

# Lomasky on Practical Reason: Personal Value and Metavalues

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In *Persons, Rights, and the Moral Community* (from now on, *PRMC*), Loren Lomasky develops a tripartite derivation of basic rights.<sup>1</sup> In the second component of the derivation, Lomasky argues for “the transmissibility of practical reason” (*PRMC* 64). According to this principle, by understanding that another agent has a reason (personal, agent-relative) to pursue an end, that provides me with a reason (impersonal, agent-neutral) to bring about that end. Eric Mack, in “Against Agent-Neutral Value” (from now on, *AANV*), argues against Lomasky’s notion of the “transmission.”<sup>2</sup> In a later article, “Response to Four Critics” (from now on, *RFC*), Lomasky defends this notion against Mack’s argument.<sup>3</sup> This essay will show that Lomasky’s defense against Mack (in *RFC*) fails.

## 1. Personal, Impersonal, and the Transmission

Before describing Lomasky’s “transmission of practical reason” (from now on, *TPR*), there are some concepts that will briefly be explicated. The first set of concepts is that of personal value and reason. Lomasky describes a “reason” as a “motivational impetus” in the pursuit of an “end” of value (*PRMC* 34). Essentially, an agent perceives a given end as being of value, and the agent is then motivated (or has a “reason”) to pursue such an end. The key to personal value is that the end is perceived as being of value simply because it is the agent’s own. Lomasky writes, “He acts rationally if he assigns special value—personal value, value-for-himself—to his own ends simply in virtue of their being his” (*PRMC* 87). Thus, when an individual has

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<sup>1</sup> Loren Lomasky, *Persons, Rights, and the Moral Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Eric Mack, “Against Agent-Neutral Value,” *Reason Papers* 14 (Spring 1989), pp. 76-85.

<sup>3</sup> Loren Lomasky, “Response to Four Critics,” *Reason Papers* 14 (Spring 1989), pp. 110-29.

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“different commitments,” “direct[s] his life along a particular path” and has “his own ends,” the individual then perceives these things as having “value-for-himself.” Since these things are viewed as possessing “personal value, value-for-himself,” they then provide personal “reasons-for-that-individual.”

The second set of concepts is related to Lomasky’s understanding of impersonal value and reasons. Describing this type of value, he writes:

If there were no conflicts among persons, there would be no need for an interpersonal morality. Because conflicts do occur, because the attainment of end  $E_1$ , desired by person B, may be incompatible with the realization of  $E_2$ , desired by C, there is need for an interpersonal morality. More specifically, such conflicts can be resolved if there is some rational basis for determining which of  $E_1$  or  $E_2$  ought to be preferred. This is provided by a standard of value that provides a measure for each. It is not B’s standard—which would merely provide a ranking in terms of value-for-B—nor is it C’s; rather, it must be one applicable to various persons’ ends and must issue in a determination which is not value for some particular person but value *simpliciter*. A standard that ranges over persons and their ends in this way is what I shall call an impersonal standard of value. (*PRMC* 23, underlined emphasis added)

Remember that Lomasky describes a “reason” as a “motivational impetus” in the pursuit of an “end” of value (*PRMC* 34). When an agent perceives an end as possessing value, the agent is then motivated (or has a “reason”) to pursue such an end. This aspect of reason plays a similar role for both personal and impersonal value. The key with impersonal value, however, is that the end is perceived as being of value regardless of whose end it is. Thus, this end has value—*simpliciter* (value for everyone, and not due merely to a particular agent’s relation to such an end).

Lomasky presents the TPR as the “second line of approach” to his tripartite derivation of rights (*PRMC* 62). It is employed to demonstrate that the recognition of other agents as having ends they personally value forces the recognizing agent into claiming that those very ends are also of some impersonal value. Lomasky writes, “Recognition that someone values end E is sufficient warrant for one to judge that there is value that attaches to E; one need not first note that the one who values E is indeed none other than oneself” (*PRMC* 64). Although the TPR is meant to generate impersonal value via the mere recognition of personal value, it does not directly argue from value to value. Instead, it attempts to argue from reason to reason. If Lomasky establishes that an impersonal reason exists, he can then argue that an impersonal value exists behind that reason.

When an agent perceives a given end as being of value, the agent is

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then motivated (or has a “reason”) to pursue such an end. This aspect of reason plays a similar role for both personal and impersonal value. What distinguishes personal from impersonal reason, is the valued end that is behind them. With the former, an agent has a reason to pursue an end, simply because it is his own. With the latter, the agent has a reason to pursue an end, even if it is not his personal end. Thus, by showing that impersonal reason exists, Lomasky will have shown that there is impersonal value.

To demonstrate that impersonal reason exists, Lomasky formulates the following argument:

A’s having end  $E_1$  provides A motivational force to pursue  $E_1$ , but also A’s recognition that B has end  $E_2$  provides A *at least some reason* to act so as to advance  $E_2$ . I deliberately say “some reason,” because if value is not completely impersonal, then A’s reason for promoting B’s attainment of  $E_2$  is not the same reason that B has to promote B’s attainment of  $E_2$ , nor is it liable to be nearly as strong as B’s reason. Nonetheless, A recognizes that there does exist reason for bringing about  $E_2$ . It happens that, in the first instance, the reason is B’s; but it seems reasonable to suggest that that very recognition has motivational force for A. (PRMC 63-64, underlined emphasis added)

B is pursuing an end that he takes to be of value. This end,  $E_2$ , has value for B, because it is his own end. In other words,  $E_2$  has personal value for B due to B’s peculiar relationship with  $E_2$ . Because of this relationship, B has a personal reason to pursue  $E_2$ . A, on the other hand, does not have this relationship (which engenders personal value and, thus, a personal reason) with  $E_2$ . A does, however, recognize that B has a personal reason to pursue  $E_2$ . According to Lomasky, this “recognition” motivates A to pursue  $E_2$ . Since A is motivated to pursue  $E_2$  and A is not connected in the relevant manner to engender a personal reason to pursue  $E_2$ , A then has an impersonal reason to pursue  $E_2$  (PRMC 63-64).

