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 §§3-7, I consider arguments in favor of moral rationalism in light of this argument; in §8, 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 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 such possibility 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 behave morally—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:

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

[1] Cf. David Brink, "Kantian Rationalism: Authority, Supremacy, Inescapability" in *Ethics and Practical Reason* ed. Cullty and Gaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Permission holds that moral behavior is not necessary for rational justification. Rather, it is simply sufficient: moral behavior 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.

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. A Prima Facie *Case Against Supremacy*

In this section, I offer a set of considerations that are designed to shed some negative light on *Supremacy*. None of these considerations are knockdown. But, I hope, they are enough to establish something of a presumptive case against the rational supremacy of morality, strong enough, at least, to shift the burden to moral rationalists.

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, *Supremacy* requires practical reasons extend beyond the objects of our (properly refined) aims, interests, and desires. But skepticism of such an inflated theory of practical reasons abouts, and many are for this reason skeptical of *Supremacy*.[2] I will assume for the purposes of argument that

[2]Included among those who doubt *Supremacy* for these reasons are Samuel Scheffler (*Human Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 74-76), David Sobel ("The Im-

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 considerations[3]) 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 of[4] 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, it is clear that ϕ-ing is the *polite* thing to do. It seems to me that we would believe 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 seems *themselves* are reason to ϕ, even

potence 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.

[3]For instance, it is unclear that aesthetics, say, issues "requirements" in a recognizable sense. But it might still be the case that one has practical reason to do that which would promote aesthetic value.

[4]When 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.

[5]Another 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, say, the fact that ϕ is 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. For the purposes of this paper, however, nothing will turn on this issue.

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 one has practical reason to conform to non-moral norms, to establish that conformity to moral requirements is rationally supreme it must be the case that in all cases of practical justification for ϕ-ing must entail *moral* justification for ϕ-ing. 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 reflect the 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 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).

As Sarah stands before the Queen, she is faced with a question: does she keep the promise to her friend, or does she conform to the demands of protocol? I find it absurd to suggest that in this case Sarah behaves in

[6] Foot disagrees. See Foot, 309.

[7] Of 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.

a *rationally 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 very well not believe that, should Sarah choose to keep her promise, she will have behaved in a rationally unjustified manner in getting cheeky with the Queen. 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.

Of course, one might respond that the demand of protocol here is in fact morally important. Perhaps the 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.[9] 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

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

[9]For 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).

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.[10]

Consider, now, an example culled from 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.[11] It is a truly astounding demonstration of Astaire's considerable talent.[12]

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 would have 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. And it seems to me that I can imagine quite a number of possibilities in which his performance is not morally permissible: one might imagine that doing so caused him to neglect his family, or the needy, or was motivated by morally bad intentions, or... But even given my *uncertainty* about the moral status of Astaire's performance, I am (obviously ruling out the truly awful scenarios) quite confident that this performance and the work leading to it were *rationally justified*, even if morally impermissible. To put this another way, I do not believe I have to do any further inquiry

[10] Of 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.

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

[12] Bosley 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.)

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.

Now prudence:

> *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. 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.[13] 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. But even if you agree that morality can take into consideration such non-moral factors, the general point remains. In each of the cases I've so far considered, any remaining moral inquiry has very little to do (leaving aside the worst-possible scenarios) with

[13]Scheffler, 58-60. Thanks also to Connie Rosati for pressing this point.

our commitment to rational justification. The finer points of moral justification, in these three cases, 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 beside the point. 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 also entail moral justification; moral justification is *never* superfluous in this way. But in the cases we've considered here, Sarah, Fred, and Andrea, are sufficiently rationally justified however the moral inquiry turns out.

The above cases, and my analysis of them, constitute a *prima facie* argument against moral rationalism. It is (a) plausible to believe that in at least Sarah and Andrea's cases, the behavior in question is immoral though rationally justified and (b) even if it is morally justified, in all three cases moral justification of the behavior in question seems, at best, beside the point. And if that is correct, moral rationalism is put under substantial pressure: it is not the case that moral justification is a necessary condition of rational justification. Of course, the *prima facie* argument against moral rationalism is just that: *prima facie*. Not all of the cases I present will be equally plausible to all readers. But, *in toto*, the cases presented are compelling enough to render a *presumption* in favor of anti-rationalism to which the moral rationalist must cook up a convincing argument in response.

