What's wrong with esoteric morality

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ABSTRACT

A moral theory T is esoteric if and only if T is true but there are some individuals who, by the lights of T itself, ought not *embrace* T, where to embrace T is to believe T and rely upon it in practical deliberation. Some philosophers hold that esotericism is a strong, perhaps even decisive, reason, to reject a moral theory. However, proponents of this objection have often supposed its force is obvious and have said little to articulate it. I defend a version of this objection, namely, that, in light of the strongly first-personal epistemology of benefit and burden, esoteric theories fail to justify the allocation of benefits and burdens to which moral agents would be subject under their theories. Because of the holistic nature of moral theory justification, this conclusion in turn implies that the entirety of a moral theory must be open to public scrutiny in order for the theory to be justified. I conclude by answering several objections to my account of the esotericism objection.

Une théorie morale T est ésotérique si et seulement si T est vraie, mais il y a des individus qui, à la lumière de T même, ne doivent pas embrasser T, où embrasser T signifie croire et s'appuyer sur lui dans des délibérations pratiques. Certains philosophes considèrent que l'ésotérisme est une raison forte, voire décisive, de rejeter une théorie morale. Cependant, les partisans de cette objection ont souvent supposé que sa force était évidente et ont peu parlé pour l'exprimer. Je défends une version de cette objection, à savoir que, à la lumière de la première épistémologie personnelle bienfaisante des avantages et des inconvénients, les théories ésotériques ne justifient pas l'allocation des avantages et des inconvénients aux agents moraux qui seraient assujettis à leurs théories. En raison de la nature holistique de la justification de la théorie morale, cette conclusion implique à son tour que l'ensemble d'une théorie morale doit être soumis à l'examen public afin que la théorie soit justifiée. Je termine en répondant à plusieurs objections à mon compte de l'objection ésotérique.

What's wrong with esoteric morality

Many philosophers are dismayed by the prospect of an *esoteric* moral theory, a theory that, despite being true or correct, is not "public" inasmuch as, by the theory's own lights, some moral agents ought not to believe that theory. (Williams 1995:169) More exactly, a theory T is esoteric if and only if, if T is true, then there are T-based reasons sufficient to warrant some individuals not *embracing* T, where to embrace T is to believe T and rely upon it in practical deliberation. (Korsgaard 1999:17, de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2010: 35)

Esoteric moral theories forthrightly acknowledge a divergence between what we epistemically ought to believe and what we morally ought to believe (and rely upon in our practical deliberation). For they assert that a moral conception, whatever the epistemic reasons that speak in its favor, need not be one that agents accept or have any positive epistemic disposition toward.

Presumably, esotericism is not an independent virtue of a moral theory, that is, a moral theorist would not set out to construct a theory hoping that in its most plausible form, the theory will turn out to be esoteric. But is esotericism then a theoretical vice, such that a moral theory's being esoteric counts as a *prima facie* reason to reject it? Unfortunately, those who press the esotericism objection often provide little explanation of its force, apparently content to suppose it obvious. For example, the most common theory against which the esotericism objection has been leveled is utilitarianism (or consequentialism more broadly). But finding a precise reason why anti-utilitarians find esotericism a compelling objection against that theory can be hard. Samuel Scheffler, for example, professes that he cannot shake the "persistent feeling of discomfort generated by the idea of a moral theory which is willing to require widespread ignorance of its own principles." (1994:48-49) Similarly, Michael Stocker asserts that it is a "severe problem" for utilitarianism if it "cannot be embraced and followed," severe enough to raise questions about whether utilitarianism is "worth serious consideration as our ethical theory." (1992:322) But Stocker says little about why esotericism disqualifies a moral theory as a serious contender for our allegiance.

And indeed, the force of the esotericism objection is far from obvious. For esoteric theories are not logically inconsistent. It seems possible for the truth conditions of a normative theory to diverge from a theory's acceptance conditions, i.e., that a theory that is nevertheless true ought not be accepted. (Brink 1992:87-88) But *P* and *some ought not embrace P* are not logically contradictory. Esoteric theories are therefore philosophically suspect only if some other, perhaps controversial, philosophical theses are true.

My purpose here is to consider what philosophical theses could play this role, that is, to identify which (if any) such thesis can render esotericism a problematic feature of a moral theory. My hope is to identify a thesis capable of persuading adherents of esoteric moral theories that they should relinquish their allegiances to such theories. Short of this, I hope at least to articulate the strongest possible version of the esotericism objection, one that captures our best reasons for skepticism about esoteric moral theories.

Although the possibility of esotericism has been entertained in conjunction with a variety of normative theories, including virtue ethics (Keller 2007, Martinez 2011), ethical egoism (Baier 1958:188-91), philosophical anarchism (Simmons 2001), and metaethical error theory (Irwin 2009:854), I focus on consequentialism, since this is both the theory at which the charge of esotericism has been most often leveled and the theory that has most often been defended in an esoteric guise. In addition, if the esotericism objection turns out to lack force against esoteric consequentialism, that would be strong evidence that esotericism as such is not a theoretical defect. A second reason for focusing on esoteric consequentialism is that the consequentialist case for esotericism is easy to decipher. As Sidgwick argued, if morality's aim is to bring about the best overall state of affairs, then consequentialists should treat the

question of the justification of agents' moral attitudes as a matter of their consequences, i.e., in terms of which attitudes in fact result in the best overall state of affairs. If as a matter of empirical fact the set of attitudes that result in the best overall state of affairs sometimes does not include embracing the consequentialist standard of right action, then consequentialists ought to conclude that at least some agents ought not embrace that standard but should embrace some other more presumably 'common sense' moral standard(s) instead.

My plan is to canvass a number of possible theses that might make sense of the esotericism objection. As noted above, esoteric theories defy the expectation that our epistemic and moral reasons ultimately converge. However, not all the reservations about esoteric morality flow from worries about the relationship between epistemic and moral reasons. Hence, I first consider several ways that the esoteric objection may be pressed that do not engage with that relationship: that esoteric theories are conceptually incoherent; that they endorse immorality; that esoteric theories are unfair in subjecting agents to requirements of which they are not aware; and that they fail to guide action. I then consider whether esoteric morality should be rejected for violating evidential standards for the ethics of belief. That case, I argue, cannot be made out without simply begging the question in favor of evidentialism.

