

## DE DICTO DESIRES AND MORALITY AS FETISH

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Consider two kinds of moral agent. First, consider the morally best agents: those who sacrifice their own interests or risk their safety to help others, who perform actions that go beyond what morality requires, who remain committed to a moral mission even in the face of opportunities to give up, and who do all of this for the right reasons. Roughly speaking, we can call these agents “moral saints.” Now consider on the other hand, not the morally worst or most evil agents, but rather the agents whose moral motivation seems to be misguided, superficial, pathological, or even phony. Again speaking roughly, we can call these agents “moral imposters.” One species of moral imposter is the moral fetishist: the person who is unhealthily obsessed with morality, who is motivated by morality in the wrong way.

A very well-disguised moral imposter might sometimes be mistaken for a moral saint. But we would not expect a real moral saint to share the negative qualities of a moral imposter, and certainly we would not expect a real moral saint to treat morality as a fetish. Indeed, the moral saint would be the *last* type of person we would expect to make a fetish of morality. It is puzzling, then, that according to the most prominent account of moral saints, they suffer from the exact motivational defect Michael Smith (1994) has famously identified as being a fetish. On what I shall argue is an uncontroversial interpretation of Susan Wolf’s (1982) famous account, moral saints are motivated not by the right-making features of acts, but rather by the rightness of those acts itself, as an abstract concept. In other words, these agents want to do what is right, but where this is read *de dicto* and not *de re*. It is the *description* of an act as right, and not the act itself, that seems to be driving these agents. In keeping with the existing literature on this issue, I will call this sort of desire or motivation “*de dicto* moral motivation.” If Susan Wolf is right that moral saints are motivated in this way, and if Michael Smith is right that this type of motivation is a fetish or moral vice, then it seems that the morally best people are not so good after all, since surely moral fetishism is incompatible with moral sainthood. That would be a troubling result indeed.

Now, those familiar with Wolf’s argument might think I have not identified any *new* puzzle, but rather simply redescribed the very puzzle she intended to bring to light: namely, that the morally best people are not so good after all. Indeed, Wolf argues that the morally best people would be bland and boring at best, humorless and harpy at worse. They would be like this because of their singleminded devotion to morality, and as such they would not be fitting personal ideals. We would not want to be them. We would not even want to be *like* them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, I have argued that Wolf’s argument for these conclusions fails (Carbonell 2009).

But Wolf's concern is fundamentally about the conflict between moral standards and other normative standards. Those we evaluate as the *morally best* people are not people we would evaluate as being the *best people*, all things considered. This is a problem, she argues, for the view that morality is in some sense the trumping normative standard—the standard that swamps or overrides all other standards. If moral evaluation trumped all other forms of evaluation, then the morally best people would be the ones we most admire, the ones we deem good models for how to live. But the best models are found elsewhere—according to Wolf—and so we need to reevaluate the relationship between moral standards and the various other normative standards against which we measure our lives.

The puzzle I aim to resolve in this paper is different, but related. It is not a puzzle about different normative standards or about the fundamental conflict between the moral point of view and some other point of view. Rather, it's a puzzle about the make-up of moral agents. What is it to be a healthy, thriving moral agent—to be motivated in the right way? How could it possibly be that the agents we identify as the morally best are in fact motivated in a defective or deviant way? Indeed how could the morally best agents, of *all* agents, get things so egregiously wrong as to be accused of making a *fetish* of morality?

Fortunately, I think there is a way to resolve this puzzle. I argue that we should understand *de dicto* and *de re* moral motivation as complementary rather than competing. Moral saints—indeed all moral agents—need not favor *de dicto* moral motivation *at the expense of* a corresponding *de re* motivation, as Wolf's account seems to require. Moreover, once we no longer view the two types of motivation as mutually exclusive, we see that *de dicto* motivation need not be a fetish or moral vice. In fact, I argue that *de dicto* moral motivation can play an important role in regulating our moral behavior.

My argument proceeds in four parts. In Part 1, I address the question of whether moral saints are really as dominated by *de dicto* moral motivation as Susan Wolf's account seems to imply. In Part 2, I address the question of whether *de dicto* moral motivation is really a “fetish or moral vice” as Michael Smith has argued. In Part 3, I suggest a few different ways that *de re* and *de dicto* moral motivation might coexist and productively interact in moral agents. Finally, in Part 4, I argue that a “non-buck-passing” account of rightness would support the division of motivational labor I've proposed.

## 1. MORAL SAINTS AND *DE DICTO* DESIRES

Let us first get clear on the difference between *de re* and *de dicto* desires. The *de re/de dicto* distinction helps to resolve an ambiguity in statements about mental states like belief or desire. Consider, for example, a sentence like this one given by Jamie Dreier:

(K) Kalista desires to do what is right.

As Dreier explains, “(K) is ambiguous. It could mean that for each thing that is in fact right, Kalista desires to do that thing. Or it could mean that Kalista has a desire whose content is: to do whatever is right” (Drier 2000, 621-622). With Dreier and Michael Smith, I will call the first reading the *de re* reading, and the second one the *de dicto* reading. Notice that the *de re* reading attributes to Kalista a large number of *specific* desires directed at particular actions. We can think of these desires as unmediated or “original” as Dreier puts it (622). On the other hand, the *de dicto* reading attributes to Kalista an abstract *standing* desire—a desire to do *whatever* happens to be right. “This desire,” Dreier claims, “is one she could have even if she has no idea of what the right thing to do is, or if she is uncertain” (622). And of course, it’s a desire she can have even if she *does* have an idea of what the right thing is, but it’s the *wrong* idea. If she thinks beating up homeless people is the right thing, then she’ll desire to beat up homeless people.

