

The Profoundest Problem in Ethics

- Handling Practical Reasons in Conflict (PROFOUND)-

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

“The Profoundest Problem in Ethics”

PROFOUND addresses one of the most fundamental puzzles in our lives: “What should we do when our moral obligations conflict with what is best for ourselves?” In such situations, there is a conflict between our *moral reasons*—roughly, reasons provided by concerns for others—and our *prudential reasons*—roughly, reasons to promote our own well-being. The conflict is most pertinent in cases where we are forced to choose between doing what morality requires and doing what promotes our own well-being.

The conflict between moral and prudential reasons is pervasive and concerns a variety of different types of cases. It thus forces us to make difficult choices with deep practical impact on an individual as well as a societal level. To illustrate: You might have moral reason to help a friend moving, but prudential reason to stay home and getting some pressing things done. You might have moral reason to reduce your carbon footprint, but prudential reason to take the flight to Thailand for vacation. You might have moral reason to agree to be vaccinated against a certain virus, but prudential reason to refuse provided that other people will be vaccinated. We might have moral reason to accept that a hostel for drug addicts is located in our neighborhood, but prudential reason to protest against it out of concern for our families. And so on.

The conflict between moral and prudential reasons has been called “the profoundest problem in ethics” (Sidgwick 1907). However, despite its significance, it has not been at the center of attention in contemporary moral philosophy.

State of the Art

A central topic in the history of analytic moral philosophy is to establish the normative significance of morality. The aim of this work has mostly been to defend morality against various forms of scepticism entailing that there are no moral reasons or that they are limited in scope. However, even if it would be possible to demonstrate that there are moral reasons and that all agents are subject to them, this does not address the concerns of PROFOUND: We still need to inquire about the relative importance of moral reasons compared to prudential reasons.

In the more recent literature on normativity, there has been considerable interest in the concept of what we have ‘most reason’ or ‘overall reason’ to do, which is claimed to determine what we ‘ought to do all things considered’ (Stroud 1997; McLeod 2001; Crisp 2006; Wedgwood 2007; Parfit 2011; Broome 2013; Chang 2016; Nebel 2019). Implicitly underlying such views is the following claim:

Standard View (S): (1) Different types of normative reasons can be *compared* with one another. (2) When reasons are in conflict, we can determine what we ought to do all things considered by *weighing* their relative strength.

The Standard View (S) entails both (1), the *comparability claim*, and (2) *the determinability claim*. According to (S), we might compare different types of reasons and appeal to the metaphor of weighing reasons, such that stronger reasons outweigh weaker reasons, and thereby determine what we ought to do all things considered (Chang 2004a; Skorupski 2010; Broome 2013; Scanlon 2014; Lord & Maguire 2016). As (S) is a general thesis about reasons, it should be able to accommodate conflicts between all types of reasons, including moral and prudential reasons (Chang 2004b; Crisp 2006; Wedgwood 2007, 2013; Parfit 2011; Broome 2013; Dorsey 2016).

The Standard View (S) is presumed in much theorizing in moral philosophy. However, little work has been done to defend (S) with respect to conflicts between moral and prudential reasons. Thus, there are currently few explicit proposals in the literature about how such conflicts should be handled. Instead, moral philosophers have mostly focused on how to weigh different *moral* reasons with one another. As a result, there is little

explicit discussion of what we ought to do *all things considered* when moral reasons conflict with *other* types of reasons. Similarly, there is much discussion on moral dilemmas in which there are conflicting moral reasons to perform incompatible actions. However, this discussion concerns conflicts between moral reasons rather than between moral reasons and other reasons.

To the extent that (1)—the comparability claim—has been defended at all, one has tended to rely on the general argument from nominal-notable comparisons, which we think can be questioned. Moreover, doubts about comparability have important historical precursors. Sidgwick found no way to resolve conflicts between self-regarding reasons and reasons concerned with the greater good. The result was a “dualism of practical reason”, where these reasons are seen as incomparable (Sidgwick 1907). Worries of a similar nature were indicated by early British ethicists, such as Reid and Butler (Frankena 1992), and are shared by some contemporary theorists (Copp 1997). At the same time, well-developed theories that reject (1) are generally lacking. However, some noteworthy work has recently been done in this regard (Copp 2009; Sagdahl 2013; Sagdahl, Forthcoming a).

Even less work has been done to defend (2)—the determinability claim—in cases where the conflicting reasons are of very different types. If moral and prudential reasons are comparable, we may expect the relationship between them to display a certain structure that reveals the way in which the reasons compare so as to resolve conflicts between them (Chang 1997, Sagdahl Forthcoming b). However, to the extent that descriptions of the relationship between moral and other reasons are to be found at all, they tend not to display *weighing* different types of reasons against one another, but rather *prioritizing* one type of reasons. For example, moral reasons are claimed to be *overriding*, i.e. moral requirements always trump prudential considerations (Smith 1994; Stroud 1997; Portmore 2011; Wedgwood 2013). Alternatively, rational egoism gives priority to prudential reasons or entails that they are the only reasons with genuine normative weight (Gauthier 1986).

