

The Non-arbitrariness of Reasons: Reply to Lenman

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James Lenman is critical of my claim that moral requirements are requirements of reason. I argue that his criticisms miss their target. More importantly, I argue that the anti-rationalism that informs Lenman's criticisms is itself implausible.

James Lenman rejects my arguments for the conceptual claim that moral requirements are requirements of reason. He also rejects my suggestion that if there are no requirements of reason corresponding to moral requirements, then we are committed to an error theory about morality. He argues, on the contrary, that if there are no requirements of reason corresponding to moral requirements then that fact itself constitutes a *reductio* of the conceptual claim.¹

My argument for this conceptual claim is, in effect, that it best explains the non-arbitrariness of moral reasons. James Lenman suggests that this argument is misguided and mistaken in various ways. Before commenting on his specific criticisms, I explain just how commonsensical the argument really is. The ideas that support it are not difficult to grasp, nor are they theoretically motivated in any way. They are simple, ordinary, everyday ideas, ideas that are implicit in distinctions we commonsensically make.

After explaining the argument I return to consider Lenman's criticisms. I also consider the version of anti-rationalism he accepts, the version which informs his criticisms. To anticipate, I remain unpersuaded. More importantly, though, I think that the version of anti-rationalism Lenman himself accepts is implausible. As we will see, its flaws are the flaws of anti-rationalist views quite generally.

I. AN EVERYDAY STORY AND A COMMONSENSE DISTINCTION

Imagine a neighbour calls by your house and asks you to help him stop a development that has been proposed for the area in which you both live. You ask him why and he tells you that it will increase traffic, decrease property values, and impinge adversely on the local amenity. When you hear each of these objections you find yourself completely

unconvinced. You tell him why you disagree, and, when you do, he has nothing convincing to say by way of reply.

He remains rather agitated, so you begin to suspect that he has not told you what his real objection is. You therefore ask him to be straight with you. He agrees that he has not been completely open, and goes on to tell you that the development will undermine the bonds of community that already exist between those who live in the local area. Once again you find yourself unconvinced, and tell him why, and again he has nothing convincing to say by way of reply. You are sure that the remark was just another dodge, and so you implore him to tell you what is really worrying him.

'Okay, okay, okay,' he finally says. 'I'll come clean. Maybe you don't mind the sort of development that they're proposing but the fact is that I just can't stand it. Every time I hear about developments like that it gives me the creeps. Call me strange, call me weird, but the fact is that I just hate them. I cannot bear to think that there will be a development like that in our neighbourhood, and that I will have to be confronted by it every day. The prospect fills me with dread.'

How would you respond if you had a conversation like this with your neighbour? An initial response, I suspect, would be to feel sorry for him. It is unpleasant for people to have to cope with their feelings of hatred. It makes them feel miserable, and their misery tends to spread to others. Having acknowledged this, however, you certainly should not feel compelled to do anything about it. If your neighbour can't stand developments of a kind that there is no reason for him or anyone else to oppose, and will be made to feel miserable when a development of that kind takes place, then he should try to change the feelings that will cause his misery. Our attitudes and feelings are, after all, to some extent under our control. Your neighbour should therefore take responsibility for his misery by removing its cause, a cause that lies within himself.

If this initial response seems right, then I suspect that you would have another more considered response as well. You would think that when he claimed to be giving you reasons for opposing the proposed development, he was not really being truthful, not to you, and not to himself either. After all, as emerged in your subsequent discussion, he does not really have any reason to oppose the development, and he is not really wedded to giving reasons for his opposition either. Rather what he has is an unreasoned hatred of developments of the proposed kind taking place. In a completely mundane sense, his feelings are therefore arbitrary, not tied in any way to anything for which a rationale can be provided. In talking to you, and perhaps in thinking the matter through for himself, he expresses these feelings of hatred, but he expresses them in a form that masks their real nature. He

¹ James Lenman, 'Michael Smith and the Daleks: Reason, Morality, and Contingency', *Utilitas*, xi (1999). All otherwise unattributed page references are to this article.

dresses them up in the language of reasons when, in fact, they are completely without a reasoned basis.

