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The ontological status of moral reasons. A critical assessment of Charles Larmore's *Morality and metaphysics* (2021)

El estatuto ontológico de las razones morales. Una evaluación crítica de Morality and Metaphysics *(2021) de Charles Larmore*

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Abstract

In *Morality and Metaphysics,* Larmore outlines a metaphysical conception of normative reasons in general, and moral reasons in particular, that he defines as "platonistic". In accordance with this conception, all reasons for thought and action would belong to an ontologically objective domain, insofar as their mode of existence would be, in Searle's words, independent of any perceiver or mental state. The main objective of the present paper is to criticize this conception. To this end, it will be argued, on the one hand, that Larmore's conception is totally inadequate to deal with a specific kind of normative reasons, namely agent-relative reasons; and, on the other, that even if it recognizes the reflective stance as an inseparable aspect of morality, it tends to underestimate what this means ontologically speaking. As will become apparent in a clear Strawsonian vein, morality's normative force would rest to a great extent on some fundamental attitudes and dispositions we cannot do without as human beings.

Keywords: Normative Reasons, Agent-Neutrality, Agent-Relativity, Reflectiveness, Strawson, Mind-Dependence.

Resumen

En *Morality and Metaphysics*, Larmore presenta una concepción metafísica de las razones normativas en general, y de las razones morales en particular, que él mismo define como "platónica". De acuerdo con esta concepción, todas nuestras razones para actuar y pensar

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pertenecerían a una dimensión de la realidad ontológicamente objetiva, en el sentido de que su modo de existencia sería, en palabras de Searle, independiente de cualquier percepción o estado mental. El objetivo del presente artículo es criticar esta concepción. Para ello se argumentará, por un lado, que la concepción de Larmore resulta completamente inadecuada para lidiar con un tipo específico de razones normativas, a saber: las razones agencialmente relativas; y, por otro lado, que, si bien esta concepción reconoce el punto de vista reflexivo como un aspecto indisociable de la moralidad, tiende a subestimar lo que esto significa en términos ontológicos. Según se pondrá en evidencia desde un enfoque strawsoniano, la fuerza normativa de la moralidad descansaría en gran medida sobre ciertas actitudes y disposiciones de las que difícilmente podríamos prescindir como seres humanos.

Palabras clave: Razones normativas, Neutralidad agencial, Relatividad agencial, Reflexividad, Strawson, Dependencia mental.

Charles Larmore's philosophical work is a remarkable example of consistency through time. For almost half a century, and throughout authentic philosophical masterpieces such as *Patterns of Morals Complexity* (1987),[2] *The Morals of Modernity* (1996),[3] and *The Autonomy of Morality* (2008),[4] Larmore has managed to challenge not only our most common understanding of moral facts and moral knowledge, but also the prevailing naturalist conception of the world on which such an understanding would rest. This project, sketchy outlined in the first of these books, has been constantly deepened and broadened since then, to finally reached its peak in *Morality and Metaphysics* (2021),[5] his most recent publication.

As in previous works, Larmore presents here again a normative conception of reality defined as "platonistic", for it recognizes, together with the ontological objective realm of physical facts, a normative realm of reasons for thought and action whose existence would stand on its own feet. But the novelty here lies in the way Larmore discusses much of what has been recently written on the nature of normative reasons in general, and moral reasons in particular, including works by E. Lord, T. Scanlon, D. Parfit, S. Darwall, and C. Korsgaard, among others. In sharp contrast with both Humeans and Kantians alike, Larmore's most distinctive contention is that our moral reality is not something that we create or introduce into the world *from without*, as if it were a postulate of our own attitudinal setups, but something to be discovered *out there* once a certain reflective route is appropriately followed. The present paper will be devoted to critically analyze this contention. Two lines of thoughts will clearly

[2] Larmore, Ch., *Patterns of Morals Complexity*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
[3] Larmore, Ch., *The Morals of Modernity*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
[4] Larmore, Ch., *The Autonomy of Morality*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
[5] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

emerge as the discussion proceeds. On the one hand, it will be argued that Larmore's approach to normative reasons in general is totally inadequate to deal with a specific kind of normative reasons, namely personal or agent-relative reasons. And, on the other hand, it will be shown why moral reasons, often cast in terms of impersonal or agent-neutral reasons, owe their very existence to what Strawson famously called "the general framework of human life", which is an unavoidable participant stance we cannot do without as moral agents and that is indissociably composed of certain attitudes and dispositions.

The paper is structured in seven sections. Section 1 presents Larmore's general position on normative reasons and reveals why it is insufficient to cope with agent-relative reasons. Section 2 presents Larmore's position on moral reasons as is reflected in his reply to Dworkin's critique to moral realism. Since as an outcome of this discussion it will be revealed that Larmore is led to a crossroad, section 3 reproduces a recent attempt to face it, which in the end will prove unconducive. Section 4, on its part, analyzes the ontological status of moral reasons by connecting it to our reflective stance as human beings, a point that is present in Larmore's analysis but that he does not capitalize in his favor. Section 5 offers a Strawson-inspired account of moral reasons that recognizes the ontological importance of our attitudinal stance. And, in line with this account, section 6 briefly exhibits the merits of a mind-dependent approach to morality and normative reasons, much in line with a well-known philosophical tradition. Finally, section 7 goes over the previous sections, to suggest that Larmore's Platonism, contrary to what he thinks, may incur the same ontological extravagancies that characterize Plato's own Platonism.

1. Normative Reasons as Facts' Relational Properties and the Uncomfortable Place of Agent-Relative Reasons

When we say that "the fact that it is raining […] is a reason to take an umbrella when leaving the house", Larmore writes, we are not affirming anything strange. Quite the contrary, in recent days this has become a widely shared position among philosophers, usually known as 'factualism'. Maria Alvarez, one of its most competent defenders, for instance, says in that respect "that all facts are indeed reasons merely by virtue of being potential premises in (theoretical or practical) reasoning".[6] In his book, Larmore does not mention Alvarez's contribution to the topic, but he brings up other rele-

[6] Alvarez, M., *Kinds of Reasons. An Essay in the Philosophy of Action*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 42.

vant contributions. One of the authors he quotes is B. Kiesewetter, who explains that "normative reasons are, at least typically, ordinary facts (or true propositions) such as the fact that you have promised to attend a meeting, or the fact that some treatment will provide the cure for a disease".[7] And another author he quotes is Errol Lord, who takes "objective normative reasons" as "facts that count in favor of various reactions […]. The fact that it is going to rain in the city I'm traveling to next week is a reason for me to intend to bring an umbrella".[8]

Although factualism has earned an important recognition in philosophy, it has also raised important criticisms, especially in the epistemological field. Indeed, many authors fear that the truth of factualism may render a significant part of our day-to-day beliefs simply unjustified, making it really hard to make sense of our common feeling that someone's limited epistemic access to certain facts may justify the possession of certain beliefs, however false they could be all things considered.[9] Today, the debate around this issue is so intense and prolific that any attempt to fix a position or have a word in any respect has turned out to be quite challenging. But, fortunately, Larmore's reservations against factualism are grounded in a different kind of worry. For what he just comes to notice is that talking of reasons in terms of facts is "a bit of shorthand", since, "strictly speaking, my reason to take an umbrella is not the rain itself, but rather a certain relation that the rain bears to my possibilities of action".[10] So, what are normative reasons after all for Larmore? Here is his straight answer:

> One can say, if one likes, that being a reason is a property of the fact, a property that some might then dispute it actually possesses. Yet since the property is a relational property, this just means that being a reason is essentially a relation –the relation of justifying or *counting in favor of*– that an empirical fact (that it is raining) stands in to one of my possibilities of action (taking an umbrella).[11]

At least in one sense, Larmore's proposal shares a key aspect of Alvarez's factualism. Recall that her "view is that all facts are indeed reasons merely by virtue of being potential premises in (theoretical or practical) reasoning",[12] and what premises essentially do is to invoke facts that *count in favor of* other

[7] Alvarez, M., *Kinds of Reasons*…, p. 28.
[8] Larmore, Charles, *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 29
[9] See, for instance, Comesaña, J. and McGrath M., "Having false reasons", in Little J., C. and Turri, J. (Eds.), *Epistemic Norms*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 59-80; Heras-Escribano, M. and De Pinedo-García, M., "Naturalism, Non-Factualism, and Normative Situated Behaviour", *South African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 37, núm. 1, 2018, pp. 80-98.
[10] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 29.
[11] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 29
[12] Alvarez, M., *Kinds of Reasons*…,, p. 42.

facts similarly referred to in propositions. In Larmore's opinion, however, reasons are not the very empirical facts that count in favor of other empirical facts, but the extrinsic or relational properties of these facts, insofar as they relate to those other facts.

Larmore makes this point explicit several times along his book, but especially when he discusses Scanlon's position, who also claims that normative reasons have a "relational character".[13] A normative reason, Scanlon says, is "the four-place relation R (*p, x, c, a*), holding between a fact *p*, an agent *x*, a set of conditions *c*, and an action or attitude *a*".[14] In general terms, Larmore agrees with this position, but then he proceeds to notice a curious remark made by Scanlon, who writes that "the relational character of reasons is most likely to seem puzzling if we focus on reasons themselves, that is to say the states of affairs, *p*, that stand in this relation to agents and their actions".[15] Reasonably, Larmore asks: "How can reasons be relational if they are themselves simply one of the terms in the relation?".[16] If reasons are relational, this can only mean in his opinion that they "are not the given facts *p* as such, but rather those facts insofar as they count in favor of certain possibilities of ours".[17]

Another key aspect of Larmore's general position on normative reasons, conceived as facts' relational properties, is his view about the specific nature of these properties, to which he confers an "irreducibly normative character".[18] However, what does he mean by that? For, as far we know, many extrinsic or relational properties do not possess this character. Consider, for instance, Jessie's dog's *being larger than* Kimmy's dog; or water's property of *having the potential to quench the thirst of human beings*. Though typically relational, these properties are not only characteristically empirical, but perfectly reducible to other kinds of empirical properties, such as Jessie's dog's size or water's molecular structure, since these presumably are the intrinsic properties upon which those relational properties supervene. Therefore, what is so distinctive about normative reasons that make them ontologically irreducible?

