

The Authority Account of Prudential Options¹

1: INTRODUCTION

Commonsense morality does not always require agents to do the morally optimal action – the action agents have most reason to do (in the circumstances), from the moral point of view. Often, it gives agents an option – it permits them – either to do the morally optimal action or to do some other action or actions instead. One class of such options one might call *prudential options*, which (as I shall understand them) occur when agents are permitted to perform one or more actions that promote their own wellbeing more than the morally optimal action does.

Such options raise a number of difficult questions. Why does commonsense morality contain any options permitting agents not to perform the morally optimal action (when there is such an action) at all? Why doesn't it always require agents to do whatever they have most reason to do, from the moral point of view? Given that commonsense morality does contain such options, moreover, why does it contain prudential options in particular? And why does it contain the particular prudential options it does, permitting agents to perform actions that promote their own wellbeing more than the morally optimal action does in some circumstances but not in others?

In this paper, I put forward (what I believe to be) a new answer to these questions. The key factor in this answer is the idea that moral requirements have an authoritative status, and hence I call it the 'Authority Account' (of prudential options). As will become clear, this

¹ I'd like to thank audiences in Canberra, Melbourne, Perth (Australia), Southampton (England), and Dundee (Scotland), and several anonymous referees, for their comments on this paper. I'm also very grateful to Douglas Portmore for his detailed written comments.

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account raises many complex and controversial issues. My main aim here is simply to introduce this account and show how it works, and in order to do so in as clear and succinct a way as possible I take the following steps. First, I focus on what I take to be simplest version of the Authority Account, leaving aside a number of possible variations. Second, I try to remain neutral about as many issues that don't affect the basic architecture of that account as possible.² Third, I focus exclusively on prudential options (as defined above).³ This is not because I think that prudential options are the only kind of moral option, or because I think the Authority Account cannot explain other kinds of options. I do so in part because it raises fewer issues to focus on one kind of option, but also because of my 'don't take on controversial issues you don't need to' strategy. For it is controversial exactly what kinds of options commonsense morality contains, but at least relatively uncontroversial that it contains prudential options.⁴

² This includes what an agent's 'wellbeing' is. Different answers to this question would not affect the basic story I am trying to tell.

³ I also ignore a number of possible variations to that definition, such as substituting 'wellbeing' with 'expected wellbeing'. Again, such substitutions wouldn't affect the basic structure of the Authority Account.

⁴ The term 'prudential option' is an adaptation of a term first used (to my knowledge) by Shelley Kagan (1989), though related terms were used earlier by Samuel Scheffler (1982) and Michael Slote (1985). Kagan focuses on 'agent-centred options', which permit agents to perform certain actions that *favour* their own *interests* more than *the action that leads to the best consequences overall* (in the circumstances) (1989: 3). The italicized words mark differences from my definition. The first two are relatively unimportant. (I focus on *wellbeing* rather than *interests* mainly because I take the former to be a (slightly) more straightforward category than the latter. If anyone disagrees, they may substitute *wellbeing* with *interests* in what follows without much collateral damage.) The third difference is more noteworthy. Kagan's agent-centred options are defined in terms of *the action that leads to the best consequences overall* (judged by some impersonal standard), a definition that presupposes (or at least takes as a kind of default) a consequentialist conception of morality. (The same is true of Scheffler's 'agent-centred prerogative' (1982: 5, 14) and Slote's 'agent-favoring permissions' (1985: 11).) Prudential

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And finally, I focus mainly here (in sections 2-5) on the Authority Account as an *explanation* of why commonsense morality contains the prudential options it does.⁵ If that explanation turns out to be correct, then of course that would be a major finding. One of the major tasks of moral philosophy is to help us understand central features of commonsense morality, and on almost any account prudential options are such a feature. If the Authority Account does explain why commonsense morality contains the prudential options it does, moreover, that naturally raises the question of whether that account also *justifies* those options. As we shall see, the explanation the Authority Account gives is a normative one, and so these explanatory and justificatory questions are closely related. Much of what I say here, therefore, bears on the justificatory question too. Nevertheless, tackling that question in the kind of detail necessary to provide a convincing answer to it would require addressing a

options, by contrast, are defined in terms of the *morally optimal action* (the action agents have most reason to do, from the moral point of view), a definition that does not build in any such consequentialist presumption. For the concept of the morally optimal action fits as well with many non-consequentialist theories as it does with consequentialist theories. Consider, for example, a non-consequentialist conception of morality that includes side-constraints against performing certain kinds of action, implying that one should not perform those actions even when doing so would maximize the good. Such a conception would have no problem with the notion of the morally optimal action. According to such a conception, it would simply be the case that one does not have most reason to do an action that would maximise the good when there is a side-constraint against doing it, and so that action would not be the morally optimal action. While only those with consequentialist sympathies may think that Kagan's agent-centred options constitute an important category of commonsense morality, then, prudential options are defined in a way that would be acceptable to a wide variety of moral theories and outlooks.

