

How *Not* to Argue Against Consequentialism<sup>†</sup>—Forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

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Hence the result of the discussion, as far as I'm concerned, is that I know nothing, for when I don't know what justice is, I'll hardly know whether it is a kind of virtue or not, or whether a person who has it is happy or unhappy.

— Plato, *The Republic*, 354b.

There is perhaps only one tradition in contemporary ethical theory more venerable than consequentialism, viz., the tradition of *objection* to consequentialism. Consequentialism has been seen as implausible for a host of reasons, from an inability to distinguish the moral significance of doing and allowing,<sup>1</sup> to an inappropriate fetishization of welfare over other values (such as autonomy or rationality),<sup>2</sup> to you-name-it.

Many of these objections are persuasive. However, in this paper, I argue that one class of objection to consequentialism is illegitimate. This class starts by noting that consequentialism requires agents to perform actions that, plausibly, agents lack decisive *practical reasons* to perform. But given that moral requirements are rationally decisive (i.e., one always has decisive practical reason to conform to moral requirements), consequentialism cannot adequately characterize the moral point of view. The demands of consequentialism fail to maintain the connection to practical rationality enjoyed by moral demands. Call this critique—which itself takes many forms—the “objection from moral rationalism”.

This paper is meant to oppose this critique. Of course, one obvious way to do so is to hold that moral rationalism is false. This is not my

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<sup>1</sup>Philippa Foot, “The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect” in *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Samuel C. Rickless, “The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing” in *Philosophical Review* 106 (1997).

<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

strategy.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I leave open the possibility that a persuasive argument for the rational decisiveness of moral demands can and will be found. My claim is different. I claim that objections from moral rationalism are either internally inconsistent *or* they rely on a *prior* rejection of consequentialism (and are hence either moot or beg the question). Either way, objections from moral rationalism should simply be discarded.

The plan of the paper runs as follows. First, I characterize the objection from moral rationalism, made explicitly by Paul Hurley, Sarah Stroud, and Douglas Portmore, among others. Next, I discuss two traditional objections to consequentialism that themselves are properly read as versions of the argumentative strategy in question. Third, I argue that moral rationalism is, if true, not true *a priori*, that is, independently of first-order moral theorizing. Fourth, I argue that *if* moral rationalism is not *a priori*, then either objections from moral rationalism are inconsistent with any plausible argument *for* moral rationalism, or the argument *for* moral rationalism must be independently committed to the falsity of consequentialism, rendering any objection *from* moral rationalism at best moot, at worst question-begging. Hence all such arguments are faulty even if moral rationalism is true.

### 1. Preliminaries

Before I begin my argument in earnest, some conceptual and terminological orientation is required.

By “consequentialism” I mean traditional maximizing forms of objective, act-consequentialism. This category will include utilitarianism, telic prioritarianism, telic egalitarianism, and other views according to which we ought to maximize the goodness of the outcomes of our actions, and that the betterness and worseness of consequences are not preferentially indexed to the interests of some particular individual or group (such as the agent herself, or the agent’s “narrow circle”).<sup>4</sup> Rather, I confine my discussion to versions of consequentialism that treat the interests of all individuals as equally significant, perhaps weighted according to some impartially applied axiological scale.

“Moral rationalism” is a view about the relationship between the require-

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<sup>3</sup>Although I have done so elsewhere; see Dale Dorsey, “Against the Supremacy of Morality”, MS; Dale Dorsey, “Weak Anti-Rationalism and the Demands of Morality” in *Noûs* 46 (2012).

<sup>4</sup>For contrast versions of consequentialism, see David Brink, “Self-Love and Altruism” in *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997), Douglas Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

ments of practical reason and the requirements of morality. One might think of the view this way. It seems natural to say that the question “how should I live?” is answered by a consideration of the practical reasons that apply to me at a given time.<sup>5</sup> If I have *decisive* practical reason to  $\phi$  (or—what I shall treat as synonymous—if I am rationally required to  $\phi$ ), then this fact implies that I ought to  $\phi$  as a matter of “how I ought to live”. If I have sufficient practical reason to  $\phi$ , this entails that I am justified, as a matter of how I ought to live, in  $\phi$ -ing, despite the fact that I may have sufficient practical reason to  $\neg\phi$ . And so on. With this in mind, moral rationalism—which is also known as the “overridingness thesis” or “supremacy thesis”—can be stated as follows:

*Moral Rationalism*: for all times  $t$ , acts  $\phi$ , and agents  $A$ , if  $A$  is morally required to  $\phi$  at  $t$ ,  $A$  is rationally required to  $\phi$  at  $t$ .

Moral rationalism holds that whenever one behaves in a rationally justified manner, one has also behaved in a morally justified manner.<sup>6</sup> Contrariwise, moral anti-rationalism will hold that one has, in at least some cases, *sufficient* practical reason to fail to conform to one’s moral requirements. For moral rationalism, when the demands of morality conflict, say, with one’s self-interest, one is all-things-considered, or rationally, obligated to conform to moral requirements. Moral requirements, in this way, are *overriding*.

Moral rationalism is a strong thesis: all moral requirements entail rational requirements. Given this, you could deny moral rationalism in stronger or weaker ways. You could hold, for instance, that one is occasionally rationally required to behave immorally.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, you might hold that one is never rationally *required* to behave immorally, but rather that in some cases one can be rationally *permitted* to behave immorally. I won’t spend much time in this paper exploring the depths of moral anti-rationalism, ex-

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<sup>5</sup>This point might be controversial, but this controversy is neither here nor there for my purposes. The arguments against which I seek to argue will presume that there is an independent “ought” of practical rationality, and that this “ought” of practical rationality is the one to which we *really* or *all things considered* or *just plain* ought to conform. For a discussion of the controversy surrounding this question, see David Copp, “The Ring of Gyges: Overridingness and the Unity of Reason” in *Morality in a Natural World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Owen McLeod, “Just Plain ‘Ought’” in *Journal of Ethics* 5 (2001).

<sup>6</sup>If one is always rationally required to conform to moral demands, it follows that it can never be the case that one is rationally justified in  $\phi$ -ing, but not morally justified in  $\phi$ -ing.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Roger Crisp, “The Dualism of Practical Reason” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 96 (1996).

cept to say that to defend moral rationalism, one must defend a strong<sup>8</sup> thesis: that under no circumstances does one have sufficient practical reason to fail to conform to moral requirements.

## 2. *Consequentialism and Moral Rationalism*

Generally, objections from moral rationalism have the following basic structure. In what follows, I will refer to this as the *Master Argument from Moral Rationalism* (MAMR):

1. *Moral Rationalism*.
2. For some time  $t$  and for some agent A, consequentialism requires A to  $\phi$  at  $t$ .
3. A is not rationally required to  $\phi$  at  $t$ .
4. Hence (by 1 and 3), A is not morally required to  $\phi$  at  $t$ .
5. Hence (by 2 and 4), requirements of consequentialism are not coextensive with requirements of morality.

The objections I discuss in this paper can be understood in terms of MAMR (even if implicitly, as I discuss in the following sections). And so in referring more generally to these objections, I will refer to MAMR and its premises laid out in the above order.

The person most explicitly committed to the objection from moral rationalism is Douglas Portmore. Portmore writes (discussing utilitarianism, but the point holds for all traditional forms of act-consequentialism):

We can... offer the following general schema for constructing an argument against utilitarianism on the basis of moral rationalism:

1. There exists an act,  $x_1$ , available to S that would produce the most aggregate utility but that S does not have decisive reason to perform, all things considered.
2. If utilitarianism is true, then S is morally required to perform any act that would produce the most aggregate utility.
3. So, if utilitarianism is true, then S is morally required to perform  $x_1$ .
4. S is morally required to perform  $x_1$  only if S has decisive

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<sup>8</sup>When I say “strong”, I don’t mean to imbue this with a plausibility valence: I mean only to say that, *qua* account of the coincidence between rational and moral justification, moral rationalism is strong, just as the thesis that “all men are mortal” is a strong thesis concerning the relationship between man-ness and mortal-ness.

- reason to perform  $x_1$ , all things considered.
5. So, S is not morally required to perform  $x_1$ .
  6. Therefore, utilitarianism is not true.<sup>9</sup>

This argument, with some premises shuffled around, just is MAMR.

