

Moral Error Theory without Epistemic Error Theory: Skepticism about Second-Personal Reasons*

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Abstract. Proponents of the Epistemic Companions in Guilt argument argue that we should reject the moral error theory because it entails that there are no epistemic reasons. In this paper, I investigate whether a plausible version of the moral error theory can be constructed that does not entail an error theory about epistemic reasons. I argue that there are no irreducibly normative second-personal reasons even if there are irreducibly normative reasons. And epistemic reasons are not second-personal reasons. In this case, a plausible version of the moral error theory can be constructed that does not entail an error theory about epistemic reasons if facts and claims about morality entail facts and claims about irreducibly normative second-personal reasons. And, as I explain, there is a good case that facts and claims about morality *do* entail facts and claims about irreducibly normative second-personal reasons.

1. Introduction

The moral error theory is the combination of: (i) the conceptual claim that facts and claims about moral right and wrong entail facts and claims about irreducibly normative reasons; and (ii) the metaphysical claim that there are no irreducibly normative reasons.¹ R is an *irreducibly normative* reason to ϕ iff the fact that R is a reason to ϕ is a fact that cannot be analysed in terms of non-normative facts such as facts about the desires we have or the roles in which we find ourselves. According to error theorists, hypothetical reasons are not irreducibly normative reasons because the fact that A has a hypothetical reason to ϕ can be reductively analysed in terms of the fact that ϕ -ing would promote A 's desires (e.g. the fact that there is a reason for me to go for a beer after work can be reduced to the fact that doing so promotes one of my desires). And conventional reasons, such as reasons of fashion or etiquette, are not irreducibly normative because the fact that we have a conventional reason to do something can be reduced to non-normative sociological facts about practices or conventions.

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¹ See Olson (2014: ch. 6 esp. 117-138) and Streumer (2008: 559-60) (2017). See also Mackie (1977: 29). See Olson (2014: ch. 6) for a defence of the view that Joyce's (2001: 37-45) arguments, and the most plausible of Mackie's arguments, are best understood as arguments for (i) and (ii).

But according to proponents of the error theory, the fact that we have a moral reason to ϕ cannot be reductively analysed in terms of such non-normative facts. This view about the irreducibility of moral reasons seems plausible. For it seems that what we have moral reason to do outstrips our desires and what the standards and conventions of our society hold that we have reasons to do. For instance, if we see a child drowning in a pond and we can save them by jumping in, it seems that we have very strong moral reasons to jump into the pond to save them even if we do not want to and even if the standards of our society do not require us to do so.

Many have argued for the error theory.² But the error theory faces a serious problem. Many including Matt Bedke, Terence Cuneo, Ramon Das, Philip Stratton-Lake, and myself have articulated what is sometimes called an epistemic companions in guilt argument against the error theory. According to this argument,

Moral/Epistemic Parity. If moral facts and claims entail irreducibly normative reasons, then epistemic reasons are irreducibly normative reasons; but

No Skepticism about Epistemic Reasons. There are epistemic reasons.

And it follows from these two claims that if the error theory's conceptual claim holds, then its metaphysical claim is false because there are irreducibly normative epistemic reasons.³ The epistemic companions in guilt argument is now probably the most discussed and most pressing problem that the moral error theory faces.⁴

This paper investigates whether a version of the moral error theory can be constructed that does not have implications for epistemic normativity. There are several reasons to be interested in this topic. First, many have made good arguments for *Moral/Epistemic Parity* and *No Skepticism about Epistemic Reasons*.⁵ Second, even if

² *Supra* note 1.

³ See Bedke (2010: esp. 56), Cuneo (2007), Das (2016a) (2016b), Rowland (2013) (2016), and Stratton-Lake (2002: xxv-xxvi).

⁴ Some might think that a Moorean response to the moral error theory is the most significant problem it faces. But this is not the case; see McPherson (2009), Streumer (2013) (2017), and Olson (2014: ch. 7).

⁵ *Supra* note 3. Cowie (2014) (2016) and Olson (2014: 155-172) have responded to these arguments. But plausible responses to at least many of these responses have been made elsewhere; see Das (2016a) (2016b) and Rowland (2016).

we should think of the jury as still being out about whether *Moral/Epistemic Parity* and *No Skepticism about Epistemic Reasons* hold, it would in general be better if a version of the moral error theory could be constructed that did not face these issues with epistemic normativity. Third, error theorists have traditionally wanted to hold an error theory just about moral normativity rather than an error theory about moral and epistemic normativity. For instance, in their introduction to a recent edited volume on the moral error theory Simon Kirchin and Richard Joyce claim that ‘typically the moral error theorist thinks that there is something *especially* problematic about morality, and does not harbor the same doubts about normativity in general’.⁶ This paper investigates whether moral error theorists’ typical thought, that there is something especially problematic about morality, might be correct.