With this distinction in place, we can now ask whether the morally best people—the moral saints—are more likely to be motivated to do what is right in the *de re* sense or the *de dicto* sense. Susan Wolf’s account of moral saints seems to entail the latter. Wolf paints the moral saint as a singleminded perfectionist, “a person whose every action is as morally good as possible” (1982, 419). The saint’s life, she claims, is “dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole” (420). Initially, we might think such a commitment to welfare might more naturally be read *de re* rather than *de dicto*, since caring about a person’s welfare seems necessarily to involve caring *for that person*—caring about her welfare for its own sake, that is, for her sake. But most of Wolf’s other descriptions of the moral saint seem to indicate a *de dicto* moral motivation. She says, for instance, that the moral saint’s life will be “dominated by explicitly moral commitments” (423) or, as she later puts it, “dominated by the motivation to be moral” (431). A life that is *dominated* by moral commitments begins to look tiresome, unhealthy, barren, perhaps even “pathological” (424). The problem here is not simply that the moral saint would be so busy with her moral projects that she would ignore other worthwhile pursuits, thus becoming unhealthy—though this is an additional concern of Wolf’s. Rather, the problem, according to Wolf, lies in the moral saint’s commitment to *morality*, not to her moral projects. Wolf puts the point most directly in the following passage:

[T]here is something odd about the idea of morality itself, or moral goodness, serving as the object of a dominant passion in the way that a more concrete and specific vision of a goal (even a concrete *moral* goal) might be imagined to serve. Morality itself does not seem to be a suitable object of passion (1982, 424).

This distinction between “morality itself” and a “concrete moral goal” is the same distinction discussed earlier between the *de dicto* and *de re* readings of Kalista’s desire to do what is right. On the *de dicto* reading, Kalista is committed to morality itself, and on the *de re* reading she is committed to one or several concrete moral goals. Thus Wolf’s discomfort with a commitment to “morality itself” is probably the same discomfort we feel, at least initially, when pondering the idea of a *de dicto* desire to do what is right.

There are several reasons for our discomfort. One is the apparent correlation between an obsession with “morality” under that description and a variety of *false* or *fanatical* beliefs about what actions are in fact morally right or morally wrong. (Wolf herself mentions the worry that her moral saint appears to be a “moral fanatic” (425)). If we try to imagine someone who takes herself to be on a “moral mission” (so described) or on a quest to rid the world of “immorality” (so described), we often end up imagining someone we take to be deeply mistaken about which missions are morally good and which things in the world are in fact immoral. A second reason for discomfort is that a *de dicto* desire to do what is right might seem to be associated with certain undesirable character traits, like asceticism or being a “goody-goody”—both of which are traits Wolf mentions as possible downfalls of a moral saint (425). Nevertheless, while it may be true that, as a contingent matter, wayward moral agents—those with false or fanatical beliefs, those who are obsessive, ascetic, or goody-goody—are more likely than average to harbor *de dicto* desires to do the right thing, there is no reason to think that the desires explain the wayward tendencies. Indeed, perhaps it’s the other way around: the goody-goody is concerned more about her moral image than her moral impact, and *because* of this, she markets herself as being on a “moral mission”—and perhaps even believes her own marketing.

What I’ve tried to show so far is that Wolf’s account clearly ascribes to moral saints a *de dicto* moral motivation. We tend to associate this type of motivation with undesirable character traits, so her moral saints look unattractive, even fetishistic: they are obsessed with morality, making them irritating and rigid. But is it the *de dicto* moral motivation *itself* that is causing the moral fetishism? Are the motivation and the fetishism in fact one and the same thing? In what follows I argue that the answer is no. Wolf’s account treats *de re* and *de dicto* motivation as mutually exclusive. Why else would she draw so sharp a distinction between directing one’s passion toward “morality itself” or “moral goodness” on the one hand, and directing it instead toward a “concrete moral goal” on the other hand (424)? Must we see the two types of motivation as being fundamentally at odds? To find out, we need to look more closely at the argument that *de dicto* moral motivation is fetishistic.

## 2. MORALITY AS FETISH

As part of his famous argument against motivational externalism, Michael Smith argues that a *de dicto* motivation to do the right thing is fetishistic. The only way an externalist can explain the “reliable connection” between a change in our moral judgments and a change in our motivation, Smith claims, is to posit “a motivation to do the right thing, where this is now read *de dicto* and not *de re*. At bottom, the strong externalist will have to say, having this self-consciously moral motive is what makes me a good person” (Smith 1994, 74). Suppose, for example, that I used to judge littering to be permissible and I now judge it to be wrong. Suppose further that I used to be motivated to litter and now I am motivated not to. If my change in motivation is explained externally, then it must be the case that my concerns about littering are indirect: they are derived from a general concern to do “the right thing,” whatever it may be. I’m not concerned about the littering itself; I’m merely concerned about littering insofar as it falls under the description “morally wrong.”

This sort of self-conscious, *de dicto* moral motivation is “quite implausible,” Smith argues. According to Smith, our moral concerns should be direct and non-derivative.

For commonsense tells us that if good people judge it right to be honest, or right to care for their children and friends and fellows, or right for people to get what they deserve, then they care non-derivatively about these things. Good people care non-derivatively about honesty, the weal and woe of their children and friends, the well-being of their fellows, people getting what they deserve, justice, equality, and the like, not just one thing: doing what they believe to be right, where this is read *de dicto* and not *de re*. Indeed, commonsense tells us that being so motivated is a fetish or moral vice, not the one and only moral virtue (1994, 75).

Why would it be a fetish or moral vice to care only about doing “what one believes to be right,” *de dicto*? As I discussed earlier, one reason is that what one believes to be right might diverge from what is *in fact* right. Another reason is that a person who is more concerned with the fact that her commitment is described as “morally right” than with the content of the commitment itself might be simply keeping up appearances. But these explanations are unsatisfactory. They simply point to some *other*, preexisting flaw in the moral agent, such as false beliefs or an exaggerated concern with her self-image. What we need is an explanation of why *de dicto* motivation is fetishistic that doesn’t rely on contingent associations with other moral or epistemic character flaws.

Smith’s own explanation for what is vicious about *de dicto* motivation is found in the following passage:

For the objection in this case is simply that, in taking it that a good person is motivated to do what she believes right, where this is read *de dicto* and not *de re*, externalists too provide the morally good person with ‘one thought too many’. They alienate her from the ends at which morality properly aims. Just as it is constitutive of being a good lover that you have direct concern for the person you love, so it is constitutive of being a morally good person that you have direct concern for what you think is right, where this is read *de re* and not *de dicto* (1994, 76).

