

Wrong-Making Reasons

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December 16, 2015

(Draft; do not cite without permission)

At the heart of Derek Parfit's magisterial book is a defence of Kantian Contractualism and an argument for convergence in moral theory. According to "*the Kantian Contractualist Formula: Everyone ought to follow the principles whose universal acceptance everyone could rationally will.*"¹ Although it uses the concept *ought*, this is meant to be a principle of moral right and wrong. It does not assume that there is decisive reason not to act wrongly, so that we ought never to do so, all things considered – though Parfit is sympathetic to that claim. Instead, it gives the condition under which an act is morally wrong.² The condition is that the act is forbidden by principles whose universal acceptance everyone could rationally will.

This formula needs explanation. To accept a principle, in the relevant sense, is to believe that the acts this principle forbids are wrong, and the acts it allows permissible.³ To will that something be the case is to make it the case by an act of will.⁴ So to will the acceptance of a

¹ *OWM*, v. I, p. 342.

² Parfit sometimes equates the question, what I ought morally to do, with the question, which acts would be wrong (*OWM*, v. I, p. 144.); his considered view is that the sense of "wrong" is primitive and that what I ought morally to do is explained by asking what it would be wrong to do in various states of information (*OWM*, v. I, pp.162, 165, 172-4). For the most part, Parfit states his Kantian principles as claims about wrongness; he shifts to formulations with "ought" in discussing the Golden Rule, and in his subsequent treatment of Contractualism and Consequentialism.

³ *OWM*, v. I, p. 341.

⁴ *OWM*, v. I, p. 285: "When we apply Kant's formula, we suppose or imagine that we have the power to *will*, or choose, that certain things be true."

principle is to make it the case that everyone believes that the acts this principle forbids are wrong and the acts it allows permissible.

When is it rational to will the acceptance of a principle? In general, what it is rational to do depends on one's beliefs, not on the relevant facts.⁵ If one has false beliefs, it can be rational to act in ways for which one has no reason. In contrast, the condition for an act to be wrong, according to Kantian Contractualism, turns on the principles whose universal acceptance there is *reason* to will. More precisely, it turns on a subset of these reasons. In applying the Kantian formula, "we should not appeal to our beliefs about which acts are wrong."⁶ Parfit calls these "our *deontic beliefs*" and adds: "Nor should we appeal to the *deontic reasons* that an act's wrongness might provide."⁷ On a natural reading, deontic reasons are reasons that consist in deontic facts, to the effect that some act is wrong; all other reasons are non-deontic.⁸ In its most explicit formulation, Kantian Contractualism takes this form:

KANTIAN CONTRACTUALISM: An act is wrong if and only if it is disallowed by principles whose universal acceptance everyone has sufficient non-deontic reason to will.

To apply this test, we perform a series of thought experiments, one for every person, in which we imagine that he or she is choosing principles for everyone to accept, and compare the non-deontic reasons for and against. A principle passes the test if no-one has stronger non-deontic reason to will the acceptance of any alternative principle.

Kantian Contractualism is a recognizable adaptation of Kant's Formula of Universal Law, though Kant does not appeal to reasons, as Parfit does. I won't pursue Kant interpretation here,

⁵ *OWM*, v. I, p. 34.

⁶ *OWM*, v. I, p. 287.

⁷ *OWM*, v. I, p. 287; see also *OWM*, v. I, p. 201.

⁸ I consider an alternative below, in section III.

or the more elusive question, whether Parfit's adaptation of Kantian materials is in the spirit of Kant. Instead, I will look directly at Kantian Contractualism, its application, its role as a guide to action, and its relation to principles of other kinds. Using Parfit's argument as a platform, I will raise questions about our capacity to apply the Kantian formula when we do not already know what we have reason to do. There is a threat of redundancy for Kantian Contractualism.⁹

