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Multi-dimensional consequentialism and degrees of rightness

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Abstract In his recent book, *The Dimensions of Consequentialism*, Martin Peterson puts forward a new version of consequentialism that he dubs ‘multi-dimensional consequentialism’. The defining thesis of the new theory is that there are irreducible moral aspects that jointly determine the deontic status of an act. In defending his particular version of multidimensional consequentialism, Peterson advocates the thesis—he calls it DEGREE—that if two or more moral aspects clash, the act under consideration is right to some non-extreme degree. This goes against the orthodoxy according to which—Peterson calls this RESOLUTION—each act is always either entirely right or entirely wrong. The argument against RESOLUTION appeals to the existence of so-called deontic leaps: the idea is that endorsing RESOLUTION would not give each relevant moral aspect its due in the final analysis. Our paper argues that, contrary to Peterson, (1) all moral aspects remain visible in what can properly be called the final analysis of a moral theory that involves RESOLUTION, (2) moral aspects do not have to remain visible in judgements of all-things-considered rightness or wrongness, respectively, (3) introduction of what Peterson calls verdictive reasons does not change the overall picture in favour of DEGREE. We conclude that multi-dimensional consequentialists should accept RESOLUTION rather than DEGREE.

Keywords Moral dimensions · Moral reasons · Moral rightness · Consequentialism · Martin Peterson

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1 Multi-dimensional consequentialism

Consequentialism, at the most general level, is the view that normative properties depend only on consequences. This general approach can be applied at different levels to different normative properties of different kinds of things, but the most prominent example is consequentialism about the *moral rightness* of acts. This version of consequentialism holds that whether an act is morally right depends only on the consequences of that act or of something related to that act, such as the motive behind the act or a general rule requiring acts of the same kind, as judged from an impersonal perspective. Setting now aside the often subtle differences between versions of the doctrine, consequentialists traditionally also hold that rightness is a binary property: an act is either fully right or fully wrong; there is no intermediate stage. In this, they unite with other mainstream moral theories such as Kantian deontology and virtue ethics.

In his new book, *The Dimensions of Consequentialism*, Martin Peterson probes this unshaken assumption of our moral thinking. He does so by putting forward a new version of consequentialism that he dubs ‘multi-dimensional consequentialism’ (MDC).¹ To work out his theory, Peterson rethinks the structure of consequentialism in particular and of the deontic in general, questioning many well-established views and putting forward radical alternatives. He develops a version of MDC that he claims to be superior to other consequentialist theories in significant respects, to wit, to be intuitively more appealing and to avoid many of the influential objections to consequentialism (such as the separateness-of-persons objection by Rawls (1971) and the demandingness objection by Williams (1973)). These supposed advantages and radical departures from established thinking no doubt make interest in MDC warranted, singling out Peterson’s theory as an important target of discussion for anyone with an interest in moral theorizing.

In this paper, we argue against the most salient and most revisionary claim of Peterson’s version of MDC, while we remain silent on some less important assumptions. The best place to start our investigation is Peterson’s account of MDC. He defines consequentialism as the view that “the deontic status of an act depends only on consequences” (1). He dubs this principle C*. The principle is crucially vague though: we need to name the moral aspects—Peterson calls them C* aspects—that can affect the moral rightness or wrongness—the deontic status—of an act. Once these aspects are on the table—Peterson will later name well-being, equality and risk, in particular—we can distinguish MDC from its one-dimensional counterpart. The idea is that the latter holds “that an act’s deontic status can be characterised by a one-place function of some C*-aspect”, whereas the former denies this: on MDC the deontic status of an act “can only be characterised by a function of several C*-aspects.” (3f.)²

¹ From now on, unless otherwise stated, all page references in brackets will be to this book.

² The clause ‘can be characterized’ in the definition of one-dimensional consequentialism is important because it makes the set of one-dimensional theories less restricted. For all it requires is that we find a moral aspect that makes it possible to characterize an act’s deontic status as a function of that one aspect; this does not rule out that another characterization exists that employs several moral aspects.

Peterson's next move is to hold that the moral aspects that determine deontic status must be irreducible. This is in fact *the* defining thesis of MDC and follows from the account given above. Peterson labels the thesis C1. One-dimensional consequentialists, among them all utilitarians, egalitarians, and prioritarists (the three major versions of this brand of consequentialism, according to Peterson), must reject C1; multi-dimensional consequentialists must endorse it.³ However, Peterson goes on to claim that "in order to formulate a normatively plausible multi-dimensional theory, which fits well with our considered intuitions, two further non-definitional claims need to be added. Both these claims raise substantial moral issues and are logically independent of C1" (8).

The first additional claim is C2: "The binary relation 'at least as good consequences as' is not a complete ordering" (8). The idea behind this thesis is that different moral aspects are either incomparable or on a par—"that it is impossible to establish a precise exchange rate between all relevant aspects"⁴ (9). How widespread this phenomenon is, i.e., whether all or most or only some moral aspects come under the scope of C2, is, however, left unclear by Peterson.

The last defining thesis of Peterson's version of MDC is given by C3: "Moral rightness and wrongness are non-binary entities, meaning that moral rightness and wrongness vary in degrees" (9). Peterson's idea is simple: not all acts are either entirely right or wrong; some acts fall between these extremes, being in part right and in part wrong. His intuitive example is a case where you can bring about either a world in which Alice gets 100 units of well-being and Bob gets 50, or a world in which Alice and Bob get 60 units each (2). The following table illustrates the situation:

The first option, Peterson says, is right with respect to well-being as it brings about more well-being than the second. The other option is right with respect to equality. All things considered, no option is entirely right or wrong since none of the aspects trumps the other. To use the language of MDC, here we have two conflicting and arguably incomparable moral aspects, well-being and equality, giving rise to a deontic analysis that conforms to C3.

2 The argument from deontic leaps

Peterson is well aware that even from a consequentialist point of view MDC is a deeply controversial theory. Each of its main building blocks (C1–C3) are hotly contested, but the most radical among them, as again Peterson admits (23), is C3:

³ There is a complication, though, that deserves mention. "A dimension", Peterson explains, "can be conceived of as the conceptual space in which an aspect can be altered." (4) This means, as Peterson subsequently admits, that a consequentialist theory that identifies several moral aspects as affecting the deontic status of an act need not be multi-dimensional because all these aspects might belong to the same dimension. However, for reasons of convenience and because his particular version identifies moral aspects that belong to different dimensions, Peterson keeps the label 'multi-dimensional' throughout the book and we will follow him on this.

