

Against the Supremacy of Morality

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Sometimes it happens that morality requires me to do something I don't want to do. Or, worse yet, requires me to do something that would be bad for me. In such cases, it's natural to ask: why should I conform to moral requirements? Why should I act morally rather than, say, prudentially, or—if they are different—in the way I'd prefer to act?

One common answer to this question is *moral rationalism*: you ought to conform to moral requirements, even when you don't want to, or even when it would be bad for you, because morality maintains a privileged relationship to practical rationality. According to moral rationalism, if you are morally required to ϕ , this fact entails that there is overriding or decisive practical reason to ϕ : immorality is always irrational. If true, this is a good answer (or, at least, so I shall assume here): in asking why I should conform to morality rather than, say, prudence, I am asking, in essence, what I have decisive practical reason to do. And if practical reason requires me to conform to morality, this settles the matter.

In this paper, I subject moral rationalism to critical scrutiny. I argue that there is at least a *prima facie* case against the rational supremacy of morality, and that arguments in favor of moral rationalism either cannot establish that immorality is never rationally justified, or end up—at best—simply pounding the table. I should note at the outset that my goal for this paper is comparatively modest. I do not claim to show that no argument for moral rationalism could succeed. I take my task to have been accomplished if the appropriate attitude toward moral rationalism is a degree of pessimistic suspicion. Given the popularity of moral rationalism, however, this is a result worth comment.

The plan for this paper runs as follows. In the first section, I characterize the view against which I seek to argue here. In §2, I offer a *prima*

facie case against moral rationalism: I show that it is plausible to believe that, in at least some very circumscribed cases, rational justification need not wait upon moral justification. In §§3-6, I consider four arguments in favor of moral rationalism in light of this argument; in §7, I conclude, and draw a wider lessons for future disputes between moral rationalism and anti-rationalism.

1. *Three Grades of Moral Involvement*

The target of this paper is moral rationalism. As I use the term, moral rationalism is a thesis about the *practical authority of morality*. In other words, it is a thesis about the relationship between two questions. The first, call it the “moral question”, runs like this: “what does morality command me to do?”. The second, call it the “practical question”, runs like this: “what ought I, all things considered, to do”? The terminology in which the second question sometimes gets expressed includes, for instance, “what am I rationally required to do?”, “what have I decisive practical reason to do?”, “how should I live?” etc. For the purposes of this essay, I treat these questions as referring to the same general question of practical justification: leaving aside what any particular standpoint, such as morality, prudence, etiquette, etc., commands of me, what should I do *really*?

There are many ways to conceive of the relationship between moral requirements and practical rationality.¹ One way runs as follows:

Authority: if x is morally required to ϕ at t , x has practical reason to ϕ at t .

Authority holds that immoral behavior is *pro tanto* irrational—i.e., that there is *some* reason to conform to moral requirements—but does not guarantee that it is all-things-considered irrational. Indeed, *Authority* is compatible with the claim that conforming to moral requirements rather than requirements of other practical standpoints is always practically irrational. It could be that practical reasons to conform to, say, prudential requirements outweigh, in all cases, the practical reasons to conform to moral requirements. For *Authority*, the answer to the practical and moral questions need not overlap to any substantial degree.

A somewhat stronger view runs as follows:

¹Cf. David Brink, “Kantian Rationalism: Authority, Supremacy, Inescapability” in *Ethics and Practical Reason* ed. Cully and Gaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Permission: if x is morally required to ϕ at t , x has sufficient rational justification to ϕ at t .

Permission holds that conformity to moral requirements is not necessary for rational justification. Rather, it is simply sufficient: morally justified action is always rationally justified. And though *Permission* does establish a strong link between morality and practical rationality, *Permission* allows that you can occasionally behave in a rationally justified, though immoral, way.

Finally, the strongest view is:

Supremacy: if x is morally required to ϕ at t , x is rationally required to ϕ at t .

Given the relationship between conformity to one's requirements and acting in a justified way, *Supremacy* may also be stated like this:

Supremacy: if x is rationally justified in ϕ -ing at t , x is morally justified in ϕ -ing at t .

Supremacy holds that not only is immorality always *pro tanto* irrational, it is always *all things considered* irrational. According to *Supremacy*, there is a very tight connection between acceptable answers to the practical and moral questions: without moral justification, one cannot obtain rational justification. All moral requirements generate requirements of practical rationality.

For the purposes of this essay, the term “moral rationalism” is meant to refer to any view that accepts *Supremacy*. For moral rationalism, one is always rationally obligated to conform to moral demands—in this way, morality is different than, say, prudence, or etiquette. Moral anti-rationalism will reject this claim. For anti-rationalism, it is not the case that all rationally justified action is also morally justified. In arguing against moral rationalism, it is sufficient to show that in at least one case, some particular agent has sufficient practical justification to behave immorally.

2. Reasonable Doubts

In this section, I offer a set of considerations that are designed to shed some negative light on *Supremacy*. None of these considerations are knock-down. But, I hope, they are enough to establish a set of reasonable doubts about the rational supremacy of morality, reasonable enough, at least, to require some sort of counter-argument.

I should distinguish my argument here from other, somewhat more popular, arguments against *Supremacy*. Many anti-rationalists note that *Supremacy* requires something of an inflationary theory of practical rationality. In other words, on any plausible view of the nature of moral demands, *Supremacy* requires that practical reasons extend beyond the objects of our (properly refined) aims, interests, and desires. But skepticism of such an inflated theory of practical reasons abounds, and many are for this reason skeptical of *Supremacy*.² I will assume for the purposes of argument that we can, and perhaps should, accept an inflationary theory of practical reasons. The question remains, however, whether *even if* we accept such an inflationary theory, moral rationalism is plausible. I claim that it is not.

The first point I seek to establish in this section is:

Non-moral Authority: there are some non-moral standpoints *S*, such that in at least some circumstances, it is *pro tanto* irrational to fail to conform to the requirements (or other considerations³) of *S*.

Non-moral Authority does for non-moral requirements (or other considerations) what *Authority* does for moral requirements. Of course, *Non-moral Authority* does not hold that we have practical reason to conform to *every* non-moral requirement. However, it does hold that some non-moral domains are the source of⁴ practical reasons, at least in some cases, just as (I presume for the sake of argument) morality is.

Why should we believe *Non-moral Authority*? This proposal is, of course, difficult to prove. But some light is shed by considering examples of non-moral normative systems. Take etiquette. Imagine that in a particular case,

²Included among those who doubt *Supremacy* for these reasons are Samuel Scheffler (*Human Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 74-76), David Sobel (“The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection” in *The Philosopher’s Imprint* 7 (2007), 14-16), and Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives” in *The Philosophical Review* 81 (1972), 309.

³For 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.