Finally, I articulate what I take to be the best version of this objection: The heart of the esotericism objection is not related to moral belief per se. Rather, moral theories are problematic to the extent that they are *practically* esoteric. Moral theories do not just make claims regarding axiology, deontic status, and the like. They also imply that some allocation of benefits and burdens is justified. I argue that the epistemology of benefits and burdens — what it is justifiable for agents to accept — has a strongly first-personal character. While the truth conditions for claims about the justifiability of burden and benefit are not identical to their acceptance conditions, they are sufficiently intertwined that neither class of claims can be justified in an esoteric way. But, given a plausibly holistic view about how moral theories are justified, the remaining elements of a moral theory cannot be justified esoterically either. Hence, the entirety of a moral theory must be open to public scrutiny to be justified. Any such theory must therefore be embraced in order to be justified, so esoteric theories can thus never be fully epistemically justified.

An important distinction to highlight before we begin: Esoteric moral theories should not be confused with *indirect* moral theories. Indirect theories are those that allow for, or recommend, agents sometimes deliberating in terms of moral principles or considerations that diverge from the foundational claims advanced by a theory itself. Hare's 'two-level' utilitarianism is an example of such a theory, inasmuch as he recommends that our moral deliberation typically proceed on the basis of intuitive moral rules rather than by appeal directly to the principle of utility. We see a similar stance suggested by Mill's invocation of 'secondary principles,' and indeed, most any moral theory can plausibly be developed as an indirect theory. A Kantian moral agent, for instance, might reason in terms of Kant's taxonomy of duties rather than use the Categorical Imperative. Indirect theories thus share with esoteric theories the thought that agents ought not deliberate in terms of the theories' fundamental principles. However, they differ crucially as to why agents ought not deliberate in these terms. Indirect theories may recommend this because such deliberation is less time-consuming, makes the demands of moral reasoning less onerous, etc. Using deliberative shortcuts may sometimes be perfectly adequate to lead agents to the correct moral conclusions. But indirect theories do not propose that agents should be *ignorant* of true moral principles. Esoteric theories, in contrast, maintain that some agents ought not believe fundamental moral truths or principles at all. Note that some of the reasons in favor of esoteric theories overlap with some of the reasons for favoring indirect theories (that deliberation may be easier and more straightforward, etc.). But the esoteric theorist wishes to

go a step further, holding that moral reasons themselves speak against some agents knowing the content of the true moral theory. The central contrast between esoteric and indirect theories is therefore not about the proper forms that moral deliberation may take. Rather, the contrast centrally concerns *justification.* Indirect theories hold that all agents are justified in believing the correct moral theory, even if they are also sometimes justified in not deliberating in its terms. Esoteric theories, on the other hand, hold that some agents are not justified in believing the correct moral theory and so ought not deliberate in its terms.

1. *Incoherence and immorality*

Let us first consider two ways of capturing the esotericism objection commonly put forth in the literature.

The most audacious way to press the esotericism objection is to claim, on conceptual grounds, that an esoteric theory is simply not a theory of morality at all. Bernard Gert, for example, states that "hardly anyone denies that morality must be such that a person who adopts it must also propose its adoption by everyone," so that "all those whose behaviour is to be judged by the system understand it, and know what kind of behaviour the system prohibits, requires, discourages, encourages, and allows." (1998:8-11. See also Baier 1958:101, Williams 1973:133-34, Hooker 2003:2)

Here the esoteric consequentialist replies that her critics have assimilated a substantive moral question to a methodological or conceptual one, thereby unfairly ruling out esoteric theories by definitional fiat. Whether the moral justification of an act should be public or kept secret — that is, whether it should be esoteric or not — certainly looks like a substantive moral question. To insist that an esoteric theory is simply not a theory of morality at all, in the way that, say, a scientific theory that makes no testable predictions would not be scientific, is to rule out esoteric theories on specious methodological or conceptual grounds. (de Lazari-Radek & Singer 2010:42-45) Furthermore, the esoteric consequentialist may argue that requiring a theory not to be esoteric simply begs the question against consequentialism. If consequentialism is fully *global,* such that any kind of item open to moral appraisal, including actions, rules, motivations, sanctions, etc., is appraised by its consequences (Pettit & Smith 2000), then mental acts concerning the acceptance, avowal, or advocacy of practical judgments are not exempt from appraisal based on their consequences. So to insist that a moral theory must not be esoteric is to impose on consequentialism the non-consequentialist demand that "one class of action — acts of adopting or promulgating an ethical theory — *not* be assessed in terms of their consequences." (Railton 1984:155)

Opponents of esoteric theories might concede these points, however, and instead argue that esoteric theories should be rejected on substantive moral grounds. Put bluntly, esoteric theories are counterintuitive and require us to act wrongfully. Parfit suggests deception is the relevant wrong: "If we believe that deception is morally wrong, deception about morality may seem especially wrong." (1986:41) Esoteric theories are likewise denounced as manipulative (Piper 1978: 205-06), paternalistic (Hooker 2000:85), or elitist (Williams 1985:108-110).

Consequentialists may welcome this version of the esotericism objection as more honest in that it presents esotericism as a moral, not a methodological or conceptual, shortcoming. But consequentialists can simply reject the substantive moral judgments in question as at best *pro tanto* judgments. Deception, paternalism, elitism, and manipulation will often, but not always or necessarily, be all-things-considered wrong on a consequentialist view. Hence, though an esoteric morality may license deception, paternalism, and the like, consequentialists understand these as permissible exceptions to *pro tanto* generalizations, and there is not (on their view) any special moral significance attached to the subject matter in

question, i.e., that esoteric morality involves deception (or what have you) regarding *moral* truths makes that deception no more or less morally justified than it would be in regard to non-moral truths.

2. *Unfairness and accountability*

The opponent of esoteric theories might then shift from worries about the wrongfulness of esotericism as such to worries about unfairness within a community that operates with an esoteric morality. In such a community, the 'common sense' moral norms that many people embrace will diverge from the true or correct moral norms (consequentialism, say). But to hold individuals accountable to norms of which they are meant to be ignorant is unfair to those individuals. When, for example, a conscientious individual abides by common sense moral norms but nevertheless fails to perform that act which has the best overall consequences, it is unfair to subject her to blame for her actions.

