Can rational agents create reasons for action? That is, can we simply through an act of will endow a consideration with the normativity – the action-guidingness – of a practical reason?

For an overwhelming majority of philosophers, the answer to this question will be an emphatic – indeed, incredulous – no. How can we magically endow a consideration with the action-guidingness of a reason simply by willing something? For other philosophers, the answer will be an emphatic – typically theory-driven – yes. To gloss one Kantian story: By willing actions whose maxims pass tests derived from laws that govern an autonomous will, we make those actions rational. Our willing confers normativity on the end specified in the action’s maxim. Through an exercise of our normative powers, we make a consideration action-guiding.

In this paper, I propose a view according to which rational agents can confer normativity on things. We do have normative powers. The view I develop, however, differs in important ways from the Kantian one. For one thing, we create only some, not all, of practical normativity. As we will see, this more modest view of our normative powers allows us to sidestep what are widely considered to be the fatal flaws of Kantian defenses of them. For another thing, what we will is different. Most philosophers who give the will some role in practical reason, Kantians included, take our willing to be directed at action or the principle that describes action motivated in a certain way. On the view of normative powers I propose, the basic attitude of willing is ‘taking to be a reason.’ Instead of willing action, what we will is, quite literally, that a consideration be a reason.
A preview of what I have in mind can be given by way of a toy example. Suppose you have been dating Harry on and off for about a year. It turns out that he needs a kidney, and yours would do nicely. If you don't give him yours, he can get another off the organ donors list, but he would then face a nontrivial risk of rejection. Now suppose your relationship with Harry is such that your reasons to give him your kidney and your reasons the keep your organs intact ‘run out’ – roughly, they fail fully to determine what you have most reason to do. In such cases, I suggest, you can, through an act of will, take a consideration to be a reason and thereby make it one. In particular, by committing to Harry, you take his need for a kidney to be a reason for you to give him yours and can thereby make it a reason. By creating a new reason to give him your kidney you didn't have before, you now may have most reason to give him your kidney. The idea here is that when ordinary, non-will-based reasons run out, we can through an exercise of our normative powers create new, will-based ones. I call this view, for reasons that will become apparent later, ‘hybrid voluntarism’.

Hybrid voluntarism is a structured hybrid of two approaches to the ‘source’ of normativity -- ‘that in virtue of which’ something is a reason. The first part of the paper situates the view within the landscape of more familiar views about normative source and describes its main features. As we will see, the will can play different roles in determining our reasons, and it will be important to distinguish the genuine normative powers at issue here from their pretenders. The second part proposes an argument for thinking that we have normative powers. The argument centers on the commitments we make to people in personal relationships or to personal projects and maintains that a proper understanding of these commitments leads to the view that they are exercises of our normative powers. By committing to a person or a project, we can create ‘will-based’ – or as I will sometimes say ‘voluntarist’ – reasons, reasons whose normativity has its source in an act of will. I end by suggesting how these commitments can succeed in creating such reasons only under the conditions laid out by hybrid voluntarism.

1. The source of normativity

The question of whether we have normative powers is the question of whether our wills can be a source of normativity. This question of source is the meta-normative
(or ‘metaethical’) question, ‘In virtue of what, ultimately, does a consideration have the normativity of a reason?’ Or as I will sometimes put it, ‘What ultimately makes a consideration have the action-guidingness of a reason, or grounds the fact that something is a reason?’ The idea of being that ultimately in virtue of which something is a reason is captured by a child’s ‘why’ question: ‘Why is such-and-such a reason?’ A series of such questions leads to an answer beyond which there is no further, different sort of explanation to be had – the source of the reason’s normativity.

An example will help. Suppose the fact that putting your hand on a hot stove would be painful is a reason for you to avoid doing so. Because this fact is a reason, it has action-guiding force. In virtue of what, ultimately, does it have action-guiding force? Why, ultimately, does it have this force? Not any old fact – such as the fact that the stove weighs 350 pounds or that you are wearing red shoes – is a reason to avoid putting your hand on the stove. If you tell a child not to put her hand on the hot stove, she may ask ‘Why?’ You might reply, ‘Because it would hurt you’. If the child presses further and asks, ‘But why shouldn’t I do it because it would hurt me?’ you might give further explanation or reply ‘Just because’. When all that can be said is ‘Just because’ or ‘That’s just how things are’, you have hit rock bottom, the source of the reason’s normativity.

The question of the source of normativity is sometimes obscured because many philosophers hold substantive views according to which it is confused or misguided. Some philosophers refuse to recognize a distinction between normative questions and meta-normative questions, or between normative questions about what we should do, on the one hand, and nonnormative questions about the substance of those questions, on the other. Insofar as they understand the question of normative source, they will see it as a normative question on a par with the question of whether abortion is wrong. I think this view is mistaken, but I want to put it to one side and direct my argument to those who allow that some explanations concerning normative phenomena can be ‘meta-normative’ and need not themselves be normative. Other philosophers – sometimes the same ones – think the question of source is misguided because there is nothing in virtue of which a consideration is a reason; it just is, end of story. Asking the ‘ultimately in virtue of’ question about normativity is like asking the ‘ultimately in virtue of’
question about some fundamental fact of physics; ‘In virtue of what, ultimately, does a vibrating string have eleven dimensions?’ – to which the reply might be: ‘There is nothing ultimately in virtue of which it does, it just does’. For our purposes, we can say that these philosophers give a degenerate answer to the question of source: that ultimately in virtue of which, say, the fact that an experience is painful is a reason to avoid it, is the normative fact that the experience is painful is a reason to avoid it. Since these thinkers locate the source of normativity in a realm of normative facts external to agents, I will call them ‘source externalists’. Other source externalists locate the source of normativity in normative facts other than the fact that something is a reason, which they do not view as normatively basic. For example, that in virtue of which being painful is a reason to avoid it is the fact that pain is “intrinsically bad” or bad-in-a-way, that its being painful is “lends weight to” or “is evidence for” the proposition that one should avoid it, that it “makes sense” of why one did something in a self-narrative, or that it figures in an explanation of why one should do it.6

While source externalists can be said in this way to locate the source of normativity outside of us, in a realm of normative facts, ‘source internalists’ think normativity has its source inside of us, and in particular, in our desires or dispositions – conative attitudes toward which we are largely passive.7 If the fact that an experience is painful gives you a reason to avoid it, it does so in virtue of the fact that you want – or would want under certain evaluatively neutral conditions – to avoid pain. More precisely, what makes a consideration a reason is some relation between the consideration and one’s desires or dispositions, usually that of ‘serving’ or ‘furthering’ one’s desires.8,9

There is a third view, ‘source voluntarism’. According to voluntarism, a consideration is a reason in virtue of an act of will. Like source internalism, voluntarism locates the source of normativity inside of us – but not in our passive states such as desiring. Rather, the source of normativity is in the active state of willing. Voluntarists maintain that through an act of will we can create practical reasons. The question of whether we have normative powers is thus the question of whether some form of voluntarism about the source of normativity is true.

Divine command theory offers the earliest example of such a view. If we ask, ‘why does the fact that she’s your neighbor’s wife give you a reason not to covet her?’
divine command theory answers: ‘Because God wills it.’ By willing it, God can make facts into reasons; in virtue of God’s will, the fact that she is your neighbor’s wife is a reason not to covet her, the fact is a hoofed animal is a reason not to eat it, and so on. After the Enlightenment, philosophers replaced God’s will with our own; through an act of will, a rational agent can lay down laws for herself, and God’s normative powers became our own. Kant’s revolutionary account of normativity is, at least on some interpretations, the most developed defense we have of our normative powers, but others before him – Hobbes, Locke, and Pufendorf – arguably helped to lay the groundwork for such a view.\(^\text{10}\)

Voluntarism brings up the rear in views about source because it is widely supposed to suffer from two fatal flaws.\(^\text{11}\) First, if what makes a consideration a reason is some act of willing, what prevents us from willing reasons willy-nilly? This was Samuel Clarke’s attack against Hobbes’s voluntarism and more recently Jerry Cohen’s attack against the Kant-inspired voluntarism of Christine Korsgaard. As Cohen put the point, voluntarists cannot block a Mafioso’s willing all-things-considered reasons to shoot the kneecaps off his rival.\(^\text{12}\) Call this the *Mafioso Problem*. Kant’s answer was that rational agents could not will reasons willy-nilly; rational agents are bound by purely formal laws that govern the autonomous, rational will, and these laws guarantee that a rational agent can will reasons only in accord with the moral law. But Kant’s argument notoriously fails, and ingenious attempts to rescue Kant on this score have fallen short of the mark.

There is a second, related difficulty. Voluntarists try to constrain willing by appealing to what the rational agent *must* will in order to be a rational agent in the first place. The strongest sense of ‘must’ they are in the ballpark of defending, however, is only the ‘must’ of structural – or what is sometimes misleadingly called ‘subjective’ – rationality. So willing is a source of normativity that is constrained by structural requirements of consistency and coherence on attitudes. But now we can ask, Why should the rational agent be bound by such structural requirements? This question asks what *reason* an agent has to bind her will in this way. And this appeal to a *reason* requires further normative materials beyond those that the voluntarist is plausibly able to provide. Either the voluntarist must admit that her reason to follow structural
requirements has its source in something other than structural requirements and so the will is not the only source of normativity, or she is faced with an unhappy endless regress of structural requirements that provide reasons to conform to other structural requirements. In short, the will cannot be the source of normativity because it leaves open the question, What reason do we have to will in conformity with the requirements of structural rationality?\textsuperscript{13} Call this the \textit{Regress Problem}.\textsuperscript{14}

Source externalism and source internalism occupy the bulk of both contemporary and historical debate about the source of normativity. Normativity either comes from outside of us, from a realm of normative facts, or from inside us, from passive states such as desires, dispositions, and motivations we have or would have under certain evaluatively neutral conditions.

That the debate about source has long had this focus – with voluntarism getting short shrift – seems to me unfortunate. The most profound – and interesting – divide in the debate is not between those who think normativity derives from normative facts (externalists) on the one hand, and those who think that it derives from a relation with our desires (internalists), on the other, but rather between those who think that normativity is \textit{given} to us, either by normative facts or relations to passive states, like desires (externalists and internalists), on the one hand, and those who think that we can \textit{create} it (voluntarists), on the other. Is normativity given to us or do we make it?

Hybrid voluntarism offers a way of understanding how these two fundamentally opposed approaches to the source of normativity – each boasting a persistent history of endorsement by distinguished thinkers – could each contain an important truth. As we will see, if hybrid voluntarism is correct, sometimes the fact that a consideration has the normativity of a reason is given to us, while other times it is a fact of our own making. More importantly, the hybrid view offers an attractive way of understanding how we could have normative powers without running afoul of the two ‘fatal flaws’ plaguing standard forms of voluntarism. By constraining our normative powers in the way hybrid voluntarism requires, we avoid both the Mafioso and Regress Problems. In this way, hybrid voluntarism presents itself as the best way of making good on the voluntarists’ insight that we can confer normativity on things.
But is the view correct? In the second half of the paper, we’ll see how an important normative phenomenon – commitment to persons or to personal projects – requires appeal to the normative powers hybrid voluntarism says we have.

2. Hybrid Voluntarism

Unlike the traditional views about source, hybrid voluntarism maintains that there is no univocal answer the question, In virtue of what, ultimately, does a consideration have the normativity of a reason? Sometimes the fact that a consideration is a reason is ultimately given to us and sometimes it is of our own making.

The hybrid view crucially turns on a distinction between two kinds of reasons: ‘given’ reasons, on the one hand, and ‘will-based’, or ‘voluntarist’, ones, on the other. ‘Given’ reasons are considerations that are reasons in virtue of something that is not a matter of our own making. They are given to us and not created by us and thus are a matter of recognition or discovery of something independent of our own volition or agency. Both source externalism and source internalism might best be understood as accounts of our given reasons: our given reasons might be ‘value-based’ or ‘desire-based’: that in virtue of which they are reasons is either a normative fact or some relation to our desires or dispositions. ‘Will-based’ reasons, by contrast, are considerations that are reasons in virtue of some act of will; they are a matter of our creation. They are voluntarist in their normative source. In short, we create will-based reasons and receive given ones.\(^\text{15}\)

While standard forms of voluntarism hold that all reasons are will-based, hybrid voluntarism maintains that not all of our reasons are a matter of acts of will. Like traditional views about source, however, the hybrid view holds that each reason has a single normative source, and in this way, although it is pluralist about the sources of normativity writ large, it is univocal about the source of the normativity of each reason.\(^\text{16}\) Hybrid voluntarism’s pluralism about normative source is not, moreover, one of coeval considerations each taking turns being that in virtue of which a reason has its action-guiding force. The sources of normativity are \textit{structured}. In answer to the question, ‘What is the source of normativity?’ hybrid voluntarism answers that the source of
normativity is a *structured* hybrid of two sorts of consideration, sometimes given to us and sometimes of our own making. This structure has two aspects.

Most importantly, given reasons operate as *metaphysical* constraints on voluntarist ones; we cannot bring voluntarist reasons into existence unless our given reasons fail fully to determine what we should do. Given reasons have, as it were, ‘first dibs’ in determining what we should do. As I will put it, we can create will-based reasons only when our given reasons have ‘run out’.\(^{17}\)

Reasons run out when they fail fully to determine what one has most reason to do. More precisely, they run out when (1) one fails to have more, less, or equal reason to choose one alternative over the other – what we might call a state of ‘equipoise’, or (2) one has most reason to choose one alternative over the other but it is indeterminate how much more – what we might call a state of ‘indeterminate most reason’. Alternatives are in equipoise when they are incomparable or ‘on a par’ – that is, comparable, but neither is better than the other and nor are they equally good.\(^{18}\) And one alternative is supported by indeterminate most reason if there is more reason to choose it, but it is indeterminate what the overall normative difference is between it and its alternative. That is, one alternative is better, but to an indeterminate degree. With respect to ordinary given reasons, the latter condition is plausibly very common. And as I have argued elsewhere, so is the former.\(^{19}\) According to hybrid voluntarism, the scope of our normative powers is a direct function of the scope of equipoise and indeterminate most reason. This scope is plausibly both very wide – covering a wide range of choices – and very deep – covering some of the most important choices we might make.

Our given reasons, however, determine not only when voluntarist reasons can be created but also what role such reasons can play in determining what we should do. They operate not only as metaphysical constraints but also as *normative* ones. Whenever our given reasons have a *valence*, that is, whenever they determine that we have most reason to do one thing rather than another, our voluntarist reasons cannot alter that valence in the all-things-considered truth about what we have most reason to do; they cannot make it the case that the disfavored alternative is now better supported by reasons, nor can they make it the case that the alternatives are equally good or in equipoise. All they can do is change the degree or extent to which the favored
alternative is supported by the most reason. But if the given reasons are in equipoise – if there is no valence to be disrupted – then voluntarist reasons can make it the case that one has most all-things-considered (given and voluntarist) reason to choose one alternative over the other. Through an exercise of our normative powers, then, we can directly determine what we have most reason to do. (I’ll be returning to these points later.)

Thus, according to hybrid voluntarism, we have normative powers. But why should we think that, if we have the power to confer normativity on things, this power is constrained in the way that hybrid voluntarism says it is? Understanding our normative powers as constrained in this way has three theoretical virtues.