⁴When I say “are the source of”, I mean this to be neutral concerning the method by which particular systems of norms are thought to have normative authority. For instance, some may hold that the reasons internal to any individual domain, such as moral reasons, prudential reasons, are necessarily practical reasons and hence practical reasons are generated by moral norms, say, insofar as moral reasons *are* practical reasons. Other views might hold that practical reasons are a *sui generis* category of reasons, and moral requirements, say, generate practical reasons insofar as one has *sui generis* practical reason to conform to moral requirements. None of this matters for the present dispute.

it is clear that ϕ -ing is the *polite* thing to do. It seems to me that this fact entails that there is at least *some* reason to ϕ .⁵ After all, it would be rude not to do so. None of this depends, it seems to me, on there being any moral reason to ϕ rather than to $\neg\phi$. Etiquette, politeness, and avoidance of rudeness are *themselves* reason to ϕ , even if that reason could potentially be outweighed by competing reasons to $\neg\phi$.⁶ Take also *aesthetics*. Imagine that I could ϕ , which would have the effect of creating an artistic performance of tremendous aesthetic worth (a painting, a dance or musical performance, etc.). The mere fact that to do so would be of tremendous aesthetic worth would seem, of itself, to be a reason to ϕ . The same can be said for prudence. That some particular action is prudentially optimal for me seems obviously a reason to perform the action in question, whether or not it is also morally required. The list goes on. Our practical lives are overwhelmingly diverse. Morality certainly plays a role—perhaps even a supreme role. But it is not the only player.⁷

But if we accept *Non-moral Authority*, a legitimate question arises: could it be the case that *S*-satisfying standpoints themselves provide sufficient rational justification of action? If moral rationalism is true, the answer is no: all rational justification requires moral justification, leaving aside any other form of non-moral justification. But it seems to me that we can construct cases in which it is relatively clear that the overall moral permissibility of ϕ -ing needn't be a decisive factor in determining whether ϕ -ing is rationally justified. I will consider three potential cases here that make reference to normative domains that seem to me, at first glance, to satisfy *S* in *Non-moral Authority*.

Take, first:

Sarah: Sarah stands before the Queen of England. A few weeks ago, she promised a friend that, as a political statement, she

⁵Another controversial point on which I won't take a stand here is the relationship between, say, domain-specific requirements or considerations and practical reasons. Some, including myself, hold that the fact that ϕ is, say, morally required is *itself* practical reason to ϕ . Others will hold that any practical reason to ϕ is provided by whatever considerations *render* ϕ -ing morally required (such as, e.g., that ϕ -ing is an instance of keeping one's promise, avoiding harm, promoting utility, etc.). For the purposes of this paper, however, nothing will turn on this issue.

⁶Foot disagrees. See Foot, 309.

⁷Of course, it is open to anyone to claim that, e.g., aesthetics, etiquette, or prudence, or anything else, has *per se* moral value. This claim will be addressed in due course. Nevertheless, it seems to me sufficiently plausible to say that these non-moral systems of norms provide reason *even in the absence*, or perhaps *even in a condition of uncertainty* with regard to their moral status. And that is all that is required for the current argument.

would speak to the Queen before the Queen speaks to her and, furthermore, would address the Queen by saying: “Hey there, Queensie!” This is a genuine promise that her friend regards as an important pact, and a feature of their joint political strategy. Furthermore, if Sarah does not break protocol, this will generate slightly less happiness—just slightly—than were she to break protocol (imagine that though no one will be pained if she breaks protocol, her friend will be angry if she does not).

As Sarah stands before the Queen, she is faced with a question: do I keep the promise to her friend, or do I conform to the demands of protocol? I find it absurd to suggest that in this case Sarah behaves in a *rationaly unjustified* manner in conforming to the demands of protocol. There appear to be a range of practical considerations that protocol, in this case, reflects: basic politeness, a due deference to VIPs, an interest in “fitting in” or “doing what’s done”, living up to the expectations of those around you, and perhaps other considerations. But, (a) none of these factors seem important in determining the moral valence of conformity to protocol, (b) the moral considerations in play in this case seem to point unambiguously toward breaking protocol, and (c) *given* the circumstances, i.e., a context in which a violation of protocol is extremely egregious *qua* protocol, it seems to me quite implausible to say that we would not regard conforming to protocol as sufficiently rationally justified.⁸ Of course, many people may not feel sufficient reason to conform to the Queen’s standards of proper behavior. Some may be inclined to keep their promise; some will feel no reason whatever to conform to the demands of protocol. And we may believe that, should Sarah choose to keep her promise, she will not have behaved in a rationally unjustified manner. But, and this is the more general point, would we believe that if Sarah *did* conform to protocol, she behaved irrationally? Or in a way that could not be justified, practically speaking? I find this difficult to believe in the utmost.

Take another case:

Andrea: Andrea is deciding whether to attend Eastern Private College or Local Big State University. To attend Eastern Private, Andrea would have to travel halfway across the country and would get to see her family only rarely. However, Andrea’s family has undergone a series of tremendous hardships, including the death of Andrea’s younger sibling, which devastated her parents.

⁸Thanks to David Sobel for challenging comments on this score.

If she were to attend LBSU, Andrea could live at home, and successfully tend to her parents' emotional needs, which is clearly essential for their well-being, at very little additional cost in time or energy. Nevertheless, it is important to Andrea, simply for her own sake, to go to EP. (Assume Andrea's future prospects would not be hampered in any significant way by staying at home.)

Imagine that Andrea chooses to go to Eastern Private rather than LBSU. It seems to me that given the description of the case, there is significant moral pressure for Andrea to stay at home. Impartial moral reasons, to say nothing of any potential filial or associative obligations, tell very strongly in favor of going to LBSU and tending to her parents. But even if we come to believe that this is correct, I find it very plausible to say that Andrea is justified in moving away to attend Eastern Private. And she is justified in doing so, it seems to me, because it is important to Andrea to move away; she has strong *prudential* reason to do so.

Samuel Scheffler opposes arguments against moral rationalism of the kind I've just given. According to Scheffler, arguments like this seem to presuppose a certain vision of the moral point of view, i.e., that moral demands are relatively prudentially stringent, or cannot take on board other, explicitly non-moral, considerations.⁹ After all, some might hold that Andrea's prudential interest in attending Eastern Private renders her decision to do so morally, not just rationally, justified. Scheffler, I think, has a good point. But there are three responses I wish to offer. First, it seems to me that those norms that seem to maintain sufficient rational justificatory force simply don't count, of themselves, as morally significant. It seems to me that morality cares very little about the *per se* demands of politeness. Furthermore, it seems to care very little about the *per se* prudential reason for Andrea to attend Eastern Private. (Notice that this need not be incompatible with holding that morality cares about Andrea's well-being; but prudence and morality surely treat Andrea's well-being in very different ways. All I mean to suggest is that the *per se* prudential way of treating it lacks moral significance, though her welfare may maintain moral significance. Plausibly, however, any moral significance this particular interest of hers has is surely trumped by the moral pressure to attend LBSU.) Second, recall the goals of the current argument. All I wish to establish is a shift of the argumentative burden. And insofar as it is at least *prima facie* plausible, in the above cases, to say that rational justification need not await moral justification, this is all that I require to shift the burden to the moral ratio-

⁹Scheffler, 58-60. Thanks also to Connie Rosati for pressing this point.

nalist, who is then free (as I discuss in §7) to argue for a vision of the moral point of view that grants significance to demands of protocol or prudence.