Research Questions and Methodology

PROFOUND consist of two main parts: **I.** Assessing (S) critically and systematically. **II.** Developing novel ways of understanding conflicts between moral and prudential reasons.

I. Assessing the Standard View

In assessing the Standard View (S), we will investigate its two constituent parts, (1) and (2), and identify what assumptions underlie them. We will also investigate the implications of accepting or denying (S) and the extent to which this would cohere with other fundamental commitments as regards normativity.

In investigating (1), the comparability claim, we will draw on the general philosophical literature on comparability. According to standard analyses of comparability, when comparing the strength of reasons, we need a *covering value* that specifies the dimension by which reasons are compared and what weight they have (Chang 2002). It is plausible to think that this is possible for *intra-type comparisons* of reasons. For example, on one view prudential reasons could be compared with respect to what degree the actions they support contribute to the good life of the agent, and moral reasons could be compared with respect to what degree the actions they support contribute to the impartial good of all agents. There are competing conceptions of what *moral* and *prudential* weight amounts to, but they are at least clear and well-developed. By contrast, with respect to *inter-type comparisons* between moral and prudential reasons, it is much less evident in what the covering value would be constituted by. Moreover, even if we could identify such a value, it is not at all clear that it would enable us to compare different types of reasons with enough precision allowing us to determine what we ought to do all things considered. If the value is of a generic nature (e.g. “living well”), it may not have the requisite content that would enable it to guide our comparisons. This would also threaten (2), the determinability claim.

A common way to avoid the problem of specifying an overarching covering value which comprises both morality and prudence is to claim that morality or (less typically) prudence itself constitutes the most fundamental value which determines the relative weight of reasons (Wedgwood 2013; cf. Schafer 2016). A problem with this type of view is that, intuitively, we do not seem to be unreasonable in pursuing either moral *or* prudential ends (Gert 2004; Dorsey 2016; Strandberg 2018). For example, if morality is the covering value, it seems that we would be irrational in pursuing our own well-being instead of acting morally, which might seem as an implausible implication. Moreover, “morality” is only a placeholder that needs to be specified by a particular moral theory in order to yield determinate answers. However, letting a particular theory of the traditional sort (e.g. a utilitarian or deontological theory) specify the covering value tends to yield overly moralistic results. In particular, there is a risk that an agent quite generally ought to sacrifice her own well-

being for the sake of morality. In addition, it entails an implausible picture of an agent's practical reasoning where she needs to keep her prudential reasons in the background when deliberating about what to do.

In part **I** of PROFOUND, we aim to argue that these problems constitute serious challenges to (S). All project participants will collaborate on this topic and our conclusions will be informed by results of the three subprojects in part **II**. For example, in exploring silencing and exclusionary reasons, subproject **A** will question established assumptions about how reasons are compared and weighed with one another. Correspondingly, in denying determinability, subproject **B** will address the implication that it must be irrational not to do what one has strongest moral reason to do. Furthermore, in denying comparability, subproject **C** will address the common argument that there *must* be some overarching value enabling *inter-type* comparisons, even if we cannot specify it.

In assessing (S), we will also consider what implications problems with this view have for the entire field of moral philosophy. In normative and applied ethics, where philosophers aim to provide verdicts about what we ought to do, there appears to be two major ways of understanding these verdicts. On the first alternative, they are verdicts about what one *ought to do all things considered*. On the second alternative, they represent a *moral* standpoint and are verdicts about what one *morally* ought to do. The former is problematic given doubts about (S) and doubts whether morality constitutes the most fundamental covering value. The latter is problematic since narrow moral verdicts might not be the practical verdicts we ultimately are interested in when trying to decide what to do. In **I**, we therefore also address how applied and normative ethics should be conceived of and pursued in the light of the problems with (S).

II. Developing Alternatives to the Standard View

In this part of the project, three alternatives to (S) will be explored in three subprojects that successively depart from it: **A**, **B**, and **C**. **A** is consistent with both (1) and (2) in (S) but departs from the way in which these claims are standardly understood. **B** accepts (1) in (S) but denies (2). Lastly, **C** denies both (1) and (2) in (S).

A. Alternatives to Weighing: Silencing and Exclusion

In subproject **A**, we will examine a strategy where both (1) and (2) in (S) are saved by reconsidering these claims. The Standard View in (S) presupposes (1) comparability (standardly understood in terms of a covering value) and (2) determinability (once we have a relevant covering value for making comparisons in place, we can determine what we ought to do). The most natural way to understand (2) is in terms of *weighing*, since 'value' is a scalar notion that comes in degrees. Thus, given that the relevant covering value is specified, it might seem that we can determine the weight of reasons based on the amount of value involved.