For the purpose of this paper I will assume with error theorists, and non-naturalist realists, that moral reasons are irreducibly normative and that hypothetical and conventional reasons are not irreducibly normative.⁷ I make these assumptions since proponents of the epistemic companions in guilt argument grant error theorists the claim that moral reasons, unlike hypothetical and conventional reasons, would have to be irreducibly normative. And, as I discussed briefly above, it is also somewhat plausible that moral reasons are irreducibly normative.

The idea that there are *second-personal* reasons has been extremely influential. In this paper, I argue that we can make use of the machinery of second-personal reasons to construct a very plausible version of the moral error theory that evades the epistemic companions in guilt argument. According to this error theory:

Conceptual. Facts and claims about moral right and wrong entail facts and claims about irreducibly normative second-personal reasons;

⁶ Kirchin and Joyce (2010: xiii)

⁷ See *supra* note 1.

Metaphysical. Although there are, or may be, irreducibly normative reasons there *are no* irreducibly normative second-personal reasons.

This version of the error theory avoids the epistemic companions in guilt argument because, as I argue in §2, epistemic reasons are not second-personal reasons. In this paper, I argue that there is a good case that we should accept both *Conceptual* and *Metaphysical*.

There are other ways we might, and in which some have tried to, respond to the epistemic companions in guilt argument. The reason why, I argue, an error theory comprised of *Conceptual* and *Metaphysical* evades the epistemic companions in guilt argument in a way that other responses to this argument do not is that the existence of (irreducibly normative) second-personal reasons involves the existence of new kinds of properties beyond those that the existence of irreducibly normative practical and epistemic reasons involve the existence of. Namely, these second-personal reasons involve the existence of practical authority relations and normative powers to change the reasons that there are that other practical and epistemic reasons do not involve the existence of (see §2). As defenders of the epistemic companions in guilt argument have already made clear elsewhere, in order to adequately respond to the argument, error theorists need to show that moral normativity involves the existence of new additional kinds of properties beyond those that are involved in the existence of epistemic normativity.⁸ Otherwise, error theorists cannot show that there is a metaphysical problem with moral properties in particular.

In §2 I explain what irreducibly normative second-personal reasons are and I show that epistemic reasons are not second-personal reasons. In §3 I argue that there is a good case that we should accept *Conceptual*. In §4-5 I make two arguments for *Metaphysical*: a queerness argument and a qualitative parsimony argument. In §6 I discuss an objection to these arguments and argue that it fails.

⁸ See Stratton-Lake (2002: xxv-xxvi) and Rowland (2016).

2. Irreducibly Normative Second-Personal Reasons

Second-personal reasons are reasons that we have in virtue of another's having the requisite authority or standing to demand something of us. For instance, troops have second-personal reasons to obey their officers just in virtue of their officers' practical authority to demand that they conform with their orders. Many moral reasons seem to be second-personal. For instance, reasons to keep our promises seem to depend on promisees' authority to require that we keep our promises to them. My reason to refrain from cheating on my partner seems dependent on her authority or right to demand that I not cheat on her. And our reason not to push the heavy man in the footbridge trolley case may seem dependent on the heavy man's authority to demand that we not push him. (The authority relations that second-personal reasons are existentially dependent upon are not epistemic or instrumental authority relations. For instance, officers have the practical authority to demand that their troops fall in even if officers are not in a better epistemic position than their troops and even if troops would not better conform with the other reasons they have by conforming with their officers' orders).⁹

Other normative reasons are not second-personal. Stephen Darwall explains the contrast between second-personal and non-second-personal reasons through the following example. Suppose that Alice is causing Beth pain by standing on her foot. According to Darwall, Alice has both a non-second-personal (impartial) reason to stop causing Beth pain and a second-personal reason to stop causing Beth pain. Alice's impartial reason to stop causing Beth pain is that she has reason to refrain from causing harmful bad mental states like pain. But Alice also has a reason to stop causing Beth pain because Beth has the authority to demand that Alice stop causing her pain and can legitimately complain that Alice is causing her pain. The second reason is a second-personal reason because it is existentially dependent on Beth's having the legitimate authority to demand that Alice stop causing her pain; the first reason is a reason that Alice has that merely derives from the dis-value of pain and from her reasons to refrain from causing dis-valuable states of affairs; she has this reason

⁹ See Darwall (2006: 12-13) (2013: 147).

not to cause anyone or anything pain regardless of whether they have the authority to demand that she not cause them pain.¹⁰