So Smith’s objection to *de dicto* motivation is that to be motivated in this way is to have “one thought too many,” and as such to be alienated from the proper ends of morality. Our earlier concerns about *de dicto* motivation—that it could be misdirected or insincere—seemed only contingent. But Smith’s accusation is stronger. His claim that this sort of motivation is alienating is meant, apparently, to hold even for agents whose *de dicto* motivation is neither misdirected nor insincere.

But what’s wrong with having “one thought too many”? This phrase comes from Bernard Williams’ famous argument about impartiality (1981, 18). Williams imagines a scenario in which a man can save only one of two people, and one of them is his wife. Those who think the man’s motive ought to be morally impartial would say that, if he saves his wife, his reasoning must include *two* thoughts, that *it’s his wife* and that *even an impartial morality permits him to favor her in this case*. Williams

thinks the second thought is unnecessary (“one too many”) and, worse, that if you need to consider the second thought then you haven’t fully appreciated the force of the first thought.

Now just as Williams thinks the extra thought alienates the man from his wife, Smith thinks that needing to consult a general standing motivation to do “the right thing” *de dicto* manifests an alienated concern for the object of the right action. So, when I decide that littering is wrong and change my behavior accordingly, I’m not motivated by concern for the environment, but rather by concern for “doing the right thing”—at least, this is what the externalist would have to say, according to Smith.<sup>2</sup> While we may not yet agree with Smith that this is a *fetish* or *vice*, we can see what might be troubling about it by considering the difference between morality and mere social convention. If tomorrow I wake up and learn that the American convention of driving on the right side of the road has been reversed, I will be moved to drive instead on the left. But my motivation will not be direct or “original”—it will not respond to any intrinsic features of driving on the left. In the case of a mere convention, this is perfectly fine. But when we’re dealing with morally significant actions like whether to help the injured animal I’ve just hit with my car (because I was so distracted by having to drive on the left), it’s expected that I will have *direct* concern for the animal.

One question that immediately springs to mind is why having an indirect or derived moral motivation rules out *also* having a direct, non-derivative motivation. The easy answer to this question is that Michael Smith has just *posited* that externalism entails motivation *de dicto* but not *de re*. And indeed he says exactly this when he claims that the externalist thinks the “good person is motivated to do what she believes right, where this is read *de dicto* and not *de re*” (76). But this doesn’t seem to be exactly what is going on in the Williams’ drowning example. Williams says we would hope that the man’s “motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife, not that it was his wife and that in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one’s wife” (18). But if the thought “*it was his wife*” is here meant to be analogous to a *de re* concern for doing the right thing (that is, a concern directly for the wife), and the thought “*in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one’s wife*” is here meant to be analogous to a *de dicto* concern for doing the right thing, then what we have is a person motivated to do what he believes to be right *de dicto* and *de re*, not one who is motivated *de dicto* but not *de re*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Why must the new motivation be derived rather than direct? It’s because, according to motivational externalism, moral judgments are not intrinsically motivating. So the change in judgment does not itself entail a change in motivation. The only way for my new moral judgment to actually be followed by new behavior is if I am motivated to act on it, and I must find this motivation somewhere other than in the judgment itself. Good people seem to be able to modify their behavior in accordance with new moral judgments. As Smith sees it, the only way externalism can explain this fact is by claiming that the good person consults some standing *de dicto* desire to do the right thing. In this paper, I set aside questions about whether Smith has accurately characterized the externalist position. I focus simply on the claim that this type of desire or motivation would be “fetishistic,” a claim which Smith seems to take as uncontroversial and upon which his *reductio* of externalism seems to rest.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is somewhat curious that Smith chooses to appropriate the phrase “one thought too many,” since the meaning of this phrase relies on the notion that the man in Williams’ example has *two* thoughts—the second thought being one too many. On Smith’s construal of externalism, the

Perhaps what is going on is that both Williams and Smith think that, if the man at the water's edge needs two thoughts, it must be because the first thought ("It's my wife!") is insufficient, on its own, to motivate him to jump in the water. That is, a man whose concern for his wife only motivates him to save her life *once he has consulted a more general principle* must be a man who is not *sufficiently* or *genuinely* concerned for his wife. But perhaps the man's concern for his wife was, on its own, sufficient to motivate him to rescue her, and he only consulted the general principle as a way of being extra scrupulous. In other words, because he had two thoughts rather than just one, the action was motivationally overdetermined.<sup>4</sup> If this is right, then instead of seeing the man as fetishizing morality, we can see him as being especially morally diligent.

Williams asked us to consider what things would look like from the wife's perspective. The wife, he claims, would want the man to stop thinking after he got to "it's my wife." But this could simply be due to impatience: I'm *drowning*, stop deliberating and just *save* me. In other circumstances she might in fact *prefer* that her husband consult a general principle. If in order to save his wife the man would have to drive his boat through twenty swimming children, drowning them, surely instead of stopping at "oh dear, my wife!" he ought to consider whether saving her is permissible. The wife wants her husband's *care* for her to be non-derivative. But that doesn't entail wanting him to act on this care *unreflectively*. Having a standing, general desire to do the right thing, *de dicto*, is often a way of mediating our unreflective motivations.

I have suggested that Williams' impartiality case is not directly relevant to Smith's change-in-judgment case, because whereas Williams is criticizing a hypothetical agent who has *both* kinds of motivating thought (direct partial concern for his wife *and* a general *prima facie* principle of impartiality), Smith is criticizing a hypothetical agent who has *only* the standing *de dicto* motivation to do the right thing. Moreover, even if we *grant* that the two cases are roughly analogous, we need not accept the conclusion Williams draws from his case, and therefore we ought to be reluctant to extend it to the cases Smith is interested in.