The key is that A is being motivated to pursue an end that A does not value personally—merely because A recognizes that that end provides B with a personal reason to procure it. Lomasky writes:

The argument can be put in this way: one who recognizes R as a reason for  $E_2$  is thereby logically bound to admit that it is not totally and in every respect indifferent whether  $E_2$  obtain. R *is* why  $E_2$  should obtain; otherwise R could not be conceived to be a reason . . . . The appeal is not moral but semantic. To understand what it is for someone else to have a reason is to recognize the existence of evaluative grounds that have not been created by oneself for oneself.

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These evaluative grounds provide reason for judging that the world ought to be one way rather than some other. But to put forth that judgment as cogent, even if it is only a *prima facie* judgment, and even if it is overridden by other considerations, is to admit the transmissibility of practical reason from person to person. (PRMC 64)

The move is semantic. In order for A to understand that there is an R for the procurement of  $E_2$  (which is personal for B), he must understand what R means. Essentially, A understands that all R's are "evaluative grounds . . . that the world ought to be one way rather than some other" (PRMC 64). When A understands that B has an R, A recognizes that there are "evaluative grounds that have not been created by oneself for oneself" (PRMC 64). A, then, understands that there is an R to bring about  $E_2$ . To understand this, according to Lomasky, A must recognize that there is an impersonal reason to bring about  $E_2$  (an R to bring about  $E_2$  that is not personal to A) (PRMC 64).

What Lomasky hopes to have established is that there are not two "radically different" understandings of a reason for action. These would be: "understanding a reason as mine, which is suffused with motivational force, and understanding it as thine, which is entirely bereft of motivational force" (PRMC 65). A understands that there are "evaluative grounds" to bring about  $E_2$ . By "evaluative grounds," I mean that A understands that  $E_2$  has value (which is not personal value to A). Since A understands that  $E_2$  has value, he is somewhat motivated to procure  $E_2$ .<sup>4</sup> Thus, A has a reason to bring about  $E_2$  that is not a personal reason. This reason, then, has to be impersonal—as is the value that is associated with it (PRMC 65).

### 2. Mack's Critique

In AANV, Mack formulates five arguments against the notion of impersonal value (or in Mack's terms, "agent-neutral value"). One of these arguments questions the link between agent-external value and impersonal value. To describe Mack's argument, I'll employ a hypothetical scenario. Alf

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<sup>4</sup> The reason that I say "somewhat" is that Lomasky downplays the strength of the reason that is transmitted. He writes:

A acknowledges that B has reason (understood personally) to act in order to bring about  $E_2$ ; thus there is (impersonal) reason to bring about  $E_2$ ; thus A has some reason to advance B's attainment of  $E_2$ ; *however, if A's commitment to his own projects entails pursuing  $E_1$ , which is incompatible with  $E_2$ , then A does not have reason on balance to promote  $E_2$ . . . . The reason transmitted from B to A can be vanishingly small.* (PRMC 64-65, emphasis added)

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is suffering an immense amount of pain. He has a headache that has been with him since he awoke. There is a drug that exists (an analgesic) that could eliminate Alf's headache. Without a doubt, using the drug to eliminate Alf's suffering is an end that has personal value for Alf. He, thus, has a personal reason to procure the drug.

Alf is also a student of philosophy. He claims that the only values and reasons that exist are personal in nature. Thus, he denies the existence of impersonal value and its correlate—impersonal reason. An advocate for the existence of impersonal reason and value could claim that this places Alf in an awkward position. For example, Thomas Nagel writes, Alf “will have to say that though he has reason to want an analgesic, there is no reason for him to have one, or for anyone else who happens to be around to give him one.”<sup>5</sup> It seems, *prima facie*, that Alf has to claim (in a contradictory manner) that he has a reason to get the drug and that there is not a reason to give him such a drug.

In response to the position that Alf finds himself, Mack provides the following argument:

This is partially correct; but mostly misleading. Clearly, if the badness of suffering is agent-relative, the sufferer cannot say that there is an agent-neutral reason for him to have the analgesic. But that is not to deny the existence . . . of an agent-relative reason for him to have it. Nor is it to deny the existence of agent-relative reasons had by some of those who happen to be around [Alf] to provide him with an analgesic. A blissful cessation of [Alf's] screams, or even [Alf's] feeling better, may be among the states of affairs that are good for some or all of these agents. (AANV 80-81)

In the first part of the argument, Mack is accounting for the apparently contradictory nature of Alf's situation. The reason it seems contradictory is because it relies upon an equivocation with the word “reason.” When phrased in an extremely ambiguous sense, Alf is being contradictory; he is claiming that there is a reason and there is not a reason for him to get the drug (R & ~R). But once we raise Alf's claim to the appropriate level of specificity, this contradiction vanishes. Alf is not denying the existence of all reasons for him to get the drug; he is only denying the existence of impersonal reasons. Alf readily affirms that he has a personal reason to procure the analgesic. Phrased in this manner, Alf is not affirming a contradiction. He merely states that he has a personal reason and there is no such thing as an impersonal reason (Pr &

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 160.

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~Ir). This is merely a reiteration of Alf's stance on the notion of impersonal reason.

In the second part of the argument, Mack describes why others might possess a reason to help Alf. Suppose Alf is waiting in the emergency room to receive his allocation of the analgesic. While he is waiting, he meets Bob, a fellow headache sufferer. Bob has the exact same headache as Alf and is also waiting for the analgesic. Bob informs Alf that the drug is in limited supply. He then tells Alf the following: "I hope we both get the analgesic that removes this wretched headache!" Since Alf does not believe in impersonal reasons or values, how is he supposed to understand Bob's statement? Clearly, Alf recognizes that Bob has a personal reason to use the analgesic to end his own suffering. However, without a belief in impersonal reasons, how would Alf explain Bob's motivation that Alf also receive the drug?