In reply, the consequentialist may again invoke the global nature of her view and argue that even within a community whose morality is esoteric, the moral evaluation of agents is itself evaluated in accordance with the consequentialist standard. When an agent fails to act in accordance with the consequentialist standard but honors the commonsensical standards of her community, consequentialists need not conclude that the agent should thereby be criticized or blamed. After all, such an agent obeyed the very moral standards that, on the esoteric consequentialist picture, she *ought* to obey and is thus not blameworthy. Perhaps the esoteric moralist will concede that, strictly speaking, such an agent did not act rightly. But it is a further question, itself to be decided based on the particular empirical consequences of doing so, whether to publicize this fact or whether to blame the agent. The consequentialist can thus argue that the very considerations that motivate the move to an esoteric version of her theory can justify *not* blaming agents who, in acting in accordance with 'popular' morality, do not satisfy the true moral standard. Conversely, the esoteric consequentialist could even admit that it might be proper to blame agents who *do* employ the consequentialist standard in their deliberations. In any case, no unfairness need arise from the divergence between the popular and true moralities in a community whose overall morality is esoteric.

3. *Action-guidingness*

The opponent of esotericism may insist that esoteric theories fail with respect to an important desideratum, that moral theories should guide action. Mark Timmons calls this desideratum the *practical aim*: "The practical aim of a moral theory is to offer practical guidance for how we might arrive at correct or justified moral verdicts about matters of moral concern – verdicts which we can then use to help guide choice." (Timmons 2002:3-4) Esoteric theories appear to ignore this aim, since they do not recommend the acceptance of the theory by at least some agents to whom the theory putatively applies. Indeed, they recommend, to some agents at least, that the theory be rejected, and *a fortiori*, that the theory itself *not* provide practical guidance concerning how to arrive at moral verdicts. Esoteric theories thus appear to disregard utterly one of the central aims of normative theorizing, namely, to identify defensible procedures to guide our reasoning about moral phenomena (Martinez 2011: 280, Brännmark 2009:450).

Now the esotericist should acknowledge that her theory will not offer practical guidance to some agents if by this is meant that the theory itself is recommended *to* such agents. Esoteric consequentialism, for example, evaluates actions according to a consequentialist standard but denies that all agents should deploy it as a deliberative standard or procedure. (Bales 1971) Hence, some agents will not be provided practical guidance *in the terms referenced in the theory*. However, an esoteric theory provides practical guidance to

agents, just not in terms of the theory itself. Such agents are more likely to arrive at "correct or justified moral verdicts about matters of moral concern" if they deliberate on the basis of some other moral conception (besides the theory itself). An esoteric theory thus understands these alternative moral conceptions as deliberative proxies for the true moral theory. Hence, agents subject to the demands of an esoteric theory are guided by that theory at one remove. In the case of esoteric consequentialism, the deliberative proxies will probably be moral rules proscribing certain classes of actions (don't lie, don't intentionally harm others, etc.) Esoteric consequentialists can thus concede that practical thought is "undelegable,", i.e., that moral decision making is "an unshirkable task for each individual" (Brewer 2009: 104) that cannot simply be farmed out to experts, without conceding that agents must be practically guided by, or in terms of, the theory itself.

4. *The ethics of belief*

Opponents of esotericism may attempt an epistemological turn, arguing that esoteric theories violate central tenets of the ethics of belief. Consider the following principle put forth by the evidentialist W.K. Clifford:

If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call into question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it--the life of that man is one long sin against mankind. (1877,¶18)

Here Clifford endorses what we might call a principle of *epistemic probity*:

(EP) For all believers x and beliefs b, x is morally obligated not to suppress or avoid evidence relevant to the truth of b.

(EP) imposes both self-concerning and other-concerning epistemic obligations. An individual believer has an obligation not to suppress or avoid evidence relevant to her own beliefs and an obligation not to suppress or avoid evidence relevant to the beliefs of *other* believers. Yet on the esoteric consequentialist model, those agents — call them *insiders* — who believe in consequentialism have strong motivations to conceal evidence relevant to the truth of consequentialism from the *outsiders* who ought not believe in consequentialism. For in order to keep them from embracing consequentialism, outsiders must not be exposed to the evidence in its favor (or if they are so exposed, efforts must be made to make this evidence appear weak or unconvincing). So given (EP), the insiders are not epistemically blameless. For they morally ought not to expose those who embrace the non-consequentialist, common sense morality to the evidence against it. Indeed, insiders have a moral obligation to undermine outsiders' efforts to fulfill their epistemic obligation to believe only what there is sufficient evidence for. In fulfilling this obligation, the consequentialist insiders manifest a form of epistemic paternalism, effectively treating consequentialism as a species of forbidden knowledge. Esotericism thus encourages some individuals to encourage other individuals to misuse or wrongfully employ their epistemic faculties.

How should the esoteric consequentialist answer this objection? (EP) essentially posits that two imperatives — one epistemic, one moral — coincide. These imperatives can be characterized in different ways. The epistemic imperative could be *seek knowledge, avoid error,* etc. Believing on the basis of sufficient evidence is thus a means to satisfy this imperative. The moral imperative could be *act rightly, be virtuous,* etc. Being morally justified in what one believes is thus a means to satisfy this imperative. The details of these imperatives aside, (EP) posits that the satisfaction of one imperative requires or entails the satisfaction of the other.

Yet it is *prima facie* implausible to suppose that beliefs that satisfy one imperative will invariably satisfy the other. Suppose that we categorize these imperatives using Kant's

contrast between categorical and hypothetical imperatives. (Wrenn 2004) An imperative is categorical when it expresses a rational requirement that applies to us regardless of any contingent ends or desires we have. An imperative is hypothetical when it expresses a rational requirement that applies to us only because we possess particular contingent ends or desires. This contrast generates four possibilities: both the epistemic and moral imperatives are categorical; the epistemic imperative is categorical but the moral imperative is hypothetical; the moral imperative is categorical but the epistemic imperative is hypothetical; or both imperatives are hypothetical.