But, third, I think it is just wrong to say that for the current argument to go through I must be committed to a particular vision of the moral point of view. Take Sarah's case. Imagine that we consider it possible, even plausible, that her promise, or the loss of happiness, doesn't have substantial enough moral heft to render it the case that Sarah is morally required to violate protocol.¹⁰ Of course, to determine all this, we would have to do a lot of very sophisticated moral theory, and settle a number of very serious moral questions. Though I myself find this proposal implausible, the more important question is this: do we believe that our pronouncement on Sarah's rational justification *must await* the completion of such an inquiry? It seems to me that the answer is certainly: "no". And if this is correct, moral rationalism is under pressure. After all, the moral rationalist will tell us that Sarah's rational justification *must await* the moral justification of conforming to protocol. Only if she conformed to her moral obligations (which seems implausible independently) can we say that she is sufficiently justified. But this, it seems to me, doesn't match our reaction to the case. Whether or not she was rationally justified does not, in this case, await an inquiry into the moral valence of Sarah's conformity to protocol before the Queen (even *if* we ultimately conclude that doing so was morally justified). In this case moral justification is rationally superfluous: Sarah is justified *simply* because doing so is important as a matter of protocol.¹¹

Here's an example that illustrates this final point (culled from the realm of aesthetics):

Fred Astaire: In 1946's *Blue Skies*, an otherwise forgettable Bing Crosby vehicle, Fred Astaire recorded what was to become his most iconic dance performance ("Puttin' on the Ritz"). The product, according to Astaire, of "five weeks of backbreaking physical work", it was intended by Astaire to be his final, and crowning, achievement.¹² It is a truly astounding demonstration

¹⁰For a case in favor of moral demands to conform to etiquette or protocol, see Sarah Buss, "Appearing Respectful: The Moral Significance of Manners" in *Ethics* 109 (1999).

¹¹Of course, this is not to say that moral considerations are unimportant in determining the justification of Sarah's conformity. If, for instance, conforming to protocol was *especially* morally terrible, we may think that doing so is not justified. But not being especially morally terrible and being morally permissible are two very different things.

¹²Astaire intended to retire from film after *Blue Skies*, but returned only two years later with Judy Garland in *Easter Parade* (1948).

of Astaire's considerable talent.¹³

I've left this case intentionally under-described. One could certainly imagine any number of scenarios in which Fred Astaire's performance of "Puttin' on the Ritz" was quite morally reprehensible and that its moral reprehensibility would render this performance rationally unjustified. Perhaps he had to murder someone, or break a rival dancer's ankles, or display an utter disregard for human life. But even if we rule out these possibilities, we are far from determining the moral quality of his performance or of his spending "five weeks of backbreaking physical work" on it. I can imagine any number of scenarios in which, though not morally horrible, Astaire's performance is not compatible with fulfilling his moral obligations. In addition, I think I could imagine any number of scenarios in which Astaire's performance *is* morally justified. But if moral rationalism is true, for me to be confident that Astaire is *rationally* justified in recording this astounding performance, I have to know that the facts of the case fall into those potential scenarios in which his performance is morally justified. But I find this requirement simply implausible. Not to put to fine a point on it, but (so long as I've ruled out the *truly* awful scenarios) I do not believe I have to do any further inquiry into the facts surrounding Astaire's performance to be confident that his performance was rationally justified. *However the moral inquiry turns out*, this performance is rationally justified. And it is so, as far as I can tell, because the performance, of itself, has tremendous value *qua* performance. And that's enough.

To sum up, it would appear that the finer points of moral justification seem at best *superfluous* to a consideration of the rational justification of the actions in question. *Even if* these actions turn out to be morally permitted (which seems implausible, especially in Sarah and Andrea's cases), the fact that they are morally permitted itself seems unnecessary to a full picture of their rational justification. And this is enough to shed substantial doubt on moral rationalism. Moral rationalism, given its acceptance of *Supremacy*, is committed to the claim that any instance of rational justification must

¹³Bosley Crowther, not known for his effusiveness, wrote, of the dance performances in *Blue Skies*, that "[b]est of the lot. . . is Mr. Astaire's electrifying dance to that ancient and honorable folk-song, "Puttin' on the Ritz." Turned out in striped pants and top hat, Mr. A. makes his educated feet talk a persuasive language that is thrilling to conjugate. The number ends with some process-screen trickery in which a dozen or so midget Astaires back up the tapping soloist in a beautiful surge of clickety-clicks. If this film is Mr. A.'s swan song, as he has heartlessly announced it will be, then he has climaxed his many years of hoofing with a properly superlative must-see." (Bosley Crowther, "Blue Skies", in *The New York Times*, 10/17/1946.)

also entail moral justification; moral justification is *never* superfluous in this way. But in the cases we've considered here, Sarah, Andrea, and Fred, are sufficiently rationally justified however the moral inquiry turns out.

Nothing in what I've said so far constitutes a knock-down case against moral rationalism. Indeed, one could imagine any number of defenses a rationalist might mount against the argument I've considered here. But recall that I've set a low bar for this section. I only mean to introduce some reasonable, *prima facie*, doubts about the truth of moral rationalism, which must be allayed by convincing argument. If such arguments there are, moral rationalists have nothing to fear. But in what remains, I hope to conclude that we should be very skeptical that any such argument could be offered.

3. Argument One: Marginalizing Morality

At this point, there are reasonable doubts about the rational supremacy of morality. In particular, many of us may feel queasy at the prospect of moral anti-rationalism, because we generally believe that morality is important in some way that other standpoints are not. Morality, in other words, is different than prudence, etiquette, or the law. It has a rational heft that these other normative systems lack, and hence we cannot simply treat, as moral anti-rationalism does, morality as one set of requirements among others. On this topic, Paul Hurley writes: "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."¹⁴

I think we should indeed shy away from any attempt to shift morality "toward the margins of meaningful inquiry into what we have good reasons to do." Indeed, I am tempted to agree with another moral rationalist, Sarah Stroud, when she asks us to

consider the fact that some of us actually *take* moral requirements to be overriding: we treat them as defeating other claims. If morality is indeed overriding, then there is no difficulty in understanding this practice: such agents are simply responsive to the true weight of practical reasons. But if in fact morality is not overriding, a commitment to honoring its demands seems rationally unmotivated. A person who treats moral requirements

¹⁴Paul Hurley, "Does Consequentialism Make Too Many Demands, or None At All?" in *Ethics* 116 (2006), 705.

as overriding is *not* automatically acting in accordance with the balance of reasons, as she would be if the overridingness thesis were true (provided her conception of moral requirement is correct).¹⁵

Stroud, like Hurley, is insisting that we should not simply treat morality as one normative system among others. To take morality as rationally overriding is itself rationally motivated. If it weren't, morality would be unacceptably downgraded in status, or at least, in the status we think morality should have in our normative lives.

But does any of this establish a case for moral *rationalism*, i.e., *Supremacy*? The answer here is clearly “no”. Moral anti-rationalism can come in many different strengths. A moral anti-rationalist, i.e., someone who denies *Supremacy*, can accept that moral behavior is always rationally motivated, or rationally justified.¹⁶ Someone who treats morality as rationally overriding, on this view, is always behaving as he or she has sufficient reason to behave. This principle needn't require *Supremacy*; it is enough that we accept *Permission*.

Furthermore, unless we accept a *dualism* of practical reason, moral anti-rationalists can accept the claim that morality continues to maintain a privileged relationship to practical rationality in comparison to other normative standpoints. The anti-rationalist can perfectly well say that morally required action, much of the time or even most of the time, is rationally required.¹⁷ All the anti-rationalist need hold is that in at least *one case* immoral action is also rationally justified.

Furthermore, at any time an individual will face many different moral requirements. Right now, I may be morally required to perform some act of

¹⁵Stroud, 176.

¹⁶As I do, see “Weak Anti-Rationalism and the Demands of Morality”.

