

Voluntariness and responsibility

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Abstract

Serena Olsaretti has recently argued for a distinction between freedom, understood as pure negative liberty, and voluntariness, being a property of actions that are *not* performed because there are no acceptable alternatives.¹ These notions are orthogonal, in that it is possible to act freely without acting voluntarily and *vice versa*. The distinction between these concepts is important when considering ascriptions of responsibility, says Olsaretti, because such ascriptions are underwritten by judgments of voluntariness rather than freedom. Agents cannot be held responsible for actions performed non-voluntarily, even if they are, in the strict sense, free. In this paper, I examine the notion of voluntariness that Olsaretti uses, and offer a comment and a criticism. My comment is this: if the definition is correct, well-informedness about the nature and extent of our options is crucially important to whether or not we are able to act voluntarily. This has interesting practical implications if we want to give people the opportunity to act voluntarily as much as possible. The criticism is that according to Olsaretti's definition of voluntariness, certain choices made for moral reasons count as non-voluntary. This offends our intuitions about voluntariness, and also — in light of the connection between voluntariness and responsibility — threatens to render us non-responsible for many of our moral actions. I therefore suggest a revision to the definition of voluntariness that both preserves the spirit of the original theory and avoids its unpalatable implications.

I

Let us start by examining the distinction that Olsaretti draws between freedom and voluntariness. By 'freedom' she means pure negative liberty: quoting Ian Carter, she says that an agent 'is free with respect to P to do x if P does not impose preventing conditions on [their] doing x '² Voluntariness, on the other hand, is a property of the choices made by an agent. A choice is non-voluntary if it is made because there are no acceptable alternatives, and voluntary if this

¹Olsaretti [2004]: p. 139.

²I. Carter *A Measure of Freedom* (Oxford: OUP 1999) p. 24. This way of characterising the notion of freedom has gained its wide usage from Gerald MacCallum's 1967 paper 'Negative and positive freedom' (in *The Philosophical Review* vol. 76: 312-334), though MacCallum acknowledges earlier writers who used a similar characterisation; for example, T.D. Weldon in *The Vocabulary of Politics* (Penguin: Baltimore, 1953) p. 157, and F. Oppenheim in *Dimensions of Freedom* (St Martin's Press: New York, 1961).

is not the case.³

Before illustrating this distinction with examples, it will be worth elaborating slightly upon some of the terms used above.

First, as it stands, this definition of freedom allows us to predicate freedom only of triads of agents, potential obstacles and actions. As we shall see, though, the uses to which the notion of freedom is put generally requires to be able to talk of freedom with less qualification. Frequently we want to say that an agent is free to perform an action without specifying any particular potential obstacle, or to talk about actions and choices as themselves being free. So, the tripartite definition should be extended in the following ways. To say that an agent is free *simpliciter* to perform an action X is to say that there exists no preventing condition upon their performing X. Generally in what follows I will talk about freedom in this sense, rather than the tripartite sense made relative to particular preventing conditions.

Formulating definitions of free action and choice is a little more difficult, because there is a danger that on many definitions any choice or action will come out as trivially free. The argument might go as follows: if one is unfree to perform an action or choice, then it is impossible to perform it. If, however, one performs an action or choice, then it is not impossible to do so; in which case, no action or choice can be unfree. G.A. Cohen makes the point succinctly: ‘If you do [an action] A, you are free to do A: you cannot do what you are not free to do.’⁴ As Olsaretti acknowledges, this is true for one sensible understanding of freedom as she defines it. However, as well as asking whether an agent is free to perform an action that they do in fact perform, we can also ask whether that agent is free to do anything else. This, Olsaretti says, is the more significant question, and it avoids the complaint of triviality.⁵ For that reason, I will say that an agent makes a free choice, or freely chooses an option x , if and only if there are other options that they might choose instead of x . Free action is then simply an action that follows from a free choice.