More generally, purely value-based reasons are not second-personal reasons. Consider the reason for me to give 70% of my income to the Against Malaria Foundation because of the good that this would do when it is not obligatory or morally required that I do this; when it would not be morally wrong for me to fail to give 70% of my income to the Foundation. This reason is existentially independent of anyone having authority to demand that I give 70% of my income to the Foundation.¹¹ So this reason is not a second-personal reason. And, at least many epistemic reasons are not second-personal reasons for they are existentially independent of practical authority relations. For instance, our reason to believe that dinosaurs once roamed the earth is existentially independent of anyone having authority to demand that we believe that dinosaurs once roamed the earth. Similarly, if we have strong evidence that p , then this is enough to establish that we have strong epistemic reason to believe that p . But our having strong evidence that p is not enough to establish that others have authority to demand that we believe that p . (In a footnote, I argue at greater length that epistemic reasons for belief are not second-personal reasons).¹²

¹⁰ Darwall (2006: 5-9)

¹¹ See *ibid.* and Bedke (2011)

¹² Darwall, (2006: 27), Southwood (2010: 130), and Enoch (2011b: 4-5) similarly argue that epistemic reasons are not second-personal reasons. It has been put to me that some do claim that

- (a) epistemic reasons are second-personal reasons; or that
- (b) if there is an epistemic reason for A to believe that p , then some agent has the authority to require that A believe that p .

However, the only argument that has been offered for (a) or (b) in the literature is that we should accept *Blame for Epistemic*. We are (sometimes) blameworthy for failing to do what we have epistemic reason to do.

John Heil and Nicholas Wolterstorff have claimed that we should accept *Blame for Epistemic*. However, Heil's (1982: 362) case for *Blame for Epistemic* only concerns epistemic reasons for action—such as reasons to look or listen more closely to what's happening before reporting what one believes is happening—rather than epistemic reasons for belief. And I am only claiming that epistemic reasons for belief are not second-personal reasons.

Wolterstorff (2005: 326-327) argues that *Blame for Epistemic* holds by arguing that we sometimes blame and reproach others for their certainty in certain propositions. But, first, this is not an argument for *Blame for Epistemic* but rather for the view that some people hold *Blame for Epistemic*. Second, even if *Blame for Epistemic* held, this would not show that, for any proposition p , all epistemic reasons to believe that p are second-personal reasons; for it might well be that when there are second-personal epistemic reasons to believe that p , there are two types of reasons to believe that p : one type which is purely truth-related and non-second-personal and one type which is second-personal.

Testimonial reasons might seem second-personal on the surface for they are reasons that others give to us via their testimony. But these reasons are not genuinely second-personal. Remember that, as I explained at the beginning of

Second-personal reasons are essentially related to normative powers. Normative powers are powers that agents have to bring particular obligations into existence or to change the reasons there are.¹³ For instance, an officer has a normative power to obligate her troops to fall-in by commanding them to do so. We have normative powers to obligate others to stop having sex with us by withdrawing our consent and to extinguish others' obligations to not interfere with our bodily autonomy by consenting to their doing so. And we have normative powers to incur promissory obligations by promising and to release others from their promissory obligations. This relationship between second-personal reasons and normative powers is just the result of second-personal reasons' relationship to practical authority relations. For if I have the practical authority to command that you perform an action, I have a normative power to change the normative reasons that you have through my commands.¹⁴

Some second-personal reasons are not irreducibly normative. For instance, troops' second-personal reasons to conform with their officers' orders are not irreducibly normative. Since, as I explained in §1, I'm assuming with error theorists that institutional reasons come to nothing more than, and can be reductively analysed in terms of, particular institutions and practices such as the existence of legal and military practices. But moral reasons are not like that; moral reasons are, or would have to be, irreducibly normative (see §1). For instance, the moral reason to save a drowning when you can easily do so, plausibly outstrips your desires and the standards of your society and others'. So, when officers' command their troops they only change the institutional reasons their troops have. But if we have normative powers to change the moral reasons that others have (e.g. by releasing another from a promise), then we have normative powers to change the irreducibly normative second-personal reasons that others have.

this section, second-personal reasons to ϕ depend on non-epistemic authority: A has a second-personal reason to ϕ in virtue of B 's demand that she ϕ only if B has more than merely epistemic authority over A regarding whether she ϕ s. But if B has a testimonial reason to believe that p in virtue of the fact that A told B that p , this reason is only existentially dependent on A 's having epistemic authority over B regarding whether B ought to believe that p or whether p ; see also Darwall (2006: 57-60). Thanks to Wouter Kalf and Alex Hyun for pushing me on the relationship between epistemic reasons and second-personal reasons.

¹³ See Heuer (2012b: 844-846) and Chang (2010).

¹⁴ See Darwall (2006: 11 n. 23), Owens (2012: esp. 25), and *supra* note 13.

