

# International Phenomenological Society

---

Précis of The Limits of Morality

The Limits of Morality by Shelly Kagan

Source: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Dec., 1991), pp. 897-901

Published by: [International Phenomenological Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2108188>

Accessed: 13-08-2014 16:34 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*International Phenomenological Society* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## Précis of *The Limits of Morality*\*

SHELLY KAGAN

*University of Illinois at Chicago*

Most of us believe that there are limits to the sacrifices that morality can demand of us. Intuitively, it seems, I am not morally required to be forever making my greatest possible contribution to the overall good—for this would involve considerable hardship and sacrifice on my part. Instead, I am permitted to favor the various goals and projects that I most care about, even if by doing so I fail to perform the act that would lead to the best consequences overall.

Of course, if I so choose, I am *permitted* to sacrifice my interests for the sake of the greater good. But such sacrifices are only rarely *required*. Typically, I am permitted to promote my own interests instead. In short, morality includes agent-centered *options*: the agent has the option of performing (or not performing) acts which from a neutral perspective are less than optimal.

This, at least, is the view of ordinary, commonsense morality. Despite its considerable intuitive appeal, however, I think that the belief in options cannot in fact be justified. Or so I argue in *The Limits of Morality*. More precisely, the attempt to defend options runs afoul of various other beliefs that are themselves important parts of our commonsense moral view; defending options pushes us in directions that are unacceptable from the standpoint of ordinary morality. Thus, options of the sort we intuitively believe in cannot be given anything like an adequate defense.

In embracing options, the defender of ordinary morality—the *moderate*—rejects a general requirement to promote the good. His position is thus less extreme than that of someone who actually endorses such a general requirement—the *extremist*. This is not to say, of course, that the moderate believes that there is never any case at all in which an agent is required to perform some act for the sake of the greater good. But such cases tend to be rather modest and limited.

Still, there *are* cases of this sort. For example, ordinary morality would require me to throw a life preserver to save a drowning child, even though the

---

\* Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. xii, 415.

rescue might make me late for some meeting, or soak my clothes. Thus even ordinary morality can be seen as going beyond the position of the *minimalist*, who denies that we are ever required to aid another. As the defender of ordinary morality, the moderate thus stands in the middle—opposed by both the extremist and the minimalist. The question is whether the moderate can offer a defense of options against the extremist without retreating into an overly minimalist position.

Why must such a defense of options be offered at all? In part, because every feature of morality needs to be justified; the intuitive appeal of options does not in itself meet the need for a coherent explanation of the basis of options. But more particularly, the moderate needs to explain how the belief in options is to be reconciled with the other features of ordinary morality.

After all, as we have already seen, ordinary morality does sometimes recognize the existence in particular cases of a requirement to promote the good. What generates that requirement in those cases where it does obtain? The best explanation of the moderate's position is, I think, this: the opportunity to promote the good (say, by saving the life of the drowning child) generates a reason to perform the act. And this reason—in these cases—is sufficiently forceful to outweigh any opposing reasons, or other countervailing considerations. That is, in these cases at least, the reason is a morally decisive one, and thus grounds a moral requirement.

Now I believe, in fact, that various judgments that the moderate wants to make commit him to more than this. The best explanation of the moderate's position involves the claim that there is a standing, *pro tanto* reason to promote the good. That is, the fact that some act would promote the good *always* generates a reason to perform that act—even in those cases where that reason is not a morally decisive one, and does not ground a requirement (indeed, even in those cases where that reason is outweighed by other moral considerations which together *forbid* performing the act).

But if the moderate recognizes—or is committed to recognizing—the *pro tanto* reason to promote the good, what then prevents that reason from grounding a requirement in *every* case? The extremist, after all, holds that there is just such a general requirement to promote the good. And the most straightforward defense of *this* position simply involves the claim that the *pro tanto* reason to promote the good is indeed always morally decisive. Apparently, then, the moderate must argue for the existence of countervailing considerations that typically prevent the *pro tanto* reason to promote the good from generating a corresponding requirement.

Just such a countervailing consideration seems indicated by the thought that I am not required to promote the good when this would involve a significant sacrifice of my interests. When the cost to the agent of promoting the good becomes too large, this consideration seems to somehow prevent the

pro tanto reason to promote the good from grounding a *requirement*. Obviously, a great deal more needs to be said about how, precisely, such an “appeal to cost” works. But a defense of options along these lines seems both intuitively plausible in its own right, and the most promising way for the moderate to reconcile his belief in options with his commitment to the pro tanto reason to promote the good.