Secondly, Olsaretti means the term ‘acceptable’ to be understood objectively: an option counts as unacceptable if it violates some objective standard of well-being, where by ‘objective’ we mean something along the lines of ‘does not depend upon the beliefs of the agent in question’.⁶ This understanding of acceptability (let’s call it, unimaginatively, ‘objective acceptability’) can be contrasted with another equally natural understanding (call it ‘subjective acceptability’) according to which an alternative is acceptable just in case I consider it acceptable (and therefore *does* depend upon the beliefs of the agent in question). Olsaretti insists upon using the notion of objective rather than subjective acceptability because, she says, using the latter would render subjective the question of whether or not a choice is voluntary. Moreover, says Olsaretti,

³By a rather trivial extension, we might say that a voluntary action is one that is the result of a voluntary choice. So, I might choose to swim across a river because I want some exercise, in which case my swimming would be a voluntary action; or I might choose to swim across a river because all other choices would lead to my being torn apart by the bears that are hot on my tail, in which case my swimming would be a non-voluntary action. Since I take voluntary choice and voluntary action to be so closely linked, I will in this paper use the terms more or less interchangeably.

⁴G.A. Cohen *History, Labour and Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon 1988) p. 241

⁵S. Olsaretti *Liberty, Desert and the Market* (Cambridge: CUP 2004: p. 140.

⁶Olsaretti [2004]: p.140. My thanks to a referee for the suggested phrasing of this definition of objectivity

we regard voluntariness as a necessary condition for responsibility: for someone to be held responsible for a choice, it must have been a voluntary choice. So, if whether or not a choice is voluntary is a subjective matter, then so is the question of responsibility.⁷ Olsaretti takes this to have sufficiently unintuitive consequences as to motivate us in seeking to use an objective notion of acceptability instead.

The intuitions that Olsaretti might appeal to here are familiar, and so I will not dwell overlong on them here, but it will be useful to give one example of the sort of judgment that Olsaretti means to harness as support for her assumption of objective acceptability. Suppose that there exists an agent — call him Lord Foppington — with sufficiently expensive and fastidious tastes that he would consider it demeaning ever to drink anything but champagne. If it is a subjective standard of acceptability that underlies our ascriptions of voluntariness, then it would seem that we are not only committed to saying that Foppington acts non-voluntarily when, at a party, he drinks champagne rather than Sancerre or Cava; we must also say that he is not responsible for his choice. If we want to resist these conclusions, and say that Foppington’s expensive choice is one for which he is responsible, then we have reason to share Olsaretti’s preference for an objective standard of acceptability. Inevitably, this sort of bare appeal to intuitions is inconclusive, but I will assume that it is sufficient to justify an objective conception of acceptability, at least as a starting point for investigation.

This suffices to delineate Olsaretti’s distinction between freedom and voluntariness. In order to illustrate the distinction, she suggests two cases, in each of which judgments of freedom and voluntariness are clearly distinct.⁸ In the first case, we consider an agent called Daisy, who lives in a city surrounded by desert. There is no barrier to her leaving the city, and she desires to leave the city very much, but she knows that she would not survive the passage through the sands. She therefore chooses to stay. Daisy’s choice is free, since nobody prevents her from leaving, but it is also non-voluntary, since she only stays because all other possible courses of action would lead to death. In the second case, Wendy lives in a city surrounded with electrified wire preventing any inhabitants from leaving. Nevertheless, she is happy to remain living in the city. Wendy is not free to do anything other than stay, but her choice to stay is voluntary: her reason for staying is *not* because there are no acceptable alternatives.

II

According to Olsaretti’s definition, an agent acts non-voluntarily if they act because all other alternatives are unacceptable. Whether an act is voluntary or not therefore depends upon the reasons for which an agent acted. When we ask for the reason that some action took place we can give two types of responses, corresponding to two different types of reasons. First, we can give a causal explanation of why an agent acted the way they did: ‘The reason he fell down the stairs was that he was drunk’. Second, we can give the motivation for an action: ‘The reason I saved the baby was that it was drowning’. I argue here that when assessing whether or not an agent acts voluntarily, we must ask for

⁷ *ibid.* p. 154.