On its face, it seems unlikely that there are no categorical imperatives of any kind. This would imply that there is nothing that we are required to do or to believe just insofar as we are rational beings or rational agents — that the normativity of reason generates only options. So let us set aside the last of these four possibilities and assume that at least one of the two imperatives in question is categorical, i.e., that it applies to us regardless of any contingent desires or ends served by its satisfaction. Could both the epistemic and the moral imperative be categorical? If both are categorical imperatives, then it would be remarkable if there were not possible contexts in which these imperatives clash. Esoteric consequentialism rests on the supposition that ordinary moral belief is one such context: The imperative to believe only on the basis of sufficient evidence (and not to undermine others' attempts to believe only on that basis) can come into conflict with the imperative to believe what is necessary in order to act morally. Clifford, for his part, does not seem to countenance the possibility that one imperative could be satisfied without the other being satisfied, but so much the worse for his optimism, the esoteric consequentialist might say.

But if at least one of the imperatives is categorical, and both imperatives cannot be, this entails that one of them is categorical, the other hypothetical. Which is the more likely candidate for being the categorical imperative, the moral or the epistemic? While I shall not offer a comprehensive argument for the moral imperative being categorical, ordinary moral practice seems to reflect this belief. Epistemic justification is typically understood as instrumentally valuable, so that the normativity or rationality of satisfying epistemic ends is contingent upon whether doing so will satisfy other non-epistemic ends, amongst which moral ends are the most prominent. The fact that acquiring additional evidence would be relevant to the truth of a belief — or, more germane to this discussion, that some individuals are shielded or kept unaware of evidence relevant to their beliefs — does not necessarily generate an *obligation* to acquire additional evidence nor an obligation not to shield someone from evidence relevant to their beliefs. Whether additional evidence relevant to a belief ought to be acquired depends on the ends served by acquiring it, and it can be the case that acquiring additional evidence runs headlong into ends incorporated into moral imperatives. Note that this conclusion will likely appeal to those *without* consequentialist moral commitments. For more characteristically Kantian considerations of privacy, autonomy, or fairness can also imply that agents have positive obligations to forego the pursuit of evidence that might nevertheless conduce to the epistemic justifiability of their beliefs.

There are thus compelling reasons to reject (EP), reasons not necessarily grounded in consequentialism itself, that esoteric theorists can appeal to in order to answer the worry that their theories violate plausible standards for the ethics of belief. Notice that rejecting (EP) does not mean junking epistemic normativity altogether. The esoteric theorist will agree that we ought, for various reasons given by our ends, to engage in diligent inquiry and to seek adequate justification for our beliefs. Our interests, and the interests of others, are nearly always well served when our beliefs are justified and the product of diligent inquiry. The absence of esotericism —publicity or transparency — could well be a *desirable* feature of a moral theory. But the esoteric theorist need not accept, nor ought we accept, that we are obligated to believe only what is justified regardless of what other ends our efforts at being so

justified would serve. Hence, there is good reason to think that if we are bound by any categorical imperative, that imperative is moral rather than epistemic in nature.

To summarize this section, then: Though outsiders within a community operating with an esoteric consequentialist morality would not be exposed to evidence relevant to the truth of their moral judgments, insiders would not thereby be epistemically blameworthy for violating any evidentialist imperative concerning the justification of these judgments. For any epistemic imperative governing the acquisition of evidence relevant to our beliefs is subordinate to a moral imperative governing the moral justification of our actions.

5. *Truth, acceptance, burden and benefit*

Having found several construals of the estericism objection wanting, we might conclude that the objection either has no force or must presuppose philosophical commitments that esoteric consequentialists have good reasons to reject. Still, it is difficult to shake the sense that the arguments of the previous section were on the right track — that the error of esotericism is epistemic at root. The best version of this objection, I shall now argue, does not involve the thought that esoteric moral theories violate wholly general epistemic standards. Rather, esoteric theories adopt a dubious epistemology for *moral* inquiry in particular.

As we have characterized it, an esoteric theory is one wherein some of those subject to a theory's evaluative standards ought not, by the lights of theory itself, embrace the theory, where to embrace the theory is to believe it and rely upon it in practical deliberation and choice. An esoteric theory thus tolerates social divergences in moral knowledge: A subset of a community deliberates in full knowledge of the true theory, another in ignorance of it. The coherence of esoteric theories thus depends on the plausibility of divergence between a theory's truth conditions and its acceptance conditions. In other words, esoteric theorists assert that theory T is true but T ought not be accepted (by some). Such a divergence can be plausible with respect to the action-guiding portion of a moral theory. Esoteric consequentialism, for example, claims that agents are obligated to perform that act which has the best overall consequences, but given that better overall consequences will result from some agents not embracing this action-guiding principle, they ought not (according to the theory) embrace it. Esoteric egoism claims that agents are obligated to perform that act which has the best consequences for the individual agent, but given that better consequences for the individual agent will result from some (other) agents not embracing this action-guiding principle, they ought not (according to theory) embrace it. Hence, esoteric theories would be problematic if they made claims for which truth conditions and acceptance conditions cannot be so readily divorced. Do they make any such claims?

Moral theories make claims of various kinds: axiological claims regarding value; deontic claims regarding the permissibility of various acts; claims regarding which traits are virtuous or vicious; etc. Critically however, these theoretical claims operate in concert with empirical facts to imply practical imperatives, directives about what individuals should do. Moral theories thus do not simply address us as knowers, concerned with moral truth in the abstract. They also address us as agents or actors asked to live in a world in which we (and others) abide by such practical imperatives. Moral theories thus do not only *assert* claims. They also implicitly *make* claims on the choices, concerns, and interests of ourselves and others, claims that generate benefits and burdens for individual agents. As Margaret Urban Walker points out:

> Human beings have to "live with" and "stand by" moral determinations and their issue. Some of the most common expressions one hears when people discuss weighty and difficult moral decisions is whether they can live with certain solutions, whether they or others will be haunted or damaged, whether ensuing burdens (psychological,

reparative, or both) will be bearable, whether they will be able to make others understand. In actual morality there are real stakes and real costs, of value, self-esteem, relationship, future options, coherence in one's own eyes … (1991:765) 1

It may be tempting to view a moral theory's implications regarding how agents would be burdened or benefitted as upshots of 'applying' that theory rather than as elements of the theory itself. If so, those implications would seemingly not bear on what renders a moral theory acceptable. However, this is a distinction without a difference. While these implications may not be part of a formal statement of a moral theory, their plausibility reflects on the plausibility of that theory, just as the observations predicted by a scientific theory bear on its plausibility. To think otherwise would be to suggest that (for example) complaints about a moral theory's demandingness can be dismissed on the grounds that they 'merely' raise concerns about the theory's implications rather than about the theory itself. Moral theories do ask us to live under their counsel.

