

Trusting Morality's Authority

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Most of us are confident that murder is wrong. We accept without question that generosity is a virtue, wittiness a boon, and cantankerousness a flaw. We have little to no doubt concerning substantive ethical matters such as these. But when it comes to morality itself, we can be of two minds.

In certain moods, we earnestly care about being moral. We seek to do as morality requires. We feel guilty when we don't. And we trust morality never to lead us astray from what we are ultimately required to do. When under the influence of this mode of thought, we are likely to find plausible the thesis that whenever an action or behavior φ -ing is morally required of us, φ -ing is required of us *simpliciter*. Call this thesis the 'supremacy of morality', or 'supremacy' for short.¹

In other moods, however, we find ourselves inclined to waver in our commitment to morality. We attempt to rationalize departure from morality's requirements. And we are prone to question morality's guiding authority over us. When in this frame of mind about morality, the supremacy of morality is unlikely to strike us as plausible.²

Supremacy's apparent plausibility, or lack thereof, wavers along with our vacillating vision of morality itself. We can further illustrate the wavering by unpacking the supremacy of morality thesis. Suppose that φ -ing is morally required of us. To say that φ -ing is morally required is to say that morality tells us that we must φ , that morality demands φ -ing. If, for example, keeping our promises is morally required, then morality demands keeping our promises.

¹ My characterization of the supremacy of morality draws on Dorsey (2016), Tiffany (2007), and Stroud (1998).

² As Christine M. Korsgaard [(2008): 233] notes, "we can *all* think of situations in which, for reasons that seem to us honorable, unselfish, or conscientious, we would do things which morality seems to forbid," even those of us who believe that morality is "unconditional and overriding." Emphasis mine.

Now, when in the initial frame of mind about morality, we tend to trust that whatever morality says goes. So, we're likely, under the initial mode of thought, to infer from the claim that morality demands keeping our promises to the claim that keeping our promises is *ultimately* required of us—no further questions asked, no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

But in the alternative frame of mind about morality, we don't tend to trust that what morality says goes. Under the influence of the alternative mode of thought, morality appears to demand us to do things that we really don't want to do, things that may even strike us, at least upon reflection, as being reasonable *not* to do. We may, for instance, really want to break our promises whenever doing so risks placing our family in harm's way. And perhaps our resistance to morality's demands is reasonable in such a case. Under these circumstances, we may accept and acknowledge that morality demands that we keep our promises and nevertheless still question whether it would be reasonable to break them.

What this shows is that, in the alternative frame of mind about morality, room remains for doubt over whether a supposed moral requirement settles the question of what one must do. Since we may agree that we are morally required to φ , and nevertheless still wonder whether we are *ultimately* required to φ , there appears to be a sense of "requirement" that is conceptually distinct from the "moral requirement." To say that one is required *simpliciter*, or *all things considered* required, to φ is to lay the question of what one must do to rest. When we say that φ -ing is required *simpliciter*, what we mean is that the *all things considered* perspective requires or demands φ -ing.

In sum, what supremacy says is that whenever morality demands φ -ing, the question of what one must do is laid to rest. Whenever morality demands φ -ing, the *all things considered* perspective demands φ -ing as well.

Supremacy is plausible, insofar as we trust morality never to lead us astray. But perhaps, as we are prone to think in alternative moods, such trust is misplaced. If morality, say, instructed us to act contrary to the demands that follow from our commitments to the people who, or projects which, provide our lives with substance and meaning, like our families or vocations, morality would in a sense lead us astray. For in that case morality would guide us to act against what's required of us by our commitments to the people or things that give us the will to go on living at all. And, one might argue, the general question of *how to live* presupposes that we have *a reason to live*. So, what we *all things considered* must do cannot in principle involve acting in ways that undermine our reason to live. When, and if, morality tells us to act in ways that, in effect, undermine our reason to live, then it's at least reasonable to think that morality departs from telling us what we *all things considered* must do.

Let's give the title '*robust internormative conflicts*' or 'rifts' to circumstances wherein morality tells us to act contrary to the demands that follow from our commitments to the people or things that give our lives substance or meaning, and so in ways that undermine our reason to live. Rifts may arise in actuality, or they may not. Regardless, since rifts are hypothetical cases wherein morality demands that we act against our reason to live, we have reason to think of rifts as viable cases wherein the demands of morality come apart from what we *all things considered* must do. In this way, rifts stand as promising potential counterexamples to supremacy.

But are these potential counterexamples to supremacy anything more than potential? Does morality ever demand that we act contrary to our commitments to the people or things that give our lives substance or meaning? Is it naïve to trust morality *never* to lead us astray?

Many philosophers argue *yes*. They claim that, if impartialism about morality is true, then genuine rifts are inevitable.³ Roughly, impartialism about morality treats the moral point of view as the impartial point of view. And, it is argued, if the moral point of view just is the impartial point of view, then the moral point of view is bound to come apart from the personal point of view.⁴ As Bernard Williams writes, "somewhere...one reaches the necessity that such things as deep attachments to other persons [or projects] will express themselves in the world in ways which cannot at the same time embody the impartial view." Our commitments to particular people and things of substance, "if they exist at all," "run the risk of offending against" the impartial point of view.⁵ Since impartialism about morality is *prima facie* plausible, we have reason to believe that genuine rifts exist and thus to doubt that supremacy is true, or so many argue.⁶

The ambition of this paper is to cast fresh doubt on such doubt about supremacy. In the end, I will argue that there are no genuine rifts, even if impartialism about morality is true. For not only is there more than one way to interpret alleged rifts, but there's a better alternative to interpreting alleged rifts as genuine rifts. We should interpret alleged rifts as cases of indeterminacy in ethics rather than genuine rifts. Alleged rifts are *not* genuine cases wherein morality tells us to act in ways that undermine our reason to live. They are instead cases wherein the requirements of morality, or of our commitments

³ Variations on this claim are present in Brink (1986), Williams (1981), Wolf (2015), and Dorsey (2016), among others.