I assume in what follows that this imagined story, and the two responses I have just sketched to it, are familiar enough. We have all had a conversation with someone, a conversation supposedly about the value of a proposed course of action, when midway through it dawns upon us that they are not driven by reasons at all, but are driven instead by their arbitrary likes, dislikes, desires or aversions. Moreover I also assume that it at least sometimes happens that it dawns not just upon us, but upon the person with whom we are conversing as well. People are able to see themselves as driven sometimes by reasons, and sometimes by arbitrary feelings, feelings for which no rationale can be provided.

II. STANDARD RATIONALIST AND ANTI-RATIONALIST ACCOUNTS OF THE COMMONSENSE DISTINCTION

Rationalists have no problem at all making sense of this distinction. They say that no like, dislike, desire or aversion has any independent reason-giving force. Thus, as they see things, the mere fact that someone has a desire to act in a certain way leaves it completely open whether there is any reason at all for them to act in that way. The rationale needs to be provided.

It is, of course, notoriously difficult to say what makes something a rationale, in the sense the rationalist intends. Here we simply plunge into the depths of metaethics. Are claims to the effect that a consideration provides a rationale truth-apt, or are they non-truth-apt? (In other words, should we be cognitivists or non-cognitivists?) If such claims are truth-apt, is it a consideration's possession of a *sui generis* non-natural property that makes it a rationale, or is it the possession of a naturalistic property? (In other words, should we be naturalists or non-naturalists?) But, however we answer these more specific meta-ethical questions that are internal to rationalism, the general rationalist idea should be familiar enough.²

Anti-rationalists have a much more difficult task ahead of them. Indeed, on certain ways of understanding anti-rationalism, the dis-

² Alan Gibbard argues for a non-cognitivist analysis of reason claims in his *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Oxford, 1990. Christine Korsgaard seems committed to such an analysis as well in her *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge, 1996. In *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, Oxford, 1974 (1758), Richard Price, himself a cognitivist, takes the view that a consideration is reason-giving in virtue of its possession of a *sui generis* non-natural property. In *The Moral Problem*, Oxford, 1994, I argue for a cognitivist analysis of reason claims according to which, by contrast, a consideration is reason-giving in virtue of its possession of a naturalistic property, ultimately a counterfactual psychological property.

tinction collapses entirely. If to say of someone that they have a reason to act in a certain way is to say that they have some desire which would be satisfied by their acting in that way, then desires evidently do have independent reason-giving force. Indeed, they map one-to-one onto the source of all reasons. One avenue open to anti-rationalists, at this point, is to insist upon an ambiguity in our talk of reasons. They might say that, in the sense of 'reason' that is tied to rationality, a reason claim is simply a claim to the effect that a certain course of action will satisfy some desire of the relevant agent. In this sense it follows from the fact that your neighbour hates the proposed development that he does have a reason for opposing it. In another sense, however, your neighbour may have failed to give any reason at all for his opposition. In this second and different sense of 'reason', the sense that is tied to morality, a reason claim is an expression of desires of a certain specified sort – perhaps a second-order desire, a desire about which desires an agent has – of the person who is making the reason claim.

The postulation of ambiguity is supposed to solve the anti-rationalist's problem because there is no tension at all in supposing that though likes, dislikes, desires and aversions all provide reasons_{rationality} for those who have them, there may be no corresponding reasons_{morality}. Even though the agent himself has a desire that would be satisfied by his acting in a certain way, we, and even he, may not have any desire of the specified sort – no second-order desire – that he act in that way. We, and even he, may therefore be disinclined to claim that he has reasons_{morality} to do what we can all agree he has reasons_{rationality} to do.

For their part, rationalists think that the strategy of postulating ambiguity is deeply flawed. How can finding some alleged ambiguity in the term 'reason' help when reasons, under both disambiguations, turn out to be just as arbitrary as they seemed to be, on an anti-rationalist view of things, prior to the postulation of ambiguity? Reasons_{rationality} are evidently still arbitrary if there are reasons_{rationality} to satisfy desires to do things when no rationale can be provided for satisfying such desires, as opposed to getting rid of them. But reasons_{morality} are evidently arbitrary too if reason_{morality} claims are expressions of, say, desires to desire to do things when, again, no rationale can be provided for anyone's acting in accordance with such second-order desires, as opposed to getting rid of them. The postulation of ambiguity solves nothing.