The overarching strategy in this subproject is to investigate whether reasons can behave differently from weighing against each other. This would either throw (2) in doubt (if it is understood in terms of weighing) *or*, on a more charitable reading, (2) would have to be understood more broadly (in which case the weighing behaviour of reasons would not entirely disappear). In the subproject, we set out to investigate such alternative behaviours of reasons. One essential feature of this strategy is that it makes possible to reformulate (2) by broadening it in a way that helps to explain the plausibility of (S). In addition, the strategy makes it possible to reinterpret (1) in a way that also helps to account for (S). In particular, considering a behaviour of reasons different from how weighing typically is understood might provide a way of comparing reasons without the invocation of a covering value. Thus, although the emphasis of the strategy is on (2), it might also help to reformulate (1) and thereby to defend (S).

The subproject will focus on the phenomenon of *silencing* (Tanyi 2013). Provisionally, silencing might be understood as follows: In (some) cases where reasons are in conflict, one reason does not outweigh the other reason, in which case the outweighed reason would still be around with its normative force (weight) intact (just outweighed). Instead, the 'winning' reason holds that the 'losing' reason is not a reason at all in such a situation. The ensuing subproject will have the following three aims:

(i) The subproject will first aim to understand in what silencing consists. In the sparse literature on silencing, there are particularly two connections that be brought to conceptualize the idea.

The first connection centres on the work of John McDowell (1978, 1979, 1998) and the related secondary literature (Baxley 2007; Seidman 2005; Stohr 2003). According to one interpretation, McDowell holds that

moral reasons (more precisely, reasons of virtue) silence non-moral reasons. It is a matter of debate exactly how McDowell's notion of silencing should be understood, and the subproject aims to clarify and evaluate various alternatives.

The other connection centres on the work of Joseph Raz, in particular his notion of *exclusionary reason* (1988, 1999). In Raz's view, exclusionary reasons are second-order reasons that exclude first-order reasons from determining what one ought to do all things considered. The subproject will aim to see how exclusionary reasons relate to silencing reasons. Are they different and, if so, in what way do they differ? For example, McDowell's reasons of virtue are arguably first-order reasons, while Raz construes excluded first-order reasons as not having lost their normative power but only their motivating power. The comparison between the two alternatives are particularly exciting since exclusionary reasons are taken to appear both in the moral domain and outside of it (Adams 2020; Scanlon 1998, cf. Tanyi 2013). It would be an important contribution to the field if it were possible to demonstrate that both moral reasons *and* prudential reasons could silence or exclude other reasons (and each other). The subproject hypothesizes that this is possible and will aim to work out the details of such a view.

(ii) The subproject will further investigate how silencing relate to the two rival *theories of reasons*: the desire-based theory and the value-based theory (where values are not understood in terms of desires) (Schroeder 2007; Sobel 2016 vs. Dancy 2000; Parfit 2011). The notion of certain reasons silencing other reasons, whether McDowell's reasons of virtue or Raz's exclusionary reasons, is put forward by philosophers who eschew the desire-based theory. It is therefore important to examine whether the desire-based theory could accommodate silencing. Are there silencing desires? (For initial phases of such an inquiry, see Tanyi 2013. See Tanyi 2011 for an account of higher-order reasons as governing so-called tie-breaking desires.)

While silencing is a particular challenge for desire-based views to accommodate, exactly how silencing occurs in value-based theories is also a task to reckon with. In particular, silencing forces us to re-conceptualize the way values can relate to one another, thereby providing insights into ways of reinterpreting (1). According to this alternative, value-based reasons compare—give rise to determination through silencing—*without* there being a covering value. This part of the subproject will explore different ways in which this might be the case.

(iii) One way to develop such an alternative account of comparison appears naturally once one considers reasons of virtue. It is often claimed that the way we pick out such reasons does not follow any 'system', nor is it codifiable in the form of general principles. (There is a clear connection here to the debate between holism and particularism about reasons. See Little 2000; Dancy 2004). McDowell (1979) speaks instead of *practical skills* to decide which situations fall under which rich moral categorizations (e.g., kind, cruel, obligatory, evil) and thereby to determine what one ought to do all things considered (cf. Little 1997; Tanyi 2014). Dancy (1999, 2018) prefers the language of *salience and shape*: reasons are salient considerations that protrude and catch the eye of a skilful observer (*pro tanto* reasons) who can 'see' the shape they begin to form (amounting to what one ought to do all things considered). On either option, we find an alternative to the systematic enterprise of comparing reasons in terms of their covering values, in the form of skills and abilities to identify and compare reasons on a case-by-case basis. Although McDowell and others connect such skills to virtues and restrict their application to the moral domain, others, like Dancy, go beyond morality and extend the idea to the investigation of normativity in general. The subproject is sympathetic to this ambition, will aim to work out its details, and defend it against various forms of criticism.

