This paper is forthcoming in Ethical Theory and Moral Practice. This is a draft copy – please cite the published version where possible.

The Division of Normativity and a Defence of Demanding Moral Theories

# Abstract

Morality, according to some theories, demands a lot of us. One way to defend such demanding moral theories is through an appeal to the division of normativity; on this picture, morality is only one of the normative domains that guides us, so it should be expected that we often fail to follow that guidance. This paper defends the division of normativity as a response to demandingness objections against an alternative: moral rationalism. It does this by addressing and refuting three arguments: the argument from blameworthiness, the argument from agency, and the argument from authority. In turn, I show that none of these arguments work as responses to the division of normativity – if normativity generally is divided, so too must be blameworthiness, agency, and authority.

# Introduction

Morality, according to some theories, demands a lot of us. Not just to live good lives for ourselves and our loved ones, and not just to blend in with the standards of our society. It requires us to rally against injustices, to speak up against our neighbours when they’re wrong, to show compassion in difficult circumstances, to work tirelessly to help others, and to give up a lot of the luxuries we might otherwise enjoy. According to such theories, most of us, if not all of us, will fail to meet many of our moral obligations. There is a mismatch between what these theories obligate people to do and what those people actually do, what people ought to be like and what they actually are like, and what they actually should do and what they judge that they should do, morally speaking.

For some, this mismatch between the way we are and our moral codes is enough to reconsider the moral theories themselves.[[1]](#footnote-1) If moral theories really demand such high standards that nobody in practice meets them, then that seems to jar with some common intuitions. But this paper focuses on a particular defence of demanding moral theories. According to this defence, it is *expected* that we should fall short of the demands of morality. This is because morality, on this picture, is only one of many normative domains that guide us. As well as moral reasons (and obligations, requirements, permissions, etc), for example, we have prudential reasons, legal reasons, reasons of etiquette. Some people will have religious reasons, some will have reasons that come from loving relationships, some will have reasons to pursue knowledge, or cultivate their talents, etc. Although on many occasions there’ll be overlap between these various domains, the basic idea is to show that although morality may ask much of us, we are not always *irrational* to fail to meet those high standards. The mismatch between moral requirements and reality, then, is explained.

To respond to demandingness objections in this way might be appealing, but one of the main explanations for its unpopularity is its incompatibility with ‘moral rationalism’. That is, the theory that “agents can be morally required to do only what they have decisive reason to do, all things considered”.[[2]](#footnote-2) The division of normativity cannot alleviate moral over-demandingness worries if moral obligations will only ever obligate us to do what we have decisive reason to do overall. That would mean that our obligations cannot be separated from our rationality – that we cannot use the division to explain why we’re still, often, rational to fail to meet those obligations.

This paper defends the division of normativity as a response to demandingness objections. It does so first by explaining the division of normativity in more detail in S1. In S2 it marks out three related arguments for moral rationalism: the argument from blameworthiness, the argument from agency, and the argument from authority. In turn, I show that none of these arguments work as responses to this defence of moral demandingness – if normativity generally is divided, so too can be blameworthiness, agency, and authority.

# Moral Demandingness and the Division of Normativity

It’s not strange that moral theories require some of us to do more good than we are actually doing. After all, not all of us are good people, and many of the rest of us clearly still have room to do better! But some moral theories suggest that, morally speaking, we are doing *far* less than we ought to. Maximising consequentialism is one of these theories.[[3]](#footnote-3) But at the risk of repeating platitudes that have come in a number of papers before this, moral over-demandingness objections are by no means restricted to forms of consequentialism – many theories will be vulnerable to the objection in some form.[[4]](#footnote-4) We could address this mismatch by trying to change ourselves, or by adjusting our moral theories. Some try to alleviate the concerns by adjusting the type of normativity that the theory concerns – such as by carving up permissibility, obligation, reasons etc.[[5]](#footnote-5) But this paper is about one response in particular – the division of normativity.

This response has its prominent supporters.[[6]](#footnote-6) Wolf, for example, describes what might be seen as a form of demandingness objection in her paper ‘Moral Saints’, where she argues that any person who was maximally good would not only be very unlike the rest of us, but they would actually be a very unappealing character, because of the degree to which they would have to downgrade their own values and projects in order to prioritise moral concerns. But Wolf doesn’t think this means we should change our moral theories. She says,

Despite my claim that all-consuming moral saintliness is not a particularly healthy and desirable ideal, it seems perverse to insist that, were moral saints to exist, they would not, in their way, be remarkably noble and admirable figures. Despite my conviction that it is as rational and as good for a person to take Katherine Hepburn or Jane Austen as her role model as Mother Theresa, it would be absurd to deny that Mother Theresa is a morally better person.[[7]](#footnote-7)

A moral saint might be unappealing, but that doesn’t mean that we’re wrong about what morality is. We’re right to have high standards in morality – it’s just that morality isn’t the only thing that we value, and a perfectly moral life isn’t the only kind of life we think is worth living. She goes on:

A moral theory that does not contain the seeds of an all-consuming ideal of moral sainthood thus seems to place false and unnatural limits on our opportunity to do moral good and our potential to deserve moral praise. Yet the main thrust of the arguments of this paper has been leading to the conclusion that, when such ideals are present, they are not ideals to which it is particularly reasonable or healthy or desirable for human beings to aspire.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Our normative lives are more complicated than just aims, obligations, and reasons that are moral. To lead good lives in a wider, non-moral sense, we need to be responsive to reasons in non-moral domains as well.