III. MY OWN PREFERRED VIEW

As I said, rationalists disagree among themselves about the details of what reasons are. They therefore disagree among themselves on the

precise nature of the distinction between being driven by reasons and being driven by mere arbitrary feelings. Though Lenman makes various references to the sort of rationalist account I prefer, he does not fully describe it. Let me therefore put my own view on the table. If nothing else, it will serve as a useful point of comparison.³

As I see things, to say that an agent has a reason to act in a certain way in certain circumstances is to say that we would all converge upon a desire that she acts in that way in those circumstances if we had a set of desires that is maximally informed, coherent, and unified. Lenman points out that this is an 'odd' and 'ungainly' way of talking (168 f.). I agree, but I am not quite sure why he thinks that is remarkable. When we go in for analysis the *analysans* will almost always sound odd and ungainly, as compared with the *analysandum*. The important question is whether it is true that reason talk is shorthand for such counterfactual psychological talk. My reasons for thinking it is true can be summarized as follows.

When we say that an agent has a reason to act in a certain way in certain circumstances let us agree that this is equivalent to saying (even if it is ungainly to say) that a perfectly rational advisor would want them to act in that way in those circumstances. This should be agreed because it commits us to no particular account of what the perfectly rational advisor is like, and hence no particular interpretation of talk about what the perfectly rational advisor would want. If this is agreed, then it follows immediately that non-arbitrary desires are desires to do things that correspond to, and hence in this way are validated by, the perfectly rational advisor's desires. But if the perfectly rational advisor's desires confer non-arbitrary status on other desires, then that presupposes that the perfectly rational advisor's desires are themselves non-arbitrary. We must therefore ask what makes them have this status. The distinctively rationalist answer to this question is that the perfectly rational advisor's desires are non-arbitrary because all that is needed to explain why she has these desires, as opposed to others, are the capacities she possesses as a perfectly rational creature. Since this point is important, let me labour it a little.

Suppose we want to explain why the perfectly rational advisor's desires that p, q and r are non-arbitrary. The distinctively rationalist suggestion is that they are non-arbitrary because in explaining why the perfectly rational advisor has them we need only mention things

such as that the set that comprises the desires that p, q and r is more informed, coherent, and unified than any alternative set of desires. These are the only sorts of things we need to mention because it is by making our desires more informed, coherent, and unified that we display our rational capacities. The upshot is that in explaining why the perfectly rational advisor desires that p, q and r we cannot mention any of the following combinations of fact: she happens to be human, and then tried to come up with a set of desires that is maximally informed, coherent, and unified; or she happens to have been born in the twentieth century, and then tried to come up with a set of desires that is maximally informed, coherent, and unified; or she happens to have desired that s, t, and u, and then tried to come up with a set of desires that is maximally informed, coherent, and unified. None of these explanations is acceptable because they mention an additional idiosyncratic fact about the perfectly rational advisor – being human; being born in the twentieth century; desiring s, t and u – a fact quite apart from the fact that she exercises her rational capacities.

Thus, to take just one example, if the desires that p, q and r just happen to be the set that you will end up with if you happen to desire that s, t and u and then make your desires maximally informed, coherent, and unified, then there seems nothing non-arbitrary about them. After all, if you had happened to desire that v, w and x, and then made your desires maximally informed, coherent, and unified, you might have ended up with a different set of desires. The desires that p, q and r would then seem just as idiosyncratic, and hence just as arbitrary, as the desires that s, t and u, and the desires that v, w and x.

What this in turn shows is that the convergence claim I made in giving my own preferred rationalist analysis of reasons – the claim that an agent has a reason to act in a certain way in certain circumstances only if we would all converge upon a desire that they act in that way in those circumstances if we had a set of desires that is maximally informed, coherent, and unified – is itself mandated by the distinctively rationalist account of what it is about a set of desires that makes them non-arbitrary, together with a distinctively naturalistic account of what reasoning amounts to. If nothing apart from the capacities people possess as rational creatures is needed to explain their possession of non-arbitrary desires, then, if there are any non-arbitrary desires, it must be the case that we would all converge upon them via a process of reasoning. And if the only processes of reasoning that a naturalist will countenance are processes such as making our desires more informed, making them more coherent, and making them more unified, then, if there are non-arbitrary desires, it must be the case that we would all converge upon them if we had a set of

³ Michael Smith, 'Internal Reasons', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, lv (1995); *The Moral Problem*, pp. 151–77.

desires that is maximally informed, coherent, and unified.⁴

This enables us to crystallize the debate between rationalists and anti-rationalists. Because they make the distinctive claim that the non-arbitrariness of reasons resides in the fact that the capacities agents possess as rational creatures are sufficient to explain why they want to do what they have reason to do, rationalists must say that, if there are any reasons at all, then there is a convergence of desires under conditions of perfect rationality. Anti-rationalists, for their part, must deny this conditional. But here-in lies their problem. For if a divergence of desires under conditions of perfect rationality is supposed to be consistent with the existence of reasons, then anti-rationalists must tell us what the non-arbitrariness of reasons consists in. And that now looks like it will be no easy task. How can reasons be grounded in something so idiosyncratic without thereby becoming arbitrary?