And it is because moral theories entail claims that we must "live with" and "stand by" that esoteric theories' proposed divorce of truth and acceptance is problematic. The force of the esotericism objection, I propose, hinges upon recognizing that claims regarding the justifiability of the benefits and burdens a moral theory creates for individuals are relevant to the satisfaction of that theory's truth conditions *and* of that theory's acceptance conditions. Or to put it differently: The justification of a theory's claims regarding the benefits and burdens it subjects individuals to cannot be esoteric because the truth of these claims is intertwined with their acceptability to those actually subject to it.

Let us suppose that theory T would impose a schedule of burdens and benefits, B, on individual S. Is B justifiable — or put differently, would it be justifiable, focusing exclusively on B and no other claims advanced by T, for S to act on T? And how would we know? With respect to other elements of T, we might well conclude that S need not be consulted regarding their justifiability. Questions regarding axiology, deontic status, etc. could well be answerable *a priori*, and as such, moral philosophers may well home in on answers to them, either through dialectic or by operating "like geometricians in different rooms who, reasoning alone for themselves, all arrive at the same solution to a problem." (Benhabib 1987:167) Yet the hypothesis that B's justifiability can be ascertained without consulting S (or anyone else asked to live under T's dictates) seems more questionable. For it to be justifiable (focusing exclusively on B) *for* S, or anyone else, to act on T might require that acting on T, and thereby being subject to B, be justifiable *to* S. This requirement could be justified in moral terms. We might, for instance, hold that it would be unfair or disrespectful to S to subject S to T, and its accordant schedule of benefits and burdens B, unless we secure S's assent (whether actually or hypothetically) to B. Of course, esoteric theorists, and esoteric consequentialists in particular, will likely be unmoved by such considerations, complaining that requiring B to be justified to S on these grounds amounts to requiring them to endorse a substantive moral framework they antecedently oppose. Yet esoteric theorists would not have such a complaint if the grounds requiring us to consult S in appraising the justifiability of B were epistemic rather than moral— that is, if failure to do so would bar us from evidence critical to the appraisal of B's justifiability. And there are, I shall now show, compelling reasons to conclude that whether S finds B justifiable, i.e., whether S can upon reflection accept B, is ineliminably relevant to the justification of B. A failure to engage with S regarding the justifiability of B would therefore result in a defect in T. For in the case of the burdens and

1 The work of feminists such as Walker, and in particular their doubts about the 'detached' or 'disinterested' metaphors often utilized by philosophers to model impartiality or objectivity, have greatly influenced my account of the esotericism objection. See also Friedman 1989.

benefits a moral theory implies, truth and acceptance converge in the first-personal perspective of those burdened or benefited by it.

One reason for the convergence of truth and acceptance here is that burden and benefit are not entirely independent of our *perceptions* of burden and benefit. How things feel can go a long way toward how things are for us, regardless of whether how things are for us is constituted by those feelings or merely perceived or registered by those feelings. A person who takes satisfaction in her friendships, professional success, and the like enjoys greater benefit from these facts that someone unable to find satisfaction in those same facts. Conversely, a person who feels the sting of loneliness or adversity is usually worse off than those who manage to slough off these misfortunes. Sometimes such judgments or perceptions are effectively infallible. With respect to raw physical pain, for example, the judgments that we are in pain (or how painful our pain is) cannot be intelligibly second guessed. This need not entail that our judgments or perceptions regarding whether and how much some fact is beneficial or burdensome are incorrigible, static, or invulnerable to counterevidence. In any case, benefit and burden are often constituted or closely tracked by perceptions thereof, suggesting that whether or not B is justifiable for S is a question that S is especially well situated to answer. That B is justifiable for S thus correlates closely with B's acceptability to S.

Another reason why truth and acceptability are richly intertwined with respect to burden and benefit is that many of the experiences by which burdens and benefits are disclosed to us are evaluatively opaque to others. In an article regarding the decision to become a parent, L.A. Paul argues that this decision is complicated by the fact that parenthood itself is an epistemically "transformative experience," an experience through which what it is like to be a parent is uniquely revealed. (Paul 2015) Because the experience of what it is like to be a parent is not available to non-parents, non-parents cannot properly gauge the value associated with being a parent. According to Paul, no amount of testimony from parents will adequately inform would-be parents about what parenthood is like. If Paul is correct, then deciding for oneself whether to become a parent is not a straightforward application of rational decision theory, wherein one identifies the range of possible outcomes of different choices one might make, assigns to each of these a probability of occurring given these choices, determines the value of these outcomes, and calculates the expected value of different choices. *A fortiori*, no one without such an experience could perform such a calculation on another's behalf. The characteristics of Paul's epistemically transformative experience are found in other human experiences wherein the benefits or burdens of some choice or event are disclosed to us. There is something that it is like to undergo certain burdens or enjoy certain benefits, the elusive value of which cannot be wholly accessed through testimony, analogous reasoning, or even the most strenuous and searching exercises of empathetic imagination. There is something that it is like to suffer the pains of childbirth (and its joys); to be the first member of one's family to be college educated; to watch a companion die in combat; to exert meaningful influence on the policies of one's community; to suffer the casual surveillance that comes with being a member of a historically persecuted group; to witness the destruction of one's home, business, or place of worship; or to set foot on a land to which one is a new emigrant. None of these events are such that those without firsthand engagement with them can adequately gauge how and to what extent they benefit or burden us.

The eudaimonic dimensions of such life events are therefore known most vividly to those who experience them. The centrality of the first-personal perspective to determining the reasonableness of an allocation of burdens and benefits is an empiricist criterion, akin to Mill's well-known 'competent judges' test. An experiential confrontation with a burden or a benefit is essential to knowing how burdensome or beneficial it is. The judgments of those

acquainted with a given benefit or burden, particularly when untainted by any antecedent moral commitments affecting what burdens or benefits they are willing to accept, should thus enjoy our *prima facie* testimonial trust.

