Revolutionary Normative Subjectivism

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Abstract

The *what next question* for moral error theorists asks: if moral discourse is systematically error-ridden, then how, if at all, should moral error theorists continue to employ moral discourse? Recent years have seen growing numbers of moral error theorists come to endorse a wider normative error theory according to which all normative judgements are untrue. But despite this shift, the what next question for normative error theorists has received far less attention. This paper presents a novel solution to this question: revolutionary normative subjectivism. Along the way, two primary contributions are advanced. First, a non-normative methodology for answering the normative error theoretic what next question is developed. Second, revolutionary normative subjectivism is presented and defended in accordance with the proposed methodology.

Keywords: Normative error theory, what next question, now what problem, subjectivism, nihilism, metaethics.

1   Introduction

Moral error theorists hold that moral judgements are assertoric yet fail to state truths. A natural response to learning that a discourse is systematically error-ridden would be to eliminate that discourse. But moral discourse carries all kinds of practical benefits, for example: the reduction of conflict, the promotion of mutually beneficial cooperation, and the counteraction of limited sympathies (Mackie 1977). What, then, should moral error theorists do with moral discourse? Should they retain their erroneous first-order moral beliefs and continue to partake in moral discourse? Should they modify their first-order moral beliefs in some way? Or should they abandon moral discourse altogether? This is the *what next question for moral error theorists* (M-WNQ): if moral discourse is systematically error-ridden, then how, if at all, should moral error theorists continue to employ moral discourse?[1]

Recent years have seen a growing number of moral error theorists come to endorse a more general normative error theory according to which all normative judgements are assertoric yet fail to state truths (see, for example, Olson 2014; Streumer 2017). But like moral discourse, wider normative discourse carries a number of practical benefits: epistemic

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[1] Some respondents have labelled this question the 'now what problem' for moral error theorists (Lutz 2014; Kalf 2018; Jaquet 2020).

discourse can promote true belief and oppose false belief, instrumental discourse can promote effective means and oppose ineffective means of achieving our ends, and prudential discourse, depending upon one's conception of the prudential good, can promote such features as pleasure and the privation of pain or the contents of an objective list theory of wellbeing.[2] What, then, should normative error theorists do with normative discourse? This is the *what next question for normative error theorists* (N-WNQ).

Despite the proliferation of investigations into the M-WNQ, and despite the growing tendency of moral error theorists to adopt an error theory about normativity more generally, the wider N-WNQ has been investigated, to my knowledge, on only one occasion (Köhler and Ridge 2013).[3] A plausible explanation for the inattention paid to the N-WNQ is that it is based on a false supposition: namely, that there is anything that normative error theorists should do. Whereas respondents to the M-WNQ can employ non-moral normative justifications (for example: epistemic, instrumental, and prudential justifications) in support of their preferred solution to the M-WNQ, such non-moral normative justifications are unavailable to the normative error theorist, for they hold all normative judgements to be untrue. It is unclear, then, on what grounds a normative error theorist can provide a positive answer to the N-WNQ without falling foul of self-defeat.

This article has two aims. First, I reformulate the N-WNQ and construct a novel, non-normative methodology for answering the N-WNQ that avoids charges of self-defeat. Second, I outline and defend a novel solution to the N-WNQ: revolutionary normative subjectivism. The article proceeds as follows. In section 2, I outline the commitments of the normative error theory. In section 3, I reformulate the N-WNQ and propose a novel methodology. In section 4, I present revolutionary normative subjectivism as a novel solution to the N-WNQ and contrast it with established candidate solutions. In section 5, I argue that revolutionary normative subjectivism satisfies the desideratum outlined in the methodology more effectively than competing solutions to the N-WNQ. Section 6 concludes.

2   Normative Error Theory

The normative error theory is the view that normative judgements are assertoric yet fail to state truths.[4] The normative error theory is an expansion of the moral error theory that holds only that moral judgements are assertoric yet fail to state truths. Until recently, the normative error theory had attracted very little attention; in 2010, Stephen Finlay described the normative error theory as 'virtually unheard of' (334), and in 2014, Richard Joyce wrote of the normative error theory that 'I don't know of anyone who endorses the view' (844). Yet recent years have seen

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[2] I assume a non-normative reading of 'benefits'. See section 3 for discussion about the kinds of considerations that normative error theorists can take to be decision-relevant (or 'beneficial').

[3] Jonas Olson (2014), upon defending an error theory that covers moral, epistemic, and certain subsets of instrumental judgements, goes on to defend moral conservationism. But given that Olson's brand of moral conservationism covers only moral discourse rather than any other normative domains, it qualifies only as a solution to the M-WNQ rather than to the N-WNQ.

[4] I understand the kinds of normative judgements deemed untrue by the normative error theory to be positive, atomic, first-order, non-tautological normative judgements (Isserow 2020: 126).

two prominent moral error theorists, Bart Streumer (2017) and Jonas Olson (2014), come to endorse an error theory about normativity more generally—a kind of error theory that Christopher Cowie (2019) has since described as 'arguably the dominant variety of moral error theory in the current literature' (16). Motivating the shift towards the normative error theory is the view that whatever is defective about morality is also defective about normativity more generally. For example, Streumer (2017) and Olson (2014) both argue that normative judgements ascribe irreducibly normative properties but that irreducibly normative properties do not exist.

The scope of the normative error theory depends on the kinds of judgements that are deemed normative. The most thoroughgoing version of the normative error theory to my knowledge has been defended by Streumer (2017), who deems all moral, epistemic, instrumental, and prudential judgements to be normative and systematically untrue. Olson (2014) and Sebastian Köhler and Michael Ridge (2013) explore more moderate versions of the normative error theory; Olson defends a normative error theory according to which certain subsets of instrumental judgements are neither normative nor systematically untrue,[5] and Köhler and Ridge investigate the N-WNQ from the starting point of a normative error theory that they stipulate does not cover epistemic judgements. I take Streumer's thoroughgoing normative error theory as my starting point because of the distinctive challenge of forging an answer to the N-WNQ when every such class of judgement is erroneous.[6] Henceforth, *normative error theory* will refer to the thoroughgoing normative error theory according to which all moral, epistemic, instrumental, and prudential judgements are untrue, and by *normative error theorists* I refer to those who endorse this thoroughgoing version of the normative error theory.[7]

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[5] Two clarificatory points are due here. First, Olson (2014: §8.1) discusses 'hypothetical reasons' rather than 'instrumental reasons'. Olson defines hypothetical reasons as 'reasons to take the means to one's ends' (152). I follow Streumer (2017: ch. 8) in assuming that what Olson calls hypothetical reasons are equivalent to what Streumer calls instrumental reasons. Second, Olson argues that hypothetical judgements that ascribe irreducibly normative reason relations are indeed systematically untrue, but at least some hypothetical judgements are reducible to empirical claims about desires and efficient means of bringing about the satisfaction of those desires, and those hypothetical judgements are neither normative nor systematically untrue.