So, second-personal reasons are dependent on practical authority relations and the existence of normative powers, but epistemic reasons are not. And although some second-personal reasons are not irreducibly normative some, given the assumptions of this paper, are.

3. Arguments for the Conceptual Claim

Darwall and Bedke have argued that

Morality is Second-Personal. Facts and claims about moral right and wrong entail facts and claims about second-personal reasons.¹⁵

And, as I'll explain, there are several reasons to accept this claim.

Many have argued that

Morality and The Reactive Attitudes. An agent's ϕ -ing is morally wrong only if their ϕ -ing is (morally) blameworthy or worthy of other reactive attitudes.¹⁶

There are several explanatory advantages to accepting *Morality and The Reactive Attitudes*. First, very often if someone does something morally wrong, they are blameworthy for this: serial killers, muggers, and torturers all perform actions that are wrong and all do something that is blameworthy. So, there is a striking correlation between someone's doing something morally wrong and their being blameworthy. But, as others have argued, unexplained striking correlations are puzzling and troubling. They call out for explanation. And it is a significant

¹⁵ See Darwall (2006: 93-94) and Bedke (2011).

¹⁶ See Baier (1966), Brandt (1979), Gibbard (1990: 42), Mill (1998: ch. 5, para. 14), McElwee (2010), Shafer-Landau (2003), Skorupski (1999: 29, 142), and Williams (1995).

virtue of a view if it enables us to explain a striking correlation that we would otherwise simply not be able to explain.¹⁷ If we accept *Morality and The Reactive Attitudes*, we can explain this correlation between moral wrongness and blameworthiness. If we do not accept *Morality and The Reactive Attitudes*, it is unclear that we can explain this correlation.

Second, *Morality and The Reactive Attitudes* enables us to explain the difference between someone who does something morally wrong and someone who does something merely morally supererogatory. If we accept *Morality and The Reactive Attitudes*, then we can hold that supererogatory actions are actions that we have most (moral) reason to perform but actions that it is morally wrong for us not to perform are actions that we would be blameworthy for performing. It is unclear how we can explain this distinction between actions that are morally wrong not to perform and actions that are merely morally supererogatory if we do not accept *Morality and The Reactive Attitudes*.¹⁸

Perhaps the strongest objection to *Morality and The Reactive Attitudes* is that there are plausibly cases of blameless wrongdoings. However, we can accept that moral wrongness is necessarily connected to blameworthiness whilst accepting that there can be cases of blameless wrongdoing. For we can hold that, in cases of blameless wrongdoing, although *A*'s ϕ -ing in circumstances *C* was wrong but not blameworthy, *A*'s ϕ -ing involved their performing a type of action that in typical circumstances would merit blame.¹⁹

Darwall holds that *Morality and The Reactive Attitudes* establishes that

Morality is Second-Personal. Facts and claims about moral right and wrong entail facts and claims about second-personal reasons.²⁰

¹⁷ See Enoch (2011a, p. 158) and Rowland (2019: 56-60).

¹⁸ See Bedke (2011).

¹⁹ McElwee (2017: 507)

²⁰ See Darwall (2006: 72, 17, 27) (2013: 138).

This is because he holds that if it is appropriate to have a reactive attitude in response to another's ϕ -ing, then they had second-personal reason not to ϕ . For instance, the fact that it would be appropriate for my partner to resent me if I cheated on her entails that I have second-personal reason not to cheat on her.²¹ Why should we accept that there exists this necessary connection between appropriate reactive attitudes and second-personal reasons? According to Darwall and P.F. Strawson, 'reactive attitudes implicitly address demands' or necessarily involve 'an expectation of and demand' certain actions or responses from others.²² And so whenever A has a reactive attitude towards B because B ϕ d, A thinks that she or others had genuine authority to demand that B not- ϕ .²³ On this view, second-personal reasons' essential link to reactive attitudes is just the flipside of second-personal reasons' relationship to authoritative demands. And so, if *Morality and The Reactive Attitudes* holds, then *Morality is Second-Personal* holds. More generally, it does seem that if A was blameworthy for ϕ -ing, then A had second-personal reasons not to ϕ . Since if I'm blameworthy for my ϕ -ing, then it seems that someone else had the authority to legitimately demand that I not ϕ .