The best answer that Larmore probably gives to this question is reflected in his critique of D. Parfit's account of normative reasons developed in *On What Matters*. Parfit's rejection of constructivism about reasons, as well as his denial to admit that reasons exist in space "*in the same way* as rocks, stars, and human beings do", lead him to conclude that, in order to be ontologically

[13] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics,* p. 155; see also Scanlon, T., *Being Realistic About Reasons,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 3-4.
[14] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics,* p. 155; Scanlon, T., *Being Realistic*…, p. 31.
[15] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics,* pp. 155-156; Scanlon 2014, p. 120.
[16] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics,* p. 156.
[17] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics,* p. 156.
[18] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics,* p. 154.

objective, they must exist "*in some different sense* of the term 'existence'".[19] But Larmore objects that this view unconditionally surrenders to the prevailing naturalistic conception that dominated the philosophical scene at least since the Enlightenment, an objection that has its roots in Larmore's previous works.[20] In conclusion, besides being *normative* and *relational*, reasons are as *real* as any other empirical property, in the sense that they exist "independently of *whatever* beliefs or attitudes we may have in their regard"[21].

Taken at first value, there is a risk that the definition may completely distort the meaning of 'real', by leaving aside anything that is not 'ontologically objective' or 'capable of existing in a mind-independent way'. Based on this restrictive definitional criterion, we would be forced to take as unreal or nonexistent whatever is not out there in the world, including all our thoughts, sentiments, and intentions, to say the least. But why would anyone want to take this route? What would be the gains of proceeding in such a fashion? As will be seen later in more detail (see section 2 below), when Larmore defines the world as "the totality of all that exists", he is careful enough to include not only physical but also "psychological facts", to which he adds "*normative facts about reasons*, which, in their irreducibility to things of a physical or psychological nature, resemble Plato's Forms".[22] Therefore, based on this and many other passages, it is out of question that Larmore takes psychological facts to be as real as any other physical fact. But if this is so, then the ontological objectivity or mind-independence of any psychological state a singular human being might be in possession of must be necessarily understood as *relative to* the attitudes or beliefs of *other* human beings. It is *in relation to them*, and not to their possessors, that all mental states would be *ontologically independent* or *real*.

Now, what about normative reasons? Since Larmore defines them as real in this very sense, they are supposed to exist quite independently of this or that individual, just like the intention to lead the billionaire space race that drives Elon Musk to increase investments in scientific research is supposed to exist in his mind quite independently of what you or I might think or feel about it. So far, so good. But now suppose that there was a normative reason for Elon Musk to increase investments in scientific research. Given that reasons, as Larmore says, are also irreducible to things of a physical or psychological nature, such a reason would have to exist independently of Elon Musk's intention. Nonetheless, how can it be possible for it to exist in such a way? Isn't what

[19] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 149.
[20] Larmore, Charles, *The Autonomy of Morality*, pp. 111-112.
[21] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 149; emphasis added. Italics were added for reasons that will become manifest in what follows but that somehow try to respond to reasonable worries formulated by two anonymous reviewers.
[22] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 178.

he thinks or feels supposed to count in this regard? Of course, if normative reasons are logical entities, and logical entities are ontologically irreducible to anything physical or psychological in nature, Elon Musk's normative reason to increase investments in scientific research will need to be similarly irreducible.[23] But semantics, as far as I know, belongs to the same ontological domain as logic. And, from a semantical point of view, there seems to be all the difference in the world between just saying that 'there is a normative reason for Elon Musk to increase investments in scientific research' (a) and saying that 'the normative reason for Elon Musk to increase investments in scientific research is *that* he intends to lead the billionaire space race' (b). In both sentences the expression 'normative reason' invokes the logical relation of 'counting in favor of', but it is only in the second case that this relation becomes transparent or recognizable. Were it not for Elon Musk's intention, the reason relation, no matter how mind-independent it could be from an ontological point of view, would nonetheless become semantically meaningless. And this is a difference that clearly has practical implications.

To assess what is at stake from a different angle, think in moral reasons, a paradigmatic case of normative reasons that will come onto the stage in the following section. If I say to you, without further ado, that you have a moral reason to prevent an innocent person from being murdered by just pressing a button, that may be enough in certain contexts for moving you to action. Of course, it would be better for you to know the real nature of the reason at stake, but fortunately real life is not philosophy. In real life, certain intellectual inquiries are simply out of place. On the other hand, imagine that you say to me that I have a normative reason to contribute to Elon Musk's personal project to lead the billionaire space race. Wouldn't I be interested in know-

[23] See, for instance, Olson, J., "The Metaphysics of Reasons", in Star, D. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 259, who claims that, according to non-naturalism about normative reasons, the fact that the *reason relation* is mind-independent does not imply "to deny that the facts that are reasons might be mind-dependent". Olson explains his point as following: "Non-naturalists may well hold that the fact that some law or norm of etiquette is prevalent in one's society is a reason for one to comply with that law or norm of etiquette. Moreover, the fact that some resort is pleasant and the fact that I have a headache are typical examples of facts that are reasons, and they are clearly mind-dependent facts. To be clear, non-naturalists take the *reason relation* and *facts about which other facts have the property of being reasons* to be mind-independent and irreducibly normative". The problem I see in this kind of non-naturalism is that the *reason relation* between a mental fact such as Musk's intention to lead the space race and the physical fact of investing money in scientific research can only become *meaningful* or *semantically transparent* in virtue of these very facts that allow its instantiation. And if these facts are crucial for the reason relation to be what it is, and not a different kind of reason relation, or even nothing at all, then a certain form of reducibility —'extensional', 'synthetic', or however we deem to call it (Pigden, Ch., "El naturalismo", in Singer, P., *Compendio de* ética, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1995, pp. 567-580)— seems to be worth considering. More on the subject in what follows. See also section 2 below, and especially footnote 36.

ing what that reason is from your perspective? Moreover, suppose that you tell me that it is not a moral consideration but something of a more personal nature, something that concerns me in virtue of my own predilections and attachments. It seems that until I realize what those predilections and attachments are, I will never be in position of finding out what the reason amounts to, and —what is here of the utmost importance— how it may move me to make any kind of contribution to Musk's own project. Hence, to reintroduce Larmore's proposition that normative reasons are *real* because they exist "independently of *whatever* beliefs or attitudes we may have in their regard" (see above), it is perfectly possible that I have a normative reason to contribute to Elon Musk's personal project without being aware that I have it, as if I were a total stranger to myself. What would be rather hard to swallow is that there might exist such a reason independently of whichever other beliefs or attitudes I may have in that regard.

Formally speaking, we know at least since T. Nagel that if a reason is a predicate R for agent p to act in a certain way, the reason will be agent-relative (or *subjective*, in Nagel's jargon) just in case the propositional content of the action makes perfect sense without involving any reference to p. Thus, for instance, if we affirm that p has a reason R to promote the well-being of his son, in correspondence with the following notation:

(1) $\forall$ (p) (Rp [to promote the welfare of p's son]),

the reason R will be agent-relative in virtue of the fact that the variable p occurring inside the bracket, although it is "bound by the universal quantification that governs the entire formula", still remains free within R and cannot be eliminated without affecting the meaning of the predicate.[24] Typical agent-relative reasons are those that spring from personal relationships like the one involved in the example, but they can also spring from our personal projects and voluntary obligations, like those we assume when making promises or signing contracts. Formalities notwithstanding, there is an aspect that almost all agent-relative reasons seem to have in common and which does not seem to be *prima facie* present in agent-neutral reasons, like moral reasons, for instance. To put it bluntly, it is the fact that, were it not for certain subjective attitudes, feelings, dispositions, affections, and emotions, let us say, no one would have an agent-relative reason to act in a certain respect. So, by way of illustration, it is just because *you are in love with* Jessica that you have a reason to buy her flowers, and it is just because collecting stamps is *your greatest passion* that you have a reason to join the next auction.

[24] Nagel, T., *The Possibility of Altruism*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 90; see also Buckland, J., "Skorupski and Broome on the Agent-Neutral/Agent-Relative Distinction", *Utilitas*, vol. 31, núm. 1, 2018, pp. 1-248.

Here a clarification is in order. Imagine that your child is drowning. By jumping into the water you can easily rescue her/him. But you are not aware that s/he is drowning. For you to have a reason to rescue her/him it is not necessary that you be in a certain mental state. Moreover, neither is it relevant what you might actually think or feel about it. The reason would apply to you in either case, existing quite independently of your current mental life. If this were Larmore's whole point, then he would be plainly right. However, it is important to emphasize that this is not Larmore's whole point. Rather, his point seems to be that the ontological status of your reason as a father/mother to rescue your drowning child is not affected by *any kind of attitudinal stance* (again, he takes normative reasons to exist "independently of *whatever* beliefs and attitudes…"), and this is clearly wrong. For imagine that your drowning child were effectively *yours* —that is, biologically speaking, s/he has your DNA— but that you had never heard of her/him in your entire life. Would you be under the same normative reason to save her/him from drowning? There is no doubt that you wouldn't, since the emotional and sentimental attachment that you have towards her/him is almost inexistent. This does not mean that, all things considered, you may not still have a compelling reason to jump into the water and try to rescue her/him. But that would not be an agent-relative reason.[25]

Much more would it be necessary to say in this regard to understand the specific nature of these reasons, but this will suffice for the moment to test Larmore's point that the irreducible reality of normative reasons implies that they exist "independently of *whatever* beliefs or attitudes we may have in their regard". For if agent-relative reasons cannot exist this way, then we will be forced to conclude that they cannot represent at all authentic normative reasons. But this conclusion would certainly be too rushed at this stage of the discussion, wouldn't it?