¹⁷Indeed, this point is reflected in another claim made by Stroud. She writes: “We generally accept moral necessity as sufficient reason for ϕ ing in such cases, as we don't for the deliverances of other evaluative perspectives. . . Consider the following general schema: S is P-ally required to δ (δ ing is P-ally obligatory), but to δ would be Q-ally wrong (δ ing is Q-ally prohibited or impermissible). . . [C]onsider the case in which S refuses to δ because δ ing is Q-ally wrong. When the wrongness in question is *moral* wrongness, our immediate inclination is to say that S is justified overall in refusing, no matter what is put in for P. Indeed, we can stack the deck by stipulating that δ ing is obligatory from several different perspectives at once, without removing the feeling that by appealing to the moral prohibition to S has provided sufficient reason to δ . You won't get this result when you replace Q by a system other than morality.” (Stroud, 177.) Here it would appear that Stroud holds that morality is the sole system whose requirements are sufficient to provide rational justification in all cases. And this, it seems to me, is perfectly compatible with the acceptance of *Permission* and the claim that, at least in many cases, moral behavior will prove rationally required.

beneficence, but if so it is surely the case that I'm also morally required not to go on a murderous rampage, insult the person standing next to me, shout some sexist comment at the top of my lungs, etc. But failure to conform to some of these moral requirements is worse than failure to conform to others. And the anti-rationalist could very well say that the more significant moral requirements generate rational requirements (such as the requirement not to go on a murderous rampage) even though some of the less significant moral requirements (such as the requirement to act beneficently) don't. (This, indeed, may be the upshot of having to rule out the truly awful moral scenarios in, e.g., Fred Astaire's case.) Given all this, the anti-rationalist needn't hold that morality is "shifted" to any margin whatever. Moral considerations remain a primary source of practical obligation.

4. *Argument Two: Conceptual Rationalism*

I can certainly understand if the reader is, by now, rather impatient. After all, it might be that the arguments I have so far offered for and against moral rationalism are much ado about nothing. To treat moral rationalism (or its denial) as the verdict of a substantive inquiry into the practical domain is conceptually confused. Moral rationalism is a conceptual, or *analytic*, truth. Put another way, the moral and practical questions are the same question; *Supremacy* says nothing substantive, but simply expresses important features of the mere concept of a moral requirement.¹⁸ As stated by Michael Smith, "our concept of a moral requirement is the concept of a reason for action; a requirement of rationality or reason."¹⁹ Put more precisely:

Conceptual truth: If agents are morally required to ϕ in circumstances C then there is a requirement of rationality or reason for all agents to ϕ in circumstances C.²⁰

If conceptual rationalism is true, moral rationalism is simply a trivial matter of the conceptual structure of moral requirements. And so this view is worth our time.

Smith argues for conceptual rationalism as follows:

Moral requirements apply to rational agents as such. But it is a conceptual truth that if rational agents are morally required

¹⁸See, for instance, Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 63-91.

¹⁹Smith, 64.

²⁰Smith, 65.

to act in a certain way then we expect them to act in that way. Being rational, as such, must therefore suffice to ground our expectation that rational agents will do what they are morally required to do. But how could this be so? It could be so only if we think of the moral requirements that apply to agents as themselves categorical requirements of rationality or reason. For the only thing we can legitimately expect of rational agents as such is that they do what they are rationally required to do.²¹

The weight of this argument is borne by Smith's claim 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 this way." His argument for this claim runs as follows (I have taken the liberty of picking out the central premises as such):

1. "[A]bsent practical irrationality, agents will do what they judge to be right."
2. "[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."
3. Hence, "[o]ur concept of a moral requirement thus turns out to be the concept of a categorical requirement of rationality after all."²²

The reasoning appears to be this. We expect agents to do what they judge to be right, unless they're irrational. Furthermore, we expect rational agents to judge correctly. If I make a judgment that morality requires ϕ of me, and it instead requires $\neg\phi$ of me, I am irrational to the extent that I have a mistaken belief about what morality requires of me. And if this is the case, then, it would appear that we can and should expect that all rational agents will conform not just to that which they *believe* are moral demands, but also genuine moral demands. We expect rational agents (a) to make true moral judgments (b) to conform to the true moral judgments they make.

Smith's argument is question-begging. The best way to illustrate this is to notice an ambiguity in the term "right" (as used in (1)). (Actually, "right" is ambiguous in two relevant ways here. One is the ambiguity between the "right" of *requirement* and the "right" of *justification*. We occasionally say that ϕ is "right" from the perspective of domain d if ϕ -ing is d -justified. Alternatively, we occasionally say that ϕ -ing is "right" if it is d -required.

²¹Smith, 85.

²²Smith, 86-87.

Given the context of Smith’s argument, however, especially (3), it would appear that he is using the “right” of requirement rather than justification. I’ll follow that usage for the remainder of this section.) If conceptual rationalism is false, it follows that the term “right” can be read in (at least) two different ways. One way is specifically moral: an action is right if and only if it conforms to a moral requirement. Alternatively, one can use “right” in a practical, rather than *per se* moral mode: right action just is action that is rationally obligatory. Now let’s assume that to make a conceptual distinction between these ways of understanding “right” is possible. Insofar as Smith must claim that (1) is a conceptual truth (as he must), he must say that rational agents will conform to that which they judge they are *rationally required* to perform.²³ Otherwise, (1) is absolutely implausible. If I judge that ϕ is required from some perspective, but I do not judge that ϕ -ing is *rationally* required, or required as a matter of practical rationality, it is at best up for grabs whether I will ϕ . That I will ϕ —if I do not judge that I am rationally required to ϕ —is *certainly* not a conceptual truth. And hence to serve Smith’s argument, the “right” in (1) must be read as the “right” of rationality.

But, as must be obvious, for the conclusion of the argument to follow, it must be that Smith intends “right” to be read as the “right” of morality. Otherwise, the argument cannot purport to establish conceptual rationalism. And hence if we can make this distinction, the argument equivocates. But then to avoid an equivocation, Smith must be *assuming* that this distinction cannot be made, i.e., as a matter of concept, the “right” of morality entails the “right” of rationality. If Smith is not assuming that it is a conceptual truth that all morally right action is rationally right, the argument for conceptual rationalism cannot succeed—it equivocates between senses of “right”, given that (1) is plausible only if read as the “right” of rationality. But if Smith is assuming, as a conceptual matter, that moral requirements entail rational requirements, he is assuming the truth of conceptual rationalism in an argument for that very thesis.

Leaving aside the failure of Smith’s argument, however, conceptual rationalism is independently unattractive. It seems wrong to say, e.g., that my analysis of Sarah’s case is conceptually mistaken. Of course, that’s coming from me. But it would seem odd that not just my analysis of Sarah’s case, but also the entire history of the dispute between moral rationalism and anti-rationalism, which is venerable indeed, is based on a simple error of

²³This is suggested by Smith’s discussion of whom to vote for in an upcoming election, Smith, 71-72.

concept. To hold, for instance, that Glaucon,²⁴ Henry Sidgwick,²⁵ Philippa Foot,²⁶ Susan Wolf,²⁷ David Brink,²⁸ Roger Crisp,²⁹ and all the rest³⁰ have been arguing over a thesis that is false simply as a matter of conceptual analysis seems, at best, revisionary. After all, the conceptual boundaries of particular terms seem to be determined, at bottom, by the way we use the concepts in question. The fact that so many thinkers seem to treat the rational authority of moral obligations as up for grabs is at least some reasonable evidence that moral rationalism cannot be true as a matter of concept. Of course, the mere fact that so many philosophers seem to discuss the substantive merits of moral anti-rationalism is compatible with a widespread conceptual error. But this would seem very surprising indeed.