⁸ *ibid.* p. 138-9.

the motivational reasons for their actions. This, though, means that an agent's beliefs about their options (even if they are incorrect) are centrally important to the question of whether they act voluntarily or not; an agent can *in fact* have several acceptable alternatives to an action, but it might nevertheless be non-voluntary due to her ill-informedness.

In showing this, I will rely on the following pair of examples.

1. A bank manager called Hilda is threatened with a gun and told to reveal the combination of the safe. Hilda complies, believing that refusal will result in a swift death. Hilda believed that the gun was loaded. As it happened, though, the gun was empty.
2. Later, another bank manager called Grace is threatened by the same robber. Grace has heard the story of Hilda, and therefore believes that the gun is not loaded. Nevertheless, she harbours a longstanding grudge against her employers, and gives the safe combination anyway. On this occasion, however, the gun was loaded.

In case 1, it was not true that Hilda had no acceptable alternatives: unbeknownst to her, she could have defied her assailants and stopped the robbery. However, the reason she acted was that she *believed* the gun to be loaded. If we had asked her for her motivation she would have said 'Because the gun is loaded!' Intuitively, I think, we believe that Hilda acted non-voluntarily. Despite the fact that the gun was empty, she was coerced because she believed that the gun was *not* empty. We cannot respect this intuition unless our account of the reason for her action describes it in terms of her motivation, and (more specifically) in terms of the beliefs upon which that motivation was based.

The converse is true of 2. Grace really does have no acceptable alternatives to giving up the combination: if she does anything other than that, a tragic and messy death will ensue. However, we are inclined to say that Grace does act voluntarily, because she didn't know that the gun was loaded. Again, unless our account of her reasons for action refers to her belief about the situation, we cannot ground this intuition.

My point here is not to suggest that the proper standard of acceptability is entirely subjective: that is, I do not claim that it supervenes solely upon an agent's attitudes. As I stated above, I think we have good reason to prefer a theory which doesn't take ones deeming an option unacceptable to be sufficient to make it so. Indeed, the tenor of the example is to show the consequence of taking an objective standard for acceptability. Precisely because the standard of acceptability is objective, it is possible for agents to be wrong about whether or not a given option is acceptable, and being wrong can affect whether an agent acts voluntarily or not. Still, insisting that an agent's beliefs about their options are crucial does reveal a somewhat unexpected subjective element to Olsaretti's theory. In effect, the theory becomes mixed: there is an objective criterion and a subjective criterion, neither of which is by itself sufficient for voluntary action. So, when deciding if an agent acts voluntarily or not, we must look both at whether there were any acceptable alternatives to their actions, and also whether they *believe* that they have any acceptable alternatives.

This implies that the extent of knowledge that an agent has about their situation can affect whether they can act voluntarily. If Hilda knew more about

her options (that is, that the gun was empty and so defiance would not lead to her death) then she could make a different, voluntary choice.

The point stands not just when considering cases where we don't know enough about the options of which we are aware: we can also be completely ignorant of options that we are nevertheless free to take, and such ignorance can also curtail our opportunities to act voluntarily. Suppose, for example, that a mafia boss offers me a choice of the contents of three boxes. Two contain my death warrant, and one contains a contract that binds me to his service forever. I choose this third box, believing that there are no acceptable alternatives. The boss then reveals a hidden fourth box, containing several gold nuggets. There *was* an acceptable alternative to the contract — but because I didn't know about it, my signing was non-voluntary.

