THE RING OF GYGES: OVERRIDINGNESS AND
THE UNITY OF REASON*

By David Copp

I. Introduction

Does morality override self-interest? Or does self-interest override morality? These questions become important in situations where there is conflict between the overall verdicts of morality and self-interest, situations where morality on balance requires an action that is contrary to our self-interest, or where considerations of self-interest on balance call for an action that is forbidden by morality. In situations of this kind, we want to know what we ought simpliciter to do. If one of these standpoints overrides the other, then there is a straightforward answer. We ought simpliciter to act on the verdict of the overriding standpoint.

For purposes of this essay, I assume that there are possible cases in which the overall verdicts of morality and self-interest conflict. I will call cases of this kind "conflict cases." The verdict of morality in a conflict case would be a proposition as to what we ought morally to do, or as to what we have the most moral reason to do; the verdict of self-interest would be a proposition as to what we ought to do in our self-interest, or as to what action is best supported by reasons or considerations of self-interest.1 These propositions are action-guiding or normative in a familiar sense.2 The conflict between morality and self-interest in conflict cases is therefore a normative conflict; it is a conflict between the overall verdicts of different normative standpoints. I take it that the question of whether morality overrides self-interest is the question of whether the verdicts of morality are normatively more important than the verdicts of self-interest. In due course, I will explain the idea of normative importance as well as the ideas of a normative proposition and of a reason.

I will be defending the position that neither morality nor self-interest overrides the other, that there simply are verdicts and reasons of these

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* For helpful discussion of the issues addressed in this essay, I am grateful to Philip Clark, James Drier, Ishtiyaque Haji, Dale Jamieson, Michael Jubien, Jeffrey C. King, the other contributors to this volume, and its editors.

1 I do not assume that the overall verdicts of morality and self-interest are always that some particular action is required. For all that I say, quite different verdicts are possible, including the verdict that a situation is a moral dilemma. For simplicity, I limit attention to cases in which morality and self-interest require a particular action.

2 Nothing of importance to my argument turns on the questions that divide realists from antirealists or cognitivists from noncognitivists in ethics.
different kinds, and that there is never an overall verdict as to which action is required simpliciter in situations where moral reasons and reasons of self-interest conflict. Accordingly, I reject the position that, in each situation, all the reasons there are determine one overall verdict, the verdict we might call the verdict of "Reason" or "Reason-as-such." In my view, there is no standpoint that can claim normative priority over all other normative standpoints and render a definitive verdict on the relative significance of moral and self-interested reasons. That is, in cases of conflict between kinds of reasons, there is no fact as to what a person ought simpliciter to do. I will explain these claims. I will be defending a kind of skepticism about the unity of practical reason.

From one point of view, it will seem that my position threatens the rational significance of morality, and its significance in guiding our actions. From this point of view, morality purports to be the final arbiter of how to act. Morality purports to tell us what we ought to do, period, and without qualification. If moral reasons do not override all others, however, then these appearances are illusory. For if moral reasons are not overriding, there might not be sufficient reason for a person to act morally in situations where the morally required action would be contrary to her self-interest. A person may not be guilty of any failure of rationality if she always acts in her self-interest in such situations.

From a second point of view, however, my position may seem to offer liberation from morality rather than to threaten to discredit it. From this standpoint, the demands of morality are sometimes excessive, for it is sometimes impossible to comply with these demands while also living a worthwhile life. If morality were overriding, the demands of morality could not rationally be escaped. It may therefore seem liberating to recognize that moral reasons are not actually overriding.

I reject both of these points of view. As for the first, I will argue that morality is not discredited by its failure to override self-interest, for it is also the case that self-interest fails to override morality. As for the second, I will argue that there is no privileged standpoint from which to assess whether the demands of morality are "excessive." It is true that moral demands may appear excessive from the standpoint of self-interest, assuming, of course, that morality can demand actions contrary to one's self-interest. This is not a telling point in my view, however, since self-interest does not override morality. Moral demands may appear excessive from other standpoints as well, standpoints that assess our lives as worthwhile, appealing, or excellent. I will argue, however, that these stand-

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3 The overall verdict of "Reason" could be complex. For example, it could be that several options are equally acceptable overall.

points also do not override morality. It is never the case that we ought *simpliciter* to violate the demands of morality.

Before I can begin to explain and defend my view, I need to clear the ground of obstructions. I begin in Section II by discussing my assumption that there can be conflict cases. In Section III, I distinguish two conceptions of self-interested reasons, a conception of self-grounded reasons and a conception of reasons to promote personal excellence. Section IV defines the notion of overridingness in terms of normative importance. It also introduces the idea of "Reason-as-such," the idea of a standard for comparing the normative importance of morality and self-interest. Sections V and VI argue that neither morality, nor self-grounded reason, nor a standpoint of personal excellence is to be identified with Reason-as-such. Section VII argues that the idea of Reason-as-such is incoherent and that practical reason is disunified in a fundamental way. In Section VIII, I discuss whether this result discredits morality in any interesting way.

II. CONFLICT BETWEEN MORALITY AND SELF-INTEREST

Consider the myth of Gyges, as told by Plato in the *Republic*.\(^5\) Gyges is a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia. One day he discovers a magic ring that makes him invisible when he twists it a certain way on his finger. Using the ring to become invisible at crucial times, Gyges commits adultery with the queen, attacks the king with her help, kills the king, and takes over the kingdom.

Plato's description of Gyges' situation is sketchy, but we can adjust the details as we like so that, for almost any moral theory and theory of self-interest, Gyges' situation was a case of conflict. To begin, imagine that Gyges did what he did because he believed that it would be in his self-interest. Now add details so that his belief was true. As a result of killing the king and winning the queen and the kingdom, he achieved a position in which he felt content with his life in a way that he had never felt before. With the queen, he enjoyed a fulfilling relationship of a kind he had never achieved before. As king, he developed talents of leadership and statecraft that he would not otherwise have developed. He valued his achievements. Given these details, which I hereby stipulate to be part of the story, I believe there is no room to deny that killing the king and winning the queen were in Gyges' self-interest, unless one accepts a highly implausible account of the nature of self-interest.