[6] Streumer's endorsement of the normative error theory is indirect; Streumer (2017: chs. 9–10) argues that the normative error theory cannot be believed, but that the inability to believe in the normative error theory speaks in favour of its truth. Various rebuttals have been made to the effect that we can in fact believe in the normative error theory (see, e.g., Hyun and Sampson 2014; Olson 2014: 169–72; Lillehammer & Möller 2015). If these rebuttals are successful, then this article aims to provide guidance to those who believe the normative error theory to be true. If these rebuttals are unsuccessful, then this article can still provide guidance to those, like Streumer, who 'believe that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that the error theory is true' (2017: 171) but cannot believe in the normative error theory, if, in the face of sound arguments that together 'seem' to show that the error theory is true, they were to call into question the usefulness of normative discourse in its current form.

[7] If the normative error theorist were to classify other kinds of judgements as normative, such as legal and aesthetic judgements, then they too would be deemed untrue by the normative error theory.

Before proceeding to my proposed methodology, unpacking the disagreement between Streumer and Olson regarding the categorisation of instrumental judgements as normative or non-normative will illuminate the argumentative moves available in the pursuit of a normative error theorist-friendly methodology. According to Olson (2014: §8.1), at least some instrumental judgements are reducible to non-normative empirical claims about desires and efficient means of bringing about the satisfaction of those desires. Streumer (2017) disagrees, holding that an empirical claim of the form 'you can do X only if you do Y' qualifies as an instrumental judgement only if we add a further claim of the kind 'you ought to do what you want to do' (114) or 'you ought to avoid the following combination: having an end and not taking the necessary means to this end' (ibid). Importantly, Streumer and Olson need not disagree about the truth value of any token judgement; Streumer and Olson can agree that any judgement about desires and efficient means of bringing about the satisfaction of desires can be true when unaccompanied by a further normative commitment of the form 'you ought to do what you want to do' or 'you ought to avoid the following combination: having an end and not taking the necessary means to this end', and is untrue when accompanied by such a commitment. They disagree only on the conceptual matter as to whether such judgements qualify as instrumental when unaccompanied by the further normative commitment. For the purposes of the methodology to be constructed in section 3, the important point is that merely empirical judgements about desires and efficient means of bringing about the satisfaction of desires, in virtue of neither being deemed normative nor instrumental by the thoroughgoing normative error theory, are not deemed untrue by the thoroughgoing normative error theory.

3   Methodology

My proposed methodology discriminates between candidate solutions to the N-WNQ on the basis of their effectiveness in promoting the desires of normative error theorists. Let us call empirical judgements about desires and effective means of promoting desires *recommendations* and let us call candidate solutions to the N-WNQ *more recommendable* or *less recommendable* if they more or less effectively promote the desires of normative error theorists.[8] In this article, I am in pursuit of the most recommendable solution to the N-WNQ. The N-WNQ under investigation in this article therefore asks not what normative error theorists should do with normative discourse, but what it would be most recommendable to do with normative discourse.

A methodology for answering the N-WNQ would be self-defeating if it involves making normative judgements about the success of candidate solutions. For example, if candidate solutions were evaluated on epistemic, instrumental, or prudential grounds, as they

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Exhaustively listing every domain that can plausibly qualify as normative lies beyond the scope of this article. The normative error theory under examination can be read as holding *at least* all moral, epistemic, instrumental, and prudential judgements to be untrue.

[8] Unlike Olson, I ground 'recommendations' in 'effective' rather than 'efficient' means of satisfying desires, as it seems likely that the normative error theorist will be less concerned with satisfying their desires with minimal resources and more concerned with the more general successful satisfaction of their desires.

characteristically are in investigations into the M-WNQ, the methodology would be self-defeating. But, as was clarified in section 2, judgements about desires and effective means of promoting desires (or 'recommendations') are not deemed by the normative error theory to qualify as instrumental or normative and are not deemed untrue by the normative error theory.[9] Hence, a methodology that 'recommends' candidate solutions to the N-WNQ straightforwardly avoids self-defeat, as no defective normative judgement to the effect that normative error theorists 'should' or 'ought to' adopt a given solution to the N-WNQ is made.

However, the reformulation of the N-WNQ may invite charges of arbitrariness. Under at least some conceptions of arbitrariness, a selection of an option is arbitrary if it is made in the absence of normative reasons (Enoch 2011: ch. 3). If so, then lest they fall foul of self-defeat, arbitrariness may be a bullet that the normative error theorist has no option but to bite. But, as the addressee of this article, it is up to the normative error theorist to determine whether the bullet carries dialectical significance. And it is not clear why the normative error theorist would indeed be perturbed by the charge of arbitrariness—after all, the normative error theorist was never in the business of providing normative reasons. Predictively, it seems highly plausible that the normative error theorist would be moved by a recommendation made on the basis of commonly held desires. It would be odd indeed if the normative error theorist were to retort: 'I can see that I have a desire *x*, and I can see that pursuing means *y* would most effectively promote this desire, but unless there is a *normative reason* to pursue means *y* then I do not care to pursue means *y*'. So long as we grant this empirical assumption—that the normative error theorist is indeed concerned with taking effective means to promoting their desires—then even if recommendations are by the light of normative reasons 'arbitrary', this need not deflate their philosophical and practical interestingness to the normative error theorist.