There are at least two other reasons to accept *Morality is Second-Personal*. First, *Morality is Second-Personal* fits with and explains our intuitions about cases. Suppose that Becky has a moral obligation to meet her friend Carla at 6pm because she promised to. Becky plausibly has second-personal reason to keep her promise to Carla for Carla has legitimate authority to demand that Becky keep her promise. Similarly, suppose that Diane deceives her friend Ellie in order to gain an advantage in a competition with Ellie for a promotion. If Diane's deception was morally wrong, Diane had second-personal reason not to deceive Ellie for Ellie had a claim on Diane not to deceive her. And if I am morally obligated not to cheat on my partner, then I have second-personal reason not to do so, for she has legitimate authority to demand that I do not. Second, it might seem that the existence of morality is tied to the existence of rights. But if we have moral rights, then we have the authority

²¹ Darwall (2006: 17)

²² *ibid.* and Strawson (1968: 85).

²³ Darwall (2006: 80-82)

to demand that others not treat us in certain ways.²⁴ So, the existence of moral rights is tied to the existence of second-personal reasons.

So, there are at least three strong reasons to accept

Morality is Second-Personal. Facts and claims about moral right and wrong entail facts and claims about second-personal reasons.

As I explained in §1, I'm assuming with error theorists and non-naturalist realists that moral reasons are irreducibly normative reasons. Given this assumption, if *Morality is Second-Personal* holds, then

Conceptual. Facts and claims about moral right and wrong entail facts and claims about irreducibly normative second-personal reasons.

Conceptual, Morality is Second-Personal, Morality and The Reactive Attitudes, and the motivations for these claims that I've discussed, might seem too controversial to be conceptual truths about moral concepts because they are at odds with act-consequentialism. However, *Morality and The Reactive Attitudes* is not at odds with act-consequentialism. For act-consequentialism only entails that the *actions* that we ought to perform and have most reason to perform are the actions with the best consequences; it does not entail that A is blameworthy only when our being in the mental state of blaming A has better consequences than our not doing so. Similarly, act-consequentialism seems to be consistent with the thesis that whenever it would be best for us to ϕ , and so it is right for us to ϕ , another can legitimately demand that we ϕ . For the claim that we can legitimately demand that p does not entail that it is morally right that we demand that p .²⁵ Furthermore, arguing that it is a virtue of a

²⁴ *ibid.* 18

²⁵ Global consequentialism may seem to be inconsistent with these claims on some understandings of it; though not on others. For instance, on Petit and Smith's (2000: 121) view, global consequentialism is only a view about what it's right to

claim about moral concepts that it can explain the difference between morally supererogatory actions and morally required actions does not entail that there are in fact supererogatory actions. This is because a good account of our moral concepts should be able to make sense of the fact that some of those who understand moral concepts and use them well believe there to be morally supererogatory but not morally required actions even if there turns out to be no such merely supererogatory actions.²⁶

Furthermore, it's not obvious that, at least in the current dialectical context, if some first-order normative views were inconsistent with *Conceptual, Morality is Second-Personal*, or *Morality and the Reactive Attitudes* this would be a problem for my argument for *Conceptual*. This is because the conceptual component of the traditional moral error theory, according to which facts and claims about moral right and wrong entail facts about categorical and irreducibly normative reasons is just as controversial: many, including Gilbert Harman and Peter Railton, believe that claims about moral wrong only entail claims about non-categorical non-irreducibly normative reasons.²⁷ In this paper I am only aiming to show how error theorists can avoid their problems with epistemic normativity, rather than show how they can avoid problems with their conceptual claims. So, the standing of *Conceptual* seems to be as good as the standing of the conceptual component of the traditional error theory. And this seems to be all that I need for my purposes in this paper. So, we have strong reasons to accept *Conceptual*.²⁸

do—inclusive of which attitudes it's right to have—rather than a view about all normativity including about (a) what we have reasons to do, (b) what we ought to do, (c) which attitudes are merited, and (d) which attitudes it's fitting to have. However, even if we understand global consequentialism as involving a view about (a-d) it still might be compatible with the claims I've been discussing such as *Morality and The Reactive Attitudes*. First, it might be that it is always non-instrumentally better to have attitudes that are merited such as to blame those who have done wrong, to desire the desirable, and admire the admirable; see Hurka (2001: ch. 1). In this case, global consequentialism would not be incompatible with the view that we should blame wrongdoers because it is always non-instrumentally good to do so. Second, if (i) it is not better to have merited attitudes and (ii) global consequentialism is partially a thesis about what attitudes we have reasons to have, then we have good reason to reject (that part of) global consequentialism. For it seems that there is a reason for us all to desire to avoid excruciating pain, even if we are being tortured and our desiring to avoid this pain would not enable us to avoid this pain or have any other good consequences. And there seems to be a reason for us to hope that wars end quickly, to wish that poverty is avoided, and to hope that our efforts to halt climate change are successful even if our having these pro-attitudes has no good consequences. But if (i) and (ii) hold, then (this part of) global consequentialism will implausibly entail that there are no such reasons to desire, hope, and wish for these things. See also Rowland (2019: 149-154).

