We often use the term ‘commitment’ to make claims of apparent normative import. An ontologically scrupulous philosopher says that she cannot accept a certain principle because it would commit her to abstracta. A conscientious friend says that he’d like to make your party but feels bound by a prior commitment. A campaigning politician says that she’s the only candidate who’s really committed to cleaning up Washington.

It is surprising, given the ubiquity of such claims, that philosophers seldom discuss the notion of commitment. The first goal of this paper is thus to remedy an oversight. The notion of commitment is interesting and deserving of analysis.

My second aim is to provide some evidence for a unifying thesis about commitment. Rational commitments, like the commitment to believe what you know to follow from one of your beliefs, and moral commitments, like the commitment you take on by making a promise, share several important underlying features. I’ll suggest that they are indeed two instances of one normative relation, the relation of being committed. And this relation is distinct from those—especially the relation of having a reason, and the relation of being required—that philosophers have recognized and invoked in constructing their theories.

An analogy may be helpful. Many of us recognize that there are moral requirements, and recognize that there are rational requirements. But it would be strange to suppose that there is nothing in common between moral and rational requirements that merits calling them both requirements. It is more natural, I take it, to assume that they are on the contrary two instances of one requirement relation. This does not mean that moral requirements and rational requirements must have all the same qualities; domain-specific differences are likely to arise. Nonetheless, it is potentially important for us to understand what requirements are, in a general sense. This general understanding of the
nature of requirement may, for all we know, illuminate the more specific instances.

Likewise, I argue here, for the nature of commitment. Attempting to understand the relationships between different forms of commitment allows us to see some new and striking similarities. And having a more general picture of what being committed involves makes us better suited to understand various apparently different normative phenomena that we commonly pick out with the term.

1. Commitment

A. Intuitive Reflections and Initial Similarities

In this section I motivate the idea that there is a distinct normative relation of being committed that we commonly appeal to in ordinary language and as a criterion for moral and rational evaluation. I also offer some preliminary reflections about the nature of this notion of commitment, emphasizing that it is distinct from the more commonly investigated notion of requirement.

Consider the following felicitous uses of ‘commitment’ and ‘commit’:

(1) Plato is committed to a wacky ontology.

(2) If Adam believes that everything in the Bible is true, and he believes that the Bible says that the world was created in six days, then he’s committed to believing that the world was created in six days.

(3) I made a commitment to my friend for Friday night, so I won’t be able to join you.

(4) President Obama committed to spending ten billion dollars on green jobs.

The first two sentences attribute what I will from here on out refer to as rational commitments to Plato and Adam, respectively. The most familiar form of rational commitment is a commitment to believing what you believe to follow from the things you already believe. In my view this is only one among several types of rational commitment. But that claim will not matter for the purposes of this paper. Our focus will be profitably restricted to cases like Adam’s.¹

¹ In Shpall (forthcoming) I extend the treatment of rational commitments to further cases.
Sentences (3) and (4) introduce a different sort of commitment. The sentences say that President Obama and I have promised to perform some action or set of actions. The obligation or normative pressure that such promises engender is the paradigmatic case of what I’ll be calling *moral commitment*. In my view there are other cases, but I’ll ignore that here.

There are other felicitous uses of ‘commitment’ and ‘commit’ that have different meanings in English. For example, we can use the sentence

(5) Jacky is committed to Joan

in order to express the idea that Jacky is devoted to and values Joan. Likewise, we can say that

(6) The judge committed him to the asylum

and thereby express that the judge legally mandated that he be placed in the asylum. In my view there are interesting relationships between all these uses; in particular, the *volitional* sense of commitment invoked in (5) is importantly related to the more run of the mill (moral) sense whose paradigm instance is given by the promissory case. But, again, the present paper will not take up these issues. That would be a much larger project.

What can we say initially about the nature of commitment? Let’s begin with rational commitment. It is uncontroversial that we make claims like (1) and (2). Here is a guiding hypothesis about them.

To be rationally committed to having A is to be such that you must be irrational if you fail to have A, assuming no changes in your other attitudes. For instance, Adam is rationally committed to believing that the world was created in six days since, given (and holding fixed) his other beliefs, he has to be irrational if he fails to believe that the world was created in six days.

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2 To get a quick handle on the distinction between the moral sense of commitment and the volitional sense, consider the fact that President Obama could commit to repealing ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”—e.g. by promising to do so in the course of campaigning—and still be appropriately accused of lacking a commitment to repealing it (after he’s been elected, say). To put it another way, Obama might fail to be committed to living up to this commitment. In this case, Obama would be morally, but not volitionally, committed to repealing ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’.

3 For the record, I am hesitant to endorse any particular conception of the closure commitment. There are substantial issues about this that I cannot address here at any length. For an extended recent discussion of epistemic closure see Hawthorne (2006).
There are two features of rational commitments that I want to draw attention to as a point of departure. First, to be rationally committed to A is to stand in a normative relation to A. Such commitments cannot be analyzed purely in terms of the actual attitudes one has; Adam might not believe that the world was created in six days even though he is committed to believing it. An agent’s actual attitudes constitute the ground of his rational commitments—that is, what makes it the case that he has the commitments that he does—but not the commitments themselves. The commitments themselves are normative, in the sense that they put genuine pressure on the committed agent to form the attitude to which he’s committed; and this pressure obtains independently of how he thinks about it. Thus rational commitment is, on the face of it, a normative relation: it cannot be reduced to the attitudes one takes towards the object of one’s commitments, and to stand in the commitment relation is to be under the grip of some distinctive form of normative pressure.

Second, notice how this notion of commitment relates to a common-sense notion of rational requirement. According to the dominant view of writers on rationality (the “wide-scope” conception of rational requirements), it is simply not true that Adam is rationally required to believe that the world was created in six days. This would amount to an illegitimate sort of bootstrapping, whereby one irrational belief sanctions another. These writers suppose, correctly I think, that an irrational belief does not possess such a robust legitimizing power. Really Adam is rationally required to either form the belief that the world was created in six days, or revise his belief that everything the Bible says is true. But then there is an intuitive distinction between what Adam is committed to believing and what he is required to believe.