Singer, an advocate of a particularly demanding form of consequentialism, takes a similar approach. He describes an agent called Helen, who cares about morality but who also has other interests. We can suppose she has partial friendships, a fulfilling job, and a passion for hiking. Singer says,

Helen accepts that, given the needs of the poor, she is morally justified in keeping for herself only what she requires to meet her basic needs. She also thinks it’s important to do what is right, but she really wants to go hiking amidst spectacular mountain scenery, which involves spending money on travel, accommodation, and hiking equipment. She doesn’t think that her desire to go hiking provides a moral justification for spending this money, but she also doesn’t think that it is irrational for her to spend it.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Even though Singer’s moral theory *morally* demands a lot from Helen – to give up on hiking and dedicate her time and her resources to others as much as she’d be able to do without ending up in a worse position than those she’s trying to help – he agrees that her other non-moral interests would often mean that the rational thing to do would be to ignore some of morality’s demands.

According to both Wolf and Singer, then, moral concerns are only one part of a larger normative picture that aims to explain what we ought to do. It may be a very important normative domain, but it’s not one that’s so important that it eclipses all others.

To help understand this picture, let’s think of some (mostly arbitrary) examples of what some normative domains might be.

The Moral Domain: the domain which prescribes what to do based on morality

The Prudential Domain: the domain which prescribes what to do based on what would be prudent for the agent

The Hiking Domain: the domain which prescribes what to do based on the pursuit of hiking

The Legal Domain: the domain which prescribes what to do based on the laws of the governing state

The Friendship Domain: the domain which prescribes what to do based on friendship

Each of these domains will prescribe their own reasons to the agents who come under their banner. The moral domain might require a person to show compassion, to fight against injustice, to give up many of their luxuries. The hiking domain will require investment in some good equipment and enough free time to visit some good nature spots – as the prudential domain might as well, if the agent in question would benefit from it, etc.

The vagueness of the way these domains are described is so that they are neutral on a number of other topics. For example, carving out normativity this way is neutral with regards to whether normativity is objective or subjective; the normativity might come from the values themselves to the extent that they exist or it might come from the agent’s own relationship with that value (such as their attitude or desire towards it). Similarly, it’s neutral on how best to respond to each of those values – whether the correct response to the domain is to maximise it or to ‘honour’ it.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Some more clarification is in order. Firstly, as in the examples of hiking and prudence above, these domains will often overlap, and the way I’ve carved them out is arbitrary and could be adjusted. For another example, some of the ‘friendship’ obligations we have will also be prudentially important to us, and some may be moral obligations as well. There’s also no strong reason why the above domains are carved out in terms of the general domains of friendship and etiquette rather than specific friendships or specific kinds of etiquette. On another account, it could be that there are only a limited number of normative domains and that ‘hiking’ isn’t one of them, but rather just a smaller number, like that of morality, relationships, prudence, and aesthetics. The list is just there to give examples of what kinds of normativity there might be, rather than to strictly carve out any metaphysical joints. Similar, perhaps, to dividing a colour wheel up into items such as “red, orange, burnt orange, burgundy, dark blue…”. What the joints would actually look like would depend on what further accounts turn out to be correct about normativity.

Secondly, and following from the above clarifications, these different normative domains won’t be equal in normative strength. Again, their strength will depend on further information about the nature of the domains. A subjectivist about normativity might take normative strength to be connected to the strength of the agent’s most deeply held desires, or an objectivist about normativity might argue that their strength comes from some objective facts about the value or importance of that domain. A domain like morality might be particularly strong on either of these pictures, if there are other reasons why it is more valuable (or that we assign it a lot of importance ourselves).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Given that this account remains neutral on so much, what’s left of it that makes it substantial? Still enough. That the different normative domains can be carved up in some way shouldn’t be too controversial – it is a plausible story if that you think several things are valuable, that we have complex relationships with different values as well as moral ones, or that there are different sets of rules or norms that prescribe action. And, importantly, the account still says that moral normativity is not the same as overall normativity – it’s simply an important subcategory.