There is, though, an additional worry about the use of "one thought too many" reasoning: the phenomenon at issue for Smith is the reliable connection between a radical *change* in one's moral judgment and a corresponding change in motivation (and thus normally in behavior as well). When we *change our minds* about a moral issue, Smith claims, a change in motivation follows. But in Williams' case, the husband (let's hope!) does not *change his mind* about whether to save his wife.<sup>5</sup> And so even if Williams is correct about the man's second thought being "one too many," we ought not assume that a second thought would be one too many in a case involving a radical change of mind. A given thought or type of motivation could be criticizable or undesirable when it plays a role in a fresh moral decision without thereby being equally criticizable or undesirable when it plays a role in the endgame following a change of mind. For *changing* one's mind is not merely an instance of

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good person would have to have only *one* motivating thought (the standing *de dicto* desire to do the right thing) and it would be "one too many"—which seems to entail he thinks the good person ought to have zero thoughts!

<sup>4</sup> Jonas Olson (2002) has argued that cases of "motivational overdetermination" are "quite common" (91).

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to discuss this point.

*making up* one's mind. Intuitively, it seems it would be *more* difficult to muster direct motivation in line with a new judgment that comes from a change of mind than one that comes from simply having made a decision, like the decision made by the husband in Williams' case. To speak metaphorically, it would seem to be like the difference between simply choosing what direction to point your vessel in, and taking a vessel that's already moving in one direction and slowing it down, turning it around, and setting it underway in an entirely new direction.<sup>6</sup>

Thus we find that Smith has given us little reason to think that the morally best agents would be in some way vicious if they had to consult an abstract standing desire to do the right thing. Several philosophers have recently challenged Smith's fetish argument, and their criticisms can be useful in developing a view about how *de re* and *de dicto* motivation might interact. Hallvard Lillehammer (1997) challenges all three parts of Smith's argument: that internalism entails a desire to do the right thing *de re*; that externalism entails a desire to do the right thing *de dicto*; and that *de dicto* desires are a moral fetish. He offers the following case as part of his argument against the fetish claim:

Consider the case of someone who has always believed that morality is not very demanding in terms of individual sacrifice. Suppose he comes to believe that he is morally required to sacrifice everything he has, perhaps even his life. Suppose further that he does not directly acquire a *de re* desire to do what he now thinks is right, but that a standing desire to do what is right *de dicto* provides the causal link which motivates him to sacrifice everything he has. It is not a platitude that this person is a moral fetishist. Maybe it would be admirable if he eventually came to care about what is right in an underived way. But given what he now considers morality to demand, he might be forgiven if his immediate concern for what is right is not direct (1997, 191-192).

Lillehammer's point here is similar to my analysis of the swimming-children case. Just as the man might be forgiven for not having a direct concern for the children he would have to drown in order to save his wife (not because he is callous but because he is overwhelmed by his concern for his wife), Lillehammer's agent can be forgiven for giving his direct concern a little time to catch up with his standing *de dicto* commitment to doing the right thing, especially given how much of a sacrifice

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<sup>6</sup> Of course I'm here speaking of perceived (i.e., phenomenological) difficulty, not difficulty as measured in some neuroscientific way. And arguably it's an empirical question whether the motivational aftermath (as measured behaviorally, phenomenologically, neuroscientifically, or however) of a change-of-mind is any different from the aftermath of a new judgment like that of the man in Williams' drowning case. Indeed, some might view Michael Smith's internalism as itself an empirical thesis about what happens (it least in ordinary cases) when humans make moral judgments. Nevertheless, to tackle these difficult issues about internalism is beyond the scope of the paper. I simply want to point out that absent some convincing argument, we don't seem to have non-question-begging reasons to think that an agent would be vicious or defective in some way if she has to consult a standing *de dicto* desire in order to be motivated to do the right thing. Appealing to Williams' notion of "one thought too many" doesn't constitute the convincing argument that we need.



that commitment is asking him to make.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, I would put the point more strongly: it's not merely that the agent can be *forgiven* for the lack of *de re* motivation—after all, this suggests that the agent has made some sort of *mistake* (though he has an excuse and though his mistake does not rise to the level of a vice or fetish). But why think that there was any sort of mistake in the first place? Instead, one might just as coherently think that it is *admirable* to be slow in changing one's *de re* desires. Back when Lillehammer's agent thought morality was not particularly demanding, he probably developed deep commitments to various personal projects, say for example watercolor painting. Deep personal commitments involve an intricate web of habits, practices, emotions, skills, beliefs, and character traits, which together become partly constitutive of one's identity. Even if earnest moral reflection leads the watercolor painter to judge that he must give up his art, it may be extraordinarily difficult for him to do so. And given this difficulty, one might think it is unreasonable for us to expect him (in the normative sense) to be directly motivated to give it up.

So if we are committed to even a minimal form of psychological realism in our moral theorizing, we might think that needing to rely on a standing *de dicto* motivation after a change of mind is not a forgivable mistake but in fact the *most* we can ask of people in many types of cases.<sup>8</sup> And in cases that involve deep moral commitments or projects deeply integrated with one's identity, a quick change in motivation might actually be suspicious. After all, it could be that to make great art (or to be a great parent or a great soldier—there are numerous examples to which one might appeal) one must cultivate a mindset that is by its very nature difficult to give up. If so, then what should we think of the committed artist who resolves to give up his art for a new morally demanding lifestyle, but can only do so by relying on a standing desire to do the right thing *de dicto*? It seems that we should think not merely that he can be *forgiven*, and not merely that this transition period is the most we can expect of him given his human psychological makeup, but in fact that his residual motivational pull towards art is proper and fitting and part of what it meant to be a committed to the art in the first place. Deep motivational commitments are not the sort of thing that can be instantaneously switched off, nor ought they to be.