Given my own preferred account of what reasons are we can distinguish between those who are driven by reasons and those who are driven by mere arbitrary feelings in the following way. People who are driven by reasons have true beliefs about the reasons they have (that is, true beliefs about the set of desires that we would all converge upon if ...); they have desires that correspond to their beliefs about the reasons they have; and these desires – that correspond to their beliefs about the reasons they have – issue in action. People who fail to meet one or another of these three conditions are driven by mere arbitrary feelings.⁵

Note that my own preferred rationalist account of what it is for people to be driven by reasons, as opposed to being driven by mere arbitrary feelings, does not require us to postulate any ambiguity in the term 'reason'. In this respect it is quite different to the anti-rationalist's explanation described earlier. Indeed, on this account there is no such thing as a distinction between reasons_{rationality} and reasons_{morality}. Reasons are one and all courses of action that are validated by desires we have when we adopt the perfectly rational point of view. There may, of course, be a distinction between moral and non-moral reasons within the class of reasons.⁶ But, if there is,

⁴ Non-naturalistic versions of rationalism might hold that the perception of a consideration's possession of the non-natural property of being a rationale is a process of reasoning. Naturalistic versions of rationalism would deny that there is any such thing.

⁵ Speaking somewhat less strictly, we might say that people who are driven by reasons are those who meet the second and third conditions just mentioned, whereas those who are driven by mere arbitrary feelings do not meet these conditions. Speaking more strictly again, this really distinguishes those who are driven by reasons-as-they-appear, from those who are not so driven. The less strict formulation is none the less useful because, it seems to me, we are not always careful in ordinary parlance to use the term 'reason' to talk of reasons, as distinct from reasons-as-they-appear.

⁶ *The Moral Problem*, pp. 182–4.

that distinction plays no role at all in the explanation of the non-arbitrariness of reasons. Moral and non-moral reasons are both equally non-arbitrary.

IV. LENMAN'S CRITICISMS

James Lenman is an anti-rationalist. He must therefore make sense of the distinction between being driven by reasons, and being driven by mere arbitrary feelings, and he must do so in anti-rationalist terms. Though he does not explicitly say that this is how he would make that distinction – indeed, he never says explicitly how he does make the distinction – it seems to me that his paper makes most sense if we interpret him as seeking to make the distinction in the standard anti-rationalist way, that is, by postulating an ambiguity in the term 'reason'. The question will be whether he can avoid the problems associated with that approach.

As regards reasons_{rationality}, Lenman asks us to consider Daleks.

What Daleks care most about is conquering new territory and exterminating as many non-Daleks as they possibly can. In pursuit of these ends they show fantastic ingenuity and resourcefulness. Far from being irrational, they are as rational as can be – that is what makes them so dangerous. (171 f.)

From the fact that they are as rational as can be I take it that Lenman wants us to conclude that Daleks have all sorts of reasons_{rationality} for doing the terrible things that they do. But while he is surely right that if Daleks are as rational as can be, and if they set out to conquer new territory and exterminate as many non-Daleks as possible, then there must be reason for them to do so, the question we must ask is whether Daleks are, as he insists, as rational as can be.

Lenman's reason for saying that Daleks are as rational as can be is that they 'are fantastic chess players, brilliant logicians, and pursue their gruesome ends with unrelenting ingenuity and forethought' (174). That certainly makes them sound like they are very good at gathering information and working out the means to their various ends, but it follows that they are as rational as can be only if this is all there is to being rational. Since this would preclude any rational assessment of their desires for ends themselves, and since the everyday story told at the outset strongly suggests that we do rationally assess desires for ends – we ordinarily suppose that our possession of some desires gives us reason not to act so as to satisfy them, but to get rid of them instead – it seems to me that gathering information and working out means to ends cannot be all there is to being rational.

