

# Too Much of a Good Thing: Moralism and Its Two Sources

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## *Abstract*

In this paper, we provide a novel definition of moralism as a failure in moral judgment, and we seek to identify its two main sources (relational and substantive). After defining moralism, we spell out a taxonomy of different kinds of moralism, the opposite—yet equally defective—moral failures, and the corresponding correct attitudes. Then, we examine how some proximate notions (judgmentalism, moral fury, hypocrisy, paternalism, puritanism, moral grandstanding) may have parallels with or differ from one or more of the four kinds of moralism identified. Finally, we argue that for there to be moralism, we must presuppose some features inherent in moral judgment which moralism perturbs in terms of its exercise and legitimate area of competence.

*Keywords:* Moralism, Moral judgment, Virtue, Hypocrisy, Moral grandstanding.

## 1. Introduction

What is moralism? Besides being pervasive in many public arenas and in some academic debates, moralism is also the ordinary and intuitive experience of one person accusing another of inappropriate judgment or behavior. In its commonsensical understanding, it is assumed to represent a mistaken attitude. Yet, why exactly this is the case is a normative question that remains a matter of some debate and controversy. Think of a politician, for example, whose private behavior is publicly put in question as immoral. Suppose the politician rebuts these charges as moralistic: what exactly is the politician accusing the opponents of? Or, imagine that a friend criticizes you for donating only a small sum to a charity supporting refugees. You may feel distressed by this intrusion and label the friend as a moralist. What do you mean by that? Alternatively, imagine that a complete stranger, who happens to learn some facts about your personal life, emails you concerning your poor marital virtues. You think this person has no standing whatsoever to judge you, so you send a huffy reply and accuse this person of behaving in a moralistic way. Are you really justified and, if so, on what grounds?

In what follows, we do not aim to rectify the ordinary use of the term, whose polemical nature depends by and large on one's preferred set of moral commitments.

We aim, rather, to clarify the structure of the concept, which underlies both its ordinary and academic use. In particular, our aim is to obtain a fuller understanding of this concept, thus providing a more comprehensive and refined definition than those offered by previous approaches. As we will argue in the conclusion, besides being a theoretically fruitful endeavor, this clarification might also prove helpful as a practical tool in adjudicating between legitimate and illegitimate accusations of moralism, both in academic debates and in the public arena.

In the first part of the paper, we identify two types of failure in moral judgment that constitute the sources of different forms of moralism: a relational failure and a substantive one. Accordingly, we define moralism as a failure in moral judgment, which occurs when an evaluator fails to recognize others' moral authority and/or fails to apply moral principles with respect to non-moral considerations. We then set out a tentative taxonomy of different kinds of moralism, before explaining how these forms of moralism differ from cognate—and apparently overlapping— notions (judgmentalism, moral fury, hypocrisy, paternalism, puritanism, and moral grandstanding). Finally, we sketch some presuppositions of moral judgment that are necessary for there to be the occurrence of moralistic behavior or its attribution in moral judgment.

Before presenting our account, a set of preliminary considerations on what we are doing (and what we are not doing) is needed. First, it is necessary to provide a working definition of the concept at the very core of moralism: the idea of moral judgment. We broadly understand moral judgment as any evaluation or criticism of some relevant feature (actions, patterns of behavior, traits, characters) of another in moral terms. Such evaluation may either be expressed publicly or kept private. Hence, we will use an inclusive account of moral judgment, understanding it as any moral assessment which may or may not entail an overt expression of a concurrent evaluative attitude, such as blame or condemnation.

The second preliminary clarification concerns the scope of our inquiry. What we want to explore, in particular, is the concept of moralism in the practice of moral judgment (and, as a consequence, moralism in moral theory), rather than moralism as it is used in other related disciplines (such as political philosophy, aesthetics, and legal theory).

As a final preliminary clarification, we want to remark that an attempt to define moralism cannot eschew the obvious but thorny fact that moralism is a necessarily evaluative term. Indeed, moralism is usually understood as a perversion of morality where someone takes morality as too strict, demanding or rigid. In our analysis we do not want to redress this commonsensical use. Rather, we take up this pejorative understanding and try to analyze what it means to understand moralism as a distortion of morality.

## 2. Competing Accounts of Moralism

The concept of moralism has already been addressed by some influential works. Our aim in this section is to show that although they all provide insightful analyses, what these accounts lack is one or more unifying principles that can make sense of the complete list of forms of moralism they provide. Accordingly, they do not seem to provide the ground as to why the diverse types of moralism should be counted as falling prey to the same kind of failure.

Craig Taylor (2012) takes moralism to be a “kind of blanket term used to signify a range of [...] vices or human tendencies”. He provides a definition of

moralism as an “excessive or otherwise unreasonable tendency in one’s moral thoughts and/or judgments about people or events” (2012: 2), and “a fundamental failure to understand what human life is like and the kinds of demands it makes upon us”. Also, drawing from Bernard Williams’s well-known criticism of the “morality system”, Taylor scrutinizes moral theories through the lens of moralism in order to vindicate an anti-impartialist view of morality as a whole. In particular, Taylor’s aim in his volume is to argue that impartialist moral theories “distort our understanding of the varieties of value that contribute to a properly human life” (2012: ix). Such a claim, the merits of which we will not adjudicate on here, parallels his view of the personal vice of moralism as the lack of “a certain responsiveness to another”, rather than as a matter of not seeing the moral facts correctly.