B. Rationalist Approach: Weak Rationalism

In subproject **B**, we will examine a strategy that saves (1) in (S) but denies (2). According to a notion that often is implicit in the debate, *practical rationality* constitutes an overarching covering value by which moral and prudential reasons can be compared and weighed. In this subproject, a view is explored according to which rationality can function as covering value given that the first part of (S) is saved but the second denied.

The notion that rationality constitutes an overarching covering value entails in conjunction with both (1) *and* (2) in (S) the following claim:

Strong Rationalism (SR): An agent ought all things considered to X insofar as she is rationally required to X (she would be irrational in not X-ing) (Darwall 1983; Smith 1994; Korsgaard 1986; Wedgwood 2007).

However, **(SR)** faces problems. First, it has counterintuitive results. For example, an agent's moral reason to save ten people might presumably be stronger than her prudential reason to not risk her own life. According to **(SR)**, this suggests that she ought, all things considered, to save ten people's lives and that she is irrational if she does not. However, it is not evident that it would be irrational to refrain from doing so, in consideration of the risk it involves (Foot 1978; Copp 1997, 2015; Gert 2004). Second, **(SR)** has different implications depending on what theory of rationality with which it is combined. Indeed, **(SR)** risks facing a dilemma. On the one hand, **(SR)** might be combined with a procedural theory according to which what is rational is the result of a process of rational deliberation that takes its point of departure in the agent's actual desires (Williams 1981; Sobel 1999; Joyce 2001). However, this alternative runs the risk of entailing that she does not have any categorical (desire-independent) moral reasons or is irrational when acting in accordance with her moral reasons. On the other hand, **(SR)** might be combined with a substantive theory according to which what is rational is entirely independent of the results of such a deliberative process (Korsgaard 1986; Shafer-Landau 2003; Parfit 2011). However, it runs the risk of being non-explanatory or highly contentious (Lillehammer 1999; Markovits 2011; Strandberg 2017, 2019). Moreover, it might have difficulties to account for the difference between moral blame and rational criticism.

In this subproject, we will: (i) Investigate alternatives to **(SR)** as regards the connection between reasons and rationality (Raz 1999; Gert 2004; Scanlon 2014). (ii) Investigate whether the preferred alternative can be combined with different theories of rationality while avoiding the mentioned problems. As regards (i), we want to explore *Weak Rationalism* (**WR**) which saves (1) in (S) but denies (2). On this view, reasons have two dimensions regarding rationality. Roughly: An agent has a *requiring reason* to X insofar as she is rationally required to X. An agent has a *justifying reason* to X insofar as she is rationally justified (but not required) to X (Gert 2004; Strandberg 2018, 2019). The distinction allows that reasons can be compared with one another. In particular, a justifying reason might be stronger than a requiring reason. However, there is no unique answer to what an agent ought to do all things considered in terms of rationality when reasons are in conflict. In particular, an agent might have a justifying reason to X that is stronger than her requiring reason to Y, but be rational in performing either X or Y. As regards (ii), we want to explore a particular version of (**WR**) that combines it with a procedural theory which understands rationality in terms of pursuing idealized desires.

We hypothesize that the resulting view is superior to **(SR)**. First, it can be demonstrated that the distinction between requiring and justifying reasons means that an agent might have categorical moral reasons, in the form of justifying reasons, also on a procedural theory of rationality (Strandberg 2019). Hence, it avoids the dilemma for **(SR)** above. Second, it means that moral and prudential reasons can be compared at the same time as the counterintuitive results of **(SR)** are avoided. For example, an agent might have a moral reason, in the form of a justifying reason, that is stronger than her prudential reason, in the form of a requiring reason. On the combination of (**WR**) with a procedural theory of rationality, an agent might have a stronger reason to save ten people than to not risk her own life, since the former would be superior in terms of all the affected people's idealized desires. However, there is no unique answer to what an agent ought to do all things considered in terms of rationality. Especially, she might have a moral reason, in the form of a justifying reason, that is stronger than her prudential reason, in the form a requiring reason, but be rational in performing either action. It might be rational for an agent to save ten people's lives, in consideration of *their* idealized desires, but it is also rational to refrain from doing so, in consideration of the risk involved in terms of *her own* idealized desires. In this way, the view enhances our understanding of the relation between moral and prudential reasons and restricts the number of rationally available options.