As will be seen later on (see section 5 below), the only occasion in his book in which Larmore openly discusses agent-relative reasons happens when he

[25] I owe this paragraph to a comment formulated by an anonymous reviewer, who fears that my interpretation of Larmore's position may not be as charitable as it could be. S/he says, for instance, that the most conspicuous reconstruction of what Larmore would be trying to say is that "by claiming that reasons exist independently of our attitudes in their regard" he would not be denying that our affective attitudes can sometimes give rise to reasons to act, "but simply that if a person has a reason to do something they have such a reason whatever they might think about it". As can be noticed, the previous paragraph faces this worry by carefully distinguishing between the psychological states we may be circumstantially in, which do not have to make any difference in relation to the normative reasons that apply to us in those very circumstances, and the different attitudinal stances that define our roles as the specific kinds of persons that we are. These are the attitudes that are central to fully understand the ontology and normative status of agent-relative reasons. I thank my reviewer for allowing me to put things in order in this respect and avoid possible misunderstandings in the following sections.

criticizes Darwall's intersubjective approach to moral reasons. And there he seems to recognize the *reality* of these reasons. He says, for instance, that the reason "to keep our promises to those to whom they are made" is clearly agent-relative, since only those who voluntarily promise have a reason to keep their word.[26] However, he also says that this one as well as other agent-relative reasons would not be "valid" were it not for the existence of "a deeper set of reasons",[27] like the reason "to value the benefits that people derive from being able to trust one another",[28] which is not agent-relative but agent-neutral. Of course, Larmore is right in asserting that the *moral validity* of agent-relative reasons depends on a set of reasons that must exist quite independently of our idiosyncratic attitudinal setups, which, as far as we know, can certainly be as arbitrary or capricious as our skin color. Nonetheless, what about those agent-relative reasons that play no role in morality, like the reason you may have to buy the stamp-plate on sale, and especially when we assume that it is *not morally objectionable*? What are we supposed to do with "enticing reasons",[29] for instance? Why would anyone want to deny that an enticer such as the reason "to have a haircut on Sunday afternoon",[30] for example, can also be part of a practical reasoning purported to justify an action? What would be the gains of adopting such a restrictive view of normative reasons? Here I am not suggesting that this is necessarily Larmore's position. But given that these questions are not attended in his book, important doubts may undermine the credibility of his metaphysical position regarding agent-neutral or moral reasons.

2. Moral Reasons as Morons?

Possibly the best way of understanding how Larmore introduces moral reasons into his relational account of normative reasons would be to review his analysis of R. Dworkin's critique of moral realism in *Justice for Hedgehogs*. In this book, Dworkin famously ridicules moral realism for defending a perceptual account of moral knowledge, as if our convictions regarding the moral qualities of facts could be explained the same way in which our perceptual knowledge of a red object usually is. Dworkin would joke in Lar-

[26] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 49.
[27] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 49.
[28] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 49.
[29] Dancy, J., "Enticing Reasons", in Jay Wallace, R., Pettit, P., Scheffler, S., and Smith, M. (Eds.), *Reason and Value. Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2004a, pp. 91-118.
[30] Dancy, J., "Enticing Reasons", p. 105.

more's terms: "Are we to suppose that these facts consist in configurations of moral particles or 'morons' that act on us as physical particles do when we acquire our beliefs about the physical world?".[31] Curiously enough, Larmore is pleased to bite the bullet, accepting that "reasons are much like the 'morons'" Dworkin "takes so much pleasure in ridiculing".[32] "Though non-physical in character", Larmore writes, "they too […] must be understood as causally responsible for the beliefs we acquire by reasoned argument".[33]

Larmore takes great care in depicting the main aspects of Dworkin's philosophical attempt to leave realism behind and presents some serious doubts about it, but this is neither the time nor the place to deal with all of this. For what I would rather like to analyze here is whether Larmore's affirmative answer to Dworkin's question is really at his disposal. It is worth mentioning that if normative reasons are, as Larmore claims in many passages of his work,

[31] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 95
[32] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 100
[33] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 100. Reasonably, an anonymous reviewer is intrigued by how Larmore characterizes motivation and the outcome of deliberation, a subject that this paper cannot properly address but that certainly deserves closer examination. Although Larmore thinks that deliberation plays an important role when it comes to explain human action and motivation, such a role is clearly subordinated to the causal power that reasons themselves possess to move us to action. Of course, reasons need to be acknowledged to move us to action (Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, pp. 127-128), but deliberation is not about projecting reasons onto the world; deliberation is about recognizing the reasons that already exist (Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 167). Larmore tries to explain the causal impact that *normative* reasons would have in our behavior *via* the acknowledgment of them that usually takes place when we deliberate about what to do or what to believe. As my reviewer cleverly points out, Larmore thinks that the so-called '*motivational* reasons', traditionally depicted in terms of certain psychological states that causally move us to act, are "no more than our conception of the *normative* reasons that we have", and so "a bit of shorthand" (Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 31). When our conception is wrong, as it happens for instance every time we believe something that is not true, it would be this conception (namely an *apparent* normative reason) the one doing the explanatory work of our behavior. But what happens when our conception is right and our action is indeed justified by a *truly* or *authentic* normative reason? Larmore seems to suppose that in these cases the explanatory work is done by the normative reason *plus* our right conception of it. However, as is evident, this would introduce an explanatory asymmetry very hard to accept. Jonathan Dancy, for instance, tried to sort out this asymmetry by postulating what he called "non-factive explanations", which invoke considerations that are not true. This is what happens, for example, when we say that "his reason for doing it was that it would increase his pension, but in fact he was quite wrong about that" or that "the ground on which he acted was that she had lied to him, though actually she had done nothing of the sort" (Dancy, J., *Practical Reality.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 132), two sentences that allow us to dispense with psychological motives. To most philosophers, however, this is an unacceptable conclusion, since "true explanations require the truth of both the explanandum and the explanans" (Alvarez, M., "Reasons for Actions, Acting for Reasons, and Rationality", *Synthese,* núm. 195, 2018, p. 3300). Be it as it may, the challenge remains for Larmore to explain in what sense that explanatory asymmetry may not endanger his whole theory, a problem he does not deal with in his book. For a possible solution on the right track, see again Alvarez, M., "Reasons for Actions…"

relational properties of *empirical, non-normative* facts,[34] and moral reasons are nothing more than a sub-class of normative reasons, therefore, on pain of inconsistency, it would be reasonable to conclude that moral reasons must also be relational properties of empirical, non-normative facts. Or, to complete the idea following Larmore's own suggestions, if normative reasons consist "in the way that physical or psychological facts count in favor of certain possibilities of thought and action" (ibid., p. 164), therefore, on pain of incoherence, he seems forced to recognize that moral reasons do also have this kind of consistency. Nonetheless, when discussing Dworkin's critique of moral realism, why does he affirm that "what moral beliefs are about would thus be *moral facts (facts involving moral reasons)* that make them true" (ibid., p. 99)?

As introduced in this passage, moral facts seem to represent a different category of facts, which would *involve* the presence of moral reasons. Here it is not easy to precise what the relationship of 'involvement' exactly amounts to in Larmore's opinion, but we can just assume it to be a constituency relationship, as if moral reasons were the constituents of moral facts. Now, since moral reasons are nothing more than a sub-class of normative reasons, which are relational properties of empirical, non-normative facts, the question that logically arises is whether these definitions are not viciously circular. In fact, if moral facts are defined in terms of moral reasons, which are a sub-class of normative reasons, and normative reasons are defined in terms of empirical, non-normative facts, the implication is that moral facts will have to be defined in terms of empirical, non-normative facts, hence giving rise to the circularity previously noticed. Does this represent, however, a charitable reading of Larmore's thesis?

Even though Larmore tends to remain silent on the specific nature of moral facts, he is more explicit when referring to "*normative* facts", which would involve the presence of *normative reasons*.[35] Of course, examples do not abound in his text, which makes it even harder to tell what a normative fact typically looks like for him. What he does reveal, however, is that "the world, as the totality of all that exists, contains not only physical and psychological facts but also *normative facts about reasons*, which, in their irreducibility to things of a physical or psychological nature, resemble Plato's Forms" (2021, p. 178). More precisions will be offered in a moment about how to understand the irreducible nature of the normative domain. For the time being, however, special attention should be called to the parallelism that Larmore traces between physical and psychological facts, on the one hand, and normative facts about (normative) reasons, on the other.

[34] See, for instance, Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, pp. 154, 161, 164.
[35] See Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, pp. 136, 146, 157, 178.

Intuitively, that an umbrella is made of a water-resistant material is a clear example of a physical fact. Likewise, that P wishes not to get wet is a clear example of a psychological fact. A fact, event, or state-of-affairs, be it physical or psychological in nature, is an entity which typically consists in a particular (e.g. this umbrella; P's desire) instantiating a property (e.g. being made of a water-resistant material; having a particular propositional content). When taken together, facts like these, as previously seen, tend to offer the *normative* or *justifying reasons* to act in a certain regard, such as to take an umbrella if it rains. Consequently, if we follow Larmore in defining normative facts as facts about normative reasons, which are relational properties of physical or/and psychological facts, then, to abide by the parallelism, they will need to be conceived not as involving (or being about, or being constituted by) normative reasons as such, which is Larmore's contention, but rather as involving (or being about, or being constituted by) the physical or/and psychological facts that, acting as particulars, instantiate those normative reasons as if they were their relational or extrinsic properties.