Another promising definition of moralism has been provided by Julia Driver (2005), whose taxonomy of the kinds of moralism is in a sense more accurate than Taylor’s. Driver aptly ascribes moralism to the domain of mistaken moral judgment: “moralism is an illicit use of moral considerations” (Driver 2005: 137). In light of this, she distinguishes between three forms of moralism: Perfectionism, whereby the supererogatory is taken to be obligatory; Absolutism, whereby no exceptions or leeway are admitted; and Moralism, whereby non-moral factors are taken to be moral ones.

Another important reconstruction of moralism has been provided by C.A.J. Coady (2008). Coady treats moralism as a distortion of morality which consists in “a kind of vice involved in certain ways of practising morality or exercising moral judgement, or thinking that you are doing so” (2008: 15). Coady works through the public debate about moralism in politics and international affairs, and situates moralism in the interplay between morality and claims of political realism. Building on this, he proposes a phenomenology, as it were, of six types of moralism: moralism of scope; moralism of unbalanced focus; moralism of imposition or interference; moralism of abstraction; absolutist moralism; and moralism of deluded power (Coady 2008, chapters 1–2).

Finally, Robert Fullinwider (2005) traces the roots of moralism in the “proclivity [...] to judge others uncharitably, typically in spoken or written forms. The bad odour of moralism, in short, arises from judgmentalism, the habit of uncharitably and officiously passing judgment on other people” (2005: 109). In Fullinwider’s view, the characteristic feature of moralism is the relational issue of attributing to oneself the standing to judge others, although he also notes that the moralist is “uncharitable”, that is, a person who judges others unfairly from a substantive point of view.

Although our paper builds on these reconstructions, our contribution aims to move a step forward in terms of completeness by tracing the fundamental features of moralism—its sources as it were—and by bringing to bear types of moralism with other correspondent failures. Hence, we aim to identify the two sources of moralism (inappropriate attitude and mistaken judgment), which frequently obtain jointly but are conceptually distinct; and include the types of moralism in a broader framework, thus expanding the debate over moralism to a more complete taxonomy.

### 3. Two Sources and a Definition

The accounts of moralism provided by Taylor, Driver, Coady, and Fullinwider, respectively, have much in common inasmuch as they all seek to map a commonplace and yet elusive idea.

In what follows we will argue that such commonalities may be best understood in terms of the two fundamental sources of the phenomenon of moralism. Our main contention here is that the different forms of moralism outlined by the most important accounts may be drawn from these two sources, that such sources constitute two distinctive kinds of distortion of morality, and that these kinds are not reducible to each other.

As a first approximation, we may say that moralism is either a relational or a substantive failure in formulating a moral judgment. The relational failure obtains as a wrongful attitude of treating others in an inappropriate manner while morally judging others in their deeds, character or achievements. More specifically, it obtains when, in passing a moral judgment on others, the judge has an inappropriate attitude toward the evaluatee, thus arrogating herself an illegitimate role. The substantive failure obtains as a mistake in the content of morally judging others' deeds, character or achievements. It obtains to the extent that in passing a moral judgment the judge commits a mistake in adjudicating the merit of moral and non-moral reasons in each case.

Consider, for example, Driver's Perfectionism and Absolutism. Instances of these categories occur when, in judging others, either a person admits of no excuses or exceptions to a general rule, or she takes the supererogatory to be obligatory. In both cases, a substantive mistake occurs, in that the judge is incapable of balancing moral requirements correctly and therefore issues a judgment which is defective with respect to its content.

On the other hand, Taylor's account of moralism reveals an emphasis on a relational, rather than substantive, failure: namely failing to be responsive to another person, no matter what the content of a judgment is. Taylor's account therefore recognizes a relational component which makes moral judgment legitimate. Although he claims that moralism cannot be characterized merely as judging without a right to do so, for there may be matters about which anybody has a right to judge, he admits that "sometimes accusations of moralism may indeed be directed precisely at those who judge others without the right provided by specific personal relationships or roles" (Taylor 2012: 8). In a similar vein, Fullinwider's account puts much emphasis on the relational dimension of moralism, as moralism entails not having the authority or standing to judge others, while also being uncharitable toward them. We will account for this in terms of Arrogance.

Finally, Coady's analysis comprises both failures that are distinctively substantive—such as "moralism of scope" and moralism of "unbalanced focus" (Coady 2008: 17, 19)—and others that have a clearly relational nature—such as "moralism of imposition or interference" (Coady 2008: 35). Some of his insights and categories clearly map onto our four kinds of moralism, as we will see below. However, there is no need to discuss the specificity of Coady's account at length because he seems less interested in providing a proper taxonomy than the others. Indeed, he seems more interested in giving a sketch of diverse phenomena, which frequently overlap with each other, in particular in the field of politics and international relations.

Our thesis is therefore that all the different kinds of moralism noted by existing accounts can be traced back to these two forms of failure, even if, as we will see below, in most ordinary cases of moralism both components (relational and substantive) occur; only in some quite unusual or hypothetical cases may either component be singled out in its purity. Thus, rather than forms of moralism in themselves, the two general failures should be seen as the two sources of all moralistic judgments. In addition, once these two sources are identified, not only can we make more sense of existing taxonomies by providing them with further support and justification, but we can also systematize them, and complement them with further kinds of moralism they might have missed. In particular, we claim that a complete taxonomy should include four kinds of moralism, which arise from these two sources of failure in moral judgment.