In defending this view, several issues need to be explored further. First, the plausibility of the distinction between requiring and justifying reasons in terms of rationality needs to be examined, e.g., whether it is plausible to maintain that an agent's justifying reason to X might be stronger than her requiring reason to Y, such that she is rational in doing either X or Y. It should also be compared to alternative views that might explain the same type of phenomenon (cf. Portmore 2012). Second, the plausibility of combining the distinction with a procedural theory of rationality should be carefully investigated and scrutinized. As mentioned, it can be shown that there might be categorical moral reasons, in the form of justifying reasons, on this theory. However, it needs to be examined further what grounds there are for understanding moral reasons and rationality in this manner. Third, the overall explanatory value of the view compared to alternative accounts should be examined. In particular, we think it can be argued that it provides a better account of the difference between moral blame and rational criticism.

C. *Pluralist Approach: Normative Pluralism*

In subproject C, we will examine an alternative that represents the most radical departure from (S). The subproject considers whether *normative pluralism*, which denies both (1) and (2) in (S), can be defended as a more plausible theory of normativity. This view understands normativity as fundamentally divided between different normative standpoints without a common basis for comparisons. In particular, moral reasons would be expected to compare with one other and by so doing form a moral standpoint, and similarly for prudential reasons which form a separate prudential standpoint. But beyond this, there is no overarching normative perspective, as moral and prudential reasons do not compare across types. Thus, there are truths about what we *morally* ought to do and *prudentially* ought to do, but there is nothing that we *just plain ought to do*. This conclusion was reached by Sidgwick, whose “dualism of practical reason” forms a proto version of normative pluralism. The view tends to be quickly rejected but has been defended by some contemporary philosophers (Copp 1997, 2009; Tiffany 2011; Sagdahl 2013; Baker 2016. For related views, see Scheffler 1992, 2008; Hills 2004; Wallace 2006; Finlay 2008).

Assessing (S) and assessing normative pluralism are closely connected, as the truth of both positions turns on whether moral and prudential reasons are comparable or not. As noted above, advocates of (S) have tended to defend the comparability claim by appealing to the argument from nominal-notable comparisons (Chang 2004b; Crisp 2006; Parfit 2011; Dorsey 2013). This argument attempts to establish the comparability claim by appealing to our intuitions about a certain type of cases of moral-prudential conflicts. For example, when an action has notable moral value (e.g., saving a drowning child) at only a nominal prudential cost (e.g. getting one’s shoes wet), we tend to clearly judge that we ought all things considered to save the child. It is then inferred that moral and prudential reasons must be comparable. In this subproject, it will be argued that the argument fails because, given some very plausible assumptions about how our prudential and moral reasons are structured, such cases could not exist. Moreover, the judgment that we ought all things considered to save the child can be accounted for without inter-type comparability of reasons (Sagdahl 2014). Some recent defences of the argument have been made, however, which we aim to address (Case 2016; Dorsey 2016).

An important part of arguing for the viability of normative pluralism is examining how we can account for our judgments that there are a number of actions that we ought all things considered to do. Such judgments form a central premise in the argument from nominal-notable comparisons. Another type of defence of the comparability claim is based on arguments that our conception of agency is bound up with reasoning about how we ought to act all things considered (Chang 2002; Broome 2013). But such forms of reasoning may both be accounted for without presupposing comparability and be less central to agency than usually is supposed (Raz 1997; Holton 2009; Sagdahl 2016). However, without comparability we can only account for such judgments if we can point to an overlap between what morality and prudence require. An important hypothesis of the subproject is that this overlap is pervasive. First, any disagreement between the moral and prudential standpoints occurs amidst a background of persistent agreement. For example, while the standpoints may disagree about whether to spend your money on charity or vacation, both will require you not to waste it on an unsound investment. And while the standpoints might disagree, for example, on whether to break a promise to your friend, both may agree that you should make it up to her if you do (for the moral reason of respect and for the prudential reason of keeping the friendship). Another ground for pervasive overlap is the close connection between moral virtues and a good life (Lemos 2006; Bloomfield 2008). It seems that we generally have strong prudential reasons to be moral and cultivate the virtues. If there is such an overlap, then normative pluralism can deny both (1) and (2) in (S), yet still claim that we generally can determine what we ought to do all things considered *without comparing the relative strength* of moral and prudential reasons.

The subproject will also examine the extent to which morality and self-interest both favour the same kind of virtuous life. However, it is the hypothesis that there is less than full overlap. Although self-interest may require agents to avoid the moral vices, it may not require all agents to develop all the moral virtues fully. Alternatively, if the virtues are defined as traits that provide a good life, it may conversely be the case that there are moral requirements that the virtuous agent would not satisfy. In addition, the concept of ‘meaning in life’ provides another link between morality and prudence, by adding meaning to the life of an agent who advances the good of others (Wolf 2010). The subproject will examine whether this constitutes prudential reasons to act morally (cf. Metz 2017) and will work from the hypothesis that such reasons contribute to a further overlap, yet one that is less than complete. This partial overlap between morality and self-interest may be sufficient to avoid possible counterintuitive implications of normative pluralism and to provide a response to the argument from

nominal-notable comparisons. It may also imply that there are moral-prudential conflicts that are irresolvable by normative reasoning and where an agent would be rational in doing either option (cf. subproject **B**).