But there are further reasons to doubt conceptual rationalism. In particular, it would seem that conceptual rationalism has a difficult time in light of *Non-moral Authority*. Assuming we accept that some non-moral norms are sources of practical reasons, conceptual rationalism must hold that it is a conceptual matter, a mere matter of the concept of moral obligation, that moral obligations have substantially greater rational force than non-moral obligations (or other considerations). But this seems to be a simple category error. That the practical authority of moral requirements dominates the practical authority of non-moral requirements is a matter that—if true—must be settled by a consideration of the first-order demands of practical rationality. Moral rationalism cannot simply be settled by a proper understanding of the notion of a *moral requirement*, insofar as moral rationalism is explicitly a comparative thesis, i.e., a thesis that compares the relative practical authority of morality and other normative domains.³¹

Of course, one could simply *stipulate* that “moral requirements” will refer to requirements of practical reason. In other words, we might simply reserve the term “moral requirement” for that which we have decisive prac-

²⁴Plato, *The Republic*, book 2.

²⁵Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 7th ed., 1981 [1907]), 496-509.

²⁶Foot, op. cit.

²⁷Wolf, op. cit.

²⁸Brink, “Kantian Rationalism”, op. cit.; see also “Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View” in *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986).

²⁹Roger Crisp, “The Dualism of Practical Reason” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 96 (1996).

³⁰Cf. Marcia Baron, “On Admirable Immorality” in *Ethics* 96 (1986); Catherine Wilson, “On Some Alleged Limits to Moral Endeavor” in *The Journal of Philosophy* 90 (1993).

³¹See David Copp, “The Ring of Gyges: Overridingness and the Unity of Reason” in *Morality in a Natural World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

tical reason to do. And if we do this, conceptual rationalism follows trivially. (Call this “stipulative conceptual rationalism”.) But stipulative conceptual rationalism to me not to advance the debate at issue. It would appear that, in accepting this view, stipulative conceptual rationalists are simply using the label “morality” in a different way than (at least) non-conceptual rationalists and anti-rationalists. The latter group uses it to refer to a substantive system of norms that may or may not be rationally supreme. Conceptual rationalists use it to refer to *whatever one has decisive practical reason to do*.³² But there still remains a substantive question concerning whether the particular, identifiable set of norms most refer to as “morality” is rationally supreme. To arrive at conceptual rationalism *via* this route seems to me both conceptually revisionary and uninteresting.

5. Argument Three: Blameworthiness³³

The fourth argument for *Supremacy* appeals to two claims about the appropriateness of blame. The first is that if x fails to conform to x 's moral requirements, x is the appropriate target of blame or other so-called “reactive attitudes”. The second is that if one performs an act that one has sufficient all-things-considered reason to perform, one is not the appropriate target of blame. If we accept both these principles, however, we appear to be committed to the claim that one can never possess sufficient reason to act immorally, which is just another way to frame *Supremacy*.³⁴

Portmore states this argument carefully. It would do to repeat his formulation here:

- [1] If S is morally required to perform x , then S would be blameworthy for freely and knowledgeably performing $\neg x$.
- [2] S would be blameworthy for freely and knowledgeably ϕ -ing only if S does not have sufficient reason to ϕ .
- [3] So, if S is morally required to perform x , then S does not have sufficient reason to perform $\neg x$.
- [4] If S does not have sufficient reason to perform $\neg x$, then S has

³²Robert Louden offers something like this view, which he calls an “architectonic” conception of morality in Robert Louden, “Can We Be Too Moral?” in *Ethics* 98 (1988).

³³This section of the paper was drastically improved thanks to a helpful round of comments and conversation with Doug Portmore.

³⁴This argument is given most prominently in Douglas Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 43-44. It also appears, however, in John Skorupski, *The Domain of Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 291-301.

decisive reason to perform x .

[5] Therefore, if S is morally required to perform x , then S has decisive reason to perform x —and this is just [*Supremacy*].³⁵

Before I investigate this argument, it is important to note the nature of blameworthiness with which Portmore is working. Portmore writes: “to say that S is *morally blameworthy*...for performing x is to say both that it is appropriate for S to feel guilt about having performed x and that it is appropriate for others to feel indignation—and, perhaps, also resentment—in response to S’s having performed x .”³⁶ For Portmore, “appropriate” is used in the sense of “being apt, fitting, or correct and, thus, in the same sense that fear is the appropriate response to the perception of danger.”

For the purposes of argument, I’ll assume that (2) is correct. Indeed, I find (2) compelling in at least some moods for the following reason: what would rational, practical, or all-things-considered justification of action be worth if it didn’t allow one to avoid blame or shame for the performance of the action in question? If I can say that I have lived as I *ought*, all things considered, to have lived, this seems to me all that is required to justify an avoidance of criticism for the way I live. (I admit that this intuition can be shaken in some other moods; and so I don’t wish to advance this as a positive thesis; I merely adopt it for the purposes of argument.) With this in mind, consider (1). Should we accept the claim that if a person performs a moral wrong (freely and knowingly—for the remainder, I’ll drop this qualifier for the purposes of brevity), that it is “appropriate” for that person to feel guilt, and for us to feel indignation, at the performance of this action? This thought is certainly popular. For instance, Brian McElwee claims that “To say that one has done something morally *wrong* is...to suggest that one would generally merit blame or serious criticism for acting in this way.”³⁷ Despite the popularity of this position, it seems to me very difficult to square with taking moral anti-rationalism as a serious possibility. To see this, consider the suggestion that one has sufficient reason not to conform to one’s moral obligations. Say, for instance, that one is morally required to ϕ , but that nevertheless one has sufficient reason to ψ , instead. If we take seriously this possibility, would we treat it as fitting or appropriate to blame someone for ψ -ing? Would ψ -ing entail that it is appropriate for someone to feel guilt? I think the intuition of most anti-rationalists here

³⁵Portmore, 43-44.

³⁶Portmore, 43.

³⁷Brian McElwee, “The Rights and Wrongs of Consequentialism” in *Philosophical Studies* 151 (2010), 397.

would be “no”. And many anti-rationalists would be tempted to appeal to Portmore’s (2): that blaming someone for something they had sufficient reason to perform is not appropriate. If I morally ought to ϕ , but it’s not the case that I ought to ϕ as a matter of practical reason, it would seem strange to say that I am justifiably blameworthy for doing something I had sufficient practical reason to do, or acting in a way that is an acceptable answer to the question: “how should I live?”.

One might put the dialectic in the following way. There are three propositions that cannot all be accepted:

1. If S is morally required to x , then S would be blameworthy for freely and knowledgeably $\neg x$ -ing.
2. S would be blameworthy for freely and knowledgeably x -ing only if S does not have sufficient reason to x .
3. S has sufficient reason, in some cases, not to conform to moral requirements.

We cannot accept all three of these premises. We’ve agreed to agree on (2). Given this agreement, anti-rationalists will appeal to (2) to deny (1). Rationalists will appeal to (2) to deny (3). Perhaps, as it stands, the dialectic is simply at a stalemate.

