

Can Pascal's Wager Save Morality from Ockham's Razor?

Abstract

One version of moral error theory maintains that the central problem with morality is an ontological commitment to irreducible normativity. This paper argues that this version of error theory ultimately depends on an appeal to Ockham's Razor, and that Ockham's Razor should not be applied to irreducible normativity. This is because the appeal to Ockham's Razor always contains an intractable element of epistemic circularity; and if this circularity is not vicious, we can construct a sound argument for the existence of irreducibly normative truths that contains a similar kind of epistemic circularity. This argument is a version of Pascal's Wager which I call "*Parfit's Wager*," because it is based on a passage from Derek Parfit's *On What Matters* (2011). It states that, if we believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths, we are more likely to be believing what we ought to believe (and less likely to be believing what we ought not to believe, or to be failing to believe what we ought to believe) compared to not believing that there are such truths, and that this indicates that we ought rationally to believe that there are such truths, justifying the ontological commitment to irreducible normativity in the process.

Keywords

Pascal's Wager; Ockham's Razor; moral error theory; moral realism; irreducible normativity; queerness; parsimony; epistemic circularity

1. Introduction

This paper argues that moral error theory¹ cannot be soundly defended by an appeal to Ockham's Razor.² The version of moral error theory I am concerned with is

1. Understood in the standard way as the view that moral thinking involves systematically false beliefs about the existence of moral properties and facts, and that consequently all moral judgements are false (Olson 2014, 8).

2. Sober (2015) defines Ockham's Razor as the principle "that a theory that postulates fewer entities, processes, or causes is better than a theory that postulates more, so long as the simpler theory is compatible with what we observe" (2). There are actually two versions of Ockham's Razor: the Razor of *Silence*, which prescribes agnosticism about postulates that are not needed to explain our observations, and the Razor of *Denial*, which actively denies their

what Kalf (2018) calls “queerness” error theory (20), which maintains that the central problem with morality is an ontological commitment to irreducible normativity. As Olson (2018) argues, “moral facts are metaphysically queer” because “moral facts are or entail irreducibly normative reasons” and “irreducible normativity is queer” (107). I will argue that the error in queerness error theory is the application of Ockham’s Razor to irreducibly normative reasons.³

Sober argues that Ockham’s Razor should not be applied to moral facts because “[e]thics is in a different line of work from psychology. Psychology has the job of explaining human thought and behavior. Normative ethical propositions have the job of telling us how we *ought* to act, not of explaining why we act as we do” (266). The problem with this line of thought is that, even if *morality* is not in the business of explaining anything, *we* are in that business if, like the error theorist, we are looking for the best explanation for our moral thinking. And if the simplest explanation for our moral thinking (that is also compatible with our observations) does not postulate moral facts, then Ockham’s Razor, unmet by a positive argument on the side of moral facts, still implies that this explanation is the best, and thus that moral facts do not exist.

Enoch (2013) attempts to provide such an argument in the form of his Argument from Deliberative Indispensability. Enoch argues that “objective, irreducibly normative facts are indispensable ... for deliberation, and ... this indispensability suffices to justify belief in their existence” (9). This is because deliberation, defined as the activity of trying to decide what it makes most sense to believe and to do, is “an attempt to eliminate arbitrariness by discovering (normative) reasons,” which is “impossible in a believed absence of such reasons to

existence (12). When I talk about Ockham’s Razor in this paper, I am talking about the Razor of Denial, because the moral error theorist actively denies the existence of moral facts.

3. Kalf contrasts queerness error theory with what he calls “rationality” error theory, which locates the problem with morality in a commitment to *categorical* reasons, rather than irreducibly normative reasons. He explains that

The difference between categorical and irreducibly normative reasons is that it is built into the definition of the latter that they make an ontological demand on the world, whereas the former leave this open and just require that they ‘bind’ agents regardless of whether they desire to perform the action that a categorical reason tells them to perform. (17)

Since rationality error theory—supported by Joyce (2007) and Kalf himself—is consequently not ontological in its main concerns, I will not argue that it is based on Ockham’s Razor like queerness error theory.

be discovered," and because deliberation "feels like trying to make the *right* choice," and the phenomenology of deliberation is similar "to that of trying to find an answer to a straightforwardly factual question" (72-74). As such, if there were no irreducibly normative facts, this would undermine our reason to engage in deliberation. Since we clearly do have reason to engage in deliberation, however, there must be some irreducibly normative facts (70). But the error theorist can respond to this argument exactly as Olson does, by pointing out that "the question one is trying to answer in deliberation is often what one most wants (to do), or most desires (to do)" (2014, 173). And it seems perfectly possible to answer such questions in the complete absence of irreducibly normative facts: all we need are psychological facts about our desires and empirical facts about how to realize them.⁴

I suggest that moral realists have not yet done an adequate job of meeting the challenge that Ockham's Razor presents to their belief in moral facts. But there is hope. In a neglected passage, located right at the end of the second volume of *On What Matters*, Parfit (2011) uses what is essentially a refined version of Pascal's Wager to argue that we ought rationally to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths (619).⁵ My contention is that, with some further refinement, his argument in this passage—which I will call "*Parfit's Wager*"—is actually the key to saving morality from the threat of Ockham's Razor. I will argue that, from a dialectical point of view, the correct thing to do for the realist when the error theorist tries to wield Ockham's Razor against the ontological commitments of morality is to defend these commitments by appealing to Pascal's (i.e. Parfit's) Wager.

2. Two Wagers: Kahane's and Parfit's

Kahane (2017) has recently put forward a similar Pascalian argument against "nihilism," by which he means "both the view that nothing has final value, and that there are no reasons to want, do or feel anything." He argues that we should reject nihilism because, if nihilism is true, nothing matters. And

4. These are not the only questions we ask ourselves in deliberation, of course. But the error theorist can apply Ockham's Razor and argue that these are the only questions that we *need* to ask, in light of the less parsimonious commitments involved in the answers to other kinds of deliberative questions (such as moral questions). We will return to this.

