

Weak Anti-Rationalism and the Demands of Morality[†]

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The demandingness of act consequentialism (AC) is well-known and has received much sophisticated treatment.¹ Few have been content to defend AC's demands. Much of the response has been to jettison AC in favor of a similar, though significantly less demanding view.² The popularity of this response is easy to understand. Excessive demandingness appears to be a strong mark against any moral theory. And if excessive demandingness is a worry of this kind, AC's goose appears cooked: attempts to show that AC is not particularly demanding are implausible at best. Given that AC requires agents to promote goodness, and given that "goodness" here is most often construed as *impartial* and *aggregative* between persons, were I in a position to save others from death by sacrificing myself or my most important

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¹For discussions of the demandingness objection, see Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism" in Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), and "Persons, Character, and Morality" in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Rev. ed., 2003); Tim Mulgan, *The Demands of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. ch. 1; Richard Miller, "Beneficence, Duty, and Distance" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32 (2004); Garrett Cullitty, *The Moral Demands of Affluence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Liam Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²This response is adopted by Mulgan, Murphy, and Joseph Mendola, (*Goodness and Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 96-102) in particular.

interests, I am morally required, on AC, to do so.

More rare, however, is the suggestion that we should reconsider whether excessive demandingness is a true objection to any moral theory.³ This is the suggestion I wish to explore in this essay. I argue here that the demandingness objection requires an unstated premise: the overriding rational authority of moral demands. I shall further argue that there is good reason to reject this premise. This thought has been explored or suggested by a number of previous writers on the subject, including David Brink, Peter Singer, and Susan Wolf.⁴ With these views my own should be considered a fellow traveller. My view, however, is substantially different, at least in this regard: similar views fail to notice the form of moral anti-rationalism that is required to defeat the demandingness objection, and as a consequence adopt views that are stronger than is required at the sacrifice of plausibility. In this paper, I seek to show that a form of weak anti-rationalism can both defeat the demandingness objection and maintain plausibility to boot.

I start this paper by motivating the anti-rationalist strategy. This discussion will put in place the conceptual apparatus that will be used to articulate my own approach to the demandingness objection, beginning in §3. There I argue that the form of anti-rationalism required to avoid the demandingness objection is weak, indeed. In §4 I argue in favor of my interpretation of moral anti-rationalism, and in §5 I show how my view can plausibly respond to standard objections.

1. Act Consequentialism, Demandingness, and Impartiality

That act consequentialist morality is peculiarly demanding is relatively easy to see. One might put the demandingness *objection* in the following way:

1. Act consequentialist morality requires that agents maximize

³Although it is not unheard of. Cf. Catherine Wilson, “On Some Alleged Limits to Moral Endeavor” in *The Journal of Philosophy* 90 (1993). A more recent paper by Caspar Hare seeks to show that on assumptions of even mild benevolence, demanding principles of beneficence are required for rational preferences. See Caspar Hare, “Rationality and the Distant Needy” in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 35 (2007). David Sobel gestures at a view that is in some ways similar to mine (although it faces an important objection, see §3). See David Sobel, “The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection” in *Philosopher’s Imprint* 7 (2008), 14-16.

⁴Brink, “Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View” in *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986); Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd. ed., 1993), 320-1; Singer, “A Response” in *Singer and his Critics*, ed. Jamieson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 308-9; Wolf, “Moral Saints” in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Crisp and Slote (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

the good.

2. Maximization of the good might require self-sacrifice⁵ on the part of moral agents.

3. Hence, act consequentialist morality requires that agents sometimes sacrifice themselves.

4. But true morality does not require that agents sacrifice themselves.

5. Hence, true morality is distinct from act consequentialist morality.

This argument, however, is a bit puzzling. Not every act consequentialist view must be committed to extreme demands. AC can allow that the goodness of one's self counts for more (even substantially more) in the evaluation of consequences, or in the moral evaluation of acts. One such position is "self-referential altruism", suggested by C. D. Broad, and defended more recently by David Brink.⁶

So premise 2 is only true under certain versions of AC. But most interpretations of AC have been committed, both deontically and axiologically, to *impartiality*. And this appears to be sufficient to commit the view to demanding results. As Garrett Cullity writes: "we can trace the problems of demandingness that have been the focus of contemporary discussion to two general theoretical sources. A thought the two share in common is that the moral point of view is an impartial point of view: the point of view I take when I recognize that, morally speaking, I am no more important than anyone else."⁷ One way of characterizing the form of impartiality to which AC (and other potentially demanding moral theories) subscribes is *via*

The Principle of Moral Impartiality (PMI): (1) The interests of persons are morally important to the extent that the persons whose interests they are are morally important. (2) Other things being equal, all persons are of equivalent moral importance.

⁵The notion of "self-sacrifice" is left vague on purpose. I intend it to mean whatever level of sacrifice might be regarded as substantially demanding; it need not be read as sacrificing one's life or even basic subsistence, though standard forms of AC would certainly not rule out self-sacrifice of this kind.

⁶Broad, "Self and Others" in *Broad's Critical Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Cheney (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971); Brink, "Some Forms and Limits of Consequentialism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. Copp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. 393-417. It is worth noting, of course, that this view permits of a variety of interpretations, some of which are compatible with obligations of "self-sacrifice."

⁷Cullity, 91-2. Cullity believes that this form of impartiality is not required to generate demanding results. He is quite right. Impartiality, however, is sufficient for demandingness, and this is the claim I would like to focus on here.

The PMI is really two principles in one. The first principle says that the only thing that can legitimately temper the moral relevance of one person's interests relative to another's is the former's diminished moral importance or status. If an action burdens some person, that burden is less morally important than comparable burdens for others only if that person's moral status is somehow compromised relative to others. The second principle suggests that no person has greater moral status than anyone else. (This is, of course, limited by the "other things being equal" clause. But I interpret this clause extremely narrowly. It is meant only to accommodate an assumption that some—not all—find plausible, that agents can have a diminished moral status if they bear some negative moral responsibility.⁸) Distinguishing these principles is worthwhile, however, as some critics of moral impartiality accept one and not the other.

The PMI as I understand it is ecumenical between moral theories. Importantly, the PMI is not committed to any particular interpretation of "interests". "Interests" can be shorthand for well-being, non-welfarist perfection, flourishing, rational agency capacity, autonomy, basic needs, capabilities, etc. Furthermore, the PMI is not committed to any particular normative stance with regard to these interests. For instance, one might accept the PMI but insist that interests ought to, in the words of Philip Pettit, be "honored" rather than "promoted", or promoted in some cases while honored in others, or promoted only within the bounds of maximally important deontic constraints, etc.⁹ The PMI only asserts that if one is to take a particular stand (whatever that stand is) with regard to the interests of a particular person in a particular case (whatever the interpretation of "interests"), one is committed to taking the same stand with regard to the interests of all.