It may help to think of an example. Suppose we think about an agent called Brian. Brian has some money and must decide what to do with it. According to some of the more paradigmatic examples of demanding moral theories, Brian is morally required to give away at least some – if not most – of this wealth to help people who have the greatest need of it. On the other end of the scale he is required *not* to do some particularly bad things, such as funding some evil local supervillain. But according to the division of normativity picture discussed above, there are more scales by which to judge his possible actions than the moral scale, and his whole normative life is much more complex. He also has things that he is obligated to do by prudence – such as keeping as much of that money possible saved for that rainy day, just like he’ll have obligations to obey the law (and not spend the money on anything illegal), to cherish his friendships (buying something for a friend), or to spend some of that money to pursue hiking (or whatever his equivalent hobby of choice might be). And as well as the thing Brian has *most* reason to do given any domain, there will also be things he has reason to do, but where it’s *less* reason. Brian might be morally obligated to give his wealth away to those most in need, but there are other things he will have *some* moral reason to do, to give money to his friend, for example. And he might have no moral reason at all to fund a local supervillain.

It’s a further question how these competing reasons will weigh against each other (when it is that they do compete – again, there may often be overlap), but for the purposes of this paper it’s enough that they exist. Given all of Brian’s competing normative commitments, it might be the most rational for him to ignore his moral obligations and instead, say, buy something for his friend. However it is that we judge the relative strength of reasons from different domains, there might be some particularly strong reasons for helping the friend in this case that just outweigh the others, and give his friendship obligations the most weight – perhaps the friend is having a terrible day, and although he values the greater good a lot, he also values the well-being of his friend and he values their friendship. That doesn’t mean in this case that helping his friend is the best thing to do by moral standards, and it certainly wouldn’t be the thing he has most moral reason to do according to these moral theories – the friend might be in need, but she is less in need than a number of strangers who could be helped much more with the money just as easily. But overall, we can say Brian ought to use the money to help his friend.

Furthermore, this account of normativity doesn’t aim to explain how agents should become better people, or to change our picture of moral reasons such that they better fit what we actually end up doing. Rather it looks to explain why we shouldn’t think that there’s a mistake with our moral theories when we see the mismatch between obligations and actions. There’s a mismatch because, for many of us, morality is not our only value. We’re rarely morally perfect, but at least when we’re not we’re sometimes more successful in other ways that are still important to us – such as with regards to our friendships and the way we interact with other people close to us, or perhaps in the way we look after ourselves.

The primary purpose of this paper isn’t to give a full positive argument in favour of the division of normativity.[[12]](#footnote-12) The view will speak largely for itself, indeed, there are many moral rationalists who will find this much appealing, but who only disagree that such a picture can be used to defend demanding moral theories in the way that I’ve described. But in explaining the division of normativity here I still hope to have briefly lent it the microphone. There is a lot to be said for it as a plausible way to understand the normative landscape.

# Rejecting Three Arguments

One view that would have to be sacrificed in the wake of the division of normativity (if we are to take it as a response to objections of over-demandingness) is moral rationalism. According to moral rationalism, morality can only obligate agents to do things that they have decisive reason to do. That is, morality cannot give us obligations that go against what it would be the most rational for an agent to do, what they ought to do *all things considered*. It cannot be the case, for example, that Brian is morally obligated to give away a large proportion of his savings, if that isn’t also something that he has enough overall reason to do to justify doing it, given all of his competing reasons (friendship reasons included).

Of course, some moral rationalists might agree that normativity is divided up into some domains similar to the ones suggested above. What marks them out as different is that special connection that morality has, on their account, with rationality. So in this paper it’s not that I see moral rationalism as an opponent of the division of normativity *as such*, but as an account that stands in opposition to the non-overriding version of the division of normativity – the one that is a way to alleviate worries of over-demandingness.[[13]](#footnote-13) It is this non-overriding version of the division of normativity that I will refer to for the rest of the paper.

To defend demanding moral theories, then, I will address and reject three arguments for moral rationalism. These three arguments are all different faces of the same (oddly shaped) coin. They each make similar mistakes, which are that they conflate moral and non-moral normativity in the pursuit of their conclusion. But such a conflation is just the point they’re trying to prove. Although they may seem persuasive to anyone already bought into moral rationalism, I will show that they don’t work as objections to this non-overriding version of the division of normativity.

For each argument I will begin by explaining what it is, and why it might seem to favour moral rationalism over the division of normativity. In turn I’ll then show how each fails to consider how normativity would work under an account that divides it up, and that doesn’t take it for granted that moral obligations are only ever for what we have decisive reason to do.

## 1. The argument from blame

The argument that I call ‘the argument from blame’ comes primarily from Portmore and Darwall. According to this argument, morality does not obligate us to do anything other than what we have decisive reason to do, because the moral practices of blaming and blameworthiness are tied up with what we have reason to do.