Next, we add details so that what Gyges did would count as morally wrong on almost anyone's account. Killing a person and violating a trust are at least prima facie wrong. Assume that the overall consequences of Gyges' actions were worse than the consequences would have been if he had remained a shepherd. Gyges was a good king, but not as good as the

king he deposed and killed. The former king was benevolent, kind, and just. Gyges’ intentions were morally indefensible; his plan made no room for the good of the king, the queen, or the kingdom, and considered only his own good. We can assume that Gyges realized he was in the wrong. Finally, Gyges’ action expressed the vices of envy, greed, lust, and the desire for power. Again, I stipulate all of this, and thus I believe there is no room to deny that Gyges’ actions were morally wrong unless one has an implausible view about morality.

To be sure, some philosophers, including Plato, would argue that morality and self-interest must necessarily coincide. If these philosophers are correct, then, of course, unless Gyges’ situation in the story is not possible, my assessment of it in terms of morality and self-interest must in some way be mistaken.

It might be argued, for example, that it is in one’s self-interest to be as good as one can be, and that Gyges would have been a better person if he had remained a shepherd. I believe that arguments of this kind turn on an equivocation. It is in one’s self-interest to achieve the best for oneself, but it does not follow that it is in one’s self-interest to be as good as one can be. It certainly does not follow that it is in one’s self-interest to be as morally good as one can be. It would not have been better for Gyges if he had chosen to stay with his sheep.

Ethical egoism is the doctrine that a person is morally required to perform a given action just in case, of all the alternatives, the action would be most in the person’s interest. Egoism implies that morality and self-interest cannot possibly conflict; it implies that Gyges did not do anything wrong, given that he acted in his self-interest. Egoism is quite implausible, however, and I assume it is false.

We surely do believe that it is possible for morality and self-interest to diverge. Otherwise, for example, we would not bother to teach morality to our children as a system of norms distinct from self-interest. Of course, morality and self-interest may coincide in certain circumstances, but whether they do coincide is a contingent matter. It may be a fortunate truth that the pursuit of advantage never leads one morally astray. The Gyges example shows merely that this is not a necessary truth.

On my view, conflict situations involve conflict between normative verdicts. Some philosophers might deny this. They might claim that, to count as normative, a verdict would have to entail the existence of a reason, and they might deny that morality and self-interest are both sources of reasons. They might claim that there is a single basis for all reasons. On a Kantian approach, one might hold that reasons are considerations that would move fully autonomous agents. Moral considerations and considerations of self-interest are reasons only if they would move fully autono-

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6 This point is made by Samuel Scheffler in his *Human Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
mous agents. On this view, conflict between reasons of these kinds would entail the existence of conflict in the motivations of fully autonomous agents, which one might argue to be impossible. On a Hobbesian approach, one might claim that all reasons are grounded in self-interest. One might infer from this that there are no reasons that conflict with reasons of self-interest.

It would take me too far afield were I to attempt to discuss these views in detail. There are, however, two things I would like to point out.

First, I do not need to insist that cases of conflict involve conflict between different kinds of reasons. All that I need to insist is that cases of conflict involve conflict between different overall verdicts as to what an agent ought to do, verdicts that are normative, or action-guiding. I merely assume the following: it is possible for the overall verdicts of morality and self-interest to conflict, where these verdicts are normative verdicts as to what an agent ought to do. As I will explain, my understanding of the problem of overridingness depends on this assumption.

The second thing I need to point out is that, intuitively, morality and self-interest are both sources of reasons. I added details to Gyges’ story to make it plausible that Gyges’ killing the king was both morally wrong and in his self-interest. Given that Gyges’ actions were in his self-interest, it is intuitively plausible that there were self-interested reasons for him to act as he did. And given that Gyges’ actions were morally wrong, it is intuitively plausible that there were moral reasons for him not to do what he did. Gyges’ situation illustrates the intuitive plausibility of the idea that there are moral reasons as well as reasons of self-interest and that there can be conflict between them.

III. REASONS, NORMATIVITY, AND SELF-INTEREST

The issue about overridingness is an issue about the relative normative significance of overall verdicts delivered by morality and self-interest. People can differ about what these overall verdicts would be in given cases, of course, and there are different theories about this. It is for this reason, in part, that the case of Gyges is so useful. We can agree that the case is a conflict case even if we do not agree in general about the notions of morality and self-interest.

Despite this, however, I cannot ignore the disagreement there is about the notion of self-interest. There are basically two views. These views agree that something is in a person’s self-interest just in case it would be good for the person. They disagree about the content of the standards for assessing how well a person’s life is going for her. A “subjectivist” view

7 A view of this kind was suggested by Thomas Hill, Jr., in discussion.
8 Strictly speaking, I may not need to assume the possibility of cases of conflict. For even if cases of conflict are not possible, there would still be the two kinds of verdict, and we could ask whether one kind overrides the other.
might propose that a person’s life is going well for her to the extent that her desires are being satisfied or her values are being fulfilled. More generally, a subjectivist view proposes a standard that evaluates a person’s life on the basis of its relation to certain subjective psychological states of the person, such as the person’s values, desires, or feelings of pleasure. An “objectivist” view proposes certain other characteristics that contribute to how well a life is going, characteristics that are not matters of the relation between the life and the person’s subjective states. For example, an objectivist view might judge a person’s life on the basis of whether the person is developing her talents. An objectivist view can be mixed, of course. For example, an objectivist view could give great weight in evaluating a person’s life to whether the person is content with her life.9

It is possible to accept both subjective and objective standards without taking a position on the notion of self-interest. Indeed, standards of both kinds could be sources of reasons, although presumably reasons of different kinds.

In order to explain what I mean, I need to sketch an account of the nature of reasons. Nothing in my argument depends on the details of the account, but my formulation of the argument will make use of a central intuition about normativity.