Mack provides a detailed description of why Bob might wish that Alf gain the analgesic:

[Alf's] groaning may be drowning out the answers on Hollywood Squares. Or it may be that [Alf's] groaning bothers him because [Alf's] being in pain, in a way that is vivid and present to him, bothers him. Because [Alf is] near to him and [Bob] is a person of normal sympathies, his sympathy extends to [Alf] and he is discomforted by [Alf's] suffering. So he has reason to want it to stop—a reason which does not extend to the suffering of those to whom, perhaps simply because of their distance from him, his sympathies do not embrace. (AANV 81)

It is important to understand what Mack is not claiming. Mack is not denying that Bob is motivated to end Alf's suffering. In fact, he readily acknowledges that Bob has such a motivation. He even claims that such a motivation is normal (by using "normal sympathies").

What Mack is denying is that anything impersonal (reason or value) can be inferred purely from this aforementioned motivation. He does this by showing that this motivation can be accounted for—merely via the employment of personal reasons. Alf, of course, has a personal reason to eliminate his own suffering. This is due to Alf's personal end  $E_1$ . This end has personal value for Alf, because it is a state of affairs in which he is not suffering. Bob, on the other hand, is a person who possesses "normal sympathies." He knows what it is like to have a terrible headache. If Bob were to get the last analgesic and Alf was forced to suffer through the headache, Bob would sincerely feel terrible. He then has a personal reason to want to end Alf's suffering. Since Alf is suffering "in a way that is vivid and present to him," Bob values (and values it personally, because it would bother him, were Alf to continue suffering a state of affairs),  $E_2$ , in which Alf is no longer

suffering (AANV 81).

The move that Mack makes is to show that there is a personal reason that can account for Bob's motivation. This personal reason comes about via the overlapping of personal ends of value ( $E_1$  and  $E_2$ ). Since the only state of affairs that can bring about the advancement of  $E_2$  is the advancement of  $E_1$ , Bob has a personal reason to bring about a state of affairs that satisfies both ends. By presenting this alternate (and purely personal) explanation for Bob's motivation, Mack has shifted the burden of proof to those who are advocates of impersonal reason and value.

### 3. Lomasky's Defense

In defending his account, Lomasky focuses upon the ambiguous status of the term, "normal sympathies." Lomasky writes:

Instead, I shall address just one of the issues Mack puts on the table: interpersonal transmission of rational motivation. Does, say, the fact of someone's awareness that I am in great pain thereby constitute a reason for him to do anything?

Mack admits that it may. My groaning may interrupt his enjoyment of Hollywood Squares. More centrally: "Because I am near to him and he is a person of normal sympathies, his sympathy extends to me and he is discomforted by my suffering [Mack, p. 81]." The problem with this explanation is that it ducks all the important questions. The first of them is: how are we to understand the reference to *normal* sympathies? By 'normal' we can intend either mere statistical frequency or the satisfaction of some normative standard. (RFC 116-17, underlined emphasis added)

Referring back to Alf and Bob, what are we to make of Bob's end,  $E_2$ ? Since Bob possesses "normal sympathies," his  $E_2$  overlaps with Alf's  $E_1$ . Due to this overlapping, Bob (claims Mack) has a personal reason to bring about a state of affairs in which Alf's suffering is ameliorated. But, as Lomasky states, Mack might mean one of two things when referring to "normal sympathies."

In one sense, Mack might be using the term "normal" as synonymous with "mere statistical frequency." According to this sense, it might be normal if a majority of people are discomforted by the sound of scratching upon a chalkboard. Those, however, who are in the minority and don't mind the sound "are not deficient with regard to some norm . . . of perceptual acuity" (RFC 117). In other words, we cannot blame or fault those who are indifferent to the sound of chalk scratching upon the chalkboard. Those who are not discomforted are not violating any normative standards by remaining in the minority. They just have different tastes from those who comprise the larger group.

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We should now be able to apply this conception of “normal” to Alf and Bob. Pretend that Bob ceases to value  $E_2$ ; he ceases to possess “normal sympathies” (construed in the “mere statistical frequency” sense). He no longer cares if Alf is suffering; he is indifferent. When given the two doses of analgesic, Bob takes one and destroys the other. Since Bob is doing something that is merely statistically infrequent (most would value  $E_2$ , and thus give the drug to Alf), we cannot fault him for his choice. In essence, we cannot blame him, say that he is wrong, claim that he ought to have done otherwise, etc.<sup>6</sup> By being indifferent, Bob is merely different from most people.

In another sense, Mack might be using the term “normal” as synonymous with “the satisfaction of some normative standard.” According to this sense, it might be normal if a majority of people employ vision at (or above) 20-20. Those in the minority, who have worse than 20-20 vision, do not merely possess different vision—they also have *bad* vision. Likewise, those who arrive at the answer “45” when adding 7 and 5, do not merely provide a different answer—they also give the *wrong* answer. In the above two cases, there seems to be a standard that is independent of the mere amount (statistical appearance) that a particular response is elicited. With these two cases, there exist external normative standards. Thus, if everybody, except for one (who answered “12”) answered “45” when adding 7 and 5, then the larger group would be wrong and the one person would be right. That is to say that there is an arithmetic norm that exists independently of the mere number of people who subscribe to that norm. And those who do not obey such a norm are referred to as wrong, faulty, deficient, etc. (RFC 117).

Pretend, again, that Bob ceases to value  $E_2$ . For no particular reason at all, Bob ceases to care whether Alf is or is not suffering; he is indifferent. When given the two doses of analgesic, Bob takes one and destroys the other. Alf still personally values  $E_1$  and thus still has a personal reason to procure  $E_1$ . Bob no longer personally values a state of affairs that overlaps with  $E_1$  (such as  $E_2$ ) and thus he has no personal reason to insure that  $E_1$  takes place. However, Bob still acknowledges that Alf has a personal reason to procure  $E_1$ . If the TPR is correct, then such an acknowledgment entails that Bob acknowledge the existence of an impersonal reason to bring about  $E_1$ . By

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<sup>6</sup> I am assuming a couple of things here. First, I am assuming that by denying Alf the drug, Bob is not violating any prudential norms. There is not another end he values (like  $E_3$ , in which giving the drug to Alf secures him a job that he values) in which it would be contrary to Bob’s interests to deny Alf the drug. Second, I am assuming that Bob has complete knowledge of what all of his personal values entail. There is not another personal end (like  $E_4$ , in which Bob likes to end the suffering of mammals—and Alf happens to be a mammal, and Bob fails to notice this) that Bob is frustrating by denying Alf the drug.