Before discussing each of the four kinds of moralism and analyzing them in turn, let us provide a general definition which comprises all these ways of failing in morally judging others.

The definition runs as follows:

Moralism is a distortion of morality in moral judgment. Relational moralism occurs in moral judgment when an evaluator fails to recognize others' moral authority; substantive moralism occurs when an evaluator fails to weigh moral principles with respect to non-moral considerations.

So far, we have assumed that moralism is a failure of moral judgment, but we have not provided independent arguments as to why the relational and substantive sources of moralism reveal moral failures of some kind. We cannot provide a full account as to why this is so, but the following considerations seem sufficiently intuitive and independent of specific moral accounts to be widely acceptable. Let us start with the substantive source. To acknowledge the possibility that moralism entails a substantive error in moral judgment one need not presuppose that there should be agreement on the criteria as to why one has passed a mistaken judgment. This means that different moral outlooks will disagree as to which actions or attitudes are morally required or permissible, and hence will disagree as to whether one's judgment is sound or inappropriate; however, they will agree on the existence of substantively wrong moral judgments.

As to the moral distortion in the relational source, moralism entails an inappropriate attitude toward other agents in that the moralist fails to adequately recognize others' moral authority, thus arrogating to herself a role she does not have. Relational accounts of morality and in particular second-personal views of morality are keen to emphasize the wrongness of failing to recognize others' moral standing and capacities. In particular, Darwall's second-personal account of normative reasons nicely expresses the relational condition by making use of the idea of "normative felicity conditions". According to his account, "[w]hen someone attempts to give another a second-personal reason, she purports to stand in a relevant authority relation to her addressee. [...] her having the authority is a necessary condition of the validity of the reason she purports to address and is thus a normative felicity condition of successfully giving her addressee the reason" (Darwall 2006: 4). Rozeboom, along similar lines, suggests that acting from the right kinds of motives—and passing a judgment on another is no exception—means being "guided by morally appropriate attitudes of regard for those pertinently involved with [one's] actions" (2017: 4). Even if we do not deem it necessary to subscribe to such perspective to perceive what is morally wrong in relational moralism,

second-personal accounts help to shed light on a key requirement of a legitimate moral judgment: that it be guided by an appropriate attitude of respect for another's authority, and that it be issued by an agent who does not arrogate to herself an authoritative role that she does not have.

Before proceeding, two further clarifications are needed.

The first concerns the specific focus of our paper. In general, moralism can be attributed to diverse objects (behavior, attitudes/dispositions, and personal character), as Benjamin Rossi suggested for hypocrisy (Rossi 2021: 60–61). There can be a moralistic behavior if a person distorts her attitude toward another in arrogating a standing she does not have and/or in failing to appropriately weigh moral considerations. A person may be moralistic if such person is disposed to display moralistic attitudes without being a moralistic person. Finally, a moralistic person has moralistic dispositions as a character trait. In what follows we will focus in particular on moralism as a relational and content failure in judgment without presupposing that moralistic behavior necessarily originates from and/or leads to dispositions or character traits. However, such may be the case in practice. If so, the singular distortion of morality in moral judgment becomes a vice in the proper sense. Hence, although in what follows we will focus on moralistic behavior as the basic element of analysis, similar considerations apply if the focus switches to the level of dispositions and character traits.

The second clarification is to fully acknowledge a partial overlap of our discussion and the debate on the conditions under which it is appropriate to blame (or express blame toward) someone. Both debates (on moralism and standing to blame), we admit, revolve around “second-order virtues and vices”, i.e., “virtues and vices pertaining to how we respond to the moral shortcomings of ourselves and others” (Watson 2013: 283). For this very reason, they share a number of categories, raise common worries, and at times provide similar answers. Among other commonalities, it is important to notice that both our discussion of moralism and the debate over blame address issues such as conditions and degrees of blameworthiness (which amounts to drawing boundaries of moral liability), procedural conditions which make moral judgments appropriate as regards their expression, and jurisdictional issues concerning the blamer or moral judge and their authority over the judged or blamed.

Our proposal is meant to complement rather than replace the standing to blame debate; in particular, we think there is an advantage in building our argument on moralism rather than blame, that has to do with the applicability of the argument. The notion of moralism seems applicable to more items than the notion of blame does. While being a blamer can only be a property of a person, being moralistic is a property of judgments, persons, and theories. In this paper, we will focus solely on judgments, but we will suggest that a transition to persons and theories is legitimate and fruitful. Hence, by staying closer to the ordinary use of the term and allowing a wider applicability, our analysis of the types of moralism should provide a vantage point on the limits, uses, and abuses of the practice of morally judging others.

#### 4. Moralistic Excesses and Anti-Moralistic Deficiencies

Having defined the notion of moralism, we are now in a position to systematize the kinds of moralism. Moralism is a failure which can be traced back to one or both of the two sources outlined. More specifically, each of its kinds can be fruitfully

seen as an excess of morality, since, when judging moralistically, an evaluator stretches the boundaries of morality beyond what is legitimate, with respect to relational and substantive standards. In what follows, we will provide a more fine-grained analysis of how different forms of moralism can be displayed. We will also push forward the intuition that moralism is an excess by showing that for each kind it may assume, a corresponding deficiency may obtain, both as a particular behavior and as a corresponding character trait. We will then provide examples of each.