Moreover, as my own rationalist analysis of reasons makes plain, it is easy to say what more there might be to being rational beyond

gathering information and working out means to ends. According to that analysis, Daleks are as rational as can be only if their desires are, in addition, those we would all converge upon if we had desires that are maximally coherent and unified. Despite the fact that the Daleks' desire to conquer new territory and exterminate as many non-Daleks as possible is not uninformed, and displays no means-end irrationality, it may therefore still be irrational, simply because it is not part of the maximally coherent and unified desire set that we would all converge upon. Their desire may in this way be idiosyncratic, and hence arbitrary. As such it will be one which disposes them to act in a way for which no rationale can be provided.

Lenman clearly rejects this analysis of reasons. He tells us that he finds it 'strange and unconvincing' to suppose that the only desires that we have reasons for acting on are those which are validated by the desires that we would have if we were perfectly rational (168). He offers Romeo as a counterexample. Romeo is not rationally required to feel the way he feels about Juliet – if we had a set of desires that is maximally informed, coherent, and unified we would surely be indifferent to our having a desire to pursue Juliet, as opposed to a desire to pursue some other woman, if we were in Romeo's circumstances – but Romeo himself quite correctly finds reason enough to pursue Juliet none the less. Lenman wants us to draw the conclusion that desires for which no rationale can be provided – desires, like Romeo's actual desire to pursue Juliet, which elude validation from the perfectly rational point of view – may give rise to reasons none the less.

The Romeo counterexample is unconvincing. We need to distinguish between two quite different questions we can ask ourselves when we imagine having a maximally informed, coherent and unified desire set. The first is whether, from that perspective, we would want ourselves to pursue Juliet when we consider the possible world in which we are in circumstances like Romeo's, but before he has formed any desire to pursue her. The second is whether, from that perspective, we would want ourselves to pursue Juliet when we consider the possible world in which we are in circumstances like Romeo's, but after he has formed a desire to pursue her. Even if the answer to the first question is 'No' – this is why Lenman can plausibly claim that Romeo is not rationally required to pursue Juliet – the answer to the second is surely 'Yes'.

This is important, because without an affirmative answer to the second question it is difficult to believe that Romeo does have a reason to pursue Juliet, even given his desire to pursue her. Suppose that when we imagine ourselves having a maximally informed, coherent, and unified desire set we thereby imagine ourselves with a complete aversion to our pursuing Juliet in the possible world in which we are in circumstances like Romeo's, but after he has already formed the

desire to pursue her. The fact that we have such a desperate desire to pursue Juliet in that possible world then seems to give us, if anything, a reason to take steps to get rid of that desire, not to satisfy it. After all, to the extent that we have that desire, we are liable to do something that our fully rational selves would not want us to do.

Similarly, to return to the example of the Daleks, we can agree that the Daleks' desire to conquer new territory and exterminate as many non-Daleks as possible gives them a corresponding reason if, when we imagine ourselves having a maximally informed, coherent, and unified desire set, we thereby imagine ourselves desiring ourselves to conquer new territory and exterminate as many non-Daleks as possible in the possible world in which we are in circumstances like the Daleks, including having their corresponding desire. But Lenman provides us with no reason at all to suppose that this is what we would want if we were in this privileged position, and, on the face of it, it seems that, if we were in that position, we would be totally averse to our acting on the desire to conquer and exterminate. If anything, then, possession of a desire to conquer and exterminate looks like it would give us a reason to take steps to get rid of the desire to conquer and exterminate, not to satisfy it.

My complaint so far has been, in effect, that Lenman's reasons_{rationality} look to be quite arbitrary. As with anti-rationalists quite generally, however, Lenman would not be too bothered by that complaint, for he thinks that we can account for the non-arbitrariness of reasons in a way that I have not yet discussed. Whereas I have been talking as if there are just reasons, and hence that we may have desires to act in certain ways without having any rational justification at all for acting in those ways, Lenman would prefer us to suppose that we may have desires to act in certain ways, and hence quite rationally act in those ways, without being 'morally required' to act in that way (168).

Equivalently, as I put it earlier on, we can describe Lenman as supposing that we may have reasons_{rationality} to act in certain ways even though we have no reasons_{morality} to act in those ways. The division between those desires which are non-arbitrary and those which are arbitrary is thus, on this way of thinking, made by finding those desires, and hence reasons_{rationality}, which correspond to reasons_{morality}, and those that do not. Arbitrariness is arbitrariness-from-the-point-of-view-of-reasons_{morality}. The complaint against the Daleks is thus that though they have reasons_{rationality} to conquer and exterminate, there is no reason_{morality} for them to do so. Indeed, there is reason_{morality} for them not to do so. They quite rationally do what they are morally required not to do.