First, hybrid voluntarism offers a way in which we can have normative powers without running afoul of the fatal flaws of standard forms of voluntarism. One of the difficulties with voluntarism, recall, is that it cannot block the Mafioso from willing into existence all-things-considered reasons to shoot the kneecaps off his enemy. Purely formal constraints on willing, like those suggested by Kant and his followers, are insufficient to prevent the willing of reasons willy-nilly. If, however, hybrid voluntarism is true, then voluntarism accounts for the source of only our voluntarist reasons. And since will-based reasons cannot change the valence established by one’s given reasons, the Mafioso is unable to create the reasons that make it permissible for him to shoot the kneecaps off his enemy. This is because he has all-things-considered given reasons not to do so, and his will-based reasons cannot change the valence established by these reasons. Of course, according to hybrid voluntarism, the Mafioso may have more reason to shoot the kneecaps off his enemy if he has created a voluntarist reason than if he had not created such a reason. But this as it should be.

Hybrid voluntarism also sidesteps the Regress Problem. The Regress Problem maintains that in order to answer the open question, ‘What reason does a rational agent have to will a principle of action?, the voluntarist must either appeal to resources beyond voluntarist reasons or be faced with an endless regress of willings.

To see how the hybrid view escapes the Regress Problem, consider the following scenario. Suppose you are faced with a choice between A and B, and your given reasons for choosing either have run out. According to the hybrid view, you have the
normative power to create a new voluntarist reason through some act of will, which may then give you most all-things-considered reasons to choose A over B. Now if we ask, ‘What reason do you have to exercise your normative power, that is, to will a voluntarist reason as opposed to, say, employ the decision procedure ‘eeny, meany, miney moe….’ or toss a coin between them?’ we can appeal to given reasons. You might have a given reason to will a voluntarist reason because it’s a good thing to exert one’s agency in making it true that one has most reason to do things. Or you could have a given reason to exercise your will in order to achieve control over what you have most reason to do instead of leaving your reasons to the vagaries of a coin toss. There are many other possible given reasons that justify the activity of creating voluntarist reasons.20 Because hybrid voluntarism does not attempt to make the will the source of all of practical normativity, it can allow that given reasons are deployed in answer to the question, ‘Why go in for the activity of creating voluntarist reasons?’ These additional resources – given reasons – block the Regress Problem faced by standard forms of voluntarism. So while the question, ‘What reason does one have to create a voluntarist reason?’ is open, hybrid voluntarism has the resources to answer it.

It is important here to underscore the difference between being assessed by reasons and being guided or governed by them. What we have just noted is that we can assess the activity of creating voluntarist reasons by given reasons, but it does not follow that the activity of creating voluntarist reasons is itself guided or governed by given reasons. Creating voluntarist reasons is something rational agents simply do, and there is no suggestion that in doing so they are guided by given reasons. Willing reasons – according to all forms of voluntarism – is by its very nature an activity that is not guided by reasons. After all, the whole point of willing reasons is to do something as a matter of will, something that is, by its very nature, not a matter of responding to or being guided by one’s reasons. This has an important implication. If the activity of willing reasons is only open to assessment by reasons but not open to being guided by reasons, then one is not guided by reasons in willing this rather than that. When your given reasons run out, your willing reasons to do A instead of B (or vice versa), while open to third-party assessment by given reasons, is not itself guided by given reasons. It makes no sense to ask of an activity that is not guided by reasons, ‘What reasons do
you have to will this way rather than that?" Which reasons you will, then, is quite literally up to you.

In sum, there is no problem of regress because although it is an open question whether one has reason to engage in the activity of creating voluntarist reasons as opposed to doing something else, this is a matter of assessing the activity according to given reasons, not subjecting that activity to guidance by those reasons. And since, unlike standard forms of voluntarism, hybrid voluntarism makes room for such given reasons, there is no worry about needing to appeal to non-voluntarist reasons in answering that open question.

The aim of the voluntarist project is to offer a plausible account of normativity according to which we can, through an act of will, endow things with normativity. Hybrid voluntarism makes good on this aim; we have the power to create voluntarist reasons where that creation is, by its very nature, not guided by prior reasons. And we can have this power without falling prey either to counterintuitive results about what we have all-things-considered reasons to do or to a view of willing according to which it is 'elephants all the way down'.

So far I have not said much about the non-voluntarist part of hybrid voluntarism and, in particular, the source of our given reasons. Strictly speaking, hybrid voluntarism might be externalist or internalist (or both) about given reasons, but I believe that the most attractive version of the view understands our given reasons as externalist and our voluntarist reasons as (by definition) voluntarist. As it turns out, if we understand the structure of hybrid voluntarism in these terms, we uncover a second theoretical virtue of the view; we solve not only the two fatal flaws of standard forms of voluntarism, but also what is arguably the most serious difficulty for source externalism. By going hybrid, we rather strikingly cure the most serious problems faced by the pure forms of each.

What I have to say about the main difficulty for source externalism is somewhat speculative, but my aim is only to give the flavor of how putting externalist constraints on our normative powers has a leg up on standard forms of externalism. How does combining source externalism with voluntarism in the way hybrid voluntarism proposes cure what is supposedly the main problem with source externalism?
I confess that I do not find the usual objections to source externalism as compelling as they are often taken to be, but I can only give a dogmatic and cursory defense of this skepticism in the accompanying note.²³ I am inclined to think instead that the central problem with source externalism lies elsewhere, in what I will call the Problem of Explanatory Shortfall. The main problem with source externalism, I suggest, is that it can offer no explanation just where explanation is most needed. This is not the familiar point that source externalism – like any other theory of source – must turn its spade somewhere. The problem is that source externalism hits bedrock just where it is most plausible to suppose that there is more explanation to be had.²⁴ The worry is most clearly formulated against the most widespread form of source externalism – the view according to which that in virtue of which something is a reason is the normative fact that it is a reason – but it can be extended to other forms of source externalism as well.

Consider the fact that a certain consideration has a particular normative weight against other considerations in a particular set of circumstances. How is this fact to be explained? There are many cases in which the right thing to say will plausibly be: ‘There is nothing in virtue of which a consideration has the normative weight that it does within and across sets of circumstances – it just does’. If you can save a drowning stranger at the cost of ruining your new shoes, the answer to the question, ‘In virtue of what does the fact that the act would save her life have greater normative weight than the fact that it would ruin your shoes?’ is plausibly ‘Those are just the normative facts.’

But there are other cases – ‘hard cases’ – in which genuine explanation is needed, and the source externalist cannot provide it. In hard cases, the normative relations among the reasons at stake is a highly nuanced and circumstance-sensitive matter, it is very unclear how to go about determining what those relations are, and the resolution of the case is of great importance. Are the reasons for capital punishment for the most irredeemable of violent criminals stronger than the reasons against it? How about those for maintaining a pristine mountainside against those for creating much-needed mining jobs in a depressed economy? How much exactly should one give to charity? Should you have one child or two, five, or none? Which of two careers should you pursue, all things considered – one in art or one in finance? Should you live in the city or the country? Marry Harry or Barry? And so on.²⁵ These are the cases of most
interest to philosophers because of their import and the epistemic challenge they pose. Much of first-order normative theorizing is taken up with proposals as to why the weights in hard cases should be one way rather than another. But the externalist must maintain that, for at least some of these cases, there is no explanation of why certain considerations balance as they do – they just do.

It might be thought that an appeal to principles can help. After all, normative theories aim to identify the most general principles of a normative domain. Perhaps there is a principle or combination of principles that explains why reasons in hard cases balance as they do. But while principles may help to explain why the reasons balance as they do in easy cases and some hard ones, any (plausible) principle cannot do so in all hard ones. The principle ‘You should confer a benefit on others if the cost to yourself is small’ may explain why you should save the drowning person when the cost is your shoes or your coat or your iPad – all easy cases – and it, in conjunction with other principles, may explain why you should give up your leg to save a life – a hard case – but principles cannot explain why you should sacrifice your own severely mentally-retarded child, if indeed you should in certain circumstances, in order to save a world-famous oncologist on the brink of discovering a cure for cancer – a hard case.

Nor can principles explain why you should give $10,000 to charity instead of $9,543, or have two children instead of three, or be a deep sea diver instead of an accountant no matter the circumstances. This is because (plausible) normative principles by their very nature fail to cover every possible circumstance in which certain reasons might figure, and hard cases are typically those that fall outside the boundaries of straightforward application of any general, abstract rule. Indeed, as the casuistic work of Frances Kamm and others suggests, far from explaining the resolution in all hard cases, principles are themselves transformed – extended and modified – by piecemeal, purportedly intuitive, resolutions in hard cases. Principles cannot determine the resolution in all hard cases since their contents are determined by the resolution of some such cases.

If this is right – if principles cannot explain the resolutions of normative weights in all hard cases but are instead at least in part explained by them – then the problem of explanatory shortfall multiplies. How can the externalist explain why a particular
consideration has different normative weights against other considerations across different sets of circumstances? The fact that it would save her life has a certain normative weight against certain competing considerations in certain circumstances but a different normative weight against those same considerations in other circumstances. How is this fact to be explained? The externalist can appeal to normative principles, but these cannot explain the weights across the full variety of possible circumstances.

Other forms of externalism seem vulnerable to the same worry. Consider, for example, an externalist who locates the source of normativity not in the fact that something is a reason but in an evaluative fact, such as the fact that doing something while being motivated by a certain consideration is valuable in some way. While values seem to have more explanatory power than the normative fact that something is a reason, it is still hard to believe that values alone can explain why reasons have the weights that they do in hard cases. Like principles, values are by their very nature general and law-like; they don’t have fully determinate structures from which relations among the reasons to which they give rise can be ‘read-off’ in each possible set of circumstances. Like principles, their contours and contents are themselves plausibly dependent on the resolution of some hard cases.

In hard cases, the need for an explanation of their resolution is especially acute. That is part of what makes them ‘hard’; we need to understand why they are resolved in the way that they are because what is at stake is significant, and yet there is no easy explanation as to why their reasons relate as they do. In hard cases, it is wholly unsatisfying to rest with ‘That’s just how things are’. Source externalism is arguably committed to saying that in at least some such cases, there is no further explanation to be had. The scope of the problem, of course, depends on the depth and extent of hard cases for which this is true, but there is no a priori reason to think the problem will be of limited scope.

If, however, as hybrid voluntarism might suppose, externalism accounts for the source of only some and not all of our reasons – if it accounts for the normative source of only our given reasons – then voluntarist reasons can step in and explain why the reasons balance as they do, all things considered. Indeed, hard cases are plausibly ones in which given reasons are in equipoise. That is what makes them hard. If there is
nevertheless some determinate fact about what we have most all-things-considered reason to do, will-based reasons can explain that fact: the will steps in to fill the gap left by our given reasons.\(^3^0\) So, for example, in choosing between careers or places to live or people with who to spend your life, sometimes your given reasons will run out – your given reasons will be in the state of equipoise. Nevertheless, it seems, at least sometimes, that you can have all-things-considered most reason to choose what you end up choosing. How is this to be explained? Hybrid voluntarism offers one possible explanation: in such cases, you can, by an act of will, create a new voluntarist reason that favors one alternative over the other, and thereby make it the case that you have most all-things-considered reason to pursue the one thing rather than the other.\(^3^1\) When explaining why you have most reason to be, say, a philosopher rather than a deep sea diver, we can appeal to your volition; by an act of will, you have created a voluntarist reason that gives you most all-things-considered reason to be a philosopher. Insofar as there are hard cases in which it is nevertheless true that you have most all-things-considered reason to do one thing rather than the other, voluntarist reasons provide an additional resource with which to fill the explanatory gap left by one’s externalist given reasons. In this way, hybrid voluntarism provides the resources – arguably just where they are needed – for avoiding the explanatory shortfall of source externalism.

There is a final theoretical consideration in favor of hybrid voluntarism that provides a deep motivation for the view. By constraining our normative powers in the way hybrid voluntarism proposes, we underwrite an independently attractive view of our freedom or autonomy as rational agents. According to one widespread view, rational agency is a matter of recognizing and responding to our given reasons.\(^3^2\) A worry with this view, however, is that it makes rational agency unattractively passive; our agential role vis-à-vis our reasons is limited to the passive roles of discovering our reasons and being guided by them. These roles are ‘passive’ in that they do not involve any creation or determination of our reasons; they are the same roles a robot might play in solving problems according to algorithms – i.e., ‘reasons’ – made available to it.

According to an alternative view, our rational agency can directly determine what we have most reason to do. This ‘active’ view of rational agency sees rational agency as itself determinative of reasons. Part of what it is to be a rational agent is to have the
power – under the constraints of our given reasons – to make it true that one has most reason to do what one has most reason to do. In this way, an exercise of your rational agency makes it the case that you have most reason to devote your life to the study of normative ethics, while an exercise of my rational agency makes it the case that I have most reason to devote my life to the study of beetles or to saving the whales or to working for a political action committee. Facts about what each of us, as rational agents, has most reason to do are not truths passively received by us, determined by causal relations among our psychology and environment, but are instead truths made by us -- made by acts of will that express our rational agency. Hybrid voluntarism gives each rational agent the freedom to create her own truths about what she has most reason to do – within the limits of her given reasons. That is the kind of freedom we should all want to have and hybrid voluntarism is the only view about normative source that lets us have it.

3. Taking to be a reason

Hybrid voluntarism holds that when are given reasons run out, we can create voluntarist reasons through an act of will. But what act of will?

I suggest that the relevant act of will whereby we can create a will-based reason is the act of ‘taking to be a reason’. By taking a consideration to be a reason when our given reasons have run out, we can quite literally endow that consideration with the normativity of a reason, thereby making it a new, voluntarist reason.

What is this activity of taking something to be a reason? Since it is an act or activity, it is not an attitude such as believing that something is a reason or wanting or wishing it to be a reason. But nor is it an intention to do something or the act (or intention) of treating something as if it were a reason, that is, giving it the role of a reason in one’s deliberations. (I’ll be saying more about these possibilities later). ‘Taking something to be a reason’ is used here as a term of art; it denotes a volitional activity that cannot be defined in nonvolitional terms.

Although taking something to be a reason is a sui generis act of will, it need not be utterly mysterious. Taking something to be a reason can be understood as a practical analogue of stipulating the meaning of a word. When you take something to be
a reason, you ‘stipulate’ that it is a reason in much the way you can stipulate the meaning of a word. Consider the word ‘glig’. What is the meaning of ‘glig’? If we consult ordinary, lexicographic meanings, they fail to determine its meaning: we might say, loosely, that ‘given’ meanings have ‘run out’. Under these conditions, you can successfully stipulate a meaning of the word. You can say to yourself: “I hereby take ‘glig’ to mean ‘red, shiny, and round!’” And, lo! it does. I suggest that, in much the same way, when our given reasons run out; we can take a consideration to be a reason – roughly stipulate that it is a reason – and thereby make it a new reason to do one thing rather than another.

Just as one can change one’s mind about the stipulated meaning of a word, so too one can change one’s mind about taking something to be a reason. This may seem strange. How can willing something to be a reason thereby make it a reason if one can just as easily unwill it to be a reason? This objection, what we might call ‘the bindingness objection’, is commonly leveled against standard forms of voluntarism, but we did not include it among voluntarism’s ‘fatal flaws’ because the objection is unsound. The worry behind the objection is that you can’t create a reason via an act of will because reasons are binding and you can’t bind yourself through your own act of will.

But just as you can stipulate the meaning of a word and thereby confer meaning on it – even if you later change your mind and ‘unstipulate’ it – so too you can will something to be a reason and thereby confer normativity on it, making it a reason. This is so even if you change your mind and unwill it. Indeed, as many philosophers have persuasively argued, you can rationally bind yourself through an act of will. Connie Rosati points out that there is a difference between sneaking a cigarette after willing yourself to quit, on the one hand, and smoking one after deciding to give up your commitment to quit, on the other. In the former case you have violated a principle you have laid down for yourself, and in the latter, you have changed your mind about what principle should govern your actions.