²⁶ The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, regarding the argument for *Morality is Second-Personal* from moral rights.

²⁷ See Harman (1975) and Railton (1986).

²⁸ Thanks to Sebastian Köhler for pressing me on the relationship between the argument in this section of the paper and act-consequentialism.

4. The Queerness Argument

Error theorists often claim that irreducibly normative reasons are metaphysically queer. And sometimes, at least, the idea that they are queer consists in a brute intuition that irreducibly normative reasons are metaphysically mysterious. Olson, for instance, seems to have the brute intuition that irreducibly normative reasons are metaphysically queer and relies on this in his argument from queerness for the error theory. For Olson's positive case that irreducibly normative reasons are metaphysically queer just consists in the following:

Such irreducibly normative favouring relations appear metaphysically mysterious. How can there be such relations? Non-naturalists...could refuse head-on to admit that there is anything *queer* about such relations. This illustrates that the issue here is at a bedrock metaphysical level. It is difficult for error theorists to convince those who find nothing queer about irreducible normativity. And vice versa, of course.²⁹

As I explained in §2, the existence of irreducibly normative/moral second-personal reasons entails the existence of normative powers to change the moral (and not just the conventional) reasons that we and others have by e.g. promising, commanding, withdrawing consent, releasing from agreement, etc. But many have found the idea that we have normative powers to change what we or others have moral (rather than conventional) reason to do metaphysically weird or mysterious. Hume famously wrote that such normative powers to change our own and others' obligations, via our willing, intending, promising, or consenting, involve 'one of the most mysterious and incomprehensible operations that can possibly be imagined, and may even be compared to transubstantiation or holy orders'.³⁰ Others such as H.A. Prichard have articulated a similar reason for skepticism about such normative powers.³¹ Even defenders of normative powers, such as Ulrike Heuer,

²⁹ Olson (2014: 136)

³⁰ Hume (1978 [1740]: 3.2.5–14/15–524)

³¹ See Prichard (2002: 257).

frequently refer to such powers as magical powers.³² Similarly, Ruth Chang asks whether we have such normative powers. And although she defends an affirmative answer to this question, she says that

For an overwhelming majority of philosophers, the answer to this question will be an emphatic – indeed, incredulous – *no*. How can we magically endow a consideration with the action-guidingness of a reason simply by willing something?³³

So, the intuition that normative powers to change our reasons and obligations are metaphysically queer magical powers is shared by many. Suppose that the intuition that irreducibly normative reasons are metaphysically weird gives us *pro tanto* reason to accept that there are no irreducibly normative reasons. In this case, the intuition that normative powers are metaphysically weird gives us *pro tanto* reason to accept that there are no second-personal moral reasons, which entail the existence of such powers.

It has been put to me that this kind of queerness argument has no force. For non-naturalists can claim that all reasons are conditional on particular descriptive facts and second-personal reasons are just conditional on particular descriptive facts about our willings or intendings. In this case, if we hold that there are irreducibly normative facts in addition to descriptive facts, there can be no further metaphysical weirdness to holding that there are particular irreducibly normative facts such as irreducibly normative second-personal reasons.³⁴

However, this response to the queerness argument that I've been making does not establish that there is nothing distinctively *normatively weird or mysterious* about normative facts that supervene on willings or intendings. This is, indeed, what I believe that Hume, Prichard, and others were pointing to. For according to Hume and Prichard, although there is nothing mysterious about normativity in general there is a brute strangeness or mysteriousness about reasons that arise from our willings or intendings. We might see this as a

³² See Heuer (2012a) (2012b).

³³ Chang (2010: 1)

³⁴ Thanks to Bart Streumer for pressing an argument along these lines particularly clearly to me.

kind of *normative queerness* rather than metaphysical queerness. That is, we might see the relevant type of queerness as not consisting in the odd metaphysical nature of a kind of property but in the first-order normative weirdness of the view that certain normative facts supervene on willings or intendings. Furthermore, it seems that the strangeness that people have in mind regarding reasons being changed through the exercise of a normative power is a kind of first-order normative strangeness rather than a metaphysical strangeness: we don't think that it makes sense to say that you can bootstrap normative reasons into existence by deciding to do so. Similarly, we don't think that our moral concepts could be such that the ultimate moral principle is that it is wrong to walk around a tree clockwise or that it is wrong to look at hedgehogs in the light of moon.³⁵ The weirdness here is not just counter-intuitiveness: the view that a life inside the experience machine is just as good for us as a life outside is counter-intuitive. But the problem with the view that we can bootstrap reasons into existence and with the view that it is wrong to walk around a tree clockwise goes beyond counter-intuitiveness: these views seem normatively strange in a way that goes beyond the counter-intuitiveness of even very counter-intuitive views such as that it is just as good for us to live in the experience machine. But the weirdness of these views doesn't involve the metaphysical nature of the property of being a reason or the property of being wrong. Rather the weirdness here inheres in the idea that the property of being wrong could (non-derivatively) attach to walking around a tree clockwise—that this action could have this property (non-derivatively)—and that whether we have a reason to do something could ultimately depend on what we decide. So, the weirdness here isn't a matter of certain kinds of properties being metaphysically odd but rather a matter of certain first-order views being (normatively) strange. But I see no reason to believe that we should take less notice of intuitions of first-order normative weirdness than of intuitions of metaphysical strangeness.³⁶

