ABSTRACT. Although it goes against a widespread significant misunderstanding of his view, Michael Smith is one of the very few moral philosophers who explicitly wants to allow for the commonsense claim that, while morally required action is always favored by some reason, selfish and immoral action can also be rationally permissible. One point of this paper is to make it clear that this is indeed Smith’s view. It is a further point to show that his way of accommodating this claim is inconsistent with his well-known “practicality requirement” on moral judgments: the thesis that any rational person will always have at least some motivation to do what she judges to be right. The general conclusion is that no view that, like Smith’s, associates the normative strength of a reason with the motivational strength of an ideal desire will allow for the wide range of rational permissibility that Smith wants to capture.

KEY WORDS: morality, permission, pro tanto reasons, rationality, reasons, requirement, Michael Smith

It is possible to read much of what Michael Smith has written and come away with the firm conviction that he means to ally himself with the traditional moral rationalists, and that he holds that moral requirements are rational requirements. Indeed, this may even be the received interpretation of Smith.¹ But the reasons for this are, as will

¹ See note 15, below. Because of this widespread misinterpretation, and although the textual evidence is independently persuasive, I have obtained explicit permission from Smith to state that he agrees to the following: “That in some conflicts between morality and self-interest, either option is rationally permissible, and that this happens not merely when one of the options is morally supererogatory, but in cases in which the choice is between a genuinely immoral and selfish action, and a morally required one.”
be argued, primarily a matter of misleading grammar. As will be explained below, for example, Smith’s talk of “categorical requirements of reason” is clearly intended only to be talk of objective pro tanto reasons – reasons that do not depend on the actual desires of the agent. Not only can it sometimes be rationally permissible to act against such “categorical requirements,” sometimes it can even be rationally required to act against them, when opposing reasons are sufficiently strong. Thus, Smith’s claim that moral requirements are categorical requirements of reason is, perhaps surprisingly, consistent with a denial of the strong Kantian rationalist position that immoral behavior is always irrational. If this is right, then there has been no change of opinion when, in a recent paper discussed below, Smith makes clear that he thinks that any adequate account of rationality – not only his – will allow at least some immoral action to count as rationally permissible. As far back as The Moral Problem, Smith quoted Susan Wolf with approval, endorsing her idea that there is something wrong with an exclusive concern with moral rightness. And in the years between The Moral Problem and Smith’s recent explicit denial of traditional moral rationalism, he has certainly made it clear both that moral rightness does not provide all things considered normative reasons, and that we must allow for the possibility that moral reasons might be overridden by non-moral reasons in particular cases.

It is also possible to read Smith’s The Moral Problem, and remain unclear whether his official account of normative reasons is intended

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3 Michael Smith, The Moral Problem (London: Blackwell, 1994), p. 183. Although Smith himself cited this passage to me when first expressing his puzzlement that anyone would have thought he regarded immoral behavior as rationally prohibited, it must be conceded that this remark in itself falls short of a conclusive repudiation of the strong rationalist view.

4 Michael Smith, “The Incoherence Argument: Reply to Shafer-Landau,” Analysis 61 (2001), pp. 255–257; “The Definition of ‘Moral,’” in Dale Jamieson (ed.) Singer and His Critics (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 57. It is in this latter paper that Smith claims that a view such as his opens up the possibility that moral reasons might be overridden by other, non-moral reasons. In itself this is a weaker claim than the claim that immoral behavior can be rationally permissible. For the possibility of non-moral reasons overriding moral ones is consistent with the idea – for example – that in cases that realize this possibility, the result is that the morally right action becomes supererogatory.