Some state MAMR in a way that is not *quite* so explicit. Take, for instance, the following passage from Sarah Stroud:

[T]he price of accepting consequentialism as an account of right and wrong includes giving up the idea that morality is overriding. . . I stress that this is a problem *distinctive* to consequentialism and certain other moral conceptions—not a result we would end up with no matter what moral theory we chose. . . I take it that among the desiderata on a fully successful moral theory is that it validate, or at least not be incompatible with, the importance we take morality to have; and consequentialism does less well on this score than other theories. So in light of our reasons to hope for the vindication of [moral rationalism], the apparent incompatibility of consequentialism with [moral rationalism] constitutes a count [against] consequentialism.<sup>10</sup>

Stroud’s argument can and should be interpreted as a version of MAMR, insofar as her argument relies on MAMR’s substantive premises, i.e., (1) and (3). Stroud holds that we should accept (1), i.e., moral rationalism, insofar as she believes that a “desiderata on a fully successful moral theory” is that it validate morality’s rational force (according to Stroud, its decisive or overriding force). But consequentialism is not compatible with moral rationalism, insofar as it issues demands that are not rationally decisive (3). To defend this claim, Stroud cites familiar problems of demandingness. Hence Stroud’s argument is an objection from moral rationalism.

Paul Hurley also argues against consequentialism on grounds of moral rationalism. Hurley writes:

[C]onsequentialism. . . is not a theory of the rational authoritativeness of its moral requirements (although it can, of course, be augmented to produce such a theory); indeed, the accounts of practical reason advocated by consequentialists typically support. . . the claim that agents often have sufficient reasons not

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<sup>9</sup>Douglas Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29.

<sup>10</sup>Stroud, “Moral Overridingness and Moral Theory” in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (1998), 185-6.

to bring about the best overall consequences. Coupled with [consequentialism], this suggests that agents often have sufficient reasons not to do what morality requires. [On this view, consequentialist] standards threaten to become merely one among other sets of standards for action that rational agents may or may not have any reasons to take into account, and cease to be what moral standards, including, typically, consequentialist moral standards, purport to be—a set of standards that are distinctive in large part due to the rational authority that they have for agents.<sup>11</sup>

Like Stroud’s concern, Hurley’s worry can be explicitly restated as a version of MAMR. Hurley holds that moral standards “purport to be” a set of rules or requirements that maintain “rational authority” for agents. (Hence (1); indeed, Hurley later argues that any consequentialist willing to jettison moral rationalism would “marginalize” moral inquiry; and hence could allow only a “pyrrhic” victory for consequentialism.<sup>12</sup>) But consequentialists accept theories of practical rationality that don’t vindicate this claim. Of course, they *could* accept a stronger link between practical rationality and consequentialist demands. But (as Hurley later argues<sup>13</sup>) this would require consequentialists to accept a radically implausible theory of practical rationality. (Hence (3).) And if this is correct, consequentialism cannot be the correct moral theory. Hurley’s argument, therefore, fits the schema set forth in MAMR.

### 3. *Implicit Objections from Moral Rationalism*

Each of the above arguments more-or-less explicitly claims that moral rationalism is a serious problem for consequentialism, given that we fail to have decisive reasons to conform to consequentialist demands. However, it is worth noting that some traditional objections to consequentialism are best understood as versions of MAMR even if moral rationalism is not explicitly presumed.

Start with Bernard Williams’ infamous objection to consequentialism on the basis of *integrity*.<sup>14</sup> The precise content of this objection is a matter of

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<sup>11</sup>Paul Hurley, *Beyond Consequentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25.

<sup>12</sup>Hurley, 59-61.

<sup>13</sup>Hurley, ch. 3.

<sup>14</sup>Stated, most famously, in Bernard Williams’ “A Critique of Utilitarianism” in Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

some interpretive dispute, but the standard interpretation begins with the following passage:

But what if [the utilitarian moral requirement] conflicts with some other project of mine? This, the utilitarian will say, has already been dealt with: the satisfaction to you of fulfilling your project, and any satisfactions to others of your so doing, have already been through the calculating device and have been found inadequate. Now in the case of many sorts of projects, that is a perfectly reasonable sort of answer. But in the case of projects of the sort I have called ‘commitments’, those with which one is more deeply and extensively involved and identified, this cannot just by itself be an adequate answer, and there may be no adequate answer at all. For, to take the extreme sort of case, how can a man, as a utilitarian agent, come to regard as one satisfaction among others, and a dispensable one, a project or attitude round which he has built his life, just because someone else’s projects have so structured the causal scene that that is how the utilitarian sum comes out?<sup>15</sup>

For Williams, a person’s actions will “flow from” projects that he or she takes seriously at a fundamental level. But given that “utilitarian agents” must recognize that their projects are only one among others, they will recognize that they must act in a way that treats these projects simply as one among others. But this, according to Williams, is a threat to an agent’s *integrity*: if I choose to conform to utilitarian morality, I must view my commitments as just the normative interests of one person, and cannot grant them the special status they quite obviously have *for me*. But insofar as your project has a certain meaning for you (i.e., insofar as it is a “commitment”), you must treat it as not simply one among all other projects. And hence utilitarianism is “in the most literal sense” an attack on the utilitarian agent’s integrity: it is an attack on an agent’s ability to see her actions as flowing from her own commitments.

I claim that the objection from integrity must rely on an assumption of moral rationalism and is here best understood as a version of MAMR. Note the way Williams himself frames the objection. We are to assume the standpoint of the utilitarian *agent*. In describing the utilitarian agent, Williams writes that such a person “has the general project of bringing about maximally desirable outcomes.”<sup>16</sup> Later, speaking of such a person, “[h]is

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<sup>15</sup>Williams, 115-116.

<sup>16</sup>Williams, 110.

own decisions as a utilitarian agent are a function of all the satisfactions which he can affect from where he is.”<sup>17</sup> But, of course, characterized in this way the utilitarian agent will *treat* utilitarian demands as rationally decisive.

Compare the utilitarian agent as described by Williams to a person who accepts utilitarianism as the *correct moral theory*, but who does not believe that one always has decisive reason to conform to moral requirements. For this person, there is very little danger that she will treat her projects as worthy of being cast aside depending on “how the utilitarian sum comes out”. This person will need only believe that this is the *morally* correct way to treat them. But insofar as this person’s commitments are, in essence, that from which her actions “flow”, she will regard her commitments as generating at least sufficient rational justification even in the face of a contrary utilitarian demand.<sup>18</sup> And hence for it to be the case that utilitarianism necessarily generates problems of integrity, there must be some mistake that this person is making. But the only relevant potential mistake is a failure to accord morality its proper rational authority. And hence, to generate the problems of integrity that Williams wishes to generate, we must assume that utilitarian obligations that generate such problems are rationally decisive, i.e., (1). But then it would appear that Williams’ appeal to integrity just is a way to defend (3) (for my money, a very plausible way). Given the importance of a person’s integrity, she fails to have decisive reasons to act in ways that would rob her of her commitments. And hence the integrity objection, properly understood, should be formulated as a version of MAMR (with an appeal to integrity as a method by which to justify (3)).

Williams’ objection is related in important ways to a more general objection to consequentialism on the basis of consequentialism’s excessive *demandingness*.<sup>19</sup> Demandingness objections generally run as follows. Consequentialism will require us, at all times, to promote the best state of affairs.

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<sup>17</sup>Williams, 115.

<sup>18</sup>Of course, one might believe that moral requirements, are not, strictly speaking, rationally required but that actions that are morally sub-optimal only by a small degree *are*. But given that, plausibly, even sub-optimal acts on a consequentialist moral scheme are integrity-threatening, it could be that integrity is a problem even if moral rationalism is false. But this possibility seems to me relatively far-fetched. If we admit that moral requirements are not rationally overriding, it seems clear that a person’s commitments, given their importance, will provide sufficient practical reason to act.

<sup>19</sup>Thus at least one of the upshots of this paper is that consistent demandingness objections will either beg the question or will rely on a prior rejection of consequentialism for different reasons; thus I reach much the same conclusion as David Sobel (“The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection” in *Philosopher’s Imprint* 7 (2007)) but arrive at it by a slightly different route.

But there are many cases in which to promote the best state of affairs would require us to make substantial sacrifices of our own aims, interests, and projects (even, perhaps, lives).<sup>20</sup> Insofar as it seems implausible to require agents to do so (even if such sacrifices are not integrity-threatening; such as refraining from buying a new car one really wants), consequentialism seems desperately problematic.