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completely ignoring the impersonal reason, Bob would be violating a norm. We would not say that he is merely acting differently. Instead, we would make the stronger claim that Bob is acting *wrongly, in a faulty manner, in a bad manner, etc.* There is a state of affairs ( $E_1$  and  $E_2$ ) that possesses impersonal value and thereby ought to provide impersonal reasons for its procurement. Bob is not motivated by something he ought to have been motivated by.

Lomasky interprets Mack “as conceding only that most people, most of the time do not find themselves entirely indifferent to the circumstance of someone next to them groaning in agony” (RFC 117). To deny impersonal value (and its correlate reason), Mack must deny the normative version of “normal.” Thus, according to Lomasky, Mack most likely thought that “normal” was equivalent to “mere statistical frequency” (RFC 117).

Lomasky, unlike Mack, holds that one ought to embrace the normative sense behind “normal.” In RFC, he writes, “It is one of those things that—normatively—count as providing a potential basis for action . . . . I maintain that the best explanation . . . is that we recognize that the sufferer’s pain is a misfortune for him, and that in virtue of our correctly apprehending its badness for him we thereby understand that we have (some) reason to disvalue the occurrence of the pain, and thus (some) reason to take action to alleviate it” (RFC 117-18). Lomasky is claiming that there is an impersonal reason to aid the sufferer.

In order for this to be true, there must be impersonal value and reasons; the TPR must hold. To show that this is likely the case, Lomasky constructs the following thought experiment:

If squealing chalk drives you up the wall, then you would do well to *extinguish* the reaction. That portion of your life conducted in proximity to blackboards would be more pleasant, and at no epistemic loss to you. That is, extinction of the chalk response would not render you oblivious to something that remains genuinely an evil. There is no “fact of the matter” concerning the badness of chalk squealing independent of the subjective tinge of your experience. Would it correspondingly be a pure gain to extinguish your sympathetic response to the pain of others? You would thereby avoid some emotional distress and would free up your busy schedule by removing pain-alleviation from your to-do list. Those are genuine benefits. Why, then, might you be disinclined to adopt the sympathy-extinction strategy? (RFC 118-19)

The “chalk response” and the “sympathetic response” are both statistically normal; the vast majority of people have such responses. Lomasky claims, however, that the chalk response is *merely* statistically normal. Thus, if

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someone were to extinguish such a response, he would not be violating a norm—he would merely be different from most people. We would not view such a person as faulty, defective, or erring in any way.

The same does not apply to the sympathetic response. If one were to quell the sympathetic response one feels when one observes the vivid pain of another, he (and others) would view such a change as unfortunate (RFC 114-15). The extinction of such a response would be viewed as more-than-merely statistically abnormal. Granted, the person who is able to extinguish such a response might benefit from not being receptive to what such a response entails. This benefit, however, *ceteris paribus* would not be important—overall. This seems to imply that there is a deeper notion of “normal” behind the sympathetic response.

Lomasky, then, describes why the extinction of the sympathetic response seems to be unfortunate. He writes:

I suggest that it is because you find that strategy permeated by irrationality. It would be akin to your deliberately refusing to read the newspaper in order to persist in the belief that the lotto ticket you bought yesterday has made you a millionaire today. That is irrational if what matters is not simply or primarily the state of your consciousness but the way things are in the world. Similarly, the extinction strategy is irrational because it would be to take a capacity for apprehending what is valuable and disvaluable in the world as if it were only a spotlight on one’s own psyche. (RFC 119)

With the extinction of the sympathetic response, it seems like you are merely avoiding the world. There is impersonal value outside of you, *but* through some mind trick, you fail to recognize the impersonal value that exists in the world. Instead, you are treating all value as if it were merely “a spotlight on one’s own psyche” (RFC 119). Since you are not motivated by something that ought to motivate you (real value in the world independent of your psyche), you are acting irrationally. This intuition seems to provide evidence that there exists impersonal reason and value.

#### **4. Another Plausible Explanation**

There are portions of Lomasky’s defense I will not deny. We would feel unfortunate and a bit irrational if we were to extinguish the sympathetic response. On the other hand, these negative feelings would not exist with the elimination of the chalk response. I recognize and accept the asymmetry in intuitions between the two aforementioned cases. However, I can provide a plausible explanation for this asymmetry without relying upon impersonal reason and value.

*a. Metavalue*

Remember that when an agent perceives an end as valuable, that agent is then motivated (or has a “reason”) to pursue such an end. The key to personal value is that the given end is perceived as being of value simply because it is the agent’s own. There is a state of affairs in the world (like  $E_1$ ), that the agent values simply because of his personal relationship to that state of affairs. As Lomasky states, “He acts rationally if he assigns special value—personal value, value-for-himself—to his own ends simply in virtue of their being his” (*PRMC* 87).

There is a type of personal value that I would like to define. This type of personal value has a personal end which contains another personal value. For example, suppose that Agent *A* personally values ( $V_1$ ) the welfare of his children ( $E_1$ ). *A* has  $V_1$  merely because of his relation to  $E_1$  (they are his children). *A* also, however, has another sort of personal value—a metavalue ( $MV$ ). According to  $MV$ , *A* personally values a state of affairs ( $E_2$ ) where he values ( $V_1$ ) the welfare of his children. In other words, *A* values the fact that he values the welfare of his children (since he likes being a good dad). The distinctive feature of  $MV$  is that its end,  $E_2$ , contains another personal value ( $V_1$ ). Thus,  $MV$  is only satisfied when it is the case that he values the welfare of his children (via the attainment of  $E_2$ ). If, for some weird reason,  $V_1$  were extinguished,  $MV$  would be frustrated.

Let’s apply the concept of a metavalue to Lomasky’s attempted defense. Here is a brief outline of the sympathetic response and the chalk response—with the inclusion of a metavalue:

Case A (sympathetic response):

Personal Value—Hate others’ suffering pain because I sympathize.

Personal Metavalue—I value being a sympathizer.

Case B (chalk response):

Personal Value—Hate chalk-scratching noise because it annoys me.