Here, then, are two senses in which an agent can be informed about their options. Firstly a weak sense which consists in being aware of a particular option. Secondly being well-informed, which consists in having enough information about that option to judge properly whether or not it is acceptable. These two senses of informedness affect the voluntariness of choices in two ways. Firstly if an agent is not even aware of other options, it is unlikely that they will be able to act voluntarily. Being aware of alternatives is therefore necessary for voluntary choice. Secondly being well-informed about options can mean an agent realises that something they previously took to be unacceptable is in fact acceptable. Making an agent more well-informed will therefore tend to improve their opportunities for voluntary choice.

This does not mean that being well-informed *always* promotes voluntariness. Consider the following example. Suppose that the mafia boss offers me three glasses of clear liquid, rather than boxes. He tells me they contain water and I must drink one. I choose a glass and drink, and discover that it does indeed contain water. In this case, it seems that my choice was voluntary: the other glasses did not seem any less acceptable. However, both contained cyanide. This makes them unacceptable; and if I had known this, no doubt I would have made a non-voluntary choice (though the action performed would have been the same, since I would still have drunk the glass of water). In ignorance, I may believe that an option is acceptable where greater knowledge would tell me that it is not. Cases like this seem to be exceptional — greater knowledge will generally expand our ability to make voluntary choices as it did for Hilda, rather than restrict it — but they do show that making an agent more well-informed will not always do so.

Olsaretti's definition of voluntariness therefore implies the following interesting conclusion about the relationship between voluntary action and how well-informed we are. When considering whether or not an agent acts voluntarily, we must examine the motivating reasons for her action, and therefore we must know what are her beliefs about her options. To act voluntarily she must at least be aware of an alternative option, and making her aware of more options will generally improve her opportunities to choose voluntarily. Moreover, being more well-informed will generally also improve her ability to make voluntary choices, notwithstanding the fact that we can construct cases (like that above) where this is not the case. Together, these consequences mean that if we adopt Olsaretti's definition of voluntariness, and consider that it would be a good thing to promote opportunities to act voluntarily, we cannot simply increase agents' freedom: we must make them better informed about both the extent and the

nature of their options.

III

One problem for Olsaretti's definition of voluntariness is that it implies that many moral choices (by which I mean choices made for moral reasons) are non-voluntary. I take this to be sufficiently implausible that it casts doubt upon Olsaretti's definition as it stands, and thereby motivates either rejecting or refining the definition.

Certain types of moral choice involve recognising a compelling demand to behave in a certain way. Suppose, for example, that I am walking past a pond when I see a baby drowning in the shallow water. There is no reason to suppose that I will be at any risk if I enter the water myself. Naturally, I choose to jump in and save the baby, and it seems that I do so *because no other possible course of action is acceptable*. That is not to say only that I would consider any other action unacceptable: plausibly, anything else would be unacceptable regardless of whether I considered it so or not. That is, anything else would be objectively rather than subjectively unacceptable, because surely if *anything* can be correctly described as objectively unacceptable, then surely not saving the child should be.

Such cases as this reveal a general feature of moral demands which we might call 'overall demands' as opposed to prima facie ones: when faced with a choice between an act demanded (overall) by morality and an act not so demanded, it would be unacceptable to choose the latter act.⁹ So, if we believe that moral standards are in some sense objective, then we can say that there are moral reasons to act a certain way that make all other possible courses of action objectively unacceptable. Therefore, moral choice (which I defined above as choice made for these sorts of moral reasons) seems, given Olsaretti's definition, to be non-voluntary; and that, in turn, renders us not responsible for our moral choices.¹⁰

One possible way for Olsaretti to avoid this implication might be an argument that appears when she discusses the difference between two senses of voluntariness.¹¹ First, there is the sense defined above, concerning choices that aren't made because there is no reasonable alternative. Second, actions can be voluntary in the sense of being the result of an appropriate process of reasoning. Quoting Bernard Williams, she says that a voluntary act in this sense is 'intentional in the relevant respect and to the extent that the agent deliberated, is

⁹This doesn't preclude there being moral demands that don't have this consequence. For example, we might say that a parent has a duty to feed her children. However, she lives in a state with a developed welfare system, and knows that if she doesn't feed her children, the government will. Hence, if she *does* feed her children, it is not because no other option is acceptable. The fact that some moral choices like this are voluntary according to Olsaretti's definition does not make it any less problematic that others *are* non-voluntary.