As stated above, we claim that moralism has two sources: one substantive, the other relational. The relational source obtains when treating others in an inappropriate manner while morally judging others, in particular when the judge arrogates to herself an inappropriate role; the substantive source, on the other hand, obtains to the extent that the moral judge commits a mistake in adjudicating the merit of moral and non-moral reasons in a given case. The typical form of the relational source of moralism is, hence, (i) arrogance in judging others, even when one is not in a position to do so. The substantive source of moralism may express itself in three other kinds that incorrectly apply moral principles to a certain situation: there can be a moralism (ii) in applying moral principles when they should not be applied; or moralism in applying moral principles when they should apply, but (iii) in too demanding a manner, or (iv) in too inflexible a manner. As we will show, there can be opposite, yet equally defective, ways of failing in morally judging. Kinds of moralism have, as it were, less-than-moral counterparts in corresponding judgments that display a symmetrical failure. The link between kinds of moralism and their sources can therefore be summarized as follows:

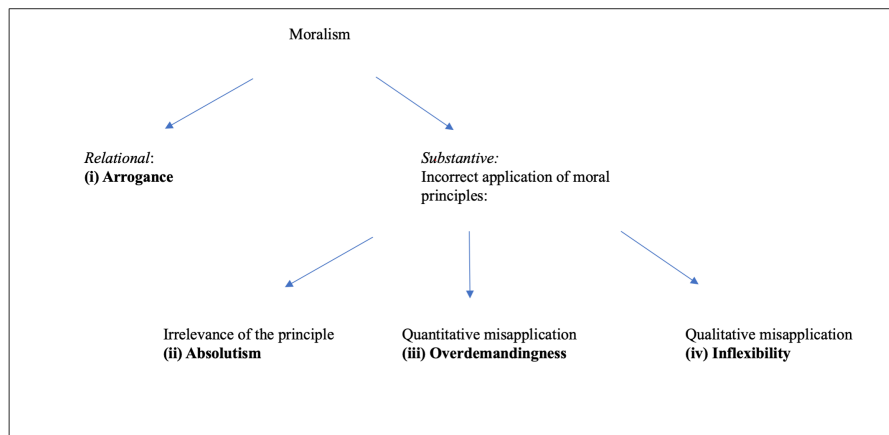


Figure 1: The two sources and the four kinds of moralism

In what follows, we will expand on the four kinds of moralism not only by showing how they relate to the two sources outlined, but also by claiming that the opposite judgment is equally morally undesirable. Finally, we will point to the correct form of judgment that is capable of mediating between these two failures.

#### 4.1. Arrogance

Arrogance is the first way of being moralistic. It concerns the type of position that the judge is entitled to have with respect to those she judges. In this sense, Arrogance is a distinctively relational failure insofar as it depends on whether one has the legitimate authority to pass a moral judgment on others. When one crosses the boundaries of one's legitimate moral authority over someone, one commits a fault of Arrogance, in the literal sense of arrogating the capacity to pass judgment on others.

If we assume that someone has legitimate authority over someone else, the contrary moral trouble they may display is that of Indifference, insofar as a person who has, by hypothesis, the authority to do so may fail to pass a judgment on the reproachable behavior of others.

The correct behavior in this case is Respect, which can be defined as passing a judgment in an appropriate manner with respect to one's role, thus acknowledging the other's authority. Although in principle it is possible to be Arrogant without expressing it, because Arrogance is a relational failure, it typically obtains when it is openly expressed to others.

It is noteworthy that many scholars working on moralism have failed to spot this form of moralism, with the exception of Fullinwider (2005: 112–114) and, as noted above, Taylor, who admits that “sometimes accusations of moralism may indeed be directed precisely at those who judge others without the right provided by specific personal relationships or roles” (2012: 8).

Driver's taxonomy, for instance, includes only what we have called substantive forms, thereby overlooking that a relational failure may obtain, and that it amounts to a moralistic violation of morality. Coady captures part of this problem, but fails to understand it properly, because he proposes the category of “moralism of imposition or interference” (2008: 35–36), which he characterizes along the lines of the debate about cultural relativism and international affairs. In so doing, he focuses on the political and cultural expression of Arrogance, which seeks to impose on others (i.e., other states and cultures) principles that might be correct in themselves. However, Arrogance takes place in judgments when one arrogates to oneself the right to judge others. Imposition on others presupposes Arrogance, but the latter need not express itself in the former.

A more nuanced understanding of phenomena related to Arrogance is provided by analyses that exist outside the specific debate about moralism. As we have seen, other approaches have an advantage in making sense of this specific kind of failure, such as second-personal accounts of morality; also, this dimension shares many features of the “standing to blame” debate, where conditions of jurisdiction and mode of blaming are discussed (Bell 2013; Watson 2013). Bell, for example (2013: 264), recalls four standard conditions for a would-be-blamer X to have standing to blame Y: (i) the Business condition (Y's wrongdoing is X's business in some relevant sense); (ii) the Contemporary condition (X and Y are contemporaries); (iii) the Nonhypocritical condition (X has not engaged in similar wrongdoing in the past); (iv) and the Noncomplicit condition (X is not complicit in Y's wrongdoing). Conditions (i) and (iii), in particular, capture part of what we have identified as the relational source of moralism, in that they point to a blamer's standing by identifying the conditions of their moral authority over the blamed. Although we do not think that hypocrisy can be equated with moralism (see below), the two conditions outlined by Bell offer further insight as to why

misconceiving one's own moral authority toward another amounts to a failure of morality, and therefore should also be included in a comprehensive account of moralism.