⁵ I follow the standard practice in philosophy of using the term 'commonsense morality' to refer to the form of morality that seems part of common sense to (most of) us (to people of our particular time and place), though the term is somewhat unfortunate in that it may be taken to suggest (wrongly, of course) that this form of morality would also seem part of common sense at all times and places.

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number of difficult issues that can be left open when tackling the explanatory question,⁶ including some that philosophers have hitherto tended to neglect.⁷ Consequently I do not attempt to do so here, though I do map out some of those issues in section 6.

First, though, a thumbnail sketch of the Authority Account.

2: THE BIG PICTURE

In outline, the Authority Account is very simple. There are two key claims. The first I call:

The Authority Claim: Moral requirements are traditionally widely taken to have an authoritative status.

The second claim makes a connection between this conception of the *status* of moral requirements, and a certain feature of their *content*. Given this understanding of the kind of status moral requirements have, the claim goes, certain restrictions on their content are necessary; in particular, morality must contain prudential options. I call this:

⁶ For a certain claim to play a part in a successful explanation of how commonsense morality came to have the prudential options it has today, it is enough that that claim is or has been widely believed. It is not necessary that that claim actually be true, for false claims sometimes influence social phenomena like commonsense morality. To play a part in a (successful) justification of such options, by contrast, a claim must of course be true. This is the main reason why tackling the justificatory question referred to in the main text would require addressing a number of issues that can be left open when tackling the explanatory question. (See further section 6 below.)

⁷ These include questions about the relative strength of different kinds of reasons from what I call the ‘practical point of view’, the most general and inclusive point of view that takes full account of all practical reasons, moral and non-moral (see sections 4.1 and 6 below).

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The Necessity Claim: In order for moral requirements to have an authoritative status, morality must contain prudential options.

It will be clear how these two claims together might explain the fact that commonsense morality contains prudential options. If moral requirements are widely taken to have an authoritative status, and if morality must contain prudential options in order for moral requirements to have that status, then there will be a (rational) pressure to think of morality as containing prudential options. And according to the Authority Account, it is this that (at least in significant part) explains the fact that commonsense morality contains such options.⁸

Now let us look at these claims in a little more detail, starting with the Authority Claim.

3: THE AUTHORITY CLAIM

According to the Authority Claim, moral requirements are traditionally widely taken to have an authoritative status. ‘Authority’ here and throughout this essay is understood in its traditional core sense as *the right to rule, or the right to give orders and compel obedience*. Moral requirements, then, are rules or orders imposed by some agent, agency, or other kind of entity that has the right to impose such rules, and does so. A number of moral outlooks share this general understanding of moral requirements, though these outlooks differ concerning the nature of the entity that imposes those requirements – whether that entity is God, or nature, or reason, or the moral agent herself, or some aspect of the moral agent (such

⁸ ‘At least in significant part’ because the Authority Account gives sufficient conditions for moral options, not necessary conditions, and so does not exclude the possibility that there is some other account that supplies different sufficient conditions for such options.

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as her conscience), or a community of a certain kind, or something else. For the purposes of the Authority Account, what is important is what these different outlooks share, and for this reason (as well as for ease of exposition) I will continue to write about ‘the (agent, agency, or other kind of) entity that imposes moral requirements’ as having the authority in question, in a way that is neutral between these different outlooks.

In saying that moral requirements are ‘traditionally widely taken’ to have an authoritative status I mean that a number of central strands in our moral tradition conceive of moral requirements in this way. The claim is not that moral requirements *must* be conceived in this way, or even that this is the only way of thinking of them in our moral tradition. It is worth underlining, though, how many influential strands in that tradition do conceive of moral requirements in this way, including certain divine command, natural law, contractualist, Kantian, and social command conceptions of morality, each of which takes moral requirements to be rules or commands imposed by some suitable agent, agency, or other kind of entity.

With this clarification in place, the claim that moral requirements are traditionally widely taken to have an authoritative status will not, I take it, be controversial. It will be controversial whether moral requirements actually have such a status – whether they are in fact rules that some appropriate entity imposes by right. But it is hardly controversial that this way of thinking of them has played and continues to play a very influential role in our moral tradition. And this being so, it seems likely that this conception of moral requirements has influenced the understanding of morality and its content that we have today. But to understand better the perspective the Authority Account gives on that influence, we need to turn to the Necessity Claim.