While in taking something to be a reason you are always, ceteris paribus, rationally permitted to ‘untake’ it, it does not follow that you are always rationally permitted to do what flies in the face of what you have willed yourself to have most reason to do. This is because, in the usual case, when you take something to be a
reason, you will perform actions downstream which give you further *given* reasons to do what you willed yourself to have most reason to do. Sometimes the downstream effects of our acts of will make it irrational to perform actions that are inconsistent with what we willed ourselves as having most reason to do.

Consider an example. Suppose you are a talented philosophy graduate student, and you are deciding whether to write a dissertation in formal epistemology or in ethics. Suppose – fill in the details however you like – that your given reasons have run out: e.g., you’d write strong dissertations in either subject, though strong in different ways; make as important a contribution to each field; your interest in each is different but you don’t have greater interest in one rather than the other; your mother wishes you to be a formal epistemologist and your father keenly desires you to be an ethicist; and so on. Your given reasons for going one way are not, all told, stronger, weaker, or as strong as your reasons to go for the other. They are in equipoise. Hybrid voluntarism maintains that by taking, say, the general importance of ethical inquiry to practical life *to be* a reason to pursue ethics, you thereby create a new, will-based reason to pursue ethics. And since you now have a new will-based reason to pursue ethics, you may have all-things-considered most reason to choose the ethics option.

Typically, taking the importance of ethics as a reason to pursue ethics will have downstream effects. It will lead you to spend your time thinking about ethics, to buy a bunch of ethics books, to present yourself to the philosophical community as an ethicist, and so on – all actions that give you *given* reasons not to pursue a career in formal epistemology or indeed deep sea diving. Even if you have a change of heart – if you no longer take features of doing ethics as reason-providing for you – you may have given reasons to continue to do ethics, though, by hypothesis, you no longer have voluntarist reasons to do so. Whether it is irrational, all things considered, for you to change course depends on the weight of the given reasons that arise downstream from your act of will. And that is how it should be.\(^{34}\)

The consideration you take to be a reason can be a consideration that is already the content of a given reason. By taking the very same fact to be a reason, you make that fact a will-based reason regardless of whether it is already a given reason.\(^{35}\) There are of course constraints on what you can take to be reason. You can’t take the fact that
the number four is the successor of the number three to be a reason to study ethics rather than epistemology – that would be unintelligible. There is a logical constraint of intelligibility operating in the background here; only considerations that can intelligibly ‘count in favor’ of an action can, logically speaking, be candidate reasons for that action. This is a constraint that any theory of reasons or the source of normativity must respect and does not raise any special issues for hybrid voluntarism. With the background logical constraint in place, there is the further substantive question of whether a consideration that could intelligibly count in favor of an action does in fact count in favor of it. When your given reasons have run out, you can also take a new consideration – some new fact previously irrelevant to the choice but which nevertheless intelligibly counts in favor of an option – to be a reason and thereby make it a will-based reason.36

Suppose, for example, that what your distant Uncle Eddy prefers is irrelevant to which dissertation you should write. You might, if your given reasons have run out, take the fact that Uncle Eddy wants you to be an ethicist to be a reason to be an ethicist. In short, just as you can stipulate a meaning for ‘glig’ that has the same or different content as the meaning of another word, you can ‘stipulate’ a content to be a reason that is the same or different content as a given reason.

Nor need taking something to be a reason – or stipulating the meaning of a word – be a conscious, deliberate act. You can find yourself having stipulated the meaning of a word. You might find yourself using a common or nonsense word in unexpected ways without having consciously set out to do so. Similarly, you can find yourself having taken a consideration to be a reason. You are, after all, more than your conscious, deliberate states. Perhaps you find yourself reading and thinking about ethics on Saturday nights. This might be evidence that you have taken the importance of ethics to be a reason to pursue it. The volitional activity of taking something to be a reason, though perhaps undeliberately and unconsciously done, differs from what we might call ‘passive drift’. You can drift into doing ethics if your ethics professors are more encouraging than your epistemology ones, or if more rewarding ethics-related academic opportunities present themselves. If you become an ethicist simply because a psychological system of feedback and reward causes you to spend more time on ethics than epistemology, then you have drifted into becoming an ethicist rather than actively becoming one. What
more is added by your activity of taking considerations to be reasons is that you are actively engaged in the pursuit.

Finally, just as your stipulation of the meaning of a word gives that word meaning only for you (further conditions need to be satisfied before it can become a shared meaning), so too does your act of taking something to be a reason create a reason just for you. A quick argument shows why this must be. If you ‘stipulate’ for me that the fact that it’s beautiful is a reason for me to pursue it, and I ‘stipulate’ for me that the fact that’s beautiful is a reason for me not to pursue it, we have a contradiction in my voluntarist reasons. According to hybrid voluntarism, we have the normative power to create will-based reasons, but only for ourselves and not others.

4. Ersatz normative powers

If an act of will creates a reason, the willing is that in virtue of which the reason is a reason. If we have normative powers, we are able through an act of will to create a reason in the strong sense of endowing a consideration with action-guiding force. There are, however, other ways in which willing might play a role in ‘determining’ or ‘generating’ our reasons, and it is important to distinguish normative powers from their pretenders.

We can start by considering contractualism or more generally ‘constructivism’, the view that we construct substantive normative principles from a procedure consisting in constrained mental activity by participants in a practice. By reasonably agreeing – and therefore willing – under certain conditions that certain principles should govern the way we live together, we have reasons to follow those principles. Our ‘willing’ certain principles might thus be said to ‘construct’ ‘what we owe to each other’ (Scanlon 1998) or our reasons for setting up the basic institutions of our society one way rather than another (Rawls 1971). So it might seem that contractualism implies that we have the normative power to create reasons for ourselves.

But this is to misunderstand contractualism. Contractualism is a view about how to get the content of some normative domain, not about what is the source of the normativity of that domain. Through reasoned agreement we construct not normativity but the content of principles governing the basic structure of society or that part of
morality concerned with what we owe to each other. Contractualism seeks to determine the substantive principles of a normative domain; it does not attempt to answer the question, In virtue of what do the principles of that domain have the normativity they do? Indeed, the leading contractualists of our time are not voluntarists about the source of normativity. Rawls, insofar as he had a view on the matter, is most plausibly an internalist about normative source since he seems to have thought that what made something a reason was some relation involving the agent’s present desire. And Scanlon is a source externalist; he thinks there is nothing in virtue of which the considerations that provide reasons to reject a principle – such as that it would harm someone – are reasons. They just are. So contractualism does not entail that we have normative powers. Indeed, contractualism assigns no special role to the will in determining reasons; it merely holds that reasonable agreement, which can, as an incidental matter, be said to be what parties to the agreement ‘will’ or ‘decide’ to do, determines which reasons they have. What determines the reasons is the agreement, not the willing. The same goes for noncontractualist forms of constructivism; what determines the substance of the principles is the procedure, not willing to do its upshots. So the role of the will in constructivism is incidental not only to which considerations are reasons but also to that in virtue of which they are reasons.

This is not to say that willings or decisions to do something cannot make a normative difference. By deciding to do something, I can change what attitudes I am rationally required or permitted to have – that is, I can affect my ‘structural’ rationality – the rationality that is wholly a function of relations among mental states. I might, through an act of will, decide to take up tennis rather than the piano as a leisure pursuit. Other things equal, if I fail to regard the fact that buying a racket would help me achieve my goal of playing tennis as a reason to do so, I am structurally irrational. In general, it is a rational requirement that, having willed an end, that I will the means to the end or give up the end. But this is not to say that my decision to take up tennis in any way determines my reasons to buy a racket or to forgo the purchase of a piano. Indeed, I may have no such reasons. So an act of will can affect what attitudes I must adopt or abandon to be structurally rational, but this is not yet an exercise of a genuine normative power, a power to create new reasons in the sense at issue.
In order for an act of will to be the exercise of a normative power, it needs to be more than a willing to do what one agrees to do or a mere decision to do it. A case that seems promising in this regard is promising. Promising seems to involve a special act of will beyond deciding or willing to do something. Suppose I promise to wash your car tomorrow. By this act of will, I commit myself to washing your car and thereby seem to create a reason for myself to wash your car. It seems that by committing myself through an act of will to wash your car, I have created a new reason to wash your car that I wouldn’t have but for my act of will. So promising might be thought to be an exercise of normative powers.

But promising, and thereby having a reason to do what one promised to do, need not involve a normative power – the power to endow a consideration with normativity through an act of will. For one thing, in order to have made a promise, you don’t, arguably, have to will to do what you promise to do. All you need to do is to (freely) utter certain words in a certain context with uptake by the person to whom your words are addressed. If I say to your face ‘I promise to wash your car tomorrow’, all the while taking delight in the thought ‘Won’t he be surprised when I don’t show up tomorrow!’ I have arguably made a promise even though I have not willed to wash your car. The conditions for the existence of a promise may not require an act of will or commitment to do something on the promisor’s part let alone any special act of will beyond this.

More importantly, supposing that I have succeeded in promising and incurring the obligation to wash your car, there remains the question, In virtue of what does my reason to wash your car, whatever it might be, have the action-guidingness of a reason? Why is my reason to wash your car a reason to do so? Does the fact that I promised answer this question? It is natural to suppose that my reason to wash your car is the fact that I promised to do so. But why is the fact that I promised normative? What is the source of the normativity of my reason to wash your car, whatever that reason might be?

The usual accounts of promising do not understand promising as that in virtue of which something is a reason; promising is not usually considered a source of normativity. Rather, a promise is a condition under which one has a reason but not that in virtue of which one’s reason is a reason. So, for example, some popular accounts of
promising understand it as part of a social institution consisting of conventional rules that it is unfair to violate (Rawls 1971: 344-50) or that implicate moral duties to perform absent release (Kolodny and Wallace 2003); or as the expression of an intention that reasonably leads to expectations it would be morally wrong to upset (Scanlon 1998: chapter 7); or as a practice that expresses an authority or autonomy interest or one’s “moral standing” in a community (Raz 1986: 84; Owens 2006; Shiffrin 2008; Watson 2009) that makes possible certain intrinsically valuable relationships between people (Raz 1977: 228; Shiffrin 2008: 485; Watson 2009). On these views, why one’s reason to do what one promised to do is a reason can be traced to some value, right, or obligation and not to an act of will. So, for example, one’s reason to keep one’s promise has the normativity of a reason in virtue of a normative principle according to which if you promise to do something, you are obligated to do it; or in virtue of the value of having the power to transfer one’s rights or authority to another; or in virtue of valuable relationships among people it would otherwise be impossible to have. That ultimately in virtue of which your reason to do what you promised to do has the normativity of a reason, then, is a normative fact. Most accounts of promising, insofar as they have anything to say about the question of source if only implicitly, seem to presuppose source externalism about the normative source of one’s reason to do what one has promised to do.\footnote{This is not to say that promises have to be understood in this way; I believe there is an account of promising according to which it is an exercise of a genuine, and not ersatz, normative power. But promising is not typically understood in this way. Instead, having made a promise is a condition under which, according to a substantive normative truth or principle, one has a reason to do what one has promised to do, not that in virtue of which one’s reason to keep one’s promise, whatever it might be, is a reason to do so. Thus an act of will can be a condition under which, according to a substantive normative principle, we have a reason. It is easy to confuse being a condition for having a reason according to a substantive normative principle with being that in virtue of which a reason is a reason, substantive normative principles aside. But this difference is of the first importance.}

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To see the difference, consider a conditional form of a normative principle:

If you _______, then you have a reason to x,

where the antecedent specifies the conditions under which the consequent follows – the conditions under which you – normatively speaking – have a reason to x. A normative principle states that, as normative matter, if a certain condition is fulfilled, the state of having a reason to x follows. A condition under which you have a reason is thus something that fills the blank of the antecedent of such a principle.

There are, of course, many different ways the conditional form of a normative principle can be filled out – as having wide or narrow scope, as stating conditional or unconditional reasons, as describing a necessary or contingent truth, and so on. Moreover, the antecedent of the conditional can play weaker and stronger roles – what fills the blank might be the circumstances or situation in which you have a reason or the conditions that ‘enable’ or ‘trigger’ your having it, and so what counts as a ‘condition’ for having a reason will admit of further distinctions. For our purposes we can remain neutral on the various ways in which a conditional normative principle can be made more precise and simply note that however the principle is interpreted, it is to be understood as a normative principle, that is, as stating a substantive, normative connection between an antecedent condition and the conclusion that you have a reason.

Now there are many instantiations of this schema in which the antecedent blank is filled by something the agent does. By doing something, you can satisfy the conditions under which you, according to a normative principle, have reasons you didn’t have before. If you punch someone in the nose, then you have a reason to apologize or make amends. If you have a child, then you have a reason to save up for her college education. If you make a promise, then you have a reason to keep it. An act of will can be such a condition. So one way in which an act of will can ‘generate’ reasons is by being the condition under which we have a reason according to a normative principle. But this is not the same as being that in virtue of which the reason is a reason. Normativity is conferred not by the act of will but by the normative principle.

This difference can be highlighted by distinguishing the question to which appeal to a condition is an answer from the question to which appeal to a source is an answer.
Suppose we have filled in the blank of the antecedent of a normative principle, that is, we have determined what conditions must be satisfied in order for you to have a reason to $x$ according to that principle. This is a *normative* matter. Indeed, much of normative theorizing can be characterized as an attempt to answer the question: What are the correct substantive normative principles according to which when certain conditions are satisfied the agent has a reason to do $x$ – to make amends, to squirrel away her savings, to wash someone’s car? Consequentialists will offer answers to this question that differ from those offered by deontologists.

Once our normative theorizing is complete, however, there remains a further meta-normative, question: In virtue of what, ultimately, is the consideration that is your reason to $x$ – whatever that reason might be – a reason for you to $x$? In virtue of what does your reason to make amends – a reason you have on the condition that you punch him in the nose – have the action-guidingness of a reason? In virtue of what is your reason to save your pennies – a reason you have under the condition that you have a child in need of a college education – a reason to save? And in virtue of what is your reason to do what you promised to do – a reason you have under the condition of having made a promise to do it – a reason to do it? These are questions not for first-order normative inquiry but for meta-normative inquiry into what ‘grounds’ the fact that something is a reason.\(^{45}\) What must normativity be like such that this consideration rather than that can ultimately make something have the action-guidingness of a reason?

There are, then, two roles the will can play in ‘generating’ reasons that it is crucial to distinguish. Sometimes an act of will plays the same role as punching someone in the nose – it is the fulfillment of a condition of having a reason according to a normative principle that is, as it were, already there, waiting for the condition for having it to be fulfilled.\(^{46}\) But this role should not be confused with another. An act of will might be *that in virtue of which* something is a reason; it might be a fact about the nature of normativity that what makes a consideration have the action-guiding force of a reason is an act of will.\(^{47}\) In short, the conditions under which we have a reason to do something are one thing and that in virtue of which that reason is a reason is another. Only the latter involves our having normative powers. But do we have any such powers?
5. The Argument from Commitment

There are, I believe, a number of arguments for thinking that we have the normative power to create reasons when our given reasons have run out. While these arguments are meant to work together to suggest that hybrid voluntarism is an attractive theory of practical normativity, each can be evaluated on its own terms. My focus here is on what I call the Argument from Commitment. This argument attempts to understand the nature of certain kinds of commitment and concludes that if these commitments are to do the work they do in practical reason, they are most plausibly understood as involving an exercise of our normative powers. The commitments of interest are those typically made in personal relationships, such as romantic and familial love relationships, and in the pursuit of personal projects, such as gardening, the Yankees, philosophy, or helping the homeless. Though I will be focusing on commitments in personal relationships, the arguments extend, I believe, to the case of personal projects.