Once things are conceptualized this way, it becomes much clearer what we typically tend to take as moral facts in our ordinary talk. Consider for instance the fact of being robbed with a gun (1), or the fact of saving a person from drowning (2). Described in these terms, they are no less physical, empirical, or non-normative, than the fact that an umbrella is made of plastic. But, of course, we also tend to describe these facts by invoking moral predicates. We usually say of a fact like (1) that it is *regrettable*, or *morally wrong*, as we usually say of a fact like (2) that it is *praiseworthy*, or *morally right*. These, as we know, are moral properties. And purely empirical, non-moral facts tend to become moral once they are described with the help of moral predicates. At first glance, moral reasons do not seem to appear in the picture. However, what does it mean for a fact to be regrettable but, first and foremost, that there is a normative (or moral) reason to regret it? And what does it mean for a fact to be praiseworthy but, first and foremost, that there is a normative (or moral) reason to praise it? As far as it goes, it seems that the way we decide to express ourselves to communicate a moral message in our ordinary talk is just optional. We might say, for instance, that fact (1) is regrettable, making no explicit reference to moral reasons (a). Or we might say, if we please, that fact (1) offers a moral reason to regret it, in which case we would avoid invoking moral properties (b).

Larmore's approach, as already noticed, defines moral and normative facts as facts about normative reasons, and defines moral and normative reasons as *relational properties* of empirical, non-normative facts. Hence, under the guide of this approach, it seems that the most natural option to go with if we decide to behave as competent speakers in the moral domain would be

option (b), for it is through this option that we get to appreciate how normative reasons relate to empirical facts as their relational properties. But here I would like to suggest that option (a) does also represent a perfectly viable alternative to cope with moral reasons. Again, when couched in terms of a moral property such as 'regrettable' or 'morally wrong', what an empirical fact like (1) gets to communicate, among other things, is that there is a normative reason to regret it, among other actions; and if this is part of the definition of what implies to be regrettable, then it seems that the normative reason at stake could perfectly be interpreted as an *intrinsic* property of such a normative or moral fact. To summarize, just as a normative (or moral) reason can be metaphysically defined as a *relational* property of an *empirical, non-normative fact*, it can also be defined as an *intrinsic* property of a *non-empirical, normative* fact. Both formulae are optional depending on the context of enunciation and can be used interchangeably.

Be it as it may, what still craves for an answer is the question regarding the supposed irreducible character of normative (or moral) reasons. Larmore seems to take for granted that normative facts about reasons, and ◎needless to say◎ normative reasons *per se*, are irreducible "to things of a physical or psychological nature". But now that it became clear the property-like ontological status of normative reasons, why things would have been different? Think for instance in a typical relational property such as 'being larger than'. Given that the number of circumstances in which it becomes instantiated is ever-increasing, any attempt to exhaust its meaning by offering an extensional definition of it will be deemed to fail. However, does this imply by any chance that the property is *plainly* irreducible? Questionably. Imagine that we offer an operative or functional definition of the property in the following terms: for X to be larger than Y is for X to measure more than Y in relation to a given benchmark or measurement procedure. As questionable as it can be, the definition seems to suffice at least in certain contexts to guide the verbal conduct of those who use the predicate when making comparisons. Firmly irreducible as it is to a physical or psychological thing, a relational property like this can still beg for other forms of reduction.

A normative reason to ϕ, as Larmore defines it, is a relational property of a fact when this fact is taken as *justifying* or *counting in favor of* another fact or possibility of action. So, according to this definition, what is irreducible to a thing of a physical or psychological nature is not the fact that instantiates the reason but the relation of *counting in favor of* something else. How could it be otherwise? After all, this is no more than a logical property, and logical properties such as 'entailment', 'relevance', or 'coherence', not to mention mathematical properties such as 'being a prime number', or even mathematical entities such as 'number 31', are not reducible to material objects. Larmore

is perfectly aware of these particularities and of the challenging metaphysical questions they posit.[36] For no other reason, he analyzes Carnap as well as Scanlon's metaphysical internalism, for which the question of what exists and what does not cannot be answered from without a given framework. Far from embracing this kind of ontological relativism, however, which would have let him accept as many different worlds as frames of reference it may be rational to conceive, what Larmore adopts in the end is a more comprehensive metaphysical worldview. Naturalism, as he notices, does also represent such a worldview. But whereas naturalism tends to see reasons and moral properties as statuses that "we confer on facts in the world", "platonism" (which, as shall be recalled, is the name Larmore chooses to characterize his own position) conceives them instead as "a feature of the way things are".[37] Indeed, in his opinion, both reasons and moral properties are *real* "in the sense that they exist independently of whatever attitudes we may have toward them".[38]

Larmore spends a great deal of his time to explain why naturalism fails to account for normative reasons in general, characterizing both Hume and Kant as naturalists, not to mention other contemporary philosophers such as Allan Gibbard and Christine Korsgaard. Despite their many differences, these philosophers have something in common, for all of them would be at one "in holding that reasons are something we introduce into the world from without, coloring the neutral face of nature with normative distinctions of our own devising".[39] Clearly enough, if normative reasons in general, and moral reasons in particular, were nothing more than a system of traffic regulations, or –as Dancy once put it not without irony– "a sort of social device,

[36] See footnote 23 above. There it was argued that non-naturalism has its problems when it tries to account for the irreducibility of the reason relation from a semantic point of view. Now compare a proposition stating that 'there is a normative reason for Elon Musk to increase investments in scientific research' with the proposition stating that 'number 5 is larger than number 4', or with the proposition stating that 'Socrates is mortal if all human beings are mortal and Socrates is a human being'. Whereas it seems clear that the truth (or falsity) of the latter propositions is knowable *a priori*, the same does not happen with the former. Whether Elon Musk has indeed a normative reason to increase investments in scientific research is something to be examined in the light of empirical work, and so its truth (or falsity) is only knowable *a posteriori*. Of course, this does not mean that there are some general aspects of the reason relation of 'counting in favor of' that cannot be knowable *a priori*. However, since in order to determine what it specifically means that the reason relation becomes instantiated in a given circumstance we need to undertake some empirical work regarding the agent and her possibilities of action, this surely must have an explanation. If, following Charles Pigden ("El naturalismo", p. 574), we define 'synthetic naturalism' as the thesis that normative properties might be identified with natural properties by means of empirical research rather than conceptual analysis, we will probably find a plausible way of accounting for the kind of reduction that normative reasons are capable of, *pace* Larmore.

[37] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 7.

[38] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 179.

[39] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 32; see also Larmore, Ch., *The Autonomy of Morality*, p. 112.

a human institution that has got set up for a purpose, a bit like the National Trust or the World Bank",[40] Larmore's suspicions against naturalism would be well grounded.

In *The Sources of Normativity*, Korsgaard has certainly encouraged these kinds of readings of positions like hers, as when she affirms that "values are *created* by human beings", or that they "are *constructed* by a procedure, the procedure of making laws for ourselves".[41] As we know, she tends to write like this because her project consists in showing how morality has its source in our practical identities, as if it were a kind of postulate that we need to adopt in order to make sense of who we are. But Nagel objects, and Larmore would probably agree with him, that the order of factors is quite the opposite. Rather than being *adopted* or *created* from our given practical identities, the values and reasons that are most characteristic of the moral point of view are not byproducts of those identities but precisely one of their sources.[42] As it stands, the idea is not without obscurity. After all, why would my identity as a basketball player, for instance, have its source in a moral reason? This does not make much sense.

Another way to put it would be to say that the reasons that I ultimately have for pursuing a career as a basketball player shall be morally permissible, in the sense of not being in contradiction with valid moral reasons. Under such a reading, however, morality would still lack any relevance to explain where my practical identity as a basketball player comes from, let alone the normative reasons that derive from it. Be it as it may, Nagel's main point, as Korsgaard acknowledges, seems to be that moral reasons are not things that we *create* or *construct* from pre-existing non-moral perspectives such as those that we occupy just for being who we are, but rather things that we *discover* once we get to appreciate the world from a more objective or impersonal viewpoint.[43] Still, the problem is how to give credit of this perspective. For if, as we may put it in Nagel's terms, there is simply no way of viewing the world from nowhere, neither will it be possible to make sense of the idea that moral reasons and values are things located out there in the world crying for discovery.

In more than a sense, Larmore's platonistic account of moral reasons seems to share Nagel's realistic assumptions. But Larmore is much more ex-

[40] Dancy, J., *Ethics without Principles,* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004b, p. 133.
[41] Korsgaard, C. M., "Reply", in Korsgaard, C. M.; Cohen, G. A.; Geuss, R.; Nagel, T. and Williams, B., *The Sources of Normativity*, ed. Onora O'neill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 112.
[42] Nagel, T., "Universality and the Reflective Self", in Korsgaard, C. M.; Cohen, G. A.; Geuss, R.; Nagel, T. and Williams, B., *The Sources of Normativity*, ed. Onora O'neill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 208.
[43] Korsgaard, C. M., "Reply", p. 245.

plicit than Nagel when it comes to reveal what moral realism amounts to in metaphysical terms. As previously seen, Larmore conceives normative reasons as irreducible to things of a physical or psychological nature. For no other motive, he calls them "irreducibly *normative*", which is one of the three truths he mentions about reasons.[44] But recall that he also calls them *real*, "in the sense that they exist independently of whatever attitudes we may have toward them".[45] In a previous passage of his work, Larmore says in this regard that when we conclude that we have an "impersonal" reason to do something, "what we mean is that the facts by themselves, apart from our interests and attachments, count in favor of that option".[46] At first glance, these two passages seem in line with each other. Nonetheless, what would happen if instead of invoking an impersonal reason we decided to invoke a personal or agent-relative one? Would Larmore still hold that a fact by itself would have to count in favor of a given option, apart from someone's interests and attachments? Given the irreducible agent-relative nature of agent-relative reasons, this would be plainly absurd.

So, as things now stand, Larmore seems to be at a crossroad: *either* he denies the distinctive ontological status of agent-relative reasons (I), *or* he accepts it (II). If he goes with option (I), he will need to come up with a convincing explanation of what is at stake when we say, for instance, that a personal project like collecting stamps offers stamp-collector Z a reason to buy a unique stamp plate which is being offered at auction. And, more importantly, since the reality of normative reasons means that they exist independently of whatever attitudes we may adopt towards their propositional contents, such an explanation will be obliged to neglect the role that stamp-collector Z's own interests and attachments play in the whole story. The challenge seems enormous, to say the least. By contrast, if he goes with option (II), then, in order to include agent-relative reasons within his philosophical approach, he will probably need to revise his second truth about normative reasons in general, and moral reasons in particular. However, is it possible to conceive the reality of impersonal or agent-neutral reasons as something that somehow depends on our interests and attachments? Wouldn't this be equivalent to deny the very existence of agent-neutral reasons?