Abstracting for a moment from problems of demandingness, the PMI seems to express a deep truth about the structure of morality. When taking up the moral point of view it seems right to say that no one should be susceptible to diminished moral consideration except on grounds of diminished moral status. Further, it is implausible to believe that agents have differential moral status (subject to the rider mentioned above). The equivalent moral status of all persons is a deep truth of moral thinking, one that appears to have buttressed some of the most important instances of moral progress. But, of course, those considering the impartiality of the moral

⁸Cf. Larry Temkin, *Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 273-7.

⁹Cf. Philip Pettit, "The Consequentialist Perspective" in *Three Methods of Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 126-8. See also, Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972), 231.

point of view have not left the demandingness objection aside for long. The central problem with this form of impartiality appears to be that it generates extraordinarily demanding results. Simply put, the problem is as follows. Any plausible moral theory will accept at least an occasional demand to promote interests (for instance, in the form of requirements of beneficence). But in such cases, accepting the PMI requires that I treat my interests as simply the interests of one person among many. And if I am not allowed to more heavily weigh my own interests, then it would appear that I cannot be justified in refusing to sacrifice these interests when they could be traded for the promotion of interests that are, from an impartial point of view, more important.¹⁰ The impartial point of view places no limits on required sacrifice of myself or my most significant interests.

Thus there is reason to believe that any moral theory that accepts the PMI will—at least on occasion—issue demanding requirements. Indeed, some thinkers have found reason to believe that several other moral theories are significantly demanding, given a commitment to impartiality.¹¹ This is not to say that all impartial moral theories will be equally demanding. Because AC requires that we promote interests in all cases, any AC that accepts the PMI will be more demanding than a view that limits our requirements to promote interests impartially. But though a non-consequentialist theory might restrict the circumstances in which one is required to act in extremely demanding ways, no impartial theory can plausibly alleviate demanding obligations *altogether* (see also §5.1). Thus any such view should welcome a method of avoiding the demandingness objection.

Before I go on, I want to note an important limitation in the argument I offer here. Solving the demandingness objection is not by itself sufficient to solve all historically important objections to moral impartiality.¹² Without comment on plausibility, some, for instance, hold that principles like the PMI are unacceptable because they cannot accommodate the importance of associative obligations, or special obligations that arise from personal relationships and interaction.¹³ I flag additional objections to lay them aside. Given the plausibility of the PMI and the seriousness of the demandingness

¹⁰I interpret this suggestion as broadly ecumenical between utilitarian, prioritarian, egalitarian, accounts of the impartial moral importance of particular interests.

¹¹Importantly, see Mulgan, ch. 1. See also Barbara Herman, “Mutual Aid and Respect for Persons” in *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), for a demanding Kantian position. See also my discussion of a form of contractualism in §5.1.

¹²Thanks to an anonymous reviewer pressing this point.

¹³See, for instance, David Brink “Impartiality and Associative Duties” in *Utilitas* 13 (2001).

objection, any position that allows the former to escape the latter deserves serious consideration, whether or not it is sufficient to dispense with all objections to moral impartiality.

2. *Demandingness and Reasons*

It is worth asking: why do we fear a demanding conception of morality? There may be many reasons to object to a demanding moral theory, but the most significant reason appears to be that morality purports to tell us how to live. This claim is intuitive. Morality is normative: not only does it *categorize* actions as moral or non-moral, that something is a moral requirement appears to be a strong, even overriding, *reason* to perform the action. If morality is both normative in this sense and impartial, it must be the case that we are bound, obligated, to do extremely demanding things, including sacrifice our own interests to a significant degree (perhaps even lay down our own lives) for the benefit of others.

Call a norm n (for instance, a moral requirement) that requires agent a to perform action x “dispositive” if and only if that n requires a to x is a decisive reason for a to x . In simpler terms, n is rationally dispositive if and only if one is (given n) rationally required act in accordance with n .¹⁴ Call a system of norms “overriding” if, whenever that system issues a requirement, this requirement is dispositive. Morality, for instance, is overriding if the fact that an action is morally required is decisive reason to perform it.

The demandingness objection thus appears problematic only if demanding moral obligations are rationally dispositive. This might be illustrated by looking at a system of norms that is to some degree less philosophically contentious. Philippa Foot compares morality with etiquette. Foot’s comparison is helpful here.¹⁵ As Foot notes, etiquette appears to be a system of norms that we can describe perfectly well without feeling as though that system of norms gives us reasons to act.¹⁶ The coincidence between etiquette and reasons is imperfect at best. But this appears to have an impact on the extent to which a system of etiquette must temper its demands. Consider,

¹⁴David Sobel usefully distinguishes between “reasons” and “rationality”, where “rational justification” is justification given by following a rational decision procedure, not justification given by conforming to the reasons one has. By way of avoiding confusion, I use “rationally justified” here to mean that an action is in conformity with one’s genuine reasons and the proper weight of those reasons. See David Sobel, “Subjective Accounts of Reasons for Action” in *Ethics* 111 (2001), 465-7.

¹⁵Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives” in *The Philosophical Review* 81 (1972).

¹⁶Foot, 309.

for instance, Jack, who has just received an invitation to a party, his attendance at which is necessary to the achievement of a major life-goal (say, being hired at a particular firm). Assume, however, that this party is a black tie affair, but that Jack's attendance would be instrumentally beneficial whether or not he conformed to the dress code. Assume also that Jack owns no tuxedo, and that obtaining one for the party is impossible. How should Jack behave? Following the dress code in this case is demanding: Jack would miss out on the achievement of a major goal. But I'm inclined to say that Jack should attend the party despite the dress code. Jack's failure to conform to the dress code is, in other words, perfectly justifiable. But given that, in so doing, Jack violates the dress code, there appear to be two possible accounts of the justifiability of Jack's behavior:

A. Jack's violation of the dress code violates a norm of etiquette, but he should go to the party anyway because conforming to the dress code is, despite being a requirement of etiquette, not rationally required.

B. Jack's violation of the dress code does not violate a norm of etiquette, because the rule of etiquette requiring conformity to dress codes permits of a variety of exceptions, of which this case is an example.

Whether we should ultimately accept the A or B justification of Jack's behavior will await the result of a sustained inquiry into the norms of etiquette (including the connection between norms of etiquette and dress codes) and the relationship between etiquette and practical rationality. Incidentally, my hunch is that we should accept the A justification. But leaving aside whether the A justification is all-things-considered acceptable, it is certainly no less plausible on its face than the B justification. The A justification certainly passes the threshold of plausibility as an account of the justifiability of Jack's violation of the dress code. In other words, we appear to be willing to countenance the suggestion that the *content* of the norms of etiquette can be demanding, and hence a demanding first-order theory of etiquette is true, so long as the particularly demanding requirements of etiquette are not rationally dispositive. But if this is correct, the demandingness objection to the content of norms of etiquette seems to rely on a further premise: that demanding requirements of etiquette are dispositive.