Portmore claims the following:

S would be blameworthy for freely and knowledgeably φ-ing only if S does not have sufficient reason to φ.[[14]](#footnote-14)

He clarifies that by ‘blameworthy’ here he means morally blameworthy. He takes it to be an intuitively plausible premise and argues that it leads us to moral rationalism. After all, we’re morally blameworthy if we fail to meet our moral obligations, and if blameworthiness is tied up to what we have sufficient reason to do in that way, then so, too, must be our moral obligations.

Let’s think back to Brian. Brian, it’s been decided, doesn’t have decisive overall reason to donate all of his savings to a charitable cause, and according to moral rationalism, he is therefore not morally obligated to do so. According to the argument from blame, we can see this because Brian doing what he *does* have sufficient (and decisive) overall reason to do – buying something for his friend – is not blameworthy.

Darwall explains:

Part of what one does in blaming is simply to say that the person shouldn’t have done what he did, other reasons to the contrary notwithstanding. After all, if someone can show that he had good and sufficient reasons for acting as he did, it would seem that he has accounted for himself and defeated any claim that he is to blame for anything. Accepting blame involves an acknowledgment of this proposition also. To feel guilt is, in part, to feel that one shouldn’t have done what one did.[[15]](#footnote-15)

If Brian spends the money on his friend, he’s got a way of explaining himself, he’s accountable for his actions after acting correctly in terms of what he had the most reason to do. After a careful reflection on his reasons, he had the most reason to spend the money on his friend. His friend was in need, after all, and he values his friendship with her. According to Portmore, it would be difficult to agree that all of this is true and still think that Brian is morally blameworthy.

To respond to this argument, I want to refer back to the division of normativity, and in doing so my response here will match the one I give to each of the other arguments. According to the division of normativity, we are guided not just by moral reasons but also by prudential reasons, some of us by legal reasons, others by reasons of etiquette, friendship, etc. It seems possible, under such an account, to also have different senses of blameworthiness. Blameworthiness, after all, is a normative concept.

This isn’t so unfamiliar – after all, I would argue that we do have an idea of what it means to be blameworthy in non-moral realms, even if we don’t always think of it as such. Suppose we think of an agent who regularly fails to follow many of her prudential reasons. She fails to look properly when she crosses the road, she spends her limited money on things she won’t really get any use out of, and she spends too much time trying to appease people whose opinions should not matter to her. We might think that agent is somewhat prudentially blameworthy for failing to do things that would be best for her own flourishing, whether or not those are moral failings. Similarly, we might be familiar with a sort of aesthetic blameworthiness, when we blame someone for painting their walls a horrid colour or shooting a remake of a favourite film with the wrong sort of lighting or a bad choice of cast.[[16]](#footnote-16) If we’re invested in the aesthetics of either of these things, a person’s failure to meet the correct standards of aesthetics in those cases could elicit a particular sort of aesthetic blame from us. In another example an agent might be legally blameworthy for failing to follow the law, even when the law itself is immoral, and yet another might be blameworthy in terms of etiquette when they use their knives and forks incorrectly even when we don’t think of it as a reflection of anything morally bad about their character.[[17]](#footnote-17) Thinking about being blameworthy in these domains is not an unfamiliar idea, even when we think we’ve still done in these cases is what’s best overall (or morally speaking).[[18]](#footnote-18)

I should also note that Darwall in the above quote was also concerned with guilt, and argued that feeling guilt is (in part) to feel that one shouldn't have done what one did. But, (and in line with the view I defend), I think that guilt can manifest in a number of ways, depending on the form of 'should' that is particularly important to us at the time. It can be fitting to feel guilty for a moral transgression or an interpersonal transgression (such as betraying a friend), even when overall one had the most reason to do that thing. In some cases, an interpersonal transgression (one that might fit the domain I've been calling the 'friendship domain' for example) will conflict with a moral obligation, and the agent will end up feeling fittingly guilty no matter what they do.

Someone otherwise convinced by the division of normativity, then, can point to different types of blameworthiness across different normative domains. To be blameworthy in a domain would be connected to a failure to meet the obligations of that specific domain, perhaps by acting in a way that demonstrates ill will or a lack of good will, where ‘ill’ and ‘good’ are also relative to that same domain.[[19]](#footnote-19) But it’s not the case that being blameworthy in a specific domain means that the agent failed to do what they *overall* had most reason to do, just what they had the most reason to do out of a very narrow set of reasons.

Let’s think about blameworthiness in the case of friendship. If I break a promise to a friend, but do so on moral grounds, then I might still be blameworthy with regards to that promise and that friendship even if I’m not overall or morally blameworthy. Many of our personal commitments to others can weigh heavily on us even when we know that failing to fulfil them is morally right, and the best thing for us to do overall. If we restrict ourselves to thinking about the normativity of friendship, and I did not break the promise for any reasons to do with friendship, then there’s a standard by which I have done the incorrect thing, and am accountable for it. My actions might demonstrate *moral* good will, but in this instance they do not demonstrate a will that prioritises my friendships with others.