In making this sort of distinction Lenman seems to me to adopt the standard anti-rationalist strategy of postulating ambiguity in our talk

of reasons. The problem with this sort of strategy, however, is the one identified earlier. It succeeds only if reasons_{morality} themselves look sufficiently non-arbitrary. The idea that something might be non-arbitrary because endorsed from a point of view that is itself completely arbitrary is, after all, of dubious coherence. The question we must ask is thus whether Lenman provides an account of reasons_{morality} according to which they look sufficiently non-arbitrary.

As he makes abundantly clear a number of times, Lenman is an expressivist about reason_{morality} claims. In other words, he thinks that claims about the reasons_{morality} that people have are expressions of the desires of the person who makes such claims. This very fact should make us doubt that Lenman will have the resources to make reasons_{morality} look sufficiently non-arbitrary to serve their stated purpose. If reason_{morality} claims express desires of a certain sort, then the non-arbitrariness of reason_{morality} claims will depend entirely on the non-arbitrariness of desires of that sort. But the class of reasons_{morality}, as distinct from the class of reasons_{rationality}, has been postulated precisely because of an inability to make a distinction between those desires which are arbitrary and those which are not. The whole strategy thus looks to be in danger of complete collapse. These doubts are confirmed when we take a closer look at what Lenman says about the desires people express when they make reason_{morality} claims, for they do indeed look to be entirely arbitrary.

Lenman's first suggestion is that reason_{morality} claims express desires with 'strong modal generality' (165). The problem with this, however, becomes evident if we consider once again the story told at the outset. Let us suppose that your neighbour's hatred of developments of the proposed kind does possess strong modal generality. In addition to saying 'I cannot bear to think that there will be a development like that in our neighbourhood and that I will have to be confronted by it every day,' let us imagine his adding, 'and I cannot bear to think that I ever might have been the sort of person who is indifferent to, or likes, such developments either.' Should that extra modal claim, if he were to make it sincerely, convince us that he has a rationale for his hatred after all? Should it convince him? I do not think so. It would certainly make your neighbour's hatred more complete – he would hate more things associated with developments of the proposed kind than he did in the original story – but his hatred would still be just as arbitrary. Moreover it seems that he could himself come to agree with this assessment of his situation. He could thus continue to give voice to his strongly modally general hatred of the proposed development while agreeing that he had no reason at all to oppose the development. He could thus still acknowledge that he had every reason to get rid of his hatred. Lenman's first proposal is thus unpromising.

Lenman's second proposal is that reason_{morality} claims are expressions of desires that are 'deeply and strongly felt' (167). This proposal is, however, quite evidently inadequate. The strength of someone's desires and the justifiability of the actions to which those desires lead are completely different things. The dispositions of the addict and the compulsive are strongly felt, but they are not for that reason supposed to provide a justification for the behaviour to which they lead. Indeed, such strongly felt desires are the exemplars of desires that are arbitrary, in the sense of lacking a rationale. The same point can be made by reference to the story told at the outset. There is no incoherence at all involved in supposing both that your neighbour has an all-consuming hatred of developments of the proposed kind, and hence that he is driven by his hatred to the exclusion of all his other projects, while still able to see himself as acting completely without reason. He might even acknowledge the fact. 'I know it is sad,' he might say, 'but I just can't help myself.'

Lenman's third proposal is that reason_{morality} claims express desires that fit into a system of mutually supporting desires. As he puts it, 'If I care about morality ... I care about a system of hypothetical imperatives. And, given such a system, it might realistically be hoped that some ingredient thereof ... is open to justification in terms of others that make up its background' (167). But, again, the problem with this proposal is evident if we reconsider the story told at the outset. Suppose that your neighbour hates a variety of features that developments can have, and that, moreover, he can always tell a story about why developments should not have one of the features he hates if we are prepared to take it for granted that they should not have the others. This would plainly have no bearing at all on whether any rationale can be given for his opposition to developments having any of those features. It would simply show him to be a systematic hater. He could thus continue to give voice to his system of hatreds while denying that he had any reason at all to act accordingly. Indeed, he could suppose that he had every reason to get rid of his whole system of hatreds.