Well, not quite. I’ve already offered an argument for (3), i.e., the cases in §2, which seem to demonstrate that—at the very least—moral justification is *sometimes* superfluous to rational justification (and hence in some cases, non-moral norms provide sufficient rational justification even in the face of a contrary moral requirement). Given this, it is worth inquiring what sort of argument there may be for (1). In defense of (1), Portmore says: “[Premise 1] expresses the common assumption that there is a conceptual connection between blameworthiness and wrongdoing.”³⁸ For Portmore, (1) just *is* a conceptual truth, a truth, presumably, of the concept of moral obligation. So, for Portmore’s proposal to go through, it must be a conceptual truth that there is a connection between moral wrongdoing—acting in a morally impermissible way—and its being “appropriate” to feel guilt for having performed the action, appropriate to have one’s ire raised by someone who behaved immorally.³⁹

Once again, for the sake of argument I will assume that there is some sort of conceptual connection, noted by Portmore, between blameworthiness and *wrongdoing*. However, assuming that we reject conceptual rationalism,

³⁸Portmore, 44.

³⁹Skorupski makes the same conceptual claim. See Skorupski, 295.

we can make a distinction between senses of “wrongdoing”. The first is “rational wrongdoing”, i.e., doing something that is an inappropriate answer to the question: “how should I live?” The second is moral wrongdoing, i.e., doing something that is an inappropriate answer to the question: “how does morality command me to live?” Portmore’s claim that there is a “conceptual connection between blameworthiness and wrongdoing” is, quite clearly, neutral between these competing interpretations of wrongdoing.

If this is correct, however, we have (at least) two potential readings of the purported conceptual connection. They are:

Moral Conceptual Connection (MCC): There is a conceptual connection between blameworthiness and immorality.

Rational Conceptual Connection (RCC): There is a conceptual connection between blameworthiness and irrationality.

Quite obviously, for Portmore’s proposal to support (1), we must accept MCC. But this interpretation faces a number of very serious challenges, especially given the availability of RCC as an alternative.

First, MCC seems wrong as a piece of conceptual analysis. Consider, for instance, Michael Slote’s notion of “admirable immorality”.⁴⁰ Slote suggests that we may find that Churchill’s fire-bombing of innocent German civilians morally wrong, but might nevertheless appropriately admire—where to admire entails not to blame—this act of Churchill’s insofar as it is the sort of action one might expect a person hell-bent on the destruction of Nazism to perform. Now, whether this is the *actual* attitude we should take toward Churchill’s immorality is neither here nor there for purposes of this argument. But it is surely enough to say that this attitude is not *conceptually* inappropriate. For what it’s worth, I find this particular bit of immorality blameworthy. But in so doing, it seems incumbent upon me to make reference to substantive considered judgments that justify such blameworthiness; claims like, for instance, that the damage done by Churchill’s fire-bombing caused massive and avoidable civilian casualties, and were certainly not required to prevail over Hitler, that failing to do so would have cost the Allied war effort very little, etc. But the fact that it is incumbent upon me to offer such substantive reasons seems to show that treating this immoral act as admirable is not analytically ruled out.

Furthermore, one might claim, in a Susan Wolf-like fashion, that always conforming to one’s moral obligations is evidence of a deficient character, and

⁴⁰Cf. Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), ch. 4. For trenchant criticism of Slote’s view, see Marcia Baron, “On Admirable Immorality” in *Ethics* 96 (1986).

that it is on occasion praiseworthy to (freely and knowingly) flout them.⁴¹ Perhaps there is, in fact, nothing morally justifiable about developing one's taste in haute cuisine, or in spending countless hours perfecting one's 7-iron approach shot. But it seems implausible to say that we cannot praise doing so as a matter of the *concept* of immorality. There may be many points to disagree with in this analysis. Perhaps we would still think that the foodie is blameworthy for spending so much money on *fois gras*. Perhaps we regard the golfer's perfect approach as morally justified. But the important point here is that in arguing against a Wolf-like view of these individuals, we are obliged to offer substantive accounts of what is or isn't blameworthy, or what is or isn't morally required of the golfer or foodie. It is not enough simply to sweep this view under the rug in the name of conceptual error.

If the previous suggestions are conceptually respectable—even if they are false—then we should reject a conceptual connection between immorality and blameworthiness. But this doesn't mean that we must reject a conceptual connection between blameworthiness and wrongdoing, of the sort that Portmore suggests. We can simply interpret this conceptual connection not as MCC but as RCC. But if we do this, the argument from blameworthiness has no force against moral anti-rationalism, and cannot rebut the reasonable doubts we uncovered in §2. Furthermore, it seems plausible to say that this is, in fact, where the conceptual connection should be drawn: after all, if one acts irrationally, one acts in a way for which there was *not sufficient practical justification*; one acts in a way that, *all things considered*, one ought not to have acted. And unless one straightforwardly begs the question against moral anti-rationalism, this need not hold in all cases of immorality.

Furthermore, note that to accept RCC rather than MCC does not mean that we need give up a very close association between moral wrongdoing and blameworthiness. Indeed, it may very well be true that one of the “conceptual markers” of immorality is the tendency of those who behave immorally to be appropriately blamed. To borrow a Kripkean idea, we may even say that the notion of blameworthiness helps us to “fix the reference” of the concept of immorality; to better understand what it means for a particular action to be immoral (rather than, say, *rude*), we start by wondering whether it is appropriate to blame someone for the performance of that action, etc. But there is a difference between using the concept of blameworthiness to fix the reference of the term “immorality”, about which we will then go on to substantively theorize, and holding that the conceptual *limits* of immorality are set by the limits of blameworthiness. We might, for instance, fix the ref-

⁴¹Wolf, op. cit.

erence of immorality by holding that immorality is the sort of wrongdoing that implies blame and then discover, through substantive inquiry into the best first-order theory of immorality, that not all immorality is blameworthy, just as we might fix the reference of the term “water” by its occurrent and functional properties, but then discover that the best theory of that to which “water” refers allows that water need not possess the occurrent and functional properties that we used to fix the reference of the term in question.⁴² The proper way to determine the conceptual boundaries of the moral domain, it seems to me, is to come to reflective equilibrium concerning our conceptual intuitions, our considered judgments concerning the best first-order theory of the moral domain, our considered judgments concerning the rational status of moral demands, and our considered judgments concerning the appropriateness of blame, shame, and/or the other reactive attitudes. We should not prejudge these conceptual limits until such an equilibrium has emerged. But this does not mean that there doesn’t remain *an* important connection between immorality and blameworthiness—i.e., as an “idea fixer”—even if that connection isn’t the strong conceptual link Portmore seems to accept.

So far, it seems plausible to say that the conceptual connection Portmore believes supports (1) is more plausibly interpreted as RCC rather than MCC; especially insofar as RCC can still allow a very important connection between immorality and blameworthiness. But even if everything I have so far said is false, there remains a serious problem with the argument from blameworthiness. To see it, note that one can interpret a potential conceptual connection between immorality and blameworthiness in stronger and weaker ways. First, the stronger version. One could say that immorality is conceptually blameworthy *independently* of whether one has decisive reasons to conform to one’s rational requirements. In other words, immorality is blameworthy *period*, and the question of morality’s rational force is a further question, to be determined *via* a logically independent inquiry. However, there seem to me to be two problems with this claim. First, it is implausible. Surely immorality’s blameworthiness is not independent of morality’s rational force, or whether immorality can be sufficiently justified. But, second, to accept this version of the conceptual connection is to render a commitment to immorality’s blameworthiness in tension (if not blatantly inconsistent) with (2); it is to say that an inquiry into whether one has sufficient reason to behave immorally has no effect on morality’s blame-

⁴²Cf. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 55.

worthiness. So it would appear that one cannot hold that the conceptual connection between blameworthiness and immorality holds independently of whether moral requirements are rationally decisive.