⁴ Peterson defines incomparability as the claim that "for some consequences, no pair-wise evaluative comparisons can be made". As for the other notion, his definition is that "two elements are on a par if and only if they are comparable, although it is false that one is at least as good as the other" (9).

the idea that rightness and wrongness come in degrees. In a sense, he has a simple argument to support C3: that it, just like the rest of MDC in his view, tallies “better with our considered moral intuitions than traditional, one-dimensional versions of consequentialism” (14). The example given at the end of the previous section is designed to illustrate this point. Yet, recall our introductory remarks, this is not obviously convincing when contrasted with our general thinking about morality. In any case, this can hardly be enough to support an entire theory and in fact Peterson puts forward a master argument in support of C3: *the argument from deontic leaps*.

To get a clear grasp of Peterson’s argument, let us first introduce the competing positions with regard to the truth or falsity of C3. The question to answer is the following: If two or more irreducible moral aspects clash (because they are incomparable or on a par), is the act under consideration right to some non-extreme degree? That is, assuming that we accept C1 and C2, do we also have to endorse C3? Peterson discusses three possible answers⁵:

In the RESOLUTION view, some available acts are right and all other acts are wrong, because there always exists a single, underlying, all-things-considered right-making feature that holds to the highest degree. In the DILEMMA view, clashes between incompatible aspects entail that all available acts are wrong in the binary sense, because there exists two or more all-things-considered right-making features that hold to the highest degree. My hypothesis is, however, that by rejecting the standard view we make room for a third position, according to which all-things-considered deontic verdicts are, in many cases, only partial (i.e., hold to a limited degree). This position, DEGREE, will be the main focus of this chapter. It can be conceived of as an explication of claim C3 stated in Chapter 1. (26)

In this paper we will not discuss DILEMMA, but will focus on the debate between RESOLUTION and DEGREE. However, Peterson’s definition of RESOLUTION is problematic and this needs to be fixed before we can move on.

The definition uses the clause “a single, underlying, all-things-considered right-making feature that holds to the highest degree”, but this surely cannot be correct. If this was so, RESOLUTION would be committed to comparability and thus deny C2. In fact, from Peterson’s own discussion it is clear that RESOLUTION is primarily the view that conflicts of different moral aspects can always be resolved into a binary all-things-considered moral verdict. For this to happen, there is no need to postulate the existence of a “single, underlying, all-things-considered right-making feature”. All that is needed is to establish the relevant moral aspects for each available alternative act in the given situation, check how acts score with respect to the different aspects and then use the scores across acts to arrive at a binary verdict. In fact, Peterson not only points out that C3 does not follow from C2 by logical implication, he also considers two approaches that endorse C2 while rejecting C3. Here is the one he claims to be better: “An act is morally right if and

⁵ As Peterson points out, these are pair-wise incompatible positions, but are not jointly exhaustive. Just like him, however, we will rest content with these three positions in what follows.

Table 1 Well-being versus equality

	Option 1	Option 2
Alice	100	60
Bob	50	60

only if there is no alternative act that is better vis-à-vis the majority of aspects, and all acts that are not right are wrong” (12). Although Peterson rejects this idea (as well as the other), this is not our concern now. Our point is only that this, or some other similar approach, must be the way to go for advocates of RESOLUTION if they want to also endorse C2 (as Peterson assumes) while denying C3. To sum up, by “RESOLUTION”, we henceforth mean the position that each act is entirely right or entirely wrong and that, in each choice situation, there is at least one entirely right act.

Once the competing positions are in place, we can turn to the argument itself. Recall Well-Being versus Equality, illustrated in Table 1, in which you have to decide about Alice’s and Bob’s well-being. A one-dimensional consequentialist who seeks to maximize well-being is committed to the claim that maximally benefitting Alice is the right choice and distributing well-being equally is the wrong choice; if he/she is an egalitarian, then the conclusion is the reverse. According to the multi-dimensional consequentialist, the first option is right to some degree as it maximizes well-being but wrong to some degree as it produces more inequality. The other option produces more equality but less well-being and is therefore also right to some degree and wrong to some degree. In order to explicate and support the multi-dimensional consequentialist’s verdict, Peterson introduces the argument from deontic leaps (25):

The most important reason for taking the non-binary account of rightness and wrongness seriously is an idea suggested by Nicolas Espinoza: unless we concede that rightness and wrongness are non-binary properties, the multi-dimensional consequentialist will sometimes face *deontic leaps*. A deontic leap occurs if the deontic status assigned to an act does not reflect all relevant moral aspects that obtain in the situation – the ‘leap’ arises as the moral theory incorrectly ignores some moral aspect in its assignment of a deontic status to an act. Consider again the case in which you face a choice between either preserving a particular distribution of wellbeing or increasing the wellbeing only for the best-off individual. No matter how you try to merge these two conflicting aspects into a binary moral verdict, one of the two aspects – equality or increased wellbeing for the individual – will not receive its due. A deontic leap is bound to occur as you assign some binary deontic status to the available act that does not reflect the two moral aspects that obtain in the situation.⁶

⁶ Espinoza and Peterson (2012) also discuss deontic leaps in the medical ethics context, but we take it that what appears in the book is the definitive statement of the argument from deontic leaps. Peterson (2013: 24) actually introduces a case structurally similar to Well-Being versus Equality when putting forward the argument from deontic leaps (this is the case he refers to in the quoted passage). However, for ease of read and because nothing gets lost as a result of this move, we continue focusing on Well-Being versus Equality.

To make his case more convincing, Peterson brings in an analogy with football. In football, he says, if one team beats another team by 3 to 1, “then the goal scored by the defeated team made no difference to the final outcome. The team that scores three goals won the match. The single goal scored by the defeated team was *completely outweighed and neutralised* by the three goals scored by the winning team” (28, our emphasis). But this, Peterson maintains, is not so in ethics where “there is actually a fundamental difference between winning by 3 to 1, and by 4 to 1. In ethics (but not in football) all goals scored by each team have to be fully recognised in the final verdict, so to speak” (28).