4: THE NECESSITY CLAIM

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The Necessity Claim says that in order for moral requirements to have an authoritative status, morality must contain prudential options. In other words, a necessary condition for moral requirements to have an authoritative status is that morality contains prudential options. Why think that this claim might be correct? According to the argument that I will sketch, because of the conjunction of the following two claims:

The Decisiveness Claim: In order for moral requirements to have an authoritative status, they must be rationally decisive.

And:

The Prudential Claim: In order for moral requirements to be rationally decisive, morality must contain prudential options.

Evidently, if these two claims are correct, the Necessity Claim will follow. What reasons, though, do we have to think that they are correct?

4.1: The Decisiveness Claim

First, some definitions. As I said in section 1, the ‘morally optimal action’ is the action an agent has most reason to do, from the moral point of view. Let us now add that the ‘practically optimal action’ is the action an agent has most reason to do, from the practical point of view. The ‘practical point of view’ is the most general and inclusive point of view

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that takes full account of all practical reasons, moral and non-moral.⁹ ‘Practically suboptimal’ actions are actions that agents have less reason to do than some other action.¹⁰ And a moral requirement is ‘rationally decisive’ if and only if acting on that requirement would be practically optimal.

The Decisiveness Claim says that in order for moral requirements to have an authoritative status, they must be rationally decisive. That is, acting on those requirements must be practically optimal – what agents have most reason to do, from the practical point of view. Why think that this claim might be correct? As I said in section 3, I am taking moral requirements with an authoritative status to be rules that some agent, agency, or other kind of entity imposes by right. If that entity has the right to require agents to act in a certain way only when acting in that way would be practically optimal, then, the Decisiveness Claim follows. And this does seem plausible.

Consider first cases in which the morally optimal action is practically suboptimal (cases in which agents have most reason, from the practical point of view, to do some other action). In such cases there seems to be a very strong case for saying that the entity that imposes moral requirements lacks the right to require agents to do the morally optimal

⁹ Judgements reached from this point of view are sometimes called ‘all things considered’ judgements. I prefer the label ‘practical’ in order to reflect the fact that this is the point of view of practical reason as a whole, and because sometimes people write about ‘all things considered’ *moral* judgements. But in any case these are all merely terminological issues that carry no substantive implications.

¹⁰ These definitions should be understood to imply that in situations in which there is no (one) action which an agent has most reason to do, from the practical point of view, such as a situation in which she has equally strong reason to do two different actions (and more reason to do either of those actions than any other action), each of those actions is neither practically optimal (such that she has most reason to do it) nor practically suboptimal (such that she has most reason to do some other action).

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action.¹¹ 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?

This argument is reinforced when one takes account of the fact that on the conception of moral requirements at issue here the entity that imposes moral requirements has the right to compel agents to act on those requirements, which includes the right to impose sanctions on those who fail to do so. For it would seem to be unfair to punish people or to impose other sanctions on them for refusing to perform a practically suboptimal action.¹² And if it is unfair to sanction people for refusing to perform a practically suboptimal, then again it is not clear what could give the entity that imposes moral requirements the right to do so. To say that that entity has the right to rule is not to say that it has the right to rule as a despot, after all, with no constraints. And it seems reasonable that such constraints should include prohibitions against requiring agents to perform practically suboptimal actions, and (a fortiori) against employing sanctions in an attempt to compel them to perform such actions.

¹¹ I assume that being morally optimal is a necessary condition for being a moral requirement, whether or not it is sufficient.

¹² Cf. Darwall 2006: 292.

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Next, consider cases in which a morally optimal action fails to be rationally decisive not because it is practically suboptimal, but because there is no action that is practically optimal, because the relevant reasons are tied, or for some other reason (because those reasons are not (precisely) comparable, perhaps, or because they are on a par).¹³ Does the entity that imposes moral requirements have the right to require agents to do the morally optimal action in such cases? The reasons to think that it does not are the same as in cases in which the morally optimal action in question is practically suboptimal, and though not as strong as in those cases they still seem strong enough. For again, given that morality constitutes just one department of practical reason among others, and that in such cases the moral reasons do not outweigh the other relevant reasons,¹⁴ from the practical point of view, it is not clear why the entity that imposes moral requirements should have the right to demand that agents act on the moral reasons, and to back up such demands with the threat of sanctions.

At this point, someone may question the claim that morality constitutes just one department of practical reason among others. Perhaps morality is special in some way, and perhaps in virtue of this form of specialness the entity that imposes moral requirements does

¹³ If there are such cases; this is another matter that I leave open in this essay. (For discussion of the relation of incomparability, see e.g. Chang 1997, and of being on a par Chang 2002.) If moral reasons were not comparable with other types of reasons *at all*, then no morally optimal action would be practically optimal, and so the whole story I am telling here would break down. I am assuming, then, that moral and other reasons are not completely incomparable. But this assumption is consistent with the possibility that moral and other reasons are not *always*, *precisely* comparable (see e.g. Derek Parfit on 'rough comparability' (1984: 431)).