Before we turn to these arguments, it is useful to sketch how the application of Kantian Contractualism is meant to go. It is essential to the success of the Kantian project that in situations that call for moral judgement, there are principles whose universal acceptance everyone has sufficient non-deontic reason to will. If this were not the case, Kantian Contractualism would be too permissive: it would fail to condemn actions that are morally wrong. This existence condition may seem hard to meet. In many situations, the effects of a principle's acceptance on different agents will be different. Some principles benefit one more than others, some the reverse. Consider, for instance, the question how to divide a quantity of unowned goods, where an equal division would produce the greatest sum of benefits.¹⁰ Won't we each have decisive reason to will the principles that give us more? As Parfit argues, there are conceptions of practical reason on which that is true. If each of us has non-deontic reason to do only what will benefit us, or what will satisfy our final desires, there will be no principle we all have sufficient non-deontic reason to will. Parfit argues instead for a "wide value-based objective view," on which we have non-deontic reason to benefit others, and when "one of our two possible acts would make things go in some way that would be impartially better, but the other act would make things go better either for ourselves or for those to whom we have close ties, we often have sufficient

⁹ The threat in question bears comparison with a problem for Scanlon's contractualism in *What we Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). In describing what it is for an act to be wrong, Scanlon cites what we can "reasonably reject" in a partly moral sense of "reasonable." Critics have asked whether we can short-circuit the contractualist machinery and determine what is wrong by direct appeal to what is reasonable. My objection is similar, though I think it can be made more definite here because Parfit is so explicit about the reasons to which his principle refers.

¹⁰ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 359-60.

reasons to act in either of these ways.”¹¹ (An outcome is impartially better when it is favoured by the balance of impartial reasons, reasons that do not depend on other people’s relationships with us.) Applied to the case of division, Parfit’s claim is that we all have sufficient non-deontic reason to will the acceptance of a principle of equal shares, and there is no alternative principle – of giving more to some than others – that we all have sufficient non-deontic reason to will. If this is right, the existence condition is met. Kantian Contractualism tells us that it would be wrong not to divide the unowned goods equally, producing the greatest sum of benefits for those concerned.

In this example, not only is there a principle that seems to pass the Kantian test, it is the only principle that does so. Things are more complicated if there are distinct principles, each of which we have sufficient non-deontic reason to will. In Parfit’s formulations, Kantian Contractualism appeals to “the principles” that satisfy this condition. He suggests that, when uniqueness fails because “everyone could rationally choose two or more seriously conflicting principles,” the Kantian formula goes wrong in much the way it does when there are no principles everyone could rationally will.¹² He adds:

It would not matter, though, if everyone could rationally choose any of several similar principles. Such principles would be different versions of some more general higher-order principle, and the choice between these lower-level principles could then be made in some other way.¹³

This remark is puzzling. How can principles that differ in what they permit fail to be distinct from one another in the sense that is relevant to Kantian Contractualism? How to individuate principles if not by their prescriptions? If Kantian Contractualism condemns actions only when

¹¹ *OWM*, v. I, p. 137.

¹² *OWM*, v. I, p. 358.

¹³ *OWM*, v. I, p. 358.

the uniqueness condition is met, even modest failures of uniqueness yield permissive conclusions. Suppose two principles pass the Kantian test. In a choice among A, B, and C, both forbid A, but the first forbids B, allowing C, and the second forbids C, allowing B. If Kantian Contractualism requires uniqueness, it fails to condemn any action in this circumstance. On a more plausible interpretation, the Kantian formula claims that an act is wrong if and only if it is disallowed by *all* relevant principles whose universal acceptance everyone has sufficient non-deontic reason to will. There need not be a single principle that passes the test. In the case described, it is wrong to do A, but permissible to do either B or C.

With this clarification, we set the issue of uniqueness aside. In the following section, I explain Parfit's argument for the consistency of his Kantian principle with Rule Consequentialism. Although the argument itself is not our main concern, it serves to introduce our principal question, about the reason-giving force of wrong-making features. According to

WRONG-MAKING REASONS: When an act would be wrong, the non-deontic facts that make it wrong are decisive reasons against it.

I argue that Wrong-Making Reasons is significant for more than the success of Parfit's derivation: it threatens our ability to learn important truths from Kantian Contractualism. In section II, I make a tentative defence of Wrong-Making Reasons. And in the final section, I ask whether Kantian Contractualism can be revised to avoid the problem, and consider what is at stake in this dispute.