This fact is significant. If a demanding theory of etiquette can avoid a demandingness objection on grounds that the demands of etiquette are not

rationally dispositive, it is difficult to see why a demanding theory of morality couldn't avoid a similar objection on grounds that demanding moral obligations are not rationally dispositive. Indeed, this point seems to generalize. If demanding obligations—of whatever system of norms—are not dispositive, why should we care whether they are demanding?

The relationship between the demandingness objection and the rational status of demanding moral requirements is reflected in discussions of impartial morality. In characterizing anti-impartialism, Brian Barry writes:

What, then, do contemporary self-styled anti-impartialists stand for? They are united on one central contention, which is that there would be something crazy about a world in which people acted on an injunction to treat everybody with complete impartiality. There must, they maintain, be something fundamentally at fault with any moral system which has the implication that, for example, children should not be regarded as having special claims against their parents, or that a fully conscientious man would toss a coin to determine whether he should rescue from a burning building his wife or a total stranger. Such a world, the anti-impartialists say, might be suitable enough for some other race of creatures. But it is not one in which human beings can find a place.¹⁷

Barry, I think, is quite right to notice how shocking a world in which everyone treated everyone else with complete impartiality would be. (Importantly, Barry's discussion of impartiality concerns not the demandingness objection *per se*, but rather the importance of certain associative norms, but the point appears the same in both cases.) But the leap from a fully impartial *moral theory* to a topsy-turvy world of Godwinian robots relies on the (unstated) premise that morality's extreme demands are dispositive. If, in these cases, immorality can be rationally justified, anti-impartialists have no reason to fear an "injunction to treat everybody with complete impartiality." Demanding morality would simply not provide rational "injunctions" on which people are required to act. Taking Barry at his word,

¹⁷Brian Barry, *Justice as Impartiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 194. See also Susan Mendus' discussion of "the normative question" in *Impartiality in Moral and Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 3. Mendus claims that in order for impartial morality to have any *motivational* power, it must recognize our partial commitments. But the problem here arises only if we are antecedently committed to the claim that strong impartial moral demands are, in fact, normative, or provide agents decisive reasons to act.

anti-impartialists should have no objection to demanding first-order moral theories so long as demanding obligations do not issue rational injunctions.

Anti-rationalism thus appears to have great power in avoiding the demandingness objection when it comes to morality. But though anti-rationalism might be a plausible approach to demanding obligations of etiquette, there might be skepticism that such a strategy could be applied in the case of morality. First, we might be convinced that morality, unlike etiquette, simply *is* rationally overriding. Second, we might have considered judgments about the *form* of justification that justification for refusing to sacrifice one's substantial interests must take. Specifically, we appear to be convinced that we are *morally* justified in disproportionate attention to our own substantial interests. If either claim is true, the A-style justification appears unavailable to a theory of morality. I hope to have addressed these skeptical challenges by the end of the paper. But leaving them aside for now, I have established that the demandingness objection to impartial morality relies on a hidden premise: that demanding obligations are rationally dispositive. If there are good reasons to doubt the overridingness of morality, there are good reasons to doubt the demandingness objection.

3. Varieties of Anti-Rationalism

So far so good. But a crucial question remains to be asked: what *form* must an anti-rationalism take in order to protect impartiality morality from the demandingness objection? This is an important question: if one's anti-rationalism is too strong, the view in question might seem ill-matched to our considered judgments.

A helpful place to begin this inquiry is to consider the following "presumptive" argument for "moral rationalism", given by Russ Shafer-Landau:

When we deem someone's behaviour morally unjustified, we imply that he has violated a standard of appropriate conduct. Suppose such standards did not by themselves supply reasons for action. Then we would be forced to allow that though some actions are unjustified, immoral, improper, illegitimate, or inappropriate, there nevertheless may be no reason at all to avoid them. But this seems wrong—not only conceptually confused, but also gravely unfair. It seems a conceptual error to cite a standard as a guide to conduct on the basis for evaluation—say, for instance, that S ought to have ϕ -ed, and was wrong for having failed to ϕ —and yet claim that there was no reason at all for

S to have ϕ -ed.¹⁸

I agree with Shafer-Landau's rough diagnosis. Importantly, however, one can deny the claim that there is "no reason at all" to behave morally while loosening the connection between morality and practical reason enough to permit impartiality to escape the demandingness objection. Defending impartial morality along this score does not require one to deny—to use David Brink's terminology—the "authority" thesis, i.e., the view that there is always a *pro tanto* reason to behave morally. It requires one only to deny the "supremacy" thesis—the view that immorality is always *all things considered* irrational, i.e., that morality is overriding.¹⁹

One way to reject the supremacy thesis without rejecting the authority thesis is to adopt a *dualism* of practical reason. This position has been advocated by, for instance, Singer.²⁰ Familiar from Sidgwick, such a view might deny that moral or prudential requirements are ever rationally dispositive; moral and prudential action is equally rationally justified.²¹ Call this—straightforwardly enough—the "dualist" view.

A second way to reject the supremacy thesis while accepting the authority thesis is proposed, most famously, by Susan Wolf. While Wolf does not make perfectly clear the overall normative structure of her view, she does appear to claim that being a moral saint—a person who adopts moral ends above all others—is not a compelling personal ideal. Hence, one might think, on Wolf's view it is sometimes all-things-considered irrational to behave morally. Wolf distinguishes between the moral point of view and the point of view of individual perfection, and suggests that, at least on many occasions, we will have most reason, or decisive reason, to develop our personal perfection.²² (Though, unlike the dualist view, she argues that moral requirements will be dispositive in some cases.) This view can also accommodate Shafer-Landau's presumptive argument: it is perfectly open to Wolf to claim that one always has *pro tanto* reason to act morally, but that the requirements of individual perfection are, on occasion, dispositive.

The "dual source" view advocated by Roger Crisp is structurally sim-

¹⁸Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 192-3.

¹⁹Cf. David Brink, "Kantian Rationalism: Inescapability, Authority, and Supremacy" in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, eds. Gaut and Cullity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁰Cf. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 320-2.

²¹Although this interpretation of Sidgwick's position is controversial. See David Brink, "Sidgwick's Dualism of Practical Reason" in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1988).

²²See Wolf, 96-98.

ilar to Wolf’s view. Though Crisp resists the notion that the sources of practical reasons are morality as a system of norms and, e.g., prudence as a system of norms, “[a]ccording to the dual source view, there are two fundamental reasons: the agent-neutral reason to promote the good, and the agent-relative reason to pursue one’s own interests.”²³ Like Wolf, Crisp claims that each reason may outweigh the other in specific cases. In certain cases, acting to promote the good will not be rationally justified, just as, in certain cases, acting in accordance with one’s own interests will not be rationally justified.²⁴ David Sobel suggests a similar view, viz., that “large considerations of self-interest can defeat moral demands on a scale of what it makes most sense to do overall.”²⁵ Call the view that moral requirements are, on occasion, rationally dispositive but are also also, on occasion, rationally overruled (by, for instance, requirements of other systems of norms), the “Wolfian” view.