¹⁴ I often use common metaphors like 'weighing (up)' reasons and comparing how 'strong' they are in this essay. I do not attempt to unpack these metaphors, and say little about other possible relations between reasons. This again is simply for reasons of economy and clarity and in order to avoid contentious issues that do not affect the main story I want to tell. All that I say is (I think) consistent with at least most plausible ways of unpacking these metaphors and with at least most other plausible relations between reasons.

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have the right to require agents to do the morally optimal action even in cases in which that action is not practically optimal. I cannot anticipate and respond to all such arguments here, but I will state a response that applies to such arguments in general. Whatever the way in which morality is special, it would seem reasonable to expect that specialness to manifest itself by making (certain) moral reasons especially strong (as well, perhaps, as in other ways). And if so, there should be little or no need for the entity that imposes moral requirements to have the right to require agents to perform morally optimal actions that aren't practically optimal. For if (certain) moral reasons are very strong then in most or all of the important cases the actions that are morally optimal would also be practically optimal.

So there seem to be strong grounds for the claim that the entity that imposes moral requirements has the right to require agents to perform morally optimal actions only when those actions are also practically optimal. And if this claim is correct, then the Decisiveness Claim (that in order to have an authoritative status, moral requirements must be rationally decisive) follows. Now let us turn to the Prudential Claim.

4.2: The Prudential Claim

The Prudential Claim says that in order for moral requirements to be rationally decisive, morality must contain prudential options (options that permit agents to perform certain actions that promote their own wellbeing more than the morally optimal action does). There are four premises in the argument I will give for this claim. The first is that agents have prudential reasons, by which I mean agent-relative reasons to promote one's own wellbeing (independent of and in addition to any agent-neutral reasons one may have to promote the wellbeing of anyone, including oneself). The second is that these prudential reasons play a greater role in determining which actions are practically optimal than in determining which actions are morally optimal. Let me pause to explain this formulation, which I choose again

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in part to ensure that the Authority Account is consistent with as many reasonable views as possible. Some people think that prudential reasons play *no* role in determining which actions are morally optimal.¹⁵ These people will naturally agree with the second premise, as long as they agree with the first (for of course if agents have prudential reasons those reasons will play a role in determining which actions are practically optimal, and *a* role is greater than *no* role.) Others think, by contrast, that prudential reasons *do* play a role in determining which actions are morally optimal. Most of these people too, though, will agree with the second premise (that such reasons play a *greater* role in determining which actions are practically optimal than in determining which actions are morally optimal). For it is a platitude that morality is one department of practical reason amongst others, and one in which considerations concerning the agent's wellbeing play a lesser role than they do in practical reason as a whole, given that practical reason as a whole also contains other departments, including prudence.¹⁶

The third premise is that because prudential reasons play a greater role in determining which actions are practically optimal than in determining which actions are morally optimal, these reasons sometimes make it the case that morally optimal actions are not practically optimal. From the moral point of view my prudential reason to see a band this evening may

¹⁵ These people include those who accept standard versions of (act) consequentialism, according to which the agent's wellbeing counts for no more than anyone else's from the moral point of view; if agents have prudential reasons, these reasons play no role in determining which actions are morally optimal.

¹⁶ So this second group of people think that even when determining which actions are morally optimal, prudential reasons play some role (considerations concerning the agent's wellbeing do not (always) have the same weight as considerations concerning the wellbeing of others), but that such reasons play a *greater* role when determining which actions are practically optimal (considerations concerning the agent's wellbeing have *more* extra weight when determining what action is practically optimal than when determining which actions are morally optimal).

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be weaker than my moral reason to visit the local home for the elderly, for example, and in part because of this visiting the local home for the elderly may be morally optimal. Given that prudential reasons play a greater role in determining which actions are practically optimal than in determining which actions are morally optimal, though, my reason to see the band may be stronger than my reason to visit the local home for the elderly (or any other moral reasons) from the practical point of view.¹⁷ Or neither the prudential nor the moral reasons may be stronger from the practical point of view, because those reasons are tied, or for some other reason. If so, my prudential reason to see the band would make it the case that the morally optimal action in this context (visiting the local home for the elderly) is not practically optimal.