In what remains, I consider five arguments for moral rationalism in light of the cases considered above. I hope to conclude that only one could succeed, and even for this one, the prospects for success are dim, indeed.

3. Argument One: Marginalizing Morality

The presumptive argument may establish a *prima facie* case in favor of moral anti-rationalism. But a contrary judgment is worth noting. In particular, many of us may feel queasy at the prospect of moral anti-rationalism, because we generally feel 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 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 maintains a privileged relationship to practical rationality. 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

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

[15]Stroud, 176.

[16]As I do, see "Weak Anti-Rationalism and the Demands of Morality".

[17]Indeed, this point is reflected in another claim made by Stroud. She writes: "We

one case immoral action is also rationally justified. The anti-rationalist needn't hold that morality is "shifted" to any margin whatever. Morality remains a primary source of practical obligation. But moral anti-rationalism needn't deny the—admittedly implausible—claim that conformity to moral standards is rationally unmotivated.

4. Argument Two: Eudaimonism

One traditional argument for *Supremacy* holds that the first-order requirements of morality and prudence are coextensive. Call this view:

> *Eudaimonism*: For any agent x, ϕ-ing is morally required of x at t if and only if ϕ-ing is prudentially optimal for x at t.

If we make a few not uncontroversial interpretive assumptions, we might read Aristotle as accepting *Eudaimonism*. Aristotle holds, essentially, that conforming to one's moral requirements—living the "active life of virtue"—is an essential element in achieving happiness or *eudaimonia*.[18] Aristotle holds this view in part because he believes that a constitutive element of *eudaimonia* is the active life of virtue. Of course, one needn't accept a *constitutive* connection between moral behavior and the good life to accept *Eudaimonism*. One might instead hold that though there is no constitutive connection between human well-being and moral behavior, i.e., moral behavior does not *of itself* make one better-off; conformity to moral requirements is prudentially optimal simply as a contingent matter of fact.

Eudaimonism supports moral rationalism by alleviating the tension between the demands of morality and self-interest that often give rise to the question "why be moral?" in the first place. As a first-order matter, it just

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generally accept moral necessity as sufficient reason for ϕing 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 (δing is P-ally obligatory), but to δ would be Q-ally wrong (δing is Q-ally prohibited or impermissible)... [C]onsider the case in which S refuses to δ because δing 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 δing 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.

[18] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* bk. 1.

so happens that moral and prudential considerations do not conflict. And if ϕ is both morally required *and* prudentially optimal, we might find it very implausible to say that one is not rationally required to ϕ. Insofar as prudence and morality are among the most practically significant normative requirements, we should expect that any coincidence between moral and prudential requirements yields a rational requirement.

I think there are two problems with the argument from *Eudaimonism*. First, and most obviously, eudaimonism supports moral rationalism only if it is true. But there are well-rehearsed reasons to doubt it. Take, for instance, the following example:

> *Derek*: Derek knows that he has one day to live. It has been Derek's lifelong goal to see the bright lights of Las Vegas, a goal he has so far left unfulfilled. Unfortunately, Derek does not have the money to fly to Las Vegas. His neighbor Gil, however, has just withdrawn thousands of dollars in cash to use as a wedding present for his newly married son. Derek, at t, asks Gil to give him the money. Gil refuses. Derek, exasperated, beats up Gil, takes the money, and flies to Las Vegas.

In this case it seems relatively plausible to believe the following claims. First, it is in Derek's interest to see the bright lights of Las Vegas before he dies and, given this, beating up Gil and taking his money is prudentially optimal for Derek at t. Second, it is morally impermissible of Derek to beat up Gil to take his money at t. In so doing, Derek will have directly physically harmed Gil, in addition, he will have robbed Gil of his chance to contribute to his son's successful new life as a married man, surely an important interest of every loving father. Finally, we can assume that though this is an achievement Derek cherishes, seeing the bright lights of Las Vegas is not as significant for Derek's well-being as remaining unbeaten, and possessing the ability to see his son off in a successful future, is for Gil's well-being. But if we accept these claims, we should accept the further claim that Derek's self-interest is advanced to the greatest extent by engaging in morally prohibited behavior.