The argument from deontic leaps can be summarized in two claims: (1) All moral aspects have to be reflected (“given their due”) in the final analysis (Peterson’s term), but (2) on RESOLUTION this is not possible because according to this doctrine about the deontic one moral aspect is allowed to outweigh, annihilate, neutralise or overshadow (these are the terms Peterson uses at different places to characterize the phenomenon) another moral aspect. As we saw, this does not have to imply a direct comparison of moral aspects (this would violate C2); it is enough if we can use the different moral aspects across alternative acts to arrive at a binary moral verdict. Nonetheless, Peterson will object that the result is that the situation in which two or more moral aspects conflict is

ultimately resolved by selecting the option that satisfies only some of the conflicting aspects. As a consequence, the agent will have committed an unwarranted leap in her assignment of deontic status to the chosen option. Having started with the assessment ‘A is right, *with respect to those and those aspects*’, the agent ends up with ‘A is right’. This is unwarranted since, clearly, A is in fact not fully justified, as some of the aspects that apply in the situation in fact entail that it would have been right to do B rather than A. (30)

On DEGREE, we get a different sort of picture. All moral aspects will be reflected in the final analysis because they will all be taken to contribute to the final calculation of the degree of the rightness (and wrongness) of the given act. Take the three moral aspects Peterson discusses in the book: well-being, equality, and risk. In Peterson’s analysis each aspect, in different ways, will receive its own analysis that results in a non-binary deontic verdict as to the degree of rightness (wrongness) of a given act with respect to the particular moral aspect. Once this is done, an aggregation mechanism is used to arrive at an all-things-considered non-binary moral verdict as to the degree of rightness (wrongness) of a particular act concerning all relevant moral aspects. The emerging view can be illustrated with Fig. 1:

What we label as Level I includes the identification of all the considerations, typically called right-making features, that are channeled into verdicts as to the deontic status of the act with respect to these considerations—well-being, equality, and risk, respectively. The verdicts, *pro tanto* moral judgments, then appear on Level II in a non-binary form (Degree_{aspect}).⁷ Finally, the mentioned aggregation mechanism is

⁷ We prefer the term ‘pro tanto’ to ‘prima facie’ because the latter suggests that the consideration in question is only apparent (as many have pointed out about W. D. Ross’s use of the term, see e.g. Searle 1980 and Kagan 1989: 17n). Although in his discussion of Ross (27–29) he follows Ross in using the term

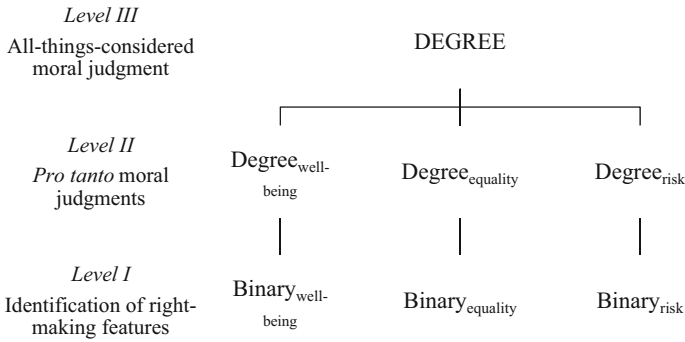


Fig. 1 DEGREE and the structure of deontic judgements

used to factor the different level II judgments into one final, all-things-considered judgment on Level III, once again in a non-binary form (DEGREE). As Peterson admits (106), this last step requires a novel kind of aggregation method, the technical details of which are discussed in an appendix of the book.

There are many questions to ask about DEGREE that we are not going to discuss in detail. Thus, the exact nature of the aggregation mechanism is important and arguably unresolved, partly because it is unclear how aggregation is possible at all in light of C2. In this paper, however, we will critique other aspects of C3 and the argument from deontic leaps. We will argue that, contrary to Peterson:

- (1) All moral aspects remain visible in what can properly be called the final analysis (Peterson does not define this term) of a moral theory that involves RESOLUTION;
- (2) Moral aspects do not have to remain visible in judgements of all-things-considered rightness or wrongness, respectively;
- (3) The introduction of what Peterson calls verdictive reasons does not change the overall picture in favour of DEGREE.

Each point will be taken up in a separate section and the paper will end with a short summary and some concluding remarks concerning the final fate of MDC.

3 The final analysis

As a starting point, notice that proponents of RESOLUTION can, and should, accept the following *pro tanto judgements* with respect to Well-Being versus Equality (Table 1):

Footnote 7 continued

prima facie, we take it that Peterson has no preferred label for these qualified moral judgments and feel at liberty to make a choice ourselves. We also assume that ‘pro tanto’ does not entail comparability.

- Option 1 is right as far as well-being is concerned and wrong as far as equality is concerned.
- Option 2 is wrong as far as well-being is concerned and right as far as equality is concerned.

This is clearly not the point where Peterson's analysis differs from RESOLUTION.⁸ The disagreement occurs when, as a next step, we ask about the account RESOLUTION gives of *all-things-considered judgments*. What all-things-considered judgement are proponents of RESOLUTION committed to in Well-being versus Equality? This depends on the balance of moral aspects across acts, and thus on *pro tanto* rightness or wrongness, respectively. We submit that proponents of RESOLUTION accept these claims:

- If one of the options is, on balance, more important than the other, then the former option is all-things-considered right and the other all-things-considered wrong.
- If neither option is, on balance, more important than the other, then both options are all-things-considered right.

At this point, however, an obvious reply suggests itself, which can, it seems, sink RESOLUTION and which is based on the second building block of MDC—claim C2. For, it seems that Peterson could just object that, given C2, no option is ever more important than its alternative; hence no balancing (or weighing) of moral aspects can take place, so RESOLUTION cannot even get off the ground and C3 must be true.

This objection, however, would puzzle us for three reasons. First of all, according to the second claim we advise RESOLUTIONists to accept, all options are right if neither option is more important than its alternatives because the options are incomparable or on a par. Thus, RESOLUTION would have clear implications (and in this sense “get off the ground”) even if C2 implied that no option is ever more important than its alternative. Although Peterson does not clarify how often moral aspects are incomparable or on a par, in each such case the proponent of RESOLUTION can have recourse to the second claim we advised him/her to accept and maintain the rejection of C3.

Second, if C2 is intended by Peterson to defeat RESOLUTION and rule out binary all-things-considered judgements in the first place, why does he offer the argument from deontic leaps at all? In fact, Peterson clearly says, as we saw, that RESOLUTION, DEGREE, and DILEMMA are the three positions he considers possible to take on the assumption that C1 and C2 are accepted (23). If these claims are false, then the entire chapter in which Peterson argues for C3 using the notion of deontic leaps is redundant and hence all the burden to support C3 falls on his arguments for C2, which focuses only on a small part of the existing literature (126–128, 162–164).⁹

⁸ Although Peterson explicitly endorses this claim (2), there is some ground for hesitation for he also claims, as we saw in the previous section, that Level II judgments (which we take to be *pro tanto* moral judgments) are also non-binary.