¹⁰Interestingly, this holds even if we deny that moral demands *do* have such objective force. An anti-realist either denies that there is a non-subjective criterion for judging whether a given option is acceptable or not, or says that what is acceptable is determined by our subjective moral judgments. In either case, in order to decide whether a given option is acceptable, we would be forced to take an agent's subjective assessment as authoritative. As I have already observed, though, the nature of moral demands is to make us feel as though they are the only acceptable options. Denying realism would therefore give no way to escape from the argument.

¹¹Olsaretti [2004]: p. 158.

the product of deliberation'.¹²

These two senses of voluntariness (she says) correspond to two different notions of responsibility identified by Scanlon.¹³ Voluntariness in the first sense — not having been performed because there were no acceptable alternatives — corresponds to a notion of substantive responsibility, which 'has to do with the obligations people have towards each other' and holding agents liable for their actions. An agent substantially responsible for an outcome, says Scanlon, is one who 'cannot complain of the burdens or obligations that result'.¹⁴ Voluntariness in the second sense — being the result of a process of deliberation — corresponds to what Olsaretti calls 'moral responsibility', and what Scanlon calls either that or 'attributability', which is the quality required for us to attribute an action to an agent, and thereby make them an appropriate subject for praise or blame.¹⁵

Olsaretti might therefore accept my conclusion, but say that it isn't as un-intuitive as it first seems. A moral choice can be non-voluntary in Olsaretti's sense, but voluntary in Williams' sense (because it is the product of deliberation). Therefore, an agent who acts morally can be morally responsible (liable to praise and blame) without being substantively responsible (liable to punishment). Olsaretti could then say that our intuition that moral actions are voluntary is sufficiently captured by saying that they are voluntary in Williams' sense, and once we recognise this, saying that they are non-voluntary in her sense is rather more palatable.

To illustrate, let us return to my example case. Suppose that I ruin my watch when I jump into the pond to save the baby, and therefore submit a claim for compensation. I am still owed praise for saving the baby (because my action was voluntary in Williams' sense) but I might claim compensation for my lost watch since I *had* to do what I did (because my action was non-voluntary in Olsaretti's sense). Olsaretti could then argue that if we are prepared to accept this diagnosis of the situation, we must also accept that moral actions might properly be called non-voluntary in her sense.¹⁶

There are two things to say about this defence. First, it depends upon our being satisfied with Scanlon's distinction between substantive responsibility and attributability (which is what I, following Olsaretti's usage, call 'moral responsibility'). Scanlon's own statement of this distinction is rather opaque. In different places, he characterises the distinction in various different ways. So, as I said above, in one place he suggests that the distinction is between moral responsibility, meaning the judgment that is the 'basis for moral appraisal', and substantive responsibility, which grounds 'substantive claims about what people are required ... to do for each other'.¹⁷ Elsewhere, he says that moral responsibility depends upon 'determining whether a given action did or did not reflect that agent's judgment-sensitive attitudes', while substantive responsibility depends upon an agent 'having their actions and what happens to them depend upon and reflect their choices and other responses'.¹⁸ These ideas seem indistinct, and they leave unclear the distinction they are intended to illuminate.

¹²Williams [1990].

¹³T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP 1998) ch. 6.

¹⁴Scanlon [1998]: p. 290.

¹⁵Olsaretti [2004]: p. 158, and Scanlon [1998]: pp. 248-51.

¹⁶This interpretation of the case was suggested in discussion.

¹⁷Scanlon [1998]: p. 248.

¹⁸Scanlon [1998]: p. 291.