One might resist. First, one might try to suggest that Derek's willingness to beat up Gil will contribute to a lack of trust in Derek, or willingness to cooperate with him, which is surely important for advancing his interests. But this response is pretty weak. It does very little to show that beating up Gil is not prudentially optimal for Derek *now*. Given that this is the last day of his life, and given that he is unlikely to lose any opportunities for social

cooperation in his failure to beat up Gil, it appears perfectly plausible to think that his self-interest is advanced most significantly by his Gil-beating.

Second, one might hold that Derek's immoral behavior *in itself*, no matter what its effects on his other goals, is a prudential burden for Derek: he lives a worse life simply given the fact of his immoral behavior. However, this claim is just too strong to be plausible. If we are not to embrace a form of ethical egoism, one must embrace a theory of prudential value that will guarantee that moral behavior is not just an intrinsic benefit, but is always prudentially *optimal*. But what theory of welfare could plausibly support such a thesis? First, the view in question must be "objective": it must hold that ϕ can be good for x even if x takes no pro-attitude toward ϕ. Of course, such views exist. Consider first the *objective list*.[19] The objective list holds that there are certain states of affairs that are good for all individuals, no matter their subjective pro-attitudes. But notice that even if we accept that moral behavior is an element on the objective list, surely it cannot be the case that moral behavior is the *sole* prudential good. But if moral behavior is not the sole prudential good, but rather *a* prudential good, it can be outweighed by the accumulation of additional benefits in other areas. For instance, even if we assume that Derek's moral sin is prudentially bad in a way that is not made up for by his trip to Las Vegas, we might assume that he garners additional objective benefits by going to Las Vegas. Maybe his doing so allows him to say goodbye to a long-lost relative, thus deepening this relationship, or perhaps he is able to fulfill some lifelong goal, or gain some high level of aesthetic appreciation, etc. At some point it becomes more plausible to say that despite any direct prudential burden Derek accrues in beating up Gil, he is *all things considered* benefited in so doing, despite its moral impermissibility, and despite the fact that his immoral behavior is a *pro tanto* prudential burden.

Second, consider the view commonly known as *perfectionism*. Though perfectionism comes in many different forms, its most common form holds that an individual is made better-off by the development and exercise of his or her rational capacities.[20] But to support *Eudaimonism*, the perfectionist must claim that moral behavior, in all cases, develops and exercises one's rational capacities to a greater degree that non-moral behavior. But

[19]Cf. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), app. I; Richard Arneson, "Human Flourishing versus Desire Satisfaction" in *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1999).

[20]See, for instance, Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); David O. Brink, "The Significance of Desire" in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, v. III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

this claim either begs the question in favor of *Supremacy*, or is false. To see this, note that the term "rational capacities" permits of interpretation. A person's rational capacities can either be construed to mean a person's capacity to respond to *normative facts* or *practical reasons*. Alternatively, one's rational capacities can be specified non-normatively, i.e., as a set of particular mental faculties possessed by humans that are engaged when, e.g., we perform math problems rather than watch high-powered action flicks. If the latter, the claim that moral behavior always exercises and develops our rational capacities to a greater extent than non-moral behavior is absurd on its face. One might behave morally, but with no ingenuity; one might be a wretched moral devil, and display keen reasoning at every stage. However, if "rational capacities" is construed normatively, then—leaving aside the claim that this is implausible *qua* theory of welfare[21]—to assume that to behave morally is to exercise and develop one's *normative* capacities is to straightforwardly beg the question in favor of *Supremacy*; it is to say that the normative force of moral commands is always decisive with respect to the normative force of non-moral commands, and one's life improves to the extent that one acts in accordance with these normative facts.