The strength of these approaches leaves them vulnerable. Take the dualist view. The main problem appears to be that we do not believe that acting prudentially can be rationally justified in all cases. If saving the entire population of Africa from extreme starvation would cost me precisely one lollypop, keeping the candy for myself seems decidedly *unjustified* in terms of what one has all-encompassing reason to do, no matter how misanthropic or candy-loving I am. We can and do make judgments that compare the relative weight of prudential and moral reasons, and much of the time moral reasons will render prudential action rationally unjustified. At the very least, adopting a dualism of practical reasons stretches considered judgment.

Furthermore, both the Wolfian and dualist views appear to violate very standard intuitions. For instance, Sarah Stroud argues for the supremacy thesis by noting several *prima facie* considerations in its favor: first, that “we think of morality as, at least in part, a constraint on the pursuit of our aims,” and “[m]orality’s felt role as a constraint on the pursuit of those

²³Roger Crisp, “The Dualism of Practical Reason” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 106 (1996), 68. Crisp advocates simply rejecting talk of morality *per se*—according to Crisp, nothing is added to normative inquiry by so doing. I think Crisp is incorrect—it seems to me that the specific force of the reason to promote the good results from its *being* a moral requirement. In other words, morality has *per se* normative heft. There is, however, no space to argue for this position here.

²⁴Crisp, 65.

²⁵See Sobel, “The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection”, 14. In point of fact, Sobel’s view might be substantially stronger than the Wolfian view: Sobel’s position is supported by a form of subjectivism about practical reasons, which leaves it open that, if undesired, the authority thesis might fail for a given person.

aims would be undermined if it were OK—not morally OK, but OK from this more encompassing point of view—to ignore moral injunctions in favor of those projects.”²⁶ Second, Stroud argues that “if, in fact, morality is not overriding, a commitment to honoring its demands seems rationally unmotivated.” Finally, Stroud argues that “We are inclined to take the fact that S was morally required to ϕ to be sufficient overall justification for her ϕ ing, even if ϕ ing was prudentially wrong, aesthetically unattractive, and so on.” The dualist view violates the first of these seemingly sensible intuitions, the Wolfian view violates the second and third. A dualism of practical reason leaves it unexplained why, rationally speaking, I should care about morality or treat it as a constraint on my ends. But, as noted by Stroud, we do appear to so treat it. Furthermore, Wolf’s position (along with the position advocated by Crisp) appears to claim that acting in accordance with a moral requirement (or acting to promote the good) sometimes cannot be rationally justified. But, as Stroud notes, it does seem as though one can rationally justify one’s action by noting that it was morally required. (Furthermore, Stroud’s intuition seems to apply to Crisp’s view: it seems as though one can always be justified in acting to promote the overall good, whether we call the reason to promote the overall good a “moral reason” or not.)

Appealing to Stroud’s intuitions might just sound like table-pounding. After all, she appears simply to assert what these anti-rationalists deny. But though Stroud’s intuitions do not necessarily *defeat* anti-rationalism as a strategy, that the dualist and Wolfian views appear to violate widespread intuitions about the relationship between morality and practical rationality certainly motivates a search for an alternative anti-rationalism that can accommodate Stroud’s important considered judgments. My proposal is one such alternative.

In articulating my solution, it is important to note that to deny that a particular moral requirement is rationally dispositive is not to deny that this moral requirement can provide *sufficient* rational justification. A moral requirement is dispositive in a given case if and only if no other norms also provide sufficient rational justification. Hence in order to deny the supremacy thesis, all one must do is argue that, in a greater-than-zero number of cases, reasons to conform to various non-moral norms are strong enough to provide sufficient rational justification even in the face of a conflicting moral requirement. This is the strategy I shall pursue here. Consider:

Weak Anti-Rationalism: that a norm n is a moral requirement

²⁶Sarah Stroud, “Moral Overridingness and Moral Theory” in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (1998), 176.

for a to x provides sufficient reason for a to x . However, in some cases, a moral requirement for a to x will not be rationally dispositive (given n , a will have sufficient, but not decisive, reason to x).²⁷

Roughly speaking, weak anti-rationalism claims that one *always* has sufficient rational justification to behave morally. But in a greater-than-zero number of cases, one will have sufficient reason to violate a moral requirement. Hence, in these cases, moral requirements will provide sufficient rational justification, but will fail to be rationally dispositive. What distinguishes weak anti-rationalism as a form of *anti-rationalism* is the position that, on occasion, moral requirements are not dispositive, and hence that morality is not overriding. What distinguishes weak anti-rationalism as a *weak* form of anti-rationalism is the position that conforming to moral requirements is never all-things-considered irrational. One always has rational *permission*, though will occasionally lack a rational *obligation*, to conform to moral requirements.

Weak anti-rationalism outperforms the dualist and Wolfian views on the dimension of overall structural plausibility. In response to the dualist view, it is perfectly open for the weak anti-rationalist to condemn the candy lover: in this case, though not in all cases, it is plausible to believe that morality *is* rationally dispositive. Stroud writes that “[m]orality’s felt role as a constraint on the pursuit of [our] aims would be undermined if it were OK—not morally OK, but OK from this more encompassing point of view—to ignore moral injunctions in favor of those projects.” But morality can be a constraint on our aims, even if it is not a rationally dispositive constraint on *all* our aims. Weak anti-rationalism can accept what the dualist view cannot: that moral requirements are at least in certain cases dispositive constraints on our aims.²⁸ (One promissory note: in response to the final objection of section 5, I will show how AC, even under a weak anti-rationalist regime, can be a dispositive constraint on *all* our aims.) Further, in response to Stroud’s second worry, weak anti-rationalism accepts what the Wolfian views deny: that moral requirements (or requirements to promote the good) are always rationally justifying. So a commitment to honoring the demands of morality (or a commitment to promotion of the overall good) is perfectly rationally justified: for weak anti-rationalism, one always has sufficient reason to conform to moral requirements. This point applies to Stroud’s third

²⁷Many thanks to Doug Portmore whose discussion of this paper has led me to see that weak anti-rationalism needn’t be any stronger than I state it here.

²⁸For instance, aims the frustration of which would not be *too demanding*.

intuition, as well: because one always has sufficient reason to conform to moral requirements, pointing out that an action is morally required is sufficient to rationally justify its performance. Weak anti-rationalism's success here is significant. Though Stroud's intuitions are important to take seriously, the lesson she draws from these intuitions is not supported by them; the *supremacy* thesis can draw no solace from these considered judgments. Rather, her intuitions point away from a stronger anti-rationalism (such as the dualist and Wolfian views) and toward weak anti-rationalism.