If the entity that imposes moral requirements required agents to perform such (morally optimal but practically suboptimal) actions, those requirements would not be rationally decisive (given that rationally decisive requirements are those it would be practically optimal to act on). To avoid this – to ensure that moral requirements are rationally decisive – the entity that imposes moral requirements must permit agents not to perform such actions. And so on the plausible assumption that agents are always morally permitted to perform the morally optimal action – and this is the fourth premise – the entity that imposes moral requirements must permit agents to perform either the morally optimal action or the alternative action that promotes their wellbeing more in such circumstances. And these, of

¹⁷ For (act) consequentialists, this will simply be because prudential reasons aren't taken into account at all from the moral point of view, but are taken into account from the practical point of view. For those who think that prudential reasons play some role in determining which actions are morally optimal, but a greater role in determining which actions are practically optimal, this will be because considerations concerning the agent's wellbeing have *more* extra weight (compared with those of others) when determining what action is practically optimal than when determining which actions are morally optimal.

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course, are prudential options. Hence the Prudential Claim that in order for moral requirements to be rationally decisive, morality must contain prudential options.¹⁸

So the Prudential Claim follows from the four premises stated above: that agents have prudential reasons, that those reasons play a greater role in determining which actions are practically optimal than in determining which actions are morally optimal, that consequently those reasons sometimes make it the case that morally optimal actions are not practically optimal, and that agents are always morally permitted to perform the morally optimal action. And all of these premises seem to be fairly uncontroversial, from a commonsense point of view. It is hardly controversial that agents have prudential reasons.¹⁹ As noted above, it is somewhat controversial whether those reasons should be counted as moral reasons (or whether in some other way they play a role in determining what the morally optimal action is). For the reasons just given, though, the Authority Account can remain neutral about this

¹⁸ The general idea that (in my terms) agents have moral options when morally optimal actions aren't practically optimal has been put forward in one form or another before. One can (I think) find the germ of the idea in Foot 1978, but it was first clearly outlined (to my knowledge) by Michael Slote (1991: 917) and Michael E. Bratman (1994: 325–32), and has since been developed as part of a consequentialist moral theory in a number of works by Douglas W. Portmore (see e.g. 2003, 2008, and 2011). None of these authors gives the explanation the Authority Account gives why agents are not morally required to perform morally optimal actions that are not practically optimal, though (i.e. because moral requirements are taken to be rules that the entity that imposes moral requirements imposes by right, and morality has no right to require agents to perform actions that aren't practically optimal).

¹⁹ This is not to say that philosophers have never questioned this view. The point is rather that this view is well-entrenched in commonsense morality and practical reason. And that is what is important here, given that I am presenting the Authority Account as an explanation why commonsense morality contains the prudential options it does. For any explanation of why such a real-life social practice developed as it did would have to appeal to views that are widely held. It is of course a separate matter whether those views are actually correct. The same point applies to what I go on to say about the other premises in the main text.

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issue. For both sides are likely to agree with the second premise, that such prudential reasons play a greater role in determining which actions are practically optimal than in determining which actions are morally optimal. This premise, in turn, explains the third premise (that prudential reasons sometimes make it the case that morally optimal actions are not practically optimal). Because prudential reasons play a greater role in determining which actions are practically optimal than in determining which actions are morally optimal, they are sometimes outweighed by (other) moral reasons from the moral point of view but not from the practical point of view (as (by hypothesis) in the case described above where I must decide whether to see a band this evening or to visit the local home for the elderly). When this is so prudential reasons make it the case that morally optimal actions are not practically optimal.

The second premise doesn't entail the third premise, though. It would be possible in principle for prudential reasons to play a greater role in determining which actions are practically optimal than in determining which actions are morally optimal without ever making it the case that morally optimal actions are not practically optimal, on the one hand, and it would also be possible in principle that such reasons always made it the case that morally optimal actions are not practically optimal, on the other.²⁰ Neither of these possibilities seems very likely, though, and certainly neither is the commonsense view. To see this, go back to the example I used earlier, when I suggested that my prudential reason to see a band this evening might make it the case that the morally optimal action (visiting the local home for the elderly) is not practically optimal. If it were part of our commonsense understanding of morality and practical reason that prudential reasons never made it the case that morally optimal actions are not practically optimal, then that understanding would rule out this possibility. And similarly, if it were part of our commonsense understanding of

²⁰ One might want to add 'when prudential reasons are relevant', if such reasons are not always relevant.