Lack of Metavalue—The fact that *X* annoys me as opposed to *Y* (*ceteris paribus*), does not concern me.

In Case A, there exists a metavalue that has an end that contains another personal value. The agent values ( $V_1$ ) a state of affairs ( $E_1$ ), in which the sufferer ceases to have any pain. The agent also values ( $MV$ ) a state of affairs

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( $E_2$ ) in which he values ( $V_1$ ) that the sufferer not be in pain. In Case A, then,  $MV$  contains  $V_1$ . On the other hand, with Case B, there isn't a metavalue. The agent values ( $V_2$ ) a state of affairs ( $E_3$ ), in which there is a lack of a chalk-scratching noise. If he were to cease to have  $V_2$ , he would not be frustrating another value.

Lomasky claims that the intuitive dissimilarity between Case A and Case B was a result of the dissimilarity in impersonal value. With Lomasky, there is impersonal value that exists independently of  $V_1$ . On the other hand, there is no impersonal value that exists independently of  $V_2$ . Thus, when both  $V_1$  and  $V_2$  are extinguished, they elicit different intuitive responses. In Case A, you feel that the change is unfortunate and irrational. With Case B, you do not have these negative feelings. He claims that such an intuitive dissimilarity makes it plausible that there exists impersonal reason and value.

I agree that there is an intuitive dissimilarity. However, I can explain such a difference without appealing to the existence of impersonal value. My explanation relies upon dissimilarity in metavalues (which are merely deeper personal values). First, let's look at the easier case, B. In this case, the agent values ( $V_2$ ) a state of affairs in which there is a lack of chalk-scratching noise ( $E_3$ ). Through some magical means, our agent is able to extinguish  $V_2$ . He no longer has a personal reason to procure  $E_3$ . Since there is no metavalue in Case B, the elimination of  $V_2$  does not trouble our agent. He just now happens to be indifferent to the sound of chalk scratching and does not view this change as a loss.

With Case A, the agent would view the elimination of  $V_1$  as unfortunate. Again, through some magical means, our agent is able to extinguish  $V_1$ . Our agent is no longer bothered by the observance of others' vividly suffering. Thus, he no longer has a personal reason to procure  $E_1$ . This change, however, is not viewed merely with indifference. The agent would still have an intact metavalue. He would still value ( $MV$ ) a state of affairs ( $E_2$ ) in which he valued (via  $V_1$ )  $E_1$ . When he eliminates  $V_1$ , he would thereby prevent  $E_2$  from obtaining and thus frustrate  $MV$ . This person would really value being a sympathizer, but for some reason he feels numb when others are suffering near him. When this transformation occurs (from  $V_1$  to  $\sim V_1$ ), the agent would not view this change as merely "different." This agent would view the change as unfortunate, bad, a tragedy, etc.

Would the agent view the elimination of  $V_1$  as irrational? Suppose that we were able to offer our agent a Faustian deal. We understand that being troubled by others' suffering is costly. When the agent is sympathetic, viewing others in pain can be emotionally draining. By no longer having  $V_1$  (if provided the magical means), our agent would no longer waste the emotional distress. Given such costs, wouldn't it be rational for our agent to extinguish his sympathy?

No. Its irrational nature is not due to its violation of impersonal

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value. Remember that Lomasky argued that the agent would be irrational because he would be avoiding the impersonal value that exists in the outside world. Lomasky writes, “That is irrational if what matters is not simply or primarily the state of your consciousness but the way things are in the world . . . [I]t would be to take a capacity for apprehending what is valuable and disvaluable in the world as if it were only a spotlight on one’s own psyche” (RFC 119). With my account, on the other hand, the irrationality is due to something that is entirely the opposite of what Lomasky has in mind. The irrationality is due precisely to the fact that the agent is not paying close enough attention to the “spotlight” on his own psyche.

Although my explanation is different from Lomasky’s, it is not without precedent in his work. In *PRMC*, he forms an argument that is similar to my own:

It is also the case for most objects of desire that they can be opposed within a person’s volitional makeup by desires at a different level. That is, one who desires some outcome O may not value the circumstance of his valuing O, may even desire to be rid of the desire for O. For example, a cigarette smoker may desire to smoke cigarettes, may in fact be motivated by that desire to smoke cigarettes yet, at a higher level, disvalue the circumstance of his desiring to smoke cigarettes. (*PRMC* 58-59, footnote omitted)

This notion of higher-order desire is similar to my account of metavalues. What is of interest, for our present purpose, is the example that he provides.

Let’s say that the smoker has “kicked” the habit. After years of struggling, he is no longer motivated to smoke. In fact, he takes a special drug that makes smoking seem disgusting to him. We can now describe his value-set as follows:

Personal Value—Hates smoking because he finds it disgusting.

Personal Metavalue—Values the fact that he disvalues smoking.

The ex-smoker no longer has a value-set that is in dissonance. However, there were some unforeseen costs to the coherent set. Because of his new distaste for smoking, he has been ostracized from his smoker-social group. Since his friends’ social lives revolve around smoking at cigar bars, he is no longer able to “hang out” with them. Assuming that there is no other metavalue in conflict with the above metavalue and assuming that there is no metavalue higher than the above metavalue (a meta-metavalue?), would it be rational for the ex-smoker to extinguish his personal value?

It would be irrational for the ex-smoker to extinguish his personal value. If the metavalue sits atop of his valuational hierarchy, he would be imprudent if he were to stop taking the anti-smoking drug. Encouraging him to stop would be equivalent to encouraging the ex-smoker to take on a form of *akrasia* (weakness of will). There are often costs to being prudent. One often has to give up some things of lesser value in order to ensure that he is in possession of the greatest amount of value. Were the ex-smoker to stop taking the drug, he would be irrational in the aforementioned sense of the term.

Returning to Case A, our agent would be acting irrationally if he were to extinguish  $V_1$ . It is true that there is some cost to possessing  $V_1$ . If, however,  $MV$  sits atop of our agent's valuational hierarchy, then it would be irrational to frustrate this higher value in order to avoid the aforementioned lesser costs. By not paying enough attention to what he truly values ( $MV$ —valuing being sympathetic), the agent would cease to maximize the general amount of personal value available to him. Instead, through some weakness of will or lack of self-knowledge, he would be exchanging the lesser value (the costs of  $V_1$ ) for the greater value ( $MV$ ). By proceeding in this manner, I can explain the intuitive difference between Cases A and B, without relying upon impersonal reason.

