful, it would seem strange to say there is no favorer that makes it eligible—after all, it creates a beautiful painting.

But perhaps this goes too fast. Obviously, it is possible that a favorer, however real, is defeated by another consideration. Does the possibility of creating a different, more beautiful, painting itself count as a defeater of the favorer in question here? Some might say yes. We saw that commendatory reasons can be defeated when there are stronger discommendatory

features of the act (recall the example of offering help to a friend that might on balance harm her). Perhaps the intuition that the greater worth of one alternative defeats the favorer supporting a lesser one arises from the thought that leaving good on the table is itself bad.

The idea is this. Take two competing commendatory options A and B; stipulate that B is better. Now imagine that the forgone option itself counts as a discommendatory reason against performing a competing option. While both options are *pro tanto* good, only the dominant is *atc* good. The *atc* status of A is the positive commendatory force minus the discommendatory force of forgoing B's merit. Since B is dominant, B's favorer is undefeated. The same is not true of A. The *atc* status of A is its positive commendatory force minus the discommendatory force of forgoing B's merit. Since B is dominant, the net force is discommendatory. In other words, the objective status of B remains good, while the objective status of A changes from good to bad. But this means that A is not an objectively eligible act. Not because it is impermissible, but because bad is no favorer. It fails to meet the second condition of eligibility. The good it by all means does produce is defeated by the badness of the good forgone, and there is no undefeated favorer. If a forgone good always counts as a normative bad, then a dominant commendatory option removes a subordinate option from the rational eligibility list.

This move depends on a view that every good (such as the beauty of the painting) that grounds a commendatory reason for an act grounds an equally strong discommendatory reason for all acts that do not realize that very good. While one could believe this, it is not in keeping with the justificational structure that forms the core, animating commitment of those who endorse the commendatory.

Recall that commendatory reasons, as unpacked in this paper, are fundamentally defined by an asymmetry in the justificatory structure they bear. While they justify acting as they commend, one needs no justification whatsoever to decline. One can acknowledge their normative force and yet decline to follow their lead. That asymmetry is not merely deontic: after all, the favoring justification they offer is about rendering an act eligible but not necessary to pursue. So, too, the impunity one enjoys in declining is both deontic and evaluative. The objective latitude afforded by commendatory reasons, that is, extends all the way to the evaluative. In its own right, it is neither wrong *nor* bad to decline to respond to a commendatory reason.

To see this, turn to another familiar denizen of the normative terrain—aptness or warrant conditions. Aptness or warrant conditions can be thought of as giving one a normative "entrance ticket" to that which they render apt. For example, that a situation is annoying is an aptness condition for feeling annoyed. That an entity is lovable is an aptness condition for loving it. That a painting is beautiful is an aptness condition for aesthetically admiring it.

Now crucially, aptness conditions, in their own right, are thoroughly asymmetrical. The fact that someone is lovable does not on its own make it wrong or even bad that I do not love her. The fact that a given person is annoying does not thereby, on its own, make it wrong, or even bad, if I am not in fact annoyed. It simply means that were I to love the person or again be annoyed at him, my response would be a reasonable one.

The *aptness* of doing (feeling, saying) something does not itself imply that it is *inapt* not to. Other things may, of course. As with deontic inflection, all sorts of other factors (relationship, roles, etc.) may render something inappropriate. The point is that the force of an aptness condition in its own right does not bring this vulnerability. Aptness conditions, as it were, serve merely to expand possibilities rather than to cast aspersions on others. To continue the ticket metaphor, entrance tickets themselves do not issue judgments on whether you use them.

Commendatory reasons are like aptness conditions or entrance tickets for given actions. Here what is reasonable is an exercise of the will: commendatory favoring provides a basis for doing given actions. They can serve the kind of rational explicans that distinguishes exercise of agency from mere behavior (whatever that distinction is). To say that there is a commendatory reason for an act-type is to say that there is a consideration that could be used by an agent, if grasped, as a basis for choosing an action. It is an entrance ticket to an exercise of the will. To say that it is an aptness condition is to underscore that the commendatory reason itself does not issue judgment on whether the agent uses it.