Of course, being blameworthy is different to being likely to be blamed. We often (but not always) want our friends to care about morality as well as caring about our relationships with them, and in those cases it might not occur to us to dish out actual blame when the requirements of friendship face off against the requirements of morality.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Another kind of blameworthiness on this picture would be the all-things-considered kind of blameworthiness, perhaps otherwise known as overall blameworthiness or rational blameworthiness. This would be when an agent is blameworthy for failing to do what they should’ve been doing overall, considering the total normative picture. For this kind of overall blameworthiness, Portmore’s statement would be true. Brian has done what he had most reason to do, and so in the overall normative realm we can’t say he’s done anything wrong. In fact, he’s done everything correctly. We cannot legitimately criticise his reasoning.

From the point of view of the division of normativity, the mistake that this argument is making is to conflate moral blameworthiness with this all-things-considered blameworthiness. It ignores the fact that according to the divided-up picture of normativity that we’re working with, moral blameworthiness is its own thing. It only governs the moral realm – it’s something reserved for people who’ve acted in a certain respect with regards to their moral obligations in particular, not their overall ones. When Portmore and Darwall say that it seems wrong to call Brian blameworthy for doing what he has overall the most reason to do, they are claiming to talk about moral blameworthiness, but their claim only works for overall blameworthiness.

According to the division of normativity, Brian is not rationally (or ‘overall’ or ‘in the domain of friendship’) blameworthy for spending the money on his friend. He has not failed in following his overall reasons, or his reasons of friendship. But he can still be *morally* blameworthy – to the extent that this option was less morally good than giving the money to a more urgent and higher-stakes cause. Exactly why he is blameworthy is up to the details of the more demanding normative ethical theories, but they might do so by appealing to Brian’s failure to help whichever people are genuinely and urgently in need of his resources. Although his actions manifest good will insofar as the domain of friendship goes, this action in particular is not the best manifestation of *moral* good will.

The account of moral blameworthiness here might seem demanding – but it isn’t so far from our common intuitions as Portmore and Darwall might think. Suppose we tear ourselves away from Brian for a moment to think about a much worse agent – Kenny. Kenny cares very little for morality. He’s selfish, and wants selfish things that would harm others. The things he values in life are things he can only get by harming others, and he doesn’t care that that’s the case. When we look to blame Kenny, it doesn’t seem to be a matter of pointing out that he’s failed to follow his own reasons, or to be rational, or to fail to do what he has overall most reason to do. He’s not weak-willed, or incorrectly reasoning about how to best bring about the things he values. He *is* following his reasons when he does bad things. He just values bad things, and so his reasons are immoral. And he *should* still be morally blameworthy. To an even greater extent than agents like Brian, as he demonstrates an even iller will. This example demonstrates that out moral blameworthiness should be tied to a failure to follow our *moral* reasons, not our overall reasons.

It’s clear that the argument from blameworthiness alone doesn’t get off the ground as a way to dissuade anyone from the division of normativity as a defence of demanding moral theories. A person on board with these accounts will find it easy to buy into a division of blameworthiness as much as anything else. But as well as that, Portmore gives another argument in support of why we should think that moral blameworthiness is connected to overall reason (and therefore why moral rationalism is true). It’s that argument I turn to next.

## 2. The argument from agency

The second argument for moral rationalism is the argument from moral agency. According to this argument, morality is specially connected to what we overall have the most reason to do because rationality and the ability to respond to reasons is a prerequisite for moral agency. We are moral agents – apt for blame or criticism for our actions – only because of our rational capacities. This one again comes from both Portmore and Darwall, but I find is best expressed by the former as an argument for why he thinks we should connect moral blameworthiness with rationality.

… if an agent is morally responsible and, thus, potentially blameworthy in virtue of having the capacity to respond appropriately to the relevant reasons, then how can we rightly blame her for doing something that she has sufficient reason to do when, in flawlessly exercising this very capacity, this is what she is led to do? Surely, it cannot be that the very capacity that opens the door to an agent’s being blameworthy is the one that leads her to perform blameworthy acts. And yet this is exactly what we would be allowing if we held that agents can be blameworthy for performing acts that they have sufficient reason to perform, for it is their capacity to respond appropriately to the relevant reasons that opens the door to their being blameworthy in the first place - a capacity that, when exercised flawlessly, leads them to perform acts that they have sufficient reason to perform.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Portmore argues here that we are moral agents – we are the kinds of creatures that can be morally obligated to do things – *because* we are the kinds of creatures that are able to respond to reasons. So responding to reasons well – doing the best job of weighing up what we ought to do – cannot be failing to meet our moral obligations. There we come again to moral rationalism – our moral obligations must only ever obligate us to do what we have decisive reason to do. Thinking back to Brian – his ability to respond to reasons is what makes him a moral agent. His spending money on his friend is an example of him exercising his reasoning skills to their full capacity. According to the argument, his doing so cannot therefore be breaking his moral obligations.