⁴ Wolf (2015): 27 and Brink (1986): 435. The personal point of view is the perspective which gives significant weight to the particular people or things to which we are attached or otherwise partial.

⁵ Williams (1981): 18.

⁶ Variations on this argument against supremacy are advanced or otherwise mentioned in Williams (1981), Scheffler (1986), Scheffler (1992), Wolf (2015), and Dorsey (2016), among others.

to the people or things that give our lives meaning, are undefined. The upshot of my proposal is a means of reconciling the two mindsets we are prone to find ourselves in about morality.

I begin by unpacking the argument from impartialism against supremacy and clarifying the notion of a rift (§1). In §2, I introduce the notion of indeterminacy in ethics, and I show that it is at least possible to interpret some alleged rifts as cases of indeterminacy in ethics rather than genuine rifts. I then argue, in §3, that it is not only possible but more plausible to interpret some alleged rifts as cases of indeterminacy in ethics than as genuine rifts. The interpretation of some alleged rifts as cases of indeterminacy in ethics better captures the appropriate way to respond to alleged rifts, and it doesn't introduce logical and practical contradictions into our theory of normativity. In §4, I show that my arguments in §§2-3 generalize, before concluding with some reflections on the intriguingly amicable relationship between indeterminacy in ethics and supremacy (§5).

§1. The Argument from Impartialism

The argument from impartialism against the supremacy of morality begins, as its name suggests, with the premise that impartialism about morality is *prima facie* plausible as a substantive moral theory. As noted above, impartialism about morality treats the moral point of view as the impartial point of view. What this means is that it centers morality around the notion that all people are equally deserving of well-being and respect—it ensures that the requirements of morality recognize and reflect the notion that all people deserve well-being and respect in equal measure.⁷ Since few would deny that all people are equally deserving of well-being and respect, impartialism about morality is *prima facie* plausible as a substantive moral theory.

With the plausibility of impartialism about morality on the table, the argument from impartialism proceeds by placing an independently plausible claim about value next to it. The second premise states that our commitments to things of substance, especially to loving relationships and personal projects, are *essential* sources of value and meaning in our lives. “Life has to have substance if anything is to have sense,” Bernard Williams notes.⁸ While some of our desires are “admittedly contingent on the prospect of one’s being alive...not all desires can be in that sense conditional.”⁹ Some desires, desires Williams calls ‘categorical desires’, “cannot operate conditionally on [one’s] being alive, since they “settle” “the question of whether [one] is going to be alive” at all.¹⁰ Categorical desires

⁷ I borrow this characterization of impartialism from Wolf (2015): 32-34. See Dorsey (2016): 72 for an alternative.

⁸ Williams (1981): 18.

⁹ Williams (1981): 11.

¹⁰ Williams (1981): 11.

are the patterns of interests, desires, or commitments which “not only provide the reason for an interest in what happens within the horizon of one’s future, but also constitute the conditions of there being such a future at all.”¹¹ In the absence of categorical desires, we lose our reason to carry on living at all. It is in this way that our commitments to various people and projects give us the intrapersonal sense that our lives have substance or meaning. We cannot find meaning or value in our own lives, reason to live, without first having and maintaining commitments to people or things of substance. Substance before sense, Williams suggests and others echo.¹²

The third premise of the argument from impartialism introduces *riffs*. If impartialism is true, the premise states, then robust internormative conflicts between the demands of morality and the demands of the people and things that give our lives meaning—be they love, friendship, art, or what have you—are inevitable. To cite Williams again, “once [impartial] morality is there, and also personal relations [or projects] to be taken seriously, so is the possibility of conflict.”¹³ As Williams sees it, we have categorical desires, and insofar as we have categorical desires, we are all committed to people and things of substance. Furthermore, what it is to be committed to people and things of substance just is to take them seriously and so to take them to place demands on oneself. Some of these demands are bound to conflict with those of impartial morality in robust ways, i.e., ways that would involve a choice *between* our commitment to the person or thing that gives us reason to live at all *and* our commitment to doing what’s required from the impartial point of view.

Suppose, for example, that you’re given the choice between saving one or two persons, but not all three, from drowning. And suppose that the one person is your lifelong partner and the two persons are strangers. Impartial morality would seem to demand that you save the two, while love for your partner would seem to demand that you save your partner.¹⁴ In this case, assuming your commitment to your partner is a central source of your reason to live, choosing to do as impartial morality demands would, in effect, undermine or eliminate your reason to live. As loosely noted above, we face a ‘*robust internormative conflict*’ (or ‘*riff*’) whenever impartial morality requires that we φ , while our commitment to people or things of substance requires that we $\sim\varphi$, where φ -ing would, in effect, undermine or eliminate our reason to live.

The fourth premise, roughly following from premise two, is that it is reasonable *not* to follow the requirement to φ , whenever morality’s demands conflict with the demands of the people and things

¹¹ Williams (1981): 11.

¹² See, e.g., Wolf (2010), Wolf (2015), and Yao (2023).

¹³ Williams (1981): 17.

¹⁴ Williams (1981): 17-19.

that give our lives meaning. To continue with the foregoing example, surely it is reasonable to save your lifelong partner from drowning, even if morality requires that you save two strangers instead. How *absurd* would it be to think that anyone must act in such a way as to undermine or eliminate one's reason to live? And yet we must take care to avoid such thoughts. For it follows from premises two and three that there are indeed times when morality's demands conflict with the demands of the people and things that give our lives meaning.¹⁵ So, it can at times be reasonable *not* to follow the demands of morality, at least when morality's demands conflict in robust ways with the demands of the people and things that give our lives meaning.

Yet to admit that it is at times reasonable not to follow the demands of morality is to admit that what's morally required of us comes apart from what's required *simpliciter* of us. For it is never reasonable to fail to abide by the demands of the *all things considered* perspective. So, on the grounds that it can be reasonable not to follow the demands of morality, the argument from impartialism concludes that supremacy is false.