The intuition is that if something has a normative property, such as the property of being right or wrong or good or bad, there are criteria that it meets or fails to meet; furthermore, a standard or a norm could in principle be formulated that calls for things of the relevant kind to meet the criteria at issue. For example, if an action is morally required, then it meets certain relevant moral criteria, and there is a moral standard or norm that calls on us to perform actions meeting these criteria. Of course, we can imagine various arbitrary standards, such as one calling on us to stand on our heads before eating any meal. Because of this, we need to add that the standards in question are not arbitrary. They are “authoritative,” or “justified.”

Elsewhere, I have proposed a model of the truth conditions of normative propositions that makes use of this idea.10 I assume that there are true propositions regarding what we are morally required to do and regarding what we ought to do in our self-interest. On my account, the truth of such a proposition depends on the existence of a relevant “justified” standard.

I think there are reasons of many different kinds, including moral reasons, aesthetic reasons, and, presumably, reasons of self-interest. If there is a warranted, authoritative, or justified normative standard of a certain kind, and if this standard calls on people to choose in a certain way, then,

I say, there are reasons of that kind for people to choose in that way.\(^{11}\) If an agent is morally required to do something, my view implies that there is an authoritative moral standard that calls on her to do the thing. Given what I said about reasons, it follows that there is a moral reason for her to do it. Similarly, if an agent ought to do something because it would be in her self-interest, my view implies that there is an authoritative standard that calls on her to do things that are in her self-interest. It follows, in turn, that there is a self-interested reason for her to do the thing.

The source of the authority of standards of the various kinds is a substantive issue that is beyond the scope of this essay. Given what I have said, it should be plain that a theory of moral judgment requires an account of the circumstances under which moral standards are relevantly authoritative.\(^{12}\) Similarly, a theory of judgments of self-interest must provide a justification of the standard that calls on each of us to seek what is most in her interest; that is, it must provide an account of that in virtue of which the standard is relevantly authoritative.

Recall that I distinguished objectivist as well as subjectivist views about the content of standards of self-interest, standards as to how well a life is going for the person whose life it is. It is quite possible that some standards of both kinds are suitably justified, although presumably standards of the different kinds would be justified on different grounds. For simplicity, I will assume that this is so. Given the view I sketched about reasons, it follows that there are reasons of both kinds. I will assume, in particular, that each of us has reason to pursue a life in which his talents are fully developed and about which he feels content. I will call reasons of this kind “reasons of personal excellence.” I will assume, moreover, that each of us has reason to pursue a life in which his desires or values are satisfied. I will call certain reasons of this kind “reasons of self-interest.” Reasons of self-interest are a subclass of “self-grounded” reasons. This is the next idea that I need to explain.

“Self-grounded” reasons are reasons grounded in a person’s own standpoint. I propose that the best life for a person, as assessed from her own standpoint, is the life that best meets her basic needs while also satisfying her values without frustrating her mere desires. A person’s basic needs, values, and desires together determine what reasons she has that are grounded in her own standpoint. I have developed this proposal elsewhere.\(^{13}\)

\(^{11}\) This is an account of “normative reasons.” For a similar view, see Michael Smith, The Moral Problem (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), p. 95.

\(^{12}\) Elsewhere, I have argued that moral standards are relevantly authoritative just when, roughly speaking, society needs their currency among its members in order to flourish. That is, their currency would be in the interest of the society as a whole. See my Morality, Normativity, and Society.

\(^{13}\) See my Morality, Normativity, and Society, ch. 9. The standard calling on me to satisfy my basic needs is not subjective in the sense I explained before. I cannot take the space to explain this here.
This is not exactly an account of self-interest. It allows that any of a person’s values or desires can give her reasons, provided they do not conflict with her needs, even though some of her values may not concern her own good. A person may have moral values, for example, and if so, my account implies that she has self-grounded reasons to realize these values. Hence, if Gyges had attached more value to keeping trust with the king, he might have had sufficient self-grounded reason to stay with his sheep rather than to try to take over the kingdom. This would not, however, have made it in his self-interest to stay with his sheep. Despite this, it seems to me that if a person has self-interested reasons grounded in the fact that she values or desires things for her own life, then her other values and desires must also ground reasons of the same kind. That is, a person’s self-interested reasons are among the reasons she has that are grounded in her needs, values, and desires. I call this larger class of reasons self-grounded.

A person’s values can be bizarre or self-destructive. It might be objected on this basis that the mere fact that a person values something gives her no reason to achieve it. Fortunately, nothing in my argument turns on the issue raised by this objection. Those who disagree with me will likely find that their view is addressed when I discuss reasons of excellence.

I assume, then, that there are both self-grounded reasons and reasons to pursue excellence. I submit that the question as to which of these kinds of reasons is more properly thought to be, or to include, “self-interested” reasons is neither interesting nor substantive.

IV. OVERRIDINGNESS

Let us return, then, to the questions about overridingness. What is a person to do when there is conflict between the action called for from the moral standpoint and the action called for from the self-grounded standpoint? Before we can begin to deal with these questions, we need to clarify the notion of overridingness. I interpret the notion as follows.

The claim that morality overrides self-grounded reason would be the claim that morality is normatively more important than self-grounded reason. We are assuming that Gyges morally ought not to have killed the king and yet that killing the king was best for Gyges in light of his needs, values, and desires. The claim that morality overrides self-grounded reason would imply that Gyges ought simpliciter to have done what he morally ought to have done.

To make sense of such a claim, we must suppose that there is a justified standard in terms of which to judge the relative normative significance of normative standpoints. This standard would specify criteria bearing on the normative importance of morality and self-grounded reason, or on the importance of their verdicts. The fact that morality is normatively more important than self-grounded reason, if it is a fact, would be the fact that
morality meets the criteria specified by the standard in question, or that it meets the criteria more completely than does self-grounded reason.