5. Neglected both in the literature and (due to its placement) by the author. Though Streumer (2017) cites it, very much in passing, during his response to Cuneo's objection that the error theory is either self-defeating or polemically toothless (170). I will not understand the argument as a version of this objection, however.

If nothing matters, this [the fact that nothing matters⁶] doesn't matter either. But if nothing matters, and we believe that, then—although it won't matter *whether* anything would still matter to us—it's likely that far fewer things *would* matter to us. If nothing matters then this result of belief in nihilism of course also won't matter. But it *would* matter, and matter greatly, if we falsely believe in nihilism and stop, in this way, to care about the things that do matter. (347-48)

I think Kahane is broadly on the right track, but his argument—“*Kahane's Wager*”—relies on an assumption about our normative or evaluative psychology which I just don't think we need to make in order to construct a successful wager argument against nihilism or the error theory. Kahane's Wager is based on a principle he calls “Belief Loss,” according to which “[c]oming to believe in nihilism will result in our coming to lose our substantive evaluative beliefs” (331). But if nihilism is true, we would still care about all kinds of things: a scenario in which nothing matters and yet we care about all kinds of things, such as justice and human suffering, is exactly the scenario that currently obtains if nihilism is in fact true. Is it really plausible that, in such a scenario, we would stop caring about the things we actually care about if we came to believe (correctly) that nihilism is true? If we came to believe that nothing matters in any sense whatsoever, then perhaps we really would stop caring about anything at all. Yet it seems quite possible to hold, like Street (2016), that “[n]othing matters, ultimately, independently of the attitudes of beings who take things to matter” (that nothing has “final value,” as Kahane puts it), but that nonetheless, “plenty of things *matter*” (121).⁷ And I doubt that holding such a position prevents one from caring about such things as justice and human suffering.

Kahane insists that our subjective concerns co-vary closely with our evaluative beliefs, and thus that “once we conclude that all of our evaluative beliefs are false, we should also largely lose the corresponding subjective concerns and motivations” (339-340). That may well be true, but it is far less clear that coming to believe in nihilism in Kahane's specific sense—the sense according to which nothing has final value—will lead us to reject our substantive evaluative beliefs as false: “to

6. Or having a true belief that nothing matters (for that matter).

7. Or even, as Street says, that “plenty of things ‘really’ matter, if we allow, as I think we should, that existing independently of a subject's point of view of the world is not the only way of being ‘real’.” What Kahane seems to mean when he talks about things mattering, however, is precisely the “robustly attitude-independent sense” of “(really) matters” that Street rejects.

no longer hold that suffering is bad, virtue good, freedom desirable, etc" (340).⁸ We might be able to believe that suffering is bad, for instance, without believing that it is ultimately bad, or that it is bad completely independently of us and our attitudes, or the like. We will then be able to continue caring about suffering even if we come to believe that nihilism (in Kahane's sense) is true. Unlike Kahane's Wager, Parfit's Wager is a purely conceptual argument, and it is thus not answerable to the contingencies of our normative or evaluative psychology. I therefore believe this argument can succeed where Kahane's Wager fails.

So without further ado, here is the passage from Parfit containing what I refer to as Parfit's Wager:

If we believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths, we might be believing what we ought to believe. If there are such truths, one of these truths would be that we ought to believe that there are such truths. If instead we believe that there are no such truths, we could not be believing what we ought to believe. If there were no such truths, there would be nothing that we ought to believe. Since

(D) it might be true that we ought to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths,

and

(E) it could not be true that we ought not to have this belief,

we can conclude that

(F) we have unopposed reasons or apparent reasons to believe that there are such truths,

so that

(G) this is what, without claiming certainty, we ought rationally to believe. (619)

And if we ought rationally to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths (even if we have no right to be certain), we should not be denying the existence of moral facts on the basis of Ockham's Razor.

Why is this argument for irreducibly normative truths a version of Pascal's Wager? For Pascal, we ought rationally to believe in the Christian God, although his existence is plainly uncertain, because wagering that God exists is the best bet in

8. Not to mention that Kahane's definition of nihilism seems to conflate two quite different views: we could believe that nothing has final value without also believing that there are no reasons to want, do or feel anything.

prudential terms (Hájek 2018). In a similar vein, Parfit's Wager purports to show that we ought rationally to believe in irreducibly normative truths, because wagering that they exist is the best bet in *normative* terms. Yet Parfit's Wager does not possess the defects of Pascal's original Wager. It is not vulnerable to a "What about the other Gods?" objection, showing that the prudential value of believing in the Christian God is cancelled out when we consider, say, the possibility of a God that doesn't want us to believe in him, and will vindictively punish us if we dare to do so. Nor does it require us to actively *try* to believe something that we might just find it too difficult to believe. Instead, it purports to show that we can come to understand, on a purely conceptual basis, that we ought rationally to believe in irreducibly normative truths when we reflect properly on the *possibility* that there could be such truths and what this possibility means for us and for what (if anything) we ought rationally to believe.

At first glance, this argument might strike the reader as viciously circular: how can we wager for the existence of irreducibly normative truths because it is the best bet in *normative* terms unless we already know that such truths actually exist? The answer is that when we make the Wager, we are comparing epistemically possible worlds in terms of the normative truths (or lack thereof) in those worlds, without assuming, at that stage, that the actual world contains any normative truths itself. For all we know at this stage, we might be in the neutral world (in normative terms), by which I mean a world in which there are no normative truths and in which, therefore, everything is normatively neutral, in the sense that nothing has any normative property or status (positive or negative). What we are doing (or ought to be doing) is giving ourselves the best chance of being in a good world in normative terms, that is, a world in which normative truths do exist and in which we behave in accordance with those normative truths. In so doing, we are *not* already assuming, in a question-begging manner, that we are not in fact in the neutral world. The existence of irreducibly normative truths (in the actual world) is a conclusion we can then go on to draw on the basis of the Wager.