Furthermore, there is a precedent for the view that even if we are committed to one (supposedly) metaphysically strange kind of thing, we might think that a particular subset of those things are strange in a

³⁵ See Foot (1978: xii).

³⁶ Unless the queerness argument for the error theory should be understood to really just be—and to consist in nothing more than—a parsimony argument (on which see §5) or an argument from metaphysical naturalism for the error theory. But proponents of the error theory do not see the queerness argument as just consisting in one of these other arguments; see, for instance, Olson (2014: ch. 6; cf. ch. 5 and ch. 7).

further way. For instance, some philosophers hold that there must be abstract entities—even though such entities are *prima facie* metaphysically odd—but still we shouldn't hold that there are abstract entities that exist in spacetime because such entities would be odd in a further additional way.³⁷ So, even if there are irreducibly normative facts that supervene on descriptive facts it can be additionally weird to hold that there are a particular subset of these normative facts that supervene on descriptive facts, namely those that directly supervene on willings and intendings.

It might be wondered: what if you don't share the intuition that irreducibly normative reasons that are grounded or enabled by our normative powers, or willings or intendings, are weird in some way? Well, first, note that the same issue arises regarding the metaphysical strangeness of irreducible normativity: what should we do if we do not find irreducible normativity metaphysically odd? Many philosophers do not find irreducible normativity metaphysically odd; and it is unclear that more philosophers find irreducible normativity—a putative feature of the universe that philosophers have only just started to discuss—mysterious than have found the idea that we can change what someone has reason to do by intending to change what they have reason to do: philosophers have been discussing the mysteriousness of the idea that what we ought to can be changed by what someone wills or intends for centuries, as is clear from Hume and Prichard's discussions. Second, if a significant number of others who are as likely to be right as us about whether p judge that p , then we should hold some credence that p even if it does not seem to us that p . Even if it doesn't seem to you that irreducibly normative reasons that are grounded or enabled by our normative powers, or willings or intendings, are weird, many others who are as likely to be right about whether this is the case do believe that they are weird. So, it seems that we should all have some credence that such reasons are normatively weird.³⁸

³⁷ See Cowling (2017: ch. 2 esp. 78, 101).

³⁸ See, for instance, Christensen (2009). It might be objected that whether something is metaphysically or normatively strange is not an objective matter and so we should not take others' views about this into account when deciding whether something is metaphysically or normatively strange. But if this were the case, then that something is metaphysically queer would never be a reason to believe that it does not exist or to refrain from believing this. I am only arguing in this paper that error theorists can revive the error theory in the face of the epistemic companions in guilt argument by holding an error theory about irreducibly normative second-personal reasons in particular. But if metaphysical queerness never gave us reason to accept the error theory in first place, then there would be a more serious problem that the error theory faces that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Namely we had no reason to accept (certain versions of) it in the first place. So,

So, the distinctive queerness of normative powers to change the irreducibly normative reasons we have gives us a reason to accept

Metaphysical. Although there are, or may be, irreducibly normative reasons there *are no* irreducibly normative second-personal reasons.

This is because even if there are irreducibly normative reasons because there are epistemic reasons, this doesn't establish that there are irreducibly normative second-personal reasons, which are queer, strange, or weird in a further way. So, we have a reason to hold that they don't exist even if there are irreducibly normative epistemic reasons.

5. Qualitative Parsimony

In order to preserve scientific as well as everyday epistemic practice we must hold that theories that entail the existence of fewer new kinds of things are preferable to theories that entail the existence of more new kinds of things. Other things equal, we should prefer the view that Sasquatch doesn't exist to the view that it does. And Lavoisier was justified in holding that phlogiston does not exist because all the evidence for phlogiston could be explained in terms of the properties of oxygen (which he, and everyone, was already committed to the existence of). So, I'll presume that we should accept a qualitative parsimony requirement according to which, if we can accept either theory *T1* or theory *T2* (but not both) and *T2* entails the existence of new kinds of things

for the course of this paper, I'm assuming that the supposed metaphysical queerness of something can give us reason to hold that it does not exist.