Thus we must reconcile two apparent realities: on the one hand, some motivations are by their very nature inertial or recalcitrant—and it is good for them to be so—and, on the other hand, we sometimes arrive at the sincere and pressing moral judgment that we must change our behavior in ways incompatible with inertial motivation. But in the absence of a good argument for why *de dicto* moral motivation is fetishistic, we can reconcile these facts by simply recognizing *de dicto* moral motivation as a legitimate way for a good moral agent to transition to a new behavior. Indeed, part of the appeal of this type of motivation is that it is compatible with the stubbornness of our particular *de re* desires. The artist cannot simply snap his fingers and turn off his desire to produce

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<sup>7</sup> David Copp (1997) has also criticized Smith's case against externalism. Along the way he addresses the fetish claim. "I do not think it is fetishistic to have the *de dicto* desire," he writes. "A good person could have this desire along with a variety of direct desires, such as the desire for the good of her loved ones" (49-50).

<sup>8</sup> For more on minimal psychological realism, see Flanagan (1991).

great art. But given his new judgment that moral demands trump artistic pursuits, he *must* change his behavior. It is his desire to do the right thing that brings the change.

More prosaic desires—like fleeting romantic attraction—can also be difficult to change, even when they are not deeply integrated in one’s personal identity. In another of Lillehammer’s examples, a woman who is “tired of her husband” and “temporarily indifferent” to his feelings contemplates having an affair with a stranger, but judges it to be wrong. Though she desires to have the affair (i.e., to do the wrong thing), and has no desire *not* to have the affair (i.e., to do the right thing, “*de re*”), she is nevertheless able to rely on her “standing *de dicto* desire to what is right”—what I have called the “motivational middleman”—to lead her to the right action. This desire, Lillehammer claims, “[...] is playing the role of an internalized norm that prevents her from being tempted to do wrong. Such norms are not in contradiction with the platitudes that are definitional of moral discourse. Their benefits are all too obvious” (192).

This line of argument is taken even further by Sigrun Svavarsdottir (1999). Svavarsdottir looks more closely at just what it would mean to make a fetish of morality, and argues that *de dicto* motivation could not possibly cause anything so unsavory. In the passage below, she offers a definition of a moral fetish:

It would be characteristic of holding oneself and others to very rigorous moral standards, while being completely unwilling to entertain any reflective question about their nature or grounds. It would be accompanied by a fear of any skeptical questions about morality, and a refusal to take them seriously enough to even attempt a thoughtful answer. The question ‘Why be moral?’ would be branded as irreverent and illegitimate (200).

This is perhaps an extreme version of moral fetishism. But surely a desire to do what is right *de dicto* does not entail anything *nearly* this bad. As Svavarsdottir puts it, “a concern for being moral should not be confused with a rigorous obsession with morality or a resistance to examine hard reflective questions about morality” (200). Ultimately, Svavarsdottir defends an account of *de dicto* moral motivation as a gap-filler, similar to the role I proposed earlier.

Admittedly, we expect a good person to develop a deep commitment to an end she has come to see as morally valuable and to pursue it for its own sake. ... The presence in the good person of the desire to be moral certainly does not prevent her from forming such a commitment. *Although her desire to  $\phi$  may initially be derived from her desire to be moral, it may subsequently come to operate psychologically independently of the latter* (1999, 205-206, emphasis added).

In the morally *best* people, we will want to say not just that the desire to  $\phi$  *may* develop into an independent, underived desire, but that it *must*.<sup>9</sup> That is to say, a *de dicto* motivation to do the right

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<sup>9</sup> There is only one account in the literature on *de dicto* desires that looks specifically at the question of how the morally *best* people—as opposed to, say, run-of-the-mill morally good people—will be motivated. Jonas Olson (2002) argues that the “paragon of moral goodness”—presumably, a moral saint—will not need *de dicto* moral motivation, because “her *de re* desires to perform acts with right-

thing *by itself* is not sufficient in the morally best people. As Svavarsdottir says, if someone never converted the *de dicto* motivation into *de re*, “I’d hesitate to hold his personality up as a moral ideal” (205). It seems that being *directly* motivated to promote a particular value or project is part of what it means to be *wholeheartedly* committed to it. Yet it is precisely the stubbornness of these wholehearted commitments that necessitates stop-gap measures for when we change our minds about them.

### 3. A DIVISION OF MOTIVATIONAL LABOR

Thus far we’ve encountered the beginnings of an account of exactly how *de re* and *de dicto* motivations interact. While *de re* desires seem to be primary in some sense, the desire to do what is right *de dicto* plays an important role in regulating and, in some cases, replacing *de re* desires. Let me briefly survey four possible characterizations of this role: higher-order moral reasoning; method of normative governance; motivational impetus; and epistemic stopgap.

*Higher-order moral reasoning.* When a man is faced with saving either his wife or a stranger and, in deciding to save his wife, he has not just one thought—“it’s my wife!”—but *two* thoughts—“it’s my wife and in this situation I am permitted to save her”—he is exhibiting higher-order moral reasoning. Setting aside questions about whether his exercise of higher-order moral reasoning demeans his relationship with his wife, one thing is certain: a person who subjects his first-order moral motivations to a test against general moral principles is, at least in many cases, exhibiting a more sophisticated sort of deliberation. Just as those who think impartiality is central to ethics would laud the man for subjecting his initial thought to systematic scrutiny, those of us who think that sometimes it’s better to be moved reflectively rather than unreflectively would laud a person who thinks, not just, “that’s littering!” but “that’s littering, and *littering is morally wrong.*” In such a case, we think that the commitment to morality *de dicto* (as exhibited in the thought “littering is morally wrong”) does not detract from the original direct motivation but in fact enhances it.

*Normative governance.* *De dicto* moral motivation acts as a check on *de re* desires, weighing them when they conflict and giving us a reason to choose amongst them. So, for example, if I find myself motivated directly to save my daughter from the cheetah attacking her and also motivated directly not to harm the cheetah, I may need to resort to my standing *de dicto* desire to do the right thing, which may, for example, tell me that in general I am permitted to show partial concern for my daughter even when doing so violates my obligation not to harm cheetahs. Presumably it is this

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making characteristics would in each and every case provide her with sufficient motivation to act on those desires (that’s what would make her a paragon)” (92). But as I have argued, it is unrealistic to expect a person—even a moral saint—to have *no gaps* in her *de re* moral motivations. And moreover, some types of commitments might constitutively involve recalcitrant or stubborn *de re* desires that cannot simply be switched off. Presumably some of these commitments are of a sort we would expect moral saints to have, and which it would be good for them to have. As such, I think a moral saint can fall back on a standing *de dicto* desire to do the right thing at no threat to her sainthood. Indeed, it could be the case that one way of being a moral saint is to have a *particularly effective* standing *de dicto* motivation: that is, to be especially good at aligning one’s actions with one’s abstract commitment to doing the right thing.

phenomenon that Lillehammer was referring to when he said that *de dicto* motivation sometimes serves as an “internalized norm” (192).