§2. The Possibility of Indeterminacy

In what follows, I will argue that the argument from impartialism fails to establish the falsity of supremacy. My strategy is to develop a general recipe for explaining away rifts. I will show, in three steps, that the third premise of the argument from impartialism is false. First, I will show that it's possible to interpret an alleged rift as a case of indeterminacy in ethics rather than as a genuine rift (§2). Then, I will argue that it's more plausible to do so (§3). Finally, I will explain why my arguments in §§2-3 generalize to all alleged rifts (§4).

Up to this point, we have mostly considered rifts at the lofty level of generality. But it's one thing to consider rifts in general and quite another to consider such cases on the ground. And on the ground is where rifts matter. For we have little reason to believe that rifts are inevitable unless we have evidence to suggest that even one rift, in particular, has arisen.¹⁶ Aware of this fact, proponents of the argument from impartialism take great pains to motivate their case against supremacy by drawing our attention to potential rifts at the level of particularity, to specific cases that they take to be rifts. To begin to assess whether rifts are anything more than alleged, we will follow their lead. Consider a representative alleged rift:

¹⁵ This is the fifth premise of the argument from impartialism.

¹⁶ Or will arise.

Mom. A woman's son is suffering from chronic migraines, and she has access to a limited supply of medication. The same medication treats other illnesses as well, including life-threatening ones. The woman has two options. She can either give the medicine to her son or to a stranger. If she gives the medicine to the stranger, her son will continue to suffer from severe migraines. If she gives the medicine to her son, the stranger will continue to suffer from a life-threatening illness.¹⁷

A rift, recall, is a case wherein one's commitment to people or things of substance demands that one φ , while morality demands that one $\sim\varphi$ even though $\sim\varphi$ -ing would undermine or eliminate one's reason to live. Insofar as defenders of the argument from impartialism view *Mom* as a rift, they understand the woman in the case to be facing a "radical choice" between her commitment to morality and her commitment to her son. Assuming the son's migraines are not life-threatening, "morality," they would say, straightforwardly "forbids [favoring] one's son at the expense of another...man's suffering."¹⁸ Thus, while love forbids the woman from giving the medication to the stranger, morality requires that she do so. In this way, proponents of the argument from impartialism read conflict into *Mom* and other cases like it. To apply what I call 'the conflict interpretation' to alleged rifts is to interpret alleged rifts as genuine rifts. Proponents of the argument from impartialism apply the conflict interpretation to *Mom* and like cases.

Yet there is an alternative way of interpreting *Mom* and similar cases. For on most plausible conceptions of love, the requirements of love make considerable space for the notion that all people are equally deserving of well-being and respect. Love for our nearest and dearest doesn't conflict with going out of our way to ensure that people near and far receive their fair due of well-being and respect. Likewise, on most plausible conceptions of morality, including impartialist conceptions, morality makes considerable space for the people and things of tremendous value in our lives.¹⁹ Morality, most would admit, permits us to perform at least some special favors for our loved ones. It may to some extent allow us to, say, "bend" or "break" the office rules for our friends in the workplace or to favor our children by buying them a brand-new Jeep for their sixteenth birthday.²⁰ The relevant question is *to what extent* love allows us to go out of our way to ensure that all people receive their fair due of well-being and respect and *to what extent* morality permits us to favor our preferred people and things over

¹⁷ *Mom* is a variation on the case of "radical choice" considered in Wolf (2015): 41-46.

¹⁸ Wolf (2015): 41.

¹⁹ I follow Wolf (2015) in assuming that an "extreme impartialism," a version of impartialism that doesn't allow considerable space for the people and things of tremendous value in our lives, is implausible. My concern in this paper is with what Wolf calls 'moderate impartialism'. For more, see Wolf (2015): 32-46.

²⁰ Wolf (2015): 38.

others. In weighing the considerations of morality against those of love, we find ourselves wondering *where* to draw the line between what love demands and morality requires. The difficulty lies in where and how to draw the line.

Facing the difficulty, some acknowledge that “strictly speaking...one need not draw a line.”²¹ Perhaps, one might think, “[i]t is unreasonable...to expect morality to have determinate answers to every question.”²² Perhaps there are borderline cases, cases of indeterminacy in morality. The same could be said of love as a normative domain. If this is right, and there are cases of indeterminacy in ethics, then we cannot assume that cases like *Mom* are genuine rifts *rather than* cases of indeterminacy in ethics. An alternative to the conflict interpretation is available. To apply what I call ‘the indeterminacy interpretation’ to alleged rifts is to interpret alleged rifts as cases of indeterminacy in ethics.

How might we apply the indeterminacy interpretation to an alleged rift like *Mom*? To illustrate one way of applying the indeterminacy interpretation, I will limit my attention to a particular kind of indeterminacy in ethics, vagueness in ethics.²³

What is vagueness in ethics? Vagueness, broadly speaking, is indeterminacy with sorites-susceptibility.²⁴ Predicates and properties can exhibit indeterminacy. To say that a predicate is indeterminate is to admit that there are cases in which it’s unspecified whether the predicate applies. To say that a property is indeterminate is to admit that it’s unspecified whether it is instantiated by certain individuals. And to say that a predicate or property is sorites-susceptible is to say that it gives rise to the Sorites paradox. Vagueness in ethics is just vagueness concerning evaluatives, directives, and matters of fit—i.e., vagueness concerning the predicates or properties that are associated with goodness, rightness, and fittingness.²⁵ Here’s an example from the literature.

Amputations. It is impermissible to amputate a person’s arm to save another’s life. It is permissible to amputate a person’s arm to save a billion lives. How many lives must be at stake for it to be permissible to amputate someone’s arm? Plausibly, we can create a Sorites series, admitting of borderline cases of permissibility, out of a series of

²¹ Wolf (2015): 38-9.