I

One of Parfit's more surprising claims is that, far from being incompatible, the most plausible versions of Contractualism and Consequentialism in fact agree. He defends this claim by deriving a form of Rule Consequentialism from Kantian Contractualism. According to the universal

acceptance version of Rule Consequentialism, the standard of right and wrong is fixed by the principles whose universal acceptance would be “optimific” in that, among the outcomes being compared, it is the one we have the strongest impartial reasons to will. For simplicity, I will talk about willing a principle instead of willing its universal acceptance. In these terms, Parfit argues as follows:¹⁴

1. There are optimific principles, ones we have the strongest impartial reasons to will.
2. No one’s impartial reasons to will these principles are decisively outweighed by other non-deontic reasons.
3. There are no other principles that everyone has sufficient non-deontic reason to will.

It follows that the optimific principles are ones that everyone has sufficient non-deontic reason to will, and that no other principles pass this test. Given

KANTIAN CONTRACTUALISM: An act is wrong if and only if it is disallowed by principles whose universal acceptance everyone has sufficient non-deontic reason to will,

we can infer the truth of

RULE CONSEQUENTIALISM: An act is wrong if and only if it is disallowed by principles whose universal acceptance would be optimific.

¹⁴ *OWM*, v. I, p. 378. Premise 1 corresponds to Parfit’s (C), premise 2 to Parfit’s (E), and premise 3 to Parfit’s (G).

This argument is valid, and like Parfit, I will not question premise 1 or premise 3. The basis for the latter is that, if we have the strongest impartial reasons to will a certain principle, A, then while some of us might have sufficient reason to will another principle, B, because it benefits us or those with whom we have close ties, others will not.¹⁵ Since B is non-optimific, there must be some who would benefit from principle A; given the strength of the impartial case for A, and the benefits to them, these individuals would have decisive non-deontic reason not to will B.

For our purposes, the most interesting premise of the argument is the second: that no one's impartial reasons to will the optimific principles would be outweighed by other non-deontic reasons. This premise could be challenged in several ways. For instance, in *Lifeboat*, I am stranded on one rock and five people are stranded on another.¹⁶ The optimific principles would require you to save them, not me. But it might be argued that, since my life is at stake, I have stronger reason to will an alternative principle. Suppose I am on the nearest rock and the Nearness Principle requires one to save the nearest group. Do I have decisive non-deontic reason to will the Nearness Principle, even though it is not optimific? Parfit argues that I do not: on his wide value-based objective view, I have sufficient non-deontic reason to will the optimific principles. That is, I have sufficient if not decisive reason to will the acceptance of principles that would save five lives at the cost of mine. What is more, even if this were not the case – even if I had decisive non-deontic reason to will that my life be saved at the cost of five – I would not have decisive non-deontic reason to will the *universal* acceptance of the Nearness Principle. If everyone accepted this principle, it would be applied to countless scenarios, and millions of lives would be lost. On any plausible view, I have sufficient reason to will the acceptance of principles that would save millions of lives, even at the cost of mine. Parfit makes a similar move when the reasons against the optimific principle are ones of partiality to friends or family.¹⁷ Given the scale

¹⁵ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 399-400.

¹⁶ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 380-2.

¹⁷ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 387-8.

of what is at stake in the universal acceptance of a principle, we have sufficient non-deontic reason to will the optimific principles even at great cost to those we love.¹⁸

The most serious threat to premise 2 appeals not to reasons of self-interest or partiality, but to the features of an act that make it morally wrong. According to Wrong-Making Reasons, the non-deontic facts about an act that make it wrong give decisive reasons against it. Parfit worries that, if we accept this principle, we may find exceptions to premise 2. Thus, in Bridge, a runaway train will kill five people unless you cause me to fall in front of it, resulting in my death.¹⁹ According to the Wrong-Making Features Objection, the principle of saving five in Bridge is optimific, but there is decisive non-deontic reason not to save the five, and therefore not to will the optimific principle. This reason might consist in the fact that, if you cause me to fall in front of the train, you would be harming one as a means to helping others.