Discriminating between candidate solutions to the N-WNQ on the basis of their recommendability may appear to constitute a radical departure from the methodologies traditionally implemented by moral error theorists in pursuit of solutions to the M-WNQ. Whereas moral error theorists discriminate between candidate solutions on the basis of non-moral normative considerations, the recommendations deployed by normative error theorists are strictly non-normative. But the non-moral normative considerations to which moral error theorists traditionally appeal bear striking similarities to recommendations. Matthew Lutz (2014: 353–54), for example, appeals to instrumental reasons to favour candidate solutions to the M-WNQ that satisfy the desires of moral error theorists and disfavour candidate solutions that fail to do so. Similarly, François Jaquet (2020: n. 3) approaches the M-WNQ by appealing to hypothetical reasons that depend upon their bearer's desires, and Toby Svoboda (2017: 52–53) employs pragmatic normative reasons tied to the contingent desires of human beings. My methodology continues in this tradition by discriminating between candidate solutions on the basis of their effectiveness in promoting the desires of normative error theorists, but departs in the justification provided for doing so—I appeal to the contingent yet highly plausible psychological claim that normative error theorists are indeed concerned with taking effective

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[9] I proceed under the assumption that desires are not conceptually tied to normative concepts. If desires are conceptually tied to normative concepts, then 'desire' can be replaced by a pro-attitude that is not conceptually tied to normative concepts.

means to promoting their desires, while moral error theorists make an appeal to non-moral normative reasons.

A second point of departure from tradition consists in my identification of the individual normative error theorist as the addressee of this article. Traditionally, moral error theorists present the M-WNQ as a question to be answered by moral error theorists collectively rather than individually. But framing the M-WNQ and N-WNQ as questions to be answered collectively, and seeking solutions to the M-WNQ and N-WNQ on the condition that they are adopted in unison with the wider community of moral or normative error theorists, severely limits the practical import of the solutions endorsed. After all, the wide range of solutions to the M-WNQ that continue to receive defence provide little confidence in the prospects of moral error theorists collectively agreeing upon a single solution to the M-WNQ, let alone the wider linguistic community coming to endorse the moral error theory as well as a single solution to the M-WNQ. Of greater practical relevance is the question as to how, if at all, moral error theorists should continue to employ moral discourse in a world where moral error theorists are a small minority and no single solution to the M-WNQ is unanimously endorsed by moral error theorists. It is in response to this framing of the N-WNQ that I recommend revolutionary normative subjectivism, albeit with a view to individual normative error theorists eventually sharing this solution with the wider community of normative error theorists.

One may worry that addressing individual normative error theorists could threaten the tractability of the N-WNQ. If different normative error theorists have different sets of desires that are most effectively promoted by different solutions to the N-WNQ, then there may be no single 'most recommendable' solution to the N-WNQ—different candidate solutions may be more or less recommendable for different individual error theorists.

To alleviate this worry, in what follows I make only minimal assumptions about the contents of the desires of normative error theorists. Specifically, I assume that the desires of normative error theorists closely mirror the desires of ordinary human beings, that those desires are both self-regarding and other-regarding, and that they do not include idiosyncratic desires to adopt a specific solution to the N-WNQ.[10] Granted, my arguments may fail to apply to normative error theorists whose set of desires radically depart from those of the ordinary human being, and those who have exceedingly strong idiosyncratic desires to continue employing normative language in a certain way or to eliminate normative discourse altogether. My more

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[10] The assumption that the desires of error theorists closely mirror the desires of ordinary human beings has been defended elsewhere (see, e.g., Elliott and Isserow 2021: 18–21) and defending it would lie beyond the scope of this article. But it is not universally endorsed: Guy Kahane (2017) has argued that coming to believe in evaluative nihilism would involve coming to believe that nothing has value, and that this in turn would result in one coming to no longer care about 'most (or at least many)' (341) of the things that they once took to be valuable. In the absence of empirical data on the desires of normative error theorists, I cannot rule out the possibility that normative error theorists have radically different desires to those of the ordinary human being, and I cannot rule out the possibility that their radically different desires would be most effectively promoted by some rival solution to the N-WNQ. But those who are doubtful of the truth of my assumption must reckon with anecdotal counterevidence in the form of growing numbers of normative error theoretic philosophers who do not appear to have suffered a wholesale loss to or modification of their desires.

modest goal is to identify a solution that applies to most normative error theorists, given a pattern of desires that closely mirrors those of the ordinary human being.

Another worry pertains to the empirical nature of the N-WNQ. The identification of a candidate solution to the N-WNQ that most effectively satisfies the desires of normative error theorists (given the minimal assumptions explicated above) seems like an empirical matter. Perhaps, then, the N-WNQ may be a project best deferred to empirical studies.

The N-WNQ may indeed take on an empirical flavour. But the empirical flavour of this project does not imply that philosophers are merely stumbling around in the dark—after all, some empirical claims are more plausible than others. The aforementioned investigations into the M-WNQ that also implement desire-based methodologies avoid the empirical worry by relying on a small number of highly plausible empirical claims. This article will continue in this tradition, and where the success of my subsequent argumentation does indeed depend upon empirical claims, these empirical claims will be explicated and justified.

4   Revolutionary Normative Subjectivism

Candidate solutions to the N-WNQ can be categorised as conservationist, abolitionist, or revolutionary. Normative conservationism is the recommendation that normative error theorists compartmentalise their normative beliefs such that they maintain positive first-order normative beliefs in everyday contexts and reserve their error theoretic commitments to critical contexts such as the seminar room (Olson 2014), normative abolitionism is the recommendation that normative error theorists eliminate normative discourse altogether (Hinckfuss 1987), and revolutionary solutions to the N-WNQ recommend that normative error theorists modify the way in which they employ normative discourse. Examples of revolutionary solutions to the N-WNQ include revolutionary normative fictionalism, the recommendation that normative error theorists replace their attitude of belief towards normative propositions with an attitude of make-believe (Joyce 2001) and revolutionary normative expressivism, the recommendation that normative error theorists reorient normative discourse towards the expression of conative attitudes (Köhler and Ridge 2013). With the exception of revolutionary normative expressivism, the aforementioned candidate solutions have only been defended as solutions to the M-WNQ rather than as solutions to the N-WNQ. But they can easily be repurposed as solutions to the more general N-WNQ by widening the scope of their recommendation from moral discourse to wider normative discourse. The candidate solutions surveyed above are not exhaustive but provide an overview of some of the most frequently defended solutions to the M-WNQ and N-WNQ.