This claim is supported by our linguistic practice, as we may appropriately say things like

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4 Niko Kolodny (2005) has argued that the requirements of rationality are only apparently normative. Though he has said nothing about rational commitments, it is plausible to suppose that he would regard them as possessing only the same sort of as-if normativity. This is not the place to give extended arguments against such an ambitious view. But briefly: unlike Kolodny, I do not think we should take all rational normativity to be the normativity of reasons. One way to support this claim is through substantive argument against the “myth” view, of the sort undertaken in Ross (forthcoming), and by me in (Shpall (ms)). Another way, I think, is to show that commitments are normative, even when they are not reason providing, which I try to do later in this paper. I thank an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to say something about Kolodny’s view here.

Adam is committed to believing some crazy things; but what he should do is stop believing that everything the Bible says is literally true.\footnote{This is precisely the form in which we often phrase objections in philosophy: ‘Jones believes/claims that \([p, q, r ...]\); he is thereby committed to \(z\); he should not believe that \(z\); so he should give up at least one of \([p, q, r ...]\). Note also that I don’t mean to assume that we use ‘should’ only to express requirements, though I think we can and do at least sometimes. I use ‘should’ only because ordinary English speakers do not regularly appeal to ‘rational requirement’.}

Whereas it would sound at least somewhat awkward to claim that

Adam is committed to \textit{either} believing that the world was created in six days, \textit{or} to revising his beliefs about the Bible.

On the face of it, then, rational commitment is distinct from rational requirement.

Consider now the claims about moral commitments that I introduced above. When I say that I have committed to dinner plans on Friday, or that Obama committed to spending money on green jobs, I am claiming that the agent in question promised to do something. And the moral commitments that such promises engender share the two features we’ve just outlined. Being morally committed to \(\phi\)-ing cannot be analyzed in terms of the attitudes of the committed agent; it must be analyzed as a fact about normative, rather than psychological, reality. Obama can be committed to spending money on green jobs even if he does not desire or intend to do so. For instance, pledging in his State of the Union address that he will spend ten billion dollars on green jobs would suffice for grounding this commitment.

Likewise, moral commitments must be distinguished from moral requirements. Imagine that Obama does commit in late January to spending the ten billion on green jobs. However, in early February there is a devastating natural disaster in a huge population center. Plausibly this tragedy of great magnitude could make it so that Obama is morally required to divert the ten billion dollars from green job creation to humanitarian assistance. In such a case he would be morally required to violate his commitment. So there’s a strong case for thinking that moral commitments cannot be identified with moral requirements.\footnote{See Williams (1985: 176) on this point.}

We have seen some pretty fundamental initial similarities between these two types of commitment. Let us now examine their differences. After doing so, we will return to give a more rigorous and novel characterization of the shared nature of moral and rational commitments (section 1C), and a deeper explanation of the roots of their differences (section 2).
B. Introducing the Differences

The most immediately appreciable distinction between moral and rational commitments concerns their objects. At a first gloss, it seems that when you are morally committed, you are paradigmatically committed to performing a certain action. And when you are rationally committed, you are committed to having or lacking a certain mental state.

In fact this first approximation is probably not correct. I can promise to feel certain emotions, and perhaps thereby come to be committed to feeling these emotions. For example, I might promise to continue loving someone after they have died. Plausibly, continuing to love someone in this sense is not an action, but rather the persistence of a set of mental states. Nonetheless, I think it is natural to say that my promise commits me to continuing to love the person in the same way that Obama’s promise commits him to funding green jobs. So it seems like moral commitments need not take actions as their objects.

In any case, we should not be surprised or worried about this difference. After all, morality and rationality are different domains, and they engage different types of considerations. On one common conception, morality paradigmatically concerns our relations with others. I would suggest that there is a deep structural analogy here between these normative realms, because rationality paradigmatically concerns our relations with ourselves, or the connections between our own mental states.

This is a claim to keep in mind. It provides a simple explanation of why we should expect the objects of moral and rational commitments to be different. Paradigmatically, rational norms will govern your own mental states, while moral norms will govern your dealings with other people.

Besides having different objects, the two types of commitment seem distinct because they come into existence in different ways. Moral commitments must be grounded in a specific form of interpersonal communication or agreement. For our purposes, we’ll assume that this form of agreement is the making, and plausibly the acceptance, of a promise.8 So in order to acquire a moral commitment, you need to perform a communicative action. By contrast, rational commitments are

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8 I won’t propose an account of what it takes to “accept” a promise. The key thought is that the mere act of promising to do something can be insufficient for grounding a commitment to do that thing if the promisee rejects the plan. So I may promise my crush that I will take her to Bali, but not thereby become committed to taking her, since she has no interest in spending time with me and tells me as much. None of my main claims turn on this intuition or on the details of an account of promissory acceptance. If you think that I am committed in this case notwithstanding the rejection, you should still accept my claim in the main text that the ground of moral commitments is interpersonal. In Section 2 I will argue that moral commitments paradigmatically require acceptance, but this is compatible with the view that in strange cases they do not.
grounded in your actual psychological states. You acquire them by forming beliefs that stand in certain relations, and forming these mental states is something you do on your own.

Diagnosing the importance of this difference between the mode of acquisition of moral and rational commitments will be one of the main tasks of section 2. There I will contend that two other central differences obtain in virtue of these facts about how commitments are acquired.

We are already in a position to begin to see what these further differences are. First, it seems that you may sometimes be released from commitments, but that securing this release involves different methods in the moral case than in the rational one. In the former case securing release involves contacting the promisee—again, performing a communicative action, and obtaining some kind of permission from someone else. In the latter case being released from a commitment simply requires revising or discarding some of your attitudes.

Second, the two types of commitment appear to differ significantly in what I will call their normative natures. Recall that in giving a preliminary gloss on the nature of rational commitment, I claimed that to be rationally committed to having A is to be such that you must be irrational if you fail to have A, assuming no changes in your other attitudes. But observe that a strictly analogous claim cannot be true for moral commitments. The analogous claim would be: to be morally committed to φ-ing is to be such that you must be immoral if you fail to φ, assuming no changes in the grounds of your commitment. But a moment ago we gave a counterexample: Obama could be morally committed to spending money on green jobs even if failing to do so would not be immoral.

We will return to these considerations in a moment. To forecast: I'll contend that the differences in escapability conditions and normative natures are traceable to the difference in mode of acquisition. And the differing mode of acquisition for moral and rational commitments is not a reason to think that they are different types of thing. It is, like the difference between their objects, a difference that arises not from the nature of commitment, but from the nature of morality and rationality themselves.