In section 4 I will try to answer these questions by starting to outline the general aspects of a response-dependent approach to moral reasons, which fortunately has many competent defenders. However, prior to that, in the following section I will briefly analyze a possible way of redefining the ontolog-

[44] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 178.
[45] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 179.
[46] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 37.

ical status of agent-relative reasons that seeks to make it compatible with the ontological status of agent-neutral reasons. In the end, such an attempt will prove unconducive. But given Larmore's silence on this topic, the alternative seems worth analyzing.

3. Can Agent-Relative and Agent-Neutral Reasons Share the Same Ontological Status?

In "Agent-Relative Reasons and Normative Force", J. Löschke explores a new way of accounting for the difference between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons. Löschke fruitfully goes through the three most common kinds of agent-relative reasons: relationship-dependent reasons, project-dependent reasons, and deontological restrictions, to argue that all of them can be reformulated in terms of their impersonal or agent-neutral counterparts.[47] He writes:

> The agent-neutral counterpart to my agent-relative reason to save my son is the fact that a child is drowning; the agent-neutral counterpart to my agent-relative reason to write the chapter for my book is the fact that a person has the project of writing a book on agent-relative reasons; and the agent-neutral counterpart to my agent-relative reason to not kill the innocent myself is the fact that an innocent person is killed. None of these reasons includes an essential reference to me as the agent, and this makes them agent-neutral.[48]

Strictly speaking, this is not to deny that agent-relative reasons exist. But given that there is no ontological difference between them and agent-neutral reasons, such an understanding may help Larmore avoid some inconsistencies. A key element in Löschke's account is the Kantian idea that "agents have moral reasons to make the ends of others their own ends",[49] including our specific goals related to our own projects and personal relationships. Curiously enough, he does not say a word about the conditions that a goal, or a project, must satisfy in order to become sharable. As will be shown in a moment, the issue is not without importance, for plainly irrational goals such as counting blades of grass do not seem to be in shape to even call our lowest degree of attention.[50] In any case, the other important element in Löschke's

[47] Löschke, J., "Agent-Relative Reasons and Normative Force", *Philosophia*, núm. 49, 2021, pp. 360-361.
[48] Löschke, J., "Agent-Relative Reasons…", p. 361.
[49] Löschke, J., "Agent-Relative Reasons…", p. 366.
[50] See Rawls, J., *A Theory of Justice,* Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971, # 65.

account is related to how interests and attachments would be relevant not to determine the normative reason that an agent has, but only its *normative force* or *significance*. So, in his opinion, a reason would be agent-relative "if it is not possible to understand the normative force" that it has for an agent without reference to the agent's identity, including her interests and attachments; and it would be agent-neutral, on its part, if the understanding of its normative force is not conditioned by elements of such a nature.[51]

In order to analyze the soundness of this proposal, let us take a look at our previous example. If Löschke is right, stamp-collector Z's interests and attachments would be relevant to determine the *normative force* of Z's reason to buy the stamp plate on sale, but not the very *normative reason* at stake. On the contrary, since normative reasons spring from our sharable goals, and Z's goal is not only his but everybody else's goal as well, anybody would have a normative reason to make it possible that Z acquires the stamp plate. This result, however, seems unpalatable. Auctions, not to mention many other competitive scenarios and zero-sum games, usually summon people who pursue colliding interests. Important as it is to stamp-collector Z, the same stamp plate on sale may be no less important to stamp-collector Y, or T, or U. Why then would agent Y have a reason to favor Z's acquiring the stamp plate? Indeed, imagine Y's being approached by Z with the intention of suggesting that she has a reason not to bid, namely: that Z wants the stamp plate. Cynicism notwithstanding, the suggestion would be ludicrous. Or think in Cyrano de Bergerac and Christian de Neuvilette, the two main characters in Edmond Rostand's drama who happen to be in love with the same woman, Roxane. There is simply no way in which the fact that Roxane falls in love with Christian can be good for Cyrano, and *vice versa*. And if the same fact cannot be good for two different agents –or, moreover, if its being good for one means that it is bad for the other– it is not possible for them to share the same normative reason.

4. Moral Reasons and the Ontological Implications of the Reflective Point of View

Let's take stock. In the last part of section 2 (see *supra*) two options were envisaged for Larmore: *either* to deny the distinctive ontological status of agent-relative reasons (I), *or* to accept it (II). Section 3 was meant to show that at least one way to cope with option (I) is not viable for Larmore. But what about option (II)? This surely is, as I would like to confess, the only op-

[51] Löschke, J., "Agent-Relative Reasons…", p. 367.

tion worth pursuing. However, in order to make a strong case for it, we will first need to explain in what sense the existence of moral reasons does also depend in some degree on certain interests and attachments. This as well as the remaining sections of this paper will be devoted to this task.

One key aspect of Larmore's approach to morality is that, contrary to what Hobbesians, Humeans, and Kantians alike have suggested, the reality of moral reasons is not something that we can "introduce into the world from without".[52] In a previous work,[53] Larmore has established the roots of this idea, arguing against what he calls there an "instrumental conception of rationality", which tends to see "the moral point of view" as "a way of thinking into which we must reason ourselves from the outside"[54] and "for the sake of advancing our own good",[55] defined by the satisfaction of desires and interests of our own that are taken as simply given. Of course, this presumably Hobbesian idea, as we know, has colored the thought of D. Gauthier, as is clearly reflected in his famous announcement that "morality can be generated as a rational constraint from the non-moral premises of rational choice".[56] But Larmore cleverly notices that the same philosophical strategy seems to be present in Kantian thinkers such as Korsgaard, insofar as their attempts have also consisted in driving us into the reality of moral reasons starting from a non-moral perspective. In Korsgaard's case, the starting non-moral perspective is not anchored in our simple desires as such, but in our reasoned practical identities. To see myself as a source of values and reasons for acting, Korsgaard says, is first and foremost to be able to conceive of me as a *human* creature whose decisions matter; and this conception, which is already presupposed in my contingent practical identity, is what ultimately forces me to see any other human being as an equally respectable source of values and reasons, which would be the core center of the moral point of view.

Both in *The Autonomy of Morality* (2008) and *Morality and Metaphysics* (2021), Larmore criticizes all these attempts to provide a foundation of moral reasons for not recognizing the distinctive ontological status of the normative domain to which all our reasons would belong. When explaining what a reason is, for instance, Korsgaard defines it as "a kind of reflective success" that we achieve once "we can stand back from our impulses and ask whether we ought to

[52] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 32.
[53] Larmore, Ch., *The Autonomy of Morality*.
[54] Larmore, Ch., *The Autonomy of Morality*, p. 103.
[55] Larmore, Ch., *The Autonomy of Morality*, p. 101.
[56] Gauthier, D., *Morals by Agreement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 4; see also Larmore, Ch., *The Autonomy of Morality*, p. 96.

follow them".[57] In Larmore's opinion, however, this would imply to put the cart before the horse. For imagine that we follow Korsgaard's reflective route to evaluate the stringency of a given interest or desire. After some thinking, we conclude that such a desire deserves satisfaction since it represents a constitutive part of our own conception of ourselves, carefully considered. Far from solving the initial problem, this account merely reproduces it, for now we need to figure out what reason there is for endorsing a given practical identity instead of another.

Larmore thinks that the solution requires abandoning the view that sees reasons as "the output of reflective success", replacing it by a radical different one. Our reason, he says, is a "faculty of mind", precisely the faculty to respond to normative reasons.[58] So, if we are to succeed when reflecting about what to do, what to be, or what to value, that would be determined by the reasons we manage to respond to, but whose existence must be presupposed by that reflection. The normative domain of reasons, therefore, is ontologically objective, in the sense that its existence is independent of whatever attitudes we might adopt towards it. And moral reasons, as part of that domain, *speak for themselves* once they are discovered.[59]

In the light of the superb analysis of human reflection that Larmore develops in Chapter 1 of his latest work, it turns out to be rather curious why he insists in offering this realistic picture of moral reasons, as if they were like the 'morons' ridiculed by Dworkin (see section 2 above). In fact, Larmore presents human reflection as a never-ending process we all need to embark in to overcome our own selves and see the world from a more impersonal or detached perspective. It is, as he also calls it, a "capacity for self-transcendence", intimately connected to "our nature as normative beings, responsive not merely to the causal impress of the environment but to the authority of reasons as well".[60] H. Plessner would have called it 'eccentricity' (*Exzentrizität*), insofar as it implies an ability to be out of our center, "to stand back from our own attachments […] so as to regard ourselves from the outside, as though we were just one among many".[61] Larmore explains that since "each of us has a life that it is ours alone to live, we naturally approach the world in the light of the interests and allegiances that happen to be ours".[62] This means, as he describes it, "to live our lives *from within*", which is what usually happens "so long as everything goes

[57] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 116; see also Korsgaard, C. M., "Reply", pp. 93-4.
[58] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 34.
[59] See Larmore, Ch., *The Autonomy of Morality*, pp. 103-5.
[60] Larmore, Charles, *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 18.
[61] Plessner, 2021, pp. 20-1.
[62] ibid., p. 22.

its customary way".[63] However, when there emerges a problem that "puts into question the way we have been proceeding […] we may be no longer clear about the sort of person we are", and this may force us "to look at ourselves from without".[64] Nonetheless, if such an impersonal standpoint achieved through reflection "is not the view from nowhere", as Larmore clearly notices,[65] what are we supposed to think about it? For he also insists once more that the moral or impersonal reasons we get to appreciate from this perspective "stem solely from facts outside of us, uncolored by our own interests and attachments".[66] Part of Larmore's answer to the last question is that the impersonal standpoint does always bear "the mark of our time and place",[67] for it is in response to a circumstantial problem that reflection is triggered. But can this be the whole story?