Portmore gives an example of breaking a promise to his student, when that’s what he has the most reason to do, and explains further:

Given my flawless execution of my capacity for sound practical reasoning, how can I be faulted for breaking my promise? Is it not inappropriate to hold me morally responsible and, thus, potentially blameworthy in virtue of my capacity for being guided by sound practical reasoning and then blame me for acting as sound practical reasoning leads me to act?[[22]](#footnote-22)

He emphasises again here that his exercising his agency and responding to reasons cannot consist in his breaking his moral obligations. For Portmore, agency and morality are too closely tied together.

Just as I did with the previous argument, I respond here by referring back to how this picture would really look to someone on board with the project of carving up normativity into different domains. The ability to reason *generally* is not the relevant prerequisite for moral agency. The ability to reason generally is the prerequisite for agency generally, and the ability to respond to *moral* reasons is the prerequisite for moral agency. This is close enough to being what moral agency *means* – the capacity to act for moral reasons.

To make it clear that there’s a distinction, it would help to look at possible cases where the two might come apart. It doesn’t seem too far-fetched to think of creatures that have some agency, but that aren’t *moral* agents. This might be the case with young children – old enough to start acting intentionally, and for reasons (crying out because they’re hungry, going to the toys because they want to play), but too young to appreciate that other people (their parents, their siblings, etc) have their own distinct interests that should be cared about. It’s not their ability to act for reasons that makes them moral agents here – because they can act for reasons before they can act for moral reasons. As soon as they grow old enough to start appreciating moral concerns, (maybe when they have moral desires, moral belief, or moral understanding) that’s when they enter the moral domain and become *moral* agents, as well as just being rational agents.

How does this work as a response to Portmore’s argument? Again, as with the argument from blame, it shows that moral and overall normativity are being conflated in a way that proponents of the division of normativity should not be happy with – this time in terms of the prerequisites of agency. Being better at following his (overall) reasons *might* make him a better agent, but it’s only following his *moral* reasons that would make him a better moral agent. A better moral agent (insofar as it’s distinct from being a generally better agent) might for example be one who has a stronger desire to discover and do what’s good, a better appreciation for moral reasons, or more accurate moral beliefs.

Such an argument, then, cannot hope to win over someone who finds the division of normativity appealing. Once again, it would only work for those who are already on board with moral rationalism.

## 3. The argument from authority

The final argument I turn to I call the argument from authority. According to this argument, morality can only obligate us to do what we have the most reason to do because in order to make such demands of agents it needs to engage with them on their own terms, take into consideration their own reasons and requirements. And it cannot do *that* if it requires people to do things that they don’t have sufficient reason to do.

One proponent of this argument is Stroud, who says the following:

I am not suggesting that morality be made so meek that it ceases ever to ask for sacriﬁces from agents. The idea is rather to ensure that when it does ask for sacriﬁces, its requests will have learned greater respect, in virtue of their issuing from a debate in which those concerns and interests ﬁgured, so to speak, as full participants.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Our moral obligations, according to Stroud, get their normative strength, their obligating power, from being able to engage with agents on their own terms and from taking pride of place among that very agent’s full sets of reasons. Unless moral obligations do that, they won’t have any hold over us, they won’t have enough normative strength, enough of the power to actually give us obligations.

A second way of understanding this criticism is that this engagement with the agent’s own reasons is necessary because such an engagement is where morality gets its *authority*. Horton puts the argument this way, and says the following:

The main reason for this is that morality constitutes just one department of practical reason (albeit a very important one), while practical reason includes and takes full account of morality and all the reasons it provides and all the other departments of practical reason and all the reasons they provide. Given this, it is hard to see what could give the entity that imposes moral requirements the right to require agents to act in opposition to a verdict reached from the practical point of view. What could give such an entity the right to order agents to act on the reasons given by one department of practical reason when those reasons are outweighed by other reasons from a point of view that takes full account of all practical reasons?[[24]](#footnote-24)

To address this last point first I’ll do so in a way that echoes the response to the previous two arguments. And that’s by discussing what this argument would look like if we fully consider a divided picture of normativity.

Suppose we think back to the different normative domains. There’s the moral domain, which gives us moral reasons. It obligates us, morally, to do what’s morally best. The extent to which we fail to meet those obligations makes us more or less morally blameworthy. If we have the capacity to respond to reasons in this domain then we have moral agency. Then we have the legal domain. Its authority comes from the law, and it produces its own set of reasons, its own set of obligations. The extent to which we fail to meet our legal obligations will affect the extent to which we’re legally blameworthy, and if we’re capable of responding to legal reasons (which we will usually be if we’re capable of responding to reasons generally and we’re aware of the relevant laws in our area), then we’re the kinds of agents you might say have – for lack of a better commonly used term – legal agency. Just as the account divides up these various normative phenomena into different domains, so too the same thing happens with the *authority* that gives these domains their normative power.