But before we get to this challenge, I need to offer a more rigorous justification of my claim that there is a distinctive, unified, and under-appreciated commitment relation.

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9 In the rational case, your actual attitudes constitute the ground of all of your rational commitments. In the moral case, it is rather a particular type of action that grounds your commitments. Since you cannot “revise” actions that you have already performed, the process by which you may escape a moral commitment is more complicated.
C. Evidence for a Unified Theory

I now turn to a more detailed examination of the nature of commitment. The point of this section is to argue that rational and moral commitments deserve a unifying treatment because of their underlying structural similarities. In addition, this section further distinguishes commitments from other more commonly investigated normative relations, especially requirement relations. As I show, commitments are normative rather than psychological, escapable, agent-dependent, pro tanto, and strict. In elaborating these features individually, I show how commitments must be conceived of as a distinctive kind of normative relation, one that has been more or less overlooked.

Commitments are normative rather than psychological

Adam might believe that everything the Bible says is true, and he might believe that the Bible says that the world was created in six days. But it clearly doesn’t follow that he believes that the world was created in six days. What follows is that he is committed to having this belief. Likewise, Obama might promise to fund green jobs, but it doesn’t follow from his promise that he wants to, intends to, or expects to fund green jobs. What follows is that he is committed to funding green jobs. So the commitments themselves are not mental states. They are relations between mental states/actions (the ground of the commitment) and other mental states/actions (the object of the commitment). These relations obtain whether or not the agent in question actually satisfies them, and they have the flavor of normative relations, in the sense that they exert some sort of pressure on the agent to satisfy them.

Commitments are escapable

Both moral and rational commitments are escapable. Suppose that at $t_1$ you are committed to doing x, and suppose that $t_2$ comes along and you have not done x. It does not necessarily follow that you have violated a commitment, or done anything objectionable at all. For you can escape a commitment by giving up its ground. In the promissory case you can escape the commitment by being released from the promise. Likewise, rational commitments can be escaped by relinquishing the attitude(s) that constitutes the ground of the commitment. For example, Adam can escape his commitment to believing that the world

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10 Do not be confused by the tricky ambiguity of the sentence ‘Obama is committed to funding green jobs’, which may mean that Obama has made this commitment, or that he is in the process of satisfying this commitment. (See footnote 3 above.) The former reading is the one I am after in the main text. The latter is what I earlier termed “volitional commitment”.

was created in six days by revising his belief that everything the Bible says is true. So, again, being committed to having A at t₁ is compatible with your being perfectly rational in failing to have A at t₂.¹¹

Notice that this feature of commitments also seems to separate them from requirements—intuitively, requirements are not escapable. Here’s an example. If you are, as is commonly supposed, rationally required to be such that [if you believe that you ought to \( \phi \), then you intend to \( \phi \)], then this is so whether or not you have a belief about what you ought to do. In other words, you fall under the scope of the requirement no matter what you are like (at least in so far as you are a rational agent).¹² Similarly, if you are morally required to refrain from stealing, then there is nothing you can do to escape this requirement. It isn’t grounded in a contingent feature of you, like the fact that you live in Berlin or the fact that you believe in ghosts. If anything, it is grounded in the fact that you are a moral agent, and this is something that you cannot escape.¹³

Commitments are agent-dependent

By claiming that commitments are agent-dependent I mean that, in order to come into existence, a commitment must be grounded in an activity of the agent who is to become committed. This is not meant to imply anything ambitious about free agency. The idea is just that since both moral and rational commitments depend, in a broad sense, on the activities of the agent who comes to stand in the commitment relation, it makes sense that different agents are committed to very different things. Another person—or, more generally, the world itself—does not have the power to commit you to actions, intentions, or beliefs. It is fundamentally your actions and your mental states that constitute the ground of your commitments; it is, for example, your act of promising that commits you to performing the promised action, and your formation of certain attitudes that commits you to having other attitudes. The main point I wish to make is that this agent-dependence is what explains why agents’ commitments vary widely.

Notice that the agent-dependence of commitments also serves to distinguish them from requirements, at least on one popular conception

¹¹ Contra the claims ofWilliams (1985: 177).
¹² As it is commonly conceived, the non-akrasia norm requires you at all times to avoid akrasia. In other words, you are governed by this requirement whether or not you have any beliefs about what you ought to do. Thus there is a clear sense in which the norm is inescapable: you are governed by it no matter what.
¹³ You could of course kill yourself, but then it wouldn’t be that you have escaped the requirement, since there would be nobody left. The feature of commitment that I’m drawing attention to is the fact that you can outlive your commitments by either satisfying or escaping them.
of requirements. For it is often supposed that we are not, in any robust sense, responsible for bringing requirements into being. A moral requirement to refrain from stealing, if genuine, entails that I am categorically required to refrain from stealing; it is merely in virtue of my moral personhood, and not my actions, that the requirement applies to me.

In order to preempt an objection to this line of thought, let us distinguish between derivative and non-derivative requirements. There is, I assume, a non-derivative moral requirement to do what’s best [or what the balance of prima facie duties favors, or what you are obligated to do, or whatever]. This requirement generates more specific derivative requirements when combined with circumstances—e.g. I am derivatively required to X when the only relevant normative consideration is that I’ve promised to X. While we can make it the case that we are derivatively required to X, we cannot “bring into existence” a non-derivative requirement.

So there be may be derivative requirements that are agent-dependent—to take another example, a requirement to return what I’ve stolen may only apply to me in virtue of my act of theft. Nonetheless, there does seem to be an important distinction between the paradigm cases, as my commitment to meet you for lunch exists primarily in virtue of my promissory act, and the requirement I am under to return what I’ve stolen exists in virtue of some fundamental normative fact about the moral wrongness of stealing. To put the idea another way: I doubt that there is a parallel distinction between derivative and non-derivative commitments. The suggestion would have to be that there is a non-derivative moral commitment to do what you’re committed to doing. But this commitment would be explanatorily inert.