Different revolutionary solutions to the N-WNQ recommend that normative error theorists modify normative discourse in different ways. Revolutionary normative fictionalism and revolutionary normative expressivism constitute two such examples. But the possibilities do not end here—in principle, revolutionary solutions to the N-WNQ could recommend reorienting normative discourse towards any other metanormative conception of normative discourse. For example, a revolutionary normative naturalist could reorient normative discourse towards natural properties, a revolutionary normative relativist could reorient normative discourse towards the dominant norms of one's own culture, and a revolutionary

normative constructivist could reorient normative discourse towards a constructivist process of rational deliberation.

My preferred solution to the N-WNQ, revolutionary normative subjectivism, qualifies as a revolutionary solution to the N-WNQ in virtue of its recommendation that normative error theorists modify the way in which they employ normative discourse. Like revolutionary normative expressivism, the modification recommended by revolutionary normative subjectivism is a reorientation of normative discourse towards one's own attitudes. But unlike revolutionary normative expressivism, revolutionary normative subjectivism recommends using normative language to report rather than express one's own attitudes. Different kinds of revolutionary normative subjectivism can identify different kinds of attitudes towards which normative discourse is to be reoriented. In what follows, I defend a particular kind of revolutionary normative subjectivism that reorients normative discourse away from normative concepts and towards one's desires about the benefits of normative discourse.[11]

The modification process involved in my brand of revolutionary normative subjectivism (henceforth, simply *revolutionary normative subjectivism*) involves two stages. First, the revolutionary normative subjectivist identifies the benefit or set of benefits that they desire each mode of normative discourse to promote. Instrumental discourse perhaps carries the least controversial set of benefits; the revolutionary normative subjectivist may identify the benefit of instrumental discourse as being the promotion of effective means and the opposition of ineffective means of attaining our ends. The desired benefits of epistemic, prudential, and moral discourse are more controversial and diffuse. Some revolutionary normative subjectivists may desire epistemic discourse to promote true belief and oppose false belief, while others may desire epistemic discourse to promote knowledge (Cowie 2019: ch. 7). Likewise, some may desire prudential discourse to promote pleasure and oppose pain, while others may desire prudential discourse to promote the contents of an objective list theory. And some may desire moral discourse to promote cooperation and oppose conflict, while others may have an other-regarding desire for moral discourse to promote net impartial happiness. In any case, the particular desired benefits of each mode of normative discourse are not essential to revolutionary normative subjectivism, and revolutionary normative subjectivists can fill them in as they see fit.

In the second stage, the revolutionary normative subjectivist reorients normative discourse away from normative concepts and towards the desires identified in the first stage

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[11] That revolutionary normative subjectivism qualifies as a revolutionary view depends on the falsity of hermeneutic normative subjectivism. In other words, if hermeneutic normative subjectivism were true, normative subjectivism would not qualify as revolutionary because one's own attitudes would be the very concepts towards which normative discourse is already oriented. One could defend the normative error theory and hermeneutic normative subjectivism if they held that normative judgements report one's own attitudes, but, for some reason, normative judgements are infected by systematic error. While such a position may be internally consistent, the hermeneutic normative error theoretic subjectivism is (to my knowledge) undefended in the literature, and I proceed on the assumption that hermeneutic normative subjectivism is false.

and beliefs about effective means of promoting those desires.[12] Both judgements made at the level of normative theory and at the level of applied normativity undergo this process of reorientation.[13] First, in order to reorient judgements made at the level of normative theory, the revolutionary normative subjectivist replaces normative concepts with the desires identified in the first stage. This enables revolutionary normative subjectivists to continue to use normative language to make judgements (henceforth: *RNS judgements*) at the level of normative theory, but in doing so, they report their desires about the benefits of normative discourse.

Precisely how this works in practice depends upon the kind of benefit or benefits that the revolutionary normative subjectivist desires the given mode of normative discourse to promote. The reorientation goes through most straightforwardly when gradable normative concepts are replaced by desires about gradable benefits, and when binary normative concepts are replaced by desires about binary benefits. For example, if a revolutionary normative subjectivist desires moral discourse to promote net impartial happiness, they can replace the gradable concept of 'moral goodness' with their desire for moral discourse to promote the gradable benefit of net impartial happiness, and by making the RNS judgement 'states of affairs are good in proportion with their constituent net levels of impartial happiness', the revolutionary normative subjectivist reports their desire for moral discourse to promote net impartial happiness. Likewise, if a revolutionary normative subjectivist desires moral discourse to promote adherence to some binary imperative, they can replace the binary concept of 'moral impermissibility' with their desire for moral discourse to promote adherence to the binary imperative, and by making the RNS judgement 'actions are morally impermissible if and only if they violate the imperative', the revolutionary normative subjectivist reports their desire for moral discourse to promote adherence to the imperative.

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[12] Revolutionary solutions to the N-WNQ can be separated into two subgroups: substitutionist solutions recommend the modification of essential features of normative discourse in order to yield a surrogate non-normative discourse, while revisionary solutions recommend the modification of nonessential features of normative discourse in order to yield a modified normative discourse (Prinzing 2018). That the reorientation towards desires and beliefs about effective means of promoting desires does indeed constitute a reorientation 'away from normative concepts' assumes that the surrogate discourse employed by revolutionary normative subjectivists qualifies as non-normative, and hence, assumes a substitutionist rather than revisionary form of revolutionary normative subjectivism. In section 2, I ascribed to the normative error theorist the claim that judgements about desires and effective means of promoting desires are non-normative when not accompanied by some further commitment of the kind 'you ought to do what you want to do' or 'you ought to avoid the following combination: having an end and not taking the necessary means to this end' (Streumer 2017: 114). Given this conceptual claim, revolutionary normative subjectivism qualifies as substitutionist rather than revisionary, for the judgements about the desired benefits of normative discourse made by the revolutionary normative subjectivist do not qualify as normative. Nevertheless, while the conceptual claim that judgements about desires and effective means of promoting desires do not qualify as normative may be essential to the methodology advanced in this article, this claim is not essential to revolutionary normative subjectivism more generally, and readers who reject this conceptual claim may interpret revolutionary normative subjectivism as revisionary rather than substitutionist.