Parfit responds to this objection in three ways. He argues, first, that if the fact of harming one as a means to helping others gives decisive reason not to save the five in Bridge, there is impartial reason to will that others act accordingly, and so to will the universal acceptance of a principle that forbids us to harm one as a means to helping others, at least in cases of this kind.²⁰ On this assumption, the principle of saving five in Bridge is not optimific: we have impartial reason to will a principle that conflicts with it. Parfit argues, second, that wrong-making features do not give decisive reason to act in ways that violate the optimific principles.²¹ And he argues, third, that even if they did, we would not have decisive reason not to will these principles. You might have reason not to harm one as a means to helping others and so to oppose the universal

¹⁸ A peculiar feature of this argument is that it is sensitive to the number of people for whom I imagine choosing. If the future population is very small, non-deontic reason to will principles that favour those I love may outweigh my impartial reasons to choose the optimific principles, so that different actions would be right or wrong.

¹⁹ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 390-1.

²⁰ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 391-4.

²¹ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 394-5, 448-51.

acceptance of a principle that requires you to save five in Bridge; but this is not enough to outweigh the impartial reasons that make this principle optimific.²²

Rather than dispute these claims, I want to address the wider significance of wrong-making reasons. It is striking that Parfit treats such reasons only as an objection to the convergence argument. He does not ask what they imply for the application of his formula. But there is a serious puzzle here. The truth of Wrong-Making Reasons would raise doubts about the value of Kantian Contractualism as a way of knowing what to do. We can see this if we think through the application of the Kantian test to Bridge. Our task is to consider the various principles that might be applied to the case, and to ask which principles we have sufficient non-deontic reason to will. In ordinary conditions, we must rely on knowledge of the non-deontic reasons for and against these principles. But, according to Parfit's first response, the non-deontic reasons for and against the principles are not independent of the non-deontic reasons for and against the relevant acts. There may be non-deontic reasons for or against a principle that do not correspond to reasons for or against the acts that fall under it, reasons that derive from the effects of its general acceptance. But there is a definite constraint: "If everyone had ... decisive non-deontic reasons *not* to act in some way, we could not ... have [sufficient] impartial reasons to *want* everyone to act in that way. That would be a schizophrenic view."²³ We can state the relevant connection as follows:

ACTS AND PRINCIPLES: If there is decisive non-deontic reason not to act in some way, there is decisive impartial reason not to will the universal acceptance of a principle that permits such actions.

²² *OWM*, v. I, pp. 395-8.

²³ *OWM*, v. I, p. 393.

Given Acts and Principles, most realistic cases will be ones in which we cannot know the balance of non-deontic reasons for and against a principle unless we know the non-deontic reasons for and against the relevant acts. And now the problem appears. For each possible act, we can ask: is there decisive non-deontic reason against it? For instance, in Bridge, is there decisive non-deontic reason not to save the five by killing one? If we do not know, we cannot apply the Kantian formula. Suppose, then, that we do. If the answer to the question is “Yes, there is decisive non-deontic reason against the act,” we can infer that there is decisive reason against it, all told. It cannot be morally required, since if it were, there would be decisive non-deontic reason not to do otherwise, in light of Wrong-Making Reasons. So the act is either permissible or wrong. If it is permissible, we can ignore deontic reasons and the non-deontic reasons carry the day. If it is wrong, that only adds another reason against it. Either way, the act is one we should not perform. If the answer to the question is no, it follows by Wrong-Making Reasons that it would not be wrong to perform the act. In fact, there is sufficient reason to do so, since there is sufficient non-deontic reason to perform the act, and no deontic reason not to.

The upshot is that, by appeal to Wrong-Making Reasons, we can determine the set of acts for which we have sufficient reason, none of which is morally wrong. In realistic cases, if we have the knowledge required to apply the Kantian formula, knowledge of the non-deontic reasons for and against the relevant actions, the truth of Wrong-Making Reasons would remove the need to do so. It already answers the questions – how to avoid acting wrongly, and what to do – that motivate our inquiry.