14 Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing the worry.
15 The locutions of this sentence themselves indicate the distinction I am after. It is natural to indicate an individual’s ownership of a commitment with a possessive (‘my commitment’), but it would be awkward to refer to a genuine requirement in such a way. The latter typically takes a categorical form, as in ‘the requirement’.
16 It might be suggested that we are (non-derivatively) committed to doing what the balance of commitments favors. That seems to me incorrect, or at least misleading. Imagine I make two incompatible promises, and following through on the first is more important. Am I then committed, or more committed, to following through on the first promise and not the second? Of course not—I am equally committed to following through on each, though I ought to follow through on the first and not the second. For a fascinating exploration of similar issues about normative explanations see Schroeder (2005).
Even if we granted that there was a parallel type of explanation in the case of commitments, it would still be true that agents’ commitments are far more variable, and far more self-imposed, than their requirements. So whether or not the underlying normative explanations of how commitments and requirements get generated are the same, we should agree that the resulting normative facts are interestingly different.

**Commitments are pro tanto**

Sometimes you have reasons to do something that you should refrain from doing. In the terminology of Jonathan Dancy, reasons are *contributory*—a reason might be an ingredient in making it the case that you are required to do something, but it needn't play that role. As John Broome puts it, there are reasons that are inconclusive but that still play a role in *normative weighing explanations*. Dancy and Broome are both getting at the simple idea that reasons are pro tanto. They are to be contrasted with all things considered concepts like ‘requirement’ that do not merely weigh in favor of something, but rather indicate what emerges after the weighing has been accomplished.

Notice that this distinction between the pro tanto and the all things considered may be more general than the distinction between reasons and requirements. Plausibly some “obligations” can weigh against each other, and are thus like reasons in that they merely contribute to, rather than constitute, what you are required to do. Commitments are the same way. Being committed does not entail that you are required to satisfy the commitment.

To see that commitments are pro tanto, simply imagine that you’ve made conflicting promises that you cannot escape. Suppose that one of the promises is more important than the other. Then you have two commitments that weigh against each other, with one losing out. There is something in favor of keeping this less important promise, but you ought to refrain from keeping it.

Likewise, imagine that you have beliefs that commit you to believing inconsistent propositions. Let’s assume it cannot be that both of these

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17 It is not in any sense up to me that an armored car just drove by, but I am morally required to refrain from hijacking it (absent some strange countervailing factors). If I were to promise the driver that I wouldn’t hijack it, however, then there would be a natural sense in which the resulting commitment owed its existence to me.

18 Dancy (2004).

19 Broome (ms). The actual account is a bit more complicated, but not in any way that’s essential for making the simple point I’m making in the text.

20 As in Ross (2002).
commitments specify what you are required to believe, all things considered. You are required to refrain from having inconsistent beliefs. 21

More formally, we can put the point like this. The distinction between a pro tanto normative relation and an all things considered one is a distinction concerning the relation’s decisiveness. To be pro tanto is to play a non-decisive weighing role in the determinations of some normative domain D. To be all things considered is to encapsulate the final verdict of D, the verdict at which the weighing is aimed.

Commitments are pro tanto because they play a non-decisive weighing role. I have really been saying this all along, in distinguishing commitments from requirements. The intuitive notion of requirement that I have been appealing to is just one kind of decisive normative verdict. Our intuition that Obama is required to divert the funds earmarked for green jobs to humanitarian assistance should be fleshed out as the claim that morality (‘all in’) says that Obama must divert the funds. Likewise our intuition that a philosopher is required to discard his theory instead of accepting its implausible implications should be fleshed out as the claim that rationality (‘all in’) says that he must discard the theory. Commitments aren’t this strong. It may often happen that you are required to violate a commitment (in the moral case) or to give up/escape its grounds (in either case). Thus commitments play a non-decisive, or pro tanto, weighing role.

There is a natural objection to my claim that rational commitments play this kind of role. 22 Imagine that my theory commits me to believing that p, and I have no contrary commitments. Doesn’t it follow from the claim that commitments play a weighing role that I am required to believe that p? This would be a counterintuitive result: my commitment may be irrationally grounded, in which case it would be irrational to satisfy it, or at least more rational to escape it.

But we should reject the claim that when you are committed to having A, and have no contrary commitments, then you are required to have A. 23 One way to explain why we should reject it is by observing that commitments can weigh against other sorts of normative considerations. If I irrationally believe that everything the Bible says is true, I am thereby committed (adding certain minimal assumptions) to believing that the world was created in six days. But I am not required to believe it, because there are other relevant normative

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21 You might think that it is sometimes rationally permissible to have inconsistent beliefs. But just imagine that my example concerns a case in which it’s not.

22 See Brunero (2010) for a similar objection to narrow scope conceptions of rational requirements. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing the point.

23 For an interesting discussion of similar “linking principles” see Liberman (MS).
considerations—e.g. that I have insufficient evidence for it, and insufficient evidence for the proposition that everything the Bible says is true (belief in which grounds the commitment in the first place). A similar story seems highly plausible in the promissory case. I may promise to come to your party, and make no commitments that conflict with that promise. But on the way to the party I encounter some pressing moral consideration, and attending to it detains me. I am committed to coming to the party, and I have no contrary commitments, but I am not required to come to the party.

This might seem controversial given my assumption that commitments play a weighing role, and given the common assumption that the structure of reasons explanations does sanction an analogous principle. But weighing is more complicated than the simple model sometimes appealed to when we talk about reasons. It might be true that if you have a reason to x, and no contrary reason, then you ought to x. But it isn’t obviously true that if you have equal reason to x and y, and we add a further reason to x, then you ought to x. 24 (If I have equal reason to go to Argentina and Brazil, and you then offer to buy me a beer if I go to Argentina, this does not obviously make it the case that I ought to go to Argentina, though the prospect of a beer is an additional reason, since I quite like beer.) In general, weighing is more complicated than we sometimes assume it to be. And it might also be that the normative basic-ness of reasons underlies the fact that they conform to a simpler weighing model than other kinds of normative considerations.

Rational commitments weigh in a complex and, I think, very interesting fashion. For instance, they ground comparative judgments of rationality that are certainly weighted. 25 One way of cashing out the difference between a meticulously calculating criminal and a bumbling one is by appealing to the former’s ability to follow through on his rational commitments (in means-end reasoning, for example). The calculating criminal is a lot more rational than the bumbling one in a certain way, even if he ends up having more particular attitudes that rationality forbids.