The argument from commitment attempts to raise a challenge to those who would deny our normative powers: how else is commitment to fulfill its role in practical reason if not as an exercise of our normative powers? The argument has two steps. First, it explores a range of candidate accounts of commitment, finds them inadequate, and ends with the suggestion that a commitment involves the activity of ‘taking something to be reason’. Second, it explores how this activity of ‘taking something to be a reason’ could explain the special reasons we have in committed relationships, and in particular, whether it could be a mere condition under which, according to a normative principle, we have a reason of the relationship or that in virtue of which we have such a reason. It turns out that the former leads to an implausible internal tension in normative principles and precludes perfectly rational agents from making commitments while the latter allows commitment to play the role it seems to play. If this is right, then by an act of volition – by taking something to be a reason – one can make it a reason. Thus commitments involve an exercise of our normative powers.

i) Commitments

Suppose Harry wants to see a show on Broadway but is $50 shy of the price of a ticket. Do you have a reason to give him $50? Whether you do depends, among other
things, on whether you have a personal relationship with him. You don’t, in general, have a reason to pay for the theater goings of every Tom, Dick, and Harry. But if Harry is your child, your friend, your father, or your husband, you may well have this reason. Our being in personal relationships gives us agent-relative reasons we might not otherwise have.

Philosophers have offered various explanations as to how our being in personal relationships gives rise to agent-relative reasons, but these discussions tend to be conducted in general terms, without distinguishing committed personal relationships from uncommitted ones. Committed personal relationships are, however, importantly different from uncommitted ones, and it is worth exploring how commitments might give rise to special reasons of a relationship in a distinctive way. My focus will be on the commitments we make to people in love relationships. They are arguably the most important relationships of a good life. These are sometimes referred to as ‘substantive’ commitments, and, as we will see, they should be distinguished from other sorts of commitment, such as ‘intention-like’ commitments, which are settlings on a course of action coupled with a determination to see it through, and ‘normative’ commitments, which are aimed at values or principles like ‘Never lie’.

While it is notoriously difficult to say just what such commitments are, we can highlight three intuitive features that any plausible account of them needs to accommodate.

First, a commitment to a person is something you can decide to make. After several years in an on-again-off-again relationship with Harry, you might decide to commit to him. This decision might be a conscious and deliberate choice to shut down further deliberations about whether he is ‘the one’ and resolve that he is. Or it could be an unconscious and nondeliberate choice; after living together for a few years, you notice that more and more of your long-term plans involve him and that his interests have greater importance than they had before. Indeed, were he to need a kidney, you would offer up yours. This is not to say that commitments must always be a matter of decision, but only that they are the kind of thing that one can in principle decide to make.
Second, a commitment is in some sense *up to us* – it can be, roughly speaking, ‘personal’, or ‘individual’, or ‘your own’. For present purposes, we can interpret this idea of being ‘up to us’ in the minimal sense of not being rationally required. In your on-again-off-again relationship with Harry, it may be perfectly rational for you to commit and perfectly rational for you not to. Similarly, if you have a range of personal projects, you may not be rationally required to commit to one over the others or indeed to any at all. Whether you commit or not, you need not be making a mistake of rationality; not all commitments or failures to commit are irrational. Again, this is not to say that commitments must always be up to us but rather that an account of them had better allow that at least some of them are.

Finally, and most importantly, commitments explain why we have the special reasons we might not otherwise have without having made the commitment. To see how this is so, start with the case of uncommitted personal relationships. You might have a personal relationship with Bob, your bank manager, or with Stacey, the Starbucks worker who prepares your latte every morning on the way to work. You are not committed in either relationship; given a better interest rate by a competitor bank, you would transfer your accounts in an instant, and you wouldn’t be much fussed if someone other than Stacey prepared your morning brew. Nevertheless, being in a personal relationship with them gives you reasons you might not otherwise have – for example, to inquire after their loved ones or to send them holiday greetings.

When you make a commitment in a personal relationship, you have *further*, special reasons beyond the reasons you might have simply because you are in a personal relationship. Before committing to Harry, for instance, you may have no reason to subsidize his theater goings, give him your kidney, or pick up his dirty socks, but after committing to him, you may have such reasons. Commitments give rise to special reasons we might not otherwise have. Without the commitment, we don’t have the special reasons, and so the commitment should figure in an explanation of why we have those reasons. We can leave open for now the way in which a commitment might provide such an explanation. But the correct account of commitment needs to show how commitments can explain why we have the special reasons we do when we make commitments in personal relationships.
Despite the importance and ubiquity of such commitments, relatively little philosophical ink has been spilled over trying to understand them. I won’t be offering a full-blown account myself – the commitments of interest no doubt typically involve much more than what I discuss here – but I want to suggest what I think is essential to them. My suggestion grows out of examination of four possible competing approaches, each of which fails to account for one or more of the intuitive features of commitments. Although my arguments are leveled against relatively spare versions of competitor approaches, the difficulties I raise for them are not, I suspect, remediable either by the addition of bells and whistles or by conjoining two or more of these possible approaches.

a. Normative belief. We might start off with the suggestion that a commitment is – that is, essentially involves – a belief that the person with whom one is in a committed relationship has special – either more or distinctive – value. Being committed to Harry would, on this view, be a matter of believing that Harry is the cat’s whiskers. One question here is, what is the basis for this belief? Beliefs are based on evidence, and evidence is typically publicly available. So if there is evidence that Harry is the cat’s whiskers for all to see, then presumably everyone should believe he is the cat’s whiskers. But not everyone is committed to Harry.

Better is the idea that a commitment is the belief that the relationship one shares with Harry has special value. I can share the evidence for your belief and come to believe that the relationship you share with Harry has special value without thereby being committed to Harry or to your relationship with him since it’s your relationship, not mine. You believe that your relationship with Harry has special value, but you don’t believe that your relationship with your bank manager does. Perhaps that is the crucial difference between having a committed relationship in the one case and an uncommitted one in the other.

But the same problem arises. Consider you and your doppelganger, identical in every relevant respect. You are both contemplating whether to make a commitment to Harry/doppelganger-Harry. As we have already noted, a feature of commitment is that it may be rationally permissible to commit or not to commit. So it might be perfectly rational for you to make a commitment and for your doppelganger not to. How could this
be if commitment were a matter of believing that the relationship has special value? If
the evidence for this proposition is uncertain, arguably the rational thing for both you
and your doppelganger to do is to suspend belief.\textsuperscript{56} So while it seems rational to commit
and rational not to, it does not seem rational for one of you to believe that the
relationship has special value while the other, faced with exactly the same evidence,
does not.

More importantly, the belief approach fails to give commitment the right relation
to volition.\textsuperscript{57} A commitment is something one can decide to make. But one cannot
decide to believe that something has special value. After your twelfth date with Harry,
you might decide to commit to him and thereby be so committed. But you can’t decide
to believe that something is valuable and thereby believe that it is. The proverbial evil
demon might offer you a million dollars if you believe that \(2 + 2 = 5\). Try as you might, by
deciding to believe this you cannot make yourself believe it. The best you can do is to
cause yourself to be in a state of believing it, perhaps by taking a pill, but beliefs
themselves are not under the control of the will.

Finally, understanding commitment as a belief that something has special value
makes it a mystery as to how commitments can explain the special reasons of
committed relationships. Suppose you are committed to your relationship with Harry,
and that your commitment is a matter of your believing that the relationship has special
value. How can this belief explain why you have reasons to give him your kidney?
Suppose your belief is false. How can a false belief explain why you have reasons to
give up your kidney? Suppose your belief is true. Can the fact that you believe this
explain why you have reasons to give him your kidney? If you didn’t believe it, would
you then have no reason? Why think that the belief plays any role in explaining the
reasons you have over and above the fact that your relationship has special value? It is
not the belief that would explain your special reasons but its content – the fact that your
relationship has special value. But if the special value of your relationship explains why
you have a reason to give Harry your kidney, you would have had this reason all along,
before you committed to him, that is, believed that the relationship had special value,
since the special value of your relationship would have been a fact prior to your
commitment. Your commitment could not explain why you have the special reasons of your committed relationship.58

b. Desire and desire-like states. Perhaps a commitment is a set of structured desires or dispositions concerning the object of commitment that is had for the sake of that object, or a set of distinctive emotions toward the object.59 Your commitment to Harry might essentially be a set of desires that his life go well, that he have your kidney if he needs one, that you pick up his socks when he forgetfully leaves them on the floor, and so on – hierarchically structured, with some desires having precedence over others, and each had for Harry’s sake. Or it might be a matter of caring about him or loving him for his own sake, where this caring and loving involves dispositions to do things, such as to give him your kidney and pick up his socks when the need to arises.60 Or, relatedly, your commitment may be an amalgam of warm and fuzzy feelings, emotions, and moods toward Harry.

Although this approach may seem to be an attractive way to think about commitment, it conflates, I think, what is essential to commitment with what is a typical consequence of having made one. Like beliefs, desires have the wrong relation to volition. You can decide to commit to Harry and thereby be committed to him, but you cannot decide to want his life to go well, or decide to be disposed to pick up his socks should the occasion warrant it, or decide to feel affection toward him and thereby want those things. Try as hard as you might, you cannot come to want (be disposed to or feel) something simply by deciding to want (be disposed to or feel) it. Again, you can decide to cause yourself to be in a state of wanting it, but you can’t want something merely by deciding to want it.61 There is much more that could be said about how commitments are not plausibly desires, but in the interests of brevity, I won’t discuss them here. Instead, I’ll take the fact that, like beliefs, desires do not plausibly stand in the right relation to volition to be decisive against them.

c. Endorsement of or identification with desires or other motivational states. If a commitment is an endorsement of a mental state such as a desire, and endorsement is volitional, we succeed in accounting for the first feature of commitments – they are things one can decide to make. Endorsing or identifying with a desire might be willing that the desire be efficacious in action. So if, for instance, you decide to endorse a
desire that Harry receive your kidney, you decide to will that your desire that he get your kidney leads to his getting it. Moreover, by endorsing a desire, you 'make it your own.' This approach seems also to capture the possibility that our commitments are 'up to us'.

One difficulty with this approach, however, is that it seems to give commitments the wrong object. When you will that your desire move you to action, the object of your willing is your desire. But when you commit to Harry or to your relationship with him, your activity does not seem to be directed inward, toward your own mental states. Commitments in personal relationships seems to be activity directed toward something outside of oneself, be it a person or the relationship in which one participates. So even if a commitment so understood could explain why we have special reasons, it would do so in the wrong way, by explaining our special reasons as a consequence of inward-looking activity. You would have a reason to give Harry your kidney because you willed that your desires concerning Harry be satisfied. This is the mock commitment of a narcissist. A narcissist might be 'committed' to Harry in the sense that she wills that her cares and concerns be met, and as luck would have it, those cares and concerns are directed at Harry.

Moreover, a commitment seems capable of flying in the face of one’s desires and thus need not be an endorsement of them. Sometimes a commitment in a personal relationship involves gritting one’s teeth, rolling up one’s sleeves, taking a deep breath, and doing what one has no desire to do. The unhappy wife who has no desire to be with her husband may nevertheless be committed to him. The middle-aged man who has no desire to exercise may nevertheless be committed to his morning calisthenics. The swinging bachelor has no desire to care for the child of a recently-deceased distant relative but might commit to raising it as his own. Nor does it help to suggest that commitments are endorsements of counterfactual desires, desires you would have had if you were less resentful, lazy, or selfish, since you can’t will desires you in fact don’t have to move you to action.

d. Decisions/Intentions/Policies. This last consideration naturally leads to the thought that a commitment is a decision or intention to do something. Michael Bratman defines an intention as “a complex form of commitment to action” (Bratman
1987: 110). Perhaps your commitment to Harry is just a decision or intention to give him money when he wants to buy theater tickets, to give him your kidney when he needs one, and to pick up his dirty socks when they’re lying around. On this view, when you decide to commit to Harry, you decide to decide to do these various things.

Again, this suggestion captures the right relation between the will and commitments; just as you can decide to commit, you can decide to intend to do something. And unlike the previous approach, it gives commitments an object apart from your own attitudes. But the problem is that the substantive commitments of personal relationships are not intentions to perform an action. When you make a commitment to Harry, you need not thereby be intending to do anything in particular. Nor can a commitment plausibly be understood as a set of conditional commitments. When you commit to Harry, you are not committing to: intending to give him your kidney if he needs one and no better match is found, intending to pick up his socks if he forgets to do so, intending to give him $50 when he’s short in the ticket queue, and so on. As Marcel Lieberman notes, “[in a]…commitment… [in a personal relationship]…it is not at all clear what, if anything, is intended in being so committed. As we move toward the more substantive cases of commitment, commitment no longer seems to track intention since the content of what is intended cannot be read off directly from the commitment” (Lieberman 1998: 65).

Moreover, it is unclear how a decision, intention, or plan to do something can explain why one has reasons to do that thing. Suppose you decide to throw yourself through the window. The reasons you have to do or not to do so have nothing to do with your having decided to do so. It is easy to think that decisions can give rise to reasons because they figure in a related form of normativity, structural rationality. If you have decided to throw yourself through the window, then the fact that you have so decided can make it structurally rational for you to do so. It’s structurally rational for you to follow through on your decision, other things equal, but you may have no reasons to do what you have decided to do.

Of course, intentions to do something can affect what reasons one has in an indirect way. A decision to do something may operate as a condition under which one has a reason to do something – it might fill the blank of the antecedent of a conditional
A final pair of suggestions. Perhaps a commitment is what Bratman and Velleman call a “policy” – a general intention or plan to act in certain perhaps amorphously specified ways in certain perhaps amorphously specified circumstances. You might have a policy to “stand up for the truth” (Velleman 1989: 307-8) or to refrain from discussing grades with your students (Lieberman 1998: 82) or to turn down a second drink when you have to drive home (Bratman 1987: 57). Of course the term “policy” can be used to signify a range of phenomena, including our intuitive idea of a commitment. But policies, strictly understood as general intentions to do things, however amorphously specified, suffer from the same difficulty as their more specific counterparts above. How can a general intention to perform actions in a range of circumstances explain why one has special reasons to do what one intends to do in a specific circumstance? How can a general intention to, say, “do good by Harry” explain why one has special reasons to give him a kidney when he needs one? A general intention may affect the rationality of one’s actions but, for the same bootstrapping considerations raised above, cannot give rise to reasons to perform those actions.

Bratman also introduces a special sort of policy, a “self-governing policy”. A self-governing policy is an intention to “treat a desire as providing a justifying reason in motivationally efficacious practical reasoning” (Bratman 2007: 39 and 1996). It is an intention to perform a very special kind of action – the action of treating certain considerations as reasons in one’s deliberations. So perhaps a commitment is a self-
governing policy to treat certain considerations as reasons in your deliberations. Bratman’s aim in introducing self-governing policies is not to account for substantive commitments and the special reasons to which they give rise but to explain what attitudes might plausibly constitute the standpoint of the agent in deliberation. However, the suggestion that commitments might be understood along these lines gets close to what I believe is correct, so it is instructive to see why the suggestion fails.