I claim that the objection from demandingness, like the objection from integrity, is best read as an objection from moral rationalism. There are two arguments for this claim. First, we generally do not treat excessive demandingness as an objection to first-order accounts of normative standpoints the demands of which cannot plausibly be said to be rationally overriding. For instance, take *aesthetics*. Imagine a first-order theory of aesthetics on which to live a tragic life is to live a life of ultimate aesthetic value. On this theory, characters such as Ophelia, Walter Neff, and Willy Loman are aesthetic paradigms. But on this view, it is clearly the case that to act in an aesthetically superior way is very demanding! However, would we reject this first-order view about the comparative aesthetic quality of these lives *simply* on the grounds that such a first-order theory of aesthetics is very demanding? Surely not. If we are not tempted to accept it, we would cite counterexamples, i.e., lives that are not tragic in the same way but are nevertheless as aesthetically valuable (such as, say, Elizabeth Bennet or Indiana Jones). But if this is correct, why should the demandingness objection apply to first-order theories of morality and not first-order theories of aesthetics? The best explanation is that the former and not the latter, or so many presume, answers the question of how we should, all things considered, live; after all, it would appear that (1) one *ought* to live according to morality's demands in a way that does not hold of lives of aesthetic value. But this is a problem for demanding moral theories because (3) one *needn't live according to demanding requirements*. On this restatement the demandingness objection takes the shape (implicitly) of MAMR.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>There are many statements of the demandingness objection. My favorite is Samuel Scheffler's "Morality's Demands and their Limits" in *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986).

<sup>21</sup>Note, of course, that one might object to a demanding view even if moral rationalism is false, so long as one has decisive reason to act in very demanding ways (so long as one doesn't have decisive reason to conform to moral requirements). But the central point is this: once we reject moral rationalism, it would appear that any judgment that a particular first-order moral theory is too demanding just is a judgment that we needn't live according to its demands. And if this is correct, we should allow that one needn't have decisive reason to behave in these demanding ways, and hence that the demandingness objection is an objection not to first-order moral theories, but to first-order moral theories *on the assumption* of a very demanding theory of normative justification. For a more in-

Second, without the assumption of moral rationalism, demandingness objections are subject to a problem of anti-accommodation. To see this, note that any partisan of consequentialism (or any other demanding theory for that matter) is going to offer a rationale for the claim that her theory is the correct account of the content of moral requirements. Call this—as I shall refer to it for the remainder—“*Rationale*”. Of course, one might be tempted to ask what *Rationale* actually *is*. Importantly, for the purposes of this paper the precise content of *Rationale* is neither here nor there; the reader is free to insert his or her favorite motivation for a consequentialist moral theory. For the sake of illustration, however, one might assume that *Rationale* takes the form of a commitment to a moral point of view that is *beneficent* and *impartial* in structure.<sup>22</sup> That morality should take this shape is independently plausible and supports a form of consequentialism. (I’ll continue to refer to “*Rationale*” in the abstract; the reader is free to treat this as a placeholder for his or her favorite argument for consequentialism.) But whatever *Rationale* is—and, I stress again, it makes no difference what it is for my argumentative purposes—it must be at least *prima facie* plausible. After all, if consequentialism can offer no plausible rationale for its view, it should be rejected whether or not it is demanding. If *Rationale* is not compelling, the demandingness objection is moot.

But then let’s say *Rationale* is compelling, whatever it is. The demandingness objection implies that there is a further considered judgment, the content of which implies that *Rationale* ought to be rejected as a method by which to determine the first-order content of the moral point of view, despite its plausibility. Call this considered judgment “*Too Demanding*”. If this is correct, we must somehow resolve the conflict between *Rationale* and *Too Demanding*. But, as a methodological point, it seems best to resolve this conflict in a way that does the least damage to our overall considered judgments. In other words, we should seek to accommodate our considered judgments (including *Rationale* and *Too Demanding*) as much as we can. Of course, insofar as there is a conflict between *Rationale* and *Too Demanding*, something has to go.

But now imagine that we are not previously committed to moral rationalism; imagine that we are simply neutral concerning its truth or falsity. If so, it would appear that greater accommodation of our considered judgments can be allowed simply by reinterpreting *Too Demanding* as making a

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depth discussion of this point, see “Weak Anti-Rationalism and the Demands of Morality”, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup>See, for instance, David Brink, “Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View” in *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986).

claim *solely* about the rational point of view (in particular, that specifically prudential concerns can occasionally rationally justify action) and remaining neutral—and thus *Rationale*-compatible—concerning the content of the moral point of view. It may be that this does not provide perfect accommodation of the shape of *Too Demanding* as an intuition. Maybe for all that *Too Demanding* really is a considered judgment about the moral point of view even independently of morality’s rational force. But even so, this proposal preserves much of the force of *Too Demanding*, reserving it strictly for the domain of practical rationality. And thus *if* we allow the possibility of moral anti-rationalism, we can accommodate both *Rationale* and *Too Demanding* by simply offering a minor modification of the latter. Insofar as the only alternative is to simply reject *Rationale*, this proposal is more accommodationist *if* moral anti-rationalism is a live option.

But if this is correct, to reject consequentialism on the basis of *Too Demanding*, one would have to say that this proposed accommodation gives up something important. The obvious candidate is moral rationalism. Thus it would appear that for demandingness objections to stick, they must rely on an assumption that to give up moral rationalism is to do substantial damage to our overall web of belief. But this is tantamount to relying on an assumption that moral rationalism is true, or is to be preserved in light of alternative methods by which to accommodate our considered judgments. As Hurley writes: “Indeed, concerns by both defenders and critics of consequentialism regarding its excessive alienation, confinement, and demandingness only make sense within the context of a commitment to [the rational supremacy of moral requirements].”<sup>23</sup> If this is right, and I think it is, we should hold that the integrity and demandingness objections are part (though implicit) of the broad argumentative strategy I have identified as the objection from moral rationalism.<sup>24</sup>

I don’t want this section to sound hyperbolic. I don’t mean to say that philosophers have never conceived the integrity or demandingness objections as anything other than objections from moral rationalism. It could be that some accept the force of these objections regardless of morality’s rational force. My only claim here is that this is the way these objections are *most plausibly* understood.<sup>25</sup> But even if I’m completely wrong about the plau-

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<sup>23</sup>Hurley, 23.

<sup>24</sup>Both the demandingness and integrity objections rely on (1), i.e., moral rationalism, but offer distinct rationales for (3). For the demandingness objection, (3) holds because consequentialist requirements are, well, too demanding. For the integrity objection, (3) holds because consequentialist requirements threaten the integrity of the agent in question.

<sup>25</sup>As an objection, one might hold that their commitment to *Too Demanding* as a verdict

sibility of reading the integrity and demandingness objections as instances of MAMR, MAMR remains an explicit, and important, argument against consequentialism and deserves attention in its own right.

#### 4. *The Reasoning From Here On*

MAMR is valid (or close enough). But validity is no protection against fallacy.

I will focus on (1), i.e., moral rationalism. To begin, I'd like to distinguish moral rationalism as an *a priori* (that is, prior to substantive theorizing about the moral/rational domains) and as a *substantive* thesis. Substantive rationalism holds that while moral rationalism is true, its truth is not independent of, but can be determined only after, substantive inquiry into the first-order character of the moral and/or rational domains. As Sarah Stroud puts it, substantive rationalism holds that: "The truth of [moral rationalism] will... depend on the content of moral requirements and the nature of reasons for action."<sup>26</sup> On this view, moral rationalism is not a limiting condition on moral/practical inquiry, but can in principle be threatened by the results of such an inquiry. *A priori* rationalism holds that moral rationalism is prior to any substantive inquiry into the first-order character of the moral and/or rational domains, and is therefore worthy to be understood as an *a priori* limiting condition on moral/practical inquiry. On this view, no moral theory could count as adequate, no matter how plausible otherwise, if it issues demands that are not rationally overriding.<sup>27</sup>

With this terminology in mind, the first step in the remaining argument is to show that moral rationalism, if true, is not true *a priori*; moral rationalism is not a limiting constraint on moral inquiry. But if moral rationalism is substantive, any argument for moral rationalism must defend first-order conclusions concerning either the moral or rational points of view that then must be treated as background assumptions in any argument that posits moral rationalism as a premise. But these background assumptions, or so I claim, render MAMR impotent against consequentialism.