To appreciate why it cannot, it would be highly instructive to redirect Larmore's discussion around reflection to analyze, once again, the reflective status of agent-relative reasons. As things now stand for him, it gives the impression that an agent's own personal or relative reasons would only exist, and be acknowledged to exist, from her own personal perspective, defined by her own interests and attachments. Of course, we may be momentarily unaware of our truly interests and attachments, or in need of psychoanalytical therapy to discover them, in which case our *current* personal perspective will not be relevant to determine the existence of our truly agent-relative reasons. If that happens, however, the only thing it would prove is that our agent-relative reasons do not ontologically depend on the *current* interests and attachments we might be aware of, though they would still depend in the end on other interests and attachments, assessable in this case from a more enlightened personal perspective. Nonetheless, what perspective are we supposed to assume when it comes to assess the agent-relative reasons that other agents may have? Our first-person perspective will be of course of no help at all. But if a third-person (or a second-person) perspective seems the only way to go, then its adoption cannot be recommended at the expense of the first-person perspective of the agent whose personal reasons are being assessed, for this would distort the whole phenomenon from head to toe. A fine (and often unstable) equilibrium will need to be envisaged between what one takes as a matter of fact to be personally important and what other people may be disposed to recognize in our favor.

[63] ibid., p. 22.
[64] ibid, p. 22.
[65] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 27.
[66] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 27.
[67] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 27.

Again, to bring Rawls's example back into consideration, imagine a person who spends her time counting blades of grass. She might feel attached to such a project. But if we cannot have the slightest clue of what it means to be so attached, we may do well to raise some doubts regarding the real existence of the agent-relative reasons in question. On the contrary, for stamp-collector Y, for instance, stamp-collector Z's agent-relative reasons to acquire the stamp plate at auction are almost as transparent as her own agent-relative reasons to do the same. The most common cases, of course, are in between these two extremes. Understanding other people's purposes is not always easy. When someone we appreciate asks for our help but we are not quite sure about the value of her project, what can we do about it? Since the adoption of a project usually activates in a person a series of dispositions and subjective attitudes such as sentiments, emotions, feelings, likings, or valuings, to mention just a few, one may be tempted to compare all this with our own dispositions and subjective attitudes towards a project.[68] But if that usually helps to arrive at a decision, and this implies an impersonal reflection, then it cannot be, as Larmore supposes, that impersonal reflection means to leave our interests and attachments behind.

[68] For further specifications on the nature of 'valuing', see especially Scheffler, S., *Equality and Tradition. Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 15-40. Scheffler's most important point seems to be that valuing something like X involves both an epistemic element (one must believe that "X is good or valuable or worthy") and an affective or emotional one (that is, one must "experience a range of context-dependent emotions regarding X") (Scheffler, S., *Equality and Tradition…*, p. 29). Now, under the assumption that X is a state-of-affairs that one can promote by doing Y, may the sole fact that one simply values X offer a normative reason to do Y? Though Scheffler does not admit such a thing, he believes, *contra* Scanlon, that the affective or emotional element involved in valuing something is fundamental to understand why different agents may have different normative reasons regarding the action at stake. Whereas it is *prima facie* reasonable that stamp-collector Z, who is personally attached to the stamp-plate on sale, bids at the auction, it is not that R ◎who does not care about stamps, and much less about Z's personal interests◎ does her best to help Z fulfil her goal. Of course, R may still have a normative reason not to obliterate Z's fulfilling her goal, but this is quite a different matter (cf. Scheffler, S., *Equality and Tradition…*, p. 34; see also Raz, J., *Value, Respect, and Attachment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 154-155, 161-164). Another related issue Scheffler's paper does not seem to be directly concerned with is whether our beliefs in the valuable character of the things we value must be necessarily true. If this is not a necessary condition, then our mere valuings may not be sufficient to justify certain actions. In any case, what Scheffler does not seem to notice is that, in the domain of agent-relative reasons, the propositional contents of our beliefs regarding what makes something good, or valuable, or worthy, are usually about the kinds of emotions or feelings that that makes us experience. These emotions may be difficult to understand for certain people, but they are so deeply entrenched in the good that we personally attribute to some things that their ignorance can only distort the distinctive value of those things. Consequently, if a belief had to be true for someone to be justified when acting in a certain way, its truth would necessarily rest on facts whose ultimate nature is ontologically subjective (on this point see Searle, J., *The Construction of Social Reality,* New York: The Free Press, 1995).

5. The Unavoidable Attitudinal Basis of the Moral Stance

B. Williams famously defined morality as a "peculiar institution".[69] And, indeed, if we take notice of the "range of ethical outlooks" that it embraces, sometimes inconsistent, sometimes over-demanding, and sometimes even indeterminate, what else could have been said in its place? Many institutions, for instance, contain obligations as parts of their ethical outlooks. But *moral* obligations, Williams notices, are special in the sense that they are "inescapable".[70] A worker may have many obligations, but they apply to her inasmuch as she chooses to comply with them acting *as a worker*. This is in the end a matter of personal decision, grounded in an agent's desires, preferences, or personal interests. A moral obligation, however, "applies to people even if they do not want it to" (ibid., p. 198), and it surely must be a peculiarity of this sort what makes morality the kind of peculiar institution that it is. Be it as it may, we should not over-exaggerate the motivationally-blind demandingness of moral obligations. For if I have a moral obligation to rescue my drowning child from the swimming-pool, the fact that I want to do this more than anything in the world makes it no less an obligation. Quite the contrary, it seems to make it even more stringent than the obligation to rescue a total stranger. And even when the drowning person were a total stranger to me, the sole fact of not wanting to rescue her would add to the situation an element for moral concern. Utilitarians may naturally object that motivations do not change the moral status of an action, but thanks to Williams himself we are perfectly aware of why this is simply unacceptable.[71] Morality is also a peculiar institution because it tends to discourage what Williams calls "counterethical motivations",[72] however important they may be to convince the Hobbesian amoralist to adopt the moral point of view.

So, in the end, why not just to admit that the moral stance is ontologically inseparable from certain (ethical) motivations? If moral education is a perfectly accomplishable task, what else could it amount to but the process of constantly improving certain dispositions, attitudes, and motivations? In his writings, Larmore admits on more than one occasion the relevance that training, coaching, and discipline usually have to "learn to appreciate the value of certain basic ways of comporting ourselves",[73] a relevance not always possessed by deliberation, for instance. When we are very young, Lar-

[69] Williams, B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006, Ch. 10.
[70] Williams, B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 195.
[71] See, for instance, Williams, B., "A Critique of Utilitarianism", in Smart, J. C. and Williams, B., *Utilitarianism: For and Against,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973, p. 116.
[72] Williams, B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 16-18.
[73] Larmore, Ch., *The Autonomy of Morality*, p. 126.

more writes, "the most basic kinds of reasons (the reason to go to school, for instance)" can only be learned "through discipline and reward", which are often a "precondition for deliberating well about what else to believe or do".[74] But if all this is so clear for him, why does he still refuse to recognize the inseparable attitudinal basis of the moral point of view, constituted by certain "enduring concerns", as D. Bakhurst once put it?[75]

In the world of aesthetics, for instance, there is no mystery in this respect. The untrained eye will frequently fail to appreciate the value of certain art pieces, for it lacks the judgmental prerequisites and sensitivity requirements that make this possible. Neophytes might react spontaneously to Guernica's Picasso by calling it "beautiful", or "astonishing", or "amazing", or "scary"; but only for someone sufficiently familiarized with Picasso's symbolism, the art of Cubism, and what it represents in contemporary art history ⊚let us say⊚ will such a painting reveal its most characteristic defining qualities. Fortunately enough, the world of morals is not that complex. If it were, then it would probably lose a great part of its inescapability. But putting aside this and other differences, both worlds seem to share pretty much the same ontological structure regarding properties, in the sense that neither moral nor aesthetic properties would be possessed by acts, objects, and even persons, without necessary involving to some extent an attitudinal stance on our part. In D. Wiggins's words, those properties and our responses to them would form 'tightly-knit pairs', since "they are made for one another and mutually intelligible".[76]

Think, for instance, in a simple moral quality such as 'generosity'. Larmore deals with it very briefly at the beginning of his book, to suggest that its presence "can be analyzed in terms of impersonal reasons, valid in abstraction from one's own interests and affections, to concern oneself with the good of others".[77] Logically, if someone's generosity were just a matter to be decided by considering our own interests and affections, generosity would be definitively lost as an objective moral fact. But the question is not whether a moral quality of this kind, in order to retain its objectivity, should be analyzed in abstraction from one's contingent interests and affections. The question, rather, is whether an analysis of moral qualities in terms of impersonal reasons can be carried out without never invoking at all some interests

[74] Larmore, Charles, *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 30.
[75] Bakhurst, D., "Moral Particularism: Ethical Not Metaphysical?", in Bakhurst, D.; Hooker, B. and Little, M. O. (Eds.), *Thinking About Reasons. Themes from the Philosophy of Jonathan Dancy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 206.
[76] Wiggins, D., *Needs, Values, Truth*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987, p. 199; see also Bakhurst, D., "Moral Particularism…", p. 200, and Jurjako, M., "Normative Reasons: Response-Dependence and the Problem of Idealization", *Philosophical Explorations*, vol. 20, núm. 3, 2017, pp. 261-275.
[77] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 4.

and affections, not to mention any other human disposition, attitude, or motivation. For even if it is true, as Larmore notices, that generous acts cannot be reduced to the plain fact that they cause certain feelings of approval in our motivational set, as some Humeans would simplistically put it, it is no less true that they wouldn't survive as the kinds of acts that they are were it not for the sentiments of gratitude that we usually develop towards their authors. So, to bring Strawson's account into focus, there are certain feelings and reactive attitudes that we cannot do without as human beings, since our commitment to them "is part of the general framework of human life, not something that can come up for review as particular cases can come up for review within this general framework".[78]

One of the most insightful distinctions that Strawson made in "Freedom and Resentment" was that between "the participant attitude and the objective attitude".[79] The participant attitude, as he says, encompasses all the reactive attitudes that we naturally adopt when dealing with people in "ordinary inter-personal relationships",[80] including gratitude, of course, but also resentment, forgiveness, anger, or "the sort of love which two adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally, for each other".[81] In contrast, the objective attitude is the one that we tend to adopt towards agents who are under some sort of mental abnormality, in which case we suspend our typical reactions, for they would be quite inappropriate. Now, compare such an objective stance with Larmore's impersonal perspective, the one we would need to adopt for assessing the existence of moral reasons. Aren't they too similar in some respect? Needless to say, Strawson's paper is not concerned (or, at least, not directly concerned) with moral *reasons*. But it is certainly concerned with *morality*, even to the point of qualifying as *moral* our ordinary reactive attitudes.[82] Indeed, it seems that it would be rather strange if, in accordance with his own conceptual scheme, a reason to be generous, for instance, had nothing to do with our own reactive attitudes towards generosity and egoism.