This understanding critically helps in understanding the import and implications of dominance within the commendatory. For stronger aptness conditions do not defeat weaker ones. To say that one aptness condition is stronger than another is simply to say it renders apt a broader scope of objects. The more irritating you are, the stronger the feelings of irritation I may aptly feel. So too with commendatory reasons. The stronger the commendatory or more value an act brings (accrues,

participates in, constitutes), the more ambitious the action, stronger the admiration, etc., undertaken on its behalf or felt in response. For instance, the edification afforded by the opera would justify more ambitious sacrifices than the momentary pleasures afforded by the trashy novel. With more commendatory force in the picture, one can rationally suffer more burden, proffer more sacrifice on its behalf. And again, for those who believe that value-based reasons also provide aptness conditions for emotions, adoption of ends, life priorities, and the like, a stronger commendatory reason secures a broader scope of aptness conditions for these, compared to a weaker one. For all of these, less ambitious aptness conditions do not get extinguished by the presence of more ambitious ones; the latter simply have a greater scope of objects they apply to.

Now, we don't mean to suggest that commendatory reasons are exhausted by the aptness conditions they so centrally provide—that such reasons are merely aptness conditions for action and emotion. Depending on one's meta-normative view about the grounding of value and reasons, there are all sorts of other rich things one may say about them. To give just a sample instance, those who endorse an idealized subjective theory of value may say that commendatory reasons indicate what an idealized person or group would value—that is, would carry an attitude of valuing to. This may have implications for reactive attitudes, the constitution of social meanings, alterations in interpersonal standing, and the like. On this sort of view, to say that it is commendatory is to say both that it makes a given type of action and set of emotions apt, and that the idealized person or group *would* value it; to say that it is more commendatory is to say the idealized entity would value that even more.

But our point here is obviously not to offer a semantics and pragmatics of value. Our core point is that the eligibility of an act-type supported by a commendatory reason is not defeated by the existence of a yet stronger one that supports an alternative. In the context of deontic reasons, an act-type is eligible if and only if it is objectively supported by the balance of reasons; the same is not true in the realm of the commendatory.

5. Commendatory dominance and subjective eligibility

The above has argued that, properly understood, commendatory dominance does not remove the objective eligibility of the subordinate act-type.

If there is a problem with commendatory dominance and latitude, then, it must be found at the level of the subjective—the level at which an agent, armed with her own understanding of the options available, makes decisions (forms intentions, exercises her will) about what, if anything, to do. The question to which we now turn, then, is: if an agent believes there are two mutually exclusive options available to her, A and B, that are supported by commendatory reasons, and further believes that the reason supporting A is stronger than the reason supporting B, is B a subjectively eligible choice?

To say that an action is subjectively eligible for an agent is, roughly speaking, to say that she may reasonably choose it from an array of options as she understands them. On a familiar and widely held view, an agent's choice is reasonable if the agent believes the act to be objectively eligible (not impermissible, and supported by an undefeated favorer) and the choice would not contravene any principles of practical rationality or norms of deliberation.

It is that last condition where the rubber seems to really hit the road. To many, one of the most obvious and important principles of practical rationality is that agents cannot choose against what they perceive as the balance of reasons. It is the height of weak will, or some other deliberative flaw, for an agent to choose what she herself believes to be less strongly supported than another possible option. Even if the lesser option remains on the list of objectively eligible options, it is not one that an agent can reasonably knowingly select. For many, a core principle of practical deliberation states that it is contrary to reason (morality, prudence) for an agent to choose against what she judges to be the balance of reasons before her.

Now, it is certainly true that this principle of practical deliberation applies to reasoning about the *deontic* realm. It would indeed be a matter of weak will or some other deliberative error to choose one option when one believes a competing option is supported by a stronger deontic reason. The reason is simple. Deontic reasons, we remember, carry requiring force. To believe that one faces such a reason is to believe it wrong not to follow its demands absent adequate justification. Faced with competing such reasons, the dominant reason emerges as victorious; one must move to act on its behalf. The option one believes to be supported by the dominant deontic reason is the only subjectively eligible action, for indeed it is required. The weaker competing deontic

reason is subjectively ineligible to the agent for the simple reason that choosing it would be incompatible with what she herself has decided she is required to do. With deontic reasons, one must act on the strongest reason one confronts.