A general intention to treat certain considerations as reasons is a plan to treat those considerations as if they were reasons. The truth of whether they are reasons is no part of having these attitudes. But this raises a dilemma. Suppose the considerations you treat as reasons aren’t reasons. Then your attitude of treating them as reasons is intrinsically irrational and cannot explain why you have those reasons. We should want the clear-eyed, ideal rational agent to be able to make commitments. But how could a perfectly rational agent give a consideration weight in her deliberations that she knows it does not have? Suppose instead that the considerations you treat as reasons are reasons. How then can the intention to treat them as reasons explain why they are reasons? How can treating Harry’s interests as if they gave you a reason to give him your kidney explain how you have a reason to give him your kidney, a reason you presumably have independently of your intention? And if you don’t have the reason independently of the intention, how can intending to treat something as a reason thereby make it true that it is a reason? The core difficulty is that these intentions essentially involve a kind of pretense; you treat a consideration as a reason independently of whether it really is one; you give it a role in your deliberation that, were it a reason, the consideration would have. But commitments don’t plausibly involve such pretense. When you make a commitment to Harry, you don’t pretend that his interests give you special reasons – indeed, there’s no use in pretending as if you have these special reasons since, by hypothesis, you have them. In short, it is unclear how pretending that you have a reason can explain why you have it.

ii) Taking a consideration to be a reason

Suppose you and Harry have been dating for a time. At some point, you transition from an uncommitted relationship to a committed one. At some point, you –
perhaps unconsciously and undeliberately – make a commitment to Harry. What happened?

I suggest that, at a certain point, you start taking Harry’s interests to be a reason to do various things. Socks provide a good example. In an uncommitted relationship, you might leave Harry’s dirty socks on the floor. “He can pick them up himself!” you might say to yourself. Once you commit to Harry, however, you find yourself taking – ‘stipulating’ – that his irremediable untidiness is a reason for you to clean up after him.

What happens, phenomenologically speaking, I suggest, is that the socks start to strike you differently. Pre-commitment, they strike you as an annoying mess that is not your responsibility. Post-commitment they strike you (not only as an annoying mess but also) as having features that provide reasons for you to pick them up. Perhaps they strike you as expressing Harry’s charming but irremediable untidiness, or as an unsightly detraction from your joint home making, or as smelly and in need of a good washing, to name a few possibilities. (I hasten to add that commitment goes both ways; if Harry is committed to you, your socks should strike him in the same range of ways, and there are complex ways in which reciprocal commitments interact that I don’t discuss here). Your commitment alters your perception of certain facts; before the commitment those facts do not seem to be reason-providing while after a commitment they do – or they seem to be reason-providing in a different way. The same goes for kidneys. Consider your reaction if told that the man with whom you’ve had a handful of dates needs your kidney to survive. You have a personal relationship, but it is not yet a committed relationship. His need for your kidney strikes you differently than it would if he were someone with whom you were in a committed relationship. Your reaction will be closer to the reaction you would have if told that a stranger needs your kidney than if told that your lifetime love or child needs your kidney. In particular, his need would not strike you as a compelling reason to give him yours as it likely would were you committed to him.69

How is this phenomenology to be explained? We have already argued that it cannot be explained by appeal to commitments as beliefs, desires, dispositions, endorsements, decisions, intentions, plans, or policies. My suggestion is that when you commit to Harry, you will that his interests be reasons for you to do things. This is
something you do. Taking something to be a reason is stipulating or commanding – by a sheer act of will – that it is a reason. When you take something to be a reason, you literally (though perhaps not consciously or deliberately) pronounce: Let this be a reason! Thus, your commitment to Harry may involve your taking his need for a kidney to be a reason for you to give him yours, his shortfall in theater funds to be a reason to subsidize his ticket purchase, and his irremediable untidiness to be a reason to pick up his socks. In general, a commitment to someone in a personal relationship involves taking his interests or features to be reason-giving for yourself.

It might be wondered how a commitment to a person could be a matter of stipulating that his interests are reasons. After all, just as you can stipulate the meaning of a word as a matter of will, you can unstipulate it as a matter of will. Should commitments to people be understood as something we can undo as a matter of will?

Consider your commitment to Harry. In the typical case, your having committed to Harry will lead you to do things that are public manifestations of it – you will start to say and do things that people who have made a commitment typically say and do. These public manifestations of your commitment in turn lead to reasonable expectations on Harry’s part that you will help him in various ways when he needs help, such as give him your kidney and pick up his socks. If you refuse to help him, you may be violating general moral principles of assurance, fidelity, and trust. Typically, a commitment has downstream effects that are the antecedent conditions of moral or other normative principles in virtue of which you have given reasons to do what is consonant with a committed relationship – even if you are no longer committed. When you divorce, you have unwilled your commitment. But it does not follow that you have no given reason to do things that you would have reason to do in a committed relationship. Lawyers call it alimony.

But commitments themselves are essentially a matter of will. People change their minds about whether to be committed to someone. You can end your commitment to Harry as a matter of will – you might deliberately decide to end your commitment to him, or you might find that the two of you have drifted apart and that you are no longer committed to him. In both cases, ending the commitment is something that you do. If you no longer take his need for a kidney as normative for you, you have no voluntarist
reason to give him yours. Thus, although your being committed is a matter of your will – 
you can will voluntarist reasons to help Harry just as you can unwill them – in the typical 
case, your commitment will have public manifestations which then trigger given reasons 
to do some of what you would have voluntarist reasons to do were you in a committed 
relationship.

Thus, understanding commitments in terms of ‘taking something to be a reason’ 
gives commitments the right relation to reasons and the will. We can, as a matter of will, 
end a commitment to someone, but at the same time, we cannot, as a matter of will, 
destroy the given reasons we have to do things that are the result of downstream 
effects of our having made a commitment.

This way of understanding commitments meets the first two of our desiderata for 
an account of commitments. Just as a commitment to Harry is something you can 
decide to make, you can decide to take Harry’s interests to be a reason to give him your 
kidney. Taking something to be a reason is something you can decide to do. At the 
same time, just as a commitment need not be a matter of conscious, deliberate decision 
– you can come to realize that you – perhaps unconsciously and nondeliberately – have 
committed to someone after the fact – you can take something to be a reason without 
having realized that you have done so. As you lie on the operating table, ready to be 
sliced open, it might dawn on you that Harry’s interests have greater normative 
significance for you than they might otherwise have. This is evidence that you have 
taken his interests to be reasons. So is your belief that you have special reasons to 
undergo the operation for him – and not for your bank manager or a stranger.

Moreover, taking something to be a reason can be ‘up to you’ in the minimal 
sense we described: you aren’t rationally required to take Harry’s interests to be a 
reason to give him your kidney. Whether you stipulate his interests to be reason-
providing for you is up to you. You aren’t rationally required to take his need for a kidney 
as a reason for you to give him yours and might perfectly rationally refrain from doing 
so. Takings-to-be-a-reason are up to us in the right way.

But what about our third feature of commitments? Can the volitional activity of 
taking something to be a reason explain why we have a reason that we take ourselves 
to have?
iii) Commitments and normative power

Taking something to be a reason presupposes that through the taking, you can succeed in creating a reason. Just as stipulating the meaning of ‘glig’ presupposes that you can confer meaning through the act of stipulation, so too taking something to be a reason presupposes that you can confer normativity through the act of taking. Although taking something to be a reason assumes the possibility of creating a reason by the taking, ‘taking’ is not a success verb. You can take Harry’s need for a kidney to be a reason to give him one of yours, but how could this explain why you have a reason to do so?

We begin with a natural suggestion. The way that a commitment explains the special reasons of committed relationships is by ‘filling in the blank’ of the antecedent of a conditional normative principle:

If you [make a commitment], then you have a reason to x.

If you make a commitment to Harry, then according to a substantive normative principle, you have a reason to support his theater goings, give him your kidney, and pick up his socks. Your commitment explains why you have these special reasons by being a condition under which, according to a normative principle, you have those reasons. Your commitment to Harry would then explain your special reasons in the same way that the fact that you punched someone in the nose explains your reason to make amends – by satisfying the antecedent conditions of having a reason to do so by the dictates of a substantive normative theory or principle. On this suggestion, the special reasons of committed relationships are all given reasons, already there, normatively speaking, just waiting for their antecedent condition to be fulfilled. That in virtue of which you have a reason to give Harry your kidney, then, is a normative principle according to which when you make a commitment you will thereby have a reason to do various things, such as give up your kidney and pick up socks, and not an act of will. In explaining our special reasons, we need only appeal to ersatz normative powers.

The trouble with this suggestion, however, is that we don’t have an account of commitments that could plausibly play this role. We have already seen that a commitment is not essentially a belief, desire or disposition, endorsement of an attitude,
decision, intention, or policy. Instead, we suggested that a commitment essentially involves an act of will – and in particular, the act of taking something to be a reason. But if commitments are essentially willing considerations to be reasons, they could not explain the special reasons of committed relationships in the above way. This is because it would be hard to believe that there could be normative principles of the kind that commitments would implicate.

Consider the normative principle:

If [you take Harry’s interests to be a reason to give him your kidney], then you have a reason to give him your kidney.

This principle says that in order to have a given reason to give Harry your kidney, a reason that you cannot possibly create, you have to engage in an activity that falsely presupposes that you can create it. Could it be a normative fact that a condition of your having a given reason, which by its very nature you cannot create, is that you engage in an activity that falsely presupposes that you can create it? Could normative principles be internally conflicted in this way?

Consider the analogue in meaning. Is it plausible to suppose that a condition of ‘water’ having the nonstipulated meaning it has that it be stipulated to have this meaning? How can it be a condition of nonstipulated meaning that it be stipulated in order to be nonstipulated? Could there be such internally conflicted semantic facts? Similarly, how can it be a normative fact that in order to have a certain given reason, you have to engage in an act of will that assumes you can create that reason, something which, by the very nature of a given reason, it is impossible for you to do? Indeed, on the suggestion that commitments are merely ersatz normative powers, no clear-eyed, ideally rational agent could make commitments. For no ideally rational agent could go in for the irrational activity of creating reasons when she knows that all reasons are given reasons, and thus, not the sorts of things that can be created. If commitments are willings that something is a reason, then they don’t plausibly explain the special reasons of committed relationships by being the antecedent conditions of normative principles.

There is a twist on this suggestion, however, that might seem to do better. Although commitments themselves do not plausibly figure as antecedents of conditional
normative principles, perhaps they trigger beliefs, desires, or other mental states that are antecedent conditions of a normative principle. Perhaps, as I have argued, commitments are essentially takings-to-be-a-reason, and the way they 'give rise' to special reasons is by causing or otherwise triggering a mental state or cluster of mental states which fulfill the antecedent conditions of a normative principle whereby one has the reasons of a committed relationship. So, for example, by taking Harry's need for a kidney to be a reason to give him yours, you will come to have a desire to give him your kidney, a belief that it would be a good thing for you to do so, an intention to do it, an endorsement of that desire, or a disposition or policy to treat his need as having weight in your deliberations about what to do. Perhaps having such a desire, belief, intention, endorsement, disposition, or policy (or some combination thereof) fulfills the antecedent condition of a normative principle according to which you have a given reason to give Harry your kidney. Once again, there would be no need to appeal to normative powers and the creation of voluntarist reasons: all reasons would be given ones.

One problem with this suggestion is that the connection between a commitment and some other mental state, such as a belief, desire, intention, endorsement, disposition, or policy, is contingent. As we have already noted, you can, intuitively, commit to someone without thereby intending to do anything. And while most commitments lead to the desire to do what one has special reason to do, an endorsement of that desire, a belief in the special value of the person to whom one is committed, or a disposition or policy to treat the interests of the person to whom one is committed as having special weight in one's deliberations, they need not. Consider the unhappy, disaffected wife who is committed to a husband whom she despises and lacks any desire to help him or to contribute to his well-being. A fortiori, she does not endorse a desire she does not have that his life go well. Still, she might be committed to him without believing that he (or their relationship) has special value and may lack a disposition or policy to give his interests any special weight in her deliberations. Indeed, matters could be quite the opposite. She might have a disposition or policy positively to disregard his interests in her deliberations about what to do – after all, she despises him – but she might, nevertheless, take his interests as reason-providing for her. So when she thinks about what to do, she steels herself against all her inclinations and wills his
interests to be reasons for her. There are less extreme versions that fall between such commitments and commitments in the typical case. For example, when you commit to a regimen of diet and exercise, you might have some but not all of the mental states that typically accompany a commitment. Your commitment might trigger a belief that resisting the chocolate cake would be good, an intention to resist it and an endorsement of that intention. But you may have no disposition or desire to resist. Indeed, you might will that the creamy deliciousness of the cake, which is a given reason for you to eat it, is a voluntarist reason for you to resist. Commitments come in many varieties, but as a class they need not trigger any particular further mental state beyond the act of will that is essential to them.

The main problem with the suggestion is that it suffers from the same defects as its simpler version. Indeed, it arguably fairs worse with respect to them. The normative principles it would implicate are even more tortured than the internally conflicted principles discussed above. Could there be, as an upshot to normative theorizing, a normative principle that held that in order for you to have a given reason to x, you must engage in the activity of creating a reason to x, which it is impossible for you to succeed in doing, which then may contingently trigger some mental state or attitude which is the antecedent of the condition of your having the given reason to x? It is hard to believe that there could be any such normative principles. And a clear-eyed, ideally rational agent would once again be precluded from making commitments. She would be expected, by such a normative principle, to go in for the activity of stipulating reasons, while knowing that reasons are not the kinds of things that can be stipulated, in the hopes that she might contingently trigger some mental states or attitudes that fulfilled the antecedent conditions of the principle. No ideally rational agent could be guided by such a principle.

What is needed is an explanation of how commitments ‘give rise’ to special reasons without appeal to implausible normative principles or to an understanding of commitments that foreclose them to ideally rationally agents. Understanding commitments as an exercise of normative powers delivers such an explanation. Your commitment – or its contingent upshots – is not a condition under which, according to a normative principle, you have a reason to give your kidney to Harry but rather that in
virtue of which his interests are a reason for you to do so. Taking Harry’s need for a kidney as a reason to give him yours can be the source of your reason to give him your kidney. Your commitment to Harry – your taking his interests as reasons for you to do certain things – ‘gives rise’ to reasons to give him your kidney and pick up his socks by being that in virtue of which you have those reasons.

So we have two conclusions. A commitment essentially involves taking something to be a reason, and commitments explain why we have the special reasons of committed relationships by being that in virtue of which we have those reasons. When you commit to Harry, you take his interests to be reasons for you to, for example, give him your kidney and pick up his socks. By taking his interests to be reasons to do these things, you thereby create voluntarist reasons to do them. Our commitments to people in personal relationships are thus an exercise of our normative powers.

With this explanation in place, we can distinguish two ways in which the conditional claim ‘If you make a commitment to Harry, you have a reason to give him your kidney’ can be true. One way it is true is as a meta-normative description, as opposed to a first order normative principle, of the normative source of your reason to give Harry your kidney. You have a reason to give Harry your kidney in virtue of your commitment to him. On this reading, the conditional describes a ‘grounding’ connection between your act of will – your commitment – and your voluntarist reason to give him your kidney; your act of will is that in virtue of which you have a reason to give him your kidney.73

But the claim can be true in another way. It can be true not only as a meta-normative claim about that in virtue of which you have a voluntarist reason to give your kidney to Harry but also as a contingent first-order normative claim about given reasons you may have to give Harry your kidney. I argued above that the claim is not true is as a first-order normative principle; a substantive normative principle that claimed that in order to have a reason you cannot possibly create, you have to engage in an activity that presupposes you can create it suffers from an internal tension and is not a principle that an ideally rational agent could follow. However, while it is implausible to think that there is a first-order normative principle according to which a commitment is an antecedent condition of having a reason, it is not implausible to think that there is a
A contingent normative truth according to which when you will yourself a voluntarist reason to give Harry your kidney, you will sometimes perform acts downstream that may then fulfill the antecedent conditions of general normative principles according to which you may have a given reason to give Harry your kidney. For example, when you commit to Harry, you will typically perform acts downstream that will lead him reasonably to form expectations about your willingness to give up your kidney should he need it. So it can be true, as a contingent normative matter, that if you commit to Harry, you have a given reason to give him your kidney since by failing to give him your kidney when you reasonably led him to believe that you would, you would betray his reasonable expectations. Commitments, like intentions, can have downstream effects, and these effects can change what given reasons you have. So, in the usual case, if you commit to Harry, you will have not only a voluntarist reason to give him your kidney but also a given one – e.g., you will betray his reasonable expectations if you don’t.