This claim should not be exaggerated. The first personal perspective is our court of first appeal in determining the reasonableness of any benefit or burden. First-personal testimony regarding the weightiness of some benefit or burden establishes a burden of proof: This testimony should be trusted in the absence of reasons to the contrary, reasons to show that this testimony itself rests on unreasonable considerations or inferences. The first-personal perspective on burden and benefit thus has a kind of presumptive force, so that consulting those benefitted or burdened by some proposed theory is an *a priori* constraint on the justifiability of a set of burdens and benefits. But the first-personal perspective on benefit and burden is not infallible or beyond question. Some individuals may espouse views about the reasonableness of some allocation or burden or benefit that are self-serving and evidently unreasonable. Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge finds ordinary moral demands excessive while failing to recognize the burdensomeness of the demands he imposes on Bob Cratchit. His conception of the burdensomeness of what ordinary morality requires seems patently unreasonable. Notice, however, that this conclusion is vindicated by adducing reasons that speak against Scrooge's judgments in this regard, which assumes that there is some presumption that even his judgments in this domain enjoy some minimal level of warrant. Likewise, we should be mindful that there are patterned affective distortions in how we view past experiences, distortions that could illicitly shape how individuals appraise various distributions of burdens and benefits associated with different moral theories. For instance, mood can distort our judgments of experiences (Haybron 2005), and our memories may focus not on experiences as a whole but only on their peaks and ends (Kahneman 2000). But the need for a non-esoteric justification of a moral theory's benefits and burdens stems from the inadequacy of third-person evaluations of the reasonableness of benefits and burdens for particular individuals. That inadequacy need not be remedied by supposing that the first-personal perspective is infallible – only that it is relevant to, and indispensable for, the justification of possible schedules of burdens and benefits. So long as we have reason to doubt the authoritativeness of the third-personal judgments of burdens and benefits, and minimal reason to invest the first-personal perspective with presumptive but defeasible authority, then in justifying the benefits and burdens of a moral theory, that justification must be non-esoteric. And it is difficult to know where else we might *begin* with comparative judgments of benefits and burdens except than with those benefitted or burdened. This is still consistent with our not *ending* our deliberation with those judgments.

Hence, if *anyone* is to be trusted regarding the benefits and burdens associated with a given experience or event, it is those who undergo that experience or event. Because there is not a "vantage point from which any and every person can rationally grasp whatever morally significant experiences a person might have," (Thomas 1992-93:233) we are owed a say in these judgments that is epistemic, not moral, in its rationale. In contrast, a detached theory builder is unlikely to have the "susceptibility to essentially particular interests" necessary to evaluate correctly the benefits and burdens of a proposed moral theory or principle. (Walker 1991: 766) Thus, the determination of how justifiable a moral theory's distribution of benefits and burdens for an individual is cannot be discharged adequately by others alone, even by fully impartial others. For in so doing, that proxy must ultimately rely upon the testimony of those who have experienced certain benefits and burdens firsthand.

Retracing the argument of this section: In considering whether a schedule of burdens and benefits B implied by some theory T is justifiable to some individual S, B's acceptability to S is our court of first appeal. Lest I be misunderstood, I do not assert that (1) and (2) are equivalent propositions:

(1) B is a justifiable allocation of benefits and burdens for S.
(2) S accepts B as an allocation of burdens and benefits.

Nor am I claiming any order of explanation between (1) and (2), e.g., that (1) collapses into (2). Rather, I only claim that whatever conclusions we reach regarding (1) — itself a claim that must be justified if T is to be justified — cannot be justified absent knowledge of (2). Proponents of T would thus be irrational not to ascribe *prima facie* weight to S's testimony regarding B. Benefit and burden have an intrinsically first-personal epistemology wherein each human agent sits in an epistemically privileged position with respect to what benefits or burdens her and the degree to which she can endorse a proposed allocation of burdens and benefits.

6. *Extending the argument*

The arguments of the previous section show that one particular portion of a moral theory — its allocation of burdens and benefits for those subject to its demands — cannot be esoteric in the sense that it cannot be *justified* esoterically. Any moral theory will imply some distribution of burdens and benefits once adopted. If I am correct about the epistemology of burden and benefit, then in order for a theory's distribution of burdens and benefits to be justified, then all those subject to the theory's requirements must be consulted regarding the justifiability of alternative such distributions. Even those expert in other components of moral theories (axiology, etc.) must, in order for the theory they propose to be justified, rely on the testimony of those affected by the theory's distribution of benefits and burdens regarding the justifiability of said distribution. To identify justified principles regarding the benefits and burdens of a moral conception, we must access first-personal judgments accessible to us only though second-personal interaction with those benefitted or burdened.

Proponents of esoteric theories may rightly point out that this conclusion does not by itself show that there is anything suspect about a theory's being esoteric. That a given distribution of burdens and benefits can only be properly evaluated by checking it against the first-personal judgments of those benefitted and burdened by it is compatible with *the theory* not being embraced by some agents, including those benefitted or burdened. For suppose that some individuals find B, the distribution of benefits and burdens implied by T, unjustified. What then? One possibility is for proponents of T to modify T so that some other distribution of benefits and burdens, B', emerges, and then determine whether B' is justifiable by consulting those benefitted or burdened by B'. If those individuals find B' reasonable, then the modified version of T — call it T' — could nevertheless be esoteric. For while one parcel of evidence relevant to selecting between T and T' (the reasonableness of the burdens and benefits of each theory) cannot be justified esoterically, selecting between T and T' could still be done by 'insiders' without consulting S or others.

But it is not clear that proponents of esoteric theories can limit the impact of these conclusions about the epistemology of benefit and burden without imperiling esotericism. For B is logically related to multiple claims in T, as well as general theoretical desiderata. So (for instance) if a group of agents determined that the schedule of benefits and burdens generated by a given theory — let us again take act-consequentialism as an example — is unjustified, there are multiple options as to how to modify that theory so as to render that schedule more justified. Adherents of the theory may revise the theory's understanding of the impartiality necessary to justify a moral claim; modify its axiology or theory or value; change its criterion for right action (e.g., adopting a satisficing instead of a maximizing consequentialist criterion); introduce a more nuanced set of deontic statuses; etc. Moral theory choice is a holistic enterprise, wherein theories are evaluated along multiple dimensions. In this respect, a moral theory faces the tribunal of reality as a "corporate body," to use Quine's famous image, not as a series of propositions understood in isolation from one

another. (1951:36) This does not entail that moral theories must have a coherentist justificatory structure. It may turn out that the correct or best theory has a strongly foundationalist structure, with a single moral principle that serves as a basic or non-inferential claim. But the point here is simply that the unjustifiability of B does not dictate which of T's claims should be modified to render T's distribution of benefits and burdens justifiable. The diagnosis of the unjustifiability of B may turn out to implicate any substantive claim in T.