[13] This distinction tracks the traditional distinction between normative ethics and applied ethics, but with respect to normativity more generally.

The reorientation is less straightforward when gradable normative concepts are replaced by desires about binary benefits, and when binary normative concepts are replaced by desires about gradable benefits. If the desired benefit or set of benefits of some mode of normative discourse are gradable, the revolutionary normative subjectivist may, for the sake of promoting the desired benefits more effectively, eschew binary normative concepts in favour of a scalar approach, or they may create some rule to govern the application of binary normative concepts. For example, if a revolutionary normative subjectivist desires moral discourse to promote net impartial happiness, they may choose to take a scalar approach to moral discourse and eliminate such binary moral concepts as 'right', 'wrong', and 'obligation' (see, for example, Norcross 2020), or they may create some rule to govern the application of binary moral concepts, such as a satisficing rule that deems actions to be 'right' just in case they promote some given threshold of net impartial happiness (see, for example, Slote & Pettit 1984). Likewise, if the desired benefit or set of benefits of some mode of normative discourse are binary, the revolutionary normative subjectivist may, for the sake of promoting the desired benefits more effectively, eschew gradable normative concepts, or they may create some rule to govern the application of gradable normative concepts. But, as with the particular benefits of normative discourse identified by the revolutionary normative subjectivist, the details of the evaluative and deontic logic employed by revolutionary normative subjectivists are not essential to revolutionary normative subjectivism, and the revolutionary normative subjectivist can calibrate their evaluative and deontic logic as they see fit.

Next, in order to reorient judgements made at the level of applied normativity, the revolutionary normative subjectivist replaces normative concepts with beliefs about effective means of promoting their desired benefits of given modes of normative discourse. This enables revolutionary normative subjectivists to continue to use normative language to make RNS judgements at the level of applied normativity, but in doing so, they report their beliefs about effective and ineffective means of promoting their desired benefits of normative discourse. For example, if the revolutionary normative subjectivist desires moral discourse to promote adherence to some imperative, then by making the RNS judgement 'stealing is morally impermissible', the revolutionary normative subjectivist reports their belief that stealing is an ineffective means of promoting their desired benefit of moral discourse: adherence with the imperative. Or, if the revolutionary normative subjectivist desires moral discourse to promote net impartial happiness, then by making the RNS judgement 'giving to effective charities is morally right', the revolutionary normative subjectivist reports their belief that giving to effective charities is an effective means of promoting their desired benefit of moral discourse: the promotion of net impartial happiness.

RNS judgements at the levels of normative theory and applied normativity are truth-apt and not systematically untrue. In virtue of not being systematically untrue, the revolutionary normative subjectivist is able to adopt a fully committed attitude of belief towards RNS propositions without falling foul of normative error. For example, at the level of normative theory, if a revolutionary normative subjectivist desires moral discourse to promote net impartial happiness, the revolutionary normative subjectivist can adopt a fully committed attitude of belief towards the proposition 'actions are morally right in proportion as they promote net impartial happiness', where in doing so, they report their desire for moral discourse

to promote net impartial happiness. Further, at the level of applied normativity, the revolutionary normative subjectivist can adopt a fully committed attitude of belief towards the proposition 'violence is morally wrong', where in doing so, they report their belief that violence is an ineffective means of promoting their desired benefit of moral discourse: net impartial happiness. In the case of RNS judgements on the level of normative theory, the RNS judgement is correct just in case the revolutionary normative subjectivist does indeed hold the desire that they report, and on the level of applied normativity, the RNS judgement is correct just in case violence is indeed an ineffective means of promoting their desired benefit of moral discourse.

Fully committed attitudes of belief towards RNS propositions enable genuine disagreements between revolutionary normative subjectivists on the level of applied normativity just in case they share the same desires about the benefits of a given mode of normative discourse. For example, if two revolutionary normative subjectivists both desire epistemic discourse to promote true belief and oppose false belief, they can genuinely disagree about the proposition 'there are good epistemic reasons to believe that we are living in a simulation' where their disagreement consists in conflicting empirical claims about whether believing in the simulation hypothesis is likely to promote their desired benefit of epistemic discourse: the promotion of true belief and the opposition of false belief. Revolutionary normative subjectivists can also have merely apparent disagreements on the level of applied normativity when they hold conflicting desires about the benefits of a given mode of normative discourse, as well as on the level of normative theory, but these merely apparent disagreements involve no contradiction.

One may worry that unless hermeneutic subjectivism is true, genuine normative disagreement between revolutionary normative subjectivists and normative success theorists would be precluded, for RNS judgements and the normative judgements made by normative success theorists would be expressing different kinds of attitudes or beliefs. If, for example, we grant the conceptual claim that normative judgements ascribe irreducibly normative properties, then the revolutionary normative subjectivist and the normative success theorist would simply be talking past one another when they employ normative language to make seemingly conflicting judgements. This difficulty should not come as a surprise—after all, the normative error theorist holds all normative judgements to be untrue. Should the normative error theorist wish to form genuine normative disagreements with normative success theorists, they can do so only by preserving the conceptual commitments of normative discourse, thereby either falling foul of normative error (in the manner of the normative conservationist) or dropping the fully committed attitude of belief taken towards positive normative propositions (in the manner of the revolutionary normative fictionalist).

Faced with the options of normative error, dropping the fully committed attitude of belief taken towards positive normative propositions, or sacrificing the ability to form genuine normative disagreements with normative success theorists, the revolutionary normative subjectivist opts for the latter. But this need not come at a grave cost. RNS judgements, in virtue of being couched in normative language, can at least carry the appearance of amounting to a genuine normative agreement or disagreement. Merely apparent normative agreements and disagreements suffice for normative conversation in most everyday contexts where the conceptual commitments of one's normative judgements are not made explicit. If this comes

at the cost of undermining normative conversation when one's metanormative commitments are on the table, this is a cost that the normative error theorist should not be surprised to face.[14]