⁹ In particular, the so-called ‘small improvement argument’ by Chang (2002) that was designed to support the idea that there is a third *sui generis* value-relation, namely, ‘on a par’. For an overview of the debate, see Hsieh (2008).

Finally, there is no reason to think that C2 rules out binary all-things-considered judgements. One can endorse C2 as well as the whole of the above analysis since, as Peterson himself points out (12) and we explained in detail in the previous section, C2 does not imply C3: it is possible to arrive at binary deontic judgments on the basis of how alternative acts score with respect to the same bundle of moral aspects.

After this detour, let us return to the main line of our discussion. Once the two views of RESOLUTION are on the table (its account of *pro tanto* and all-things-considered moral judgments), an objection to the argument from deontic leaps suggests itself. It has two parts, the first is negative, the second is positive. Our negative claim is that Peterson seems to assume, but does *not* give a reason for thinking, that by “the final analysis” of a moral theory we should just understand the all-things-considered judgements it implies. Our positive claim is that the final analysis offered by a moral theory is instead best understood as the *conjunction* of—at least—the all-things-considered judgements and the *pro tanto* judgements concerning the deontic status of an act (we will elaborate on this point below). If this is so, there is an important sense in which all moral aspects remain visible in the final analysis, even if one endorses RESOLUTION. To illustrate, take again Well-being versus Equality. Proponents of RESOLUTION might hold the following *final analysis* with respect to the case:

- Option 1 is right as far as well-being is concerned and wrong as far as equality is concerned.
- Option 2 is wrong as far as well-being is concerned and right as far as equality is concerned.
- *And*: Either option is all-things-considered right.

As we pointed out, the last claim—either option is all-things-considered right—holds even if the consequences of Options 1 and 2 are incomparable or on a par.¹⁰ There is a further complication, though. One might wonder how we link the claim that both options are all-things-considered right to a plausible account of decision making. For in his chapter about multi-dimensional decision making, Peterson argues that a decision-making procedure analogue to our criterion of rightness (that is: a decision-making procedure according to which, if two objects are incomparable or on a par, the agent is permitted to choose either of them), leads to certain losses because it sanctions non-randomised choices when facing consequences that are not fully comparable (129–138). Cannot an agent who accepts our final analysis be turned into a kind of money pump because he/she is committed to the decision-making procedure criticized by Peterson?

We have a twofold response. Firstly, even if an agent who accepts our final analysis could be turned into a money pump, this wouldn't by itself speak against our proposal. The money-pump argument arguably has its merits in discussions about rational decision making. Here, however, we are talking about moral rightness, not about rationality. This is a crucial difference that Peterson himself often emphasizes. Why should money-pump arguments be relevant when it comes

¹⁰ In fact, as we mentioned above, Peterson himself concedes that an advocate of RESOLUTION could even endorse a more committed analysis, namely: either Option 1 or Option 2 is all-things-considered right and the other is all-things-considered wrong. These verdicts, however, would commit RESOLUTIONists to the rejection of the second claim we suggested to them above.

to assessing moral theories (as opposed to theories about rationality)? It is widely accepted that moral rightness and rationality can come apart: what morality requires might not be the rational thing to do, and vice versa. Applying criteria that are used for the assessment of theories of rationality to moral theories therefore seems to be problematic and in need of justification.

Secondly, the final analysis we suggest does not commit agents to decision-making procedures of the kind criticized by Peterson. It is, rather, compatible with Peterson's preferred decision-making procedure.¹¹ Thus, if Peterson is right that multi-dimensional consequentialists should adopt his preferred decision-making procedure and this procedure prevents you from being exploited as a money pump, then agents who accept our final analysis should adopt Peterson's preferred decision-making procedure and, as a consequence, cannot be turned into money pumps.

Hence, we suggest that *the final analysis* of a moral theory contains, at least, the *pro tanto* as well as the all-things-considered judgements; contrary to Peterson's suggestion that the final analysis is exhausted by all-things-considered judgments. We have seen that our final analysis does not turn you into a money pump. However, why should one accept our rather than Peterson's proposal? Aren't only the all-things-considered judgements of moral theories important at the end of the day, so that Peterson's understanding of "final analysis" is more adequate?

We agree that "the final analysis" should refer to a moral theory's most important judgements. However, we would like to point out that which moral judgements are important depends on what we are looking for:

- (1) If we are looking for *action-guidance* (if we ask, "How ought we to decide?", that is), only all-things-considered judgements are important.
- (2) If we want to *deliberate* about what we ought to do all things considered or if we already know the all-things-considered judgements and are looking for an *explanation* of them, then only the *pro tanto* judgements are important.
- (3) If we are asking for an *exhaustive* description of what is going on in a situation, from a moral point of view, then both all-things-considered and *pro tanto* judgements are important.

It seems most appropriate to call the exhaustive description (3) a moral theory's *final analysis*. For it contains both the action-guiding all-things-considered judgements (1) and the explanatory *pro tanto* judgements (2) and will thus inform us about whatever judgements implied by the moral theory are relevant to us.¹²

¹¹ According to the decision-making procedure Peterson proposes for MDC, it is rational to choose each option with a probability that is directly proportional to its moral force (119). An option's moral force is the sum total of all the products of degree and strength corresponding to each aspect (118). Obviously, then, since the data you feed into Peterson's decision-making procedure do not stem from the all-things-considered but from the pro-tanto level, and since DEGREE and RESOLUTION do not contradict each other on the pro-tanto level, you do not need to accept DEGREE in order to apply Peterson's decision-making procedure; you can apply it on our favoured version of RESOLUTION, too.

¹² It can be argued that an exhaustive description also has to mention other moral facts: evaluative facts, the explanatory relations between *pro tanto* and all-things-considered judgements, etc. But this isn't a problem for us to admit, as we only want to show that the final analysis, contrary to Peterson, does not only include all-things-considered but *at least* also *pro tanto* judgments.

We conclude that Peterson is wrong in claiming that on RESOLUTION certain moral aspects will be lost in the final analysis of moral theories. Proponents of RESOLUTION can have their cake and eat it, too: they can adopt both binary all-things-considered judgements and nonetheless keep all moral aspects visible in their final analysis. The bottom line is that our claim (1) is true.