I will now defend the premises of this argument one at a time. In Section 3, I defend premise (D) on the grounds that queerness error theory relies, implicitly or explicitly, on an appeal to Ockham's Razor. In Section 4, I defend premise (E) by arguing that, if there are any normative truths at all, there must be some irreducibly normative truths. In Section 5, I defend premise (F) and the conclusion (G), first by constructing a matrix I call "the Normative Matrix," which shows that believing in irreducibly normative truths *normatively superdominates* not believing in such truths, and then by introducing an additional premise that Parfit himself does not supply: a

principle I call “Normative Superdominance” (NS), which—when combined with the Normative Matrix—entails that we ought rationally to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths. And finally, in Section 6, I compare Parfit’s Wager to Ockham’s Razor from a dialectical point of view, arguing that they both share an intractable element of epistemic circularity (although Parfit’s Wager is not question-begging in the way considered above). The ultimate upshot is that, if this circularity is vicious in the case of Parfit’s Wager, it is also vicious in the case of Ockham’s Razor (although I suggest that it is not vicious in either case).

3. Queerness Error Theory and Ockham’s Razor

Premise (D) follows from the assumption that irreducibly normative reasons are at least *epistemically* possible.⁹ *Normative* reasons are reasons which pertain to the *justification* or *rationality* of an agent’s behaviour, including doxastic behaviour, such as forming or suspending belief, contrasted with *motivating* reasons, which are reasons which feature in the *explanation* of an agent’s behaviour (Smith 2005, 95; Joyce 2007, 70).¹⁰ *Irreducibly* normative reasons are reasons which cannot be fully analyzed in terms of non-normative facts, such as facts about desires, functions, or conventions (Olson 2018, 109; Rowland 2020, 218). Irreducibly normative reasons are epistemically possible so long as we do not know, with something approaching certainty, that such reasons do not exist. And the error theorist will need a sharper tool than Ockham’s Razor to motivate a denial of this assumption: a methodological norm like Ockham’s Razor can at most be used to establish that normative reasons are improbable, not that they are impossible. If the error theorist needs to rely on Ockham’s Razor to deny the existence of irreducibly normative reasons, therefore, I submit that such reasons are epistemically possible, and premise (D) is true: if there could be some irreducibly normative reasons, it might be true that we ought to believe that there are some truths involving these reasons, that is, irreducibly normative truths.

9. This is distinct from the assumption that such reasons are *metaphysically* possible, which risks begging the question against the error theorist for whom irreducibly normative reasons are metaphysically impossible. Something can be epistemically possible while nonetheless being metaphysically impossible: even if irreducibly normative reasons are in fact metaphysically impossible, we may not know (for certain) that this is the case.

10. Motivating reasons might also be normative reasons (the same reasons might both explain and justify an agent’s behaviour). But since there are two distinct concepts of a reason (the normative/justificatory and the motivational/explanatory), reasons can be motivating without being normative (and *vice versa*).

In his 2011 paper, Olson called it “fairly obvious” that the Argument from Queerness “is based on an appeal to Occam’s Razor. The gist of the argument, after all, is that error theory offers a *theoretically simpler* and hence *preferable* explanation of the phenomena to be explained (i.e. moral thought and talk) than do competing realist explanations” (67-68). Though he does not explicitly refer to Ockham’s Razor in his presentation of the argument in his 2014 book, *Moral Error Theory*, he admits that the error theorists’ conviction that irreducible normativity is queer “is at a bedrock metaphysical level” and that the defender of morality “could maintain that it is a fundamental fact about reality that there are irreducibly normative reason relations” (136). He then proceeds to put the onus on the realist to find a way out of this dialectical impasse, for instance by appealing to “companions in guilt” with moral facts, such as the abstract facts of logic and mathematics. Olson’s reply is simply to say that, although such facts about abstracta “may be metaphysically problematic in a number of ways, they do not display the feature that the error theorist finds especially queer about moral facts—they do not entail irreducibly normative reasons” (138). If this presumption against the realist is not to be question-begging, it must surely derive from an appeal to Ockham’s Razor. And indeed he then goes on to say, in his defence of debunking explanations of moral belief, that “error theorists can apply Occam’s razor. If our moral practices and beliefs can be explained without appeal to irreducibly normative properties and facts, a theory that dispenses with such properties and facts will have the advantage of being in this respect the more ontologically parsimonious theory” (147). This should make it clear that Olson’s case for the error theory depends on Ockham’s Razor.¹¹

Streumer’s case for the error theory is less clear in its invocation of Ockham’s Razor. His Reduction Argument against irreducibly normative properties is based on a criterion of property identity he calls “(N),” which states that “[t]wo predicates ascribe the same property if and only if they are necessarily co-extensive” (11). Since normative predicates are necessarily co-extensive with descriptive predicates, given (N), normative and descriptive predicates ascribe the same properties. This means that normative properties are identical to descriptive properties, in which case (if they even exist at all) they are not *irreducibly* normative.¹² And he denies defending (N) on the grounds that it follows from a general principle of parsimony; instead, he

11. In light of Olson’s use of Ockham’s Razor, Evers (2014) is left “with the sense that queerness is not doing any work in the argument against non-natural moral facts after all.” I am left with the same exact sense.

12. Because it means that normative properties can be specified in entirely non-normative terms (Jackson 2016, 200).

argues that what it says about various purported counterexamples is exactly right, and that apparent alternatives either do not in fact contradict (N) or effectively confuse properties with concepts (22-23).

But Streumer endorses what (N) says about certain of these purported counterexamples on the grounds that its denial would excessively multiply properties:

If the predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’ and ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’ ascribed two different properties [in spite of being necessarily co-extensive], why would the predicate ‘is a triangle’ not ascribe a third property? And suppose we defined a ‘half-side’ as half a side and a ‘half-angle’ as half an angle. If the predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’, ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’, and ‘is a triangle’ ascribed three different properties, why would the predicate ‘is a closed figure with six half-sides and six half-angles’ not ascribe a fourth property?