Admittedly, it would be *possible* for 'insiders' to decide, having drawn upon evidence provided by those benefitted by B or B' respectively, between T and T' without consulting the would-be outsiders. But having conceded the relevance of the outsiders' judgments regarding the benefits and burdens of candidate theories, why ought the insiders disregard their judgments with respect to *other* dimensions of those rival theories? After all, the outsiders presumptively care about more than the benefits and burdens they would undergo under T and T'. The outsiders can also occupy a third-personal point of view on moral questions, a point of view from which they can assess how a theory should (if at all) be modified in light of its imposing an unacceptable slate of burdens and benefits on them, and they may find themselves willing (say) to live with some slate of burdens and benefits if a moral theory implying that slate has other theoretical virtues. The reasonableness of living with a slate of benefit and burden, while (again) a matter of first-personal perspective with respect to its desirability, is not exhausted by that desirability. This is not to say that their point of view on other theoretical matters enjoys the same first-personal privilege that their judgments of benefit and burden or is as reasonable as that of 'insiders'. Indeed, it probably is not. The theory-building insiders could simply ignore what others believe about the justifiability of a moral theory as a whole. But having conceded the *relevance* of outsiders' judgments of benefit and burden to theory justification, theory-building insiders can only deny the relevance of their other theoretical judgments by insisting that such judgments are unreasonable.

Again, the benefits and burdens a moral theory subjects us to cannot be logically separated from the other statements the theory asserts. Hence, in checking whether B is justified, T's 'insiders' have little ground to stand on if they insist on disregarding the judgments of purported 'outsiders' as to whether T is *on the whole* justifiable. The first-personal epistemology of burden and benefit is thus a foothold from which a more comprehensive rejection of esotericism emerges. The justification of a moral theory's benefits and burdens may not be esoteric. But given the logical relation between a theory's other elements and its distribution of benefits and burdens, the theory itself must be revealed to all agents as a candidate to be embraced by all. Thus, since the conditions for the justification of a moral theory are not esoteric, the theory itself cannot be justified merely esoterically.

7. *Objections and replies*

Let me now consider several objections to my understanding of the esotericism objection and its force.

First, it may appear that my argument implies that any moral theory can only be accepted provisionally. For if a moral theory must be subject to public endorsement and embrace, then any theory already found to be plausible could be upended if it cannot enjoy this endorsement and embrace.

To some extent, this is correct: My understanding of the esotericism objection is congruent with a fallibilist conception of moral epistemology, one in which any of our moral knowledge could have turned out to not to be knowledge. (Reed 2002) But I take this fallibilist understanding of moral epistemology to be sensible in light of the difficulties in

attaining moral knowledge, pervasive moral disagreement, and the like. This does not entail that every moral theory is equally plausible, nor that no moral theory could ever be sufficiently justified to enjoy at least our ongoing practical assent.

Second, it may seem that any advocate of publicity against esotericism in moral theory is open to the charge that his position makes the acceptability of a moral theory hinge upon the irrational convictions of the masses. No doubt some interlocutors espouse moral convictions that are patently irrational. Indeed, one need not be sympathetic to esotericism to concur with Sidgwick that common moral understandings can be so haphazard or ramshackle that they deserve no place in a "scientifically complete and reflective form" of ethics. Why should we not, as Sidgwick proposes, assign the responsibility of selecting and overseeing a community's morality to a "class of persons defined by exceptional qualities of intellect, temperament, or character"? (1874:IV,iii, §1)

In one respect, this objection simply overlooks the central claim of my argument, namely, that moral theories' distribution of burdens and benefits is an aspect of morality for which even those of "exceptional qualities of intellect, temperament, or character" must consult 'the masses'. However, this objection also highlights that moral theories must nevertheless answer to constraints on rational inquiry into morality. These constraints must, on the one hand, acknowledge the first-personal claims regarding benefits and burdens articulated in the previous sections, while at the same time subjecting moral conceptions as a whole to rational standards capable of countermanding irrationality. Habermas (1990) offers us a model of public moral discourse that satisfies these constraints. On his model, individuals attempt to arrive at universally valid moral principles by participating in an argumentative praxis defined by certain discursive rules. Whatever consensus emerges from this praxis is epistemically legitimated by its being generated by inquiry conducted on the basis of those rules, rules designed (as Habermas puts it) so that "in discourse the unforced force of the better argument prevails." A discourse so constrained precludes esoteric theories from consideration because truth and acceptance conditions effectively converge on this model of inquiry. Such a model allows for claims to be introduced into discourse on the basis of their first-personal epistemic credentials. Hence, individuals' claims regarding the weightiness of the burdens or benefits generated by a proposed moral principle have a place at the deliberative table. At the same time though, the first-personal pedigree of such claims does not exempt them from intersubjective scrutiny, and instance of such claims neither decisively vindicate nor decisively refute candidate moral principles or theories. Hence, with such procedural constraints in place, we are not compelled to choose between publicity and (minimal) rationality. My purpose is not to defend Habermas' particular picture of moral discourse here. I merely emphasize that while unconstrained moral inquiry that honors first-personal insights regarding the weightiness of moral burdens and benefits might heedlessly incorporate irrational prejudices, moral inquiry suitably constrained by evidential or discursive norms need not.

My aim has been to identify an understanding of the esotericism objection that is theory-neutral, i.e., that does not rest on substantive, first-order moral commitments or contentious theoretical claims about morality. Advocates of esoteric theories, esoteric consequentialists in particular, may claim that the lynchpin of my argument against such theories, the largely first-personal character of the epistemology of benefit and burden, works from a conception of justification they reject. Indeed, as I have presented it, moral epistemology has a strongly contractualist flavor. More specifically, claims about benefit and burden are subject to the requirement that they must be judged justifiable to those subject to them, where this entails that those actually benefitted or burdened (not a proxy or theorist) determine this. Defenders of esoteric theories may complain that this seems to tilt the scales against their theories *ab initio*. They may in fact detect the residue of substantive complaints

about the place consequentialism assigns to the individual point of view, e.g. Scheffler's complaint that consequentialist moral theories incorrectly assume that "human pains are individually measurable, interpersonally comparable, and ultimately compensable from the standpoint of eternity." (Scheffler 1994: 117)