This time, as far as the proponent of the division of normativity is concerned, the mistake here is in conflating moral authority with rational authority generally.[[25]](#footnote-25) The place that morality gets its authority from, on a divided picture of normativity, cannot be from the same place that rationality gets its authority – and to think that it does is to beg the question against the division of normativity. Moral authority must get its authority from morality – whether that turns out to be some objective set of rules, some other facts about what’s objectively valuable, our attitudes towards others or our desires to do what’s best for them, etc.

Faced with demanding moral theories there are two ways to turn. One way is the way that Stroud goes – diluting the substance of the moral demands, reducing how much it asks of us, in order to give morality a special place in our normative landscape. The other option is to keep the demands of morality difficult, strict, demanding. And to accept that morality does not have the kind of primary and overriding spot in our normative landscape that critics such as Stroud think it does. The latter option has a lot going for it – and I hope to have shown here that a number of arguments for moral rationalism fail to make it any less persuasive.

# Conclusion

This paper aims to defend demanding moral theories with reference to an account of the division of normativity: a view that explains normative phenomena by carving them up into different domains. How they’re carved up, and what the domains look like, will depend on further views about normativity that I’ve tried to remain neutral on. What matters for the view for my purposes – and for how well the view acts as a response to demandingness objections – is that the view is anti-rationalist in the sense that the moral realm is importantly its own separate (but important) domain. One that has strict demands of us, but that only represents one aspect of an otherwise rich normative life.

I defended this view against three arguments for moral rationalism. None of these arguments work against this defence of demanding moral theories for similar reasons – each conflates a moral normative concept with an ‘overall’ normative one. In the first case it was to confuse moral blame with overall (or ‘rational’) blame, in the second it was to confuse moral agency with overall (or ‘rational’) agency, and in the last it was to confuse moral authority with overall (or ‘rational’) authority.

On my account, many people are still morally bad. There is still a significant mismatch between what people do and what they are morally required to do. But the mismatch is explained. Agents are guided by more than just morality – they are guided by their personal relationships, pursuits of knowledge or the arts, and by their own more self-concerning desires. There’s still room for comparative moral claims – we can still talk about and praise those who follow more of their moral reasons than others, or more than the average in their social group. But there’s also plenty of room for humility about how good we are compared to how good we could potentially be. This view allows us to aspire to be morally better. If, that is, we (contra Wolf) think that’s something worth aspiring to after all.[[26]](#footnote-26)

# Declarations

The author has no competing or conflicting interests to declare.

# Bibliography

Archer A, Ware L (2018) Beyond the Call of Beauty: Everyday Aesthetic Demands Under Patriarchy. The Monist, 101(1):114-127.

Arpaly N, Schroeder T (2013) In Praise of Desire. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Ashford E (2003) The Demandingness of Scanlon’s Contractualism. Ethics, 113(2):273-302

Benn C (2015) Over-Demandingness Objections and Supererogation. In van Ackeren M and Kühler M (eds.) The Limits of Moral Obligation, Routledge, New York

Darwall S (2006) The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect and Accountability, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA

Dorsey D (2011) Weak Anti-Rationalism. Nous, 46(1):1-23

Harman E (2016) Morally Permissible Moral Mistakes. Ethics, 126(2):366-393

Horton K (2015) The Authority Account of Prudential Obligations. Southern Journal of Philosophy, 53(1):17-35

Kiesewetter B (2017) The Normativity of Rationality, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Kolodny N (2005) Why Be Rational? Mind, 114:509-563

McElwee B (2017) Demandingness Objections in Ethics. The Philosophical Quarterly 67:84-105

Pettit P (1993) Consequentialism. In Singer P (ed.) A Companion to Ethics, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., Oxford

Pinheiro Walla A (2015) Kant’s Moral Theory and Demandingness. Ethical Theory and Moral Practice 18(4):731-743

Portmore D (2011) Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Scheffler S (1992) Human Morality, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Scheffler S (1994) The Rejection of Consequentialism, Clarendon Press, Oxford

Singer P (2009) Reply to Michael Huemer. In Schaler J (ed.) Peter Singer Under Fire, Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago and La Salle

Slote M, Pettit P (1984) Satisficing Consequentialism. Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 58:139-63

Stroud S (1998) Moral Overridingness and Moral Theory. Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 79(2):170-189

Williams B (2011) Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, Routledge, Abingdon