*Commitments are strict*

Commitments are pro tanto, but they are not to be understood on the model of reasons. There are lots of reasons that you can take or leave. I have a reason to bring flowers to the secretary of the geology department, even though I’ve never met her—namely, the fact that it would brighten her day. I have a reason to eat dim sum tomorrow morning—namely, the

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24 See Hare (2010).
25 For more on this point see Shpall (forthcoming).
fact that I find it delicious. I have a reason to learn how to play the trumpet—namely, the fact that I’ve always wanted to. Yet it is perfectly okay for me to fail to act on these reasons, and countless others. But it is not perfectly okay for me to fail to satisfy my commitments.

My view is that commitments have a characteristic force that distinguishes them from our paradigmatic example of the pro tanto. Much needs to be said to defend this view, and I do not have the space to say it in this paper. For the time being I’m concerned to make the following points. First, it is possible for a normative relation to be more forceful than the relation of having a reason, but to nonetheless not be decisive. Second, moral and rational commitments seem to share this feature of being strict rather than slack.26

To begin, let us consider what it is about commitment that motivates the introduction of the distinction between the strict and the slack. Here is a simple illustration of the idea. If you are committed to meeting me for lunch, and you fail to meet me for lunch, then there is something bad about that. Likewise, if you are committed to believing that p, and you fail to believe that p, then there is something bad about that. But as we’ve seen, it can’t be that this badness is decisive. In other words, it may be that you were morally required to refrain from meeting me for lunch, or that you were rationally required to refrain from believing p. So we need to look elsewhere for a way to characterize the badness of violating these commitments. The problem is that it is not plausible to think that the badness of violating a commitment is just the badness of acting, or believing or intending, against a reason. That would severely underestimate the seriousness of many commitments and distort their normative character.

Imagine that Obama commits to repealing ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ and then refuses to satisfy this commitment. Whether or not he has ultimately done the right thing, it seems likely that his critics will have something to legitimately complain about. But merely having a reason to repeal would not necessarily ground the legitimacy of complaint. Obama has a reason to do all sorts of things. For instance, he has a reason to take today off work and spend it playing basketball. Yet if he goes to work today, it would not be reasonable for us to complain that he didn’t spend the day playing basketball. Merely having a reason to do something doesn’t ground the intelligibility of someone else’s complaint when you fail to do that thing. Moral commitments like Obama’s do not seem to be simply reasons. They appear to have some distinct kind of force.

Similarly, imagine that the moral theory I accept commits me to believing that I should give money to Oxfam. Whether or not this moral

26 Bratman (1987), Broome (1999), and Schroeder (2009) seem to be after something like this distinction.
theory is ultimately correct, my friends may legitimately take me to task if I do not have the belief that I should give money to this organization. This would not necessarily be appropriate if I merely had a reason to have this belief. After all, I presumably have a reason to believe that I should do lots of incompatible things with the money—give it to Human Rights Watch, spend it on my friends and family, bet it on the Heat making a championship run, etc. But if I refrained from believing that I should give to Human Rights Watch my friends could not reasonably take me to task. There is something distinctive about my rational commitment; it is not just a reason to believe that I should give to Oxfam.

These suggestions need filling out, but I think they are sufficient to motivate the general picture I’ve been pushing. For now the reader should just take the term ‘strictness’ to be a placeholder for the property of commitments that renders their normativity perplexing—to put it neutrally, the property that makes commitments appear to be bearers of a distinctive and interesting kind of pro tanto normative force.

I take it that the shared features I’ve just outlined establish at the very least a prima facie case for my unifying thesis. One point deserves clarification. I said at the outset that the commitment relation should be distinguished from two other commonly deployed relations—the relations of being required and having a reason. In this section I’ve provided several reasons for thinking that commitments cannot be identified with requirements. But I have said less about why identifying them with reasons would be a mistake.

The latter issue merits more attention than I have space to give it in this paper. What I’ve said thus far is that commitments appear to be examples of the strict pro tanto, by which I mean that they count in favor non-decisively, but also in a more forceful way than run of the mill reasons. This claim is motivated by the way in which commitments structure our (moral and rational) lives.

We commonly regard commitments as important things. We often regret violating moral commitments; and we often feel related sentiments of discomfort even when we judge our violation to be morally proper. It would be callous to forget about your commitments, or to refrain from keeping them in mind when you contemplate making incompatible ones. We likewise take our rational commitments very seriously. We feel embarrassed if we discover that we have conflicting commitments, and, insofar as we are rational, we keep our commitments in mind when reasoning about forming new attitudes that are related in certain structural ways to ones we are already committed to having.

None of these claims are true about reasons. We all have tons of reasons that are not important in these ways. It is often perfectly
permissible to disregard some of your reasons; it displays no callousness or irrationality whatsoever. And it is often perfectly okay to feel no regret, sadness, or embarrassment about acting/believing against some of your reasons. If this weren’t true, then pretty much every act we performed, and every new attitude we formed, would be an occasion for such negative emotions.

That is a preliminary elaboration of the point. Commitments seem to be very different than reasons, in that commitments seem in some way more forceful—more essentially tied to deliberative salience, and more essentially tied to the presence of negative emotions when they are violated. For now this relatively spare version of the argument must suffice.27

Our next task is to more precisely articulate the most interesting differences between moral and rational commitments.

2. Acquisition, Escape, and Normative Nature

A. Unilateral vs. Multilateral Modes of Acquisition

As I said at the outset, there are some apparently substantial differences between moral and rational commitments that reveal themselves almost immediately and that may reasonably be thought to threaten a unifying analysis. The challenge of this section is to provide an account of the nature of these differences that preserves the unified picture. My strategy is to explain the differences as results of domain-specific features of morality and rationality, rather than as differences in the nature of the normative relation that’s invoked.28 This subsection will offer the outline of an argument for this view.

27 There’s also a simpler way to get to my conclusion. I’ve argued that commitments have certain features like agent-dependence and escapability, but it’s implausible to contend that all reasons have these features. Your reason to refrain from torturing animals for fun does not depend on you, and it is not escapable. This is not to say that we cannot analyze commitments in terms of reasons—as, perhaps, a certain class of reason with the features I’ve articulated. Similarly, many philosophers think that the notion of requirement can be analyzed in terms of reasons. But that reductive project wouldn’t undermine the importance of the notion of requirement, which we find useful in all kinds of ways. The same goes for the notion of commitment.