In consequence, why would someone like Larmore still want to defend such an attitudinally aseptic conception of the moral point of view? To put it bluntly, he may fear that if my reason to be generous with my dearest cousin rests on the love I feel towards him, then it could never be possible to have a similar reason to be generous with someone for whom I have no such a feeling. However, this would be a complete distortion of the phenomenon. Truly enough, nobody

[78] Strawson, P. F., *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays,* Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008, p. 14.
[79] Strawson, P. F., *Freedom and Resentment…,* p. 10.
[80] Strawson, P. F., *Freedom and Resentment…,* p. 13.
[81] Strawson, P. F., *Freedom and Resentment…,* p. 10.
[82] See, for instance, Strawson, P. F., *Freedom and Resentment…,* p. 21.

whom I don't know can ask me to donate an organ. Here, as in many other cases, demands of generosity are simply out of place. But if less generous acts are nonetheless expectable from me towards total strangers in different situations, as when someone is drowning in a swimming-pool and I am the only person who can help, surely this cannot be because I have no feelings at all. A primitive sentiment of compassion may be all that is needed to make me accountable in this situation, though moral accountability involves many other aspects.

Larmore might want to reply at this point that the total lack of such a sentiment is not enough to eliminate the moral reason in place to jump into the water. However, the only thing that this would prove is that moral reasons, in order to exist as such, do not depend on who we *currently* are. Yet, they would still depend on moral agency, and moral agency, be it mine, yours, hers, ours, or theirs, is intrinsically constituted by certain attitudes and feelings. Consequently, even if I am a dangerous psychopath who lacks any feelings of compassion towards human suffering, moral reasons can still apply to me as the kind of human being that I *might* become, as they certainly apply to human beings who already share these feelings. On the contrary, imagine a world only inhabited back to the down of time by natural born and irrecoverable psychopaths. Since moral agency as we know it is not there possible, moral reasons will not be possible either. In other words, they would be inexistent.

In another passage of his text, already analyzed (see section 1 above), Larmore makes a great deal of Darwall's idea that the moral point of view would be "'intersubjective' rather than 'impersonal'", in the sense that "moral reasons for action are founded in basic relations of mutual accountability in which we all stand to one another".[83] Larmore probably fears that such an understanding of moral reasons may put them on an equal footing with personal or agent-relative reasons, and particularly with relationship-dependent reasons (see section 3 above), in which certain sentiments, interests, and attachments are so fundamental. As he recognizes, there is a part of morality in which agent-relative reasons play an essential role. It is only because *you* promised me to water my plants that *you* ought to keep your word. And he is certainly right when he observes that, even if such a reason is agent-relative, it derives its authority from the "impersonal reason to value the benefits that people derive from being able to trust one another".[84] In any case, what is it that he pretends to infer from this? Is his purpose to discredit the role that subjective attitudes may still play in accounting for the impersonal point of view? If it were, it could hardly succeed. For it may well be, as in fact I think it is, that the impersonal reason

[83] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 48.
[84] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 49.

to value the benefits of trust among people will only be adequately revealed to those who have developed the capacity to feel what a betrayed person may typically feel. Connie Rosati has recently written in this respect that "if people's emotional capacities were such that they did not care about and so could not benefit from friendship, for example, then it would arguably be false that we ought to promote the good of friendship for their sake".[85] Moreover, insofar as an emotional capacity like this implies to be the receptacle of many other feelings and reactive attitudes, the moral point of view will need to cover them all, or at least a substantial part of them.

6. Testing a Mind-Dependent Approach to Moral Reasons: The Case of Respect

Unsurprisingly, what lies behind these critical considerations is a response-dependent theory of moral reasons; or, as Connie Rosati would prefer to put it, a mind-dependent kind of moral realism, committed to the thesis that moral facts, or facts about moral reasons (see *supra*), in order to be objective, need not be thought as being "existentially independent of the attitudes of actual or hypothetical human moral agents".[86] In fact, if such a strong kind of constraint were indeed of Larmore's taste, it would not survive even a weak scrutiny, unless we were willing to deny that mental entities like intentions, for instance, have no business at all in explaining the moral wrongness of certain actions, which is plainly absurd.[87]

Larmore is perfectly aware of this fatal consequence, as he explains at length in Ch. 3 of his book in regards to the importance of respecting an author's intentions in an adequate ethics of reading. So, what he could say in his defense is that even if intentions and other subjective attitudes usually are of the utmost importance to determine the moral character of a deed, that happens precisely because there is a moral reason that explains it, but a moral reason which is, again, "existentially independent of the attitudes of actual or hypothetical human moral agents". In the specific domain of the ethics of reading, Larmore seems to think that the moral reason not to distort the meaning of a text ultimately rests on the objective existence of a general

[85] Rosati, C. S., "Mind-Dependence and Moral Realism", in McPherson, T. and Plunkett, D. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Mataethics*, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 358.
[86] Cuneo, T., *The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 45; quoted in Rosati, C. S., "Mind-Dependence…", p. 358.
[87] Rosati, C. S., "Mind-Dependence…", p. 358.

duty of respect for people.[88] Nonetheless, what is 'respect'? Is it not evidently an "attitude, a way of treating something, a kind of valuing",[89] as is usually recognized in the literature? This seems undeniable. But if this is so, then the meaning of a moral duty to respect people, unless it is filled with concrete information about typical disrespectful treatments among human beings, or about certain thresholds of tolerance regarding common ways of affecting people's dignity, will be no more than an empty shell.

Surely much more would it be necessary to say in all regards to understand the complex dynamics governing the concept of respect in the different contexts in which it is used. For the moment, however, it will suffice to notice that a mind-dependent approach to moral reasons seems more naturally fit to succeed. Of course, mind-dependent theories in this area are manifold and it is far beyond the scope of this paper to contribute to their analysis. But think, for instance, in Michael Smith's dispositional theory of value, a clear exponent of Kantianism.[90] Since moral reasons for acting one way or another appear in this theory as the byproduct of what we all would converge in desiring were we to rationally deliberate from a set of desires that is maximally informed, coherent, and unified,[91] the moral reason to respect a person can never be envisaged without taking into consideration the set of desires that such a person possesses, on condition that it is maximally informed, coherent, and unified. Of course, apart from desires, many other elements shall be brought to light, like her sentiments, emotions, likings, attachments, and dispositions, to mention just a few. But once this is done, wouldn't it be much simpler to understand what is at stake when trying to respect a human being? As a general obligation, it is beyond doubt that respect cannot be confused with what each occasion particularly requires to comply with it. So, in that sense, there is no choice but to recognize its independent status. However, what Larmore does not seem to note is that such a status is just a logical matter, not an ontological one.

To see the difference from an angle that, as I hope, is still in line with Larmore's reflective position, think of the way in which we, as foreigners, may dare to approach a distant culture to show respect for the life of its members. If Larmore is on the right track, we should begin by taking some distance from our own subjective attitudes, including what we might regard as offensive of our own sense of dignity or self-respect. But important

[88] See, for instance, Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, pp. 87-91.
[89] Dillon, R. S., "Respect and Care: Toward Moral Integration", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 22, núm. 1, 1992, p. 108.
[90] See Lord, E. and Plunkett, D., "Reasons Internalism", in McPherson, T. and Plunkett, D. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Mataethics*, New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 336-337.
[91] See Smith, M., *The Moral Problem*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1994.

as it may be as a first step towards that goal, this can hardly be enough. For a mere detachment from who we are or what we feel in certain matters can only impede that our own bias and prejudices get in the middle. And, as we know, this is only part of the story of what implies to respect people. At one point, and especially as days pass by and our need to interact with these people becomes more stringent, more positive ways of approaching them will need to be envisaged. If we discover, for instance, that they are not so different from us, strict detachment may be discarded as an option. On the contrary, if we experience some difficulties in understanding them, or they react with anger or contempt to some of our acts and gestures, the circumstances may not only require that we detach from certain aspects of who we are, but also that we figure out new forms of attachment. The nature of such a challenge is not so different from the educational-upbringing process that takes place through the different stages of our lives, from childhood to adulthood, though it may be far less revisionist. It need not require, for instance, that we abandon our previous cultural attachments. But if they could be momentarily suspended until we start dealing again with members of our own culture, why not to take this path?