Again, so far so good. But is weak anti-rationalism strong enough to allow impartial morality to escape the demandingness objection? How do we know that weak anti-rationalism will declare that moral requirements will fail to be rationally dispositive in all and only cases of too-demanding moral obligations? One option is to simply stipulate this answer: *only* too-demanding moral obligations count as not rationally dispositive. But we need not rely on stipulation. There is a plausible rationale for this response. To see this, it is helpful to consider what might come between the authority thesis and the supremacy thesis. Assume that the authority thesis is true, but the supremacy thesis is false. What might provide rational justification in addition to morality? Though there may be many additional reason-giving systems of norms, one class of reasons that seems to provide rational justification is surely *prudence*. Especially for very demanding moral theories, prudence and morality coincide imperfectly. But if prudence is rationally authoritative, and weak anti-rationalism is true, prudence will provide rational justification in those cases in which prudential reasons are *sufficiently* strong. But these reasons will get stronger when the negative impact of morality on one's interests is heightened. In other words, the greater the requisite prudential sacrifice, the stronger the prudential reason to avoid the action. Thus prudence appears to provide rational justification in those cases in which morality requires significant prudential sacrifice on the part of agents—when morality becomes *too demanding*.

This claim might sound unsubstantiated. How do we know that prudence will provide rational justification in precisely those cases in which impartial moral requirements become too demanding? To be sure, the answer to this question is difficult to determine with any degree of precision, but it is no more difficult than determining the extent to which an obligation must be demanding before it becomes *too* demanding. On weak anti-rationalism, the project of determining when moral requirements fail to be dispositive just *is* the project of determining when moral obligations become too demanding. To the extent that we believe that any particular obligation is too demanding, we believe that we should not have to follow that obligation—we believe

that that obligation need not form part of “how we should live”. But if weak anti-rationalism is true, “how we should live” need not involve always following morality’s commands.²⁹ Thus any considered judgment that we should live, or can live, or needn’t live in such and such a way implies a corresponding judgment about the content of moral requirements only if morality is overriding. Morality’s requirements entail that we “should live” according to them only if these requirements are rationally dispositive. Thus *if* weak anti-rationalism is true, we can accept impartial morality and also the various considered judgments we have concerning “how we should live” that permit departures from impartial morality. On this picture, if a particular impartial demand need not constitute “how we should live,” (but instead, perhaps, “how we *can* live”) the weak anti-rationalist should interpret this as a call that this demand is not rationally dispositive.³⁰

4. *An Argument in Favor of Weak Anti-Rationalism*

So far I have done the following. I have shown that if a form of moral anti-rationalism is true, this significantly weakens the demandingness objection to moral principles. Second, I have argued that the required form of moral anti-rationalism is weak enough to satisfy considered judgments that tell against stronger anti-rationalisms. I need not deny that morality always provides reasons. I need not deny that moral requirements provide sufficient rational justification in all cases. I need not deny that moral requirements

²⁹Compare Wolf, 97.

³⁰One possible objection to weak anti-rationalism concerns the relation of its various *first-order* commitments about practical reasons to *second-order* theories of practical reasons themselves. For instance, what guarantee do we have that, despite this claim’s plausibility, conforming to moral requirements *is* sufficiently rationally justified in all cases? I have two responses. First, it seems to me quite plausible to judge any theory of the nature of practical reasons against our considered judgments about what practical reasons we have actually have. If so, it seems to me, there is strong reason to reject any second-order theory that cannot accommodate weak anti-rationalism. Second, I think there is good evidence that at least one important theory of practical reasons could support weak anti-rationalism. (I make no comment about whether other views might, as well.) So-called “constructivism about reasons” treats our considered, coherent judgments about reasons as the *source* of practical reasons. On this view, the best evidence that I have a reason to ϕ is simply that the judgment that I do so is supported by my coherent system of beliefs about reasons. Given the considered judgments outlined in this section, I claim that weak anti-rationalism is well-supported on such a view. This sort of view is argued for by Sharon Street in “Constructivism about Reasons” in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* v. 3, ed. Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and in [*Author’s Published Paper*] and [*Author’s Forthcoming Paper*]. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer and Jack Bricke for raising this concern.

are often rationally dispositive. I need only deny that they are *always* dispositive. However, I have not yet argued in favor of weak anti-rationalism against the *supremacy* thesis. To this task I now turn.

The most significant virtue of weak anti-rationalism is that it is an outcome of a generally plausible principle of theory choice in practical philosophy. Accounts of practical reason, morality, etc., are more plausible when they are able to accommodate and systematize more of our considered convictions than other views. No view will be able to perfectly accommodate all such judgments. But the view that does a better job overall has a greater claim to plausibility. I claim that weak anti-rationalism displays this virtue of accommodation in a more robust manner than the supremacy thesis.

The first major accommodation is the PMI. Because weak anti-rationalism weakens the demandingness objection, it weakens the most serious obstacle to the PMI—that it is too demanding. If we accept that morality need not maintain rational supremacy and that prudential norms and other norms can issue in all-things-considered rational justification, impartial morality does not succumb to the demandingness objection. This is a virtue. The PMI is a plausible principle on its face. There is good reason to try to fit it into our moral conceptual scheme if at all possible. Accepting weak anti-rationalism allows us to do so without fear of excessive demandingness.³¹

Though he ends up rejecting impartial morality, Samuel Scheffler notices the plausibility of the PMI. Scheffler refers to the idea that morality requires “radical self-transcendence”. “The moral point of view, according to this strand of thought, is a standpoint that one attains by renouncing any distinctive attachment to oneself, and by acting instead from a thoroughly selfless concern for all.”³² According to Scheffler, this is an “important strand in our substantive thinking about morality.”³³ In agreement with Scheffler, any theory promising to accommodate this important intuition about the moral point of view is worth taking seriously.

However, Scheffler goes on to reject principles like the PMI given an account of the content of moral principles themselves. In particular, Scheffler’s brand of anti-impartialism includes a commitment to one feature of the PMI and not the other. Scheffler insists that the equivalence of everyone’s moral status (other things being equal) can and should be accepted by any moral view. Scheffler interprets this as a claim about value: that no person’s interests or commitments are any more valuable from an independent standpoint

³¹Though I note, again, that there may be additional obstacles to the PMI. See §1.

³²Scheffler, *Human Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 120.

³³Thomas Nagel agrees. See *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 191.

than anyone else's. But, argues Scheffler, this does not entail that agents are required to act in accordance with the equal moral status of all.³⁴ According to Scheffler, "it is a basic tenet of our commonsense moral outlook that we are justified in devoting some disproportionate degree of attention to our own basic interests, where these are construed as including our fundamental human needs as well as the major activities and commitments around which our lives are organized."³⁵ Scheffler interprets this intuition as an intuition about morality, that we are *morally* justified in engaging in such pursuits, in giving ourselves disproportionate attention from the moral point of view; he calls this the "moral legitimacy of disproportionate attention to one's projects, concerns, and commitments."³⁶

Weak anti-rationalism has resources in the face of Scheffler's intuition. In particular, we might ask: why must this form of "justification" be interpreted as moral justification? If weak anti-rationalism is true, morality is no longer the only game in town when it comes to practical justification. The intuition that we are justified in engaging these personal projects must be counted as an intuition about moral justification only if the supremacy thesis is true. Weak anti-rationalism can accommodate not only the moral importance of impartiality, but also the fact that we are justified in the devotion of time to ourselves, our basic projects and interests. This form of justification is interpreted not as moral justification, but as rational justification. On weak anti-rationalism, prudence will provide rational justification at least some of the time. Hence, at least when it comes to overall *practical* justification, weak anti-rationalism can accommodate Scheffler's claims.