But, of course, there is a weaker version of this conceptual connection. One could say that there is a conceptual connection between immorality and blameworthiness but in a way that is *not* independent of whether moral requirements are rationally decisive. This argument would presume not only that immorality is always blameworthy, but that one never has sufficient reason to behave immorally (perhaps as a conceptual truth). But to accept this weaker conceptual connection would be, quite obviously, to beg the question in favor of moral rationalism: it would *presume* the truth of moral rationalism in the argument for (1)—i.e., in an appeal to the purported conceptual connection. But one must either accept the weaker or stronger version of this connection; these interpretations are mutually exclusive and exhaustive. If this is correct, it must be that either the relevant conceptual connection is in tension with (2) (under the stronger interpretation), or it is straightforwardly question-begging. Notice that this problem holds even if the “connection” Portmore draws between blameworthiness and immorality is not conceptual. However this connection is drawn, it either depends on their being decisive reason to conform to moral requirements or it does not. If it does not, it would appear that to assert such a connection is simply to deny (2), i.e., that, necessarily, sufficient reason to ϕ entails a lack of blameworthiness in ϕ -ing. If it does, to assert such a connection is to assert, in effect, that morality is rationally decisive. And hence it is to beg the question against moral anti-rationalism. Either way, this conceptual connection renders the argument from blameworthiness of little force against moral anti-rationalism.

6. *Argument Four: Morality as Comprehensive*

So far we have seen an argument that cannot establish moral rationalism (Argument One), and two arguments that—at best—simply pound the table against moral anti-rationalism (Arguments Two and Three). But there is a further argument that can avoid, I think, both problems. Moral rationalism is quite true if the following thesis is correct:

Morality as Comprehensive (MAC): for any S -satisfying system of normative requirements n , if conformity to the requirements of n is rationally justified for x at t , conformity to the requirements of n is morally justified for x at t .

Take again the *prima facie* case for anti-rationalism. This argument notes that our potential uncertainty concerning the moral status of Sarah's conformity to protocol, Fred's dancing, and Andrea's decision to attend Eastern Private, does not shake our confidence in our commitment to the rational justifiability of such actions. It seems that we need *no further inquiry* (leaving out, say, truly morally awful scenarios) to be confident of the rational justification of these actions. But MAC can accept this claim. MAC can hold that we need no further moral inquiry because all *rational justification* entails *moral justification*. Further moral inquiry is superfluous because we have already completed the necessary moral inquiry; Fred Astaire's rational justification simply *entails* his moral justification. And if this is correct, our reasonable doubts are allayed.

Given the diversity of reason-giving systems of normative requirements, defending MAC seems a pretty tall order. But I can think of two ways to defend it. One might first claim that the first-order requirements of all reason-giving non-moral standpoints command conformity to moral requirements. But this seems pretty implausible. As noted before, it seems wrong to say that whether one conforms to the demands of protocol before the Queen is necessarily determined by whether or not one conforms to one's moral obligations. Conforming to one's moral obligations can be, at least some of the time, cheeky.

The obvious alternative is to hold that things like politeness, protocol, prudence, aesthetic value, etc., have *per se* influence in determining what actions are and aren't morally permissible. And if this is correct, any justification for ϕ -ing provided by non-moral norms is simply evidence that ϕ -ing is morally justified. If this is correct, one might accept a form of MAC: conformity to non-moral obligations—or, at least, those non-moral obligations that offer sufficient rational justification—is in all cases *morally permissible*.

Skepticism about this proposal creeps in, however. It seems natural to say that the deontic categories internal to the moral point of view (i.e., moral requirement, moral permissibility, etc.), will necessarily be a function of *moral reasons* in favor of and against ϕ -ing. For instance, Shelly Kagan writes: “since we are concerned with what is required by morality, the relevant reasons—whether decisive or not—must be moral ones.”⁴³ However, it is difficult to see that there could be any moral reason to, say, refrain from speaking to the Queen prior to having been spoken to, or that the *per se* aesthetic reasons telling in favor of Fred Astaire's performance are also *per se* moral reasons. Though there may be some moral value in Fred Astaire's

⁴³Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 66.

performance, it seems that the sufficient justification of his action is a result not of its moral value, but its aesthetic value.

Fortunately, the partisan of MAC needn't say that there is a *per se* moral reason not to speak to the Queen before spoken to, or that all aesthetic value generates *per se* moral reasons. Portmore claims that the moral requirement is not settled *simply* by *moral reasons*. Rather, according to Portmore, some non-moral reasons are morally relevant, at least in the sense that they have the power to render certain actions morally justified. To put this claim more precisely, some non-moral considerations (such as reasons of protocol, reasons of etiquette, reasons of prudence, etc.) have “moral justifying strength”—the power to morally justify the actions they favor.⁴⁴ (This is in contrast to moral reasons, which possess not just moral justifying strength, but also moral requiring strength and perhaps other sorts of moral strength.) When the non-moral reasons are strong enough in comparison to contrary moral reasons, the action so favored will be *morally* justified. Given this, if actions not supported by moral reasons seem rationally justified, this does not entail that immorality is rationally justified. Rather, non-moral reasons such as the reason to conform to protocol have the power to *morally* justify particular actions, even in the face of reasons that have *per se* moral requiring strength, such as the reason to keep one's promises, etc. And hence to conform to these rationally justified actions is not to behave in a morally impermissible manner. This would help to explain the superfluity of any further *moral* inquiry in, say Fred Astaire's case: given the strength of the aesthetic justifying reasons, we needn't settle the finer points of the *moral* reasons involved to know (leaving aside the truly awful scenarios) that his performance is morally justified *given* the weighty non-moral considerations in its favor.

I have argued against the structure of this proposal elsewhere.⁴⁵ Ignoring its structure, however, it seems to me implausible to say that Portmore's proposal, by itself, could yield an adequate defense of moral rationalism. (It should be noted that Portmore does not exploit this feature of his view to defend moral rationalism; his argument has been dealt with in §6.) In particular, we might evaluate MAC at a first-order level. Do reasons of *protocol before the Queen* have any *per se* moral justificatory weight? Offhand, this sounds to me implausible. Though it may be that, e.g., reasons of association, or professional reasons, might have moral justifying strength, it seems hard to believe that the reason to refrain from speaking to the Queen

⁴⁴Portmore, 122.

⁴⁵“The Supererogatory, and How to Accommodate It”, MS.

before one is spoken to, or the aesthetic reasons in favor of Fred Astaire's performance, or—most crucially—the *per se* prudential reasons that tell in favor of Andrea's decision to go to Eastern Private, are reasons that should have any moral significance at all, even if merely justifying.⁴⁶

These are blunt intuitions, however. I admit that one possible way to show that moral rationalism holds is to show that the moral point of view allows an expansive programme of non-moral justification. However, I think this proposal, even if not implausible on its face, comes up against a very serious skeptical challenge. Even if we grant that some rationally justifying systems, such as protocol, maintain moral justifying strength, the moral rationalist must go further. To use MAC as a defense of moral rationalism, the moral rationalist must defend the verdict that the moral point of view is expansive enough to include not just prudence, protocol, etc., as morally justifying, but that *all* normative standpoints that plausibly provide sufficient rational justification also provide sufficient moral justification. *And* it must do this in a way that *does not presuppose that all rational justification proceeds by way of moral justification* (which would, obviously, beg the question in favor of moral rationalism). And though I have no impossibility proof to offer, I simply register skepticism that such a task could be accomplished.