Now, *this* pathway to the subjective ineligibility of lesser options is not at play with commendatory reasons. Commendatory reasons don't carry any requiring force. By definition, such reasons do not require that one follow their lead. One can gaze upon them in full appreciation and simply stay on the sidelines, declining their invitation. They are not in the business of making what they support impermissible not to do. Facing competing such reasons, one need not pursue the strongest such reason, because one need not pursue either one.

The commendatory, by definition, is not governed by a norm of practical deliberation that one must act for the strongest reason one faces, for there is always the option of giving all the competing commendatory reasons a pass. Invoking such a deliberative principle would not count as an independent argument that commendatory dominance limits subjective latitude, but an expression of a view that denies commendatory favoring from the get go.

Is there, then, a different deliberative principle fairly described as honoring the nature of the commendatory but that eliminates the subjective eligibility of an option an agent believes to be subordinate? The thought is not far in coming. We will remember that, while some deliberative principles govern how one must move from reasons to action, other deliberative principles govern what are sometimes called conditional constraints on deliberation. A familiar example is the principle governing means–ends reasoning involving hypothetical imperatives. One need not take on an optional end; conditional on doing so, though, one must pursue appropriate means. Such a principle does not govern what conclusion one must make based on acknowledgment of a reason—it does not govern how one must move from consideration to action. Instead, it is a principle that issues what John Broome (1999) calls "wide scope" oughts: wide scope, for the principle applies to the truth of a conditional rather than attaching directly to the consequent of that conditional. If one really doesn't like the means, one can abandon the end. What one *cannot* do is both keep the end and ignore the means. To do so would contravene a principle of practical consistency.

Similarly, the very idea of acting on a reason can rightly be said to bring with it certain consistency constraints. What it means to say that one responds to and acts upon a reason is, in a sense, to say that one has taken on a certain end, at least for that moment—whether it is the end of having fun, or being kind, or saving one's life. To count as taking on an end, even if on just one occasion, involves certain counterfactual commitments. For instance, if there were a way to achieve that same end without any of the burdens or inconveniences one chose in spite of, it would be contrary to reason not to choose that option instead. Or again, for many reasons, if there were a way to achieve yet more of the value with no salient increase or change in burdens, it would be contrary to reason not to choose that option instead. For instance, conditional on a willingness to save the three victims at a risk to one's life, if there were an option that would save four, with no salient change in risk or burden, many would agree that it would be contrary to reason not to do the latter. For other types of reasons, it may be possible to forgo a yet stronger option, even if it had the self-same burden as the first, if the end one has actually adopted is what some call a "threshold" end. Even conditional on choosing to pursue the fun, it may not be contrary to reason to forgo a yet funner option with the self-same burdens, if what one was after was "fun enough."[12]

Details aside, though, note that these consistency constraints are all constraints that flow from what one is committed to by virtue of acting on a given reason—from the commitments implicit in taking on a given, optional end. *These* constraints, that is, are about consistency over choices involving the same value or end; they are about what consistency looks like when contemplating choices involving the same type of such reasons. But the scenarios that pepper the literature on the basic belief and supererogation are not that kind of scenario. They aren't about scenarios involving the self-same reasons—quite to the contrary. They involve different values: the respite of a trashy novel versus the edification

[12] The intuition that the former, moral reasons, require maximization relative to an accepted burden is sometimes called a "perfectionist" account of such reasons; for an excellent account, see Hurka (2004). We might call these substantive rather than formal consistency constraints, since they are grounded in intuitions about the specific kind of value at issue, and what it takes to fully respect it. The intuition that the latter, hedonic reasons, can admit acceptably of threshold ends is defended by Richardson (2004) and Hurley (1995). We ourselves would appeal to the latter to explain the puzzle about fun vs. funner that Dancy (2004) discusses.

of the opera. The basic belief, and again paradigmatic supererogation, are precisely ones that involve importantly *different* substantive values. The examples of latitude adduced in support of the basic belief are not probing questions of fun vs. funner, but fun vs. edification.