But perhaps this is a reinterpretation of considered judgment. I am willing to grant that our *intuitions* about various agent-centered options point to the conclusion that we are morally justified in acting on them. My view cannot accommodate this intuition. But the reinterpretation called for by my view is very small indeed. My view does not ask common sense to give up its commitment to these special norms, special permissions, or their justifying power. Rather, it only asks common sense to stop identifying these norms as moral norms. Doing so comes at significant cost: Scheffler's view cannot accommodate the PMI. A strong moral rationalism, if we are true to the letter of Scheffler's intuitions, *must* reject impartialism. With only very little reinterpretation of the original judgments, weak anti-rationalism allows us both the PMI *and* the commonsense practical justification of dis-

³⁴Scheffler, 107.

³⁵Scheffler, 122.

³⁶Scheffler, 123.

proportionate concern for one's own interests. Agreeing with Scheffler, we *do* feel as though morality is self-transcending. Why not have a moral theory that allows us to keep this intuition, along with the common-sense rational justification of our basic projects and commitments? If any view must reject features of our considered judgments, why not accept a view that is more robustly accommodationist?

Perhaps I have been misleading in discussing anti-rationalism's accommodationist virtues. After all, it requires revising one important commitment: *supremacy*. This is an important point. However, the *strength* of this reason against adopting an anti-rationalist view varies with the strength of the anti-rationalism under consideration. This appears to be a virtue of weak anti-rationalism as opposed to its stronger brethren. Even if the supremacy thesis is itself intuitively plausible, the version of anti-rationalism on display here is extremely mild. The revision requires only rejecting the supremacy thesis, and only allowing rational justification of morally prohibited action when the demands of moral requirements are "too demanding". As anti-rationalisms go, this one is comparatively benign. Hence, it seems to me, even if the supremacy thesis is plausible, the revision required is small enough to maintain the accommodationism of *weak* anti-rationalism. Acceptance of the PMI is itself weighty enough to allow weak anti-rationalism's mild revisions to our moral conceptual scheme.

5. *Objections*

In this section I defend weak anti-rationalism, and the anti-rationalist defense of impartial morality more generally, against three objections. The first holds that the PMI isn't as demanding as I make it out to be. If so, my vindication of demanding moral views (such as AC) falls flat: there appears to be significantly less reason to accept the accommodationist credentials of weak anti-rationalism. Second, I discuss Catherine Wilson's important concern that adopting a form of anti-rationalism in the face of the demandingness objection flirts dangerously with a form of morally repugnant bourgeois ideology. Finally, I discuss an objection due to Paul Hurley: that weak anti-rationalism is but a Pyrrhic victory for a significant range of impartial moral theories, including, most notably, act consequentialism.

5.1. *Is Impartiality Demanding?*

It is important for my argument that the PMI is demanding. If not, there appears to be no reason to believe that weak anti-rationalism is accommo-

dationist; one doesn't need weak anti-rationalism to accommodate the PMI in light of the demandingness objection. There are two arguments I wish to consider here. The first point, prominently made by Brian Barry, suggests that impartiality is required only in the selection of moral principles, not in the principles themselves. Hence in making an impartial selection, we might be led to accept a less demanding set of first-order moral principles. The second argument is given by Garrett Cullity. He argues that demanding obligations can be impartially rejected. I will take these arguments in turn.

Barry argues that there are two "levels" of impartiality. Second-order impartiality insists on impartiality in the selection of principles that are to guide our daily lives and choices. First-order impartiality entails that all our decisions require impartial justification, including "what I do with my toothbrush".³⁷ Barry insists that "[w]hat the supporters of impartiality are defending is second-order impartiality. Impartiality is here seen as a test to be applied to the moral and legal rules of a society: one which asks about their acceptability among free and equal people." Because the critics of impartiality are interested in first-order impartiality, Barry argues that the dispute between impartialists and anti-impartialists is "bogus".³⁸

The following question, however, immediately arises: what is the standard of second-order impartiality? On Barry's view, second-order impartiality just is "the quest for a set of rules for living together that are capable of attaining the free assent of all."³⁹ Earlier in the book he defines the quest for impartiality as the quest for "principles and rules that are capable of forming the basis of free agreement among people seeking agreement on reasonable terms."⁴⁰ Thomas Nagel interprets the test of second-order impartiality in much the same way.⁴¹ Barry (and Nagel) thus approach the concept of second-order impartiality in a contractualist way. I shan't criticize Barry's contractualism here, though I believe it leaves much to be desired in the way of a moral theory.⁴² But I do wish to challenge the suggestion that this form of contractualism would not imply demanding first-order principles. (For a much more in depth discussion, see Elizabeth Ashford's illuminating essay "The Demandingness of Scanlon's Contractualism."⁴³)

³⁷Barry, 201.

³⁸Barry, 193.

³⁹Barry, 191.

⁴⁰Barry, 11. Barry explicitly accepts Scanlon's model of contractualism. See T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁴¹See Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 45.

⁴²Richard Arneson successfully challenges Barry's view in "The Priority of the Right Over the Good Rides Again" in *Ethics* 108 (1997).

⁴³Elizabeth Ashford, "The Demandingness of Scanlon's Contractualism" in *Ethics* 113

The immediate thought is this: contractualism requires demanding principles because any non-demanding system of first-order principles would be rejected by those who stand to lose (and lose big, viz., by starving, etc.) as a result, thus failing to obtain the “free assent of all”. Further, it is hard to see how the rejection of a non-demanding first-order principle on these grounds could be “unreasonable”. Barry insists that we require a measure of “control” over our lives. “Regardless of our conception of the good, we all want some ability to control our own corner of the world, and in return for that we are prepared to relinquish the chance of exerting control over others in their corner of the world.”⁴⁴ But it is not clear to me why such a principle of control couldn’t or wouldn’t be reasonably rejected if and when it leaves some people lacking lives worth living. True, we have an interest in controlling our corners of the world. But all people also have an interest in a life worth living. I am supremely skeptical of the claim that it is more reasonable to reject a principle that requires sacrificing control for insurance against a life not worth living than a principle that requires sacrificing insurance against a life not worth living for control. All things considered, the primary interest, when it comes to reasonable rejection, is an interest in avoiding deprivation, starvation, and lives not worth living. If so, the principle of control will be tempered by this interest, yielding demanding results.⁴⁵ It might be claimed that both principles are reasonably rejectable.⁴⁶ But this would be an unhappy result for contractualism.