A remarkable feature of Arrogance is that, as the only relational form of moralism, it may be coupled with all the other kinds without being reducible to the substantive source. That is to say, an Arrogant may also be Absolutist, Overdemanding or Inflexible, as frequently happens in real life, thereby violating a legitimate use of moral judgment in plural, irreducible ways. The same does not happen with the remaining three forms of moralism.

#### 4.2. Absolutism

Absolutism, within this discussion, is a term of art. Julia Driver has used it to indicate the kind of moralism that admits of no exceptions or leeway. Unlike her, we use it here to signal the pervasiveness of moral considerations, which the Absolutist seeks to apply in all domains in which they seem to be elicited, a mistake Driver calls simply "Moralism". The reason for this divergence is that in our view this label better captures the "imperialistic" nature of such a moral failure, where morality seeks to colonize domains or situations where non-moral considerations are more relevant than moral ones, or override them. Accordingly, in Absolutism there is a failure to appreciate where a certain moral principle is properly applied and where it is inappropriate because, for instance, manners, personal values, taste, or other types of considerations provide more relevant reasons. Absolutism is a failure of moral judgment because the specific features of a situation are not properly assessed to the effect that they seem to trigger a moral evaluation even though the situation is not a morally relevant one. In this kind of moralism, moral considerations are taken to apply in all circumstances without recognizing the prerogatives of other sources of reasons (e.g., taste, manners, etc.). Unlike other kinds of moralism, however, this is not a matter of not allowing excuses or demanding too much when moral principles do apply; rather, it is the inappropriate application of a principle to diverse domains. Coady has called this phenomenon "moralism of scope", which "involves seeing things as moral issues that aren't, and thereby overmoralizing the universe" (2008: 17). Another type of moralism identified by Driver shares some important similarities with Absolutism, i.e., the attitude to "frame issues in moral terms", or "providing moralistic explanations", such as in the case of framing sexual orientation issues as ones of sexual morality (2006: 48). An advantage of our labeling, we contend, is precisely that of capturing what is common to Driver's perfectionism and Coady's category, by identifying their common core, i.e., an imperialistic extension of the boundaries of the moral domain.

The opposite failure to that of Absolutism is what we label Relativism, according to which there are no principles that should be applicable in all cases and every context has idiosyncratic standards. The merit of the Pluralist, by contrast, consists in appreciating the varieties of diverse standards that may apply in different circumstances, while at the same time holding fast to the priority of moral principles.

As Ivison notes, this kind of moralism has a special connection with the political sphere, since it may bear consequences as to the exercise of power over minorities' basic freedom and dignity (2005: 171); in its political form, Absolutism consists in "impos[ing] moral judgements on people through the exercise of state

power or public policy, which are inadequately justified” (ibid.). Such political implications lie beyond the scope of our analysis; however, it is important to note how the same undue exercise of power can also obtain within the moral domain, when a judge applies moral standards inappropriately. Also, it is particularly the case with Absolutism that a match with Arrogance can obtain, so long as the reason of the misapplication lies in a misplaced feeling of entitlement on the part of the judge, who feels entitled to apply supposedly universal moral standards to traditions or values she has no title to evaluate—something which trespasses, again, into an undue exercise of power.

### 4.3. Overdemandingness

Overdemandingness has to do with the quantitative degree of the moral demands placed on others. It entails a distortion of moral judgment insofar as the Overdemanding moralist fails to distinguish between how much can be legitimately demanded, and the supererogatory acts that cannot be taken, by definition, to be morally required.

The opposed deficiency is that of Underdemandingness, i.e., passing a judgment which is quantitatively defective. It consists in failing to distinguish between the legitimate degree of morality which must be demanded and what is morally forbidden.

The correct moral attitude between the two is a sort of Fair demandingness, i.e., a tendency to make quantitatively appropriate moral judgments. This means that the evaluator possesses the ability to discern, from case to case, which act is to be morally demanded in a given situation, without falling into either of the two failures.

As noted, this kind of moralism is well represented in the relevant literature. Driver (2005: 139) has defined this form as “Perfectionism”. We prefer the label “Overdemandingness” because our term seems to better capture what Driver also has in mind, namely the fact of demanding too much. Indeed, she also mentions the case of a person who demands too much for evil purposes (the Nazi perfectionist moralizer). But assuming that there is a form of evil perfectionism is unnecessarily confusing, while being overdemanding is not tied to an implicit positive evaluation as the notion of “Perfectionism” is.

### 4.4. Rigidity

Rigidity is a substantive mistake in judging others, as the Rigid proves incapable of evaluating when exceptions to general rules or duties must be made. This type of moralism concerns the level of flexibility with respect to excuses and other attenuating factors that may be taken into account.

Diametrically opposed to the Rigid, we find the Lenient, who, while recognizing the existence of duties, fails to acknowledge their bindingness, and thus is prone to giving priority to excuses based upon any motives, including personal prerogatives and individual interest. Hence, the Lenient always approves of any behavior out of this refusal, rather than as a result of an accurate evaluation of the case at hand.