4 All-things-considered judgments

However, accepting the claim that the final analysis of a moral theory is best understood as an exhaustive account that includes both all-things-considered and *pro tanto* moral judgments does not put an end to critical questioning. For, Peterson could ask: “What about the deontic leaps *within* the all-things-considered judgements: Isn't it worrisome if, say, an option's being wrong in one respect doesn't figure in the judgement that the option is all-things-considered right?” Whether or not we are right about what the final analysis of a moral theory looks like, Peterson can point out, this is the real issue that the argument from deontic leaps is designed to call attention to.

We disagree. First of all, there is no general requirement that each deontic property of an act has to reflect all the other deontic properties of the act. Therefore, it looks sensible to hold that an act's all-things-considered rightness does not have to reflect the act's wrongness as far as a certain aspect is concerned, just like an act's rightness with respect to equality does not have to reflect the act's wrongness with respect to well-being and vice versa. Similarly, an act's being the prudent thing to do does not have to reflect its being immoral. In short, the question is why we should single out the property of an act's being all-things-considered right as somehow special and different from all other moral (as well as non-moral) properties of acts. Appeal to deontic leaps cannot be the answer because this just is the claim that such a special status should be granted. Our question is: why?

One could answer that the relationship between all-things-considered and *pro tanto* rightness is special because the former kind of rightness is uncontroversially based, in some way or other, on the latter, whereas rightness with respect to equality and rightness with respect to well-being are independent from each other, just like an act's being the prudent thing to do is not based on its being immoral. This answer is unconvincing, however, for it is not true in general that if property *P* is based on property *Q*, then *P* has to reflect *Q*; and there is no reason for thinking that *deontic* properties are special in this regard. To illustrate with Peterson's own example, assume that a football team's winning a match is based on its beating the other team by 3:1. As the team's winning the match is a binary property, it does not reflect the team's beating the other team by 3:1.

Another possible answer to our question takes us back to incomparability. At an early point in the book, Peterson says that what he takes to be the best argument for accepting C3, given that one accepts the “multi-dimensional picture” he describes, is “that this principle accurately reflects the insight that the ordering of consequences is incomplete. If consequences determine deontic properties, and there are ‘gaps’ in the ordering of consequences, then these gaps should presumably occur all the way up to

the ultimate deontic level.” (12) Peterson’s idea here seems to be that to argue for C3, one needs *both* incomparability (C2) *and* the notion of deontic leaps: it is the former that creates the ‘gaps’ that, as the latter claims, need to be reflected in the final deontic verdict. This combination of claims would answer our previous question (in section II) why Peterson needs the argument from deontic leaps if he already has C2 in place. And it would also answer our question above by pointing to incomparability as the missing link in granting special status to all-things-considered moral rightness.

We have a three-fold response. First of all, although C2 implies that there are *evaluative* gaps in the assessment of consequences and consequentialist moral theories *can* map these evaluative gaps onto their deontic assessments of actions, we have still not been shown that consequentialist theories *should* map them. In particular, an argument is required to make the move from the evaluative (gaps) to the deontic (degrees). And again, the deontic leap argument cannot be this argument because it states simply that such a move must take place without itself being an argument for it. It is true that Peterson’s discusses and argues for incomparability (although the arguments, as we noted, are relatively meagre, focusing on only a small part of the debate), but only for incomparability as such and not for moving from the evaluative to the deontic. Hence from his arguments it does not follow that any such move must be made.

Second, a question about the legitimacy of focusing solely on all-things-considered moral verdicts still looms large: If, on RESOLUTION, the gaps mentioned by Peterson are represented in the form of *pro tanto* judgments in the final analysis, why is this not enough? Why must these gaps also be reflected in the all-things-considered judgments?

Finally, there is the question whether Peterson is right in his claim that the only way to represent the relevant gaps in all-things-considered judgments is by endorsing DEGREE. It seems to us that Peterson’s point turns on whether he is right that RESOLUTION is committed to a picture on which moral aspects get, to use his terms, outweighed, annihilated, neutralised or overshadowed by other moral aspects. These terms characterize importantly different phenomena. In particular, outweighing and overshadowing contrast with annihilating and neutralising: When aspects conflict, the former phenomenon leave the aspect in place as something that stays around, although outweighed; whereas the latter tells us that the given aspect is not relevant, that it should not be considered at all (cf. Scanlon 1998 and Tanyi 2013). That is, the first type of phenomenon does not imply that a moral aspect is non-existent (irrelevant) just because it lost out in a conflict with another moral aspect(s). A moral aspect is thus reflected in two ways on RESOLUTION (since we can reasonably assume that this approach requires no more than the first phenomenon): It appears in the process that leads to an all-things-considered judgment, namely, weighing, and it does not disappear as irrelevant even if it loses out, but stays around waiting for its call. Add to this the fact that, as we showed, RESOLUTION does not require any direct weighing of moral aspects and certainly no annihilation or neutralisation of aspects, and it becomes questionable if Peterson is right that the gaps created by incomparability are not reflected at all on RESOLUTION. Is anything more theoretically demanding needed in order to reflect the presence of moral aspects?

If there is no good answer to our question, how about offering a simpler argument in favour of non-binary all-things-considered judgments? Here is one. Since we have accepted that *pro tanto* judgments are non-binary and all-things-considered judgments are reached at via some method of aggregation from *pro tanto* judgments, it appears reasonable to hold that all-things-considered judgments are also non-binary. There are two problems with this proposal. One is that, although we haven't questioned this (since there was no need to) at the point when we introduced the idea, it is far from clear why *pro tanto* judgments would be non-binary. What would make these judgements non-binary, given that they are arrived at on the basis of binary judgments about the right-making features of acts? Deontic leaps certainly wouldn't, since here we have no conflicting moral aspects that would have to be reflected in the *pro tanto* judgment. Nor could the present proposal be reapplied since judgments about right-making features are binary. More importantly, Peterson wants to say that all-things-considered judgments are non-binary also in those cases when *pro tanto* judgments from which they are generated are themselves binary—Well-being versus Equality is an example at hand. The crucial point is not that the present proposal would therefore make the scope of DEGREE significantly restricted (although this too is a problem), but that it would contradict the very spirit of Peterson's thinking about why C3 is true (as encapsulated in the argument from deontic leaps): that non-binary judgments are needed to reflect the conflict of moral aspects as they appear in Level II *pro tanto* judgments.