One further argument against a demanding interpretation of the PMI is due to Garrett Cullity. Cullity argues that excessively demanding principles can be rejected without denying impartiality. Cullity’s argument is clear and compelling. It runs as follows:⁴⁷ surely I am required to assist a well-off friend of mine in achieving some important interest, say, an interest in reuniting his long-estranged family if I can do so at little cost to myself. But on the demanding interpretation of the PMI, it appears that my friend cannot legitimately spend time with his kin; he must instead spend that time

(2003).

⁴⁴Barry, 200.

⁴⁵Importantly, Scanlon rejects the “complaint model”, i.e., that the test for reasonable rejection includes only well-being effects (cf. Scanlon, 229-30). Even if the complaint model is rejected, however, well-being effects still remain one source of reasonable rejection. That is all that is required here.

⁴⁶Thomas Nagel appears to be struggling with just this sort of a response. See Nagel, 50-1.

⁴⁷See Cullity, esp. ch. 8. Though he rejects it for different reasons than I do, see Jeffrey Brand-Ballard’s review of Cullity’s book in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=2881>.

working for the benefit of the global poor. But it is also true that we are not required to assist others in achieving something it is morally illegitimate for them to have. However, this would imply that, because my friend cannot legitimately spend time with his family, I cannot legitimately assist him in achieving it. But, *ex hypothesi*, I am required to so assist. So, without suggesting that any person is any more morally important than anyone else, or that moral evaluation can legitimately weigh persons differentially, we have derived by *reductio* the claim that moral requirements are not excessively demanding.

There are several facets of Cullity's argument that I must skip over here. Many people have focused on what appears to be the crucial premise, viz., that we are not morally required to assist others in achieving what is immoral for them to achieve. There are good reasons for rejecting this premise.⁴⁸ But even if we accept it, we should reconsider the extent to which our intuition that we *should* benefit our friend in this case is compatible with *impartiality*. Cullity's argument presumes that, in benefiting our friend, we will be distracting him from his work for the global poor. But then how could it *possibly* be compatible with impartialism to so distract him, given that this (presumably) will have significant ill effects for the global poor? Cullity defends this requirement by noting that people's interests in living lives that are not dedicated to the poor provide "compelling moral reasons for assistance."⁴⁹ If interpreted in the following way, Cullity is surely correct: if there are no other more important moral considerations, I am surely morally required to benefit my friend in achieving a life not dedicated to the poor. But it does not follow that these moral considerations are decisive in a case of conflict with the far more basic interests of many distant needy strangers. Consider the following. Suppose my friend is an emergency room physician. I can reunite him with his estranged family, but only during a particularly difficult and demanding shift. Doing so will cause multiple patients, whom he could have saved, to die. I might have a moral interest in reuniting the family. And were my friend not on a difficult and demanding shift, I certainly would be morally required to reunite his family. But if morality *does* require that I reunite the family during that difficult and demanding shift, it is certainly implausible to claim that such a requirement would be compatible with treating all persons as morally equal. Rather, such a requirement would be committed to the greater moral importance of my friend and his family. The same applies if my friend is not a doctor, but a

⁴⁸See Brand-Ballard, op. cit.

⁴⁹Cullity, 141-3.

would-be benefactor of the global poor. An impartial point of view seems to rule out assisting my friend in this manner.

I conclude this section by noting that, though the PMI is not the only interpretation of a principle of moral impartiality, any such principle will face problems of demandingness. The ability of weak anti-rationalism to accommodate these principles, then, is a positive reason for its acceptance.

5.2. *Is Weak Anti-Rationalism Too Bourgeois?*

I have been busy defending impartial morality from the demandingness objection. I have suggested that the demandingness of morality is no particular concern because morality is not rationally overriding. Prudential norms, for example, will emerge as rationally justifying when moral norms get too demanding. But this move might be thought subject to, as it were, a “critique from the left.” After all, many of the world are in sorry shape while those in rich, industrialized countries spend frivolously on, in the words of David Hume, “worthless toys and gewgaws.”⁵⁰ Should we really be apologizing for this behavior by weakening the extent to which rational justification requires moral justification? Catherine Wilson argues against those who would suggest that morality is one among several sources of rational justification, and that when the moral going gets rough, we have the “option, always, simply to pay morality no mind”: “The question that has to be faced is whether the resulting award of a philosophically protected status to life as it is lived by a percentage of the population in North America and Britain is not as or more objectionable than the faults ascribed to those impersonal theories of ethics.”⁵¹

Wilson’s critique is powerful, and I am tempted even to agree. But nothing in *weak* anti-rationalism (as opposed to, say, the dualist view—which specifically implies that we are rationally justified in paying morality no mind) implies a “philosophically protected” status to the luxury goods that many of those in developed nations take for granted. Nothing in this view requires that moral requirements fail to be rationally dispositive when they run up against my interest in a new iPod. What Wilson rightly questions is the proper—for lack of a better term—*extent* of any moral anti-rationalism: what specific types of case allow morality to be rationally dispositive, which do not? As I argue above, the proper extent of weak anti-rationalism is to

⁵⁰Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 9.2.25.

⁵¹Catherine Wilson, “On Some Alleged Limits to Moral Endeavor” in *The Journal of Philosophy* 90 (1993), 288.

be settled by an inquiry into the sorts of obligations that are too demanding on agents. Plausibly, weak anti-rationalism requires that prudence might allow rational justification in cases in which morality demands that I lose even basic and crucial personal projects (such as obtaining a rewarding education or career), or that I give up attempts to enjoy life, the world around me, and important personal relationships. These goods, it seems to me, *do* deserve a philosophically protected status in the following sense: acting to preserve these basic interests is rationally justifiable. However, these considerations are provisional and subject to revision by further inquiry into the proper demandingness threshold. Such an inquiry will rely on considered judgment about the nature of practical rationality and the reason-giving force of moral and prudential norms. And at this level Wilson's point is well-taken, but compatible with my view.

5.3. *A Pyrrhic Victory?*

The most oft-criticized view on the basis of excessive demands is AC. Hence it would be disappointing if weak anti-rationalism could not deflate the demandingness objection for the view against which it is most directed. But Paul Hurley argues that weak anti-rationalism is a poor savior for AC; in other words, weak anti-rationalism, at least when it comes to a defense of AC, throws the baby out with the bathwater.