Streumer insists that “this multiplication of properties must stop somewhere,” and that it “seems most defensible to say that it stops at the start, and that the predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’ and ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’ ascribe the same property” (14-15). But although these predicates have the same extension, they do not have the same intension, whereas a predicate like ‘is a closed figure with six-half sides’ not only has the same extension as the predicate ‘is a closed figure with three sides’, but has the same intension as well: it is clearly *analytic* that a closed figure with three sides is also a closed figure with six half-sides, though it does not seem to be analytic that a closed figure with three sides is also a closed figure with three angles. Lillehammer (2018) points out that, according to (N), “there are no ‘genuine’ properties our commitment to which is explained by such non-extensional features as their place in explanation or justification” (447). The will-o-the-wisp in Streumer’s error theory is the assumption that real properties (what he calls “ways objects can be”) can only be differentiated on an extensional basis. And this assumption, combined with the concern about multiplying properties, strongly suggests an underling appeal to Ockham’s Razor: we get a more parsimonious ontology if we only differentiate properties on an extensional basis.¹³

13. Brown’s (2011) formulation of the Reduction Argument explicitly involves applying Ockham’s Razor to properties he calls “*redundant*, in the sense that they do no work in distinguishing possibilities” (210). Streumer’s claim that “if properties are ways objects can be, (N) is the correct criterion of property identity” (13) is surely just another way of saying the same thing, i.e. that distinct, necessarily co-extensive properties are redundant because they do not distinguish between possibilities (ways objects *can* be), and Ockham’s

It becomes clear that Streumer needs Ockham's Razor when we consider his response to the Deliberative Indispensability Argument. Streumer concedes that if irreducibly normative properties are indispensable to deliberation, "this may explain why normative properties are an exception to (N)" (22). His response is that the argument

may show that normative properties are indispensable to deliberation. But it does not show that if normative properties were identical to descriptive properties, this would undermine our reason to engage in deliberation. It therefore does not show that *irreducibly* normative properties are indispensable to deliberation. (23)

But even if Enoch does not show that irreducibly normative properties are indispensable to deliberation, Streumer himself may provide the resources to show this in light of his own arguments against reductive realism (the view that there are normative properties and these properties are identical to descriptive properties). If what he calls "the false guarantee and regress objections" to reductive realism are correct, they show as a matter of necessity that "if there are normative properties, these properties are not identical to descriptive properties" (61).¹⁴ And if we combine this conclusion with the conclusion of the Deliberative Indispensability Argument—that normative properties (at least) are indispensable to deliberation—we get the further conclusion that *irreducibly* normative properties are indispensable to deliberation: if deliberation requires normative properties, and normative properties cannot possibly be identical to descriptive properties, it surely follows that deliberation requires irreducibly normative properties. And if the deliberative indispensability of irreducibly normative properties means that they are an exception to (N), the Reduction Argument cannot be used to establish the non-existence of such properties.

Streumer's case for the error theory fails, therefore, unless the Deliberative Indispensability Argument can be rejected on other grounds. And the obvious way to do this is to argue, like Olson, that all we really need from deliberation is for it to

Razor should be applied to such properties. Despite Streumer's stated methodology, Enoch is probably right that "[t]he deep reason ... for objecting to distinct necessarily co-extensive properties has to do not so much with intuitive judgments about some examples, but with parsimony, with the methodological requirement not to multiply entities (including properties) unnecessarily" (139).

14. It is not part of my purpose to defend reductive realism, so I will not consider these objections in this paper.

tell us (how to get) what we most want, and since this task apparently involves no commitment to irreducibly normative reasons or properties, *by Ockham's Razor*, such reasons and properties do not exist. As Joyce writes, “[t]here is such a thing as instrumental deliberation: we deliberate about how best to satisfy our desires, and we deliberate about how those desires fit together as a whole ... It is the person who wants to go beyond this picture ... who has the explaining to do” (124). Since the burden of proof, therefore, is on the proponent of non-instrumental deliberation, should this burden not be met, we can say that the only valid form of deliberation is instrumental, and thus that there are no irreducibly normative reasons or properties. So long, that is, as we are content to rely on an appeal to Ockham's Razor.

It should not be too surprising that the ontological version of error theory ultimately depends on Ockham's Razor. Enoch observes that “without such a principle it is exceedingly hard—perhaps even impossible—to justify many of our negative existential beliefs” (53). To avoid having to appeal to Ockham's Razor, the queerness error theorist will have to show that irreducibly normative reasons are akin to square circles in their absolute impossibility. And this is something he seems unlikely to be able to do. I therefore conclude that irreducibly normative reasons are epistemically possible, and thus that premise (D) of Parfit's Wager is true.

4. Irreducible Normativity

Premise (E) states that it could not be true that we ought not to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths. But this is something the error theorist can deny. Olson argues that we have *hypothetical* reasons—reasons that depend on the agent's desires or ends—to believe the error theory if we want to have true beliefs on matters of metaethics, and that we also have *standard-relative* reasons to believe this theory that apply to us in virtue of our engagement in a rule-governed or goal-orientated activity (2014, 158-59). Since the goal of an intellectual endeavour like metaethics is to get at the truth, people who engage in this endeavour have reasons to apply certain standards, such as Ockham's Razor, that increase their likelihood of getting at the truth. If these reasons are decisive, not only *could* it be true that we ought not to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths: it *would* be true that we ought to believe that there are *no* such truths.