***b. The entrenched nature of metavalues***

Lomasky might not be content with the above counter-explanation. He might argue that I am not addressing the problem, but merely delaying it. He would try to re-employ the thought experiment in Case A at the level of the metavalue. It would be a case in which we would no longer even value being sympathetic. As I have stated, there are costs to being sympathetic. If we were to remove all positive personal values involved (both  $V_1$  and  $MV$ ), would we view this new existence as a better state of affairs and/or merely a different state of affairs? Lomasky would probably deny the view that such a state is better and/or merely different. Instead, he might claim that we would view such a change as unfortunate and irrational. Since these negative intuitions remain, *though the metavalue is gone*, he would maintain that impersonal value better accounts for the recalcitrant nature of these intuitions.

To block this move, I maintain that metavalues are entrenched. This means two things. First, if an agent possesses a metavalue, that agent cannot imagine what it is like to live without that metavalue. The metavalue is constitutive of the agent's identity and it is thus impossible for the agent to imagine what his life would be like separate from it. Second, it is hard for an agent to change metavalues. Only after a major change can an agent switch metavalues. In some cases, it is impossible for an agent to switch.

If the metavalues are entrenched, this has a disastrous effect upon Lomasky's thought experiment. His experiment between A and B would be permanently tainted. The existence of the personal metavalue in Case A and the lack of a metavalue in Case B would always produce the asymmetry. You

would always be viewing the thought experiment from a perspective in which the metavalue is intact. Thus, the chalk-extinction strategy would be viewed with indifference, while the sympathy-extinction strategy would be viewed as unfortunate and irrational. Without a doubt, the intuitive asymmetry does exist. Ultimately, however, it is personal value (albeit a metavalue) that accounts for it.

**c. Personal projects**

A consistent theme throughout *PRMC* is the high level of importance that Lomasky allots to personal projects. Project pursuit provides many things for his theory. It plays a part in establishing personal identity for agents. And it plays a central role in his derivation of rights. I will argue that the entrenched nature of metavalues is similar to the entrenched nature of personal projects.

In the second chapter of *PRMC*, Lomasky provides a detailed explication of the concept of a personal project. A project is defined by three characteristics: persistence, centrality and structure. With the first, a project lasts “throughout large stretches of an individual life.” With the second, projects “play a central role within the ongoing endeavors of the individual.” With the third, projects provide structure by eliciting “actions that establish a pattern coherent in virtue of the ends subserved.” Projects can either be bad or good. Some examples of them are serving God, bringing relief to the starving persons in Africa, advocating White Supremacy, and practicing philosophy (*PRMC* 26).

An important component of projects is that they can be directed at internal states of affairs. Lomasky writes, “Nor are all projects expressly devoted to bringing about and maintaining a desired external state of affairs; some are directed at becoming and remaining a certain sort of person” (*PRMC* 26). This sounds strikingly similar to a metavalue. Let’s say that it is our agent’s project to be a sympathetic person. This agent values being a person who values the lack-of-suffering of those who are near to him (this is the metavalue in Case A). It meets the three characteristics of a project. For as long as the agent can remember, he has wanted to be a sympathetic person (persistence). Before he does anything important, he asks himself the following question: “What would a sympathetic person do in this circumstance?” (centrality). Most of his actions follow (or he takes them to follow) the pattern of what a person primarily concerned with being sympathetic would try to accomplish (structure).

Just like metavalues, projects are a source of personal value.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Lomasky does claim that the personal value that comes from project pursuit rests upon a notion of impersonal value. He writes:

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Lomasky writes:

Project pursuit, though, is partial . . . . An individual's projects provide him with a *personal*—an intimately personal—standard of value to choose his actions by. His central and enduring ends provide him reasons for action that are recognized as his own in the sense that no one who is uncommitted to those specific ends will share the reasons for action that he possesses. (*PRMC* 27-28)

If my project is to be a sympathetic person, then I have an end that I value simply because it is my own end (it's my project). I am, then, motivated (a personal reason) to behave in a manner that is consistent with the behavior of a sympathetic person. Since I am deeply committed to my end, my motivation should match my level of commitment.

This moves us to a much more important point. What is of interest is the role that projects play in Lomasky's aforementioned notion:

The reason why projects in this respect stand apart from other kinds of valuation is that projects are those persistent desires which order a life and by reference to which other items are valued or disvalued. A being who has projects is one for whom there is a highest level that confers positive or negative value on lower-level desires. Or, if there is no highest level but instead an infinite hierarchy, projects are those valuational commitments that, at every succeeding level, are positively valued. (*PRMC* 59)

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I have argued that unless there is some objective truth concerning what is valuable and what is not, no one could, at bottom, have reason to direct his activity in one way rather than another. Personal value cannot be conjured out of nothing; it presupposes the existence of impersonal value. *However*, it has not been claimed that impersonal value provides a decision procedure to which agents rationally must subscribe as setting out for them the projects they are to undertake. That would be at odds with the whole tenor of the previous chapters in which personal value was seen as individuating agents. (*PRMC* 234, emphasis added)

In this passage, Lomasky seems to conflate the different notions of impersonal value. In the first part (before "however"), he means "impersonal" in the "objective" sense. In the second part (after "however"), he means "impersonal" in the "agent-neutral" sense. Since my essay is not concerned with the "objective" sense of impersonal value, I am not concerned whether Lomasky states that this sense of impersonal value underlies personal value. That is beyond the scope of this essay, and will not be addressed.



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In this hierarchy of values, projects and metavalues occupy a similar (if not the same) position. They both sit atop of the valuational hierarchy. In other words, they ought to take precedence over all of the lower-order desires (or values).