[An anti-rationalist approach], however, only wins this strategic battle by losing the war so many consequentialists have taken themselves to be fighting. A central aim of many consequentialists has been to demonstrate that we should be doing more than moderate morality requires of us. But the approach in question lowers the bar of rational demands to act morally even as it raises the bar of moral standards. ... If we accept that morality, properly understood, provides merely one among other sets of standards and that these standards lack the distinctive relationship that has been claimed for them to our reasons for acting, then morality is shifted toward the margins of meaningful inquiry into what we have good reasons to do. This would be a Pyrrhic victory, vindicating consequentialist morality only by marginalizing the role of morality in practical reason and deliberation.⁵²

It is hard to understand what precisely is meant when Hurley argues that

⁵²Paul Hurley, "Does Consequentialism Make Too Many Demands, or None At All?" in *Ethics* 116 (2006), 705.

morality is “shifted toward the margins” of meaningful inquiry. One natural reading is as follows: morality is no more important than other systems of norms when it comes to all-things-considered practical justification. But on this interpretation, morality is shifted to the margins only on the *dualist* view (and perhaps Wolf’s view, depending on how one interprets the structure—and perhaps “extent”—of her position). In fact, morality still has a strong practical role to play on weak anti-rationalism. If weak anti-rationalism is true, morality is more important than every other system of norms. To see this, imagine a fourth thesis, a “middle thesis” between the authority thesis and supremacy thesis. Call this the “super-authority” thesis. A system of norms is super-authoritative if and only if a) one always has pro-tanto reason to conform to its requirements and b) in at least one case, a requirement of the system is rationally dispositive. If weak anti-rationalism is true, because conforming to moral requirements is always rationally permissible, the requirements of non-moral systems of norms will never be rationally dispositive—it will never be the case that one is rationally *required* to conform to, e.g., a prudential requirement. However, moral requirements are, in a greater-than-zero number of cases, rationally dispositive (see, for an easy example, the choice between a lollipop and mass relief of starvation). Hence, on weak anti-rationalism, *only morality* is super-authoritative: though reasons to conform to moral requirements will in many cases render morally impermissible action rationally unjustified, reasons to conform to the requirements of non-moral systems of norms will *never* render morally required action rationally unjustified. This provides an intuitive sense in which morality, under weak anti-rationalism, is the “most important” system of norms.⁵³ If so, morality is not “shifted toward the margins” of meaningful inquiry if being so shifted is means being no more important than any other system of norms.

One might define being “shifted toward the margins” somewhat differently, however. A system of norms might be “shifted to the margin” if an agent is only *rarely* rationally required to perform the act that that system of norms requires. This might be problematic for AC under weak anti-rationalism: given that AC’s requirements rarely fail to be extreme—at any given point, it is likely that the most good one could do would be to give one’s life savings to Oxfam, for instance—the requirements of AC will almost always fail to be rationally dispositive. If so, moral requirements will entail rational requirements only rarely. I think there are good reasons for believing that some AC requirements will be intuitively undemanding, and

⁵³Thanks to Scott Jenkins and Ben Eggleston for discussion of this point.

hence dispositive, but leave this aside.⁵⁴ If this is Hurley’s complaint, it is not compelling: Hurley fails to understand that act consequentialism is not *solely* a theory of what actions are morally required. (Indeed, according to Alastair Norcross, it is not even a theory of *that*.⁵⁵) Act consequentialism is also a theory of what actions are morally better and morally worse. In this way, AC is a view with tremendous power: an act consequentialist axiology has the power to rank-order various acts, rather than simply declaring some act right, the others wrong. And given that it has this power, AC can be instrumental in deciding which of the non-optimal actions are rationally required: it might not be rationally required of us to perform the *best* action, but it might be rationally required of us to perform the second-best action, or third-best, and so forth. To put this point another way, the *limits* of prudential justification might be determined not by AC’s requirements, but by some moral threshold: actions morally worse than *x* are not rationally justified. This feature of AC shows, once again, that Stroud’s intuitions can be captured by weak anti-rationalism. AC yields a genuine felt constraint on all our aims: it details the limits of rational justification by reasons of prudence. Pursuant to my discussion of Wilson, though I might not be rationally required to give away my life’s savings to Oxfam (the optimal act, given that in this case prudence provides rational justification), I might be required to give away my iPod rather than giving nothing away. If so, act consequentialist *morality* will remain influential in determining practice *in every case*, even if AC’s requirements can fail to be rationally dispositive.

However, Hurley might still insist that AC is significantly damaged by the loss of morality’s rational supremacy. If previous consequentialists were really out to convince us that we “should live” according to the demands of AC, this appears to be a failure of that cause. One wonders whether Hurley’s sociology is accurate.⁵⁶ Leaving aside the sociological worries, however, Hurley’s objection is hard to state in a non-question-begging manner. Why should the failure of AC to be rationally overriding constitute a Pyrrhic victory? It seems to me that it is only a Pyrrhic victory if we agree with those who would insist that act consequentialism should be rationally overriding.

⁵⁴Consider, for instance, our obligations to set in place external sanctions that entail a greater coincidence between prudence and morality for the next generation, as noted by Mill in *Utilitarianism* III.

⁵⁵Alastair Norcross, “Reasons without Demands: Rethinking Rightness” in *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, ed. Dreier (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

⁵⁶At least one philosopher who argues for extreme moral demands is most certainly *not* out to convince us that we “should live” according to them all the time: Singer, as has already been noted. See also Singer, “A Response”, 308-9.

But this simply asserts what this paper denies.⁵⁷ Insofar as I am arguing that the demandingness objection can be avoided by weakening morality's stranglehold on rational justification, I am arguing that previous consequentialists were wrong: we *need not* live according to these extreme demands. This still allows a robust role for AC: AC's requirements can be rationally dispositive when our *basic interests* are not at stake (as I suggested in the previous paragraph). But if and when these basic interests are at stake, extreme demands, while providing rational justification, are not dispositive. If consequentialists were arguing that extreme demands are dispositive, they were arguing for a false conclusion.

In short, weak anti-rationalism is a Pyrrhic victory for a false conjunction of claims: the conjunction of AC with the supremacy thesis. However, I see this as no Pyrrhic victory, but rather as a *real* victory, for AC itself. It is a way to establish a robust role for AC within practical thought while deposing the demandingness objection. This, it seems to me, is a significant result, and one that should be attractive to consequentialists or any other partisans of impartial morality.

6. Conclusion

I have argued as follows. The demandingness of AC is an outcome of its commitment to a plausible principle of impartiality, but one that is threatened by its seemingly excessive demands. However, the demandingness *objection* relies heavily on an unstated premise: the supremacy thesis. The supremacy thesis has been denied by others, but in ways that are too strong. Weak anti-rationalism, however, appears just right: it is enough to guarantee that moral obligations that are *too demanding* are not dispositive (whatever those obligations turn out to be). Furthermore, weak anti-rationalism can avoid many plausible objections to moral anti-rationalism generally. This, I argue, is a significant result, and one that should cause us to rethink the demandingness objection not only to AC, but to impartial moral theories more generally.

⁵⁷Some might believe that Shelly Kagan's defense of AC requires that AC should be rationally overriding. Kagan, after all, insists that there is a *pro tanto* reason to promote the greatest good, and proceeds to show that potential reasons to override that reason fail. (See Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).) But this misinterprets Kagan's view: when Kagan talks of "reasons," he means so-called "moral reasons" (see Kagan, 66; see especially n. 11). But this is an argument only that AC has the best account of moral reasons—it is left open whether those specifically moral reasons are rationally overriding. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.