Let me put this point in a slightly different way. As a matter of my own blunt intuition, norms of protocol, aesthetic value, and *per se* prudential norms, have no moral justifying strength. OK, maybe you disagree. But the burden on the moral rationalist, if the rationalist wishes to exploit MAC to rebut the argument of §2, is to show that *all S*-satisfying systems *also* have moral justifying power. But, so far as I know, there are only two ways to do this without begging the question. The first would be to come up with an independent argument that all rational justification proceeds by way of moral justification, or that the set of all rationally justified actions for any agent at any time is (at least) a proper subset of morally justified actions. But if this is the strategy, MAC cannot succeed as an argument for moral rationalism, because it rests on a *prior* assumption (and, indeed, successful argument) that moral rationalism is true.

There is a second way, however, which if successful would actually constitute an independent and non-question-begging case for moral rationalism: roll up one's sleeves, and argue that moral requirements are always rationally

⁴⁶ Again, I here distinguish between *per se* prudential norms and the moral significance a particular person's well-being may have. Prudence and morality surely care about Andrea's well-being. But they care about it in *very* different ways, and the ways in which prudence cares about it seems to me to have no *per se* moral strength.

required *by* presenting a plausible vision of the moral point of view, a plausible vision of the rational point of view, and by showing how the account of the moral point of view so defended allows, in all cases of sufficiently rationally justified action, moral justification. And one must accomplish these tasks *without* cheating, viz., by evaluating substantive theories of the moral point of view in light of morality's rational force, or substantive theories of practical justification in light of their ability or inability to guarantee a coincidence with moral justification. In other words, without the question-begging assumption that moral rationalism is true. As I already said, I can offer no argument here that this strategy is impossible. But there are very good reasons, including, e.g., Sarah and Andrea's cases, to believe that such a proposal will not prove fruitful. But stranger things, I suppose, have happened.

7. Conclusion: Why MAC is the Only Way

I have considered four arguments here. One of which cannot establish moral rationalism (Arguments One) two of which—at best—pound the table in favor of moral rationalism (Arguments Two and Three), and one of which *might* succeed, but faces a very challenging burden of argument, a burden we have good reason to believe will not be adequately discharged.

But what does this show? After all, there could be other arguments. And though I've considered what seem to me the most important, there is nothing that guarantees that there is no convincing argument for moral rationalism on the horizon. With this in mind, however, I wish to conclude this paper by arguing that *any* sensible argument for moral rationalism *must* take the strategy outlined in the conclusion of the last section, and hence faces a very challenging—plausibly, too challenging—burden of argument.

Notice that once we rule out the possibility of conceptual rationalism, it seems that we can make a perfectly respectable distinction between the extent to which an action is morally required and the extent to which an action is rationally required (and, conversely, justified). But once this distinction is on the table, the following appears to me a fair question: what's at stake here? What are moral rationalists and anti-rationalists really disagreeing about? It seems there could be three potential sources of disagreement. They are as follows:

1. The moral (anti-)rationalist's claims about what actions are rationally justified/required are implausible.
2. The moral (anti-)rationalist's method of categorizing ratio-

nally justified/required action is implausible.
3. The moral (anti-)rationalist's claims about what actions are morally justified/required are implausible.

First point: moral rationalists and anti-rationalists needn't disagree about (1). They need not disagree about which actions are proper answers to the question: "how should I live?" This is because, for any *true* claim of the form: " ϕ is rationally justified", which purports to be an instance of rationally justified immoral behavior, moral rationalists have, at their disposal, a "reorientation" strategy. This strategy proceeds by taking whatever action that appears to be an example of rationally justified immorality, and recategorizing that action as an instance of morally justified behavior.

So let's assume that the dispute is not about (1). If so, it would appear that the substantive dispute must come at the level of (2) or (3). But, second point: (2), by itself, is utterly uninteresting. There can be nothing at stake in a dispute *purely* about categorization. Without any substantive traction—that is, without any consideration of the independent plausibility of the first-order results of such distinct methods of categorization—arguments in favor of one method of categorization rather than another must devolve into table-pounding. At most this sort of disagreement would be interesting if, say, there were a dispute about concept; perhaps one might hold that the rationalist or anti-rationalist has inadequately understood the concept of moral or rational obligation, and hence either the rationalist's or anti-rationalist's method of categorization should be rejected. But notice that *ex hypothesi* whether moral rationalism is true or not is not a conceptual matter. And hence, insofar as we are looking for a *substantive* disagreement, we are unlikely to find it in a dispute *purely* about categorization.

Hence if the dispute is simply over (2), the dispute between moral rationalism and anti-rationalism is uninteresting. But it's not—*ex hypothesi*—about (1). Hence, or so it would seem, the dispute must be about (3). And this is easy to see. Once (1) is off the table as a source of disagreement, the only thing that distinguishes moral rationalism from moral anti-rationalism is the moral rationalist's peculiar account of the moral point of view and its demands. And hence whether or not moral rationalism succeeds *must* depend on the independent plausibility of this vision of the moral point of view. Hence *if* (1) is the subject of agreement, the dispute between moral rationalism and anti-rationalism must, at heart, be a dispute about *what morality requires*, and whether morality requires actions we have sufficient reason not to perform. But this just is a defense of *Morality as Comprehensive*: a defense of an account of the moral point of view that would render

all rationally justified action morally justified. But it is worth noting, again, the argumentative uphill battle MAC faces. To defend MAC in a way that supports moral rationalism, one must make a plausible case that all forms of non-moral justification of action must also provide moral justification with the argumentative equivalent of a blindfold and hands bound at the wrists: viz., without the question-begging assumption that all rationally justified action is morally justified. The moral rationalist *must show* that all moral requirements yield rational requirements by offering substantive theories of the moral point of view, arguing that these are plausible *independently of their rational force*, and showing that the requirements of such theories perfectly match the (agreed upon) account of the all-things-considered justification of action.

What if they don't agree about (1)? One might imagine, (a) that the moral rationalist and anti-rationalist agree about (3), but not about (1) or (b) that the moral rationalist and anti-rationalist disagree about both (1) and (3). But if the dispute takes the former shape the same verdicts holds, albeit in a different direction. It would appear that the moral rationalist needn't justify a particular theory of *morality* (because this is the subject of agreement), but must now defend a substantive account of the practical point of view, or the all-things-considered 'ought', that renders it the case that at any point at which there is a moral requirement there is also a rational requirement. And it must do this with a converse handicap: without question-begging treatment of the coincidence between moral and rational justification as a reason to accept this account of the practical point of view. Again, this is just to defend MAC in the reverse order. If they disagree about both (1) and (3) this requires, as must be obvious, a convincing independent case for *both* the moral point of view and rational point of view that would generate the right "link up" between moral and rational requirement. MAC, or so it would appear, is the only way to settle what could possibly be the *substantive* dispute between rationalism and anti-rationalism.

Of course, it is open to the moral rationalist to take up this project and to convince moral anti-rationalists that all rationally justifying norms provide moral justification, i.e., that the moral rationalist's reorientation strategy delivers a plausible account of the moral point of view (and/or rational point of view) without presumption that the moral point of view is rationally supreme. Officially, this is an open project.⁴⁷ But given our

⁴⁷Though I have argued elsewhere that the most plausible first-order theory of morality is one that does not provide the appropriate "link up" with rational requirements. See Dale Dorsey, "Weak Anti-Rationalism and the Demands of Morality" in *Noûs* 46 (2012).

reasonable doubts, and the argumentative burden faced by any argument seeking to rebut them, we are justified in being at least *qualifiedly* pessimistic concerning the prospects of moral rationalism.