The problem here is one of practical worth. It is about the useful application of Kantian Contractualism, not about its truth. This point comes out in at least two ways. First, the test inspired by Wrong-Making Reasons identifies the acts for which we have sufficient reason, none of which are morally wrong. It does not tell us which acts are permissible, among those for which we lack sufficient reason. But that is a merely theoretical question. It has no bearing on how to

act.²⁴ Second, one could in principle know the balance of non-deontic reasons for and against a series of principles without already knowing the non-deontic reasons for and against the corresponding acts. One might be told how the reasons for the principles compare, instead of working this out by weighing the reasons oneself. In this unusual circumstance, one could discover what to do by Kantian reasoning but not by Wrong-Making Reasons. Ordinarily, however, the attempt to balance non-deontic reasons for and against principles will assume knowledge of the non-deontic reasons for and against the actions they prohibit and permit. Given Wrong-Making Reasons, this knowledge allows us to short-cut the elaborate thought experiments called for by Kantian Contractualism. We can know what to do without it.

Although it does not refute the Kantian formula, this line of thought casts doubt on its power to guide and illuminate practice. The problem here is not about the bad effects of embracing this formula, as we might fear that it would impede the maximization of utility if we were all committed utility-maximizers, so that act-utilitarianism is “self-effacing.”²⁵ The problem is rather that, if we accept Wrong-Making Reasons, what we have to learn from Kantian Contractualism is not of practical value. What then is the point of the Kantian project?

II

Parfit might concede that the Kantian formula, while true, is practically redundant. Its interest is merely theoretical. But he might also resist the argument of section I. This argument assumes the truth of Acts and Principles and of Wrong-Making Reasons. We will focus on the latter.

In the sections of his book that respond to the Wrong-Making Features Objection, Parfit considers the reason-giving force of facts we take to make an action wrong. He suggests that

²⁴ I set aside the role of moral judgement in guilt and blame, and in the justification of punishment. While these are practical matters, one would expect moral thought to have a more immediate bearing on the question what to do.

²⁵ A claim defended by Parfit himself, in Part One of *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

(X) if the optimific principles require certain acts that we believe to be wrong, the features or facts that, in our opinion, make these acts wrong would not give us decisive *non-deontic* reasons not to act in these ways. What might be true is only that, by making these acts wrong, these facts would give us decisive deontic reasons not to act in these ways.²⁶

It is worth noting that this principle does not conflict with Wrong-Making Reasons. (X) is concerned with the strength of non-deontic reasons to act against the optimific principles, and thus with premise 2 of the convergence argument. I have been supposing that this premise holds, in light of Acts and Principles. If there is decisive non-deontic reason to act against certain principles, there is decisive impartial reason not to will those principles, which therefore do not count as optimific. Conversely, if principles are optimific, the acts they require cannot be wrong. There is no need for the advocate of Wrong-Making Reasons to question principle (X).

In defending (X), Parfit considers an argument against this principle that would support Wrong-Making Reasons. According to this argument, “when some act is wrong, this fact is the second-order fact that certain other facts give us decisive moral reasons not to act in this way.”²⁷ Parfit rejects this conception of wrongness on the ground that such higher-order facts “would not give *further, independent* reason[s]” against the relevant actions, while “an act’s wrongness does give us strong or even decisive further reasons not to do it.”²⁸ It is not obvious to me why a higher-order fact could not provide a further reason. But we need not take that up. Those who defend Wrong-Making Reasons can agree with Parfit about the conception of wrongness as a higher-order property, and about the reason-giving force of deontic facts. They can endorse

²⁶ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 395, 448.

²⁷ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 448-9.

²⁸ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 172-3.

DEONTIC REASONS: That an action would be wrong is a decisive reason against it.

Deontic reasons are not redundant, even if the non-deontic facts that make an action wrong are decisive reasons, too. When an act is wrong, the case against it is over-determined; but reasons of both kinds are significant. They do not pre-empt or undermine each other. Sometimes, deontic reasons matter more. If you know that it would be wrong to act in a certain way but do not know the facts that make that action wrong, you cannot respond directly to those facts. Still, it is irrational to perform the act, assuming Deontic Reasons.