We can now describe the intuitive difference between Lomasky's Case A and Case B. In Case A, the agent has a project in which he tries to be a sympathetic person. In other words, he values a state of affairs in which he values the lack-of-suffering of those who are proximate to him. In Case B, on the other hand, he does not have a project that is associated with the chalk-scratching noise. In a similar fashion to the metavalue account, the intuitive dissimilarity between A and B can be explained without reference to impersonal value.

I will now show that Lomasky argues that personal values can be entrenched. He formulates such an argument when he ties projects to personal identity:

I shall instead suggest another factor that bears on the identity of an individual: it is the persistent attachment to ends that shape and continue to shape a person's life. In the absence of such ends—that is, in the absence of projects—bodies could continue to endure in the way that bodies do and memory might still exert cohesive force. What would be absent, though, is continued identity as the selfsame purposive being. One who was open to motivation from one source at time  $t_1$  and then to motivation from a wildly disparate source at  $t_2$ —and so on, and so on—would be what I called above an *Indiscriminate Evaluator* . . . . I claim, then, that one component of a person's identity over time is constituted by his commitment to projects. This is not put forth as a replacement for the other criteria employed to establish identity but as an addition to them. (*PRMC* 31-32)

Pursuing projects provide “psychological continuity” to the agent. The agent is the same psychological being through time, because he orders his life via the same projects.

This is a fairly intuitive idea. Often when referring to the personal identity of a particular agent, we refer to his personal projects. We say that a certain agent is identified by, for example, his love of children, his advocacy of White Supremacy, his attempts to remain a sympathetic person, his strong sense of patriotism, etc. His persistent attachment to these enduring ends (i.e., personal projects, or my account of metavalues) is what makes that person mentally distinct. If that agent were to change one or more of his projects, we would say, in more than a metaphorical sense, that that agent's identity had been altered. Depending on the amount of projects he alters, we might even

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claim that he has become an entirely different (mental) person. Worse yet, if he continues to alter his projects, he may cease to have any form of a mental identity.

It is not impossible to change your projects (or metavalues) and thereby alter your personal identity. When such a change occurs, the person becomes a new individual (mentally speaking). Lomasky writes about such a change:

A conversionary experience conceivably could bifurcate a life in this way. The postconversion individual is imbued with drives and allegiances that give his life definite shape, but they bear no resemblance to those that motivated the preconversion self. It would be natural for a convert to look back at the preconversion life as foreign, as one lived by someone else whose goals now seem puzzling and confused. The convert may speak of the decisive experience as a confluence of death/birth (as does, most famously, Paul, the erstwhile Saul). Here we find not the absence of unity, but two temporal segments, each of which displays an intelligible pattern, yet which are unhinged from each other. (*PRMC* 45-46)

The important aspect of this passage is the perspectival limitation of the agent who undergoes a conversionary experience. When talking about the notion of being entrenched, I never denied that a person could change his projects/metavalues. What I did deny is that the agent can go beyond the perspective that is currently embodied in his current identity.

Take Lomasky's reference to Paul and Saul. These different (mental) individuals have radically different projects. Because these projects are what make them individuals, they cannot conceive of what it is like to be without these projects. Thus, if we were to give Paul the option to return to a Saulian state, he would view this life "as foreign, as one lived by someone else whose goals now seem puzzling and confused" (*PRMC* 46). Likewise, Saul would not be able to imagine his life as Paul. The reason that this is so is that the definitive characteristic of these individuals is their value sets (projects/metavalues).

If we were to ask Paul to conduct a thought experiment and to imagine what it would be like to return to a Saulian state, he would not be able to conduct a pure experiment. If, for any time in the thought experiment ( $t_1$ - $t_n$ ), Paul were able actually to take on the perspective of Saul (and adopt his value sets), he would cease to be Paul for the duration of  $t_1$ - $t_n$ . Instead, he would be Saul. On the other hand, if he were to remain Paul throughout the experiment (by retaining Paulian value sets), the experiment would be tainted. He would then be judging Saul's values from the perspective of a Paulian value set. Such a tainted thought experiment would view Saul's goals as

foreign, puzzling, confused, etc. (*PRMC* 46). We would get similar results if we were to conduct the thought experiment in reverse (i.e., Saul's pretending to be Paul).

**d. Sociobiology**

Lomasky might not be satisfied with the view that metavalues are similar to projects. It seems that, with the situation in question (Case A and Case B), most individuals would find an intuitive difference between the two cases. Most individuals would find it unfortunate and irrational to use the extinction strategy in A. With B, on the other hand, most people would not be similarly troubled. Lomasky writes, "That, though, raises the further question: what are we to make of this statistical regularity" (*RFC* 117)? Wouldn't it be an implausible coincidence that most people happen to share such a strong and entrenched metavalue/project? Instead, the reason that this large group of people recognizes the stronger value in A, Lomasky might argue, is that they are recognizing a value that is independent of their personal value sets—an impersonal value.

There is, however, another plausible explanation that could explain both the entrenched nature of the metavalue and why some are statistically ubiquitous.<sup>8</sup> In fact, in the first part of his tripartite derivation of basic rights, Lomasky provides an argument that could explain both of the aforementioned characteristics:

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<sup>8</sup> The reason that this is "another plausible explanation" and not merely a continuation of my last explanation, is due to a conceptual division that Lomasky places between projects and innate qualities. He writes: "First, one's identity as a purposive project pursuer . . . is an identity which one creates by the act of *identifying* oneself with some ends above others. It is not innate but acquired" (*PRMC* 32).

In essence, the projects that a person pursues, according to Lomasky, are not products of his genes, but are acquired (a matter of choice separate from biological make-up).

However, Lomasky's theory is somewhat confusing when it attempts to demarcate between the "acquired" and the "innate." When describing some personal projects (which are acquired), he writes: "That the ends are personal does not, of course, preclude their being directed toward the welfare of other persons. The relations of mother to child, lover to beloved, friend to friend generate projects that are as intensely personal as they are other-directed" (*PRMC* 35).

Yet, later, he talks about these values as if they were innate (via a shared biology). In chapter four, he writes, "Thus there is a sociobiological explanation of why the tendency to be moved by the needs of others, especially the needs of kin, has become a characteristic of the species" (*PRMC* 62). Given the last two quotations, it is hard to understand how Lomasky separates the "innate" from the "acquired." In fact, I think there is much more of an overlap between projects and a shared biology than Lomasky lets on. But I will not pursue that point in this essay. Instead, I'll refer to the sociobiological account as merely "another plausible explanation."