*Motivational impetus.* As discussed earlier, sometimes when we change our moral judgment we do not immediately acquire a *de re* desire to do whatever our revised judgment tells us to do. Or perhaps we acquire a motivation but it is initially quite weak and inefficacious, whether because we are not completely certain about our new judgment, or because of weakness of will. In such cases, a standing *de dicto* desire to do the right thing can be a motivational substitute, or as Olson calls it, a “safety device” (2002, 92). For example, suppose that for a long time I judged it morally permissible to drive a car while quite sleep-deprived, and did so often. After some thought I changed my mind; I now judge sleepless driving to be dangerous and morally forbidden. But despite changing my mind, I’m still motivated to drive while sleepy. However, if I simply consult the fact that I have a standing *de dicto* desire to do what is right, combined with the fact that I judge refraining from driving to be obligatory, then I can at least be motivated *derivatively* in accordance with my judgment, if not yet directly. In fact, it is in cases like these, where our desire to do what is right *conflicts* with our baseline desires, that we can be *sure* we are acting on moral reasons.

*Epistemic stopgap.* *De dicto* moral motivation is helpful in the many contexts in which we want to do what is right but do not (yet) know exactly what is right, and therefore have no direct *de re* motivations toward any particular course of action. For example, suppose that I want to do what is right with respect to the question of whether to raise the minimum wage. Suppose also that I have learned that prominent economists who care about helping the poor disagree about whether raising the minimum wage is morally good. Since I don’t know what course of action is right with respect to this question, I don’t have any direct motivation one way or the other, but nonetheless I have a standing motivation to do whatever happens to be right in the end. This is not the same as simply being *indifferent* about what to do. Whereas the indifferent person might not care which way she votes on a ballot measure to raise the minimum wage, the person with the standing *de dicto* motivation to do what is right cares a great deal. Indeed, it is *because* she cares about doing the right thing that she will seek out information and deliberate about how to vote. Once her epistemic gap has been closed and she has arrived at a judgment, the *de dicto* motivation will move her to act even if she has not yet acquired an original desire to vote one way or the other.

Given the various ways in which *de re* and *de dicto* moral desires can interact, any position according to which one type is considered genuine and the other illegitimate is oversimplified.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. RIGHTNESS AND *DE DICTO* MOTIVATION

The importance of a standing *de dicto* moral motivation is made more evident when we look closely at the nature of rightness and wrongness. Of course, the nature of rightness and wrongness is too big of a question to address with any satisfaction in this small space. But I want to at least

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<sup>10</sup> Indeed, that the distinction is oversimplified is made all the more evident when we consider cases in which it appears that *de re* and *de dicto* desires might even amount to one and the same thing. Elsewhere, I’ve argued that this might be true in cases involving essentially moral values like justice (Carbonell 2009).

introduce the idea that our account of rightness will bear on our account of *de dicto* moral motivation, and vice versa.

Consider the following questions: Is the fact that an action is right distinct from the fact that it has certain right-making features? Is the fact that it's right an *additional* reason to do it, or is its rightness redundant with the existing reasons? It should be quite clear why the answers to these questions bear on my argument about moral saints and moral fetishism. If rightness is an *additional* reason-giving property of actions, then it might in many cases be not only permissible but *obligatory* that a morally good person be motivated by the rightness of an action *de dicto*. Correspondingly, if rightness is *redundant* as a property of actions—that is, if there is nothing more to an action's being right than the totality of the particular reason-giving features the act already has—then that might partly explain the charge of fetishism. Perhaps a moral fetishist is just someone who gives rightness more attention (and more influence in her deliberation) than any redundant property could possibly deserve.

When we ask whether rightness is a reason-giving property, we are asking whether the correct account of rightness is a “buck-passing” account or a “non-buck-passing” account. As R.J. Wallace puts it, buck-passing accounts are “summary accounts” and the concepts these accounts analyze are “summary concepts” (2006, 332, 335). A buck-passing account of *value*, for instance, would show that the property of being valuable does not itself provide reasons, but merely *summarizes* (“passes the buck” to) the other reason-giving properties an object has, such as pleasantness. So, for example, according to T.M. Scanlon's buck-passing account of value, “being valuable is not a property that provides us with reasons. Rather, to call something valuable is to say that it has other properties that provide reasons for behaving in certain ways with regard to it” (2003, 96). Suppose, for example, that a discovery “is valuable because it provides a new understanding of how cancer cells develop” (96). The *value* of this discovery does not provide us with a reason, say, to spread the word about the research paper in which the discovery is revealed. Instead, our reasons to spread the word arise from *other* facts about the discovery, like the fact that it could save lives.

According to buck-passing accounts of *rightness* (or wrongness), the fact that something is right (or wrong) does not provide any additional reason to (not) do it. Consider, for instance, Jonathan Dancy's view of rightness:

In deciding whether an action is right, we are trying to determine how the balance of reasons lies. Our conclusion may be that there is more reason (or more reason of a certain sort, perhaps) to do it than not to do it, and we express this by saying that it is therefore the right thing to do. The rightness-judgment is verdictive; it expresses our verdict on the question of how the reasons lie. It is incoherent, in this light, to suppose that rightness can add to the reasons on which the judgment is passed, thus, as one might say, increasing the sense in which, or the degree to which, it is true. And the same is true of wrongness (2000, 166).