Whether you have such downstream given reasons, however, is a purely contingent matter. You might commit to Harry – or perhaps more plausibly, to Brad Pitt or Johnny Depp – ‘privately’, as it were, without any public manifestation of your commitment. In this case, you will have only the voluntarist reasons you have created and not the given reasons that would have been the typical downstream effects of your commitment. And this is how it should be. By publically manifesting your commitment to Harry, you have more reasons all things considered to give him your kidney than you would have had had you kept your commitment to yourself.

6. Constraints on our normative powers

When you take something to be a reason, it does not follow that you make it one. That would lead to the Mafioso problem that plagues standard voluntarist views about normative source. Hybrid voluntarism maintains that there are strict conditions under which taking something to be a reason can make it a reason. Our normative powers can successfully create reasons only when our given reasons run out.

We said that there are two ways in which reasons can run out: either (1) one fails to have more, less, or equal reason to choose one alternative over the other – being in a state of ‘equipoise’, or (2) one has more reason to choose one alternative over the
other but it is indeterminate how much more – having ‘indeterminate most reason’. Is there some unity to these two conditions?

On my preferred interpretation of these matters, there is a single, underlying phenomenon – parity – that ultimately explains both conditions; reasons run out when they are on a par.74 To avoid unnecessary controversy, however, a more modest link between the two conditions will suffice for our purposes: equipoise entails indeterminate most reason. A quick proof: Suppose \( x \) and \( y \) are in equipoise. Now consider \( y^{+++} \), which is just \( y \) plus some added value, such as a significant amount of money, and is as a consequence in fact better than both \( y \) and \( x \). \( Y^{+++} \) must be better than both \( y \) and \( x \) by an indeterminate degree. To see why this is the case, suppose the opposite. If there is some determinate amount by which \( y^{+++} \) is better than \( x \), say a million dollars, then we should be able to subtract that amount from \( y^{+++} \), resulting in \( y^{+} \) which is equivalent in value to \( x \). Now \( y^{+} \) must be better than, worse than, or equal to \( y \), since \( y^{+} \) is just \( y \) with some added money. And since \( y^{+} \) just is equivalent in value to \( x \), \( x \) must be better than, worse than, or equal to \( y \). But that contradicts our supposition that \( x \) and \( y \) are in a state of equipoise.75

With this minimal link between equipoise and indeterminate most reason in place, we can proceed to examine how we can create reasons under each considered separately. Start with the case of equipoise.

Suppose you and Harry have been dating for some time, and you are on the brink of making a commitment to him. It turns out that Harry needs a kidney, the transplant list is long, and yours will do nicely. As it also happens, Barry, a stranger to you, shares your unusual antibodies so that only your kidney can save his life. On the one hand, you can give your kidney to someone you care about, helping him to avoid years of suffering and an uncertain fate. On the other, you can give your kidney to a stranger whose life you will certainly save by doing so. Now consider all your \textit{given} reasons, that is, the usual agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons you have to distribute your kidney one way rather than another. These are the reasons given to you and not created by you, the reasons you have in virtue of either some normative fact or a connection with your desires. Let us suppose that the given reasons to give Harry
your kidney are neither stronger, less strong, nor as strong as the given reasons to give Barry your kidney. They are in equipoise.

According to hybrid voluntarism, by making a commitment to Harry – by taking his need for a kidney to be a reason to give him yours – you create a voluntarist reason to give it to him, a reason that you have in virtue of your commitment. And putting all of your given and voluntarist reasons together, you may now have most all-things-considered reason to give your kidney to Harry. Your voluntarist reason may tip the scales in favor of giving your kidney to Harry when your given reasons are in equipoise. And were you to commit to the cause of saving the lives of strangers, the balance of reasons might go the other way.

Putting the point in terms of ‘tipping the scales’ might be misleading. It should not be thought that there are necessarily two temporally distinct steps in deliberation; first recognition that your given reasons are in equipoise and then, second, an act of will that swoops in as a tie-breaker. Your voluntarist reasons are just one sort of reason among your other, given, reasons, and all of your reasons, both voluntarist and given, must be balanced together in determining what to do. Suppose that, having already committed to Harry, you have taken his interests to be reasons to do various things including to give him your kidney should he need it. Now, being in a committed relationship, you are contemplating whether to give your kidney to Harry or Barry. If your given reasons are in equipoise, your having taken Harry’s need for a kidney to be a reason will have succeeded in creating a voluntarist reason to give him yours and may make it the case that you have most all-things-considered reason to do so.

Your given reasons might run out not because they are in equipoise but because they favor one alternative over the other – but to an indeterminate extent. We might say that there is ‘no fact of the matter’ as to exactly how much better one alternative is relative to the other. There are two ways such indeterminacy might occur, and we can be neutral between them: either every claim that a certain precise difference holds between them is false or it is neither true nor false. So, for example, one alternative might be indeterminately better than the other when there is an ordinal but no precise cardinal ranking of them. Or an alternative might be indeterminately better than another when the difference between them is not greater, lesser, or equal to the difference.
between some other pairs of items. That is, how much better $x$ is relative to $y$ is indeterminate if the difference between $x$ and $y$ and the difference between $r$ and $s$ are in equipoise.

Suppose once again that you are on the brink of a commitment to Harry. Unfortunately, in this scenario Harry is a bit of cad. Once again, Harry needs your kidney, and yours will do nicely. But you could give your kidney instead to Barry, a world-famous oncologist about to perfect a vaccine against cancer. And again, your unusual antibodies are such that only your kidney can ensure that Barry survives long enough to develop the vaccine, which will in turn save countless lives now and in the future. Let us suppose that you have most given reason to give your kidney to Barry, not Harry, but the extent to which you have more reason is indeterminate.

According to hybrid voluntarism, when your given reasons run out in this way, you have the normative power to create a further reason to, say, give your kidney to Harry instead of Barry. By making a commitment to Harry – by taking his need for a kidney to be a reason to give him yours – you create a voluntarist reason to give it to him, a reason you have in virtue of your commitment. Your commitment makes it the case that you have more reason to give your kidney to Harry than you would have had without the commitment. Similarly, you might commit to the cause of finding a cure for cancer. Your taking Barry’s imminent breakthrough in a cure as a reason to give him your kidney can create a reason to give it to him. You now have more reason to give him your kidney than you would have had without the commitment.

Now hybrid voluntarism maintains that you can create voluntarist reasons only when given reasons run out and that voluntarist reasons cannot change the valence established by your given reasons. We saw in section 2 some general theoretical reasons for thinking that voluntarist reasons should be constrained by given reasons in these ways: we avoid the Mafioso and Regress problems, solve what is arguably the most serious difficulty with source externalism, and give expression to an independently attractive view of the role of the will in rational agency. But the constraints also make sense in the context of the special reasons we have in committed relationships.

Suppose you are casually dating Harry and Cary. You have a ticket to a concert that you can’t use, and you’re deciding which of them to give it to. If your given reasons
to give the ticket to one rather than the other are in equipoise, it makes sense to think that by committing to Harry you can give yourself most all-things-considered reasons to give the ticket to Harry. You take Harry’s interests – the enjoyment he would derive from the concert – to be a reason for you to give him the ticket. And since your given reasons are in equipoise, you create a voluntarist reason to give him the ticket, thereby making it true that you have most reason, all things considered, to give it to him. It makes sense that a commitment can make it the case that one has most all-things-considered reasons to do something when one’s given reasons are in equipoise.

The same holds when one has indeterminately most reason to give the ticket to the one rather than the other. It makes sense in such cases not only that commitments can create voluntarist reasons but also that these voluntarist reasons cannot change the valence established by one’s given reasons. Suppose again that you are casually dating both Harry and Cary and that you have very slightly but indeterminately stronger reasons to give your ticket to Cary rather than Harry. If you commit to Harry, it makes sense that you now have more reason to give the ticket to Harry than you had before you committed. Your commitment created a new voluntarist reason you didn’t have before.

What about changing the valence of reasons? It might be thought that the new voluntarist reason you have created can change the valence established by your given reasons. Indeed, in the case at hand, the difference between your given reasons to give the ticket to Cary and your given reasons to give the ticket to Harry is very small. Surely, it might be thought, a voluntarist reason could change the overall balance of reasons. But appearances here are misleading. There are two cases to distinguish. In the ‘pure’ case, you commit to Harry privately without any public manifestation of your commitment. Can your private act of will make it the case that you now have most all-things-considered reasons to give the ticket to Harry? Hybrid voluntarism says not. Appearances to the contrary can be explained by distinguishing the pure case from the typical, ‘impure’ case in which a commitment has downstream effects through its public manifestation. As we have already pointed out, in the typical case, when you commit to Harry, you will act towards him in ways that lead him reasonably to form expectations about your future behavior. If after ‘leading him on’, you don’t give him the ticket, he will
be hurt and disappointed. The fact that he will be hurt and disappointed is a
downstream given reason to give him the ticket which can make it true that you have
most all-things-considered reasons to do so.\textsuperscript{76} Thus it is the downstream given reasons
that, together with one’s voluntarist reasons, can change the valence established by
one’s original given reasons. Voluntarist reasons alone cannot do so.

A final note. It might be thought that the normative priority of given reasons over
voluntarist ones renders the latter irrelevant to morality, and that, in particular, moral
requirements are a matter only of given reasons.\textsuperscript{77} But this would be a mistake.
Although voluntarist reasons are constrained by our given ones in the way described,
they are central to what we have most reason – moral or otherwise – to do. Suppose
Harry needs your kidney. Although it is up to you whether to commit to him, once you
do, it could be morally wrong for you not to give him your kidney. One way this could
happen is if your commitment leads you to act in ways that in turn lead Harry
reasonably to expect that you would give up your kidney to save his life. Your failure to
meet these expectations might violate your moral duty to him. What would have been a
supererogatory act in the absence of a commitment may become a morally obligatory
one given it. Thus our normative powers allow us to create reasons that can help
determine the moral rights and wrongs of action.\textsuperscript{78}

7. Conclusion

Hybrid voluntarism attempts to do two things. First, it tries to find the truth in the
broadly Kantian idea that we can confer value or normativity on things. It offers a view of
the role of willing in practical reason that gives us constrained normative powers, the
power to create reasons when our given reasons have run out. Such a view avoids what
are widely considered to be the fatal flaws of standard forms of voluntarism, the Mafioso
Problem and the Regress Problem. In its externalist-voluntarist version, it also solves
what is arguably the main difficulty of standard forms of externalism, the Problem of
Explanatory Shortfall. Finally, it underwrites an independently attractive ‘active’ view of
rational agency, one according to which agents make a direct agential contribution to
determining what they have most reason to do. Insofar as there is any insight to be
gained from Kantians on how we can confer normativity on things, hybrid voluntarism
offers itself as the most plausible account of how we might have such normative powers.

Second, hybrid voluntarism provides a general framework against which we can understand the commitments we make to people in personal relationships and to personal projects. If the arguments are correct, these commitments are not properly understood as conditions under which, according to a normative principle, we have the special reasons to which commitments give rise but are rather that in virtue of which we have such reasons. When we make a commitment to a person or to a personal project, we exercise our normative powers within the constraints laid out by hybrid voluntarism. In this way, we create for ourselves reasons to do the things we have reasons to do in committed relationships and projects. ⁷⁹
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1 I trace the use of the term ‘normative power’, as applied to principles, to Martin Leibowitz (1943) and, as applied to agents, to Neil MacCormick and Joseph Raz (1972) (see also Raz 1975: section 3.2).
MacCormick’s and Raz’s use of the term denotes what I describe below as an ‘ersatz’ normative power, and neither seems to countenance the sort of normative power I have in mind here.

There is one way in which calling the question of source ‘meta-normative’ might be misleading. Sometimes, but not always, ‘metaethics’ and ‘meta-normative’ inquiry is understood as concerned exclusively with foundational questions about what is ‘ultimately’ the case at the most fundamental level of explanation possible. This way of understanding metaethics, however, helps to obscure a domain of questions that can be asked about the subject matter of normative inquiry at a ‘middle level’ of explanation – explanation via ordinary concepts like ‘value’, ‘desire’, and ‘normative fact’ – which is self-consciously neutral on the most fundamental and foundational explanation of what there is. Thus the ‘ultimately’ here is neutral as to what might ‘ultimately’ be the case at the level of ‘foundational’ or ‘reductionist’ metaphysics. Maybe what there ‘ultimately’ is in this latter sense, are only sub-atomic particles, but that kind of explanation is not of interest here.

This gloss on the source of normativity should be understood as compatible with the idea that there is no single, specific consideration which is that ultimately in virtue of which something is a reason but rather that the source is a kind of consideration. Thus, the normative source of a reason could, in principle, be a circle of normative facts or an infinite regress of acts of will.

Strictly speaking, the claims I make about source can be understood as normative claims, so long as they are distinguished from first-order normative claims or principles such as ‘abortion is wrong’. It is easy to see how they might be so distinguished. If the source of a reason’s normativity is, for example, the will of God, then even if we understand this claim as normative, the relation it stands to ordinary first-order normative claims will be different from the relation that holds among first-order normative claims. In particular, the claim that F is a reason to x in virtue of God’s will explains certain first-order normative claims in a way that other first-order normative claims cannot. To highlight the contrast between questions of source and first-order normative questions about what to do, I treat questions of source as meta-normative rather than normative questions, but my claims about source can be translated into normative claims that stand in a special explanatory relation to first-order normative claims.

Those who have the first ground of doubt cannot, strictly speaking, also have the second ground of doubt since if they have the first, they don’t even recognize the question of source as a distinctive, nonnormative question to which there is an answer. Since the second doubt can be had without the first, however, I treat it separately and its adherents as giving a ‘degenerate’ answer to the question of source.

Source externalists include Plato [1941], Clarke (1706), Sidgwick (1907), Prichard (1968), Moore (1971), Ross (1930), Nagel (1975), Raz (1986 and 1999), Scanlon (1998), Dancy (2000), Scheffler (2001), Schafer-Landau (2003), Huemer (2005), Wallace (2006), Wedgwood (2007), Thomson (2008), Kearns and Star (2009), Parfit (forthcoming), and Enoch (forthcoming), and arguably Velleman (2000), insofar as Velleman is concerned with normative reasons (as opposed to what an agent believes are her normative reasons) and considers “making sense” to oneself via a self-narrative a normative matter. John Broome, in email correspondence, tells me that he does not have a view about that in virtue of which something is a reason, despite suggestive externalist-leaning remarks he makes in his 2004 and ms.