A second worry might linger: that the revolutionary normative subjectivist's continued employment of normative discourse involves some level of deception (Lutz 2014: 366–67). Under a traditional definition of deception according to which deception consists in intentionally causing one to have a false belief, the revolutionary normative subjectivist, in virtue of misleading the normative success theorist into thinking that they are making genuinely normative judgements, may be vulnerable to this charge. But at least two considerations speak against its significance. First, the revolutionary normative subjectivist need not obfuscate the true meaning of their RNS judgements—in such contexts as the seminar room where the revolutionary normative subjectivist is called upon to reveal their metanormative beliefs, the revolutionary normative subjectivist may well choose to let their error theoretic inclinations be known. And second, even if RNS judgements do amount to a kind of deception, this need not be problematic. After all, under the assumption that normative success theorists agree that normative discourse is worth preserving, the continued employment of normative discourse will advance their own self-regarding and other-regarding interests too. It is not clear that, upon learning that RNS judgements are not genuinely normative, the normative success theorist would prefer the revolutionary normative subjectivist to have refused to engage in normative discourse (in the manner of the normative abolitionist), or to have made genuinely normative judgements that they believe (in critical contexts) to be false (in the manner of the normative conservationist). In any case, should any readers have lingering concerns about the deceptiveness of revolutionary normative subjectivism or the ability to form genuine normative disagreements, these concerns can be weighed against the benefits of revolutionary normative subjectivism to be covered in section 5.

5   Defence

Remember that the methodology advanced in section 3 discriminates between candidate solutions to the N-WNQ on the basis of their recommendability, and remember that a solution to the N-WNQ is recommendable if it more effectively promotes the desires of normative error theorists. RNS judgements report desires about the benefits of normative discourse and effective means of promoting those desires. Hence, to act in accordance with RNS judgements is to take effective means to promoting the desires of revolutionary normative subjectivists. And hence, to act in accordance with RNS judgements is recommendable. But whether the recommendability of acting in accordance with RNS judgements implies the recommendability

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[14] Even the normative conservationist and revolutionary normative fictionalist, who preserve the conceptual commitments of normative discourse and the ability to form genuine normative disagreements with normative success theorists in everyday contexts, face difficulties in forming genuine normative disagreements with normative success theorists when their metanormative commitments are on the table. Upon discovering their subscription to the normative error theory, imagine the normative success theorist retorting: 'but you don't *really* believe any of what you say, do you?'.

of revolutionary normative subjectivism depends on whether RNS judgements generate a motivational effect to act in accordance with RNS judgements.

The motivational effect of RNS judgements can be intrapersonal or interpersonal. On the intrapersonal side, RNS judgements and their systematization may provide a bulwark against weaknesses of will and lapses of motivation. For example, categorising options as 'morally wrong' if they fail to promote the desired benefits of moral discourse discourages in-the-moment practical deliberation about whether to succumb to a weakness of will (Kalf 2018: ch. 6). Admittedly, that RNS judgements can act as a bulwark against weaknesses of will assumes that normative language can give rise to a distinctive intrapersonal motivational effect even when it is used to refer to non-normative concepts. But given the illocutionary force of normative language when used to refer to normative concepts, it is possible that normative language could retain at least some residual intrapersonal motivational effects even after the normative error theorists shifts to using such language to refer to non-normative concepts.

But the motivational force of RNS judgements does not stand and fall with this possibility. Given that we live in a world mostly populated by normative success theorists, and given that normative success theorists will take RNS judgements to refer to normative concepts, RNS judgements can continue to exert an interpersonal motivational effect upon normative success theorists. While supportive empirical data on the intrapersonal motivational effectiveness of RNS judgements on normative error theorists may be difficult to come by, recent studies have demonstrated an interpersonal motivational effect arising from the employment of moral language and argumentation in a number of different arenas: one study identified a reduction in meat-eating after undertaking a class on the ethics of meat-eating (Schwitzgebel, Cokelet, and Singer 2020), another study found moral language to be more effective than economic language in influencing managers to address social issues (Mayer, Ong, *et al*. 2019), and another study found that communicating a moral appeal to credit card customers decreases levels of delinquency and reduces default rates (Bursztyn, Fiorin, *et al*. 2019). Even models of moral reasoning that downplay the intrapersonal motivational force of moral judgements such as Jonathan Haidt's (2001) social intuitionism still propose that 'the mere fact that friends, allies, and acquaintances have made a moral judgment exerts a direct influence on others' (819).

This yields the following presumptive defence of revolutionary normative subjectivism: if acting in accordance with the dictates of revolutionary normative subjectivism is recommendable, and if the employment of normative language does indeed generate a motivational effect (whether intrapersonal, interpersonal, or both) to act in accordance with those dictates, then revolutionary normative subjectivism is recommendable. But it remains to be seen that revolutionary normative subjectivism is more recommendable than competing solutions to the N-WNQ. In the remainder of this section, I will argue that revolutionary normative subjectivism is more recommendable than the four competitors under consideration in this article: normative abolitionism, normative conservationism, revolutionary normative fictionalism, and revolutionary normative expressivism.

To begin with normative abolitionism, the revolutionary normative subjectivist and the normative abolitionist unite in eliminating normative concepts but depart in their stance towards normative language: the revolutionary normative subjectivist recommends couching

RNS judgements in normative language, while the normative abolitionist recommends eliminating normative language along with normative concepts. A close abolitionist competitor to revolutionary normative subjectivism could function as follows: like the revolutionary normative subjectivist, the normative abolitionist could recommending replacing normative discourse with a non-normative discourse about the desired benefits of normative discourse, but unlike the revolutionary normative subjectivist, the normative abolitionist could recommend eliminating normative language and couching the replacement discourse in squarely non-normative language.[15]

But as argued above, normative language generates a distinctive motivational effect (whether intrapersonal, interpersonal, or both) that an abolitionist discourse couched in non-normative language would miss out on. All other things being equal, without the distinctive motivational effect of normative language, the non-normative dictates of normative abolitionists would be less effective than RNS judgements at motivating one another to promote the desired benefits of normative discourse, and normative abolitionism would be less recommendable than revolutionary normative subjectivism.