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internal to the moral point of view is *so strong* that even to revise it in the minimal way indicated here is less accommodationist than the option of simply giving up *Rationale*. Of course, this is an open suggestion. But it strikes me that this (a) is implausible and (b) renders the rationale for consequentialism *very* intuitively weak. But if that's correct, then it would appear that the objections in question are, as noted above, moot: consequentialism fails for lack of a strong rationale, whether or not it is demanding.

<sup>26</sup>Stroud, 179.

<sup>27</sup>Thanks to Doug Portmore for helping to clarify this distinction.

I want to stress once more that I do not seek to argue that moral rationalism is false. In fact, my argument here is neutral concerning moral rationalism's truth or falsity: it simply notes that to defend moral rationalism one must defend first-order claims about the content of the moral or rational points of view, and if this is correct, MAMR itself must take on board these commitments. But, in light of these commitments, MAMR fails.

## 5. A Priori *Rationalism*

If moral rationalism is an *a priori* constraint on first-order theories of morality, then to show that consequentialism yields requirements that are not rationally overriding (i.e., (3), which I've granted for the sake of argument) just *is* a rejection of a consequentialist theory of the moral point of view. Full stop.

Moral rationalism is not *a priori*. To see this, mark a distinction between two ways that moral rationalism could be *a priori*.<sup>28</sup> First, it could be simply *analytic*. On this view, moral rationalism just is a feature of the bare concept of a moral requirement. Or it could be non-analytically *a priori*; in other words, independent of moral theorizing but not entailed simply by the concept of a moral requirement. Neither succeeds.

### 5.1. *Analytic Rationalism*

Analytic rationalism should be rejected. I offer two arguments here. Take, first, the following case:

*Reggie the Anti-Rationalist*: Reggie accepts a very demanding theory of morality, which holds that he is morally required to donate substantial portions of his income to overseas aid agencies at the sacrifice of even his most central interests and projects. These projects include, for Reggie, making sure that his daughter has sufficient resources to attend a very good, but comparatively highly priced, university. During the course of his deliberations, Reggie says: "I know that donating most of my income to overseas aid agencies is morally required of me. And I know that this means that there is very good reason to donate my income to overseas aid agencies. But I also have very strong reason to make sure that my daughter has the chance to go to the best possible

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<sup>28</sup>Thanks to Doug Portmore for helping me to see the necessity of such a distinction.

college. So I think I have sufficient reason not to donate.”<sup>29</sup>

If moral rationalism is analytic, Reggie is misusing the term “morally required”. But as a matter of simple linguistic intuition, it doesn’t strike me this way. After all, Reggie recognizes that morality generates reasons. He recognizes that, absent his interest in making sure his daughter attends the best college, he would be rationally required to donate to overseas aid agencies. But he also regards his daughter’s education as providing reason and, in this case, strong enough reason to rationally justify. It may be plausible to say that Reggie’s moral requirement is analytically *normative*, i.e., generates a *reason*.<sup>30</sup> But Reggie doesn’t deny this. And hence, or so it seems to me, we would be very unlikely to say that Reggie’s claim is analytically false (though it may very well be false as a substantive claim about practical rationality).

Michael Smith argues against cases like this. His central claim is that: “it is a conceptual truth that if rational agents are morally required to act in a certain way then we expect them to act in that way.”<sup>31</sup> And, if this is correct, insofar as the only thing that rational agents share is that they conform to the requirements of rationality, we should expect that it is a conceptual truth that moral requirements are requirements of rationality. Reggie, therefore, is misusing the notion of a moral requirement. Paraphrasing the crucial premises, Smith writes:

- i. “[A]bsent practical irrationality, agents will do what they judge to be right.”
- ii. “[W]e can and do expect rational agents to judge *truly*; we expect them to *converge* in their judgments about what it is right to do.”
- iii. Hence, “[o]ur concept of a moral requirement thus turns out

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<sup>29</sup>This is, of course, a variant on David O. Brink’s “principled amoralist” in “Moral Motivation” in *Ethics* 108 (1997). A difference, however, is that Brink’s principled amoralist does not believe that morality generates *any* reason for action. Reggie, however, recognizes that moral requirements generate reasons, perhaps even strong reasons, to conform.

<sup>30</sup>Michael Smith holds that (at least for the rational person) being motivated to conform to the moral action is necessary for having a full understanding of moral concepts. In particular, he claims that this point is supported by an analogy between the possession (or lack thereof) of color concepts by blind persons. (Smith, 69-70.) But given Reggie’s acceptance of *some* reason to donate, this analogy fails to support analytic rationalism. Reggie, given his recognition of a reason to donate, possesses at least some motivation with respect to the moral action, whereas the blind person—or so we are to imagine—lacks any experience whatever of colored objects. See Brink, 21-30.

<sup>31</sup>Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 85.

to be the concept of a categorical requirement of rationality after all.”<sup>32</sup>

Note that if we accept the conceptual possibility of moral anti-rationalism, we can and should distinguish between two senses of right action: *morally* right action, and *rationally* right action.<sup>33</sup> Thus the term “right” in (i) must be disambiguated. Clearly, Smith means “morally right”. Now suppose we read “right” as “morally right”, but in a way that is *independent* of its rational force. If we do so, (i) is implausible. It would seem very odd to say that rational agents will always conform to moral requirements if morality fails to be rationally overriding. But then (i) cannot be read as “morally right” independent of the rational force (i.e., “rational rightness”) of the moral requirement in question. In other words, it must be that (i) holds that in judging that they are morally required to perform a particular action, rational agents will also, thereby, judge that they are rationally required to perform that particular action. For (i) to remain plausible Smith must treat conceptual rationalism as a background assumption. But this quite obviously begs the question. And hence Smith’s argument should not convince us that Reggie is making a conceptual error.

My second argument against analytic rationalism, however, does not rely on interpretation of individual cases. Instead, it relies on two assumptions about practical reason that seem to me vindicated by everyday moral/normative life. The first assumption is:

*Non-moral Authority:* there are some non-moral standpoints  $S$ , such that in at least some circumstances, one has practical reason conform to the requirements (or other considerations<sup>34</sup>) of  $S$ .

Take, for instance, prudence. Prudence is conceptually distinct from morality—the fact that some act  $\phi$  is more harmful to me than some alternative  $\psi$  entails that, prudentially speaking, I should not  $\phi$  (which is not simply entailed by morality’s treatment of the value of  $\phi$ ing versus  $\psi$ ing). But it seems quite clear that I have at least *some* practical reason to take seriously the verdicts of prudence. In attempting to determine how one should act, surely the *per se* effect on one’s own welfare is something that can provide a real

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<sup>32</sup>Smith, 86-87.

<sup>33</sup>There is a further question concerning which deontic operator “right” is supposed to refer to here, viz., permissibility or requirement. Given (iii), however, we are justified (I think) in assuming that “right” refers to a requirement.

<sup>34</sup>For instance, it is unclear that aesthetics, say, issues “requirements” in a recognizable sense. But it might still be the case that one has strong practical reason to do that which would promote aesthetic value.

consideration in favor of one or more alternatives, even if these alternatives are not morally favored. Indeed, we appear to justify our own actions on strictly prudential grounds *all the time*. Similar thoughts hold of etiquette, professional norms, and other discrete domains. If so, *Non-moral Authority* appears well-supported by everyday normative inquiry.

The second assumption is:

*Morality Competes*: there are some cases in which the rational authority of a moral requirement to refrain from  $\phi$ -ing will compete with the rational authority of an  $S$ -requirement to  $\phi$ .

*Morality Competes* simply says that the authority of moral requirements will at least occasionally compete with the requirements of other domains for which we have practical reason to conform. Practical reason, in other words, will at least sometimes have to settle conflict between moral and divergent non-moral demands. Take, again, prudence. It is at least possible that my own interests are advanced to a greater degree by performing an immoral action. And if this is right, there is a practical reason to refrain from conforming to moral demands that, rationally speaking, competes with the authority possessed by moral requirement. Again, *Morality Competes* seems an obvious, completely hum-drum feature of moral life.