²² Wolf (2015): 40, 44. Perhaps surprisingly, proponent of the argument from impartialism Susan Wolf admits that there are cases of moral indeterminacy in addition to cases of radical choice or conflict. In response to Wolf, I wonder why we should think that *any* cases of alleged rifts are *genuine* rifts, given that, as Wolf allows, there are cases of indeterminacy in ethics.

²³ There may be other ways of applying the indeterminacy interpretation.

²⁴ Barnes (2010).

²⁵ For more on vagueness in ethics, see Dougherty (2014), Schoenfield (2016), and Hawthorne (2022). For the purposes of this paper, I take no stand on whether the source of vagueness is epistemic, semantic, or ontic. I also remain neutral on the question of whether incommensurateness is vagueness.

amputations, each of which is performed to save an increasing number of lives.²⁶

In *Amputations*, the predicate ‘permissible’ is indeterminate because it is sometimes unspecified whether it applies.²⁷ It is not specified, for example, whether ‘permissible’ applies in the cases of three-hundred lives, one-thousand lives, or five-hundred-thousand lives. The cutoff point of the moral predicate ‘permissible’ is in some way undefined. Along these lines, the indeterminacy in *Amputations* can be shown to give rise to the Sorites paradox. It seems that (i) amputating a person’s arm to save one person’s life is impermissible and (ii) if Y is the act of amputating a person’s arm to save one more person’s life than you’d save in the impermissible act X of amputating a person’s arm, then Y is impermissible. Given (i), (ii), and modus ponens, we can derive the conclusion that amputating a person’s arm to save a trillion lives is impermissible. Our seemingly true premises give rise to a seemingly false conclusion. A paradox. The paradox arises with the predicate ‘permissible’ in *Amputations* because it is in some way left unspecified *where*, along the full range of number of lives saved, permissibility ends and impermissibility begins. So ‘permissibility’ is vague in the case. The paradox arises with other ethical predicates because it is left unspecified where, along the full range of relevant cases, the predicate ceases to apply.

To see how vagueness is relevant in *Mom*, consider one specification of the case.

Mom’. It’s morally impermissible to give one’s son medication to cure a migraine when the alternative would be to save a stranger’s life. It’s morally permissible to give one’s son medication to cure a migraine when there’s no chance that giving the same medication to a stranger would save the stranger’s life. How likely must it be that the medication would save the stranger’s life in order for it to be impermissible for the mom to give the medication to her son? We can create a Sorites series, admitting of borderline cases of moral permissibility, out of the range of likelihood that the medicine would save the stranger’s life.²⁸

The probability that the medication would save the stranger’s life in *Mom* is a matter of degree, which may give rise to borderline cases of moral permissibility. In the same way that we can interpret *Amputations* as a case of ethical vagueness involving the predicate ‘permissible’, we can interpret *Mom* as a case of moral vagueness.

²⁶ I quote *Amputations* from Schoenfield (2016).

²⁷ Likewise, we could say that the property of impermissibility is indeterminate because it’s unspecified whether it’s instantiated by certain individuals. My characterization of indeterminateness draws on Williamson (1994).

²⁸ The relevance of vagueness in the case under discussion does not depend on any appeal to probabilities. One could instead fill-in the case by varying the severity of the stranger’s illness or the strength of the medication as a remedy for the stranger’s illness. I leave these nearby cases as an exercise for the reader.

Still, we can find ethical indeterminacy in *Mom* even without interpreting the case as a case of *moral* vagueness. We could instead interpret *Mom* as a case of vagueness in the normativity of love. Here's an alternative specification of the case.

Mom''. It's impermissible by love to give a stranger medication when the alternative would be to save one's son's life. It's permissible by love to give medication to a stranger rather than one's son, when doing so has no chance of improving one's son's life, let alone saving it. How likely must it be that the medication would save or otherwise improve the son's life in order for it to be impermissible by love for the mom to give the medication to the stranger? We can create a Sorites series, admitting of borderline cases of permissibility by love, out of the range of likelihood that the medicine would save or otherwise improve the son's life.

The probability that the medication would save or otherwise improve the son's life is a matter of degree, which may give rise to borderline cases of permissibility by love. Just as we can interpret *Amputations* and *Mom* as cases of ethical or moral vagueness, we can interpret *Mom* as a case of vagueness in the normativity of love.

Mom, understood as a case of moral vagueness or vagueness in the normativity of love, leaves us with three relevant categories of deontic possibility. At one end of the spectrum, we have clear cases in which it's both required by love and permitted by morality for the mom to give the medication to her son. In these cases, the mom may give the medication to her son without giving us reason to doubt that she's done anything morally out of line. At the other end of the spectrum lie clear cases in which it's permitted by love and at least permitted, if not required, by morality for the mom to give the medication to the stranger. If the mom gave the medication to the stranger under these circumstances, we wouldn't doubt that she loved her son. In between the two bins of clear cases lie cases of ethical indeterminacy. In this "borderline" category of cases, it's unspecified whether it's morally permissible for the mom to give the medication to her son, or it's unspecified whether it's permissible by love to give the medication to the stranger.

These three categories encapsulate the range of possible "*Mom* scenarios" involving moral requirements and requirements of love. And no category leaves space for decisive conflict between the demands of morality and the demands of love. So, under my proposed indeterminacy interpretation of *Mom*, *Mom* is not a genuine rift, and in no version of the case does what is morally required of us come apart from what is required *simpliciter* of us.

§3. The Plausibility of Indeterminacy over Conflict

I've now shown that it's possible to apply the indeterminacy interpretation, rather than the conflict interpretation, to an alleged rift like *Mom*. Having shown the possibility of the indeterminacy interpretation, I will now defend its plausibility. I will offer two lines of reasoning in defense of the claim that the indeterminacy interpretation of alleged rifts is more plausible than the conflict interpretation. First, I will argue that the indeterminacy interpretation allows us to make better sense of our complex responses in and to alleged rifts than the conflict interpretation. Second, I'll argue that the conflict interpretation is less plausible than the indeterminacy interpretation because it introduces needless and otherwise theoretically problematic dilemma into our theory of normativity. If my lines of reasoning are sound, and the indeterminacy interpretation of alleged rifts is more plausible than the conflict interpretation, then *even if* impartialism is true, we have less reason to believe that rifts are inevitable than that they are not.