If this is right, Parfit's claims do not refute, or count against, Wrong-Making Reasons. For all he says, this principle might be true. But it might also be false. Is there any reason to accept it? A case can be made for Wrong-Making Reasons from reflection on the rational authority of right and wrong. Parfit is sympathetic to Moral Rationalism, according to which there is decisive reason not to act in ways that would be wrong.²⁹ The truth of Moral Rationalism follows from Wrong-Making Reasons. But, on the face of it, the converse implication fails. Moral Rationalism might be true even if the non-deontic facts that make an action wrong are not decisive reasons. Most plausibly, its truth would be explained instead by Deontic Reasons. Against this, I will argue that we cannot have Moral Rationalism without Wrong-Making Reasons.

Begin by supposing the contrary: Moral Rationalism holds without Wrong-Making Reasons. On the natural alternative, it is the fact that an action would be wrong that is the reason against it, not the facts that make it wrong. We thus accept Deontic Reasons. Now, it is not a condition of practical rationality, as such, that the beliefs on which one acts be epistemically rational.³⁰ It is not a failure of *practical* reason that one's beliefs about means and ends, or about the effects of acting in a certain way, go against one's evidence. But as Parfit insists, there are exceptions to this rule. It is a failure of practical reason if one has irrational beliefs about what

²⁹ *OWM*, v. I, p. 141. Parfit formulates Moral Rationalism in a way that implies Deontic Reasons; I will keep these principles distinct.

³⁰ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 112-7.

there is reason to do.³¹ In general, practical rationality involves epistemic rationality in the domain of practical reason. Even if they are not facts about reasons, as such, facts about wrongness are, given the truth of Deontic Reasons, of central importance to this domain. Those who cannot conceive such facts, or who fail to consider them in practical reasoning, or whose beliefs about right and wrong are epistemically unjustified, fall short of practical rationality. More strongly, assuming Deontic Reasons, a practically rational agent who knows the non-deontic facts that make an action wrong will conclude that the action is wrong, and thus refrain from doing it. Finally, if knowledge of certain facts would prevent a practically rational agent from performing an action, those facts provide decisive reason not to act in that way. It follows that we must accept

WRONG-MAKING REASONS: When an act would be wrong, the non-deontic facts that make it wrong are decisive reasons against it.

To summarize this argument: Moral Rationalism would be explained by Wrong-Making Reasons; if that explanation is false, the most plausible alternative appeals to Deontic Reasons; but the truth of Wrong-Making Reasons follows from Deontic Reasons, on modest assumptions about the nature of practical reason. Parfit might dispute these premises, but if they are true, we cannot ignore the problems raised in section I.

III

In closing, I will look at a response to these arguments that revises the Kantian formula, or the definition of “deontic reason,” and discuss the larger question it provokes.

The revision is inspired by the fact that, in the argument of section II, what follows from Deontic Reasons is that the non-deontic facts that make an action wrong are reasons against it

³¹ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 119-20.

because they are grounds on which a rational agent would conclude that the act is wrong. Their status as reasons turns on the fact that they are wrong-making features. Why not exclude, in the application of Kantian Contractualism, not only deontic reasons but reasons of this kind? Alternatively, why not adjust the definition of “deontic reason” to apply to reasons whose status as such turns on the fact that they make acts wrong?³² Either way, what matters is the balance of reasons whose status as such does not depend on being, or being grounds for, deontic facts. This revision makes it possible to apply the Kantian formula without knowledge of wrong-making reasons: the information required to apply the formula is no longer sufficient for the short-cut framed in section I.

There are three things to say about this line. First, it is not clear how much the revision helps with the practical redundancy of Kantian Contractualism. In balancing the reasons for and against conflicting principles, it may be hard to say whether the status of a non-deontic fact as a reason turns on making an act wrong unless one already knows the deontic facts. Second, although the argument of section II does not prove that the status of wrong-making facts as reasons is independent of the fact that they make acts wrong, it is perfectly consistent with that view.