So long as our concept of rightness is “verdictive” in the way Dancy describes, the buck-passing view about rightness is appealing. After all, it makes sense that in deciding whether an action is right

or wrong, we are in a way “adding up” the various reason-giving factors (harm, well-being, rights, promises, etc.). Our final judgment is like a verdict or summary; it presents the correct weighing of the reasons without influencing or contributing to their weights at all. In other words, the buck-passing account draws on a notion of rightness that means something like “on balance, morally choiceworthy,” where what we are responding to is the considerations that make it choiceworthy, not its choiceworthiness itself. These specific considerations would be, as Scanlon says, “sufficient in themselves” (2007, 6). The fact that “it would be right” is not only unnecessary but redundant.

But things are surely more complicated. Even if rightness and wrongness judgments just are verdicts, it’s not obvious that this precludes them from giving us *additional* reasons. Furthermore, whether our concepts of rightness and wrongness are verdictive in this way (or *merely* verdictive, we might say) is open to debate. There are more and less plausible versions of the thesis that rightness and wrongness are verdicts. Consider the following two possible versions.

*Verdict as signal.* On this view, an action’s rightness or wrongness is just a signal, or perhaps a placeholder, for the fact that the reason-giving considerations add up in a certain way. We use rightness and wrongness as short-cuts or heuristics, as products of a straightforward decision procedure. Consider the following analogy: you take a blood test to check for the presence of certain antibodies that indicate the likelihood of disease. If the pathologist sees those antibodies under the microscope, he sends back the test results marked “positive.” But this verdict is merely his way of signaling to your doctor the presence of the antibodies. The “positive” result does not provide an additional reason to begin treating the condition over and above whatever reason is provided by the existence of the antibodies themselves. The verdict is just a signal.

*Verdict as normative weighting scheme.* On this view, the fact that an action is right or wrong involves a weighting of the various first-order reason-giving considerations, and the nature of the weighting is normatively relevant. Rightness is like a spreadsheet formula used to calculate a student’s final grade. The grades on all the various exams and papers, taken individually, give us reasons to rate the student’s performance as excellent, mediocre, or poor. But the verdict we get after applying the spreadsheet formula gives us an *additional* reason to approve or disapprove of the student’s performance as a whole, because it represents the results of a normatively relevant weighting scheme. Perhaps we weight each assignment equally, or perhaps we weight some twice as much as others—whatever we choose, it is usually not arbitrary. We weight some items more than others because we take them to have more educational value, or to be more reflective of the student’s learning, and so the weighting scheme is inherently normative—we choose it because we think it represents how much each item *ought* to matter in light of our pedagogical goals. The “verdict” in this case is not simply a transparent window through which to view the first-order reason-giving considerations. Rather, the verdict represents a way of interpreting those reason-giving considerations as a whole so as to create a *new reason*. We think, for example, that the papers should count more than the exams, or that the later papers should count more than the earlier papers. And because we think this, we take the final result—the weighted average, signified perhaps by a letter grade like “B+”—to be meaningful in a way that all the grades that contributed to it, even taken together, are not.

The distinction I've just drawn is rough, but at the very least I hope it lends some plausibility to the idea that we can have a "verdictive" conception of rightness without being forced to accept that *the fact that an action is right* provides us with *no additional reason* (for an action or attitude) than was present before the judgment was made. If we think of rightness as the second sort of verdict rather than the first, we see that the way in which the first-order reason-giving properties are combined is itself a reason-generating process. And in any case, we need not accept a "verdictive" conception of rightness or wrongness.

Consider, for example, Scanlon's view of wrongness, according to which an act is wrong "just in case any principle that permitted it would be one that someone could reasonably reject" (2003, 160). On this view, the "normative basis of right and wrong" lies fundamentally in the idea of "justifiability to others" (160). Clearly, there is more packed into this notion than the simple idea of a verdict. A wrong action is one that we cannot justify to others, one that goes against "what we owe to others," and this fact provides us with an *additional* reason not to do it, over and above the mere fact that the principle permitting it is a rejectable principle.

Another non-buck-passing account of wrongness is Stephen Darwall's (2006). From his "second-personal standpoint," wrongness is fundamentally a matter of what we're responsible or accountable to others for. Again, this is a much richer notion than simply a verdict. On Darwall's account, the fact that an action is wrong provides an additional reason—a "second-personal reason"—against doing it. We are, and ought to be, motivated by this notion of accountability when we would not be motivated merely by the presence of certain reason-giving features like harm or pain. On non-buck-passing accounts like these, rightness, like wrongness, is fundamentally a matter of what can legitimately be demanded of us. Construed this way, we can say not only that the rightness of an action provides an additional reason to do it, but that *recognizing* this additional reason and responding to it *de dicto* might be an essential skill of the morally good person and thus the moral saint.<sup>11</sup>

In more recent work, Scanlon has offered some examples that help to show just what it might mean for rightness or wrongness *itself* to influence our action. There is a gray area between rightness or wrongness constituting an extra reason and constituting no reason at all; in the middle lie cases where the rightness or wrongness "shapes" deliberation. Consider, for example, the following case:

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<sup>11</sup> In a more recent paper, Darwall (2010) challenges the notion that if a normative concept (such as right, wrong, or obligatory) is a "buck-passing" concept in some sense then it necessarily provides no additional reason for performing (or not performing) the action to which it applies. Thus he defends a view of wrongness that he deems "buck-passing" in one sense and non-buck-passing in another: "Anyone who accepts the fitting-attitude account of moral obligation and wrongness I will propose should therefore be a buck-passer with respect to reasons for blaming and holding morally responsible. But that would not entail being a buck-passer with respect to reasons for *action*, specifically, for avoiding moral wrong. The fact that an action is wrong might still itself be, and I shall argue actually is, a reason, indeed a decisive reason, not to perform the act or to intend or choose to do so" (Darwall 2010, 143).

I have been hired as a guard, by someone who has good reason to believe he is likely to be attacked. While standing guard, I see someone else about to be injured by a thug. I could run from my post and prevent this, but I would be leaving my client exposed to attack. So it might not be wrong for me to refuse to go this person's aid, despite the fact that he will be injured if I do not (2007, 7).