As I said, even if what lies behind all these requirements is a general moral obligation to respect people, whoever they are, this is something that only starts making sense once we have come a long way. Up to that moment, however, we must first have learned to realize which of the things that we said and did in the past might have caused other people to react in certain ways, not to mention which of the things that other people said and did might have led us to feel happy, or thankful, or angry, or sad, or vulnerable, or resented. It is only after this long (and usually unending) process of personal awareness and experiential growth that we progressively reach a more trustable stance to appreciate what 'respect' actually means, how it can be honored, and why it is morally significant. So, at the end of this process, it may well be that this value ⊚not to mention many others⊚ appears before our eyes as the content of an abstract and general obligation, certainly irreducible to its many diverse instantiations. But this is just a logical result, generally crystallized in a linguistic device purported to make things easier for moral agents who must interact between each other in a complex world disturbed by incomprehension and cultural disagreement. Still, ontologically speaking, respect is nothing *before* and *beyond* the attitudinal background that governs all human agency. Without such a general framework, so well described by Strawson and many other philosophers who followed him after "Freedom and Resentment", not only respect would be meaningless and insubstantial. The same verdict would also apply to the whole universe of norms, obligations, moral facts, and moral reasons that populate our otherwise natural, non-normative world.

7. Final Remarks

Several times along his book, Larmore defines normative reasons as the relational properties that certain facts bear to our *possibilities of thought and action*.[92] However, what is supposed to count for a person as a real possibility to take up? Larmore writes, for instance, that "the possibilities we see before us and among which we must decide have to be possibilities that in our view are left open by the given circumstances […] for no one deliberates about what they regard as already determined".[93] This is of course pure common sense, but, as we also know commonsensically, not all the options that are open to us for the sole reason of being factually available are also personally feasible or ethically conceivable. J. P. Sartre's famous pupil may have had compelling moral reasons to go to England and join the Free French Forces, and this option probably was a perfectly realizable possibility. But if the love for his mother was too strong to turn it away, or if his mother's despair was enough to put upon his shoulders a weight too heavy to bear alone, then it may be that such a possibility was not as conceivable as it might have been for a different kind of person. Needless to say, Sartre's skepticism towards the role that moral principles could play to help us make our minds in scenarios of such a kind is also directed towards our own sentiments and emotions, which he judges too fuzzy to serve as reliable guides of conduct.[94] However, is this always the case? It does not seem so.

Under the category of the "unthinkable", Harry Frankfurt has grouped all those actions we cannot bring ourselves to perform, not just because of the overwhelming aversion we may develop towards them, but because of our conscious endorsement of this aversion.[95] When we fear to be "severely maimed" by some actions, for example, or see our pride under the risk of being intolerably injured, Frankfurt notices,[96] we typically tend to see ourselves as unable to act in certain regards, even if –and this point is crucial in the present context– there is no factual impediment for so acting. The moral domain, as Frankfurt concedes, includes many actions conceived as unthinkable, like "the procedures for launching nuclear weapons" many officers finally refused to carry out in spite of having volunteered for those assignments. But, as he says, "the unthinkable is not essentially a moral cat-

[92] See for instance Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, pp. 7, 8, 29, 36, 99, 132, 174.
[93] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 188; see also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 5, 1140a 23-1140b 30.
[94] See Sartre, J. P., *Existentialism and Humanism,* trans. P. Mairet, London, UK: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1948, pp. 36-37.
[95] Frankfurt, H., *The Importance of What We Care About*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 182; see also Williams, B., "A Critique of Utilitarianism", pp. 92-93.
[96] Frankfurt, H., *The Importance of What We Care About*, 1998, p. 182.

egory".[97] In Habermas's terms,[98] it may also function as an ethical category, in the sense of encompassing the whole universe of actions that are "entirely self-regarding and without moral significance at all".[99] Of course, some of these actions may lack moral significance, but this can hardly mean that they are normatively inert.

Moreover, think of those normative reasons that justify some of our most ordinary actions, like taking an umbrella when it is raining, which is Larmore's favorite example all along his book. As he says, the fact that it is raining would not be a normative reason unless there was a possibility of thought or action to bear to, like the possibility to take an umbrella for not getting wet, if this is our desire. Indeed, a normative reason like this is no less normative for being ethically trivial or morally insignificant. If we decide to put it in Löschke's words (see section 3 above), we may confer upon it a lesser normative force than the one we may be willing to confer upon a non-trivial reason, though its normativity would still be out of question. However, consider again Sartre's student. What help would it be to tell him that, in the light of the possibilities of action that are open to him, he has at least two normative reasons: a normative reason to join the Free French Forces as well as a normative reason to take care of his mother? If these are reasons he has a right to discount, as Dancy would put it,[100] no help will be offered to him unless we manage to evaluate the relative normative force that each of them may have. Nonetheless, how can we even dare to afford this task without considering the whole universe of feelings, affections, and emotions that define his character, not to mention many other aspects of his life, like his personal attachments, dreams, and commitments? Only someone who ignores what his mother represents to him may advise him to join the army, with all the negative consequences this may cause to his life.

In consequence, even if it is true that normative reasons are, as Larmore thinks, the relational properties that certain facts bear to our real possibilities of thought and action, the role that such possibilities play when deciding what to think or what to do is only marginal. If you had 10,000 dollars in your pocket and a desire to go on holiday, hundreds of alternatives would surely be factually possible for you. Yet only a few of them would be strictly relevant to evaluate, depending on your desires, of course, but also on your interests, mood, company, previous touristic experiences, and so on and so forth. Therefore, it is the meaning that our real possibilities of thought and

[97] Frankfurt, H., *The Importance of What We Care About*, 1998, p. 182.
[98] Habermas, J., *Aclaraciones a la ética del discurso*, Buenos Aires: El Cid Editor, 2000, p. 485.
[99] Frankfurt, H., *The Importance of What We Care About*, 1998, p. 182.
[100] Dancy, 2004a, pp. 113-114.

action have for ourselves rather than these possibilities *per se* what is usually determinant to make up our minds.

The category of the unthinkable just helps to shed some light on these matters.[101] From an ethical, agent-relative perspective, this seems easy to understand. But even from a moral, agent-neutral perspective, things cannot be all that different. As already suggested in the previous section, and as Larmore himself has recognized in previous works,[102] what else could be more basic from the moral point of view than showing respect for people? Even so, in order to honor this general duty in the different circumstances we might face, it seems that we have no other option but to acknowledge the sentiments, feelings, and dispositions of the persons we may happen to deal with. For me, a simple joke about my hair could be a motive for laughing. For another person, however, a similar joke could rather be an unforgivable humiliating gesture, perhaps closely related to her own conception of the unthinkable. And even if it is far from being humanly possible, or remotely desirable, to try to live up to everybody's expectations, certain general principles may be useful to bring some peace. Obtaining a person's consent usually represents a convenient mechanism to avoid hurting her feelings, but there may be others.

Be it as it may, one thing is for sure: since the normative force of both our ethical and moral reasons is so intimately connected to our own attitudinal background of feelings and emotions, as Strawson has noticed, Larmore's contention that the reality of normative reasons implies that they exist independently of any such background turns out to be highly implausible. Nevertheless, imagine that he tries somehow to untie the reality of reasons from their normative force. He might say, for instance, that whereas the normative reasons that an agent may have is a matter to be determined by judging the factual possibilities that are objectively open to her, the variable normative force of those reasons, in contrast, is something to be assessed by examining the universe conformed by her own subjective attitudes. Such a move, however, would not exempt him to revise his position regarding the reality of normative reasons, since now there is a key aspect of them, namely their normative force, that seems unable to exist independently of certain subjective attitudes.

But what if he decided to embrace objectivism all the way down? That is, what if he adopts, in accordance with his own Platonism, an objectivist stance on the normative force of normative reasons, be they agent-neutral or agent-relative? In fact, this move seems to be present in Larmore's work, especially when he discusses Dworkin's criticism of moral realism (see section 2 above). There

[101] For a similar contention, see Williams, B., *Making Sense of Humanity*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995, Ch. 4.
[102] Larmore, Ch., *The Autonomy of Morality*, 2008, pp. 148-153.

he says, for instance, that the truth of a value judgment that supports a normative reason "cannot depend on and vary with the standpoint of its addressee", explaining that "what makes a judgment *true* (as opposed to justified) has to do with what it purports to be *about*",[103] which is the value itself. Does anything of this mean, however, that values would still exist in a universe devoid of human creatures? When Larmore defines himself as "platonistic", he is careful enough to reject what he calls "an extravagant kind of Platonism", which supposes that reasons and values "dwell in some platonic heaven, unsullied by the vicissitudes of the world here below".[104] Even more, when he discusses Darwall's intersubjective approach to normativity (see section 5 above), he recognizes that "not everything that is valuable in our lives originates from" our "ability to stand outside ourselves",[105] which is, as shown in section 4 (see above), a precondition of the reflective point of view. "The love we feel for particular individuals does not derive from an impartial consideration of their merits", writes Larmore accordingly.[106] Nonetheless, insofar as such a feeling has a role to play in determining the special normative force of a normative reason, it is difficult to see what a purely objectivist approach to this phenomenon would even look like.

With that end in view, we may refuse to take at face value "the bonds of family, the transports of passion, the blossoming of chance encounters", a goal that could be accomplished, for instance, if we are wise enough to appropriately locate these affairs "in the larger scheme of things".[107] Larmore seems confident that such a move may allow us to appreciate "how small and fleeting" some human affairs frequently are. Evidently, for someone who after some thought gets to take distance from her current worries, feelings, and attachments, things that once seemed urgent, important, or indispensable may end up looking deferrable, foolish, or superfluous. But how far are we supposed to go in this reflective process of personal awareness and conscience's enlargement? For a "god's eye standpoint" –as Nussbaum describes Plato's position in the *Republic* and the *Symposium*, among many other dialogues– seems too distant to be minimally attractive for the average person.[108] Thus, in order to offer an answer that avoids incurring the extravagant kind of Platonism he reasonably rejects, Larmore will need to come up with a more detailed explanation of *how far is too far* in these domains. Until then, however, his book will nonetheless remain a worthwhile philosophical piece for all those interested in the intricacies that connect moral theory to metaphysics.

[103] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 97.
[104] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 37.
[105] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, pp. 50-51.
[106] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 51.
[107] Larmore, Ch., *Morality and Metaphysics*, p. 51.
[108] See Nussbaum, M. C., *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 157.

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