Methodology

In general, we will evaluate accounts of how to understand conflicts between moral and prudential reasons in terms of their overall explanatory value. A potential challenge for PROFOUND is that our aim of understanding conflicts between moral and prudential reasons might be sensitive to particular theories about these reasons. For example, the discussion rests on the assumption that there might be conflicts between moral and prudential reasons, an assumption that is supported by everyday experience and philosophical reflection. However, the prospect of questioning prevalent assumptions about comparing and weighing reasons might depend on the content of the reasons in question. There are however many competing theories of what morality and prudence amount to, and it is not the primary purpose of this project to determine what view is correct. While we aim at the outset to be neutral to such issues, we will be conscious and explicit about the ways in which presuming first-order theories about morality and prudence may have a bearing on the higher-order issue of how the two categories relate.

Novelty and Ambition

The Standard View (**S**) lies at the background of much theorizing in moral philosophy, but in spite of this it is seldom explicitly questioned. There are two serious drawbacks with this lack of attention to potential challenges for (**S**). First, it is unclear how strong the foundation of this theorizing really is. Second, it is unclear what implications the falsity of (**S**) would have for moral philosophy. As a consequence, there is a regrettable lack of developed alternatives to (**S**) with regard to how conflicts between moral and prudential reasons should be handled.

PROFOUND aims to fill this gap of knowledge in two unique respects, corresponding to the two parts of the project: **I**. Assessing (**S**) critically and systematically. An overarching hypothesis of the project is that (**S**) lacks the support it is tacitly presumed to have in moral philosophy. As part of this assessment, we intend to start a reevaluation of the ambitions of moral philosophy, including applied and normative ethics, considering the difficulties with (**S**). **II**. Developing novel ways of understanding conflicts between moral and prudential reasons. In particular, in the three subprojects described above we will explore approaches that successively depart from (**S**). A general hypothesis of the project is that they provide reasonable ways to proceed when we face “the profoundest problem in ethics” —even if (**S**) wholly or partly turns out to be false or needs to be fundamentally reconsidered.

As indicated, the project has implications for normative and applied ethics. To illustrate, if a theory in normative ethics entails very demanding claims about what morality requires, it will be less clear that the moral point of view expresses what we ought to do *all things considered*, and similarly with respect to claims in applied ethics. For example, assume that we agree with Peter Singer’s argument that morality demands that we give away a substantial amount of our income to charity (Singer 2011). In that case, the advantages of the views articulated in subprojects **B** and **C** become clearer, by explaining how an agent can still be rational in not doing what morality demands. This type of examples also highlights the unclarity as to whether verdicts in normative and applied ethics should be understood to concern what one ought to do *all things considered* or what one *morally* ought to do. The first alternative is problematic in case (**S**) turns out to be false, whereas the second is problematic since it might not provide the verdicts in which we ultimately are most interested. The approaches suggested in subprojects **A**, **B**, and **C** appear to have different implications for normative and applied ethics, something that will be examined in the project.

IMPACT

Academic Impact

In examining the basis for and alternatives to the Standard View (**S**), PROFOUND will open up a field of research that so far has been little explored in moral philosophy. The project’s investigation of comparing and weighing reasons, and into concepts such as ‘ought all things considered’, promises that it will be relevant to all of moral philosophy as well as theories about practical and theoretical reasoning. Moreover, while delving

into central questions in the philosophy of reasons, it could have a profound and broad impact on the methods by which normative and applied ethics are carried out, as described above.

The most important likely result of PROFOUND is that it will improve theorizing in moral philosophy by urging the discipline to take into account the problems concerning (S), to actively find ways to articulate a covering value that saves (S), or else to employ an alternative to (S), such as one of those proposed in the project. This will contribute to moral philosophers engaging more clearly with the normative question that ultimately matters the most: What we ought to do *all things considered*.

Societal Impact

An increased understanding of conflicts between moral and prudential reasons will have fundamental ramifications for our ability to handle such conflicts in our private and public lives. In particular, it is essential for lifestyle choices and political choices where the greater good seems to be in conflict with living good lives of our own, e.g., with respect to carbon emission, poverty and inequality, and privileges we enjoy as members of certain social groups. In this way, PROFOUND will both be relevant for how to balance the reasons involved in such critical choices and how to act with regard to such important matters. Moreover, it is significant for seeing how morality and self-interest might be integrated in a way that is sensitive to concerns of our individual well-being, and thereby more practically and politically feasible. As such, the project fits the aims of *Report to the Parliament on Humanities* (2017), where the importance of philosophy addressing conflicts in society is stressed repeatedly.