This standard must of course be justified or authoritative. In addition, it must be normatively more important than any other standard that specifies criteria bearing on the comparative importance of morality and self-grounded reason. We want to know whether moral reasons override self-grounded reasons period, not merely whether moral reasons are overriding as assessed by some standard or other. We therefore need to know whether morality overrides self-grounded reason when assessed in terms of criteria specified by the normatively most important standard bearing on the comparison of standards. This standard must also bear on the choice of actions, for if morality overrides self-grounded reason when assessed in terms specified by this standard, then we ought simpliciter to act morally in every case of conflict.

If we ought simpliciter to act morally in every situation, then, on my view, there is a relevant authoritative standard that calls on us, in every situation, to act morally. I introduced this idea before. Now this standard could not simply be one among many. In order for its assessment of what we ought to do to be definitive and final, in order for it to settle what we ought to do simpliciter, it would have to be normatively the most important standard. We are not interested merely in whether, when a person is morally required to do something, she is required to do it by some standard or other.

In summary, then, the fact that morality overrides self-grounded reason, if it is a fact, would consist in the fact that morality is normatively more important than self-grounded reason as assessed in terms of the normatively most important standard bearing on the comparison of standards and the choice of actions. We could call this standpoint or standard, if it exists, Reason, or Reason-as-such. Then we could say that morality overrides self-grounded reason just in case it is never Rational (knowingly) to do otherwise than act morally in situations of conflict. 14

The standard of Reason-as-such would have the following properties, which, for future reference, I will call “comprehensiveness” and “supremacy”: First, there are various special standpoints or standards for choice—standpoints such as that of morality, self-interest, prudence, etiquette, law, aesthetics, and so on. The standard of Reason would take the verdicts given by all the special standpoints regarding any situation where an agent needs to choose; it would evaluate these verdicts without any question-begging; and it would produce an overall verdict as to what the agent is to do. As I will say, it would be “comprehensive.” Second, the standard of Reason would be the normatively most important standard for assessing such verdicts and choosing how to act. Hence, an agent ought simpliciter to comply with its overall verdict. Reason-as-such would

14 Samuel Scheffler says that the “claim of overridingness” is “the claim that it can never be rational knowingly to do what morality forbids” (Human Morality, p. 52).
not be merely another standpoint alongside the special standpoints. As I will say, it would be "supreme."

The issue of whether there is such a thing as Reason-as-such is not the same as the issue of whether morality overrides self-grounded reason. For Reason-as-such might fail to align necessarily with either morality or self-grounded reason. It could be that although it sometimes aligns with morality, and sometimes aligns with self-grounded reason, it sometimes aligns with neither. If I am correct, however, the existence of Reason-as-such is a necessary condition of its being the case that morality overrides self-grounded reason. For if morality overrides self-grounded reason, there is a comprehensive and supreme standard such that, necessarily, in every case of conflict, it yields the verdict that each agent is to comply with the overall verdict of morality. It would follow that each agent ought simpliciter to do the morally right thing.

V. MORALITY, SELF-GROUNDED REASON, AND REASON-AS-SUCH

Assuming that there is a standard of Reason-as-such, there are three possibilities. First, it may be that the verdicts of morality are verdicts of Reason-as-such, and the standpoint of Reason includes morality. Second, it may be that self-grounded verdicts are verdicts of Reason-as-such, and Reason includes the self-grounded standpoint. On either of these views, Reason-as-such is seen as simply a wider standpoint than the moral standpoint or the self-grounded standpoint, respectively. The third possibility is that the standpoint of Reason is different in character from both of these other standpoints. This possibility leaves open whether Reason necessarily agrees with morality or with self-grounded reason.

There is something to be said for each of the first two possibilities. Consider the idea that the moral standpoint is the supreme standpoint in cases where morality renders a verdict. One might claim it is analytic, or conceptually guaranteed, that if morality requires Gyges not to kill the king, all things considered, then Gyges ought simpliciter not to kill the king, and there is no further question as to what he ought to do. One might add that it is analytic, or conceptually guaranteed, that if morality requires Gyges not to kill the king all things considered, then since Gyges ought simpliciter not to kill the king, he would refrain from the killing if he were fully rational. On this view, in cases where morality yields an overall verdict, its verdict is identical with that of Reason-as-such. Call this view "moral rationalism."^{15}

Consider now the idea that the self-grounded standpoint is the supreme standpoint, the standpoint of Reason-as-such, in cases where self-grounded reason renders a verdict. One might claim that it is analytic, or conceptually guaranteed, that if Gyges’ needs, values, and desires argue

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that it is best for Gyges to kill the king, then it is *rational* of Gyges to do so, and there is no further question. He simply ought to kill the king. On this view, in cases where the standpoint of self-grounded reason yields an overall verdict, it is identical with that of Reason-as-such. Call this view “self-grounded rationalism.”

The reply to these suggestions is essentially that although they purport to answer the question about overridingness, in fact they do not. For, in each case, the question could be reformulated. Let me explain.

Moral rationalism contends that it is analytic that if one morally ought to do something all things considered, then one ought to do the thing *simpliciter*, and there is no further question as to what one ought to do. I agree, of course, that when a person ought morally to do something, we often speak simply of what the person “ought” to do, without mentioning the qualification that this is what she ought *morally* to do. But the fact that this qualification is not mentioned hardly settles what an agent ought to do in a case of conflict between morality and self-grounded reason. We can ask: What is the thing that the person ought to do from a standpoint that provides a definitive assessment of the relative normative priority of morality and self-grounded reason? Or is there no such standpoint?

Moral rationalism also claims that it is analytic or conceptually guaranteed that if one morally ought to do something, all things considered, then one will do it if one is “fully rational.” But in the absence of an argument that the “fully rational” person in this context is the person who does exactly what is required by Reason-as-such, this claim merely sidesteps our question. Our question could be reformulated as follows: Consider a case where there is conflict between what a person would do if she were “fully rational” (i.e., what she morally ought to do) and what she ought to do from the self-grounded standpoint. What is the thing she ought to do *simpliciter*, from a standpoint that provides a definitive assessment of the relative normative priority of morality and self-grounded reason?