The conjunction of these two assumptions puts substantial pressure on analytic rationalism. Analytic rationalism holds that moral rationalism is a product of a proper understanding of the mere concept of a moral requirement. But if we accept the assumptions above, moral rationalism must be understood as a *comparative* thesis: a thesis about the comparative rational weight of moral requirements and requirements of other domains. And hence it would appear strange to say that we can know the truth of this thesis *simply* by understanding the idea of a moral requirement. To understand whether, in rational competition with prudence and various other domains, moral requirements have greater rational weight, it is not enough *simply* to understand the notion of a moral requirement, or what moral requirements refer to. One must, or so I propose, know something substantive about practical rationality (at least). If these assumptions are correct, analytic rationalism seems a simple category error.

One could preserve analytic or conceptual rationalism in the face of *Non-moral Authority* by simply stipulating that morality refers, quite simply, to what one has decisive practical, or all-things-considered, reason to do.<sup>35</sup> This is compatible with holding that some non-moral concerns (such as prudence)

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<sup>35</sup>See, for instance, Robert Louden, "Can We Be Too Moral?" in *Ethics* 98 (1988).

will enter into a determination, at least on occasion, of what one has decisive reason to do. But there are two problems here. First, this proposal would be to reject *Morality Competes*; to say that moral requirements just *are* requirements of practical reason is to say not that the rational authority of morality can compete with the authority of non-moral domains, but that morality just identifies the *outcome* of any such rational competition. And given that *Morality Competes* is an entrenched feature of moral life, this consideration seems decisive.

But, perhaps more importantly, this proposal seems to simply change the subject. Most important for this paper, it is clear that consequentialists themselves have not offered their view as a theory of all-things-considered practical rationality, but as a theory of a domain (“morality”) the rational authority of which is questionable, and certainly not conceptually guaranteed.<sup>36</sup> And hence if MAMR relies on analytic rationalism as a justification for its first premise, it appears to be talking about a concept of which consequentialists (at least many of them anyway) are not offering a theory.

## 5.2. *Non-analytic A Priori Rationalism*

So moral rationalism is not analytic. However, one may claim, this does not exhaust the prospects of *a priori* rationalism; one could still explain the rational authority of moral requirements without appeal to their content without *also* claiming that their rational authority is simply a product of a proper conceptual understanding. Fair enough. But note that any such view faces an explanatory burden. Given that analytic rationalism fails, moral requirements refer to the requirements of one domain among many others; others that (given *Non-moral Authority* and *Morality Competes*) are themselves authoritative and compete with morality for rational attention. And hence the non-analytic (I’ll drop this qualifier from here on) *a priori* rationalist must *explain* why the requirements of the moral domain should have their special status *vis-à-vis* practical rationality.

How might such an explanation go? To properly explain morality’s overwhelming force, the moral rationalist must identify some property (“*p*”) of moral requirements that could explain their overwhelming rational authority. But there are (at least) three constraints on any such *p*. First, it must be *general*: it must hold of *all* moral requirements (after all, moral rational-

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<sup>36</sup>See, for instance, Peter Singer, “A Response” in *Singer and his Critics*, ed. Jamieson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 308-9; Brink, 1986; John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic*, 657-8; Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 7th ed., 1981 [1907]).

ism insists that *all* moral requirements are rationally overriding). Second, it must be *a priori*—we shouldn't have to do any substantive moral theory to know that *p* holds of moral requirements (otherwise the resulting rationalism would not be *a priori*). Third, *p* must be *normatively significant*. I don't mean to say that *p* should just be the question-begging insistence that requirements that maintain it are rationally overriding. Rather, I mean that *p* ought to ascribe to moral requirements some important role in our lives or in the lives of rational agents, or insist that moral requirements trigger other normative concepts we should care strongly about. One could, for instance, say that *p* ascribes a special connection to the *motivational capacities* of rational agents.<sup>37</sup> Alternatively, *p* might ascribe a special connection to what others can reasonably *expect* or *demand* of us,<sup>38</sup> etc. If *p* is not normatively significant in this way, *p* hasn't a prayer of explaining why we should, all-things-considered, conform to the requirements that bear it. Summing up, then: the *a priori* rationalist must explain the authority of moral requirements *via* their possession of some property *p*. And *p* must ascribe—independently of the content of moral concerns—some normatively significant property to *all* moral requirements.

No such explanation is possible. When we ascribe normatively significant properties to a particular requirement (independently of its content), this ascription is (at least in part) explained *by*, and cannot thereby *explain*, the normative force of the requirement in question. To see this, imagine for the sake of argument that moral rationalism is false. This entails that there will be some moral requirements one has sufficient rational justification to ignore. But, and this is the crucial question, would we believe that *this* moral requirement—the one we have sufficient rational justification to ignore—should maintain a significant role in the lives of rational agents, or trigger the application of concepts we should care strongly about, independently of whatever it requires? Surely not! For instance, others could surely not reasonably expect or demand that we would conform to requirements that we needn't, all-things-considered, conform to; no requirement that we are rationally justified in ignoring would bear a special relation to the motivational structure of rational agents,<sup>39</sup> and so on. If *p* truly imparts a normatively significant property or role to requirements that possess it, it is far more plausible to say that *p* is not borne generally by moral re-

<sup>37</sup>This proposal is at the heart of so-called moral motivational internalism. See Smith, 61; C. L. Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms" in *Mind* 46 (1937), 16.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>39</sup>See Brink, 18.

quirements (which can, on occasion, be justifiably ignored) but by rational requirements—those that determine, in all cases, how one ought to live.

Here’s another way to see this.<sup>40</sup> Imagine that we come upon speakers of a foreign language who clearly make use of a range of normative terms to critique and evaluate actions. Different terms apply in different contexts and with various levels of importance. Let’s say that one such term, “boffo”, plays a significant role in their lives, bears important connections with other concepts they care strongly about, etc. *If* we accept that sometimes moral requirements needn’t be followed, we would translate “boffo” not as “morally required” but rather as “what one ought to do”, i.e., *rationally* required. We would translate “boffo” as “morally required” *only* if we were already convinced that moral requirements entail rational requirements. And this just establishes the explanatory direction upon which I insist. We do not ascribe truly normatively significant roles or properties of any old requirement, but reserve them for requirements we really should conform to. Hence to say that *p* applies to moral requirements *generally* (independently of their content) requires a prior vindication of the overriding rational authority of *all* moral requirements—which just *is* moral rationalism.

To investigate this problem in somewhat less abstract terms, I’d like to consider perhaps the most important *a priori* argument for moral rationalism, viz., the “blameworthiness” argument. This argument is given precise voice here by Portmore:<sup>41</sup>

- [I] If S is morally required to perform *x*, then S would be blameworthy for freely and knowledgeably performing  $\neg x$ .
- [II] S would be blameworthy for freely and knowledgeably  $\phi$ -ing only if S does not have sufficient reason to  $\phi$ .
- [III] So, if S is morally required to perform *x*, then S does not have sufficient reason to perform  $\neg x$ .
- [IV] If S does not have sufficient reason to perform  $\neg x$ , then S has decisive reason to perform *x*.
- [V] Therefore, if S is morally required to perform *x*, then S has decisive reason to perform *x*—and this is just moral rationalism.<sup>42</sup>

A connection between failing to conform to a moral requirement and blame-

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<sup>40</sup>Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting a similar argument.

<sup>41</sup>Note that a similar argument is offered by John Skorupski in *The Domain of Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 291-300. In addition, its first premise is argued for by Darwall, 92-94.