We have labeled the mediating attitude as Tolerance. While reminiscent of the notion of tolerance (or toleration) as understood in political philosophy (Forst 2017), our idea differs in the following sense. In political philosophy, tolerance is usually understood as an act (or a virtue) of accepting, for some more important

reasons, something which one has reasons to disapprove of. In our usage of the term, Tolerance is also a case of taking into account conflicting reasons. However, here the choice is not between accepting or rejecting either alternative, but rather between strictly applying a moral rule and not applying it. Tolerance, then, is when one recognizes the bindingness of morality as well as the possible weight of the excuses.

Rigidity is the type of moralism that Driver calls “Absolutism”, and for which she provides the paradigmatic example of Kant’s absolute prescription to always tell the truth, even in the face of patent undesirable consequences. We have already explained why we use the label Absolutism to capture a different type of mistake in moral judgment. It is important to note, however, that by introducing Rigidity we want to highlight the specific nature of this substantive mistake; namely that of a lack of sensitivity in rule-application. We do not aim here to defend the particularistic nature of moral judgment, nor do we wish to subscribe to a strong non-codifiability thesis, according to which, although we can articulate rules embodying the demands of morality, they can only be generalizations which cannot be applied without practical wisdom (see, among others, McDowell 1998; Dancy 2004). All we need to assume is that, within moral theory and practice, excuses may be allowed in certain circumstances.

Before proceeding with an overview of related kinds of moral mistakes, which—we claim—can relate to moralism without collapsing into further moralistic attitudes, it will be useful to recall the categories identified so far:

SOURCE		MORALISTIC	OPPOSITE	CORRECT
		JUDGMENT	FAILURE	JUDGEMENT
Relational		Arrogance	Indifference	Respect
	inappropriate moral judgment	Absolutism	Relativism	Pluralism
Substantive	quantitatively mistaken moral judgment	Overdemandingness	Underdemandingness	Fair demandingness
	qualitatively mistaken moral judgment	Rigidity	Lenience	Tolerance

Table 1: Taxonomy of moralistic excesses, anti-moralistic deficiencies, and corrective attitudes

### 5. Moralism and Its Cognate Notions

The analysis conducted so far can allow us to better appreciate the difference between moralism and other, proximate notions. We have identified at least six cognate abuses of moral judgment which partly overlap with the definition and kinds of moralism outlined so far, but which nevertheless should be clearly distinguished from the latter.

The first two ways in which a moral judgment can be flawed, which, in our perspective, do not fall into any of our categories, either apply to a different object (persons rather than actions), or concern the fittingness of the emotions the judge feels and expresses in passing the judgment. Therefore, both can potentially

combine with any of the four kinds of moralism above, as well as with judgments which would be otherwise correct. Indeed, they typically occur in combination with kinds of moralism and increase the impact of moralistic behavior but can be conceptually distinguished from moralism.

*Judgmentalism.* Judgmentalism is sometimes taken to be a form of moralism, such as in Fullinwider (2005), who describes it as “the habit of uncharitably and officiously passing judgment on other people” (9). However, we use the term here to label the improper transition from judging an act to judging a person. Let’s assume that Pesky Mary from the example above is in fact entitled to pass judgment on the parents who are hanging out in the park—she might be the bullied child’s mother, or caregiver. But rather than reproaching the parents for their specific behavior, she directly accuses them of being bad parents. In such case, had she limited herself to judging those parents’ specific behavior, she would have been right, and within the limits of her legitimate authority of a caregiver. However, the fact that she infers from an episode, however mistaken it may be, that the other child’s parents are overall morally reprehensible as parents, is illegitimate, and therefore inappropriate qua Judgmental.

At the other end of the spectrum, it is easy to imagine the opposite attitude of Indulgence, i.e., the refusal to draw general consequences concerning someone’s morality, even when in possession of a sufficient amount of evidence. If Mary, e.g., witnessed scenes of blatant bad parenting every day—including episodes of negligence, and possibly even violence—and refused to admit that those parents were morally reprehensible as parents, or even as moral agents overall, she would be both epistemically and morally mistaken. The attitude of Fair Judgment, which is corrective of both mistakes, is the attitude of discerning when one can draw implications about people’s character from their behavior and when one cannot.

*Moral fury.* The second form of flaw in moral judgment that may co-occur with all types of moralism concerns the way one reacts to others’ behavior. In all cases above, the Overdemanding, the Rigid, the Absolutist, or the Arrogant may overcharge their moralistic evaluation by eloquently expressing their disapproval in words, physical gestures, or else, in such a way that these expressions are excessive with respect to the importance of the (supposed) wrong. By emphasizing her disapproval this moralist may express a Moral fury that reacts to the (supposed) wrong in an exaggerated manner. The opposite deficiency is a lack of capacity to express how wrong something is, thus giving the impression that one is Numb and not reactive to the (supposed) wrong. The relevant correct attitude is the capacity to express one’s Calm indignation when the circumstances call for it.