It might be replied that no requirement counts as a *moral* requirement unless it is overriding. On this view, of course, there is no problem of whether morality is overriding. However, for any *putative* moral requirement, or “schmoral” requirement, there is a problem of whether it is in fact a moral requirement. On this view, there may be no moral requirements since “schmoral” requirements may not be overriding. The question we are interested in could be expressed as follows: In a case where there is conflict between what a person ought “schmorally” to do and what she ought to do in light of her needs, values, and desires, is her “schmoral” requirement a moral requirement? What is the thing she ought to do from a standpoint that provides a definitive assessment of the relative normative priority of these two verdicts?

Self-grounded rationalism claims that the thing that a person ought to do in light of her needs, values, and desires is the “rational” thing to do. I agree, of course, that this is a common way of speaking. We do at least
frequently express verdicts as to what would be in our self-interest as verdicts about what it would be “rational” to do. This does not settle the question about overridingness, however, for the question could be reformulated: Consider a case where there is conflict between what a person morally ought to do and what she would be “rational” to do, given her needs, values, and desires. What is the thing she ought to do from a standpoint that provides a definitive assessment of the relative normative priority of these two verdicts?

There is a substantive question we want to ask, and the views I have been considering do not answer it. They may appear to answer it, but in each case the question arises again, even if in different terminology.

Here is a way to think of the problem. Morality consists of a particular system of justified standards. These standards call for certain things; they call for Gyges not to kill the king. Similarly, the norm of self-grounded reason calls for agents to pursue the satisfaction of their needs, values, and desires. This norm calls for Gyges to kill the king. The question about overridingness is about the relative normative importance of these two systems of norms. It cannot be answered on the basis of either system. Each of these systems is concerned to evaluate our actions, traits of character, and the like; neither is concerned with the issue about the relative significance of normative standpoints. Moreover, although each system can yield a verdict about verdicts of the other system, these verdicts do not settle the relative normative significance of the systems. Morality would prescribe that we comply with our moral duty rather than act on our self-grounded reasons in cases of conflict, but self-grounded reason would prescribe that we act on our self-grounded reasons in such cases. These verdicts leave unanswered the key question as to which of these verdicts is normatively the more important.

I conclude, then, that in order for morality to override self-interest, or vice versa, there would have to be some other normative standpoint that ranked one as normatively more significant than the other. And this standpoint would have to be normatively more significant than either morality or self-grounded reason; it could not be merely another standard for choice alongside morality and self-grounded reason that gives rise to merely another special kind of reasons. This supreme and comprehensive standard, if it exists, would be the standard of “Reason,” or “Reason-as-such.”

I believe there is no such thing. Before I attempt to show this, however, let me explore the credentials of the standpoint of personal “excellence.” Some philosophers would identify this standpoint with self-interest. I want to consider whether it can be identified with Reason-as-such.

VI. The Standpoint of Personal Excellence

Several recent discussions of the issue of whether morality is overriding, and of the related issue of whether morality is “too demanding,”
have invoked ideas about the admirable, desirable, or excellent life. Bernard Williams discusses the importance of our “projects” to the “rational justification” of our choices. In discussing a fictionalized Gauguin, who wrongfully abandoned his family in order to go to the South Pacific to pursue his career as a painter, Williams appears to say that Gauguin made the best choice.\(^{16}\) Williams’s thought may be that morality asked too much of Gauguin, for Gauguin could not reasonably have been expected to sacrifice success in the central project of his life in order to take care of his family. Michael Slote argues that Gauguin receives our admiration even though the central choice of his life was morally wrong.\(^{17}\) Perhaps Gauguin deserved our admiration because his choice to pursue his painting made his life more fulfilling and successful than it would otherwise have been. Susan Wolf discusses the desirability of living an interesting and appealing life, and she argues that a morally flawless life would not generally be an especially appealing one to others.\(^{18}\) She might therefore say that even though Gauguin’s life was morally flawed as a result of his decision to abandon his family, he lived a more appealing or interesting life than he would have if he had decided otherwise. Similar things could perhaps be said about Gyges, for he too had a “project” that morality asked him to abandon, and he lived a more interesting life than he would have, if he had complied with his moral duty. One might admire him for his success in his project.

Williams, Slote, and Wolf appear to be invoking a standard that is distinct from morality, a standard concerned with the choice of the best life—the life that would be best for the person whose life it is. Let me simplify by assuming that they have the same fundamental idea in mind, a standard of “personal excellence.” Each of them appears to be suggesting that morality deserves equivocal support at best from this standpoint of personal excellence.\(^{19}\)

An Aristotelian view of personal excellences is a familiar one, and I will suppose, for the sake of argument, that an Aristotelian view is at work in the thinking of Williams, Slote, and Wolf. In particular, I will assume that the following standard is at work: We are to pursue projects that, if pursued, would develop our most valuable talents as fully as they could be developed while also giving us enjoyment. The best life for a person is a life of success in enjoyable self-developing projects.

Given this framework, we see immediately that the standard of excellence is distinct both from the familiar standards of morality and from the standard of self-grounded reason. Moreover, it is arguable that the pur-

\(^{16}\) Williams, “Moral Luck,” pp. 22-24, 36-39. Williams’s discussion is difficult to follow, so I cannot claim to have the only or the best interpretation.

\(^{17}\) Michael Slote discusses “admirable immorality” in his Goods and Virtues, pp. 77-107.

\(^{18}\) See Wolf, “Moral Saints.”

\(^{19}\) The idea of the good for a person is discussed by Richard Kraut in “Desire and the Human Good.” Thomas Hurka has developed an account of personal excellences in Perfectionism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
suit of excellence does not necessarily align either with morality or with self-grounded reason.