<sup>42</sup>Portmore, 43-44.

worthiness passes the tests for an explanatory *p*. It is general and imparts a normatively significant role to moral requirements: it insists that (free and knowledgeable; I'll drop this qualifier for the remainder—save in offering my second argument below) failure to conform to *any* moral demands renders one an *appropriate* target of reactive attitudes such as blame or guilt. In addition, for Portmore, morality's blameworthiness is *a priori* (indeed, conceptual): "[I] expresses the common assumption that there is a conceptual connection between blameworthiness and wrongdoing."<sup>43</sup>

This argument displays the faults outlined above. To insist on an *a priori* connection between immorality and blameworthiness relies on a presumption of moral rationalism. Indeed, Darwall, though he states that (I) implies that we have "conclusive" reason to conform to moral demands, notes that this is *because* the first principle *presupposes* this very claim.<sup>44</sup> I offer two

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<sup>43</sup>Cf. Portmore, 44. This link is expressed in the following terms by John Stuart Mill: "We do not call anything wrong, unless we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it; if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow-creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience," (John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, V.12). See also Darwall, 92; Skorupski, *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup>Darwall, 94n7. An anonymous reviewer disputes this by making the following proposal. Take a joint set of claims from Scanlon. He writes: "[A]t least in a large and central class of cases, distinctively moral standards have to do with the kind of concern that we owe to each other. The importance of moral standards, at least in these cases, thus lies in the importance for us of our relations with other people," (T. M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 124). But, according to Scanlon, "to claim that a person is *blameworthy* for an action is to claim that the action shows something about the agent's attitudes toward others that impairs the relations that others can have with him or her," (Scanlon, 128). And hence if moral wrongness is failing to live up to our relations with others, and blame takes someone to task for impairing such a relation (as manifested in one's attitudes, which would surely be present in any case of "free and knowledgeable" impairment of such a relation), then it would seem to follow, *independently of morality's rational force*, that immorality is blameworthy.

But I deny a conceptual link between immorality and blameworthiness is independent of morality's rational force. If we construe the "impairment" of relations sufficient to merit blame, then it's important to construe it in a way that *builds in* that such impairment is unjustified. Take an example. Let's say I need to do a grocery run, but my car is in for repairs. You agree to take me, but at the appointed time you fail to show up. Later, I learned that you had to take your child to the doctor, you did so freely, and *knowing* that you would not show up when you agreed. Does this action "show something about [your] attitudes toward [me] that impairs the relations that [I] can have with [you]?" No, and the explanation would appear to be that you were attending to reasons that outweighed the reason to give me a lift, namely, your daughter's health. We would not (or should not) declare *justified* action sufficient to impair our relationships in a way that merits blame. Indeed, *Scanlon makes this point explicitly*: "It is relatively easy to say what this type of impairment consists in. It occurs when a person governs him- or herself in a way that shows a lack of concern with the justifiability of his or her actions, or an indifference to

arguments for this.

First, note that Portmore’s link between blameworthiness and immorality actually makes reference to a link between blameworthiness and “wrongdoing”. But note that moral anti-rationalism is in part characterized by a distinction—similar to the distinction in interpretations of “right” I mentioned in §5.1—between (at least) two ways of interpreting “wrongdoing”: *moral* wrongdoing and *rational* wrongdoing (wrongdoing as a matter of “how I ought to live”). But *if* we make this distinction, which is the more plausible interpretation of “wrongdoing” in any conceptual connection to blameworthiness? The latter.<sup>45</sup> Take, for instance, Reggie the Anti-Rationalist. Imagine that we come to believe that sending his daughter to the best university is immoral, but that it is nevertheless appropriate as a matter of “how Reggie ought to live”. Would we treat Reggie as blameworthy? No—to say otherwise, it seems to me, is very implausible. Imagine now, however, that we come to believe that doing so was *inappropriate* as a matter of how Reggie ought to live; that, when all is said and done, Reggie *really* ought not to have sent his daughter to the best university. In this case, it seems right to blame Reggie for having done so. And so *if* we can distinguish between senses of “wrongdoing”, we should insist only on a connection between blameworthiness and *rational* wrongdoing. But then for the moral rationalist to insist that morality possesses the relevant connection to blame, it seems we should reject the suggestion that moral wrongness can fail to be rationally wrong.

Second, without a presumption of moral rationalism, the partisan of (I) cannot explain its “excusing conditions”. To see this, note that (I) allows that immorality need not always be blameworthy, viz., if unfree or unknowing. But it is important for the blameworthiness argument that the relevant excusing conditions are not *extended* in the following way:

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considerations that justifiable standards of conduct require one to attend to,” (Scanlon, 141). Insofar as “justifiable standards of conduct” seem clearly to refer to the extent to which one’s action is or is not justified as a matter of “how one ought to live”, this just is the claim that “impairment” of this kind is genuine only when a person acts in a way that is insufficiently rationally justified. But then to say that immorality always displays a blameworthy impairment of this kind just is to presuppose—or, perhaps more precisely, to simply assert—that one never behaves immorally with *sufficient justification*.

<sup>45</sup>It is worth noting that Portmore introduces the distinctive connection between immorality and blameworthiness as a distinctive connection between immorality and *moral* blameworthiness. (Portmore, 43.) But this is a red herring. Portmore’s account of *moral* blameworthiness just is the aptness of various reactive attitudes. And hence to insist that the aptness of reactive attitudes is distinctively moral is just a reassertion of a distinctive connection between (free and knowledgeable) immorality and blameworthiness, which I am challenging here as question-begging.

(I'): If S is morally required to perform  $x$ , then S would be blameworthy for freely, knowledgeably, and unjustifiably performing  $\neg x$ .

(I'), rather than (I), clearly cannot function in an explanation of the rational overridingness of moral obligations.

But to defend (I) against (I') is more difficult than one might believe. To see this, take *etiquette*. Rudeness—even rudeness that is not *per se* immoral—is typically blameworthy.<sup>46</sup> But how would one express this thought? Consider:

(I<sub>e</sub>): If S is required as a matter of etiquette to perform  $x$ , then S would be blameworthy for freely and knowledgeably performing  $\neg x$ .

(I<sub>e</sub>), however, is strikingly implausible. Imagine a formal dinner party in which the guests are awaiting the sorbet. We all know that at such parties, it is rude—and typically blameworthy—to dig into the dessert course until all guests have been served. But imagine that a first-served guest is a type-1 diabetic, who is experiencing a dramatic bout of hypoglycemia. So she simply digs into the sorbet in an effort to raise her blood sugar, without waiting. She isn't blameworthy, and the most straightforward explanation is that her rudeness<sup>47</sup> in this case was rationally justified: given the stakes involved, she has sufficient (dare I say decisive) reason to dig in. In addition, if we accept (I<sub>e</sub>), this would commit us (given (II)) to a form of “etiquette rationalism” which is surely on its face absurd. And hence we should replace (I<sub>e</sub>) with:

(I<sub>e</sub>') : If S is required as a matter of etiquette to perform  $x$ , then S would be blameworthy for freely, knowledgeably, and unjustifiably performing  $\neg x$ .

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<sup>46</sup>Someone might hold that only immoral rudeness is blameworthy. But this is implausible if morality is construed in a consequentialism-friendly way; imagine that I could produce the same optimal consequences by being rude to you, or by doing something else. If I choose the former, it is certainly appropriate for me to accept blame (though not, if consequentialism is true, on moral grounds) for so doing. But then to accept that only immoral rudeness is blameworthy, we must construe morality in a consequentialism-unfriendly way. But this is hardly an option for the *a priori* rationalist: it would require defending rationalism only in light of substantive first-order commitments.

<sup>47</sup>One might deny that digging in, in this case, is rude. My intuitions differ, but this doesn't make much difference. Insofar as we should resist “etiquette rationalism”, there are certainly cases in which one behaves rudely with sufficient justification. But any such example seems to me to support (I<sub>e</sub>') rather than (I<sub>e</sub>).

( $I_e'$ ) seems precisely the right way to understand the blameworthiness of rudeness. But notice that the reason to adopt ( $I_e'$ ) rather than ( $I_e$ ) just *is* the fact that requirements of etiquette *are not rationally overriding*. And hence to distinguish morality from etiquette in a way that would justify (I) rather than (I') seems to require a prior commitment to moral rationalism. Of course, one could explain the success of (I) rather than (I') *via* a consideration of the distinctive sorts of acts morality requires, and why failure to perform those acts is plausibly blameworthy, unlike etiquette, *independently* of any presumption of their authority. But though this may salvage the blameworthiness argument, this is no help to the *a priori* rationalist, because this attribution of blameworthiness is not *a priori*. Any defense of (I) rather than (I') as an *a priori* feature of *all* moral requirements seems both unexplained and implausible without a prior commitment to morality's rational authority.

A distinctive connection to blameworthiness, therefore, cannot assist the *a priori* rationalist in explaining morality's overwhelming rational authority in light of *Non-moral Authority* and *Morality Competes*. But the failures on display here generalize: as I argued above, it is implausible to ascribe normatively significant roles, relations, or other properties to requirements one needn't conform to. And hence the possession of such properties is properly (at least in part) explained *by*, and hence cannot explain, the rational authority of these requirements.