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The first line to be taken is to note that we are not in fact the sort of beings described above: beings whose empathy is totally disengaged from the plights of their fellows. Rather, human beings are social animals whose survival is predicated upon their being the beneficiaries of altruistic concern of limited yet crucial scope. One of the most far-reaching facts about human beings, a fact that moral theory ignores at its peril, is that human beings are more inclined to feed their young than to eat them. Undoubtedly this propensity is rooted far more in biology than in delicate moral reflection . . . . Thus there is a sociobiological explanation of why the tendency to be moved by the needs of others, especially the needs of kin, has become a characteristic of the species. The value of empathetic response is, at least in part, survival value. (PRMC 62)

There are values that tend to have a biological foundation. The (casual) reason we have these values is due to our biological make-up. Humans have a tendency to be rather nice to each other, which allows them to cooperate on a large and beneficial level.

The statistical ubiquity of the metavalue that is present in Case A might constitute evidence that it is the product of a shared biology.<sup>9</sup> If in a particular species a trait is universal, it most likely is an adaptation.<sup>9</sup> This trait is probably passed through reproduction (variation and inheritance) and gives the organism (which possesses this trait) a survival or reproductive advantage (differential-fitness). This advantage is so high that pretty much all of the members in this particular species have the trait (except for some random mutations which would be new variation).

We should not be surprised that the metavalue in Case A is statistically ubiquitous. There is probably a large survival advantage in valuing the fact that you value that others not be in pain. As was discussed above, you will try to live your life in such a way that it is coherent with this metavalue. Showing others that you are attempting to live such a coherent life (regarding valuing them not being in pain) might elicit a reciprocal behavior on their part. The presence of such emotions and values would aid in the fulfillment of reciprocal altruism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Radu Bogdan, *Interpreting Minds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Reciprocal altruism is a fairly common notion in sociobiology. With reciprocation, altruistic thoughts and behavior cease to be a sacrifice and can be beneficial for those who participate. Both altruistic agent and benefiting agent benefit, as long as there is mutual reciprocation of kindness. In other words, there is a benefit to the altruistic agent (and ultimately its genes), if it is kind to other agents and, in turn, those agents

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What is contentious is the conclusion Lomasky draws from the notion that certain values might come from natural selection. He maintains that natural selection merely gives a *capacity* to be motivated to benefit others:

If it is the case that people ought to acknowledge and respect the rights of others, then it must be true that people generally can respect the rights of others. They can do so only if the recognition that others crave moral space within which to carry out their projects will somehow provide a motivation to cede that space. If a certain version of psychological egoism were true, that version maintaining that nothing can possibly move a person to action except desires for his own personal well-being, then no recognition of the needs of others could, by itself, have motivational force. The argument from biology is put forth as a corrective to that kind of egoism. If empathetic response comes naturally to human beings, then they are creatures who at least can be motivated by the recognition that others are project pursuers. A necessary though not a sufficient basis for grounding rights has been uncovered. (*PRMC* 63)

Lomasky is providing an instantiation of the ought-implies-can principle. He realizes that if people were complete psychological egoists, we could not argue that they ought to respect the rights of others (*ceteris paribus*). He then maintains that the “argument from biology” shows that people have a capacity (he uses the word “can”) to be motivated by empathy. Since agents can be motivated to respond in an empathetic fashion, this does not violate the ought-implies-can principle to require that agents ought to respond in such a fashion.

What is contentious is that his argument is too weak when he describes the empathetic response in humans. He views it as merely a “can” and not as a “must.” Nature does not always endow us with mere capacities; often it forces us to experience the world in a certain fashion. The visual apparatus of humans only works within certain parameters. The eye can only pick up certain wavelengths of light (red-violet). Our visual apparatus is hard-wired in such a fashion that it is impossible to see ultraviolet and infrared light. It is not that humans merely have a capacity to experience certain wavelengths of light (red-violet), but that they are forced (via biology) to see only according to that spectrum. In essence, normal humans are forced to observe the world in a certain way. They cannot know what it would be like to see the world differently.

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are kind to it. For more on reciprocal altruism, see Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998).

We should now be able to apply this reasoning to the main argument of this essay. The “normal sympathies” that Mack referred to and that Lomasky attacked, might be the mere statistical frequency of the presence of certain metavalues (like in Case A) due to a shared biology.<sup>11</sup> Since the metavalue is shared because of biology, that might also explain why it is entrenched. Experiencing certain metavalues (like valuing that you disvalue the suffering of others) might be more than a mere capacity; our shared biology might force us to view the world with these metavalues intact. This means two things. First, we can’t change these innate metavalues without changing our biology (since our minds are hard-wired with these values). Second, those endowed with these innate metavalues are perspectively limited. They would have no way of knowing what it would be like to experience the world independent of their neurophysiology. If they are biologically determined to experience the world with certain metavalues, they would have to view moral problems with those metavalues intact.

## 5. Conclusion

Lomasky readily maintains that he has not constructed a conclusive argument. Instead, Lomasky holds that his argument is more similar to abductive reasoning (RFC 118). A common difficulty associated with abductive inference is that the one who is conducting such an inference has to be sure that he has covered every relevant alternative to his proposed hypothesis. In order to claim that his hypothesis is the best, Lomasky must ensure that there are not other hypotheses that are just as good as or better than the one he has proposed. Thus, the burden of proof resides with Lomasky. He must demonstrate that he has exhausted all of the relevant alternatives to his theory. This is where his account fails.

In providing the metavalue account, I have not tried to provide an inference to the best explanation. I have merely provided a plausible alternative hypothesis. By doing this, however, I have undercut his argument. His theory is no longer an inference to the best explanation. Instead, it is merely an inference to an explanation, one among many. In order to claim the privileged status of “best,” he must satisfy the burden of proof. By providing the metavalue account, I have shown that he has yet to meet such a burden.

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<sup>11</sup> This applies only to normal people (in the statistical sense), and not to those who are autistic and/or psychotic.