What has been said so far is negative; here is a positive point against the idea that all-things-considered judgments must be non-binary. Since the purpose of all-things-considered judgements suggests that at least one option is entirely all-things-considered right in each choice situation, an option's being wrong in one respect should not figure in all-things-considered rightness in cases when different moral aspects clash. To substantiate: One purpose of (deontic) all things-considered judgments is the provision of *action-guidance*. However, all-things-considered judgements are not action-guiding in a satisfactory way if they do not single out at least one action as *the* thing to do. (Imagine the following conversation: "What should I do?"—"Well, there is nothing it would be entirely right for you to do. To some extent..."—"What?!")¹³

Another purpose of all-things-considered wrongness judgments is *assigning blameworthiness*. Arguably, the performance of wrong acts without excuses makes people blameworthy. However, if there were choice situations with no entirely right acts, then agents would become blameworthy irrespectively of what they did, for every act in such situations would be somewhat wrong and in some such situations there would be no excuses. The possibility of unavoidable blameworthiness, we submit, is not plausible.¹⁴

Two objections have to be considered at this point. To our first claim concerning action-guidingness, Peterson could reply that on his theory the thing to do is the

¹³ Note that the action-guiding function also explains why RESOLUTION is preferable to DILEMMA.

¹⁴ Intuitively, it would be *unfair* if you became blameworthy whatever you did. Morality would seem to be incoherent.

action that is *most right* in the given circumstances. However, first, is this really in line with how we ordinarily see the connections between rightness and obligation? Doesn't morality *demand* only what is *entirely* right? How do demands relate to degrees?

Second, if the thing to do on MDC is the act that is most right in the given situation, it is far from clear that Peterson can indeed disarm the demandingness objection: the charge that given the world as it is, consequentialism requires us to do things that we, intuitively, find excessively demanding—say, to donate a large part of our income to famine relief (Peterson's example). Peterson claims that MDC has the resources to defuse the objection because it can hold that donating is both right and wrong at the same time (47–48).¹⁵ However, if the thing to do is the act with the highest deontic score ('most right'), it is well possible that, given the world as it is, consequentialism will still come out as excessively demanding.¹⁶ In other words, it is not enough if Peterson can show that excessive donation on MDC is not entirely right; he must also show that the ranking of alternative acts is such that excessive donation does not come out on top.

Turn now to the second objection that targets our second point concerning assigning blameworthiness. Peterson could in response point out that if there is no entirely right act in the given situation, then precisely *this* is an excuse. However, this also sounds strange. It would mean that in a given situation where there is no entirely right act, every act that is also to some degree wrong is nonetheless excused *just because* it is not entirely right. This is surely a too easy way to avoid blameworthiness!

We thus conclude that, contrary to what Peterson claims, not every moral aspect has to figure in all-things-considered moral judgments in the way DEGREE requires. Even if this qualifies as a deontic leap, it is not a problematic one. Hence our claim (2) is true.

5 Verdictive reasons

So far, our treatment of the argument from deontic leaps did not take into account the distinction between evidential and verdictive reasons. Peterson thinks that the distinction is important in that it lends significant support to his thesis about deontic

¹⁵ The idea, as Peterson later explains (70), is that those who donate excessively damage their own as well as their loved ones' well-being. Since, according to Peterson, persons' well-being count separately ('persons' is a separate moral aspect that Peterson uses to answer the separateness of persons charge), this influences the calculation of all-things-considered rightness by making excessive donations less right and more wrong.

¹⁶ Peterson could try to get around this problem by holding that the thing to do is not what is most right to do in the given situation but what is sufficiently right to do. Besides that this raises the question of where we draw the line (what is sufficiently right?), we also end up with the mirror of the debate about satisficing consequentialism. Another possible way-out for Peterson would be to adopt agent-relative theories of value—or maybe a person-relative dimension of value. Again, this would leave us with the mirror version of an on-going debate. In general, arguments based on satisficing, agent-relative value, etc., would be disappointing in the present context, for the hope was for MDC to escape the demandingness objection in virtue of multi-dimensionality.

degrees (C3) because it shows how certain moral considerations (evidential reasons) can be disregarded in our final deontic verdicts, whereas others (verdictive reasons) must always remain visible in our deontic analysis. If this was so, the argument from deontic leaps would clearly follow since to say that certain moral considerations must remain visible in the deontic analysis just is to state the argument from deontic leaps. In ending our paper we must therefore bring the distinction and Peterson's use of it under close scrutiny. This requires that we understand what the distinction is about, how it allegedly gives us the argument from deontic leaps, and what its problems are.

The distinction between the two kinds of reasons comes from Foot (1978: 182). Peterson quotes Foot in introducing the distinction (29): "That a promise is being broken, or a man killed or injured, is an evidential consideration; that something immoral is being done is a verdictive consideration." He then reformulates the argument from deontic leaps using the distinction (29):

Now the deontic leap occurs in the transition from evidential to verdictive considerations. Even though, initially, the agent correctly acknowledges all relevant considerations while deliberating, some of which are verdictive and some of which were merely evidential, the agent's all-things-considered conclusion will only respect some of these verdictive considerations. From a moral point of view, this seems too heavy-handed. If you promise something and then break the promise, it seems that the verdictive consideration that you actually made a promise should – if we take traditional non-consequentialist intuitions about promises seriously – remain visible in the final analysis.

The first thing to observe is that in the quote Peterson falsely interprets the distinction; hence, as it stands, the distinction cannot give us the argument from deontic leaps. 'That you actually made a promise' is not a verdictive reason, but an evidential one: it is therefore not a consideration that, by Peterson's own lights, should be visible in the final analysis. A verdictive reason, as the quote from Foot makes clear, would be a consideration such as 'that your breaking the promise was immoral'.

However, this understanding of a verdictive reason would again not give Peterson the argument from deontic leaps since this is clearly an all-things-considered claim, one that should be what reflects verdictive reasons and not be reflected itself—as a verdictive reason would have to for the argument from deontic leaps to go through. This is already clear in Foot's original treatment since she talks about breaking a promise being 'immoral' without any qualifiers, whereas it is certain that the kind of verdictive reason Peterson needs is one that corresponds to qualified—we called them: *pro tanto*—moral verdicts, where the qualification comes from the relevant moral aspect. Stratton-Lake (1997: 753) whom Peterson also quotes in support of the distinction makes this clear (this comes from the same passage that Peterson also quotes at 29)¹⁷:

¹⁷ There is an underlying strand in Peterson's discussion of verdictive reasons in which Stratton-Lake's article also appears that we do not discuss in this paper and to which the quote Peterson uses refers. It concerns W. D. Ross's distinction between *prima facie* duties and duties proper. Although it is an interesting question how Ross's theory relates to Peterson's and whether Peterson's treatment of Ross is correct, dealing with these questions would bring unnecessary complications into this paper.