§3.1 The fitting-reaction argument

The correct way of interpreting an alleged rift is related to the appropriate way of responding to it. The relationship between the two suggests a promising lead. We may, perhaps, discover evidence for the correct way of interpreting an alleged rift like *Mom* by considering more or less apt ways of reacting to *Mom*-like cases.

For starters, suppose that the conflict interpretation of alleged rifts is correct. According to the conflict interpretation, an alleged rift like *Mom* is a genuine rift. Whereas love demands that the mom give the medication to her son, morality demands that she give the medication to the stranger, despite the fact that doing so would undermine her reason to live. If the conflict interpretation is correct, then alleged rifts like *Mom* involve a requirement of morality to φ alongside a requirement of another normative domain (e.g., love) to $\sim\varphi$. What, under these circumstances, would be the fitting-reaction to have in response to an alleged rift?

Granted that neither normative domain in an alleged rift overrides the other, I propose that the apt response to an alleged rift is a starkly torn, split, or fragmented one. For it would be fitting for agents in, and onlookers of, such a case to respond to it with feelings of both clear-eyed approval and sharp disapproval. On the one hand, it would be apt for agents and onlookers alike to deem the option of φ -ing as “right” by the standards of one normative domain, and so to feel positively about φ -ing from the lens of that domain. On the other hand, it would be apt for agents and onlookers to deem

the same option as “wrong” by the standards of another normative domain, and so to feel negatively about it from the lens of that domain. In response to a case like *Mom*, Susan Wolf concurs:

To describe the woman’s conflict as one between morality and the bonds of love seems to...capture or preserve the split, almost schizophrenic reaction...we ought to have to her dilemma. It allows a part of us to disapprove of the [immoral] option of [helping] her son, while allowing another part of us to withhold judgment [i.e., to “respect” and admire the same option].²⁹

Wolf’s emphasis on the split-nature, the *tear* in our response is crucial here. Behind the lens of each normative perspective, the fitting response to take up is a wholly positive or solely negative one. What nevertheless causes us strife, one might say, is that we’re bifocaled, shifting our vision from one unified perspective and verdict on the case to another and back again, rinse and repeat. If the conflict interpretation is correct, then the most accurate way of responding to the case would be to approve of each option from one perspective while nevertheless disapproving of it from another.

Now, suppose instead that the indeterminacy interpretation of alleged rifts is correct. According to the indeterminacy interpretation, an alleged rift like *Mom* is not a genuine rift. It’s a case in which either it’s unspecified whether it’s morally permissible for the mom to give the medication to her son, or it’s unspecified whether it’s permissible by love to give the medication to the stranger. If the indeterminacy interpretation is correct, then the requirement of morality to φ or the requirement of another normative domain like love to $\sim\varphi$ is indeterminate. What would be the fitting way to respond to the case under these circumstances?

Assuming again that neither normative domain overrides the other, the apt response to an alleged but not genuine rift would, I submit, be an existentialist or angsty one. For it would be fitting for agents in, and onlookers of, such a case to respond to it with feelings of neither clear-eyed approval nor sharp disapproval. If, for example, the mom in *Mom* decides to give the medication to the stranger, but it’s nevertheless indeterminate whether morality permits the mom to give the medication to her son, then the best way to evaluate the situation is left unspecified. Morality may recommend that we approve of such behavior, or it may not. Regardless, we’re left without a rubric for evaluating the case. And without it, we can’t assign high marks for morality and demerits for love, at least not in good faith. Since the evaluative path before us is unmarked, we’re left with a kind of blank slate. Our typical metrics of assessment have left us to our own devices.

²⁹ Wolf (2015): 41-44.

It's worth pausing to underline why the fitting response to alleged rifts under the indeterminacy interpretation is especially complex. It's complex because agents and onlookers alike lack a standard metric for evaluating the options of agents from at least one given and relevant normative perspective. Consider what this is like from the perspective of an agent facing a *Mom*-like case. Before acting, it would be apt for such an agent to feel a mixed bag of dreadful, courageous, and creative regarding what to do. The way forward is totally up to them, and there's no right answer in the back of the book. As far as the agent can see, the answer is theirs for the making. Whether to hope like Kierkegaard or despair like Camus is their call to make. But even after they act, it would be fitting for them to feel angst or empowerment over their decision. In a way, they may aptly feel a deep kind of existential dread, "remainder" or "regret," after opting for one course of action over the other. Because in acting without the guidance of a relevant normative standard, there's nothing to blame for the consequences of their action except themselves. The burden of responsibility falls back on them. At the same time, they may aptly feel brave and bold following their act. Some choices pay off personally. And when all goes well, it's nice to be in charge.

The existential angst or hope involved in alleged rifts as cases of indeterminacy goes deeper—it's more disorienting or empowering—than the regret or resolve that may at times follow from the decision to opt for the requirements of one normative domain over another, when it's specified what each domain requires. One may regret departing from the specified requirements of one normative domain like morality but nevertheless find resolution in the fact that one had to do so for the sake of another normative domain like love. One cannot, however, find resolution in a fact that does not exist or is otherwise unknowable. So, in one's decision to act in the face of indeterminacy, one may feel anxious or dreadful in having to decide how to act, but one will not find resolution *in the fact that* one had to act in that way for the sake of something else. Perhaps one didn't have to act in that way. And this may be dreadfully frightful while fantastically freeing.