Of course, all other things may not be equal—the normative abolitionist may argue that the continued employment of normative language is discommendable in other ways. For example, moral abolitionists have argued that moral language gives rise to costs that include moral elitism, according to which people who are thought to be morally superior are handed disproportionate levels of power, moral authoritarianism, according to which freedoms are relinquished to the moral elite, and moral guilt, according to which public moralizing gives rise to feelings of inferiority, failure, and guilt in the moral nonelite (Hinckfuss 1987). But even if we were to grant that such costs infect the moral domain, it is less clear that other normative domains are susceptible to similar kinds of costs. For example, even if the importance placed by society on moral character generates feelings of inferiority, guilt, and failure, parallel feelings of epistemic, instrumental, and prudential guilt do not appear nearly as pervasive. Perhaps more plausible is the existence of epistemic elitism and authoritarianism—phenomena that could arise from the more general notion of epistemic injustice. But even we grant that such phenomena as epistemic elitism and authoritarianism do indeed exist, it is unclear to what extent this is problematic, the abolition of normative language would combat these phenomena, and, most importantly, whether these purported costs outweigh the motivational costs of eliminating normative language. The assertion that such costs do indeed arise from the employment of normative language and that such costs outweigh the costs of abolishing

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[15] Under some conceptions of normative abolitionism, revolutionary normative subjectivism (assuming a substitutionist rather than revisionary reading) qualifies as a kind of normative abolitionism in virtue of eliminating normative concepts (Jaquet 2020). I contend that revolutionary normative subjectivism departs from normative abolitionism in spirit—the normative abolitionist seeks to eliminate normative discourse on the grounds of its discommendability, while the revolutionary normative subjectivist seeks to preserve the purported practical benefits of normative discourse (Kalf 2023). But this is merely a terminological dispute, and if the reader does indeed classify revolutionary normative subjectivism as a kind of normative abolitionism, the following remarks can be read as defending revolutionary normative subjectivism against a more thoroughgoing normative abolitionism that recommends the elimination of normative language as well as normative concepts.

normative language would be a surprising empirical claim in need of empirical evidence—evidence that has not yet been provided.

In the absence of strong arguments in support of normative abolitionism, the motivational effect of normative language provides support for the comparative recommendability of revolutionary normative subjectivism over normative abolitionism. In what follows, readers who remain sympathetic towards moral abolitionism can revise revolutionary normative subjectivism to cover only epistemic, instrumental, and prudential discourse, while remaining abolitionist about moral language. And readers with tendencies towards a more general normative abolitionism can substitute the revolutionary normative subjectivism under defence for the parallel abolitionist solution to the N-WNQ that eliminates normative language and couches RNS judgements in non-normative language.

Next, normative conservationism and revolutionary normative fictionalism recommend preserving rather than reorienting the conceptual commitments of normative discourse. The two views depart in the attitude taken towards normative propositions: the normative conservationist adopts a fully committed attitude of belief while the revolutionary normative fictionalist adopts an attitude of make-believe. Under a traditional reading of these two views, the normative conservationist and the revolutionary normative fictionalist adopt attitudes of belief and make-believe towards the same normative propositions that they believed prior to coming to believe in the normative error theory. But unless the normative conservationist or the revolutionary normative fictionalist defend the surprising view that normative judgements express or report one's own attitudes yet are systematically error-ridden, the preserved normative judgements must express or report something other than the desires of normative error theorists (for example, irreducibly normative properties). Hence, if their preserved normative judgements do indeed express or report something other than the desires of normative error theorists, their normative judgements will track the desires of normative error theorists less closely than RNS judgements, acting in accordance with their normative judgements will be less recommendable than acting in accordance with RNS judgements, and, in the absence of competing considerations, the adoption of revolutionary normative subjectivism will be more recommendable than the adoption of normative conservationism or revolutionary normative fictionalism.

So much for traditional readings of normative conservationism and revolutionary normative fictionalism. Recently, however, Eline Gerritsen (2023) has proposed that normative conservationists and revolutionary normative fictionalists could preserve the conceptual commitments of normative discourse but recalibrate the contents of their normative judgements. Hence, if their recalibrated normative judgements continue to do whatever genuinely normative judgements do (for example, ascribe irreducibly normative properties), normative conservationists and revolutionary normative fictionalists may be able to recalibrate the contents of their normative judgements as to accord with the contents of RNS judgements without collapsing into revolutionary normative subjectivism. If so, acting in accordance with their recalibrated normative judgements would be equally as recommendable as acting in accordance with RNS judgements, and normative conservationism and revolutionary normative fictionalism need not be any less recommendable than revolutionary normative subjectivism. Indeed, if genuinely normative judgements exert a greater motivational effect

than RNS judgements, normative conservationism and revolutionary normative fictionalism so construed may even be more recommendable than revolutionary normative subjectivism.

But there are serious concerns about the viability of normative conservationism and revolutionary normative fictionalism so construed. First, if their recalibrated normative judgements are to track the desires of normative error theorists just as closely as RNS judgements, and if normative discourse in its current form does not merely express or report the desires of normative error theorists, the contents of their normative judgements must undergo an extensive recalibration. But it is far from clear that this is a psychologically possibility. Of course, the revolutionary normative subjectivist is also committed extensively recalibrating the contents of normative discourse. But RNS judgements, unlike fictionalist and conservationist normative judgements, are not genuinely normative. And the project of recalibration is trickier in the case of genuinely normative judgements; while normative conservationists and revolutionary normative fictionalists could plausibly discard of discommendable normative beliefs or make-beliefs, it is much more psychologically challenging to form new genuinely normative beliefs or make-beliefs (Gerritsen 2023: 548–49). And if genuinely normative beliefs and make-beliefs cannot be extensively discarded and formed at will, the normative conservationist and the revolutionary normative fictionalist cannot recalibrate the contents of their genuinely normative judgements as to fully accord with the contents of RNS judgements, in which case (in the absence of competing considerations) their solution is less recommendable than revolutionary normative subjectivism.

Second, even if genuinely normative beliefs and make-beliefs can indeed be extensively discarded and formed at will, this may be at the expense of sacrificing the purported distinctive motivational effects of genuinely normative judgements. After all, if normative judgements are to generate distinctive motivational effects, they must be plausibly true. But it is difficult to see how normative conservationists and revolutionary normative fictionalists could take their normative judgements, recalibrated in accordance with their desires about the benefits of normative discourse, to be plausibly true.