As said, Judgmentalism and Moral fury are not kinds of moralism; rather, they may be correlated with them. In this sense, they may strengthen the epistemically striking effect (Judgmentalism) or the emotionally disturbing impact (Moral fury) of a kind of moralism. They may occur in practice without contributing to the definition of moralism. Indeed, it is plausible to presume that Judgmentalism derives from a cognitive bias (that of inferring a general tendency from a single case) that can also yield unjustified appraisal, while Moral fury stems from a tendency to have excessive emotive reactions, which may also generate enthusiasm and unmotivated support. Evidence that Judgmentalism and Moral fury are not kinds of moralism per se can also be inferred from the fact that these two forms of failure are the result of epistemic biases or emotional overreactions that can occur in non-moral instances. Consider the case of a person who falls prey to the

generalization bias by saying that someone else's intellectual abilities are poor, as an inference from a single poor intellectual performance. Or consider the person who, after visiting her new friend for the first time, says that her new friend is messy. As to Fury, it can take the non-moral form of overreacting to violations of non-moral codes, such as etiquette. While moralism can only be about moral issues, Judgmentalism and Fury may occur in moral cases, and amplify the strength of a judgment, without necessarily being confined per se to the moral domain.

*Hypocrisy.* A third notion that can be easily confused with moralism is that of hypocrisy. The hypocrite "condemns immorality in others while failing to acknowledge their own similar moral failings" (Taylor 2012: 6). Although the hypocrite's condemning attitude can often be mistaken for moralism, it should be noted that she need not be ipso facto a moralist, in that her moral judgment may be correct and appropriate according to all the four categories set out above. Thus, from the hypocrite's lack of self-assessment alone, one is not entitled to infer her being a moralist without a thorough analysis of the nature of the judgment she passes on others. However, a hypocrite can easily become a moralist insofar as the two-faced judgments she passes fall into one or more of the four categories above. Also, we claim there is a peculiar correlation between Hypocrisy and Arrogance, for being morally flawed can, in some cases, represent an unentitling condition in itself.

*Paternalism.* Paternalism is "the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm" (Dworkin 2017; emphasis added). Insofar as the Paternalist considers herself morally superior and capable of knowing someone else's good, her failure may overlap or correlate particularly with Arrogance, but also with other forms of moralism depending on the kind of standard the Paternalist imposes on the object of her patronizing behavior or judgment. However, such attitude does not coincide with Arrogance tout court, because paternalism is, under certain conditions, allowed or necessary (consider the obvious case of parents' attitudes toward their children), while moralism, as understood here, is taken to be a failure of moral judgments. Moreover, the ground of paternalism is the supposed good of the patronized, which the paternalist seeks to promote. The good of a person may be thought to be promoted by the compliance with a moral principle, but the ground for the moralistic behavior and judgment is not the independent value of respecting the moral principle, but the (supposed) good of the patronized.

*Puritanism.* Puritanism as a moral attitude, as opposed to a religious membership stricto sensu, implies "a spirit of moral earnestness that informs its bearer's whole way of life" (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2018, modified). Given its extremeness, it may be seen as a rather similar excess to Rigidity and Overdemandingness. However, it may simply mean a very demanding morality one can follow without necessarily judging others accordingly. This will often imply carrying out self-reformation without at the same time openly interfering with others' lives.

*Moral grandstanding.* Finally, we have identified a notion which is potentially proximate to moralism, i.e., moral grandstanding. According to Tosi and Warmke (2016), to grandstand is to make "a contribution to public moral discourse that aims to convince others that one is 'morally respectable'", due to vanity. In brief, grandstanding "is the use of moral talk for self-promotion" (Tosi and Warmke 2022: 40). Obviously, one need not be a moralist in order to grandstand, or vice versa. However, there may be a subtle yet deep connection between the

two attitudes. Think, for instance, of politicians or other public figures, who issue moralistic judgments in order to convince the public that they are morally respectable. In this case, the choice of being moralistic is motivated by a wish for admiration, which is (perhaps incorrectly) supposed to be more easily elicited by “extreme” moral statements than by more moderate ones. This is particularly true in Tosi and Warmke’s (2022: 54–57) notion of “trumping up”, a type of grandstanding whereby a person seeks special recognition as a highly moral person by objecting to irrelevant or non-immoral features of the world.

Moral grandstanding, as is clear, can also correlate with hypocrisy, when the moral qualities displayed are fake; it may be the case, therefore, that one can be simultaneously moralistic, hypocritical, and a moral grandstander.

As we have seen, each of the cognate notions outlined is potentially—and relatively easily—correlated with one or more forms of moralism. However, since the features of moralism are not included per se in the definition of these notions, it cannot be concluded that they are moralistic in themselves. Rather, we propose that they take a moralistic shape when associated with one or more kinds of moralism.

## 6. Conclusion: The Purchase of the Argument and the Boundaries of Morality

We have tried to identify two common sources from which all kinds of moralism identified in the literature spring, and which make sense of what is wrong with moralism both in itself and in each of its instances. Moreover, in light of this identification, we have systematized kinds of moralism in what we think is a more refined taxonomy, which does justice to existing attempts in this sense but also partly revises them. Finally, we have explained why certain notions commonly understood as falling within the scope of moralism should be considered as different—yet frequently co-occurrent—kinds of mistake in moral judgment.

We have understood all kinds of moralism as ways of improperly stretching the boundaries of morality when judging others; thus, as forms of excess, and as ways of doing “too much of a good thing”. But what of the boundaries themselves, which we have so far tackled, so to speak, from the perspective of their violation? We have argued that moralism is a perversion of morality when judging others. It entails a prevarication in putting oneself in a special position toward others and/or in giving too much weight and relevance to moral reasons against other reasons. If these considerations are convincing, it means that there are limits to what we can demand of others, that morality cannot always impose its authority on other forms of normativity, and that we cannot always override the authority of other persons even though we might have a good (supposedly moral) motive to do so.