A verdictive moral consideration is the conclusion of a piece of practical reasoning about the deontological status of some act. It is an overall verdict about whether some act is morally right, wrong or permissible. Evidential considerations, on the other hand, are those which support, but do not constitute overall moral verdicts.

To sum up, neither underlying right-making features such as ‘that you actually made a promise’, nor overall moral verdicts such as ‘that breaking a promise is immoral’ can be the verdictive reasons that would give Peterson the argument from deontic leaps. The only interpretation of verdictive reasons that can support the argument is one that claims that verdictive reasons correspond to *pro tanto* moral claims, i.e., claims that are qualified according to a particular moral aspect. At certain points Peterson is clear about this. Thus, he says (18, same point repeated at 30):

I argue that clashes between different moral aspects give rise to clashes between conflicting verdictive reasons...Each aspect gives the agent a verdictive reason to act in a certain way and the key question is, thus, whether such conflicting verdictive reasons can always be resolved into a single all-things-considered reason, such that all alternative acts are either entirely right or entirely wrong, or whether there are cases in which acts come out as neither entirely right nor entirely wrong.

That is, recall our schematic representation of DEGREE, evidential reasons are the right-making features that figure in Level I judgments; verdictive reasons of the kind Peterson needs are considerations that figure in Level II (*pro tanto*) judgments; while verdictive reasons of the kind Foot and Stratton-Lake have in mind are those that figure in Level III (all-things-considered) judgments. The conflict of evidential reasons, under a given moral dimension, decides what verdict an act deserves with respect to the given dimension; then the conflict of verdictive reasons, following the argument from deontic leaps, decides about the overall deontic status of an act, i.e., about its degree of rightness/wrongness; finally, this overall deontic verdict gives rise to an overall verdictive reason—whether we are morally required, prohibited, permitted etc. to carry out the act in question—that can conflict with non-moral reasons, should the situation arise. The result is the following modified schematic representation of DEGREE, again using the three moral aspects—well-being, equality, and risk—that Peterson discusses in the book (Fig. 2):

An advantage of this new presentation of DEGREE is that, piecing it together with the schema we provided in Sect. 2 (Fig. 1: DEGREE and the structure of the deontic), we can learn more about the overall structure of MDC. In particular, the aggregation of Level II judgments (verdictive reasons) into Level III judgment becomes somewhat clearer. Peterson gives the following clue: (30):

The fact that an act scores low with respect to a moral aspect is a verdictive reason for not performing that act. If the act on the other hand scores high, then that is a verdictive reason for performing it. Sometimes two or more aspects give rise to a single verdictive reason for performing or not performing an act, but sometimes each aspect produces separate verdictive reasons.

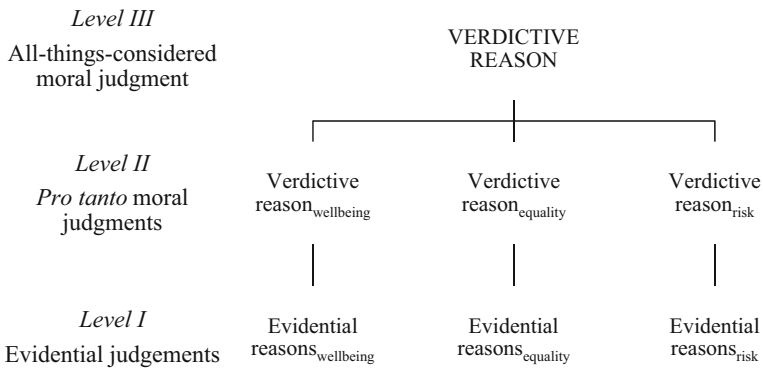


Fig. 2 DEGREE and the structure of moral reasons

That is, assuming that we have established the relevant deontic scores on Level II, i.e., the degrees of rightness (wrongness) the act has with respect to the different moral aspects, we can determine, in the way Peterson says in the quote, the presence or absence of verdictive reasons generated by these aspects. And once we have these reasons in place, we can follow Peterson’s further instructions as to how the conflicting verdictive reasons give us the final deontic status of an act (33).¹⁸

There can be no doubt that the appeal to verdictive reasons, in the way specified above, adds a further layer to Peterson’s already complex theory. And it is indeed a further layer, as nothing in what Peterson says about moral aspects, incomparability and irreducibility requires or implies the need for verdictive reasons (hence our decision to give this topic a separate treatment), especially considering that not everyone is keen on introducing reasons into moral theory. Be that as it may, the real question for us is whether the introduction of verdictive reasons helps Peterson to support the argument from deontic leaps.

We don’t think so. To begin with, our points in the previous two sections retain their force. If we are right that the final analysis of a moral theory involves also the *pro tanto* judgments (Sect. 3), then of course it also involves the verdictive reasons these judgments are grounded in. Next, the introduction of verdictive reasons will make no difference to our point that, given the two main purposes of all-things-considered moral judgments, degrees of rightness and wrongness are not admissible on that overall level of judgment (Sect. 4). Finally, there is the critical question we raised and have attempted to answer concerning the special status of all-things-considered moral verdicts and the properties they reflect (Sect. 4): why do they have

¹⁸ Peterson discusses four basic cases: when an act is entirely right (there is a verdictive reason in favour of and no verdictive reason against the act), when it is neutral (there is no verdictive reason either for or against the act), entirely wrong (there is verdictive reason against the act, and no verdictive reason for it), and to some non-extreme degree right (there is a verdictive reason both in favour and against the act). Of course, several gaps still need to be filled in. In particular, the exact calculation of degrees still requires a technically well worked out aggregation mechanism.

to reflect deontic properties of acts when no other, moral or non-moral, properties of acts have to do the same? This question now reappears with renewed force: what is so special about verdictive reasons that would require them to be reflected, in the way Peterson proposes, in final all-things-considered moral judgments?