PROFOUND will also aim to be of practical assistance to the important work carried out in the various ethics committees in Norway. The most prominent of these, certainly the one that is most in the public eye, is the committee that oversees the operation – investment policy - of the [Norwegian oil fund](#). The attention is understandable since the fund constitutes one of the central pillars of the welfare of future generations in Norway. At the same time, the fund's decisions raise ethical issues as regards conflicts between morality and prudence. According to the cornerstone of the Fund's investment philosophy, [ethical or responsible investment](#), ethical investment should be respectful of human rights, children's rights, seek transparency, and shun corruption. To respect these 'constraints' may require missing out on lucrative investments: a clear case of prudential-moral conflict. Moreover, the Fund's [Council of Ethics](#) that provides recommendations on what qualifies as ethical investment is required to operate according to [ethical guidelines](#). These guidelines are practical in nature and no doubt subject to change and development. We cannot influence the operation of the Fund or the Council in these matters. However, we think that the findings of our project might constitute important input to the public discussion that should determine the investment philosophy of this all-important Fund.

We think that the same is true, to mention another prominent example, in the case of [research ethics committees](#) that were set up in all disciplines of research in Norway following the [Act on Ethics and Integrity in Research \(2017\)](#). During our tenure in Oslo, we would like to initiate a constructive dialogue to with one or more of these committees to see how they could utilize our findings and, in return, how we could utilize their practical experience. Since the project leaders are both deputy members of the [Medical Research Ethics Committees \(REK\)](#), we plan to establish contact with them first and depending on our experience, expand our work contact to other committees.

Dissemination

The intended audience of the scientific output of the project primarily consists of philosophers working in all the three fields of moral philosophy and on the notion of practical normativity broadly understood. The results will be communicated in journal papers and an edited volume. We will arrange three workshops, corresponding to PROFOUND's subprojects, to which international experts in the field, including our external collaborators, will be invited. Moreover, we will arrange seminars where drafts are discussed and improved and ensure regular participation of our collaborators to the mentioned events. We believe that it is vital to involve students to increase the import of the project, as the ideas and results of the project may help shape and inform aspiring researchers who may carry the themes of the project in new directions. To do so, we intend to organize courses at MA and PhD levels as well as cooperating with the association for philosophy students to communicate and discuss the project with students at all levels. This might involve participating in arrangements such as "Socratic Evening" in Oslo and editing an issue of the student journal *Filosofisk supplement* where some of the papers from the courses can be published. We believe this engagement will not only directly benefit the

students, but also help to shape a general interest, such that themes of the project are advanced by future researchers and tomorrow's decision makers. We might also take our findings and ideas to public broadcasters such as NRK in the form of radio programme participation (e.g., *Verdibørsen*) or various philosophy podcasts.

IMPLEMENTATION

Project Team

The project will be carried out by a core group whose research profiles are exclusively fit to their parts of the project. There will be two project leaders: **Mathea Slåttholm Sagdahl** and **Attila Tanyi**. **Mathea Slåttholm Sagdahl** is Associate Professor at UiT: The Arctic University of Norway. She earned her PhD on a thesis about the challenges of weighing normative reasons. Sagdahl has published several articles on normative pluralism and is the author of a complete book manuscript on the same topic that is forthcoming from Oxford University Press, to be included in the series "Oxford Moral Theory". Sagdahl's participation in the project contributes to the gender diversity in Norwegian philosophical research. As a transgender woman, her research will provide representation and visibility to a gender minority that is not otherwise represented in Norwegian philosophy or academia generally. **Attila Tanyi** is Professor of Ethics at UiT. He has a wide competence in practical philosophy with numerous publications in metaethics, normative ethics, applied ethics, and political philosophy. Tanyi has a particular expertise in the theory of practical reasons and wrote his dissertation on the topic, followed by several subsequent publications.

The project leaders will be joined by four core members of the project who have expressed their intent to spend at least semester in Oslo working on the project. **Ruth Chang** is Chair of Jurisprudence at the University of Oxford. Her key research interests are incommensurability of values, reasons, and the notion of normativity. Chang is the author of *Making Comparisons Count* and editor of a much-cited volume on incommensurability, which has formed the debate on the notion of weighing in practical philosophy. **Joshua Gert** is Leslie and Naomi Legum Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at William & Mary University. He is one of the foremost experts on issues concerning practical rationality and reasons. He is the author of many important publications including the books *Brute Rationality* (CUP, 2004) and *Normative Bedrock* (OUP, 2012). **Andrew Reisner** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Uppsala University. He works primarily in value theory and on the topic of normativity. At present he leads the 'Pragmatism, Pluralism and Reasons for Belief' research project funded by the Swedish Research Council. **Sarah Stroud** is the Director of the Parr Center for Ethics at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research interests lie in the intersection between moral theory, metaethics, and moral psychology, and include topics such as practical rationality and the relative strength of moral reasons. The core group thus encompasses a gender-balanced team of leading international scholars. The group covers all the major issues to be investigated in the project – reasons, rationality, weight of reasons, comparability, among others.