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morality and practical reason that prudential reasons *always* made it the case that morally optimal actions are not practically optimal, then that understanding would rule out the possibility that visiting the local home for the elderly would be practically optimal (since I have a prudential reason to go to see the band). In fact, though, both of these possibilities would be open, at least from a commonsense point of view. It may be that visiting the local home for the elderly would be practically optimal, particularly if my reason to do so is especially strong (because my elderly mother has just moved there, for example) and my reason to see the band is relatively weak. Similarly, it may be that visiting the local home for the elderly would *not* be practically optimal, particularly if my reason to see the band is especially strong (it is my only chance to see them, perhaps, and they are my favourite band) and my reason to visit the local home for the elderly is relatively weak. The point is that the answer to such questions is something that would have to be established by argument, drawing on the details of the particular case; our commonsense understanding of morality and practical reason does not settle such questions decisively and invariably one way or the other, as it would if it implied that prudential reasons either never, or always, made it the case that morally optimal actions are not practically optimal.

The fourth premise (that agents are always morally permitted to perform the morally optimal action) also seems plausible. Why should an agent ever be *morally* prohibited from doing what is *morally* optimal? To be sure, there may be prohibitions against performing morally optimal actions that are practically suboptimal.²¹ But if so, such prohibitions will be practical prohibitions, not moral ones; that is, such prohibitions will derive from the practical point of view, not from the moral point of view.

The Prudential Claim (that in order for moral requirements to be rationally decisive, morality must contain prudential options) seems plausible, then, at least given certain

²¹ Or there may not; I am not assuming the existence of such prohibitions here.

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premises that are strongly entrenched in commonsense morality and practical reason. And with that claim, we have the core of the Authority Account clearly in view. In the next section I will briefly summarise what has been said so far, and discuss one or two further issues.

5: TAKING STOCK

In this essay, I am putting forward the Authority Account as an explanation of why commonsense morality contains prudential options, which permit agents to perform certain actions that promote their own wellbeing more than the morally optimal action does. At the root of the explanation that account provides is the Authority Claim, which says that moral requirements are traditionally widely taken to have an authoritative status; that is, to be rules that the agent, agency or other kind of entity that imposes moral requirements imposes by right. The bridge between this claim and the fact that commonsense morality contains prudential options is provided by the Necessity Claim, which says that in order for moral requirements to have such a status, morality must contain prudential options. I discussed the Authority Claim in section 3, and provided an argument for the Necessity Claim in section 4, based in turn on arguments for two further claims, the Decisiveness Claim (that in order to have an authoritative status, moral requirements must be rationally decisive), and the Prudential Claim (that in order for moral requirements to be rationally decisive, morality must contain prudential options). And the Authority Claim and Necessity Claim together suggest the explanation of prudential options that I outlined in section 2. The fact that moral requirements are widely taken to have an authoritative status creates a (rational) pressure to think of morality as containing prudential options, given that (if the Necessity Claim is correct) morality must contain prudential options in order to have that status. And according

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to the Authority Account, the fact that commonsense morality contains such options is (at least in significant part) the result of this pressure.

The Authority Account also provides another, less direct explanation of the fact that commonsense morality contains prudential options. In the story I have just given the source of the belief that moral requirements are rationally decisive is the belief that those requirements have an authoritative status (via the Decisiveness Claim, which tells us that in order to have an authoritative status, moral requirements must be rationally decisive). It is possible that the belief that moral requirements are rationally decisive has other sources too, though. And even to the degree that that belief is derived from the belief that moral requirements have an authoritative status, the belief that moral requirements are rationally decisive, once established, might take on a life of its own and come to be a self-standing aspect of commonsense moral thought, widely held even by those who do not believe that moral requirements have an authoritative status (by those who believe that moral requirements do not have an authoritative status, that is, and those who have no clear views about whether or not they do). If so, the argument I gave in section 4.2 for the Prudential Claim (that in order for moral requirements to be rationally decisive, morality must contain prudential options) would still apply as before, and might therefore be able to explain why commonsense morality contains prudential options without any immediate reference to the idea that moral requirements have an authoritative status. To the degree that the belief that moral requirements are rationally decisive nevertheless has (or had) its origin in the belief that those requirements have an authoritative status, though, the latter belief would still play an important background role in the explanation why commonsense morality contains prudential options.²²

²² One is reminded here of Elizabeth Anscombe's well-known argument that notions like moral obligation continue to be used even though the context that is needed to such notions their sense (according to her, a law

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The explanation the Authority Account gives why commonsense morality contains prudential options at all also implies an explanation why commonsense morality contains the particular prudential options it does. On the Authority Account, commonsense morality contains prudential options when it (or commonsense practical reason) takes agents to have prudential reasons that are sufficiently strong, from the practical point of view, to make it the case that morally optimal actions are not practically optimal. It is when commonsense morality *takes* agents to have such reasons because commonsense morality is of course a real-life social practice rather than a philosopher's theory, and as such its content depends on common perceptions about how the relevant reasons stand. If such perceptions do not match the reality, then commonsense morality may not contain the prudential options it should, even if morality should contain prudential options of some sort.²³

As I noted in section 1, the Authority Account may generalise. Other (types of) reasons – reasons to promote one's *interests*, for example, in a sense broader than one's wellbeing – may play the role prudential reasons play in the story just sketched, and if so the

conception of ethics, with God as the lawgiver) has largely been left behind (1958). The story I have just sketched needn't involve any incoherence, however, though if the view that moral requirements are rationally decisive is no longer grounded in the view that those requirements are authoritative, it would need some other grounding, unless it is to be taken as a basic assumption.