Of course, as I've been hinting at so far, my insistence that moral rationalism must explain why all moral requirements possess *p* requires a caveat. It is perfectly possible to explain the connection between moral requirements and *p* independently of morality's rational force by investigating the content of moral requirements and the extension of *p*, which would (perhaps) deliver the result that all moral requirements fit within that extension. And while I admit that this may be a way to draw a connection between moral requirements and normatively significant properties, and hence may function in a perfectly good argument for moral rationalism, it is obviously no help to the *a priori* rationalist.

Ultimately, the conclusion of this section is as follows: moral rationalism is not an *a priori* limiting constraint on first-order inquiry: to defend moral rationalism, one *must* appeal to the content of moral/rational requirements. This conclusion, while it may sound radical, seems to me little more than common sense. Indeed, the *overwhelmingly* natural explanation of morality's decisive authority (in light of *Non-moral Authority* and *Morality Competes*) appeals to the content of specifically moral concerns, and why those concerns are, plausibly, the most important ones. For instance, if

asked why morality rather than some other domain is rationally authoritative, one might say that morality, unlike other domains, requires people to respect others, and that one always has decisive all-things-considered reason to do so. Or one might say that morality, unlike other domains, is concerned with the promotion of the good, in a way mirrored by practical rationality. Any such explanation just *is* to defend moral rationalism *via* an inquiry into the content of moral domains.

### 6. *How to Argue for Substantive Rationalism*

It would appear, then, that moral rationalism, if true, is not an *a priori* limiting constraint on moral inquiry. The next question is: if moral rationalism is substantive, how might one go about arguing for it?

The answer might seem relatively simple. Insofar as moral rationalism, if true, is a product of an inquiry into the moral/rational domains, moral rationalism must be argued for, first, by offering a theory of morality, and a theory of practical rationality, and showing (without begging the question) that requirements of the former are always requirements of the latter. Indeed, this seems to me common sense: just as Plato's Socrates declares in *Republic* 354b that one cannot know whether justice is a virtue without knowing what justice *is* or *commands*, how can we possibly know whether moral rationalism is true unless we know, in all cases, what we are morally required, and rationally required, to do?

Though this may seem straightforward, I'll back down a bit. We need not be simply neutral on the truth of moral rationalism unless and until the relevant first-order facts are completely determined. And given moral rationalism's inherent plausibility, the burden of argument really should be placed on the moral *anti*-rationalist. In other words, it is not up to the moral rationalist to prove her view, it is instead up to the anti-rationalist to provide reason for thinking that it may be false. Fair enough. But this doesn't mean that there needn't be any argumentative commitments on the part of the moral rationalist. In particular, moral rationalism faces *substantive threats* that must be addressed. Because moral rationalism is a substantive thesis it is threatened, in principle, by first-order claims, either about the rational or moral domains, that would shed a negative light on its posited coincidence between moral and rational demands. In particular, moral rationalism is false—given its strength—if there is at least one instance of *rationaly justified immorality*. Call the search for such an action the “anti-rationalist's strategy”. If this search succeeds, moral rationalism is false.

Thus even if the burden of argument is shifted entirely to the anti-rationalist, the partisan of moral rationalism must engage in a first-order inquiry into the relevant domains if, at least, the anti-rationalist has met her burden of argument. *If* it is the case that there is a plausibly motivated<sup>48</sup> instance of the anti-rationalist’s strategy (which, for now, I leave as a big “if”), then to establish her view the moral rationalist must address the substantive plausibility of this version of the anti-rationalist’s strategy. This is, as far as I can tell, the weakest possible argumentative burden borne by the rationalist: *if* the anti-rationalist offers a plausible rationale or set of rationales to accept the claim that  $\phi$ -ing is an instance of the anti-rationalist’s strategy, the moral rationalist must argue that this strategy fails in at least *this case*. For any action that is at least *plausible* to say that there is an open anti-rationalist interpretation (i.e., that it is an instance of rationally permissible immorality), the moral rationalist must argue (without begging the question) that such an action is either morally permissible or rationally unjustified. Surely the rationalist faces an argumentative burden that is *at least* this strong.

What, then, must a person who wished to deploy moral rationalism in an argument assume? Well, put bluntly, that *this argumentative burden is discharged*; in other words, that if there is a plausible rationale to treat  $\phi$  as an instance of the anti-rationalist’s strategy, either the content of the moral point of view is such that  $\phi$ -ing is morally permissible, or that the content of our rational obligations are such that  $\phi$ -ing is rationally impermissible. Of course, this does not entail that the moral rationalist must make *specific* assumptions about the content of the moral or rational point of view: one could make any number of substantive assumptions that would vindicate this disjunction. But they must at least assume that the contents of the points of view in question are sufficient to show:

*The Crucial Disjunctive Assumption (CDA):* For any action  $\phi$  for which the anti-rationalist’s strategy maintains a plausible rationale,  $\phi$ -ing is either morally justified or rationally unjustified.

The fact that the CDA must be defended is a direct outcome of the fact that moral rationalism is a substantive thesis. We should not accept moral ratio-

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<sup>48</sup>What do I mean by “plausibly motivated”? Nothing more complicated than this: that both conjuncts of the anti-rationalist’s strategy that are supported by strong, though obviously not indefeasible, considered judgment. A philosophical claim is plausibility motivated when its partisan can offer compelling, but not indefeasible, rationale for it, or when it itself is independently compelling. This is nothing like a precise definition, but I take the intuitive idea to be clear enough.

nalism if *to* accept it is to accept a less plausible or less satisfactory theory of the content of moral or rational demands. But this is precisely what a well-motivated anti-rationalist's strategy is designed to argue, viz., that the moral rationalist gets the facts about morality or practical rationality—upon which the truth of substantive rationalism depends—wrong. And hence any such critique must be responded to at a first-order level, viz., by a defense of the crucial disjunctive assumption. And hence these first-order claims must be taken as background assumptions by any argument—like MAMR—that uses moral rationalism as a premise.

### 7. *Why MAMR Fails*

Given what has come so far, the failure of MAMR can be put in relatively simple terms. MAMR must treat, as a background assumption, whatever is required to defend the CDA. But to do so is to render MAMR fallacious. Here's why. It seems quite plausible to say that for *any* action that satisfies  $\phi$  in (3), the anti-rationalist's strategy is well-motivated. There are two claims that motivate this. First: *Rationale*. *Rationale* motivates the claim that morality takes a consequentialist form. Second: (3) itself, i.e., the claim that one does not have decisive reasons to perform whatever actions consequentialism commands. If we accept *Rationale* and (3), anti-rationalism is true. Indeed, precisely this sort of argument is used by anti-rationalists to justify their position.<sup>49</sup>

Take again *Reggie the Anti-Rationalist*. According to consequentialism—as supported by *Rationale*—there would appear to be a moral requirement for Reggie to donate his resources to an international aid agency. But this would leave him unable to send his daughter to a top university, and hence—as supported by the same sort of considered judgments that support (3)—Reggie lacks decisive reason to donate to said agency. Hence moral rationalism (given *Rationale* and (3)) is false. In light of this argument, the moral rationalist must commit to one of two things. First, she must *either* argue that Reggie is, in fact, morally justified in sending his daughter to a top college or that sending his daughter to a top college is, for Reggie, rationally unjustified. But then, given the CDA, the partisan of MAMR must treat either first-order claim as a background assumption in stating MAMR.

But herein lies the problem. As we have already seen, MAMR is explic-

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<sup>49</sup>See, for instance, Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints" in *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1981). David Brink suggests such an argument in "Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View" in *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986).

itly committed to the rejection of any account of the rational point of view that would not allow Reggie to send his daughter to a top university. And so it would appear that the partisan of MAMR cannot take just any route she pleases in vindicating moral rationalism—she cannot, in other words, be *neutral* concerning which disjunct of the CDA is to be embraced by the moral rationalist. She must accept moral rationalism in light of a defense of CDA that explicitly takes the route of *moral permission*: she must treat as a background assumption that Reggie has moral permission to send his daughter to a top university. But to accept this claim is just to assume that consequentialism is false. And so MAMR must accept, as a background assumption, a first-order claim about the moral point of view that is tantamount to the rejection of consequentialism. This is, as far as I can tell, a textbook begged question.