28 Analogy: there are normative reasons for belief as well as for action, and there are major differences between these types of reasons (e.g. the former are reasons for believing something true, whereas the latter are reasons for performing some action). However, these differences do not mean that there is no unified normative phenomenon that is equally captured by both types of reasons claims. Since the observed difference can be satisfyingly explained by appealing to the nature and aim of belief and action themselves, this difference should not incline us to think that there are two unrelated concepts in play.
Let us recall first that though both moral and rational commitments depend upon the activities of the agent who becomes committed, the mode of acquisition for these types of commitment typically differs. Consider the fact that rational commitments are, paradigmatically, unilaterally acquired. By this I mean that the only agency involved in the acquisition of a rational commitment is that of the agent who is to become committed.\footnote{The claim is not that the ground of the commitment must be an attitude or set of attitudes that is \textit{voluntarily} formed, though there may be a broad sense of voluntary activity relative to which this claim is true. Many philosophers are uncomfortable with the notion of a doxastic will, and I do not mean to offend their scruples here. I am only arguing that it takes nothing beyond the exercise of one’s own mental agency to acquire rational commitments.} Simply forming certain attitudes is sufficient to ground rational commitments. Other agents’ actions do not enter into the picture.

By contrast, moral commitments are not, paradigmatically, acquired unilaterally. In order for me to be committed to meeting Jane for dinner, it is typically necessary that there be some sort of agreement between us. This is natural, since the moral commitment that promises engender presumably gets its force from the relations of social dependence that are brought about by genuine promising.\footnote{For important accounts of promissory obligation that have influenced my treatment here, see Ross (2002), Raz (1971), Scanlon (1998), and Owens (2008).} And an exercise of one’s own agency is not typically sufficient for grounding these relations of social dependence. There needs to be in addition a related exercise of another agency that issues in a shared plan, or some kind of uptake. Let’s call this the

**Acquisition Fact:** Rational commitments are unilaterally acquired; moral commitments are not.

This difference in the way we acquire commitments corresponds to, and explains, a substantial difference in the possibility of escaping them. Since rational commitments are unilaterally acquired they are also unilaterally escaped. For to relinquish the ground of a rational commitment, and thus to escape the commitment itself, is merely to give up an attitude or set of attitudes that was at one point unilaterally acquired. And the process of revising one’s own attitudes does not depend upon anyone else, any more than the process of forming them does.

Not so for the case of moral commitments. Since moral commitments are acquired by way of an agreement with someone else, they can only be escaped if you are released from the agreement. And your
being released is not a matter of your own unilateral decision. First, the party to the agreement may refuse to release you. For example, your mother may refuse to release you from the promise you made to come home for Christmas. Second, you might be unable to escape a commitment merely because you are incapable of securing your release. This might happen if you have no way of contacting the person to whom you’ve made a promise. Thus the unilateral mode by which we acquire rational commitments explains the unilateral ability we have to escape them. And the non-unilateral mode of acquisition of moral commitments explains the typical insufficiency of unilateral means of escaping them. In other words, the Acquisition Fact directly explains the

**Escape Fact**: Rational commitments are unilaterally escaped; moral commitments are not.

Further, the Escape Fact accounts for the

**Violation and Conflict Fact**: Violation and conflict of rational commitments is always avoidable, whereas violation and conflict of moral commitments is not always avoidable.

In other words, because you can always unilaterally escape rational commitments, you can always avoid violating them, and avoid being committed to conflicting attitudes.

Finally, we appeal to a general principle (whose truth I simply assume for the purposes of this paper):

**Permissibility Principle**: Violation and conflict of commitments is impermissible if not properly excused.

And we arrive at an interesting conclusion about what I’ll call the divergent normative natures of the two types of commitment:

**The Normative Difference**: We can always *rationally* fulfill, or escape, all of our rational commitments; but it is not always the case that we can *morally* fulfill, or escape, all of our moral commitments.

In other words, the nature of rational commitment guarantees that we are definitely irrational when we violate a rational commitment. But the nature of moral commitment does not allow for such a guarantee. Sometimes the violation of a moral commitment entails no immorality—as we have already observed above, in the case of Obama’s diverting the green jobs funds to humanitarian assistance.
B. Violation and Conflict

As I’ve just suggested, it is the distinction between unilateral and multilateral modes of acquisition that explains why rational and moral commitments have divergent escapability conditions. The point to emphasize is that the mode of escape for rational commitments entails that violations (and conflicts) of rational commitments are necessarily avoidable. This observation constitutes the key stage in my argument. It permits us to derive a tidy explanation of the most important difference between the two types of commitment—the difference in their normative natures—from the original Acquisition Fact. And this seems to be a clear case in which it is the natures of the rational and moral domains themselves that do the explanatory work.

For the sake of clarity I’ll state the general form of this argument in more detail. Then I’ll consider some examples as illustration.

The fact that only violations of rational commitments are necessarily avoidable leads to the difference in normative natures if we endorse the Permissibility Principle, which says that violated commitments are irrational/immoral provided they are not properly excused.31 This entails that all violations of rational commitments, and conflicts between them, are irrational, since there is no such thing as a proper excuse in the rational case. (A proper excuse would need to appeal to something like the agent’s inability to avoid the violation or conflict; by hypothesis, we never lack this ability, as we can always get out of our conflicted state.) And it explains why some violations of moral commitments, and conflicts between them, are not immoral: there are proper excuses in the moral case, since violations and conflicts of moral commitments are not necessarily avoidable. So the Acquisition Fact directly explains the Escape Fact; we derive the Violation and Conflict Fact directly from the Escape Fact; and we appeal to the Permissibility Principle in order to explain the Normative Difference.

Now consider a case of conflicting rational commitments. You believe that p. You also believe that q, and that p implies not q. Though you do not believe that not q, you are clearly committed to so

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31 Here we do not need a fancy story about what it takes to get excused. The point is just that since commitments are normative, they should guide us insofar as they do not come into conflict with a competing normative consideration that’s weightier. But though such competition between two legitimately normative considerations is possible in the moral case, it is impossible in the rational case: the necessary escapability of rational commitments seems to entail that any conflict is avoidable and thus irrational.
believing. And you are trivially committed to believing that q, since you in fact believe it. This is a paradigm case of conflicting commitments.