The error theorist can say that we have reasons to believe the error theory because the above kinds of reasons are not irreducibly normative (159). To make it clear that hypothetical reasons are not irreducibly normative, Olson invites us to

consider the fact that we might say that there was reason for Hitler to invade Britain during the Second World War. Typically, this will mean only that Hitler had some desire (e.g., a desire to win the war) that would have been satisfied, or would likely have been satisfied, had he invaded Britain. Thus there clearly is a usage of 'reason' in ordinary language according to which the term merely signifies connections between agents' desires and means to bringing about their satisfaction. (154-155)

If we use 'reason' in this sense, we are not justifying any course of behaviour on the part of the agent (Hitler) when we say that he has reasons to do what will satisfy his desires (invading Britain). Concerning standard-relative reasons, we can

suppose that the standard for being a responsible mafioso involves not letting squealers go unpunished. Then to call someone a responsible mafioso is not necessarily to commend his behaviour but simply to make the descriptive claim that that agent does not fail to punish squealers and therefore meets the standard of being a responsible mafioso. (165)

We can say that mafiosos have reasons to punish squealers in virtue of this standard without in any way justifying such behaviour on the part of mafiosos. But as these examples show, claims to the effect that an agent has hypothetical or standard-relative reasons are not only not *irreducibly* normative: they are not normative at all. To say that an agent has reasons in either of these senses is to make a purely descriptive claim, precisely because such claims do not purport to offer even *pro tanto* justification for any course of behaviour on the part of the agent.

Olson claims that "reducibly normative facts, such as facts about the law or rules of chess, do not imply that that we ought or have reasons to comply with these laws or rules" (2018, 113). But it is surely a misnomer to call such facts normative if they do not imply that we ought or have reasons to behave in some way.¹⁵ Facts about reasons that simply observe that some course of behaviour would satisfy the agent's desires or would conform to certain rules or standards are not normative facts at all, because they do not imply that the agent would be justified or rational (to any extent) in engaging in this behaviour. If all such "normative" facts were like this, there would really be no normative facts. I think we can say, therefore, that if there

15. At most they imply that, *according to* some rule or standard, we ought or have reasons to behave in some way. But such facts are no more normative facts than the fact that, "according to Olson, there are no irreducibly normative reasons," is a metanormative fact.

are no irreducibly normative facts and no irreducibly normative reasons, there are no normative facts or reasons. If there are any normative reasons, there must be some irreducibly normative reasons.

The error theorist cannot say that we have normative reasons to believe that there are no irreducibly normative truths. If he were to deny premise (E), therefore, he would have to understand (E) in a descriptive way, as implying that we could not have decisive motivating reasons not to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths. Understood in this way, (E) is obviously false. The queerness error theorist clearly has motivating reasons to apply Ockham's Razor to irreducibly normative truths in an attempt to get at the truth about metaethics (regardless of whether or not this attempt is successful), because this is the core motivation for his view. And these reasons could potentially be decisive, in the descriptive sense that being motivated by these reasons could give one the best possible chance of getting at the truth.

But if we understand (E) in a normative way, as implying that we could not have decisive *normative* reasons not to believe that there are such truths, then (E) certainly seems to be true. If we had normative reasons not to believe that there are such truths, this belief would in fact be true, as there would be some irreducibly normative truths (because there would be some normative reasons, and therefore some irreducibly normative reasons). So these would be normative reasons not to believe the truth. And although we might sometimes have normative reasons not to believe the truth, we surely could not have *decisive* normative reasons not to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths if there in fact are such truths. Any view according to which there are such truths, but we ought not to believe this, would be utterly without motivation. Since (E) is false if understood in a descriptive way, but true if understood in a normative way, I conclude that (E) should be understood in a normative way, and therefore that (E) is true.

5. The Normative Matrix and Normative Superdominance

In order to show that (D) and (E) together entail (F)—that we have unopposed reasons or apparent reasons to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths—we can present Parfit's Wager in the form of a decision matrix (à la Pascal's Wager):

	There are some irreducibly normative truths	There are no irreducibly normative truths
Believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths	Believe what we ought to believe	Normatively neutral
Believe that there are no irreducibly normative truths	Believe what we ought not to believe	Normatively neutral
Suspend belief	Fail to believe what we ought to believe	Normatively neutral

According to this matrix—I call it “the Normative Matrix”—if there are no irreducibly normative truths, there is nothing that we ought to believe (or ought not to believe), and therefore, whatever we believe (or don’t believe) in such a scenario is normatively neutral: it neither has any normative property or status (positive or negative) itself, or involves the possession of any normative property or status by anything. In a scenario such as this, it doesn’t matter normatively what we believe or don’t believe. If, on the other hand, irreducibly normative truths do actually exist, then, if we also believe that there are such truths, we will be believing what we ought to believe. Yet if, in this same scenario, we instead believe that there are no such truths, we will be believing what we ought *not* to believe: if we ought to believe that there are such truths, it follows that we ought *not* to believe that there are *no* such truths. And what if we simply suspend belief, believing neither that there are nor that there aren’t any such truths? If there are no irreducibly normative truths, it won’t matter normatively whether or not we suspend belief on this question. But if there are such truths, then, although we might avoid believing what we ought not to believe by suspending belief, we will also be *failing* to believe what we ought to believe, because, in such a scenario, we ought to believe that there are such truths.

As the above suggests, the Normative Matrix assumes that, in the scenario in which there are some irreducibly normative truths, it is also the case that we ought to believe that there are such truths; as Parfit says, “[i]f there are such truths, one of these truths would be that we ought to believe that there are such truths” (619). But couldn’t it instead be the case that, even though there are such truths, we have no reason (or at least not decisive reason) to believe in them?

Suppose that there are some irreducibly normative truths. In this scenario, there will be some things that we have normative reasons to believe. And if we ever

have reasons to believe that we have reasons to believe any of the things that we in fact have reasons to believe, we will also thereby have reasons to believe that there are some irreducibly truths; we will then be able to infer the existence of such truths straightforwardly from the fact that we have these reasons. And if (in this same scenario) we ever had any countervailing reasons to believe that there are no such truths, these very reasons that we have would themselves indicate that irreducibly normative truths actually exist.