The distinction between source externalism and source internalism cuts across some of the more familiar externalism-internalism divides and should not be confused with them. Source internalists include Hume (1739), Falk (1986), Williams (1981), Railton (1989 and 2003), M. Smith (1994), Brandt (1996), M. Schroeder (2007), Tiberius (2008), and probably Rawls (1971: 123-24). Some contemporary statements of source internalism and source externalism approach the source question obliquely by focusing not explicitly on the question of what makes a consideration a reason but instead on the question of what makes it the case that one has a reason or on what ‘provides’ or ‘gives’ one a reason. For example, Williams (1981) frames his ‘internalism’ about reasons as a view about the necessary conditions for a claim that someone has a reason to be true. And externalists such as Parfit (forthcoming) and Scanlon (1998) sometimes argue that desires cannot ‘provide’ reasons, where what they have in mind is that desires cannot be the source of reasons, that is, that in virtue of which something is a reason. Part of the confusion has to do with the assumption that a ‘reason’ includes everything that is relevant to the explanation of why one should do something and thus includes not only the consideration that is action-guiding but also that in virtue of which it is action-guiding. See especially Broome (forthcoming) but also Scanlon’s idea of a ‘complete’ reason (1998, page 75). I suggest that it is important to keep distinct the
question of which sorts of considerations can be action-guiding, on the one hand, from the considerations in virtue of which they are action-guiding, on the other. See my 2004a, 2009a, and Ms(a).

8 See Williams (1981) and more recently Mark Schroeder (2007) who suggests that the relation that holds between a reason and one’s desire is that the reason partly explains how doing the action promotes what one wants.

9 It might be thought that internalism (or for that matter, voluntarism) is best understood as a kind of externalist view. That is, it might be thought that the source internalist points to the normative fact that a relation with one’s desires makes something a reason as the source of the normativity of that reason. On this alternative reading, the internalist would be answering the meta-normative question, ‘in virtue of what is a fact action-guiding?’ with: ‘it’s a normative fact that when a fact relates to one’s desires in a certain way, that fact is action-guiding’. No internalist, as far as I know, holds such a view. It would also be a mistake to collapse voluntarism into a form of externalism. Both internalism and voluntarism stake out distinctive positions about the metaphysics of practical normativity or reasons. (This point cuts across the question of whether claims about source can be ‘translated’ into one sort of normative claim; even if claims about the source of normativity are normative, source internalism and voluntarism are logically distinct views from source externalism, each understood as a kind of normative claim distinct from first-order normative claims).

10 Voluntarists arguably include Hobbes (1651), Pufendorf (1672), Locke (1689), Kant (1785) and Korsgaard (1996). See Schneewind (1998) for an historical development of the idea of autonomy, and Bittner (ms) for an interpretation of the historical roots of the notion of the will. The interpretation of Kant I assume here is more or less Korsgaard’s. (For an array of objections to the Korsgaardian-Kantian view, see, for example, Cohen in Korsgaard 1996; Wallace 2006, chapter 4; Fitzpatrick 2005; and Parfit forthcoming). I follow Korsgaard’s interpretation because it brings Kant closer to the view I favor than do other interpretations. Some neo-Kantians understand Kant as what I have called a source externalist. For example, Thomas Hill (1991) argues that, for Kant, there is nothing in virtue of which something is a reason – acting on such-and-such a consideration in these circumstances just is what it is to be rational. So there is a normative fact – being rational is acting on this consideration – that is that in virtue of which the consideration is a reason. Other neo-Kantians are externalist in other ways, grounding normativity in the intrinsic value of the good will (Herman 1993), or the person herself (Anderson 1993), or the normative fact that freedom has “incomparable” value (Guye 1998: 33, 34). These externalist interpretations of Kant might also be invoked as needed supplements to some internalist accounts. The most plausible internalists place formal constraints of rationality on desires, but one difficulty they face is justifying these constraints as opposed to others. These Kantians can be seen as stepping in to offer a justification of certain formal constraints on motivations by claiming, for example, that those constraints are constitutive of being rational or grounded in some fundamental value like that of being a person.

11 Christine Korsgaard has done the most in contemporary times to revive it, and I believe she has developed the view pretty much as elegantly, forcefully and plausibly as it can be (see her 1996 and 2008). A third objection often lobbed against voluntarism worth mentioning here holds that since reasons are by their very nature, binding, the source of a reason’s normativity cannot be an act of will since just as one can will a reason, one can unwill it ‘at will’. Reasons cannot have their source in an act of will because they are not the kinds of things that can come in and out of existence through an act of will – they bind the will and are not created by it. I discuss this objection below.

12 Notice that the objection is not that the voluntarist cannot block the Mafioso from willing a reason to harm his enemy. As I will suggest below, it is plausible to think that the Mafioso who wills a reason to harm his enemy has more reason to harm him than the Mafioso who doesn’t, even though both have all-things-considered most reason not to do so.

13 Korsgaard has ingeniously suggested that the principles willed by a rational agent are those that solve a practical problem the agent actually confronts. That is, the principles that a rational agent ‘must’ will are those that provide an answer to a practical problem to which she needs to have a solution. Thus, insofar as she is to be a rational agent in response to the practical problem she faces, she must will certain principles rather than others. Those principles provide a solution to her problem, so of course she ‘must’ will them if she is to respond to her problem as a rational agent (Korsgaard 2003). But as Fitzpatrick (2005) has carefully argued, the ‘must’ her arguments deliver fall short of the ‘must’ of being an agent at
all. Instead, Korsgaard at best shows that in order to conform to the requirements of structural rationality, an agent ‘must’ will certain principles and not others. And since it makes sense to ask, Why be structurally rational?, the problem remains.

14 This objection is powerfully formulated in general terms by Railton 2004 and specifically against Korsgaard’s voluntarism by Scanlon 2003 and Fitzpatrick 2005 and in a related form by Enoch 2006.

15 Implicit in this distinction is a principle of the individuation of reasons according to which reasons are individuated not only by their contents but also by their normative source. This should not be too controversial. Consider a rough-and-ready analogy from physics. Just as a single object can exert different physical forces that are distinguished by the ‘source’ of that force – for example, gravitational or electromagnetic – a single consideration can count in favor of action in different ways – be the contents of different reasons – in virtue of having different normative sources.

16 Compare Scanlon 2004, who rightly worries about a “puzzling duality” that may arise if a single reason can have two sources.

17 As Raz might say, reasons render options “eligible” (Raz 1999: 65). My claims are that (1) eligibility should be understood as leaving open the possibility of there being further will-based reasons, and (2) there are very specific ways in which the options can relate to one another in order to be “eligible” in Raz’ sense, none of which are the ways Raz himself suggests, i.e., that the options are “incommensurable”. This paper attempts to defend (1), and I have tried to defend (2) in my 2002.

18 See my 2002.

19 *Ibid*. There are, I believe, good reasons to think that voluntarist reasons can be created in the case of equipoise only when items are ‘on a par’ and not when they are incomparable, but defending that claim would take us too far afield. I explore such reasons in my ms(b).

20 I broach some in my 2009a and discuss alternatives to creating reasons in my ms(b).

21 Strictly speaking, there are three qualifications to this claim. First, as already mentioned, the question ‘Why will this rather than that?’ is open to third-party assessment by reasons. When you will a voluntarist reason in favor of A instead of B, your willing is not guided by given reasons. But a third party observing you can sensibly say, “She had more reason to will a reason in favor of B than one in favor of A”. The interpretation of these third-party statements turns on substantive claims about what makes for a unified agent and about which “rational identities” are better than others from a third-person’s particular deliberative point of view. Second, there could be given instrumental reasons to will one way rather than another that may ‘guide’ my willing. If you offer me a hundred dollars to will a reason in favor of A, I have a given instrumental reason to so will. (I owe this point to Daniel Nolan). But, again, these instrumental reasons do not ‘guide’ the activity of willing on the merits and so do not impugn the claim that taking something to be a reason is not guided by given reasons in the sense that threatens a regress. Finally, there may be constraints derived from what it is to be a unified agent that further constrain whether one can, as a rational agent, will this rather than that. So for example the unity of agency may block the rationality of willing this one minute and that the next minute, and so on, until one’s death. But this last constraint will not take the form of reasons that guide one’s willing one thing rather than another; rather it is a formal constraint on what it is to be an agent in the first place – to be an agent you have to be capable of getting at least some things done – and so the sense in which the question is ‘open’ is different.

22 Other versions of hybrid voluntarism are possible but I think less attractive. If given reasons are internalist in source, for example, it becomes much more difficult to see whether it has clear advantages over its more traditional rivals. Much of the force of source internalism is driven by substantive, naturalistic assumptions about what there ultimately is according to the most basic, reductionist explanation possible. And so internalists might accuse hybrid voluntarism of two potentially nonnatural sources of normativity. But this line of thought is misguided. Voluntarism – hybrid or otherwise – is compatible with a thoroughgoing metaphysical naturalism at the most basic, reductive level of explanation. There need be no special nonnatural faculty, The Will, with special causal powers for some form of voluntarism to be true. Nor need ‘taking something to be a reason’ be something outside the realm of a naturalistic normative psychology. As already noted, questions about source are neutral on the question of whether at the most basic level of explanation, all there is are sub-atomic particles whizzing around in the void.
The usual objections are these: first, that source externalism cannot explain how we come to be motivated by reasons if what makes something a reason is a normative fact; and second, that it is encumbered with the metaphysical queerness of normative facts and the epistemological queerness of how we come to know them. The first worry is met by pointing out that what it is to be rational is to recognize one’s reasons and to thereby be motivated to do what one has reasons to do. So the way reasons whose normative source is given by normative facts ‘get a grip’ on us is through our capacity for rationality. (Remember, the defense here is of source externalism, not all kinds of externalism). The second worry gets its sting from the assumption that in order to be epistemically and metaphysically respectable, normativity must be a natural phenomenon. If normativity is a sui generis, nonnatural justificatory force, however, we shouldn’t expect to come to know normative truths in the way we come to know natural truths or for normative properties to fit into the metaphysical mold of natural ones. (All the more so if we grant, as many normative realists believe, that normative facts need not have ontological – the weight of being in the world – as opposed to merely metaphysical – having a nature – import). This is not to deny that an explanation of how we come to know such truths and what are their natures is owed, but such an explanation is owed not just for normative truths, but for modal, phenomenal, and mathematical ones too. And since it seems pretty clear that we know at least some normative, modal, phenomenal, and mathematical truths and have at least some grasp of their essential features, the problem of explaining how we come to know them and what they are like can be reasonably seen, as it were, a matter of detail and not itself grounds for rejecting the view. Mackie 1977 himself recognized that this problem of ‘partners in guilt’ was the main weakness of his queerness arguments, but his response to it is widely (and correctly) agreed to be unsatisfactory. There are, moreover, strong methodological grounds for discounting metaphysical and epistemic worries at this level of explanation. The aim here is to explain, in an illuminating way, the relation between our wills and the reasons we have, and thus prejudices about what there ultimately is at the most basic level of explanation have no place in ruling out ‘middle-level’ explanations.

This problem is also different from the one Korsgaard levels against the source externalist (the normative realist). Korsgaard’s complaint is that the source externalist cannot explain why an agent must do what she has most reason to do without positing a further normative obligation to do what she has most reason to do, and so on, and so on. (Korsgaard 2003 and 1997). I believe that the externalists’ quasi-stipulative answer to this question is adequate – it is in the nature of being a rational agent that a rational agent’s will is bound by what she in fact has most reason to do (See Scanlon 2004, Parfit forthcoming, and also the previous note). (It is worth pointing out that a parallel stipulation that might be appealed to by the voluntarist – that it is in the nature of being a rational agent that a rational agent’s will is bound by formal rules of consistency, coherence, and the like – is far less plausible since, while one cannot have reasons not to will what has most reason to will, one might have reasons not to will certain principles that are required for one’s attitudes to be consistent, coherent and otherwise formally rational). The complaint here is rather that the externalist runs out of explanatory resources just when we most need them.

Add to these cancelling, excluding, bracketing reasons and the epistemic problem generated by hard cases multiplies in complexity.

See Dancy 2004a for an argument that such principles cannot be found. I suspect that some of the motivation for particularism derives from the problem of explanatory shortfall – given the shortfall, why not go whole hog and just allow that there are brute normative facts everywhere? As we will see hybrid voluntarism gives us a way to remedy the shortfall without succumbing to particularism.

Implausible principles may be fully determinate in a way that plausible ones are not. The principle ‘You always have most all-things-considered reasons to choose whatever maximizes your own happiness’ can yield a complete set of determinate weightings of reasons at stake (happiness-to-oneself reasons) in all cases. But my suggestion is that any plausible principle will have by its very nature a content that has incomplete application and that sets of such principles will underdetermine how reasons relate in at least some hard cases.

See also my 2004b for further discussion. Of course Kamm and others attempt to justify what they take to be a resolution of a hard case in terms of a principle, but the order of explanation is not always one in which the principle has priority. Rather, one argues from the resolution, on the basis of intuition, to the
content of the principle which then helps to explain other hard cases. More concessively, the resolution of hard cases and the contents of principles may be co-determined. This result is sufficient to block the thought that principles fully determine the resolution of hard cases.

This is one reason source externalists are, I believe, better off eschewing buck-passing accounts of value. Insofar as the externalist wants to explain as much of the normative domain as possible, she is better off regarding values as not explanatorily posterior to reasons. Values have a richer structure than the normative facts that something is a reason and thus provide a more powerful basis for normative explanation.

A source internalist might think that gaps in externalist reasons are nicely filled by internalist ones. But it is hard to see the motivation for a structured hierarchy between externalist reasons and internalist ones. What makes the combination of source externalism and voluntarism attractive is that it gives a role to volition when reasons passively given to us – whether externalist or internalist – run out. Without appeal to voluntarist reasons, we are left with the ‘passive’ view of rational agency deemed unattractive below.

Another explanation, of course, is that hard cases are hard only because it is difficult to ascertain the balance of the given reasons, which are the only sorts of reasons there are. I discuss reasons to reject this interpretation in my 2009a and my ms(b).

See e.g. Wolf 1993.

Rosati (ms). See also Thomas Hill (1991) for persuasive arguments about the conceptual possibility of self-imposed obligations. See also note 11.

In the case of career choices, the importance of doing something with features that one wills to be reasons to pursue it will ordinarily provide one with sufficient given reasons to change course with a change of heart. But if downstream effects include hungry mouths to feed or moral obligations that cannot be met with a change of course, then it will be irrational to change course. The rational life is a free life – but only up to a point.

Recall that reasons are individuated not solely by their content but also by their normative source.

This wouldn’t be possible if, like some crude forms of consequentialism, it is thought that everything that intelligibly could count in favor of an action is a reason to perform that action. In that case, you can only take the content of an already-given reason to be the content of your new will-based one.

Will-based reasons are thus not universalizable, though many people will have the same will-based reasons. This is not to say that these reasons are not “objective”. Compare Thomas Hill (2002: 266-67), who argues (pace Korsgaard) that Kantian commitments to personal projects need not generate “objective” value.

Contractualism is the most developed form of constructivism – we construct principles from reasoned or rational agreement. Sometimes ‘constructivism’ is used to mean what I have called ‘voluntarism’, the view that the source of all practical reasons is the will, but these uses sometimes oscillate between the idea of constructing the contents of substantive principles and the idea of being that in virtue of which those principles are normative. Given this ambiguity in the use of the term, I use ‘constructivism’ to denote the view that we construct substantive principles, not that our wills are the source of normativity.

Put another way, it is a view about what it is to belong to the principles of a particular normative domain – for example, to be such that no one can reasonably reject it.