Notice, first, that though it is possible to have conflicting commitments in this sense, it is pretty clearly irrational. Without more detail it is impossible for us to say precisely which attitude, or set of attitudes, is the culprit. But we take the fact that you have inconsistent commitments to show that you are in some way irrational.32

Our explanation of the necessary irrationality of violating rational commitments also accounts for the necessary irrationality of conflict states. For if you have conflicting commitments, you are in a state that guarantees that you will violate at least one of them on account of satisfying the other, so long as you don’t escape one.33

So while rational commitments can conflict, the presence of such a conflict is a sign of some kind of irrationality, and the explanation of why this is irrational will appeal to the fact that the conflict is avoidable. Typically we can eliminate a conflict of commitments by revising a single attitude. Furthermore, there is always at least one rational way of eliminating the conflict: revising the irrational attitude or set of attitudes that ground it. I believe that there is typically, though not always, a uniquely rational way of eliminating the conflict, but this does not matter much for the argument I’m presenting here.

Before explicitly contrasting the rational case with the moral one, let me summarize our main conclusions about the normative nature of rational commitment. First, rational commitments can be violated, and they can conflict. Second, violation and conflict states are necessarily irrational. Third, it is always possible to escape a conflict of rational commitments unilaterally and in a manner that is rationally

32 There are difficult issues with cases of paradox. Some philosophers believe that it can be rational, in these atypical cases, to have conflicting beliefs and/or commitments. I cannot fully address these complex issues here. But I do think that even if we can come to have conflicting commitments without this conflict arising because of some instance of irrationality, it is nonetheless irrational to persist in the state of conflict. We should become agnostic about at least one of the problematic propositions. It should also be noted that this thought about paradox would actually support the unifying project I’m pursuing. It is for partially rhetorical purposes that I’m assuming that conflicts of rational commitments are never rational: this is the main distinction between them and moral commitments. If some conflicts of rational commitments are rational, then there is less reason to be suspicious of the claim that we are dealing with two instances of the same commitment relation.

33 If the commitments are synchronic, then conflict entails that you are presently in a violation state.
permissible—namely, by revising the irrational attitude or set of attitudes grounding one of the conflicting commitments.  

Now imagine a parallel case in the moral domain. Suppose that you have promised to have a dinner date with Jane on Friday night, and also promised to have a dinner date with Sally on Friday night. It is impossible, we stipulate, to go on both dates. Here we have a straightforward case of conflicting moral commitments.

A few observations are in order. First, note that you may potentially escape the conflict by being released from one of the two promises. However, this is a matter that is not entirely up to you. So, secondly, whether you do indeed escape the conflict depends on matters extrinsic to your psychology. Most commonly, it depends on whether one of your promisees will release you; but it may also depend on whether you have available means of attempting to secure such a release (e.g. means of contacting Jane or Sally sufficiently prior to the time of the dates). Third, the existence of such a conflict does not necessarily entail that you have acted immorally in any way. The present example lends itself to an interpretation on which you have immorally made at least one plan that you had no intention of fulfilling. But it may just as well be that you made the plan with Jane in good faith, and only later learned of a personal crisis of Sally’s that only you had the ability to subdue. Alternatively, you may have made the plans independently, and simply not noticed the conflict. If such cases were suitably specified, it would be highly plausible to contend that your promise to take Sally on the date was a morally permissible one, even though you had previously committed to Jane. So unlike conflicts of rational commitments, which indicate some irrationality on the part of the agent, conflicts of moral commitments may indicate no immorality at all.

Some care is required if we are to adequately grasp this last point about the moral import of conflicting moral commitments. Let us

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34 I have been intentionally vague about the sense of possibility to be employed in the claim that it is always possible to escape rational commitments. There is a sense of possibility—call it psychological possibility—that might seem to falsify my claim that we can always escape a conflict of rational commitments. For it might be that for certain agents in certain circumstances there are no psychological means whereby they can revise the attitudes in question. To get a grip on this, consider the sorts of cases given in Frankfurt (1971): a nefarious neurosurgeon will intervene if I decide to revise my attitudes and block my attempted revision. It is reasonable to wonder in what sense I can really revise my belief if a neurosurgeon will intervene when I try to revise it. I cannot deal with these issues at any length here. However, note that my claim is primarily that the possibility of escaping from conflicts of rational commitments is unilateral—it depends only on the agent who has the conflicting commitments. It is compatible with this claim that external or internal impairments may prevent the agent from exercising this unilateral capacity on some occasions.
assume that to be immoral, an act must be such that you are *morally required* to refrain from performing it. What I am claiming is that there are cases in which an agent S comes to have conflicting moral commitments even though none of the grounds of these commitments were immoral actions—that is, actions that S was morally required to refrain from performing. For example, the ground of S’s commitment to have dinner with Jane is his promise to Jane, and his making of this promise was morally permissible. Likewise, the ground of S’s commitment to have dinner with Sally was his promise to have dinner with her, and his making of this promise was morally permissible. Even though S knows at the time of promising that having dinner with Sally will involve not having dinner with Jane, we are assuming that there are sufficiently weighty moral reasons for him to pursue this course of action.

This does not necessarily mean that there is *nothing wrong* with making the promise to Sally. S knows that by doing so he places himself under the scope of conflicting commitments, and that this means he will inevitably disappoint one of the two women. But the kind of wrongness that we would ascribe to S’s action, if we would call it wrong at all, is not sufficient to make him morally required to refrain from performing that action. All things considered, it is preferable that S makes (and keeps) his promise to Sally. Put differently, the morally best state of affairs accessible to S is the one in which he makes and lives up to the commitment to Sally, and escapes his commitment to Jane. And the second best state of affairs accessible to S is the one in which he makes and lives up to his commitment to Sally, and violates his commitment to Jane.

I said that care is required here because the vagueness of expressions such as “is immoral” can generate unnecessary confusion. I use this expression in a sense that is analogous with the sense in which I employ “is irrational” above and throughout this paper. These expressions refer to the *decisive* normative relations of their respective domains. (For this reason I have taken care to mark such relations with the term ‘requirement’, which I regard as our paradigmatic bearer of decisiveness.) So while I am happy to agree that there is a respect in which the violation of a moral commitment is morally *lamentable*, and elsewhere hope to offer an account that attempts to make this idea more precise, this is perfectly compatible with the claim that such a violation is not immoral. Moreover, it is sometimes the case that something even more counterintuitive obtains: morality *requires* you to violate a moral commitment.