²³ Another important implication of the fact that judgements about the relative strength of moral and prudential reasons have to be made in the real world is that there are likely to be many cases in which it is quite unclear how those reasons stand – whether the moral reasons outweigh the prudential reasons, or vice versa, or neither set of reasons outweighs the others. Given the gravity of the language of moral requirements, on the view that takes them to be authoritative, there may be a tendency to regard agents as not being morally required to do the morally optimal action in those cases. If so, the effect would be to limit how much self-sacrifice (sacrifice of one's own wellbeing) commonsense morality requires, quite possibly to an extent that (given how the relevant reasons actually stand) is not justified. This might help to explain a feature of commonsense morality that many have found curious: how little self-sacrifice it requires in certain domains, such as that of general beneficence.

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Authority Account may also be able to explain other (types of) options – potentially, indeed, all the kinds of options there are. At the same time, it should be noted that the Authority Account gives sufficient conditions for moral options, not necessary conditions. It says that commonsense morality contains prudential options, in particular, when it takes agents to have prudential reasons that are sufficiently strong, from the practical point of view, to prevent morally optimal actions from being practically optimal, not that commonsense morality contains prudential options *only* in those circumstances. If there is some other account that supplies different sufficient conditions for such options, then, the Authority Account may explain some but not all of the (prudential and/or other) options commonsense morality contains. Or those options may result in some more complex way from the interactions between the conditions the Authority Account supplies and those supplied by some other account or accounts.

These are issues that will have to be taken up on another occasion, though. For now, I hope just that what I have written is enough to suggest that the Authority Account at least merits further investigation as an explanatory account of prudential (and possibly other) options. I will finish here, as promised, by saying a little about whether the Authority Account might *justify* such options.

6: THE AUTHORITY ACCOUNT AS A JUSTIFICATORY ACCOUNT

The Authority Account will justify prudential options if moral requirements have an authoritative status, and the Necessity Claim is correct (for the Necessity Claim tells us that in order for moral requirements to have such a status, morality must contain prudential options). Is the Necessity Claim correct? I gave an argument for that claim in section 4. In my view, that argument is a strong one, but of course it might be challenged in a number of ways.

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One important consideration is that in making that argument I appealed a number of times to the fact that certain views are well-entrenched in commonsense morality or commonsense practical reason. Such an appeal was legitimate at that point because then I was focusing on the Authority Account as an explanation how commonsense morality came to have the kind of prudential options it has today, and evidently such an explanation may appeal to views that are widely held, whether or not they are correct. In order to establish whether the argument I gave for the Necessity Claim is sound, though, one must of course ask whether those views are in fact correct. And one also needs to ask whether there are any other flaws in the argument I gave in section 4,²⁴ and whether there are any other arguments that might support the Necessity Claim.

Evidently, conducting this exercise in any detail would require at least another paper to itself, and so is not something I will take on here. Instead, I will consider what might follow if the Necessity Claim is correct and if it is not. If the Necessity Claim is not correct, then the Authority Account won't justify any prudential options at all. In some ways, this would be a disappointing result. It might nonetheless have important implications, though, if the Authority Account provides a significant part of the explanation why commonsense morality contains the particular prudential options it does. For that account might then

²⁴ Not that all flaws would undermine the Authority Account altogether; some would merely require modifications, leading to different versions of that account. As against what I said in section 4.1, for example, one might argue that there are certain exceptional cases in which the entity that imposes moral requirements does have the right to require agents to perform practically suboptimal actions. As long as any such cases really were exceptional, they would complicate rather than fundamentally change the story the Authority Account tells, and so would lead to a different version of that account rather than a fundamentally different kind of account. As I said in section 1, though, I won't discuss any such different versions of the Authority Account here; for now what is important is the general shape of the Authority Account rather than any possible variations.

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provide powerful materials for an error theory that explains why commonsense morality contains those options, when perhaps it should not do so.²⁵

What if the Necessity Claim is correct?²⁶ Would it follow that the Authority Account justifies prudential options? Well, it would if moral requirements have an authoritative status; that is, if they are rules or commands that some appropriate agent or agency imposes by right. For if morality must contain prudential options in order for moral requirements to have an authoritative status (the Necessity Claim), and moral requirements *do* have an authoritative status, then of course morality must contain prudential options. As I noted in section 3, this conception of moral requirements has been and continues to be very influential. But is it correct? Do moral requirements actually have an authoritative status?