If there are any irreducibly normative truths, therefore, it follows that we ought to believe that there are such truths—unless, that is, we never have any reasons to believe that we have reasons to believe any of things that we nonetheless do have reasons to believe. And while this is a logically possible combination, it is not exactly a plausible one. If there are some normative reasons, although there will no doubt be cases in which we have reasons to believe something without knowing that we have these reasons, in all probability, there will also be cases in which we *do* know that we have reasons to believe what we actually have reasons to believe. If I have reasons to believe that I have a hand, I probably also *have reasons to believe* that I have reasons to believe that I have a hand (because I also have reasons to believe that I have eyes that work correctly, for instance). And if we ever know that we have normative reasons to believe something, we are thereby in a position to know that there are some normative reasons, simply by inference from the fact that we have these reasons. It does seem to be the case, therefore, that if there are some irreducibly normative truths, this is what we ought to believe. This means that, in accordance with the Normative Matrix, if we ought to believe that there are such truths, and we instead believe that there are no such truths, we will be believing what we ought not to believe; and if we suspend belief on the matter, we might avoid believing what we ought not to believe, but we will still be failing to believe what we ought to believe. And this should be enough to entail that we have at least *apparent* reasons to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths, and thus that premise (F) is true.

However, that we have *apparent* reasons to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths does not necessarily entail that this is what we ought rationally to believe as (G) states (even if we avoid claiming certainty). (G) does follow if we have *unopposed* reasons to believe that there are such truths, but for this to be the case, we need to have *actual* reasons to believe that there are such truths. And I don't think the Normative Matrix on its own is enough to entail that we have actual reasons to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths.

To arrive at this conclusion, we need to make an appeal to a principle I call "Normative Superdominance" (NS). (NS) states that:

If a course of behaviour (such as a forming a belief) *normatively superdominates* all possible alternative courses of behaviour (such as forming a contrary belief, or suspending belief), we have *at least some* normative reason to engage in this behaviour (such as by forming the belief).

A course of behaviour “normatively superdominates” all possible alternative courses of behaviour if and only if

1) the *normatively best* possible outcome associated with this behaviour is *normatively better* than any of the possible outcomes associated with the alternatives,

2) the *normatively worst* (or least normatively good) possible outcome associated with this behaviour is *normatively equal to or better than* the *normatively best* possible outcome associated with any of the alternatives,

and

3) the *normatively worst* possible outcome associated with each one of the alternatives is *normatively worse* than the *normatively worst* possible outcome associated with this behaviour.

In other words, the particular behaviour in question not only has to provide us with the only chance we have of getting the normatively best possible outcome; there also has to be no way that we could get a normatively better outcome (better than we would *actually* get if we behaved in this way) by behaving in some alternative way instead (because the possible outcomes associated with any possible alternative are none of them normatively better than *any* of the possible outcomes associated with this behaviour). And not only that, but this behaviour has to provide us with the only guarantee that we will avoid the normatively worst possible outcome: all the alternatives must involve some risk of getting an outcome which is normatively worse than any of the outcomes we would get if we engaged in this behaviour. If all three of these conditions obtain, it seems to be a conceptual truth that we have at least *some* normative reason to engage in this behaviour, and so that it is not the case that we have absolutely no normative reason whatsoever to behave in this way.¹⁶

16. In support of this idea, consider that it is clearly a conceptual truth that, if we ought to behave in a certain way, then we have decisive reason to behave in that way. This seems to suggest that, if we are more likely to behave as we ought to behave, and less likely to behave as we ought not to behave, if we behave in a certain way, compared to any other

When I speak of certain outcomes being normatively better or worse than others, I am defining a “normatively good” outcome as one in which we behave as we have normative reasons to behave, and a “normatively bad” outcome as one in which we fail to behave as we have normative reasons to behave. A “normatively neutral” outcome is simply one which is neither normatively good nor normatively bad. In a scenario in which there are no irreducibly normative truths, all outcomes are normatively neutral: we neither behave nor fail to behave as we have normative reasons to behave in such a scenario, because there are no normative reasons for us to behave in accordance with. We can say that a normatively good outcome is, of course, normatively better than a normatively bad outcome. I also think we can say that a normatively good outcome is normatively better than a normatively neutral one: if one outcome is good (in a certain way) and another outcome is *not* good (in the same way), then, even if the latter outcome is not bad (in that way), it seems reasonable to infer that the former outcome is better (in that way) than the latter outcome. And for the same reason, I also think we can say that a normatively bad outcome is normatively worse than a normatively neutral outcome.

With these conceptual resources in hand, if we return to the Normative Matrix, we can clearly see that forming a belief in irreducibly normative truths normatively superdominates all possible alternatives. The normatively worst (or least normatively good) possible outcome involved in forming this belief (the normatively neutral outcome) is as normatively good as the normatively best possible outcome involved in either forming the contrary belief or in suspending belief (the normatively neutral outcome in both cases). Forming this belief is the only behaviour that has the normatively best possible outcome (believing what we ought to believe) associated with it; and the normatively worst possible outcome associated with either of the other two behaviours (believing what we ought not to believe or failing to believe what we ought to believe) is worse than the worst possible outcome associated with forming the belief in irreducibly normative truths (mere normative neutrality). Since forming this belief normatively superdominates all possible alternatives, by (NS), we have at least some normative reason to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths. If we have even *some* normative reason to believe in such truths (no matter how *pro tanto* weak this reason may be), it follows that such truths must therefore exist: this reason that we have is itself a normative reason, and as I have argued, if there are any normative reasons at all, there must be

behaviour we could possibly engage in, and we know this, then we have, perhaps not *decisive* reason, but *at least some* reason to behave in that way.

some irreducibly normative reasons. And if *this* is the case, we can indeed conclude that we ought rationally to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths.

6. Parfit's Wager, Ockham's Razor and Circularity

At this point, the error theorist will probably object that it is circular to appeal to (NS) in the course of arguing for the existence of irreducibly normative truths. After all, if (NS) expresses a truth, it is surely an irreducibly normative truth, so appealing to (NS) (arguably) question-beggingly assumes that there are some irreducibly normative truths.