The following sketches will clarify the various classes of situations that concern us:
• **Conflict of MC’s grounded in an immoral act.** S promises to dine with Sally merely to get her out of his hair. He has no intention of breaking off the date with Jane. This conflict is analogous to all cases in which rational commitments conflict—the conflict arises because an impermissible ground is adopted.

• **Conflict of MC’s without any immoral act.** The original Jane-Sally case. S promises to dine with Jane, then later promises to dine with Sally, correctly judging the latter to be far more important. Surely there are some situations in which Sally’s predicament could warrant S’s making and keeping such a promise, even absent prior permission from Jane.

• **Conflict of an MC with another, weightier moral consideration.** S has promised to dine with Jane. On the way to his car he sees a man bleeding on the ground. He takes him to the hospital and cannot get to a phone until Jane has already left the restaurant, distraught and angry. Here S has fulfilled a moral requirement, but doing so has necessitated the violation of a moral commitment. The violation is regrettable, but it would be unfair to accuse S of immorality. Even the perturbed Jane should come to dismiss any resentment she feels towards S once he apologizes and explains the situation.

This range of cases demonstrates that the relation of moral commitment is in some ways more complicated than the relation of rational commitment. One way to conceive of the main difference is by observing that moral commitments do not provide as simple a guide to the moral nature of a situation as rational commitments provide to the rational nature of a situation. The latter provide a self-standing diagnostic tool, in the following sense: when there is a conflict of rational commitments, there is also irrationality; when there is a violation of a rational commitment, there is also irrationality. Not so for the former. A conflict of moral commitments can mean that one of several things has occurred. Such a conflict can be due to immorality, but it can also be due to a change in circumstances, or to simple carelessness (which we may or may not be morally required to avoid). And the violation of a moral commitment does not necessarily entail any immorality at all. Sometimes it is even immoral to refrain from violating a moral commitment.

Thus the central normative difference between the two types of commitment can be summed up as a difference with respect to a kind of **guarantee of the possibility of success.** Necessarily, you can rationally
refrain from violating your rational commitments. Stated differently: there is always a rationally permissible world, one that’s open to you, in which you refrain from violating your rational commitments. However, there is not always a morally permissible world that’s open to you in which you refrain from violating your moral commitments. Sometimes the only morally permissible worlds are ones that involve the violation of a commitment.\(^{35}\)

I have granted that there are some key differences between the two types of commitment we are investigating. But I have also shown how these differences can be traced to a fundamental and very simple Acquisition Fact. Moreover, it should be clear that the different modes of acquisition correspond to, and are predictable on the basis of, central differences between the moral and rational domains. In other words, it is precisely the reflexivity of rationality—the fact that the important set of rational norms under consideration concerns the relations we stand in to ourselves—that explains the fact that rational commitments are unilaterally acquired. And it is precisely the non-reflexivity of morality—the fact that the important set of moral norms under consideration concerns our relations with others—that explains why moral commitments cannot be unilaterally acquired. This principled explanation defuses the worry that we are really talking about two unrelated phenomena. The chief difference between moral and rational commitments is not a difference in what they are. It is a difference in the way we come to possess them, and this difference is a natural consequence of the fact that morality and rationality are about different things.

**Conclusion**

We routinely use the term ‘commitment’ in ordinary conversation when talking about normative phenomena like promising. The term is employed ubiquitously in intelligent conversation and philosophical

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\(^{35}\) This paragraph brings out the sense in which a skeptic about my claims about the possibility of avoiding conflicts, and violations, of rational commitments can still endorse the crucial distinction I have made between the moral and rational cases. For it remains true that, necessarily, it is rationally impermissible to have conflicting, or violated, rational commitments. Whereas it is not true that, necessarily, it is morally impermissible to have conflicting, or violated, moral commitments. Of course, the atypical cases of paradox may threaten this distinction—it may (sometimes) be rationally permissible to come to have conflicting commitments, though it is probably not rationally permissible to persist in this state. My goal has been to assume the greatest possible difference between the normative nature of rational and moral commitments, and to show that, even accepting this characterization, the unifying project can still succeed. All the better for this project if the normative difference is not as substantial as I’ve supposed.
discourse to capture normative claims about rationality. These uses are not merely accidentally related. They are instances in which we invoke a general normative kind, the relation of being committed.

If the main ideas of this paper are correct, then this commitment relation plays a central role in some of the most important issues in practical philosophy. It informs our understanding of promissory obligation, and more generally the normativity of agreements; it gives us new insights into the complexity of the demands of rationality; and it helps us draw crucial distinctions in the theory of normative concepts.

Elsewhere I have made some of these arguments in more detail.36 Once we know that there are commitments, that they are plausibly narrow scope, and that they have the interesting strict pro tanto character that I have articulated, we can provide a conciliatory solution to the debate between wide and narrow scope views about the logical form of rational requirements. Many requirements must be wide scope if they are to be appropriately decisive. But commitments are narrow scope, and commitments matter. It is commitments that explain certain rational asymmetries, like the fact that there is always something rational about forming an enkratic intention, but not always something rational about revising a belief of the form ‘I ought to x’. Wide scope requirements cannot explain such asymmetries, because both forming the enkratic intention and revising the ought-belief always take us from violation to compliance. Further, commitments help us to explain certain pervasive and extremely intuitive features of rational assessment—for example, the fact that rationality comes in degrees, and that people who (e.g.) believe irrational moral theories nonetheless exhibit some degree of rationality by intending in accordance with those theories. The present work lays the conceptual foundation for these arguments by vindicating the notion of commitment as a general kind.37

We have good reason to desire an account of the nature of commitment. Perhaps just as importantly, our interest in normative questions commits us to providing one.

36 Shpall (forthcoming). I pursue questions about commitment, promising and love in work in progress.

37 I anticipate some skepticism about introducing a new notion of commitment into the well-worn dialectic about rational requirements. This skepticism is unjustified, both because we appeal to commitments all the time at many different levels of analysis and because a similar skepticism about moral commitments seems indefensible. If moral and rational commitments are two instances of one relation, then skepticism about the existence of rational commitments can be called into question by showing how much they have in common with moral commitments.
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