Lenman's discussion obscures this because he runs two quite different points together. He makes the perfectly correct observation that 'all justification is internal, contextual justification, its efficacy conditional on commitments we carry with us at the outset' (167). But he seems to think that this entails or makes plausible the rather different idea that our commitments, taken together, might be one and all quite arbitrary. That does not follow. To be sure, the only way to convince yourself that something you care about is justified is by relating it to other things you think are justified. But what you thereby take for granted is precisely that the other things are justified, and

hence are not arbitrary. It is thus quite consistent with acknowledging Lenman's point that all justification is internal and contextual to admit that your beliefs about the justifiability of the various things to which you are committed would be undermined if you came to believe that your commitments are themselves one and all arbitrary.

I am not quite sure why Lenman fails to notice this. Perhaps he thinks that if justification is internal and contextual then nothing could count as coming to believe that your commitments are one and all arbitrary. But there seems to be at least one clear candidate for what you might thereby come to believe. You might come to believe that though your commitments form some sort of mutually supporting system they are not commitments that others have any reason to share. They are therefore idiosyncratic. To believe that there are non-arbitrary commitments, then, would be to believe that there are commitments which form a mutually supporting system, and that these are commitments that would emerge out of anyone's actual commitments if they were to attempt to form a mutually supporting system out of their own commitments. They are not idiosyncratic, because reflection leads to their endorsement by each and every one of us. Unsurprisingly, here we find the rationalist's convergence claim once again.

Lenman makes a number of disparaging remarks about convergence claims of this sort. As he notes, however, two quite different convergence claims need to be sharply distinguished. Whether we agree or disagree with his disparaging remarks will in turn therefore depend on which of these two claims his remarks are aimed against. The first, the claim I have just made, is conceptual: when we say that our commitments are non-arbitrary what we mean is that we would, on reflection, all converge in the commitments that we have. The second, a claim I have said nothing about here, is a substantive claim: there would be such a convergence in our commitments upon reflection, and hence they are indeed non-arbitrary in this sense. Though, as it happens, I am inclined to believe both these claims, I should immediately add that I am much more confident of the first than I am of the second. For present purposes, however, only the truth of the first claim – the conceptual claim – is at issue.

Lenman thinks that both of these claims are implausible, and that our reasons for believing them are linked in interesting and surprising ways. Suppose, for *reductio*, that the conceptual claim is true as regards moral reasons, but that we come to think, substantively, that our desires that people act in accordance with moral reasons are idiosyncratic, and hence arbitrary. Like Simon Blackburn, Lenman insists that this would not cause us to give up all talk of what there is moral reason to do, but would rather lead us to 'reconstrue' such talk

so as to purge it of the false presupposition (176).⁷ We would talk not of what people have 'moral' reason to do, but would talk instead about what they have 'shmoral' reason to do, where, for people to have shmoral reasons to do something, there is no requirement that we all on reflection converge on the desire that they do that thing. We can perhaps think of shmoral reason claims as expressive of these rather more idiosyncratic desires that we have. We might even demarcate these desires from others in one of the ways Lenman suggests: perhaps they possess 'strong modal generality', or are 'deeply and strongly felt', or form a 'system' with other desires we idiosyncratically possess.

Like Blackburn, Lenman next asks us to imagine what this reconstructed practice in which we talk about shmoral reasons, as opposed to moral reasons, would be like, and, again like Blackburn, he suggests that it would be exactly like our current practice in which we talk about what we have moral reasons to do. But if this is correct then we have a *reductio* of the initial conceptual claim. A practice in which we talk about shmoral reasons would have to differ in some way from our current practice in which we talk about moral reasons if the conceptual claim were true. Lenman wants us to conclude that it is therefore wrong to suppose that moral reason claims presuppose that we would on reflection converge in our desires that people act accordingly.

How should we respond to this argument? If the premises were credible then, let us agree, it would be reasonable to suppose that we have a *reductio* of the conceptual claim. But the premises are surely quite incredible. There would be at least one very salient difference between a practice in which we talk about shmoral reasons and our current practice in which we talk about moral reasons, because – assuming, remember, that the conceptual claim is true – claims about what we have moral reasons to do have to be withdrawn if our desires that people act in accordance with what they have moral reason to do are shown to be idiosyncratic and hence arbitrary, whereas shmoral reason claims do not. Reflective convergence is a condition on one sort of talk, but not on the other. Lenman simply ignores this fact when he invites us to imagine a practice in which we go in for talk of shmoral reasons as opposed to moral reasons, but that is quite illegitimate. His first attempt at a *reductio* of the conceptual claim thus fails.