If the normative conservationist or the revolutionary normative fictionalist can indeed recalibrate their genuinely normative judgements in such a way as to promote the desired benefits of normative discourse, while at the same time preserving the distinctive motivational effects of normative discourse, then normative conservationism or revolutionary normative fictionalism so construed may indeed be more recommendable than revolutionary normative subjectivism. Such a result would be only a minor concession for the revolutionary normative subjectivist, for normative conservationism and revolutionary normative fictionalism so construed share the spirit of revolutionary normative subjectivism: recalibrating judgements made using normative language in order to promote the desired benefits of normative discourse. Adjudicating upon the possibilities of normative conservationism and revolutionary normative fictionalism so construed is an empirical matter that may require further empirical evidence. Nevertheless, I have argued that there are grounds on which to be suspicious about such a possibility. And if this is indeed a psychological impossibility, then once again, the normative judgements of normative conservationists and revolutionary normative fictionalists will track the desires of normative error theorists less closely than RNS judgements, acting in accordance with their normative judgements will be less recommendable than acting in

accordance with RNS judgements, and, in the absence of competing considerations, the adoption of revolutionary normative subjectivism will be more recommendable than the adoption of normative conservationism or revolutionary normative fictionalism.

Finally, revolutionary normative expressivists, like revolutionary normative subjectivists, recommend the reorientation of normative discourse towards one's own attitudes. Where the two views depart is with regard to the constituent attitudes of their reoriented judgements—revolutionary normative subjectivism recommends the issuance of judgements that report desires and beliefs about effective means of promoting desires, while revolutionary normative expressivism recommends the issuance of judgements that express conative attitudes. Completing my defence of revolutionary normative subjectivism therefore requires demonstrating that the desires of normative error theorists are more effectively promoted by judgements couched in normative language that report rather than express one's own attitudes.

As hermeneutic views, expressivism has garnered much more support amongst metaethicists than subjectivism in recent years. But the desiderata for successful hermeneutic metanormative views are not identical to the desideratum for successful revolutionary metanormative views; revolutionary metanormative views are evaluated on the basis of their recommendability rather than on the basis of their ability to accommodate each feature of actual normative discourse. I argue that at least two features of revolutionary normative subjectivism favour its recommendability above the recommendability of revolutionary normative expressivism.

First, hermeneutic expressivism has been purported to be better able to account for moral disagreement; expressivists can disagree on the basis of conflicting attitudes, while subjectivists merely talk past one another by reporting their own attitudes (Köhler 2012). But, as argued in section 4, revolutionary normative subjectivists can have genuine disagreements on the level of applied normativity just in case they share the same desires about the benefits of a given mode of normative discourse. These disagreements, couched in normative language, consist in conflicting empirical claims about effective means of promoting shared desires about the benefits of a given mode of normative discourse. Such disagreements enable revolutionary normative subjectivists to collectively identify and progress towards more effective means of promoting their desires. By contrast, revolutionary normative expressivism, in virtue of recommending the adoption of conative attitudes rather than attitudes of fully committed belief towards its dictates, enables no such genuine disagreements. Although revolutionary normative expressivists may disagree on the basis of conflicting attitudes, these merely apparent disagreements do not take place at the level of conflicting empirical claims about effective means of promoting shared desires about the benefits of a given mode of normative discourse. Hence, these merely apparent disagreements do not facilitate the collective identification and progression towards more effective means of promoting their desires.

Second, revolutionary normative subjectivism more straightforwardly accommodates reasoning within the framework of RNS judgements. For example, if the revolutionary normative subjectivist desires moral discourse to oppose (amongst other things) lying, they can judge lying to be morally wrong, where this judgement reports their belief that lying is an ineffective means of promoting their desired benefit of moral discourse: the opposition of (amongst other things) lying. Should the revolutionary normative subjectivist be faced with the

option of getting their little brother to lie, they can employ the straightforward *modus ponens* argument 'lying is morally wrong, if lying is morally wrong then getting your little brother to lie is morally wrong, therefore getting your little brother to lie is morally wrong', in order to determine that getting their little brother to lie is an ineffective means of promoting their desired benefit of normative discourse. This kind of reasoning bolsters the recommendability of revolutionary normative subjectivism by providing a shorthand by which revolutionary normative subjectivists can discriminate between effective and ineffective means of promoting their desires (Kalf 2018: 181–85).

By contrast, as the Frege-Geach problem demonstrates, expressivists face difficulties in accounting for straightforward moral reasoning. Expressivists hold that nonembedded moral sentences and embedded moral sentences have different meanings—the former express conative attitudes while the latter do not. Expressivists therefore face the challenge of explaining how simple moral sentences can embed into complex moral sentences, and how *modus ponens* arguments of the form above can come out as valid (Geach 1958). This problem carries across to revolutionary normative expressivism; revolutionary normative expressivists face the challenge of explaining how simple normative sentences can embed into complex normative sentences. The revolutionary normative expressivist thereby lacks the shorthand by which revolutionary normative subjectivists can discriminate between effective and ineffective means of promoting their desires. In the absence of competing comparative advantages of revolutionary normative expressivism, the superior abilities of revolutionary normative subjectivism to account for contradictory normative disagreements and normative reasoning generate a presumptive case in support of revolutionary normative subjectivism over revolutionary normative expressivism.[16]

6   Conclusion

I have argued that revolutionary normative subjectivism is a more recommendable solution to the N-WNQ than four competing solutions: normative abolitionism, normative conservationism, revolutionary normative fictionalism, and revolutionary normative expressivism. This article yields two upshots pertaining to the N-WNQ. First, in section 3, I developed a non-normative methodology by which normative error theorists can defend solutions to the N-WNQ without falling foul of self-defeat. Second, I proceeded in section 4 to present a novel solution to the N-WNQ: revolutionary normative subjectivism, and in section 5 defended revolutionary normative subjectivism according to the methodology outlined in section 3.

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[16] The Frege-Geach problem is not without candidate solutions. Svoboda (2017) redeploys Simon Blackburn's (1984) higher-order attitude approach in order to salvage an expressivist-friendly form of moral reasoning. In the absence of competing merits and demerits of revolutionary normative subjectivism and revolutionary normative expressivism, such a solution to the Frege-Geach problem must show that expressivist-friendly normative reasoning is *at least* as effective as standard normative reasoning in enabling normative error theorists to identify effective means of promoting their desires. It is not clear that candidate solutions to the Frege-Geach problem have met that threshold.

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