 This charge is unwarranted, however. In arguing that moral theories may not be esoteric because of the first-personal epistemology of benefit and burden, I have not argued for any thesis that would preclude any substantive moral theory from due consideration. It could be the case that, after participating in ideal discourse, moral agents select, for example, a form of agent-neutral consequentialism, having concluded (among other things) that the benefits and burdens of that theory are justifiable in their eyes. The esotericism objection merely precludes a theory being justified while concealing those subject to it from the theory and its justification. In calling the relevant standard 'justifiable,' I simply invoke a placeholder notion, not any substantive conception of justifiability or what agents, individually or collectively, would find it justifiable to accept. That individuals are in a distinctive epistemic position to appraise how weighty a set of burdens and benefits is for them does not imply that they are epistemic authorities regarding how the weightiness of burdens and benefits is to be factored into the evaluation of moral theories overall. And while my arguments regarding the first-personal epistemology of burden and benefit do imply that the weightiness of burdens and benefits can only be appreciated from the various first-personal points of view, they do not entail any substantive claims about the ultimate measurability, comparability, etc. of those burdens and benefits.

 These remarks suffice to show that my effort to make sense of the esotericism is neutral in its effects. Yet proponents of esoteric theorists may question whether this effort is also neutral as regards its justification. Why, they may claim, should esoteric consequentialists (for example) accept that a moral theory must be justifiable to, and indeed justified to, those subject to it in the first place? Such theorists may dig in their heels, insisting that moral justification is impersonal, with no accommodation to first-personal perspectives allowed.

 I have attempted to show that the considerations that most fundamentally speak against an esoteric theory are epistemic in nature. Insofar as moral theories generate allocations of burdens and benefits, those subject to such allocations must be consulted in order for those theories to be justified. Note that this demand is not a moral demand, rooted (say) in respect for persons, the irreducible normative significance of subjectivity, etc. Rather, the demand stems from the way in which first-personal perspectives provide essential, albeit defeasible, evidence regarding the justifiability of such allocations. If I am correct that this is a genuine demand on the justification of moral theories, then its rationale is epistemic, and hence theory-neutral. A particularly stubborn esoteric theorist may then ask why she ought to accept even an ostensibly theory-neutral desideratum that implies the falsity of her esoteric theory. Here I point out that rejecting theory-neutral desiderata on such grounds seems to reflect a radical perspectivalism on theory justification. For it would be extremely surprising if there were not *some* theory-neutral desiderata by which to evaluate rival moral theories. Were there not, it is difficult to see what adherents of a given theory, esoteric or otherwise, could appeal to in order to compel the assent of anyone not already convinced of it. This is not to deny that the desiderata for moral theory choice are controversial, and stand in a dynamic relationship with moral theories themselves, i.e., that we home in on these desiderata in part by considering what they imply regarding the acceptability of otherwise plausible moral theories. But unless esoteric theorists reject outright that there are theory-neutral desiderata, they must offer non-question-begging reasons why the desideratum proposed here — again, that the allocation of burdens and benefits must be justifiable in relation to the first-personal perspectives of those subject to it

— should be rejected, lest their complaints about this desideratum appear disingenuous or *ad hoc*.

A final objection: Ben Eggleston (2013) has argued against publicity as a condition of accepting a moral theory on the grounds that the requirement is implausibly demanding, as evidenced by the fact that "nearly all moral theories," not just consequentialist ones, violate it. Eggleston observes that even non-consequentialist theories, theories that do not require agents to bring about the best possible outcomes, often incorporate a "disaster-avoidance provision" requiring agents to avert disasters, where disasters are outcomes that are much worse than every alternative. He then reasons as follows: Suppose that an agent faced two options. The outcome of option A is worse enough in comparison with option B to count as a disaster according to some disaster-avoiding theory T. Hence, T enjoins the agent to choose A. However, A involves, either as a means to its intended result or as a side effect, that at least some of those to which T applies will no longer deliberate with reference to T, rendering T esoteric. T thus violates the publicity condition. Eggleston takes this argument to show that every disaster-avoiding theory violates the publicity condition, and since every consequentialist theory is disaster-avoiding and a wide spectrum of non-consequentialist theories are disaster-avoiding, then nearly all theories countenance the violation of the publicity condition in order to avoid disasters that those theories enjoin agents to avoid. Every moral theory has reason to 'go esoteric' in extraordinary circumstances.

Eggleston's argument does not, in my estimation, show that esoteric theories are plausible. As we noted at the outset, esoteric theories recommend that a theory not be embraced, where this involves believing the theory and putting the theory to deliberative use. But there is no contradiction between the demands of publicity and adherents of theory T knowingly opting not to deliberate by reference to T for T-based reasons. Indeed, we could well imagine a council of moral agents, all of whom embrace T, operating under the discursive constraints Habermas offer and deciding that the avoidance of disaster morally justifies some of these agents not deliberating by reference to T. But in doing so, they would be operating within the demands set by T, a theory they believe as a result of inquiry that satisfies the conditions for public deliberation. This is no more paradoxical than a constitution empowering a chief executive to temporarily suspend certain constitutional provisions in times of crisis. Eggleston's argument thus reminds us that most any moral theory can be developed in a two-level or "sophisticated" version, wherein agents sometimes deploy the theory's fundamental claims but sometimes utilize claims or principles derived from these fundamental claims. But a theory one believes without always deploying it directly in deliberation is not genuinely esoteric.

8. *Conclusion*

We are now in a position to appreciate how esoteric moral theories manifest what Walker has identified as a "suspicious convergence of a certain model of moral theory and a distinctly modern disciplinary perspective and managerial point of view." (2003:93) Esoteric theories countenance viewing moral agents not as participants in moral inquiry, but as a medium in which moral conceptions are to be realized. Many have found this morally worrisome. I have argued that there is no non-question-begging way to vindicate these moral worries. The worries esoteric theories raise are instead epistemic. They present moral theorizing in far too idealized and abstract a way, and in so doing, fail to lend their substantive claims the epistemic credibility they need, especially as regards the justifiability of living with and under those claims. Once this is conceded, a moral theory *in toto* requires for its justification the kind of engagement with common moral opinion that entails that the theory be embraced by those subject to it. Even if proponents of esoteric morality do not

acknowledge this conclusion, I hope to have shown that the esotericism objection need not remain an inchoate or easily dismissed complaint.

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