Lenman has a second attempt at a *reductio* of the conceptual claim. Suppose, again for *reductio*, that the conceptual claim is true as regards moral reasons, but that we become convinced that though we would all on reflection converge in the desires we have as regards what people have moral reasons to do – and hence that our desires that people

⁷ Simon Blackburn, 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value', *Morality and Objectivity*, ed. Ted Honderich, London, 1985.

act in these ways are non-idiosyncratic and hence non-arbitrary – the desires we become convinced we would all converge upon have alarming contents. Suppose, for example, we become convinced that we would, on reflection, all converge on desires like those that the Daleks currently have, and so come to believe that we have moral reasons to conquer new territory and exterminate as many non-Daleks as possible.

According to Lenman the most natural response, if we came to believe this, would be to deny that we have any interest at all in what we have moral reasons to do. And, if this is conceded, then, according to Lenman, it ‘eliminates entirely any plausibility this story may have had about where the authority of morality comes from and leaves us to look for different sources of authority closer to home’ (176 f.). His suggestion, by implication, is that the authority of morality comes from the one of the sources he identifies earlier on: from the fact that our desires that people act in the ways we think they morally should possess ‘strong modal generality’, or are ‘deeply and strongly felt’, or form a ‘system’ with other desires.

It is unclear to me why this argument is meant to be persuasive. Leaving to one side the difficulty of imagining that we would, on reflection, all converge on the desire to conquer new territory and exterminate as many non-Daleks as possible – let us admit that is a possibility, even if only a bare one – I do not see how our disinclination to make our actual desires conform to these desires is supposed to undermine the authority we thereby believe them to have. Of course, it does show that the authority they possess may not interest us. But having no interest in their authority is different from denying that they have any authority in the first place. The following analogy suggests why.

Suppose I believe that I have been betrayed by one of my friends, and that I am convinced that, if I were to reflect on the basis of the information that is available to me, I could work out which one of them did it to me. However, suppose also that because I prefer not to know, I do not reflect. I remain ignorant. Does the fact that I have such a strong preference not to form the belief I would form if I were to reflect show that that belief, the one I would form, does not really possess any authority? Does my state of ignorance, formed under the pressure of a preference not to know, possess more authority? The answer is plainly ‘No’ on both counts. Authority goes firmly with that state of belief that survives after reflection on the basis of information. All that follows is that I might be disinclined to form authoritative beliefs. But that is hardly news. Wishful thinking is pervasive.

Similarly, even if Lenman is right that I would not be inclined to form desires corresponding to those I believe we would all converge

upon if we were to reflect, that only goes to show how disinclined I might be to form authoritative desires. But this too is hardly news. Wishful wanting is perhaps even more pervasive than wishful thinking. The fact remains that rationality is on the side of forming desires corresponding to those I believe we would all converge upon if we were to reflect, just as, in the analogous case, it is on the side of forming the belief that I would form if I were to reflect on the basis of the information that is available to me. Perhaps we wish it were not so, but that wish is irrelevant to questions of authority.

CONCLUSION

My response to Lenman can be summed up in the following two points.

First, though he rejects my arguments for the conceptual claim that moral requirements are requirements of reason, he fails to see how commonsensical those arguments really are. They appeal to the ordinary, everyday idea that reasons are non-arbitrary, an idea that his own anti-rationalism is singularly incapable of capturing. Because it cannot capture it, the distinction he makes between what it is rational for us to do and what we are morally required to do – or, equivalently, between reasons_{rationality} and reasons_{morality} – not only is unmotivated, but multiplies the problems to be solved.

Secondly, though he rejects my suggestion that if there are no requirements of reason corresponding to moral requirements, then we are committed to an error theory about morality, he must surely agree that that is a conclusion to which we are committed if we have a convincing argument for the conceptual claim. His own arguments against the conceptual claim – the two attempts at a *reductio* – fail to convince. One ignores the way in which the non-arbitrariness of reasons disciplines our reason-giving practices, and the other conflates a consideration’s being authoritative with the quite different feature of answering to an interest we have.

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