Of course, there could be a substantive and convincing argument that Reggie is morally permitted to send his daughter to a top university. But given that this argument (whatever it is) is used in an argument *for* moral rationalism (i.e., it is used to vindicate (1)), it cannot rely on the *assumption* of moral rationalism. And hence, at the very best, MAMR is simply moot: it relies on a prior, and independent, argument against consequentialism.

The partisan of MAMR might re-open the possibility of a commitment to the *other* disjunct, viz., that Reggie is rationally required to conform to the *Rationale*-supported consequentialist moral requirement. But to do this is to render MAMR internally inconsistent. And hence, depending on which way the moral rationalist wishes to go, MAMR will beg the question or be simply moot (if it assumes that the anti-rationalist's strategy fails because, e.g., Reggie's sending his daughter to a top university is morally justified), or be rendered inconsistent (if it assumes that the anti-rationalist's strategy fails because, e.g., Reggie is in fact rationally required to conform to the relevant consequentialist demand).

One might respond that to accept that Reggie does not have rational permission to send his daughter to a top university is not itself inconsistent with (3). Note that MAMR requires only that there is *some* action required by consequentialism for which one lacks rational justification. But this response fails to grasp the depth of the problem. Let's call the set of actions that are required by consequentialism and plausibly are not rationally required *NR*. Given *Rationale*, there is a plausible rationale to believe that consequentialism is the correct account of the moral point of view, and hence a plausible rationale to believe that every member of *NR* is morally required. But given that the members of *NR* are, *ex hypothesi*, not rationally required, this provides sufficient rationale to hold that *every* member

of *NR* is an action for which the anti-rationalist's strategy is well-supported, and hence MAMR must treat as a background assumption the claim that *every* member of *NR* is either not morally required or is rationally required. But, given (3), MAMR is committed to claiming that no member of *NR* is rationally required. And so MAMR, to remain consistent, must rely on an argument for moral rationalism that explicitly commits to the claim that no member of *NR* is morally required. This, as we have seen, is fatal to the force of MAMR.

## 8. Objections

Two objections to the foregoing argument are considered here. Both question whether a commitment to substantive rationalism need threaten MAMR.

### 8.1. Rationale

First, one might argue that I have helped myself to the whole shebang in assuming that there is a plausible rationale for the claim that Reggie is morally unjustified in spending his resources on his daughter's education. After all, if I'm assuming that *Rationale* is plausible, doesn't that, by itself, stack the deck in favor of consequentialism? But such an assumption is legitimate. First, nothing here assumes that consequentialism is true or that *Rationale* should, all-things-considered, be accepted. Only that it is *prima facie* plausible—whatever it is. Many views that are *prima facie* plausible (i.e., that the sun revolves around the Earth) are nevertheless shown false on reflection. Second, if there is no such rationale, consequentialism has bigger fish to fry than MAMR. MAMR becomes more-or-less an idle wheel: the real problem with consequentialism is lack of an adequate rationale. Third, and related to the second point, if MAMR succeeds only if we are not allowed to assume that there is a plausible rationale for a consequentialist moral theory, MAMR is an independently weak argument and should be bypassed in serious discussions about the merits of consequentialism. After all, MAMR was supposed to accomplish something: it was supposed to convince us that consequentialism was, after all, false *despite* its charms. But if MAMR cannot stand up to the relatively innocuous assumption that there is a plausible rationale for consequentialism, it has nothing like the power its supporters have claimed it to have.

Fourth, and finally, at least one interpretation of *Rationale* is straightforwardly plausible, viz., an interpretation of the moral point of view as (a) concerned primarily with beneficence or, in other words, the promotion

of good quality lives and (b) impartial in structure.<sup>50</sup> If we accept both these principles, something like a traditional form of consequentialism follows: one is morally required, at all times, to promote welfare impartially. Though many will reject this claim about the moral point of view, it is notoriously difficult to shake completely. Even Samuel Scheffler, himself a harsh critic of moral impartiality, notes that an “important strand in our substantive thinking about morality” is that “[t]he moral point of view. . . is a standpoint one attains by renouncing any distinctive attachment to oneself and by acting instead from a thoroughly selfless concern for all.”<sup>51</sup> Of course, whether we agree with Scheffler or not is neither here nor there. Whatever the content of *Rationale* is, it is perfectly acceptable, for the purposes of this paper, to assume that it is at least plausibly motivated.

## 8.2. *Much Ado About Nothing?*

Some might be puzzled by the argument I offer here.<sup>52</sup> All that’s been shown, according to my interlocutor, is that MAMR is, if it is to be consistent, incompatible with consequentialism. But how does that beg the question? Of course consequentialists—those who accept *Rationale*—will reject MAMR. MAMR is, after all, a valid argument to the denial of a proposition they accept. But if this is right, all valid arguments beg the question against somebody. This doesn’t mean they are fallacious. My response: the problem here is substantially deeper. I don’t claim that, when all is said and done, MAMR begs the question because the *conclusion* of MAMR is that consequentialism is false. Obviously, this by itself is no objection. But the problem is this: in positing moral rationalism, *any* argument is explicitly committed to the CDA *whatever the conclusion of the argument ends up being*. But for MAMR, the CDA either renders the argument internally inconsistent *or* requires the assumption, in the positing of the first premise, that the conclusion is true. And even if a reasonable argument against consequentialism, sufficient to vindicate moral rationalism, can be found, this entails that MAMR is at best moot, as it relies on an argument against consequentialism that is independent of the assumption of moral rationalism.

There’s a counter-response I should consider here. “So far,” my objector claims, “you have argued that the partisan of MAMR must accept

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<sup>50</sup>I’ve argued for this interpretation in much more detail in [*Author’s Published Paper*].

<sup>51</sup>Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 120.

<sup>52</sup>Thanks to Doug Portmore and Mark van Roojen for related discussions.

the crucial disjunctive assumption. But so what? The CDA, in essence, is that *either* consequentialism is false *or* one is rationally required to conform to consequentialist demands. But of course there's a further argument that the latter disjunct fails: (3), as we've been assuming, is independently motivated. And hence, by disjunctive syllogism, consequentialism is false. What's wrong with that?" The problem with this response is that it assumes that the CDA can just be made without being vindicated by argument. But as it stands, the CDA is simply a reassertion of moral rationalism against the anti-rationalist's strategy. To rebut the anti-rationalist's strategy—to show that moral rationalism is a plausible result of the best theories of morality and practical reason—the disjunction that characterizes the CDA must be *argued for*, by arguing for *one—or both—of the disjuncts*. And whichever disjunct the moral rationalist argues for, this first-order conclusion must be taken on board by MAMR in positing premise (1). But this is to render MAMR at best moot, at worst inconsistent or question-begging.

## 9. Conclusion

Objections from moral rationalism cannot provide independent reason to reject consequentialism. The problem is the first premise. Once we depose *a priori* rationalism, one cannot simply posit moral rationalism without taking on board first-order assumptions required to vindicate it. Of course, how comprehensive these assumptions must be depends on what you think of the dialectic between moral rationalism and anti-rationalism. Even if we are willing to treat moral rationalism as a reasonable working hypothesis, it must be the case that the moral rationalist has a good argument against the anti-rationalist's strategy whenever that strategy has a compelling rationale. But one compelling—and common!—rationale is the combination of consequentialism and (3). And hence to argue for moral rationalism one of these must be denied. And hence to deploy moral rationalism, one must assume that either (3), or consequentialism, is false. Hence MAMR ceases to be an acceptable argument against consequentialism.

This is a *really big deal*. As I've already shown, many of the most historically persuasive arguments against consequentialism—including the integrity and demandingness objections—are best thought of as versions of an objection from moral rationalism. But if in their best guise such arguments are either question-begging or inconsistent, or rely entirely on a prior rejection of consequentialism, they should simply be swept away. Indeed, I believe this is precisely what should happen.

*None of this entails that consequentialism escapes unscathed.* In partic-

ular, I have not argued that the moral rationalist couldn't come up with an acceptable independent argument against consequentialism (independent, that is, of the presumption of moral rationalism). An argument for moral rationalism, consistent with (3), may well exist. If it does, we have independent grounds to reject consequentialism. But these grounds cannot themselves depend on the assumption *of* moral rationalism, and hence they must be independent of considerations of integrity, demandingness, or any other consideration that relies, for its force, on this very thesis.