In fact, the force of this question is not simply renewed but stronger. For it is not obvious that verdictive reasons exist. Recall that both Foot and Stratton-Lake think in terms of two kinds of reasons: evidential reasons that are provided by what the given theory takes to be the right-making features of acts and verdictive reasons that are, however, understood as final, all-things-considered moral considerations—that is, not the sort of considerations that Peterson needs in order to get his argument off the ground. At this point, though, Peterson could have an answer that is analogous to the one we gave on his behalf in the previous section: a combined appeal to incomparability and deontic leaps. There are different moral aspects, he could say, and they are incomparable, creating ‘gaps’ in the ordering of consequences. Verdictive reasons are provided by these aspects (this is something, recall the quote above, he does in fact say) and the need to reflect the gaps in the ordering is what gives us the argument from deontic leaps. We have taken issue with this sort of answer in the previous section and what we say there also applies here (as far as we can tell).¹⁹ But now there is a further challenge.

The challenge is simple: are there reasons which are not *evidential*? Jonathan Dancy (2004: 16) clearly answers ‘no’:

The point that verdictive judgments do not contribute to the situations on which they pass judgment is only one application of the more general truth that thin concepts cannot be used to add to the store of reasons. That an action is good, or right, is no reason to do it. It is the features that make the action good or right that are the reasons for doing it, and to say that it is good or right is merely to express judgment about the way in which other considerations go to determine how we should act.

Now, of course, we do not have to accept what Dancy says just because he says it. One opinion, however well-known it is, cannot decide the debate. However, the point is that there *is* a debate: Dancy, for instance, spends an entire chapter on arguing for his thesis. This, in the minimum, means that, whether or not Dancy’s thesis appears sensible to one (and to us it does so appear), the only way to support the argument from deontic leaps that in its present interpretation crucially requires the existence of verdictive reasons, is by taking issue with Dancy’s (and others’)

¹⁹ Of the three responses we give there, the last might be less applicable insofar as Peterson repeatedly denies that the *weight* of verdictive reasons would be what determines the degree to which an act is right; it is instead the *content* of these reasons that does so (37–39). This claim is then supported by examples that should trigger intuitions in favour of Peterson’s thesis (37, 93, 117). We are not so sure that the examples indeed work in Peterson’s favour but, in absence of space, we let this go. What instead we would like to point out is that, as we noted in our original response, it is not clear that RESOLUTION would have to be committed to any direct weighing of verdictive reasons (since it accepts C2 that rules out any such weighing).

thesis. However, Peterson does no such thing and this leaves his argument from deontic leaps without proper foundations.²⁰

Therefore, we conclude that our claim (3) stands: the introduction of verdictive reasons does not, as it stands, tilt the balance in favour of DEGREE.

6 Concluding remarks

We have argued for three points in this paper: (1) all moral aspects remain visible in what can properly be called the final analysis of a moral theory that involves RESOLUTION, (2) moral aspects do not have to remain visible in judgements of all-things-considered rightness or wrongness, respectively, (3) the introduction of what Peterson calls verdictive reasons does not change the overall picture in favour of DEGREE. Since we have moreover seen, in Sect. 4, that the purposes of all-things-considered judgements—the provision of action-guidance and the attribution (or expression) of blameworthiness—suggest that at least one option is entirely all-things-considered right in each choice situation, we have reason to conclude that multi-dimensional consequentialists should accept RESOLUTION rather than DEGREE.

Despite our criticisms, we find Peterson's theory a fascinating new take on an old view. In fact, even if we have managed to establish our three points, we have not questioned two of the three building blocks of MDC: we have accepted that there are irreducible moral aspects and that at least some of these aspects are incomparable or on a par. Given that the first claim of irreducibility is the one that, according to Peterson, makes consequentialist theory qualify as multi-dimensional, this means that we have not refuted MDC *per se*. All we did was to question the particular version of MDC that Peterson advocates.

This doesn't mean, though, that we find the theory obviously true. In particular, we have the nagging worry that *anything* can be built into MDC: if there is an alleged problem with consequentialism, be that concerning equality, rights, duties, virtues, or risk, Peterson can simply point out that this is a separate moral dimension, or a separate aspect of a dimension, and the challenge these ideas pose to consequentialism is over. Still, one cannot but wonder: is this really so easy? Take Peterson's discussion of the legitimacy of what is normally called, following Scheffler (1994), agent-centred prerogatives. Peterson simply says that this is a legitimate device, because 'persons' is a separate moral dimension in his theory (69–70). Yet, one wonders if he can really get this result so cheap: over the past decades several philosophers have struggled to find a rationale for such prerogatives within consequentialism (cf. Kagan 1989) and now Peterson brings them in with one simple move. Could this be so easy?

²⁰ In fact, the situation is more peculiar since Peterson cites Dancy in *support* of the distinction between evidential and verdictive reasons (29, fn. 10) and hence in support of the argument from deontic leaps. This, as the quote in the text shows, is clearly a mistake.

To be fair, at one point Peterson does give us his criterion for including a moral aspect in MDC (which is pretty much what our worry boils down to).²¹ He says that it should directly influence an act's deontic status in the sense that "the deontic status of an act varies if we hold constant everything but the putative aspect in question" (15). But this definition appears to be question-begging, since the dispute among moral theories is *exactly* what influences this deontic status. As a result, this criterion cannot come from within moral theories, since then every one of them will be self-justifying and hence uninteresting.²² It must come from outside these theories, but what would that outside source be? We suppose that it would have to be intuition. But surely, one thing we know about common-sense is that it is unclear and often inconsistent about questions of this sort. In any case, is Peterson suggesting that intuitions singling out widely different features of our moral life can be pulled into one moral theory just by one master stroke? Before we embrace MDC, even if without C3, we would like to hear a convincing answer to this question.²³

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²¹ This is *not* the same problem as the alleged vacuity of the consequentializing project that Peterson spends a separate chapter on justifying (Chapter 8). The vacuity objection says that if consequentialism builds everything into itself, it will no longer be making any practical recommendations (since everything will be fine with it). What we are saying now is that *even if* there is no problem with the project of consequentializing, there is still the question how this accommodation is to be carried out on MDC without encountering the charge that its moves are *ad hoc*.

²² There is a clear (and intended) parallel here with Murphy's (2000) criticism of Scheffler's (1994) attempt to build prerogatives into consequentialism.

²³ An appeal to reflective equilibrium could offer the right way forward but this is also a long and complicated way that cannot be got for free. To compare: the most famous example of reflective equilibrium is that of Rawls, but, in addition to considered judgments ('intuitions'), he brings in several levels of background theories and other aspects of our moral thought (see Daniels 1996 for an excellent account of the Rawlsian method). Not even traces of this idea could, however, be found in Peterson's book.

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