Eudaimonism is false. But even if true, there's a second, and perhaps more obvious, problem on the horizon. Even if we accept *Eudaimonism*, is it plausible to believe that moral rationalism follows? I don't think so. *Eudaimonism* guarantees only a coincidence between moral obligations and prudential obligations. But it does not guarantee a coincidence between our moral obligations and *all rationally justifying non-moral requirements*. Take, for instance, requirements of protocol. That ϕ-ing is both morally required and prudentially required does not guarantee that ϕ-ing is not a violation of standards of protocol. And though it is plausible to say that protocol is, practically speaking, less significant than morality and prudence (in other words, a morally required action ϕ must be *very* rude for protocol to rationally justify ϕ-ing), this does not entail that protocol has no rational weight at all. Indeed, in Sarah's case, it seems we are rationally justified to conform to protocol even in the face of a contrary moral requirement, and perhaps even a contrary prudential requirement, to do so. Similar claims could be made about Fred Astaire. Even if his performance was prudentially sub-optimal and morally prohibited, the extraordinary aesthetic value on display seems enough to justify it, ruling out the morally worst sorts of behavior he may have engaged in. And in this case, we require further rea-

[21] Cf. Daniel Haybron, "Well-Being and Virtue" in *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 2 (2007).

son to believe that morality is decisive with respect to protocol or aesthetic value. *Eudaimonism* does not address this question.

5. Argument Three: 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.[22] 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."[23] 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.[24]

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 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.[25]

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

[23] Smith, 64.

[24] Smith, 65.

[25] Smith, 85.

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."[26]

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. 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

[26] Smith, 86-87.

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.[27] 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 concept. To hold, for instance, that Glaucon,[28] Henry Sidgwick,[29] Philippa

[27]This is suggested by Smith's discussion of whom to vote for in an upcoming election, Smith, 71-72.

[28]Plato, *The Republic*, book 2.

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

Foot,[30] Susan Wolf,[31] David Brink,[32] Roger Crisp,[33] and all the rest[34] 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 are rationally dominant with respect to all other non-moral norms put together. 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 substantive 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.[35]

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 practical reason to do. And if we do this, conceptual rationalism follows trivially. But this seems to me not to advance the debate at issue. It would appear that, in so doing, conceptual rationalists are simply using the label "morality" in a different way than non-conceptual rationalists and anti-rationalists.

[30] Foot, op. cit.

[31] Wolf, op. cit.

[32] Brink, "Kantian Rationalism", op. cit.; see also "Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View" in *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986).

[33] Roger Crisp, "The Dualism of Practical Reason" in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 96 (1996).

[34] Cf. 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).

[35] See David Copp, "The Ring of Gyges: Overridingness and the Unity of Reason" in *Morality in a Natural World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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*.[36] 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.

6. Argument Four: Blameworthiness[37]

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*.[38]

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 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*].[39]

Before I investigate this argument, it is important to note the nature of

[36] Robert 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).

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

[38] This 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.

[39] Portmore, 43-44.

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."[40] 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*, practically, 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."[41] 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 possibility 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 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.

[40] Portmore, 43.

[41] Brian McElwee, "The Rights and Wrongs of Consequentialism" in *Philosophical Studies* 151 (2010), 397.

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 non-moral normative systems are sufficient to rationally justify action even in the face of potential immorality. 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."[42] 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.[43]

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, we can make a distinction between senses of "wrongdoing". The first is "rational wrongdoing"—doing something that is an inappropriate answer to the question: "how should I live?" The second is moral wrongdoing—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:

[42] Portmore, 44.

[43] Skorupski makes the same conceptual claim. See Skorupski, 295.

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".[44] 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 about 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 that it is on occasion praiseworthy to (freely and knowingly) flout them.[45] 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

[44]Cf. 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).

[45]Wolf, op. cit.

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 presumptive argument in the latter view's favor. 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*. And unless one straightforwardly begs the question against moral anti-rationalism, this need not hold of immorality.

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 immoral behavior; to better understand what it means for a particular action to be immoral, 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 reference 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 morality 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.[46] The proper way to determine the conceptual boundaries of the moral domain, it seems to me, is to come to a

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

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 blameworthiness. 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 pur-

ported conceptual connection. But one must either accept the weaker or stronger version of MCC; 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. Either way, this conceptual connection renders the argument from blameworthiness of little force against moral anti-rationalism.