Suppose for the moment that the appeal to cost can indeed be developed so as to provide an adequate defense of options. This leads the moderate straightway to a new problem. The moderate believes, let us say, that the appeal to cost would support an option permitting me to allow some stranger to die if the only way of saving her would be for me to give \$1000. But if the moderate is right about this, then it seems that the appeal to cost would also support an option permitting me to *kill* someone, if this were the only way to prevent my losing \$1000. That is, it seems that it is not merely options to *allow* harm that would be supported by the appeal to cost, but also options to *do* harm. Yet although ordinary morality insists on the existence of options to allow harm, it rejects options to do harm. Only the minimalist believes in the existence of options to *do* harm for the sake of promoting one’s own interests. Thus, in defending options against the extremist, the moderate is in danger of retreating into an overly minimalist position.

It seems, then, that the moderate must claim that there are special considerations that oppose the doing of harm—considerations capable of withstanding the appeal to cost. If there is something special about harming, such that the appeal to cost is impotent in such cases, then the moderate can offer the appeal to cost and argue that it succeeds in grounding options to allow harm, but not options to do harm. The most straightforward proposal along these lines is that there are (typically) morally decisive reasons not to harm.

Now ordinary morality in fact recognizes the existence of agent-centered *constraints*: these forbid the agent to perform certain types of acts—even if this would lead to the greater good overall. Among the constraints recognized by ordinary morality is a constraint against harming. Thus the point we have reached is this: if the moderate is to defend options, he must first defend a logically distinct feature of ordinary morality; he must defend a constraint against harming.

Accordingly, I devote considerable attention in *The Limits of Morality* to examining whether or not the moderate can successfully defend the existence of constraints, in particular the constraint against harming. Certain familiar arguments are quickly rejected as nonstarters; others, I claim, cannot be put to the use that the moderate’s overall position requires. (For example, I argue that even if certain indirect moral theories, such as a contract approach, would support constraints, they would not in fact support options—and so are of no use to the moderate.) Ultimately I turn to a detailed consideration of the two

most important versions of the constraint against harming: a constraint against *doing* harm (as opposed to merely allowing harm); and a constraint against *intending* harm as a means (as opposed to merely foreseeing it as a side-effect). Parallel difficulties arise for both versions.

First off, it is extremely difficult to come up with an intuitively adequate specification of the constraint: various formulations seem inevitably to either condemn too much or to excuse too much. And modifications intended to make for a better intuitive fit often seem ad hoc from the perspective of plausible motivations for the underlying constraint. Furthermore, each version of the constraint presupposes the moral relevance of a particular distinction. But the most promising attempts to demonstrate that the given distinction genuinely has the requisite moral relevance repeatedly fail. Nor is it any easier to see why the distinctions—even if they are thought significant—should be incorporated into agent-relative structures of the sort needed if they are to yield constraints. In sum, the moderate's defense of a constraint against harming is plagued with difficulties and mysteries from start to finish.

This is of course an awkward result for the moderate, who not only believes in constraints in their own right, but also needs them if he is to base the defense of options on the appeal to cost. But even if the existence of constraints is simply *granted*, it hardly follows trivially that options can be successfully defended; rather, we might still face a general requirement to promote the good—*within* the limits of those constraints. Thus, even with constraints, there still remains the task of spelling out the appeal to cost.

The attempt to do this can be guided by the suggestion that options somehow reflect the nature of persons. People have a personal point of view from the perspective of which their various individual aims and interests take on a value and significance greater than that assigned to them from a more objective standpoint. Thus even if some act would promote the overall good, that act might still be rejected from the personal point of view if it involves a significant sacrifice of the agent's interests. The moderate can plausibly suggest that morality must reflect this fact about the nature of persons by incorporating options, which give room for the agent to act on the subjective standpoint even when it diverges from the objective standpoint.

Ultimately, I believe, this line of thought can be developed in two different directions. Both have considerable plausibility; but neither, I think, succeeds. First, there is the *negative argument*, which claims that genuine moral requirements must be based on considerations capable of motivating the agent to conform to that requirement. Given the nature of the personal point of view—this argument goes—agents have a bias in favor of their own interests, and so the pro tanto reason to promote the good will lack the motivational underpinning necessary to ground a general requirement to promote

the good. I argue, however, that a general requirement to promote the good can indeed meet this motivational condition, particularly when one bears in mind the effects that a more vivid understanding of the needs of others can have on our willingness to adopt a more objective standpoint.

This leaves the *positive argument*, which claims that certain significant values, such as love and friendship, cannot be adequately accommodated from an objective standpoint, but only within more subjective points of view. The personal standpoint is thus of positive value in its own right, and can be seen as generating subjective reasons for promoting the agent's own interests—reasons capable of outweighing the pro tanto reason to promote the good. I argue, however, that the case for such subjective reasons has not been sufficiently made out; and, equally important, even if there were such subjective reasons, they would only yield a new set of requirements—requirements to promote one's own interests—thus undermining the moderate's desire to defend *options*.

If I am right about all of this, then the most promising line of defense of options fails. As I see it, we are indeed under a general moral requirement to promote the good. Ordinary morality may tell us otherwise; but ordinary morality cannot be defended.