Why do these limits exist and on what are they grounded? An answer to these two questions will be even more tentative than the previous considerations, since it would require a much longer detour. In analyzing the limits of the demands we can place on others, we will try to unpack what we have so far partially assumed. By bringing to the fore the implicit presuppositions of the phenomenon of moralism, we aim to account for the philosophical conditions for the common usage of moralism. In this sense, we are not committed to defending the idea that these limits are philosophically existent and metaethically justified. We only claim that if the common idea and phenomenon of moralism are morally tenable, this is only

by virtue of certain presuppositions, presuppositions which, in what follows, we seek to bring to the fore.

Broadly speaking, we can at least suppose that moral judgment acquires and maintains its legitimacy if it is appropriately exercised. When an individual (A) judges another individual (B), A seeks to assume a normative role with respect to B. For this action to be acceptable to B, it must be the case that the content of what A demands, the domain over which A judges and the very action of arrogating the role of judging B are legitimate. To further elucidate this point let us compare moral judgment to other types of normative judgments where the activity is more formalized according to established rules. The point of comparing the activity of moral judgment with other kinds of judgment is to highlight how an appropriate moral judgment depends on the condition that the moral judge has the right to judge over a certain domain (role and domain authority) and she appropriately exercises her role as a judge (correct exercise of judgment).

Role and domain authority: A's role qua judge must be legitimately recognizable by the other parties at stake. As said before, one need not subscribe to second-personal accounts of moral reason to accept that it cannot be the case that A arrogates to herself a role she does not have. There should either be an informal recognition according to established norms, or a formal one, as in the case of an appointed judge or referee. This need not be an actual relation where the parties look at each other. Rather, legitimately or illegitimately arrogating the authority to judge others is often an implicit action because a person can act moralistically even by passing judgment on a person she does not know. Moreover, A must have the authority to judge over a certain domain. For instance, a football referee's authority is circumscribed to the football pitch, not to criminal behavior, and conversely a judge in a criminal court cannot convict a boxer for the fact of punching their opponent during a boxing match. This condition may seem either obvious or unnecessary: after all, qua moral agents we are all entitled to pass judgments on others if something immoral is occurring. This is true, but it highlights the (implicit) conditions for having authority to judge. Moreover, moral life is not always an activity involving simple moral agents and judges because we frequently act in specific roles. Think of our duties and responsibilities as parents, doctors, professors and so on.

Correct exercise of judgment: The second condition requires that A should judge B's behavior appropriately with respect to the normative standards at stake and the relevant circumstances. This means not demanding too much and admitting, when relevant, appropriate attenuating factors. Indeed, a moral judgment may be inappropriate not only because the judge does not have authority, but also to the extent that the legitimate judge passes a judgment that does not apply appropriate standards.

If these considerations are true, it follows that the legitimate use of moral judgments involves a number of boundaries which limit the judgments' applicability. In a way, this shows that morality itself is a more nuanced and fragile domain than one might expect. Being nuanced and fragile does not mean being weak or prone to compromise. Rather, it means being open to the assessment of circumstances, variable roles, and countervailing considerations, without relinquishing the idea that typically moral considerations are generally valid, urgent, and prior to other considerations. In sum, to understand morality as limited and as possessing boundaries does not entail a depreciation of its value and authority.

To approach the conclusion, one may finally inquire into the practical import of our account of moralism. Without presupposing that conceptual clarification is a worthwhile enterprise per se, a taxonomy of the structure of a concept that is at the core of certain philosophical debates may provide a fertile ground for further analyses of related concepts, as we have seen in §§2–4. Furthermore, our taxonomy could help to identify which moral theories are hospitable to the very concept of moralism. As already noted, we have attempted to keep substantive claims to a minimum, so that our taxonomy could potentially fit any moral theory, according to its own substantive moral standards. However, some theories may be unable to account for at least some of the forms of moralism sketched above – i.e., theories may fail to distinguish between what is morally required and what is supererogatory, or they might undervalue the relational dimension of moral judgment. It would be well beyond the scope of this paper to provide an analysis of specific moral theories through the lens of their degree of hospitality to moralism. However, we think such an analysis could be fruitfully carried out.

Finally, we suggest that the conceptual clarification of such a pervasive, and yet elusive, idea may shed light on how moralism is used as a weapon by polemicists in many public debates. Excessive or inappropriate requirements may be rejected as moralistic, but moralism can also be used as a charge, namely as a defense against accusations that are taken to be illegitimate, relational, or substantial moral judgments. However, as much as moral judgments can be mistaken qua moralistic, so polemical rejoinders can be misguided if they accuse of moralism judgments that are in fact relationally legitimate and substantively accurate. Whether a judgment is actually moralistic or not cannot be settled in the abstract, for it obviously depends on the preferred moral standards. However, our analysis may provide a conceptual toolkit to begin to assess the plausibility of charges of moralism. Such a toolkit, besides contributing to the conceptual understanding of a quotidian phenomenon, may also provide a fine-grained contribution to the broader aim of defending the authority of morality.

Our intuition is that allowing morality to be confused or conflated with moralism, both theoretically and within real-life interactions, is precisely one of the possible reasons why some people fail to acknowledge the binding force and authoritativeness of morality (see Archer 2018). But the present paper has only provided the preliminaries for this idea; a full defense of this idea requires another paper.

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