Some may claim that this is a badly formed question. There are a number of different ways of conceiving morality and its requirements, they might say, and one of those conceptions (or sets of conceptions) takes moral requirements to be rules imposed by some appropriate agent by right. One can ask a number of questions about this conception – how influential it has been, how it relates to other conceptions, what its implications are, and so on. But one can't sensibly ask whether it is the 'right' conception – whether moral requirements *actually* have such a status. For those who take such a line, when we ask whether morality should contain prudential options, the answer would have to be simply: if

²⁵ 'Perhaps' because it is always possible that some other account justifies precisely those options. If that other account is significantly different to the Authority Account, though, that seems unlikely, to the degree that it is the Authority Account and not that other account that explains those options. For it would be quite a coincidence for one account (the Authority Account, by hypothesis) to explain without justifying precisely those options that some other account justifies but doesn't explain.

²⁶ For the purposes of argument I will assume it is in the remainder of this section.

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you conceive of moral requirements as rules imposed by some appropriate agent, yes; if you do not, the question is still open.²⁷

Others would argue that we can sensibly ask which of these conceptions of morality and its requirements is the correct one – or the one that makes best sense of the totality of our practices, perhaps, or the one that we have most reason to embrace on reflection, or something of that sort. If that is right, and if a conception of moral requirements as rules imposed by some appropriate agent is the preferred one, then the Authority Account would indeed justify prudential options (given our assumption that the Necessity Claim is correct). That of course that would be a major finding, for we would then at last have found out both that prudential options are justified and what justifies them.²⁸ If, on the other hand, that conception is not the preferred one, then the Authority Account would not justify any prudential options at all. In that case, again, the Authority Account might provide materials for an error theory explaining why commonsense morality contains the kind of prudential options it does, when perhaps it should not do so.²⁹

²⁷ Still open, because again even if the Authority Account doesn't justify prudential options, some other account may do so.

²⁸ Though this claim would be subject to a justificatory analogue of the explanatory point made in the penultimate paragraph of section 5 – that the Authority Account gives sufficient conditions for prudential options, not necessary conditions, and that it may therefore justify some but not all of the prudential options that are justified.

²⁹ 'Perhaps' because again it is possible that some other account justifies precisely those options. The less direct explanation the Authority Account provides why commonsense morality contains prudential options outlined in section 5 also suggests another, intermediate possibility. For the purposes of argument, suppose that the belief that moral requirements are authoritative is at least a major source of the belief that moral requirements are rationally decisive, that the Prudential Claim (that morality must contain prudential options, if moral requirements are rationally decisive) is correct, and that moral requirements are *not* in fact authoritative. In that case, the Authority Account might explain the fact that commonsense morality contains prudential options, but

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Suppose (at least for the purposes of argument) that the Authority Account does justify prudential options of some sort. The next question is whether it justifies exactly the prudential options we find in commonsense morality. As we saw in section 5, commonsense morality contains prudential options, on the Authority Account, when it takes agents to have prudential reasons that are sufficiently strong, from the practical point of view, to make it the case that morally optimal actions are not practically optimal. That will be precisely when morality *should* contain prudential options if commonsense morality (or commonsense practical reason) identifies those circumstances correctly. If it does, then the Authority Account would justify exactly those prudential options we find in commonsense morality. If it does not, then though the Authority Account would justify prudential options of some sort, it would not justify exactly the prudential options we find in commonsense morality. In that case, we may again need an error theory, but this time that theory would not concern the Authority Account per se, but rather how certain mistaken judgements about the relative strength of prudential and (other) moral reasons come to be widely accepted.

If the Authority Account justifies prudential options of some sort, then, the key question to focus on, if one wants to determine if that account justifies exactly the prudential options commonsense morality contains is this: in what circumstances are prudential reasons strong enough, from the practical point of view, to make it the case that morally optimal actions are not practically optimal? Whatever the answer to this question, the conclusion that it may be the key question to focus on is striking, given how normative ethics is normally done. For it is rare for philosophers even to attempt to tackle such questions about the relative

it would not justify those options, given that it would be based in part on a false belief (that moral requirements are authoritative). Nevertheless, if moral requirements are in fact (or should be conceived as being) rationally decisive, and the argument I gave for the Prudential Claim (in section 4.2) is sound, then that argument *would* justify prudential options.

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strength of different kinds of reasons from the practical point of view. If the Authority Account is on the right lines, then, it would have some quite radical implications concerning how we should do normative ethics.

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