But just because an argument is circular does not necessarily mean that it is *viciously* circular. Psillos (1999) explains that "[w]hat is necessary for an argument to be correctly judged *viciously* circular is that the argument should purport to offer reasons for accepting a certain sentence (the conclusion), where (one of) the reasons cited is the sentence itself." We may call such arguments "*premise-circular*" (82). Now consider the following formulation of Parfit's Wager:

1. Believing that there are some irreducibly normative truths normatively superdominates not believing that there are such truths
2. If a behaviour normatively superdominates all possible alternatives, we have at least some normative reason to engage in this behaviour (NS)
3. Therefore, we have at least some normative reason to believe that there are some irreducibly normative truths
4. Therefore, there are some normative reasons
5. If there are some normative reasons, there are some irreducibly normative reasons
6. Therefore, there are some irreducibly normative truths.

Is this argument viciously circular in the way described by Psillos? If it is, the vicious circularity must occur in premises (1)-(3). Premise (3) straightforwardly entails premise (4). I defended premise (5) in Section 4. And premises (4) and (5) together straightforwardly entail the conclusion (6) (if there are some irreducibly normative reasons, there are some irreducibly normative truths). But the syllogism comprising (1)-(3) does not purport to offer reasons for accepting the conclusion (3), where one of these reasons is (3) itself: the reasons for accepting this conclusion—premises (1) and (2)—are neither of them logically equivalent to nor dependent upon (3). (1) could be true even if (3) is false: even if it is true that believing that there are some

irreducibly normative truths normatively superdominates not believing that there are such truths, for all that (1) says, this might not mean that we have any normative reason at all to believe that there are such truths. And (2) could also be true even if (3) is false: even if (NS) is true, it might also be true that no behaviour normatively superdominates all possible alternatives. It is only when we put these two premises together that the conclusion is entailed. I therefore conclude that this argument for irreducibly normative truths is not premise-circular.¹⁷

Even if Parfit's Wager is not premise-circular, however, it may nonetheless be what we can call "*rule-circular*," a rule-circular argument being one that uses a rule of inference to draw a conclusion, where the conclusion asserts or implies something about the rule of inference used in the argument, such as that it is reliable, without which the conclusion will not follow (Psillos, 82). On the one hand, Parfit's Wager does not seem to be rule-circular either: the syllogism comprising (1)-(3) uses the *modus ponens* rule, and its conclusion make no mention of *modus ponens*. But suppose that the conclusion of Parfit's Wager is false, and there are no irreducibly normative truths. We would then have no normative reason to follow *modus ponens*. But if the conclusion is true, we surely have at least *pro tanto* normative reason to follow *modus ponens*. The conclusion of Parfit's Wager, therefore, implies something about the rule of inference used in the argument, in particular, that we have normative reason to follow *modus ponens*. Since we need to rely on *modus ponens* to draw the conclusion that there are some irreducibly normative truths, if we had no normative reason to follow *modus ponens*, we would have no normative reason to draw this conclusion. And if we had no normative reason to draw the conclusion that there are some irreducibly normative truths, it would not be true that we ought to believe that there are such truths. As I have already argued (and as the Normative Matrix requires), if there are some irreducibly normative truths, one of these truths would be that we ought to believe that there are such truths. If it is not true that we ought to believe that there are such truths, therefore, it follows that there are no such truths. So the conclusion of Parfit's Wager *does* imply something about the rule of inference used in

17. To make it clear that it is not premise-circular, we can understand Parfit's Wager first-and-foremost as an argument for irreducibly normative *reasons*, and recognize that the key premise used to derive the conclusion that there are such reasons, (NS)—the culprit for premise-circularity if anything is—is a conditional which postulates a normative reason in its consequent, and as such, it does not *by itself* entail that there are such reasons, and is logically compatible with the negation of the conclusion that there are such reasons. It is only when we combine (NS) with the Normative Matrix—which, I have argued, establishes premise (1)—that we get the conclusion that there are some irreducibly normative reasons.

drawing this conclusion, without which this conclusion will not follow. I therefore conclude that Parfit's Wager is indeed rule-circular.

Psillos argues that rule-circularity is not vicious, because no assumptions about the reliability of a rule are present, either implicitly or explicitly, when an instance of a rule is used:

When an instance of a rule is offered as the link between a set of (true) premisses and a conclusion, what matters for the correctness of the conclusion is whether or not the rule *is* reliable ... Any assumptions that need to be made *about* the reliability of the rule of inference, be they implicit or explicit, do not matter for the correctness of the conclusion. (83)

As we have just seen, Parfit's Wager requires not just that *modus ponens* is reliable, but that we have normative reason to follow *modus ponens*. Yet the basic point still remains. What matters for the correctness of the conclusion is that we *do* have some normative reason to follow *modus ponens*; we do not need to assume, in a question-begging manner, that we have any normative reason to follow *modus ponens* in order to simply use *modus ponens*, as we would in any other case, to draw the conclusion that there are some irreducibly normative truths. Having drawn this conclusion, we can then infer that we have normative reason to follow *modus ponens* and thus that we have normative reason to draw this conclusion. But I don't think this makes the argument viciously circular.

Even if Parfit's Wager *is* viciously circular, however, the case for queerness error theory still fails if Ockham's Razor is just as circular as Parfit's Wager. Olson defends the appeal to methodological norms of parsimony by saying "that such norms are truth-tracking in the sense that applying them tends to render us having true beliefs" (2014, 149). But can we arrive at the conclusion that Ockham's Razor is truth-tracking without, implicitly or explicitly, making use of Ockham's Razor?