It is plausible, for example, that although Gauguin’s choice was morally wrong, it was recommended by the standard of excellence. Painting was the central project of Gauguin’s life, and his talent for painting was arguably the most valuable of his talents. As for Gyges, I stipulated that his action of taking over the kingdom enabled him to develop talents of leadership and statecraft that he would not have been able to develop as a shepherd. It is arguable that these talents are more valuable than the talents a shepherd could develop, and, in any case, Gyges had already developed the latter talents. Arguably, then, the standard of excellence supported the actions of both Gauguin and Gyges despite their being morally wrong. Apparently, then, excellence does not necessarily align with morality.

Self-grounded reason calls on a person to choose what would be best for her from her own standpoint, in light of her needs, values, and desires. The standard of excellence, however, calls on a person to choose what would most facilitate a life of enjoying self-developing projects. Such a life is not necessarily best from the person’s own standpoint, given her own values. The projects she values may not be projects that would best develop her talents. If Gyges had most valued his work as a shepherd, then continuing to work as a shepherd would have been recommended by self-grounded reason even if the pursuit of political power would have been recommended by the standard of excellence. It is certainly arguable, then, that the best choice from the standpoint of self-grounded reason is not necessarily the same as the best choice from the standpoint of personal excellence.

These claims about personal excellence would of course be debated by some philosophers. Some would argue that a person living the most excellent life would necessarily be living a morally virtuous life. For our purposes, however, the crucial issue is whether the standard of excellence can be identified with that of Reason-as-such. Does this standard have the two properties of comprehensiveness and supremacy?

The standpoint of excellence does yield verdicts about at least some of the verdicts of morality and self-interest. It may therefore be comprehensive. The key question, however, is whether it is supreme. Is the standpoint of excellence normatively the most important standpoint? Unless this is so, it is not the case, when a person is required to do something by the standard of excellence, that she ought to do it simpliciter and without qualification. And unless this latter thing is so, then the fact, if it is a fact, that the standard of excellence aligns in Gyges’ case with self-grounded reason would have no tendency to show that morality is overridden in this case by self-grounded reason. It would have no tendency to show that Gyges ought simpliciter to kill the king.

Intuitively, the standpoint of excellence is merely a special standpoint of evaluation. What we ought to do in order to best develop our talents
is not what we simply ought to do, without any qualification. If this is correct, the standpoint of excellence is not supreme among all special standpoints in the way that Reason-as-such would be, if it existed.

The claim that the standpoint of excellence has the property of supremacy is the claim that it is supreme over other standpoints as assessed in terms of certain relevant criteria. Let these criteria be specified by a standard $S$. The first point I want to establish is that the standard of excellence is not itself this standard $S$. The standard of excellence speaks to the relative excellence of our choices, not to the relative normative importance of various standards for choice. In some cases it does yield verdicts about the verdicts of other standards; it prescribes that we pursue excellence in cases of conflict, rather than that we comply with either our moral duty or self-grounded reason. But morality also delivers a verdict in such cases; it prescribes that we comply with our moral duty rather than pursue excellence. The verdict of the standard of excellence in favor of the pursuit of excellence leaves unanswered the key question of whether this verdict is normatively superior to the (perhaps) contrary verdict of morality. This question cannot be answered by the standard of excellence. To suppose otherwise would be to argue in a circle. Hence, the standard of excellence is not standard $S$.

It follows that the standard of excellence does not have the property of supremacy. For in order to yield definitive assessments of the relative importance of normative standpoints, $S$ must be supreme. It must take the verdicts of the various standpoints and yield verdicts about them, and these verdicts must be definitive in the way that only the verdicts of the normatively most important standpoint could be. Hence, the claim that the standard of excellence is supreme has led to the conclusion that it is not supreme, that $S$ is supreme. It follows that we must deny the claim and conclude that the standard of excellence is not the standard of Reason.

VII. Skepticism about the Unity of Reason

When we deliberate about what to do, we may try to take into account all relevant considerations and to make the best or the right decision. We may not want to make a decision that is merely right or best from one standpoint. We may want to make the decision that is best period.\footnote{Philip Clark has stressed this point, in discussion.} This would be the decision required by Reason-as-such.

To be sure, a morally virtuous person wants to do what would be morally best, but she then presumably thinks that to do what is morally best is to do what is best, period. At least, she does not think that something else would be best, period. This is part of what it is for her to be morally virtuous. Similarly, a self-interested person wants to do what would be best for herself, from her own standpoint. But she presumably thinks that what would be best for her from her own standpoint is the
best thing for her to do. At least, she does not think that something else would be the best thing for her to do, period. Otherwise, she would not be wholly self-interested, for she might think she could do better than pursue her self-interest.

I have claimed that there is no standard of Reason, no supreme and comprehensive standpoint. If we accepted this position, we would have to give up the thought that when we deliberate, we can make the best or right decision, period. For this thought presupposes that there is a standard for the evaluation of choices that is normatively the most important. This would be the standard I have been calling the standard of Reason or Reason-as-such, the standard that yields verdicts as to what we ought to do \textit{simpliciter}, and without any qualification.

To be sure, I have not \textit{shown} that there is no such supreme and comprehensive standard; for all I have argued, then, it is possible that one does exist. But I have argued that morality is not identical with Reason, nor is self-grounded reason, nor is the standard of excellence. These standards are all warranted in their own ways, and they give rise to reasons of their respective kinds, or so I assume, but they are not normatively supreme.

I believe that there is no such thing as Reason-as-such. First, I do not believe we have any clear conception of what such a thing would be. Consider any candidate for the standard of Reason. Call it "S." It is quite unclear what status S could have that would give it the kind of supremacy it would need in order to qualify as the standard of Reason. It is also unclear what status it could have that would give it authority, such that it would indeed be a source of reasons, without giving it a special perspective on the facts of situations where choices must be made. We would then see S as simply another special standard rather than as the one standard qualified to appraise the significance of the verdicts of all of the special standpoints.