Wolf S (1982) Moral Saints. The Journal of Philosophy 79(9):419-439

Woollard F (2016) Dimensions of Demandingness. Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 116(1):89-106

1. A number of critics take this position. For more on how demandingness objections are used, see examples in McElwee (2017), Benn (2015), Woollard (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Portmore, (2011) p.25. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eg Scheffler, (1992), (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example, Pinheiro Walla (2015) for the demandingness of Kantian ethics, Ashford (2003) for discussion of demandingness in Scanlon’s contractualism and Williams (2011) for an example of demandingness worries for moral philosophy generally. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For example, you might prefer ‘satisficing’ consequentialism to ‘maximising’ consequentialism. See, eg, Slote & Pettit (1984), or discussions of moral permissibility such as that in Harman (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As well as those listed in the main text, Dorsey (2011) also defends demanding theories against rationalism, arguing instead for a ‘weak’ form of anti-rationalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wolf, (1982) p.432. Although many don’t see Mother Theresa as being very saintly, I won’t address those concerns here – instead substitute for your favourite caricature of a saintly person. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Wolf, (1982) p.433. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Singer, (2009) p.389. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The language of ‘honouring’ here is taken from Pettit, (1993) where he explains some different ways to respond to value in normative ethics. Honouring value is different to maximising (or ‘promoting’ as he says) it – honouring a value is usually more about your own personal relationship with the value. For example, honouring the value of knowledge might involve personally reading, or getting a good education, where maximising it might involve doing what you can to ensure more people *generally* become educated. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Depending on further details of accounts of normativity, determining a domain’s normative strength might be done with reference to the subject’s strongest desires, for example, their strongest idealised desires, or with reference to objective facts about what’s best for them, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. At least partly this is because moral rationalists may be on board with the division itself, just not as a way to respond to over-demandingness objections. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Some refer to this relationship as seeing morality as being the overriding normative domain (eg Stroud, 1998) but not everyone agrees with that characterisation (eg Portmore, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Portmore, (2011) p.43. A quick note on sufficient and decisive reasons might be helpful here. For Portmore, an agent is required to do only what she has decisive reason to do, and permitted to do only what she has sufficient reason to do. If an agent is not permitted to perform an act then she does not have sufficient reason, and indeed she has a decisive reason not to. (p.14) For my account, each of these types of reasons will also be able to be split up into the same domains as the rest of normativity, so implicitly there would be things we have decisive reason not to do (in terms of morality), things we have decisive reason not to do (in terms of friendship), etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Darwall, (2006) p.292 (quoted in Portmore, (2011) p.46.) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. More examples can be found in Archer & Ware, (2018) For example, “…consider a visitor to a university campus learning their host had never seen its magnificent forest—renowned for its summertime blossoms and autumnal foliage. The visitor would be entitled to think that their host is blameworthy.” p.116 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. These instances of non-moral blameworthiness might be structurally similar to moral blame in a number of ways. The blameworthiness might be easily counteracted by good excuses, for example, as long as those excuses are also in the same domain. An agent might not be aesthetically blameworthy for painting her walls a strange colour if she doesn’t see colours in the same way as everyone else, or if she painted them that way to match some larger part of the house’s appearance. And if her excuses are non-aesthetic, we might not blame her overall but still blame her for committing some sort of aesthetic crime. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. To reiterate: many of the non-moral realms will often have moral dimensions to them. Whether or not a promise to a friend is kept, for example, will usually also be morally relevant. This might go some way towards explaining why we don’t commonly talk about blameworthiness in these domains as being distinct from other types of blameworthiness. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For such an account of blameworthiness see, for example, Arpaly and Schroeder (2013) pp.159-199. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. To reiterate: many of the non-moral realms will often have moral dimensions to them. Whether or not a promise to a friend is kept, for example, will usually also be morally relevant. This might go some way towards explaining why we don’t commonly talk about blameworthiness in these domains as being distinct from other types of blameworthiness. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Portmore, (2011) p.48. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Portmore, (2011) p.50. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Stroud, (1998) p.104. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Horton, (2015) p.23. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Not that rational authority is without its problems. See, for example, Kolodny (2005) and Kiesewetter (2017), for the explanation of difficulties in determining whether we have reason to follow our own reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. As this paper was written during the pandemic, I didn’t get to discuss some of the ideas in it with as many people as I might have otherwise. As such, I am particularly grateful to the people who were able to offer me help and feedback. In particular, I would like to thank Sophie Keeling, Joe Slater, and the friends and colleagues who attended an online work in progress seminar at The University of Liverpool where I shared an earlier draft. I am also grateful to several anonymous referees for their helpful comments, and for a number of useful reading recommendations on non-moral blame that I’m sure will come in useful for a while yet. I wrote this paper while working for an AHRC funded project ‘How Does It Feel? Interpersonal Understanding and Affective Empathy’, ref AH/T012781/1. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)