Finally, and most importantly, the success of the revision turns on a double standard. Consider Parfit’s wide value-based objective view, on which we have non-deontic reason to act in ways that benefit others, despite the cost to us or those we love. The facts that provide these impartial reasons are often among the facts that make an action wrong, for instance, because it harms another person. Now, there are two views we can take about the rational significance of such facts where they do not make an action wrong. One view denies that they are reasons in that

³² There are hints of this in Parfit’s book, as when he suggests that features of an act that make it wrong “might give you a decisive reason not to act in this way” but “only *by making this act wrong*.” He goes on to say: “[this] decisive reason would have to be *deontic*” and that “[you] would not have decisive *non-deontic* reason not to act in this way” (*OWM*, v. I, p. 395). These remarks can be interpreted in two ways. On one reading, Parfit adopts the broad definition according to which non-deontic facts that count as reasons because they make acts wrong are themselves deontic reasons. On the second reading, he claims that they “give us” deontic reasons, which consist in deontic facts, since they make such facts obtain.

case. When they fail to make an action wrong, reasons of harm and benefit to others do not count as reasons at all. On this view, the rational significance of such facts is deontically mediated. This view is fatal to Kantian Contractualism, on the revision just proposed. The revision forbids appeal to reasons of this kind; but if we cannot appeal to reasons of benefit and harm in applying the Kantian formula, its existence condition will fail. There will be no principles we all have sufficient reason to will. On the alternative view, the rational significance of benefits and harms to other people is immediate. Even when they fail to make an action wrong, such reasons have weight. Their status as reasons is independent of wrong-making. But then we should take the same view of all impartial reasons. It would be arbitrary not to. Just as facts about harm to others can make an action wrong, but count as reasons even when don't, so facts about harming as a means, if they can make an action wrong, may count as reasons even when they don't. In general, the rational force of wrong-making features is partly independent of deontic facts. Such reasons must be weighed in applying the Kantian formula, even when it has been revised. On neither view does the revision save Kantian Contractualism from the arguments above.

The larger question here is why Parfit is willing to make the assumptions he needs about impartial reason in order to apply the Kantian formula. Parfit defends the wide value-based objective view by attacking subjective and desire-based theories of practical reason.³³ He does not give a direct argument for this view. And there are many conceptions of non-deontic reason he does not discuss. We have considered one of them: the principle of Wrong-Making Reasons. Even if my claims about this principle are mistaken, we can ask why Parfit begins just where he does.

Of course, we can always question premises, and it would be unfair to expect an argument every time. But there is more going on. If someone has a practical interest in knowing right from wrong, their real concern is knowing what to do. How difficult their challenge is, and what form it takes, will depend on what they already know about reasons. Nothing at all? Just formal constraints? Or more than that? These questions apply to Parfit's book. What state of knowledge

³³ *OWM*, v. I, pp. 58-110.

does the Kantian project address? It does not speak to those who are largely ignorant of reasons, or who doubt that they have reason to benefit others, even at some cost to themselves. It assumes that we have knowledge of impartial reasons. But it does not assume more. It does not assume that we have decisive reason to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of others, or that we know what is right and wrong. Why focus our attention here? Why is this state of limited knowledge – knowledge of impartial but not deontic reasons – an urgent target of ethical thought? Why not assume less knowledge and set a more ambitious challenge? Why not confront the normative sceptic? Or if that seems hopeless, why not aim for much less? A modest project would begin with those who know what to do, and why to do it, and defend their claim to know.

The fundamental question posed by Wrong-Making Reasons concerns the shape of Parfit's approach. On any account, the use of Kantian Contractualism assumes a delicate balance of known and unknown normative facts. I have argued that we almost never satisfy these constraints, and that the Kantian formula is practically inert. Even if I am wrong, why fixate on this epistemic state? Why address someone who knows all there is to know about non-deontic reasons, including ones that bear on the treatment of others, but is oddly blind to deontic facts? There is nothing to prevent us from doing this, but why expect to learn valuable truths?³⁴

³⁴ For comments on earlier versions of this material, I am grateful to Mike Otsuka, Derek Parfit, Karl Schafer, and three anonymous readers for the press.