For further valuable discussion of the distinction between “rational requirements or permissions” (Broome 2004) or “structural rationality” (Scanlon 2004, 1998: chapter 1), on the one hand, and “reasons”, on the other, see, for example, Parfit forthcoming, Kolodny 2005, Raz 2005, and Bratman 2010.

See Scanlon 2004: 233-36 and Bratman 1987. Watson (2009: 159) writes, “Hume seems right to suggest that willing cannot itself be an ultimate source of reasons to act as willed”, but then goes on to allow that willing can alter what it is structurally rational for one to do.

More carefully: none of the views cited here expressly confronts the question of why ultimately one’s reason to do what one has promised to do has the normativity of a reason, and so although they all seem in varying ways to rely on some normative fact or principle to justify the ways in which making a promise entails an obligation, their views are strictly compatible with any view about normative source. Put another way, the normative explanations these authors give of how promises give rise to reasons may themselves be open to the question, ‘In virtue of what, ultimately, are the norms appealed to normative?’: For
example, while Rawls gives a normative explanation of how promises give rise to obligations, he arguably holds that that ultimately in virtue of which something is a reason is some relation to one's desires (Rawls 1971: 123-124).

43 Shiffrin (2008) and in some ways Watson (2009) come closest to treating the power to promise as a normative power in the sense of interest here. Shiffrin holds that the power to make promises is a "fundamental moral" power that is part of being autonomous and argues that we must have this power in order to satisfy minimal moral demands and to have intrinsically valuable relationships with others. Her transcendental argument seems to leave open, however, whether the reasons we have to do things we promised to do are reasons in virtue of the act of will involved in promising or in virtue of the value of being autonomous. Similarly, Watson maintains that the power to create an obligation by promising is part of having "moral standing", which sounds like a metaphysical, nonnormative grounding of the power, but at the same time, he explicitly endorses Raz's slogan "Reasons precede the will" – that is, the will cannot create reasons ab initio but can change the reasons one has only as a condition of some non-will-based value or non-will-based reason. Other philosophers hold positions that can be understood as broadly sympathetic to the spirit of view I have in mind here. Talbot Brewer (2003) makes a distinction between promises, understood as what I have called ‘ersatz’ normative powers, and “internalist commitments” which come from the agent’s “own values”. For Brewer, however, such commitments do not appear to be a matter of will but seem to be expressions of dispositions over which we have no direct volitional control. (Thanks to Tim Scanlon for alerting me to Brewer's paper). Samuel Scheffler (2010: chapter 11) argues that tradition can itself be a "source of reasons", and reasons to do what tradition requires don't always have their source in the values embodied in or by the tradition. It seems that the activity that constitutes the tradition may itself be that in virtue of which the fact that ‘it's how we do things around here’ can be a reason for participants in the tradition. These are views that appear to ground the fact that something is a reason not exclusively in a normative fact.

44 For a discussion of 'enabling' or 'triggering' reasons, see Dancy (2000) and Enoch (2010). Exactly how these conditions operate – a mystery in its own right – is something those who would deny genuine normative powers in favor of ersatz ones arguably owe an explanation of.

45 Again, modulo the thought that the distinction between condition and source can be made within the domain of the normative itself. See n. 4.

46 Many philosophers have suggested that an act of will can 'generate' reasons in this ersatz way, that is, by being the condition of a value or normative principle according to which one has reasons. So, for example, Bratman has suggested that intentions can 'generate' reasons by creating “snowball effects”; one's intention to x can lead one to take steps that then make it the case that one has reasons one didn't have before (Bratman 1987: 82). He also suggests in later work that an intention to do something can be a reason not to reconsider whether to do it, but one has that reason in virtue of the reasons one has to make one's intentions conform to norms of rationality that call for the stability of intentions (Bratman 2010). Scanlon has suggested that decisions to adopt an end can 'generate' pragmatic reasons not to reconsider the decision in the absence of new information and can be second-order reasons to treat one's decision as a reason to regard certain other considerations as reasons (for example, the fact that something is a means to one's adopted end), but the decision is not itself the source of these reasons (Scanlon 2004: 239). And as we have already seen there are many accounts of promising that understand the act of will involved in promising as a condition under which we have reasons, not that in virtue of which we do. Raz (1986: 84) has articulated a general form of this thesis: acts of will can 'create' reasons only in the sense that they satisfy the conditions for having an already-existing non-will-based reason, but an act of will cannot itself be the source of reasons. His primary argument for this view, if I understand him correctly, is his endorsement of what he calls the “classical” conception of agency according to which the will has a role only after reasons have had their say. Hence his slogan, "Reason precedes will." See also Raz 1997. David Enoch (2010) has extended this idea specifically to requests, which he argues can (as I would put it) fill the role of antecedent conditions of a normative principle according to which one has a reason.

47 This distinction between the conditions under which we have reasons as a normative matter, on the one hand, and that in virtue of which something is action-guiding, on the other, can also be made at the higher-order level of a normative principle itself, at least insofar as such principles are themselves action-
guiding. The condition under which we have a reason to x is whatever fills the antecedent of the principle. But there is a further question, In virtue of what is the principle normative? What ultimately makes this principle have the acting-guidingness of a reason? The question of normative source is a meta-normative question about the ground of the normative principle.

I have sketched some others in my 2009a and offered a possible application to the problem of social choice in my 2009b.

They are not the only examples of exercises of our normative powers. The fundamental activity at the heart of hybrid voluntarism is ‘taking something to be a reason’, and commitments are only one example of a common phenomenon that, I argue, involves this activity.

Thanks to Randall Harp for the sports example – an obvious instance of the kind of commitments I have in mind which, alas, would not have occurred to me.

See, for example, Scheffler 2004 and Kolodny 2003. See also Jeske 2008. Each of these authors is, it seems, a source externalist about the reasons of love relationships. If my arguments are correct, we should be source voluntarists about some of these reasons.

Some have argued that commitments to people and projects are not as important as they are often thought to be; in particular, they are necessary neither for the integrity of the self (Schauber 1995), or for the well-lived life (Calhoun 2009). While this may be so, many, if not most of us, achieve integrity and well-being in part by making such commitments.

The only book-length treatments of substantive commitments I am aware of are Robins 1984 and Lieberman 1998; the former argues that substantive commitments are a species of intentions while the latter distinguishes them but focuses mostly on intentions.

Evidentialism, of course, can be disputed. One interesting alternative, following William James, holds that it is rationally permissible to ‘will to believe’ that p and rationally permissible not to when the evidence is uncertain. This suggestion, however, depends on a controversial pragmatic view of truth which it would be unwise to build into an account of substantive commitments. See Bishop (2007) for a modern development of this view in the case of religious belief.

This is also a problem for the Jamesian suggestion that we can ‘will to believe’.

David Velleman has argued that one can rationally adopt the belief that p on the grounds that p will be true if one believes it. (Velleman 2000: 21-26, 49-52). It seems odd, however to think that my reason to give Harry my kidney is explained by my believing that I have a reason to give Harry my kidney (or that my relationship with Harry has special value) on the grounds that I will have such a reason by merely believing that I have the reason. While Vellemanian belief may explain some phenomena, such as intentions, it does not plausibly help us in understanding commitments.

According to Samuel Scheffler, personal relationships (and projects) give rise to agent-relative reasons because of their value, and this value is in part constituted by participants in the relationship “valuing” them, where what it is to value a relationship is to be have a “complex syndrome of interrelated dispositions and attitudes, including certain characteristic types of belief, dispositions to treat certain kinds of considerations as reasons for action, and susceptibility to a wide range of emotions.” (Scheffler 2010: 4 and 2004: 248). Scheffler’s aim is not to give an account of commitments in personal relationships but only to give a general account of agent-relative reasons one might have in personal relationships since he does not distinguish committed relationships from uncommitted ones. Valuing a person, as he sees it, however, cannot play the role of being committed to her because the dispositions and beliefs that constitute valuing don’t stand in the right relation to volition. You can’t decide to believe or to have a disposition to treat something as a reason as you can decide to commit to someone, and if, by hypothesis, a commitment explains why one has special reasons of committed relationships, valuing won’t fill that role. However, his account of valuing seems to me a sensible and plausible way to understand the agent-relative reasons we may have in uncommitted relationships and some of the (given) reasons we have in committed ones. I understand our views as complementary parts of a larger picture of reasons of personal relationships. See Scheffler 2004 and 2001, chapters 6 & 7.
Susan Wolf has suggested that romantic and familial love are essentially a matter of deep and personal caring. See Wolf 2010. See also Frankfurt 1999, 2004, 1988. My own view is that these kinds of love essentially involve voluntarist reasons, and the argument from commitment offers a template for that view. This argument also shows why views that try to combine desires and beliefs into a mixed state of conation and cognition (for example, Murdoch 1975, McDowell 1979, and Helm 2001) cannot adequately account for commitments – whatever their other merits. Neither beliefs nor desires are states one can decide to have, and presumably an amalgam of them is also beyond decision.

I purposely frame this view in terms that are intended to be neutral between causation and justification. So one’s endorsement of a desire as ‘efficacious’ or as ‘leading’ to action can be willing that one’s desire justify or cause the corresponding action.

See Frankfurt (1988). There may, of course, be some desires you cannot decide to identify with or to endorse. These include Frankfurt’s ‘volitional necessities’ (Frankfurt 1999). Some commitments may be volitionally necessary, but not all of them need be.

This also seems true to me of commitments you might make to a personal project, even one of self-improvement. You might commit to the project of sticking with your desire, say, to be a better person. The object of commitment may seem to be your desire, but it is rather yourself. There is more to be said about commitments to oneself and how they relate to self-promises or vows to oneself, but I don’t have space to consider these issues here.

Although some philosophers treat decisions differently from intentions, for our purposes we can treat them together. (See O’Shaughnessey (1980: 295-98) and Raz (1978: 130-136) who understand decisions as an intention that resolves uncertainty or answers the question of whether one should continue to deliberate, but this difference does not make a difference to our argument.) Just as you can in principle decide to decide to do something, you can decide to intend to do it, and these decisions and intentions are not reasons to do what one has decided or intended to do for the reasons given. See also Bratman 1987 and Scanlon 2004. Note that the fact that you can decide to intend to, say, start up a new hobby, does not entail that you can decide to intend to do what you believe you have strong reasons not to do (and know you will not do), such as to drink the toxin tomorrow.

Patricia Greenspan (2005, 2007) has argued that the norms of structural rationality allow one’s decisions to determine the weights of one’s reasons for the purposes of rational deliberation. See also Nozick (1981). Chrisoula Andreou (2009) suggests that intentions can rationally transition an agent from one deliberative framework to another – by intending to x, I can alter what it is structurally rational for me to regard as my choice situation. I take these authors to be exploring ways in which the will can nevertheless be active in obedience to the requirements of structural rationality. Their concern, however, is with structural rationality, not with reasons in the sense of interest here.

Relatedly, Samuel Scheffler proposes that what it is to “value” a relationship is, among other things, to be disposed to “treat that person’s needs, interests, and desires as providing one with reasons for action.” (Scheffler 2004: 248). See also note 59. This disposition is not something one can decide to have and so is neither a policy in Bratman’s sense nor plausibly in what a commitment consists. Scheffler offers a subtle and persuasive account of valuing as an amalgam of having a disposition to treat certain considerations as reasons, having certain beliefs, and being susceptible to certain emotions. But I wonder whether ‘valuing’ should be understood so passively. Take, for instance, the disposition to treat a person’s needs as reasons. Note that Scanlon (1998: chapter 1) defines desires “in the directed attention sense” in more or less these terms – having a tendency to see features of the object of one’s desire as providing reasons. Since we often desire things in the directed attention sense that we don’t, in an intuitive sense, ‘value’, it might be argued that what is missing from the account of ‘valuing’ is some volitional activity, such as ‘taking something to be a reason’. Perhaps what lies at the heart of valuing – or at least one important kind of valuing – is the activity of willing something to be a reason, which may, in turn, be an expression of one’s agency. This volitional activity may typically have the downstream effects that Scheffler discusses – causing one to have certain beliefs, dispositions, and susceptibility to emotions. There are of course different sorts of commitments to people, and not all of them give rise to reasons to give up one’s kidney.
For a defense of such principles in the context of promising, see Scanlon 1998, chapter 7; and Southwood & Friedrich (ms). Such principles may also play a role in explaining given reasons that arise downstream from public manifestations of commitments to people. It should not be thought that commitments to people are promises since promises are either public, and you can privately commit to another person, or private (there can be self-promises) but a commitment to another person is not plausibly, except by the lights of a narcissist, a promise to yourself.

The ideally rational agent might do something akin to taking something to be a reason if there was instrumental value in engaging in an activity that was its close cousin. If you are offered a million dollars to stipulate the (nonstipulated) meaning of the word ‘water’, you can do something close to stipulating the meaning of that word without actually stipulating it, since you can’t stipulate the (nonstipulated) meaning of a word that already has a (nonstipulated) meaning (though you can create a different stipulated meaning, but that is not what is at issue here). Similarly, there may be instrumental value in doing something akin to taking something to be a reason, but that is not the same as actually taking it to be a reason, which presupposes that you can make it a reason. Stipulation and taking to be a reason are activities that presuppose the possibility of success to be the activities they are.

This suggestion was made in one form or another by David Chalmers, Sven Ove Hansson, and Luke Russell.

Again, meta-normative claims about the source of normativity can also be understood as normative claims, but if normative, they must nevertheless be distinguished in content and explanatory role from first-order normative claims that are the upshot of first-order normative theorizing about what to do. See also n. 4.

See my 2002. If some items are on a par with respect to a covering consideration, then some other items will be indeterminately better than other items with respect to that covering consideration.

There is a deeper explanation of why these two kinds of indeterminacy should be grouped together. There is a practical standpoint from which the will should have the freedom to create reasons when reasons run out in exactly these two ways, but a proper discussion of this point would take us too far afield.

Note that the Mafioso Problem does not rear its ugly head here. Although the Mafioso can publically manifest his commitment to knee-cap his enemy so that many people will be hurt and disappointed if he doesn’t end up doing so, the question of whether those downstream given reasons can make it the case that he has most all-things-considered reasons to harm his enemy depends on the substantive weighting of the downstream given reasons. The hurt and disappointment of Mafioso mates over failure to do something morally wrong is not much of a given reason, if one at all.

Compare Watson (2009) who suggests that the power to create an obligation through a promise is constrained by moral requirements.

Two further thoughts relating voluntarist reasons to recent innovations concerning the relation of the will to moral reasons: First, Stephen Darwall (2006) has recently suggested that there is a distinctive kind of reason – a “second-personal reason” – that is an important kind of reason for understanding moral obligations, rights, respect for persons and so on. The essential idea behind “second-personal reasons” is that they are conceptually connected to the authority to demand action of the person for whom they are reasons. It might be thought that my authority to make a demand on you can be understood in terms of your normative power to ‘take someone to have authority’, a cognate of taking something to be a reason. If this is so, then a full account of the authority relations needed for second-personal reasons may rely on this idea of taking something to be a reason/authoritative for oneself. Second, Scanlon (2008) has recently distinguished the permissibility of an action with its “meaning” or “significance”. For example, he says that “I treat someone as an end in herself only if I take the fact that she is an end in herself as giving me reasons to treat her in some ways but not others.” (Scanlon 2008: 99). He suggests that the reasons one “takes” (read: “believes”) oneself to have can affect the “meaning” of one’s action but not its permissibility. While this seems to me an important distinction, we should not think that the import of voluntarist reasons is confined to the “meaning” side of possible objections to an action since voluntarist reasons can speak to moral permissibility and obligation.

[Acknowledgments]