We might assume that there is a conceptual connection between blameworthiness and wrongdoing. But there are two ways to interpret "wrongdoing": as moral wrongdoing or rational wrongdoing. But I think there is reason to prefer RCC to MCC. But even if we reject this proposal, the argument from blameworthiness is independently faulty. The argument for (1) either straightforwardly begs the question (i.e., by treating any conceptual connection between blameworthiness and immorality not independent of of morality's rational supremacy) or is in strong tension with (2) (i.e., by treating the blameworthiness of immorality as independent of morality's rational supremacy). Either way, the argument from blameworthiness should have no force against the *prima facie* argument for anti-rationalism.

7. Argument Five: Morality as Comprehensive

So far we have seen two arguments that cannot establish moral rationalism (Arguments One and Two), and two arguments that—at best—simply pound the table against moral anti-rationalism (Arguments Three and Four). 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* argument for anti-rationalism. This argument proceeded by noting 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, the *prima facie* argument stands rebutted.

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 systems of norms 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, not to say (as per Argument 2), imprudent.

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*.

An immediate source of 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."[47] 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 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 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. Douglas 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.

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

To put this claim more precisely, some non-moral reasons (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.[48] (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 certain 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.

I have argued against the structure of Portmore's proposal elsewhere.[49] 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 in the face of the *prima facie* argument. (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., prudential reasons, or 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 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.[50]

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 plausible on its face, comes up against a very serious skeptical challenge. Even if we grant that some rationally justifying systems,

[48] Portmore, 122.

[49] "The Supererogatory, and How to Accommodate It", MS.

[50] 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.

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 blunt intuition, it seems to me that 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 that moral rationalism is true.

There is a second way, however: roll up one's sleeves, and argue that moral requirements are always rationally required *by* presenting an independently plausible vision of the moral point of view, an independently plausible vision of the rational point of view, and by showing how the requirements of the former "link up" with the requirements of the latter. (This might include showing that, as a substantive matter of the moral point of view, all non-moral rationally justifying reasons provide moral justification.) And one must accomplish these tasks *without* cheating, viz., by evaluating substantive theories of the moral point of view in light of their requirements' rational force, or substantive theories of practical obligations in light of their correspondence 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, that seem to suggest that such a proposal will not prove fruitful. But stranger things, I suppose, have happened.

8. Conclusion: Why MAC is the Only Way

I have considered five arguments here. Two of which cannot establish moral rationalism (Arguments One and Two) two of which—at best—pound the table in favor of moral rationalism (Arguments Three and Four), 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 burden of argument.

To see why I think MAC is the only way forward for the moral rationalist, take, first, the *prima facie* argument. This argument, if it establishes nothing else, certainly establishes that moral rationalism is not true as a matter of concept. It establishes, in other words, that we can make meaningful sense of a distinction between moral requirements on the one had (which Sarah, Fred, and Andrea may well flaut) and rational requirements on the other (to which Sarah, Fred, and Andrea clearly conform). 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 rationally 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 concerning 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, eventually, 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 a 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. Given that the moral rationalist will adopt a reorientation strategy designed to accommodate all rationally justified action as morally justified, whether or not moral rationalism succeeds must *depend* on the success of this reorientation strategy. But insofar as this reorientation strategy just *is* a first-order claim about the moral point of view, 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.

Thus it would appear that the only further way to argue for moral rationalism is to defend *Morality as Comprehensive*. But 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 most plausible account of the all-things-considered justification of action. Notably, this is true even if we do not make

the assumption that the rationalist and anti-rationalist will agree about the overall structure of the rational justification of action. Whatever the status of their debate, if it is to go beyond a table-pounding dispute about categorization, the moral rationalist must show that there is a proper and complete "link up" between the requirements of an independently plausible substantive theory of morality and an independently plausible substantive theory of rational justification *without* the question-begging assumption that moral rationalism is true.

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 without presumption that the moral point of view is rationally supreme. Officially, this is an open project.[51] But given the range of rationally justifying standpoints and their *prima facie* force (on display in the cases offered in §2), we are justified, I think, in being at least *qualifiedly* pessimistic concerning the prospects of moral rationalism.

[51] Though 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).