Neither can much greater clarity be gained from the examples that Scanlon describes in an attempt to explain how our intuitions support his thesis. Scanlon cites an example of Aristotle's, in which a group of sailors jettison the cargo of their ship in order to avoid their ship being sunk in a storm.¹⁹ Scanlon says that this is an example of a situation where we have two divergent intuitions about responsibility: the sailors are morally responsible (i.e. in the sense of attributability) for their choice to jettison the cargo, but they are not blameworthy.²⁰ This is confusing, since Scanlon explicitly says elsewhere that blameworthiness (or praiseworthiness) themselves depend upon attributability rather than substantive responsibility.²¹ Even if we assume that 'blameworthy' was a slip of Scanlon's pen, and that he in fact meant to suggest that the sailors are morally but not substantively responsible, the example doesn't conclusively show what Scanlon takes it to show. By contrast, Aristotle himself took the case to indicate that there are actions which seemed to bear the hallmarks of both voluntary and involuntary action, rather than that the sailors are both responsible and not responsible for their actions.²² Moreover, if Scanlon intends to say that the sailors are blameworthy for the loss of the ship's cargo, but not substantially responsible (in the sense, perhaps, of owing reparations to the ship's owner) then this comes dangerously close to begging the question: for whether it is possible to separate the two issues is precisely what is at issue. If one already understands and accepts the distinction, then one might accept Scanlon's interpretation of the case, but without that prior acceptance the case provides little reason for the sceptic to change their mind.

I could run through other examples that Scanlon raises, but the general point is the same in each. Insofar as each case is supposed to provoke certain intuitions, the best explanation for which is the implicit recognition of a distinction between moral and substantive responsibility, the strategy fails. The cases fail either to illustrate the distinction clearly or to force us to recognise its existence.

The point is, perhaps, best made in response to Olsaretti's own interpretation of the case of the baby in the pool. Suppose that we agree both that I am due praise for my action and that I should receive compensation for the loss of my wristwatch. To provide support for Scanlon's distinction (and Olsaretti's use of it in her defence), we must also agree that the most plausible reason for awarding compensation being that I was not responsible (in some sense) for my action and the loss thence ensuing. However, any intuition that I deserve compensation could also be explained in other ways. For example, we could say simply that the case reveals an underlying intuition that, when we suffer a loss as the result of morally required actions, it is right to try to rectify that loss. Alternatively, we might say that the case provides intuitive proof for an indirectly consequentialist position: we must rectify losses like this because it would make myself and other people less likely to hesitate in saving babies in the future. My point here is not to suggest that these are, in fact, correct interpretations of the case. Rather, the plethora of alternative explanations shows how inconclusive the appeal to intuitions is inevitably going to be. Unless we are given good prior reason to believe that Scanlon's distinction (and Olsaretti's appeal to it) is the best explanation in these cases, the defence fails: but for that reason, the cases

¹⁹ *The Nichomachean Ethics* 1110a9-19; p. 37 of the Crisp [2000] edition.

²⁰ Scanlon [1998]: p. 280.

²¹ *ibid.*: p. 248.

²² Aristotle [2000]: p. 38.

cannot be appealed to as support for the distinction itself.

Suppose that we were to find some way to circumvent these problems and bolster the appeal to Scanlon's distinction. Even then, there is a second criticism that we might make. This response (that there is only one sense in which one is not responsible for moral choices like the one being considered) is still nothing more than an invitation to bite the bullet. Therefore, we are justified in declining the invitation if we consider that doing so stretches the notion of non-voluntariness beyond recognition. I would suggest that it does. Therefore, I suggest that this is not a satisfactory response to the problem of moral choice. For that reason, we have some motivation for seeking a refinement that might capture the intuitive plausibility of Olsaretti's version while avoiding such a startling consequence. In the rest of this paper, I will attempt to sketch such a revision.