On the face of it, these do not trigger any consistency constraints, formal or substantive. It would be odd to say that, having chosen to do something yesterday that was fun, it was true of me that I was counterfactually committed to having gone to the opera if there had been nothing fun to do that day. Or again, having chosen to go to the mani-pedi today, it was true of me that I was counterfactually committed to having done a kindness if the appointment had not been available. Or with heroic supererogation: that if I chose to save myself, it was actually true of me that I was counterfactually committed to saving other people's lives. Pair-wise comparisons involving substantively different commendatory favorers do not on the face of it trigger any consistency constraints. Both reasons are optional, and one simply responds, on this occasion, to the value behind one rather than the value behind the other.

In rejoinder, some may argue that, contrary to first impressions, pairwise comparisons of substantively different favorers *do* end up triggering consistency constraints: they are just located at a different level. The argument is as follows. It is sometimes argued that, to explain a choice between options supported by disparate favoring values, one must appeal to a common covering value in virtue of which one choice was superior (Chang, 2002). Having found the covering value, one must of course obey consistency constraints with respect to it: conditional on responding to it, one must choose the option that maximizes that value, at least where burdens are held constant and the end is not structured as a threshold. One must chose the option that instantiates it best or is most strongly supported by that value. Of course, the covering value itself must be merely commendatory—one could pass it on by without justification. But conditional on responding to it, one must choose the option that is strongest with respect to it. Once again, latitude seems to constrict. Appreciable latitude once again depends on rejecting judgments of better and worse, stronger and weaker, even within the commendatory.

Now, the claim that one needs to recover a common, covering value in order to explain choices between disparate values is a hotly contested one. For our purposes, the relevant point is a different one. Even if one were generally committed to the view, it would only apply to deontic

reasons, not commendatory ones. Having laid out the nature of commendatory reasons, the idea that one must appeal to a common covering value to choose between two substantively different commendatory reasons is just wrong.

To see, imagine that you encounter a chance for fun with modest inconvenience; imagine it is the only salient favorer. As a commendatory reason, whatever the strength of this reason, so long as it is merely commendatory, you get to pursue or decline; and if you decline, you need give no reason, explanation, or defense. Let's say that you accede. Imagine now that, on another occasion, you encounter a chance for edification with modest inconvenience; imagine it is the only salient favorer just then. As a commendatory reason, whatever the strength of this reason, so long as it is merely commendatory, you get to pursue or decline; and if you decline, you need give no reason, explanation, or defense. Let's say that you decline.

Now imagine these two options side by side in a choice situation. You see that both options are available, though mutually exclusive. The exact same responses described when encountering the reasons alone can occur when they are together. You accede to the invitation to have fun; you decline the invitation to be edified. You do not need to explain why you chose fun over edification, for the simple reason that you didn't need to explain not pursuing edification in the first place. The whole point of commendatory reasons is that one stands in no need of justifying why one did not follow a given one's lead. If one responds to it, it simply means that one did respond to the one reason, and one walked on by the second. One can acknowledge the existence of both without needing to enter a plea justifying why you ignored the other. The side-by-side comparison does not alter the fundamental asymmetry structure that is present when encountering the reasons alone: one responds to the one, and walks by the second. You *might* choose between them by ascension to a common, covering value. But it can also just be the case that you choose fun and decline edification. We might describe it here as less a matter of choosing fun over edification, and more a matter of choosing fun despite acknowledgment of the option of edification.

Further, doing so is compatible with acknowledging that the strength of the commendatory reason you responded to is weaker than the strength of the commendatory reason you declined. Return to the cases where one encounters the reasons by themselves. You could decline

the edification favorer, however strong it was, so long as that strength was merely commendatory. That absolute fact remains true even when the edification favorer sits side by side with a different favorer that in fact carries less strength. Put differently, the comparative strength of the two favorers may be of very little interest. The salient point is that one responds to the fun but walks on by edification. And this makes sense given what strength in the context of commendatory amounts to. Part of what it means to say that a commendatory reason is stronger is to say that it underwrites a larger scope of actions undertaken on its behalf, and more ambitious forms of ends undertaken—and this is certainly true. It is perfectly consistent with that understanding of strength to choose the fun rather than the edifying even as one sees that the edifying renders eligible more ambitious actions than the fun.

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