Let's take stock. I've argued that, if the conflict interpretation is correct, then the fitting response to an alleged rift is a starkly disunified one. In this case, it's fitting to be torn between two cleanly delineated normative domains. By contrast, if the indeterminacy interpretation is correct, then the fitting response to an alleged rift isn't a split one. It's instead a unified existentialist or angsty one. With the fitting ways of responding to the conflict and indeterminacy interpretations of alleged rifts in hand, I propose the following premise: If it's more apt to feel existentialist or angsty in response to alleged rifts *than* starkly torn in two, then the indeterminacy interpretation better captures the fitting reaction to have in response to alleged rifts than the conflict interpretation. The indeterminacy

interpretation better captures the fittingness of angst, existential hope, or existential dread in response to alleged rifts than the conflict interpretation.

From here, our question becomes one of whether it's more apt to feel existentialist or angsty in response to alleged rifts than starkly torn in two. If it is, and thus if the indeterminacy interpretation does a better job of capturing the fitting reaction to have in response alleged rifts than the conflict interpretation, then it follows that the former interpretation is *ceteris paribus* better than the latter. I will argue that it is more apt to feel existentialist or angsty than starkly torn in two in response to alleged rifts for two reasons.

The first is that the object of fit in such cases appears to be a singular, unified situation of choice. As a result, it's more fitting to respond to the case in such a way that reflects the unity of the case as we experience it than to respond in a way that does not. And at the end of the day, the existentialist or angsty response reflects the apparent unity of the situation while the starkly torn or fragmented one does not. The starkly torn or fragmented response splits *Mom* into two. It envisions *Mom* as *Mom-from-the-perspective-of-morality* and *Mom-from-the-perspective-of-love*, and it toggles between the two. But fundamentally, *Mom* isn't *Mom-from-the-perspective-of-morality* plus *Mom-from-the-perspective-of-love*. It's just *Mom*, whatever that looks like. And whatever it looks like, *Mom* appears to be a unified situation of choice. It's a situation where we as individuals are forced to decide what to do. And as individuals forced to decide what to do, we are ultimately forced to decide what to do from *one* point of view: our own. There's no other way for the situation of choice to proceed. Unlike the starkly torn or fragmented response, the existentialist or angsty response to *Mom* is one of neither clear-eyed approval nor sharp disapproval. It may be awfully hopeful or amazingly dreadful. But it is one, and it is ours.

Second, it's more apt to feel existentialist or angsty than torn in response to alleged rifts because the former feelings better track with the commonly shared judgment that what the agent in an alleged rift is required *simpliciter* to do is itself indeterminate. Ask many of us whether the mom in *Mom* is required *simpliciter* to give the medication to the stranger, and we'll tie ourselves in knots searching for an answer. Even after reflecting upon the pros and cons of either course of action, we'll come up short, with no ready answer to the question of what the mom ultimately must do. Too, our lack of reply is more complicated than run-of-the-mill cases of normative ignorance. To see how, compare our reply to what it's like to try to answer the question of whether a given sunset is orange or red. Often, the sunset is a borderline case. Neither 'orange' nor 'red' readily apply. And in these contexts, we're left to our own devices concerning how to answer the seemingly straightforward question of whether the

sunset is orange or red. We fittingly feel frustrated or free regarding how to reply. What this reveals is that it's generally fitting to have minor existentialist or angsty feelings in response to cases of indeterminacy, whenever we're forced to choose from a discrete set of options in response to them. Many share the judgment that it's indeterminate whether the predicates '*all things considered* permissible' and 'required *simpliciter*' apply in alleged rifts. If they're right, then it is at bottom fitting to have feelings of angst or existential hope or dread in response to alleged rifts. The fitting reaction to have, given that the indeterminacy interpretation is true, *matches* the fitting reaction to have in response to the case, given that what the agent in an alleged rift is required *simpliciter* to do is itself indeterminate. The fitting reaction to have, given that the conflict interpretation is true, does not.

For these reasons, I conclude that it's more apt to feel existentialist or angsty in response to some alleged rifts *than* starkly torn in two.³⁰ The upshot is that the indeterminacy interpretation better captures the fitting reaction to have in response alleged rifts than the conflict interpretation. As a result, the indeterminacy interpretation is *ceteris paribus* better than the conflict interpretation.

§3.2 The anti-dilemma argument

Apart from considerations of apt ways of responding to alleged rifts, there is additional reason to suggest that the conflict interpretation is less plausible than the indeterminacy interpretation. The conflict interpretation introduces (additional) genuine normative dilemmas into our theory of normativity, while the indeterminacy interpretation does not.³¹ And in general, an interpretation of cases of practical choice that introduces genuine normative dilemmas into our theory of normativity is *ceteris paribus* less plausible than one that does not. Therefore, the conflict interpretation is *ceteris paribus* worse than the indeterminacy interpretation.

To break down the argument, it will help to begin by projecting a clear picture of genuine normative dilemmas onto the screen. A moral dilemma is a particular kind of genuine normative dilemma. Since most work on dilemmas centers around moral dilemmas, I will develop an account of genuine normative dilemmas by generalizing from our best accounts of moral dilemmas.

Following extant work on moral dilemmas, we can think of a *moral dilemma* as a circumstance C in which an agent S is morally required to φ and morally required to ψ but cannot both φ and ψ ,

³⁰ An objector may insist that the common, fitting reaction we have in or to alleged rifts is better understood as guilt than as existential angst or hope. Note, however, that the special lack of resolution we aptly experience in response to alleged rifts doesn't arise in cases of guilt. As traditionally understood, guilt involves the perception of having done something wrong or of having violated a moral requirement. Not so in cases of existential angst or hope.

³¹ As I clarify below, genuine normative dilemmas are not genuine rifts.

where neither the requirement that $S \varphi$ nor the requirement that $S \psi$ is overridden in C .³² Assuming, however, that morality is but one of many genuine normative domains, we may readily extend our account of moral dilemmas to include the requirements of *any* genuine normative domain.³³ In light of this, I propose that we think of a *genuine normative dilemma* as a circumstance C in which an agent S is required by genuine normative domain A to φ and by genuine normative domain B to ψ but cannot both φ and ψ , where neither the requirement that $S \varphi$ nor the requirement that $S \psi$ is overridden in C and A and B may or may not be the same genuine normative domain.