Second, there is the following \textit{reductio} of the idea that our candidate S has the property of supremacy. The claim that a standpoint has the property of supremacy is the claim that it is the \textit{normatively most important} standpoint. I argued before that comparisons of the relative normative importance of standpoints must be made in terms of criteria specified by some relevant authoritative normative standpoint. Hence, the claim that the candidate S has the property of supremacy is the claim that it is normatively more important than any other standpoint, as assessed from a relevant authoritative standpoint. That is, if S is normatively the most important, then there is some authoritative standard \( R \) that yields the verdict that S is normatively the most important standpoint. \( R \) assesses the relative significance of S's verdicts and the verdicts of all the special standpoints, and \( R \) determines that the verdicts of S are definitive as to what we ought to do \textit{simpliciter}. Now, either standard \( R \) is identical to S, or it is not.

We cannot suppose that \( R \) is identical to S. For a standard cannot be normatively the most important in virtue of its meeting criteria that it
itself specifies as criteria to be met by standards. The standard of Reason is to be normatively the most important simpliciter, not merely normatively the most important from its own standpoint. Morality prescribes that we ought to do our moral duty, and it judges that standards that prescribe otherwise are morally wanting by comparison with itself. But this fact about morality does not suffice to make it the case that morality is the normatively most important standpoint simpliciter; at best it shows that morality is the morally most respectable standpoint. Similarly, the standard of self-grounded reason is presumably the most respectable from the standpoint of self-grounded reason. And for any candidate S, there is presumably a sense in which S assesses the significance of its own verdicts by comparison with the verdicts of other standpoints; for it prescribes, I assume, that we ought to perform exactly the actions it prescribes. But this does not suffice to make it the case that S is normatively the most important standpoint simpliciter; it merely shows that S is the most acceptable standpoint from its own standpoint. This verdict of standard S leaves unanswered the key question as to whether the verdict of S is normatively more important than all other verdicts. To suppose otherwise would be to argue in a circle. Therefore, if S is normatively the most important standpoint, then it meets criteria specified by some authoritative standpoint R that is distinct from S. This is what constitutes S as normatively the most important.

This standard R must be normatively the most important standard. Otherwise, its verdict would not settle definitively the relative normative status of S and the special standpoints. Otherwise, there would be some standpoint superior to R, and its assessment of the relative importance of S and the special standpoints would be the definitive one. But then, if R is normatively more important than S, it follows that S is not in fact the normatively most important standpoint. Moreover, although we ought simpliciter to do what S prescribes, this is a judgment made from the standpoint of R, not a judgment made from the standpoint of S itself. Hence, S itself is not to be identified with the standard of Reason-as-such, which contradicts the assumption with which we began.

21 Let me briefly discuss two possible objections to the conclusion that R must be normatively more important than S. (1) Perhaps R is exactly as important normatively as S. But then, what would constitute them as exactly equally important? It could not be the assessment of R by S and vice versa. This is simply to argue in a larger circle than we argue if we suppose that R is identical to S. There would then have to be some additional standard T that specifies criteria such that R and S are equally important. Now there is the problem of the relative status of R, S, and T, which raises the very issues that were supposed to be escaped by supposing that R and S are equally important. (2) Perhaps R and S are normatively "incomparable." But then all we have is that a standard of indeterminate significance ranks S as superior to all other standpoints. This is not sufficient to constitute S as normatively superior simpliciter; at most it shows that S is superior from the standpoint of R. Moreover, there might be some other standpoint T that is superior to R and that assesses S as normatively inferior to some other standpoint. To eliminate this possibility, we would have to suppose that no standpoint is superior to either R or S. But then there must be some other standard that specifies criteria of evaluation according to which no standard is superior to R or to S. This begins the regress anew. I see no way to avoid a regress problem.
The same *reductio* can be run on the assumption that $R$ is the standard of Reason-as-such. It appears, then, that the idea of a standard of Reason-as-such is incoherent.

The incoherence can be displayed in two sentences: The claim that a standard $S$ has the property of supremacy is the claim that it is normatively the most important standard as assessed in terms of some other standard, $R$, which is the normatively most important standard. But only one standard could be normatively the most important.

When we are trying to decide how to act, we do sometimes manifestly have the thought that there is something that it would be best to choose, period. This thought commits us to the existence of a standard that determines the proper weight of all the reasons that bear on a decision and that therefore determines what would be best or right *simpliciter*. If I am correct, this thought is false.22 There are only the various reasons of the various special kinds, and in weighing them we are simply choosing which to act on. Our choice may be *guided* by the reasons there are, but it is not *determined* by the reasons. That is, again, the reasons do not balance out from a standpoint that determines their correct weight and the right choice, period and without qualification.

My position is a kind of skepticism about the unity of practical reason—"skepticism" seems the appropriate term, for although I deny that practical reason is unified, I concede that I have not proven this. My argument depends on the assumption that there are various special kinds of normative considerations, including those of morality and self-grounded reason, and that it is possible for such considerations to conflict. It also depends on the intuitions about normativity and reasons that I introduced earlier in the essay.

Henry Sidgwick also doubted the unity of practical reason. He thought it unlikely “that the performance of duty will be adequately rewarded and its violation punished.” In consequence, he said, there is a “vital need that our Practical Reason feels of proving or postulating this connexion of Virtue and self-interest, if it is to be made consistent with itself. For the

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22 Hence, in *most* situations of deliberation it is false that there is something we could choose that would be best, period. There may be *some* situations in which this thought is true, however; for if all the special reasons speak in favor of the same option, then any plausible candidate for the standard of Reason would select that option as best, period. Compare the problem of social choice that was explored by Kenneth Arrow in his *Social Choice and Individual Values*, 2d ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963). Arrow argued that there is no function that takes individual preference rankings over social options and yields a social preference ranking over those options—no function that meets certain theoretically desirable conditions. I am arguing that there is no standard that takes the rankings over sets of options given by the various special standards for choice and yields a supreme ranking over these sets of options—no standard that meets certain theoretically desirable conditions, including especially that it be comprehensive and supreme. In this note, I am pointing out that in certain special circumstances only one ranking could plausibly be accepted. In particular, if all the special standards rank the options the same way, then that is the only way that the supreme standard or Reason could rank the options.
negation of the connexion must force us to admit... that the apparently intuitive operation of the Practical Reason... is after all illusory.”