IV

In this section, I sketch a revision to Olsaretti's view which attempts both to preserve the plausibility of her account of voluntariness, while avoiding the problems raised above. This revision depends upon recognising a distinction between two different ways in which an option might be unacceptable. First, an option may mean serious specific damage to the agent, such as starving to death in the case of Daisy. Second, certain moral demands by their nature make all other possible actions unacceptable. The first type of unacceptability relies on prudential concerns, the second on moral concerns. These two seem to have very different characters.²³ Let us call 'morally unacceptable' those options which are ruled out in the way I described above: some choices are required by morality in such a way as to make any other option unacceptable. Let us call 'prudentially unacceptable' those options which involve what I am loosely calling 'serious specific damage'. In what follows I suggest that reflection upon our intuitions about prudentially unacceptable options suggests a principled way of excluding moral unacceptability as a cause of non-voluntariness.

Suppose that we ask ourselves precisely *why* having no acceptable alternatives is supposed to undermine the voluntariness of our choices. To say that an option is unacceptable is roughly to say that there is some feature of it that effectively bars us from choosing it. What sort of feature might this be? In most of the paradigmatic cases of non-voluntary action, it is that the other options involve a tremendous loss of well-being. In the case of Daisy in the desert city, if she were to choose to leave the city, she would die a dreadful desiccated death, and that is what makes the alternative to staying where she is unacceptable. In the case of Hilda and the bank robber, she believes that if she were to resist, she would end up with a bullet through her head — again, it is this that makes the alternative unacceptable. In such cases, the feature of the alternatives that makes them unacceptable is the prospect of the awful personal consequences.

²³Admittedly, this assumes the controversial claim that morality and prudence are unrelated. Many philosophers have claimed that doing the right thing has prudential as well as moral value: that is, being a good person contributes to one's welfare. Against this, I might say that what is at issue is merely terminological, and that I can rephrase the distinction between moral and prudential value as one that divides different types of prudential value. Then, I can say that the considerations above suggest that the loss of only some types of prudential value is relevant to judgments of voluntariness; and that the prudential value lost through doing the wrong thing is not of the relevant sort.

We might say that it is this prospect that acts as the instrument of force: it is because we cannot face such a loss of well-being that we have to choose in a particular way.

If the other options are *morally* unacceptable, though, it is hard to identify a similar instrument of force. Hence, there is no factor analogous to that which in the presence of prudential unacceptability grounds our judgment that a choice has been made non-voluntary. In most such cases, there will not be dreadful consequences *for us* if we do not do the moral act. Admittedly, there may be cases where there would be — perhaps if I do not save the baby I will be lynched by a mob, or I am an extreme moral fetishist and will suffer a nervous breakdown if I fail to do the right thing. These, though, are prudential concerns, and don't seem relevant to the moral concern making the demand. I do not think that I should save the baby *because* I will be lynched if I do not. In cases of moral choice without prudential concerns providing interference like this, there doesn't seem to be anything that constitutes coercion in the way that the prospect of awful consequences does in prudential cases. This suggests that we should not say that voluntariness is undermined in such cases, even though they are situations where we act because there is no acceptable alternative to the moral choice. Taking only prudential unacceptability as relevant to questions of voluntariness is therefore both intuitively plausible, and allows us to avoid the implication that moral choices are non-voluntary.²⁴

My proposed revision to Olsaretti's distinction of voluntariness is therefore as follows. Suppose that we are prepared to accept the relatively innocuous assumption that it is the prospect of awful consequences for our well-being that is the instrument of force in cases of non-voluntary choice. This allows us to explain why having no prudentially acceptable alternatives makes a choice non-voluntary. Accepting that assumption also shows that moral unacceptability is irrelevant to questions of voluntariness, for in cases of moral choice there are no awful consequences for our well-being. We could then say that an action is non-voluntary only if all other options are prudentially unacceptable, as only they involve a serious loss of well-being.

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²⁴There is insufficient space here to discuss what exactly we might take to be a loss of prudential value, but a plausible definition would have to include not only the well-being of the agent in question, but also other people whose well-being and interests we take for our own.

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