Now, to see why an interpretation of cases of practical choice that introduces genuine normative dilemmas is *ceteris paribus* less plausible than one that does not, consider the following principles.

Agglomeration (P). If S is required by one (genuine) normative domain X to φ in circumstance C and required by another (genuine) normative domain Y to ψ in C , then it follows that S is required *simpliciter* to φ and ψ in C , unless X outweighs Y in C or Y outweighs X in C .³⁴

Ought-Implies-Can (Q). If S is required *simpliciter* to φ , then it's possible for S to φ .

Contrapositive of Q. If it's impossible for S to perform φ , then S isn't required *simpliciter* to φ .

All three of these principles are *prima facie* plausible. Given these principles, and our account of genuine normative dilemmas, it's easy to see why genuine normative dilemmas are marks against our theoretical tools rather than assets. In a case of genuine normative dilemma, an agent S is required by genuine normative domain X to φ and by genuine normative domain Y to ψ but cannot both φ and ψ . By P, then, S is required *simpliciter* to φ and to ψ . But S cannot both φ and ψ . In other words, it's impossible for S to φ and ψ . So, by the Contrapositive of Q, S is not required *simpliciter* to φ and ψ . It's thus both the case that (a) S is required *simpliciter* to φ and ψ and that (b) S is not required *simpliciter* to φ and ψ . (a) and (b) cannot both be true. Since (a) and (b) are logically contradictory statements, genuine normative dilemmas are marks against our theoretical tools rather than assets.

Yet the rub doesn't stop there, at the level of deontic logic. It further extends to the level of practicality. A practical predicament is a situation wherein, given competing courses of action, we're actively engaged in deciding how to act. And "when in a practical predicament, we must of course

³² Marcus (1980); Foot (2002a): 38, 177; Horta (2003): 557; and Sinnott-Armstrong (1985): 322.

³³ I specify that the requirements come from "genuine" normative domains in order to exclude requirements from domains of normativity which lack any normative force. For the purposes of this paper, I am assuming that morality and love are genuine normative domains.

³⁴ My characterization of P is loosely based on the principle considered in Williams (1973): 166-186.

decide on *one*,” and only one, “thing to do.”³⁵ Since what it is to say that one is required *simpliciter* to φ just is to lay the question of what one must do to rest, the notion of being required *simpliciter* to do something is conceptually bound up with that of practical predicament. The introduction of genuine normative dilemmas into our theory of normativity is problematic because it suggests that it would be reasonable for an individual who faces a practical predicament to decide on more than one thing to do, despite the fact that they can only do one thing. A decision of this sort would involve willing oneself to act in a way that one is incapable of acting, a ‘practical contradiction’.³⁶ Genuine normative dilemmas not only drag logical contradictions onto the scene. They invite practical contradictions as well. Accordingly, I submit that an interpretation of cases of practical choice that introduces genuine normative dilemmas is *ceteris paribus* less plausible than one that does not.

Crucially, the conflict interpretation necessarily introduces (additional) genuine normative dilemmas into our general theory of normativity, while the indeterminacy interpretation does not. Here’s why. Roughly speaking, a genuine normative dilemma is a circumstance wherein we’re required by one genuine normative domain to φ and by another genuine normative domain to ψ , even though we cannot both φ and ψ and neither requirement is overridden. And as defined, the conflict interpretation requires us to read conflict into alleged rifts. It requires us to interpret alleged rifts as involving a moral requirement to φ and a requirement of some other genuine normative domain to $\sim\varphi$. Moreover, according to the fourth and fifth premises of the argument from impartialism, it can be reasonable *not* to follow the demands of morality, at least when morality’s demands conflict in robust ways with the demands of the people and things that give our lives meaning. So, the proponent of the conflict interpretation cannot admit that the normative domain of morality *necessarily* overrides that of, say, love without giving up the argument from impartialism. Insofar as the proponent of the conflict interpretation is likewise a proponent of the argument from impartialism, they are forced to introduce genuine normative dilemma into our theory of normativity.

By contrast, the indeterminacy interpretation doesn’t require us to read conflict into alleged rifts. It instead beckons us to interpret alleged rifts as cases of indeterminacy in ethics. Under the indeterminacy interpretation, it’s either indeterminate that the agent in an alleged rift is morally required to φ or indeterminate that the agent is required by way of some other normative domain to $\sim\varphi$. Either way, the interpretation doesn’t require us to introduce additional genuine normative conflict into our theory of normativity. If anything, it requires us to refrain from doing so. Since the

³⁵ Stroud (1998): 175.

³⁶ Korsgaard (1996).

conflict interpretation necessarily introduces needless and problematic genuine normative dilemmas into our theory of normativity, I conclude that the conflict interpretation is *ceteris paribus* worse than the indeterminacy interpretation.

One may object to my complaint against the conflict interpretation by denying my preferred agglomeration principle P. In P's place, one may propose the following alternative:

Agglomeration' (R). If S is required by one (genuine) normative domain A to φ in C and required by another (genuine) normative domain B to ψ in C, then S is *permitted* simpliciter to φ in C *or* to ψ in C, unless X overrides Y in C or Y overrides X in C.

If R is the correct agglomeration principle, not P, then it isn't true that the conflict interpretation involves the introduction of genuine normative dilemmas into our theory of normativity. For the conflict interpretation then involves the introduction of permissions, not requirements.

But we have reason to doubt that R is correct. For if R is the correct agglomeration principle, then it introduces a new way in which the conflict interpretation struggles to make sense of our apt responses in and to alleged rifts. If in the face of a requirement by A to φ in C and a requirement by B to ψ in C, S is *permitted* simpliciter to either φ *or* ψ , then it's difficult to make sense of why our tendency to respond to alleged rifts with the kind of existential angst or hope that we do is apt. For this reason, I doubt that R is the correct agglomeration principle in the context of alleged rifts.