Huemer (2009) defends a likelihood account of the epistemic virtue of parsimony. On this account, "a simple theory can accommodate fewer possible sets of observations than a complex theory can: the simple theory makes more specific predictions. The realization of its predictions is consequently more impressive than the realization of the relatively weak predictions of a complex theory" (221). This is because introducing additional entities into a theory introduces more parameters—in the form of the properties of these entities—which can be adjusted in order to accommodate the data. It is therefore easier for complex theories and more difficult for simple theories to accommodate the data. When a simple theory accommodates

the data, this does more to indicate that the theory is likely to be true than when a complex theory accommodates the data (222). But as Huemer concedes, “the likelihood account provides at most a qualified defence of the virtue of parsimony,” because, “it suggests only that simpler models tend to be more easily confirmed or disconfirmed,” not that they are themselves more likely to be true (223). It therefore does not show that norms of parsimony track the truth in the way required by the error theorist.

Huemer also considers the following empiricist argument:

1. Science has been highly successful in identifying truths
2. The best explanation for this is that its methodology is truth-conducive
3. Therefore scientific methodology is probably truth-conducive
4. The appeal to simplicity is a central part of scientific methodology
5. Therefore simplicity is probably a genuine mark of truth.

He suggests that this argument is circular, because we need to use the appeal to simplicity in order to know that (1) is true (for example, because (1) is the simplest explanation for the past predicative accuracy of science) and to know that (3) follows from (1) and (2) (for example, because the best explanation for the success of science is also the simplest explanation). But he also suggests that “the circularity objection could be diffused by an appeal to externalist epistemology” (218). And the appeal to externalist epistemology is equivalent to pointing out that this argument is rule-circular, not premise-circular: none of the argument’s premises are logically equivalent to its conclusion, but its conclusion does imply that the rule of inference the argument uses (the appeal to simplicity) is reliable. As Psillos tells us, “given externalism, all we should require of a rule-circular argument is that the rule of inference employed *be* reliable,” not that we *know*, or have reason to believe, that it is reliable before using it to draw the argument’s conclusion (84). If the appeal to simplicity does in fact track the truth, we can reliably use it to draw the conclusion that simplicity is truth-tracking, even if we do not already know that it is truth-tracking before using it to draw this conclusion.

But the question remains as to why we would use the appeal to simplicity if we do not know, or at least have some reason to believe, that it reliably tracks the truth. To this question it might be answered that we can know that simplicity tracks the truth on the basis of the above argument. And so long as rule-circularity is not vicious, this argument does appear to be sound. But this does not tell us why we would appeal to simplicity in this very argument, before we could possibly know *on*

the basis of this argument that simplicity tracks the truth. Huemer puts his finger on the problem when he says that “the empiricist argument, whether persuasive or not, makes no attempt to explain *why* simplicity is truth-indicative” (218).

In externalist form, this argument is based on severing the alleged link between being justified in using the appeal to simplicity and knowing, or having reason to believe, that it is reliable (Psillos 84). This is necessary as far as epistemic justification is concerned because, as Yudkowsky (2007) observes, “it seems that there is no way to *justify* Occam’s Razor except by *appealing* to Occam’s Razor, making this *argument* unlikely to *convince* any *judge* who does not already *accept* Occam’s Razor.” But we must remember that the queerness error theorist is not arguing that Ockham’s Razor *is* justified, because he is not arguing that the error theory is justified. In Olson’s words, “error theorists are not in the business of offering arguments about what would be rational to believe or about what there is epistemic reason to believe” (158). If therefore does not matter for the purposes of the error theorist if Ockham’s Razor is not epistemically justified, or if it cannot be used to justify the conclusion of some argument. What the error theorist needs is not an empiricist *justification* of Ockham’s Razor, but a naturalistic *explanation* of why Ockham’s Razor works for us as a tool for getting at the truth. Yudkowsky writes that, “[i]f you clear your mind of *justification*, of *argument*, then it seems obvious why Occam’s Razor works in practice: we live in a simple world, a low-entropy universe in which there are short explanations to be found.” And I think this is what the error theorist must ultimately say in defence of his appeal to Ockham’s Razor: Ockham’s Razor tracks the truth because it is fine tuned to the ontological condition of the universe (at least in its present, low-entropy state).

Does the abandonment of justification save Ockham’s Razor from circularity? I think that it does not. The error theorist cannot clear his mind of argument as Yudkowsky recommends, because he is arguing for the non-existence of irreducibly normative reasons. Scientific methodology is what tells us that we are living in a simple, low-entropy universe, and as (4) states, Ockham’s Razor is a central part of scientific methodology: we clearly need Ockham’s Razor to explain why Ockham’s Razor tracks the truth. And why would we use Ockham’s Razor in the first place? Because, just as *the universe* is simple and low-entropy, *we*, as parts of this universe, are also simple and low-entropy, and we consequently prefer simple explanations to more complex ones that have equal explanatory power.¹⁸ Luckily for us, simpler

18. For the error theorist, questions like “Why would we use Ockham’s Razor?” really mean something like “What explains why creatures like us are affectively disposed to take such naturalistic epistemic criteria seriously?” (Leiter 2015, 67).

explanations are more likely to be true. But this good luck is no mere chance: the brain is an “engine of accuracy,” in Yudkowsky’s phrase, that has been built deterministically by natural selection to help us survive in a simple, low-entropy universe, in part by enabling us to acquire accurate beliefs about that universe.

This story explaining Ockham’s Razor of course depends on Ockham’s Razor in every chapter. If we require such an explanation in order to argue for the non-existence of certain entities, our argument will be rule-circular, because in making this explanation, we are implying that the criterion we are using to deny these entities is truth-tracking, and we are using this very criterion in making this explanation. And if this criterion were not truth-tracking, this explanation would not be true, and our conclusion—that the entities in question do not exist—would not follow.

I conclude that Ockham’s Razor is rule-circular. Therefore, if rule-circularity is vicious, Ockham’s Razor cannot be used to defend the error theory. But if it is not, Parfit’s Wager is a sound argument for the existence of irreducibly normative truths. Either way, morality is safe from the fateful edge of Ockham’s Razor.

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