Scanlon thinks the idea of wrongness influences the guard in this case, but not primarily by way of “providing a new direct reason for a certain course of action” (7). Instead, wrongness “shap[es] the way I should think about the decision I face, and [determines] which other considerations I should take to be reasons” (7). Complementing this “shaping” role of wrongness is what Scanlon had in earlier work called a “backstop” role: in cases where we are tempted to do something we judge to be wrong, we attend to its wrongness and ask ourselves “How much weight should I give to the fact that doing this would be wrong?” (1998, 157).

In both the “backstop” role and the “shaping” role, wrongness needs to “provide reasons (or invoke them)” in response to the same question: “Why take the results of thinking about what to do in the way morality prescribes as authoritative and conclusive?” (2007, 10). It is because we can ask this important question that buck-passing accounts of rightness are implausible. On a buck-passing account, the fact that an action constitutes breaking a promise might seem to be the only morally relevant reason-giving feature. But Scanlon points out that there are higher-order questions we often need to ask about our reasons, like “Why should these reasons include the fact that one made a promise but exclude the fun of breaking it?” (2007, 9). In order to know whether to avoid a certain action, we need to know whether it is wrong, and in order to know whether it is wrong, we need to attend to subtle weightings of the lower-order reasons against and in favor of it.<sup>12</sup>

But it's not that the wrongness of an action *just is* its lower-order properties. Rather, the wrongness arises out of the way those reason-giving properties add up. Scanlon refers to the role wrongness plays here as “reason-referring” (2007, 10 note 7).<sup>13</sup> We can now begin to see parallels between the “shaping” or “reason-referring” role of rightness (or wrongness) and the various ways

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<sup>12</sup> In what I take to be a similar point, Darwall (2010) claims that “Wrong-making features, such as that an action would cause harm or subvert a criminal investigation, themselves entail nothing about legitimate demands... My claim, however, is that in believing that such features *are indeed wrong making*, we are committed to thinking that these features nonetheless ground a legitimate demand not so to act and that this fact—the fact that the act would violate a legitimate moral demand and so be wrong—gives us a further reason not to perform the act” (151). So just as Scanlon is claiming that we need to know not only that an action would be the breaking of a promise, but also that breaking promises is fun and how to weigh the latter against the former, Darwall is claiming that we need to know not only that an action would cause harm, but also what we can legitimately demand of others with respect to refraining from harm.

<sup>13</sup> He later explains that while, according to his account, the property of moral wrongness is not *itself* reason-providing, he *is* positing a higher-order reason-providing property, and it's a property of “one way of having [the property of moral wrongness]”—namely, via justifiability to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject (2007, 17).



in which I earlier claimed *de dicto* moral motivation can interact with *de re* moral motivation. Recall that I considered four ways *de dicto* motivation might influence our deliberation: higher-order moral reasoning, normative governance, motivational impetus, and epistemic stopgap.

The first three, in particular, draw on notions of rightness itself being, if not “reason-providing,” at least “reason-referring.” The “higher-order moral reasoning” role was meant to explain situations in which a *de dicto* motivation enhances a moral judgment, by adding a layer of reflectiveness to what would otherwise be a crude initial reaction to a situation. If Scanlon’s argument about wrongness is plausible and carries over to rightness, then these higher-order reasoning cases are cases where the agent responds to the rightness (or wrongness) of an act over-and-above its right-making features. The “normative governance” role of *de dicto* motivation was meant to describe cases in which the agent needs to consult a judgment of rightness because the *de re* considerations conflict. This seems to be what Scanlon referred to as the “backstop” role of rightness, though the backstop cases have the added feature that the agent is otherwise motivated to do the action that is in fact wrong. Finally, the “motivational impetus” role of *de dicto* motivation was meant to explain cases in which a standing general desire to do the right thing acts as a “patch” to fill the gaps in *de re* motivation that occur when we have a change in moral motivation. This, again, seems to be analogous to Scanlon’s “backstop” role for wrongness.

If Scanlon is correct and rightness and wrongness are not mere “verdicts” but rather reason-shaping or reason-referring properties that play an important role in moral deliberation, then we should expect moral saints to be interested not just in the right-making features of acts, but in the rightness itself. That is, we should expect moral saints to be motivated by rightness *de dicto*. Notice that this argument, if successful, provides an even stronger grounding for *de dicto* moral motivation than the three possible grounds I discussed in Section 2 of this paper. Those grounds were, from weakest to strongest, that consulting a standing *de dicto* desire when the direct *de re* desire has not yet “caught up” with one’s moral judgment is: (1) useful and therefore “forgivable”; (2) the most we can expect given the psychological difficulty associated with changing one’s commitments; and (3) required by the way certain fitting and admirable *de re* desires are embedded in our identities. If a non-buck-passing account of rightness is correct, all of these grounds may be eclipsed by a fourth: the good moral agent ought to be interested in the rightness of her action because *the rightness is more than just the right-making features*. Recognizing and responding directly to the action’s *rightness* is part of what it means to recognize and respond to *moral reasons*. Surely morally admirable people, and especially morally saints, can be expected to respond to moral reasons.

Notice, however, that none of this means moral saints need to be motivated in the way Susan Wolf describes, the way that looked troublingly like a kind of moral fetishism. Wolf’s picture of *de dicto* moral motivation is flawed in two ways. First, it posits *de dicto* moral motivation *at the expense* of *de re* motivation, when in fact the two are complementary. And second, it conflates a *concern* for the rightness of one’s action with an *obsession* with the rightness of one’s action. Both of these features cause Wolf’s moral saints to appear irritating, fanatical, or even pathological. Indeed, her saints seem to make a fetish of morality. Fortunately, we need not worry that real moral saints would look like this, since there is no reason to build a monolithic obsession with rightness *de dicto* into our account of moral sainthood, *at the expense of* the corresponding *de re* desires. The moral saint

can, and ought to, both *care directly* for those she helps, and help them *because it is right*. And when the saint concludes that a new group of people require her help, but doesn't yet care directly for them (perhaps, for example, it's a group of troubled teenagers who are outwardly hostile to her), we can expect her to help them in the meantime simply *because it is right*.

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