§3.3 From the plausibility of indeterminacy to the non-inevitability of rifts

I have now offered two lines of reasoning in defense of the claim that the indeterminacy interpretation of alleged rifts is more plausible than the conflict interpretation. Not only does the indeterminacy interpretation allow us to make better sense of our complex responses in and to alleged rifts than the conflict interpretation, but it also avoids the introduction of genuine normative dilemma into our theory of normativity. Since the indeterminacy interpretation of alleged rifts is more plausible than the conflict interpretation, it's more plausible to interpret some alleged rifts as cases of indeterminacy than as genuine rifts. We thus have more reason to think that at least some alleged rifts like *Mom* are not inevitable than that they are inevitable *even if* impartialism about morality is true.

§4. Indeterminacy and Rifts

The astute reader may notice that our focus in §§2-3 was narrowed in on a particular alleged rift, *Mom*. In §2, I argued that it's possible to interpret *Mom* as a case of indeterminacy in ethics rather than as a genuine rift. I then argued that, assuming it's possible to interpret an alleged rift like *Mom* as

a case of indeterminacy in ethics, it's better to interpret an alleged rift like *Mom* as a case of indeterminacy in ethics than as a genuine rift (§3). But in order for the arguments in §§2-3 to generalize to *all* alleged rifts, one must show that it's *possible* to interpret *all* alleged rifts as cases of indeterminacy in ethics. So, to complete my argument against the inevitability of rifts given impartialism about morality, in this section, I will explain why my conclusion in §2 generalizes beyond *Mom* to *all* alleged rifts.

Presumably, we won't find vagueness, a particular kind of indeterminacy, in every alleged rift. And of course, it remains possible to interpret any alleged rift as a case of genuine conflict. All of this is true. So why should we expect to find indeterminacy in every alleged rift? What explains why what's true of *Mom*—that it's possible to interpret the case as a case of indeterminacy in ethics—is true of any alleged rift?

Note, first of all, that *Mom* is no anomaly. *Mom* serves as a *representative* alleged rift because it represents a case in which one allegedly faces a choice between acting on one's commitment to the people or things that give one's life meaning and acting against it, albeit in accordance with morality's requirements. Opting for the latter apparently involves opting to act against one's reason to live. All alleged rifts have, by definition, the same alleged structure.

Considering the structure that all rifts allegedly share, rifts are unique insofar as they present agents with a chasmic choice, a choice between one's substantive, particular commitments and one's abstract, general commitment to morality. In broad strokes, we can say that rifts present agents with an alleged choice between meaning and morality. What this dichotomy in choice suggests is that one's abstract, higher-order commitment to morality cannot in and of itself give one's life substance or meaning. The people and things that give one's life meaning are placed on one side, and morality on the other. In alleged rifts, morality is directly posed *against* one's reason to live. And it is for this reason that alleged rifts represent a faux choice, a choice situation that can plausibly be interpreted as a case of indeterminacy.

Morality's job, I take it, is to tell us how to live *rightly* or *morally*. This isn't controversial. Substantive disagreements over what morality tells us to do aside, we can all agree that morality's role is to direct or guide us in how to live in a specific way, morally. Morality, however, cannot as a matter of principle tell us what to do unless and until we're committed to living or "doing" at all. It cannot tell us how to act unless we have the will to act howsoever. Why not? Because we cannot ask how to live *morally* unless we're committed to living whatsoever. And without a question there can be no answer. In order for morality's demands to apply to us, we must have and maintain a reason to live.

A “morality” that tells us to eliminate our will to live is thereby no morality at all. A “morality” of this kind is a wolf disguised in sheep’s clothing, a morality we ought to turn “away” from “with a sense of distrust.”³⁷ When and if morality is allegedly telling us to eliminate our reason to live, we have, in principle, reason to doubt that the normative predicates ‘permitted’, ‘forbidden’, or ‘required’ determinately apply.

Ultimately, it’s possible to interpret *Mom* as a case of indeterminacy in ethics, at least in part, because we have reason to doubt that the relevant normative predicates determinately apply in the case. And our reason for doubt is that *Mom* represents morality as telling us to undermine our reason to live. Since *all* alleged rifts represent morality as demanding us to undermine our reason to live, *Mom* is no exception. For all alleged rifts, it could *either* be the case that the relevant moral predicates don’t determinately apply *or* that the corresponding predicates of the normative domain posed against morality (e.g., ‘required by love’, ‘forbidden by art’, etc.) don’t. If the former is true, then it’s unspecified whether morality is asking us to act against the demands that follow from our substantive commitments. If the latter is true, then it’s unspecified whether our substantive commitments entail the demand that we shirk morality’s demands. It’s thereby possible to interpret *all* alleged rifts as cases of indeterminacy in ethics. And as I’ve argued above, it’s more plausible to interpret alleged rifts as cases of indeterminacy than as cases of conflict.

§5. (Dis)trusting Morality

I’ve now argued that the argument from impartialism fails to establish that supremacy is false. In particular, I’ve made the case that there are no genuine *riffs*, even if impartialism about morality is true. A key strength of my case against the argument from impartialism is that it doesn’t rely upon the denial of impartialism about morality’s plausibility. Even if impartialism is true, I’ve suggested that morality has a limit. Past a certain point, morality’s dictates—its predicates of permissibility—fail to apply. My defense of the supremacy of morality works not by denying impartialism, but instead by granting careful attention to the limited presence and place of indeterminacy in ethics. Perhaps at first glance my method of defense looks strange. There’s something counterintuitive about defending the authority of morality by limiting the scope of that very authority. I hope, however, to have motivated a new way of approaching morality’s authority. We can trust morality never to lead us astray. At the same time, our trust in morality need not be starry-eyed. Indeed, we should be suspicious of any

³⁷ Foot (2002b): 167.

“morality” that speaks when morality should in principle have no voice. Any “morality” that requires us to eliminate our reason to live is a “morality” we should not trust. Not because it’s too demanding, but because it’s providing answers where there are none to be found.³⁸

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