It may seem that matters are different when it comes to the choice of what to believe. It may seem that reasons of the kind that ground our knowledge, which we may call “epistemic” reasons, simply do override all other reasons that bear on what to believe. I doubt that this is correct. From the “epistemic” standpoint, we have reason to believe a proposition if it is more likely to be true than its negation, given the available information. But there are other kinds of reasons to believe things. In some cases, for instance, there may be self-grounded reasons to believe something, and these reasons may conflict with the epistemic reasons. Suppose, for example, that a person has certain values about the kind of person she wants to be. She values being a “God-fearing” person with traditional moral standards. Or she values having faith that God exists. In either case, her values give her reason to believe that God exists; they give her a self-grounded reason to believe that God exists. Reasons of this kind may conflict with epistemic reasons. It is not obvious in such cases what a person ought simpliciter to believe, even though it may be obvious what she ought epistemically to believe.

Epistemic reasons override self-grounded reasons only if there is some third standard for deciding how to believe, a standard that is comprehensive and supreme. It is not obvious that there is such a standard. We should not restrict our skepticism about the unity of reason to so-called “practical reason.”

To be sure, conflicts between kinds of reasons to believe are not generally a problem. To believe something is to accept it as true. Because of this, the epistemic reasons for believing a proposition are central to the question of whether to believe it, for they speak to the issue of whether the proposition is more likely to be true or false. Normally a person simply does believe a proposition if she believes it is most likely to be true given the available information; for if she believes this about the proposition, it is a small step to accept the proposition as true. It is a step, however; and it is not necessarily the case that a person takes the step.

Notice that it is not paradoxical for a person to believe a proposition even though she concedes its negation is more likely to be true given the available information. She may suspect that the evidence is misleading, for example. Or she may be moved by some nonepistemic reason, such as a self-grounded reason. She may believe that God exists because she sees this belief as an expression of the virtue of faith, even though she concedes that it is not likely that God exists given the evidence. She may see the absence of evidence as a test of her faith.

Therefore, the plurality of kinds of reasons that have a bearing on our decisions as to how to act is mirrored in a plurality of kinds of reasons for belief that have a bearing on our decisions as to what to believe. There is no supreme comprehensive standard of Reason-as-such in either case—or, at least, I believe there is no such standard.

VIII. The Standing of Morality and Self-Interest

What does the denial that reason is unified imply about the relative standing of morality and self-interest? If neither morality nor self-interest overrides the other, does it follow, for example, that there is no reason to be moral? Does it follow that there is no answer to the question “Why be moral?”

To begin with, my view does not challenge either the facts as to what we ought morally to do or their normativity, their bearing on our choices of how to act. Indeed, the question of whether morality overrides self-interest presupposes that morality yields verdicts as to what we ought morally to do. The correct moral verdicts, whatever they are, have a bearing on our choices of how to act because they are verdicts as to what we ought to do. They imply that there are reasons to act as we morally ought.

Moral reasons can of course be given for choosing to do the morally required thing. In cases of conflict, however, self-interested reasons can be given for choosing not to do the morally required thing, and I believe that there is no well-grounded answer to the question “What ought we to do simpliciter?” If this is correct, we might ask ourselves: Why should we be moral?

This question is normally understood as the question of whether we have sufficient self-interested reason to be moral. It may seem that if morality were overriding, morality would not need the support of self-interest, and the question “Why be moral?” would not be interesting. But, on the contrary, even if morality did override self-interest, it would still be important to determine whether there are good self-interested reasons to be moral, simply because people are typically moved to act in their self-interest. The question “Why be moral?” has an importance that is independent of the issue of overridingness.

It is part of my view that morality and self-interest are in similar positions. The question “Why act as self-interest requires?” is just as pressing, theoretically, as the question “Why be moral?” The “Why be moral?” question is the more pressing given the facts of human psychology, however; and the important standpoint from which to answer it is the standpoint I have called “self-grounded” reason, as I will explain.

A person normally does the thing that would be recommended by self-grounded reason, given the agent’s own perception of her needs,
values, or desires. This is a thing she perceives she needs to do, or it is a thing that she thinks would best promote satisfaction of her values or desires. Hence, typically, although not necessarily, when a person does what she is morally required to do, her action is recommended by self-grounded reason. Indeed, a person who acts morally acts on her moral values. That is, she subscribes to the moral standards that correspond to the overall moral verdict as to what she ought to do, and this explains her action. In such cases, a person may in fact be acting in the way that is best supported by her self-grounded reasons. I earlier explained that, in my view, reasons of self-interest are a subset of self-grounded reasons. A person who acts morally may be acting on the balance of self-grounded reasons, even if her action is not in her self-interest, narrowly construed.

Given all of this, and given our interest in having people act morally, it is in our interest that people subscribe to moral standards, and in particular, that they subscribe to justified moral standards. Moral education and the informal moral sanctions that reinforce our moral values are therefore of central importance to us all. For if people have the proper moral values, if they subscribe to justified moral standards, they thereby have self-grounded reasons to act morally. And from a person’s own perspective, self-grounded reasons are as compelling, and they are compelling on the same basis, as self-interested reasons narrowly conceived.

If, therefore, we can create social conditions in which people have the proper moral values, we can thereby contribute to bringing about a situation in which there is less conflict between morality and self-interest than would otherwise be the case, and in which the remaining conflict is less important. For we can thereby help bring it about that people have self-grounded reasons to act morally. Of course, if there is conflict between people’s ability to meet their basic needs and the demands of morality, then the balance of self-grounded reasons may still speak against morality. But this is no reason to despair of the place of morality in rational decision-making. It is rather a reason to favor creating a society in which people are enabled to meet their basic needs. A society in which people are enabled to meet their needs while also being encouraged to have proper or justified moral values would be one in which people on the whole would have self-grounded reasons to act morally. In such a society, morality and self-interest would walk the same road.

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