The core group of researchers will be joined by research fellows in the project who have expressed their intention to spend at least two months in Oslo working on the project. **Benjamin Kiesewetter** is presently postdoctoral researcher fellow at Technische Universität Dresden. Despite his young age, he is the author of several influential papers and the book *The Normativity of Rationality* (OUP, 2017). **David Copp** is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at University of California, Davis. He publishes on numerous topics in metaethics and is currently defending a pluralist conception of normativity. **Julian Fink** is Professor in Practical Philosophy at the University of Bayreuth (Philosophy & Economics). He is an expert on rationality, normativity and reasoning. **David Sobel** is Irvin and Marjorie Gutttag Professor of Ethics and Political Philosophy at Syracuse University. Sobel publishes widely within all areas of practical philosophy and is especially known for his important work on subjectivism about reasons and value. **Caj Strandberg** is Professor of Practical Philosophy at the University of Oslo (UiO). He has published widely in metaethics on topics with direct relevance for the project. Strandberg has recently started to develop a theory of the connection between reasons and rationality (Strandberg 2017, 2018, 2019). **Frans Svensson** is Senior Lecturer in Practical Philosophy at the University of Gothenburg. He works mainly in moral philosophy and the history of ethics. He has particular expertise in virtue ethics and in particularism about practical reasons.

In addition to these two groups of researchers, the project will engage a group of international collaborators who will be invited as guests of the project to participate in workshops, provide feedback on papers produced in the project, and contribute in other ways. So far, we have such agreements from three researchers. **Chrisoula**

Andreu is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Utah. She is an expert on practical reasoning and rational choice, philosophy of action, theoretical and applied ethics. **Roger Crisp** is Professor of Moral Philosophy and Uehiro Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at St Anne's College, University of Oxford. He is one of the world's foremost ethical theorists. **Susanne Mantel** is researcher at Saarland University, Germany. She works mainly in philosophy action and ethics. Once the project is granted funding, we will also invite promising junior researchers (PhDs and Postdocs) to Oslo.

Project Organization

PROFOUND will actively encourage and enable participants' publication plans. All members of the core group will work with part **I** of the project by examining **(S)**. As regards part **II** of the project, Tanyi will mainly be responsible for **A**, Sagdahl for **C** and the two jointly for **B**. Other members of the project team, especially its core members, will actively assist the project leaders in their research. There will be close cooperation between core group members particularly in three respects. First, we will work together with assessing **(S)**, considering alternatives to it, and their implications for moral philosophy. Second, we will consider to what extent the different subprojects **A**, **B**, **C** are able to accommodate the advantages of the other parts. To illustrate, employing skills or virtues could serve as an alternative model of practical reasoning for both **A** and **C** with respect to determining what an agent ought to do all things considered. Similarly, intuitions favouring the rationality of both moral and self-interested actions can work to justify **B** as well as **C**. In this light, it is natural to think that some of the papers in the project will be co-authored. Third, the project will culminate in an edited volume on weighing moral and prudential reasons, and one main aim of the book will be to bring together our different approaches in a cohesive evaluation of **(S)**.

PROFOUND plans with the organization of three workshops: at the start (September 2023), in the middle (January 2024) and at the end (May 2024). The workshops will also be used as vehicles to encourage and facilitate the above-mentioned publication plans. In addition, two student courses (MA, PhD) are also planned, one before the start (May 2023, to meet potential doctoral and Masters students who could collaborate with the project) and another at the end of the project (June 2024, primarily to disseminate project results and discuss plans for continuation). The project will also organize public meetings and its members will, if the occasion arises, participate in relevant public debates (such as, for example, on the principles governing Norway's oil fund). A key ambition furthermore is to provide the basis for future large-scale research projects and applications for funding from both Norwegian and international sources: PROFOUND's members and networks will be actively utilized for this purpose.

Even more broadly, PROFOUND offers an opportunity to consolidate the research environment in ethics and metaethics in Norway and the Nordic countries. The topic of the project is closely related to issues studied at the Moral Agency division at former centre of excellence CSMN (IFIKK, UiO). Moreover, IFIKK hosts PPG (Practical Philosophy Group), a network of practical philosophers, which organizes biweekly seminars and annual workshops where results of the projects will be presented and discussed. The topic of the project is also closely related to issues studied at ERG (UiT), led by Tanyi, which also runs a seminar in metaethics. Lastly, PROFOUND will do its best to connect to partners at other Nordic universities and institutions such as the Institute for Future Studies in Stockholm.

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