in addition to those that *T1* entails the existence of (without explaining any more than *T1*), then we should accept *T1* rather than *T2*.³⁹

The view that (a) there are irreducibly normative second-personal reasons in addition to irreducibly normative non-second-personal reasons is less qualitatively parsimonious than the view that (b) there are only irreducibly normative non-second-personal reasons. (a) is less qualitatively parsimonious than (b) because, as I argued in §2, (a) entails the existence of normative powers to shape the normative landscape by bringing particular obligations into existence or changing the reasons that there are and (b) does not. So, given a qualitative parsimony requirement, other things equal, we should hold

Metaphysical. Although there are, or may be, irreducibly normative reasons there *are no* irreducibly normative second-personal reasons.

To see that qualitative parsimony counts in favour of *Metaphysical* consider qualitative parsimony and witchhood. It's generally held that the reason why we should refrain from holding that there are witches is that accepting the view that witches exist would involve accepting the existence of a new kind of entity that we do not need to explain anything.⁴⁰ However, to hold that there are witches is just to hold that there are *more* people who exist who can influence the physical world in particular ways. The reason why the existence of witches would constitute a qualitative addition to our ontology is that the existence of witches would involve the existence of beings with kinds of powers (supernatural powers) to influence the world in new ways that go beyond the powers to influence the world that we are already committed to the existence of. And we do not need the existence of beings with these supernatural powers in order to explain anything.

³⁹ See Barnes (2000: 359), Enoch (2011a: 53), Baker (2013: §2), and Rowland (2019: 70-73)

⁴⁰ See Enoch (2011a: 53) and Joyce (2001: 96).

Similarly, the existence of irreducibly normative second-personal reasons would involve the existence of an additional kind of normative power to shape the normative landscape (to use David Owens' phrase) and of beings with such powers to shape the normative landscape.⁴¹ And we are not committed to the existence of such powers to fundamentally change the normative landscape by being committed to the existence of irreducibly normative practical and/or epistemic reasons. For, as I explained in §2, the existence of irreducibly normative second-personal reasons entails the existence of normative powers that agents have to shape and change the normative landscape by extinguishing or bringing into existence reasons and obligations. And the existence of such powers is not entailed by the existence of irreducibly normative reasons. If there are some irreducibly normative epistemic reasons it does not follow that there are some second-personal reasons.

Those who wish to argue that the view that (b) there are only irreducibly normative non-second-personal reasons is no more qualitatively parsimonious than the view that (a) there are irreducibly normative second-personal reasons in addition to irreducibly normative non-second-personal reasons incur a serious cost. For the qualitative-parsimony-based case for the view that witches do not exist is analogous to the qualitative-parsimony-based case for the view that there are no irreducibly normative second-personal reasons (in addition to irreducibly normative non-second-personal reasons). So, those who wish to claim that there is no qualitative parsimony-based case for accepting (b) rather than (a) must hold that there is no qualitative parsimony-based case for holding that witches don't exist. And this case constitutes the main reason why we should hold that there are no witches.

It might be objected that once we have irreducibly normative properties there is no reason of qualitative parsimony to refrain from holding that there are new types of irreducibly normative properties. But this is not the case. For the existence of Sasquatch and the Loch Ness Monster would just involve the existence of more physical things and we are already committed to the existence of physical things. But qualitative parsimony is

⁴¹ Owens (2012)

widely held—and argued—to count against the existence of these things.⁴² So, it must be that even if we are committed to there existing kinds of things in a particular domain (the physical, the abstract, the irreducibly normative) we can still have reasons of qualitative parsimony to refrain from holding that there are new kinds of things that fall within that domain.⁴³ So, qualitative parsimony counts importantly in favour of

Metaphysical. Although there are, or may be, irreducibly normative reasons there *are no* irreducibly normative second-personal reasons.

6. An Objection to the Queerness and Qualitative Parsimony Arguments

There is an important response that can be made to the queerness and parsimony arguments for *Metaphysical*. If we are committed to epistemic and practical reasons, we are committed to our being able to change the reasons that others have. My neighbourhood grocer can change the practical reasons that I have by increasing the price of her avocados: by increasing the price of her avocados she gives me a reason to buy fewer from her. I can change the reasons that my partner has: by telling her that I'll be getting into the train station at 2pm rather than 6pm I change what she has reason to believe. These changes of practical and epistemic reasons just consist in triggering conditional reasons that were there all along: I had reason to buy fewer avocados if they became more expensive; my partner had reason to believe that I'll get in at 2pm if there is good evidence for this. Now the following objection can be made: the existence of normative powers to change the moral reasons there are would not involve the existence of new or strange entities because these normative powers just consist

⁴² *Supra* notes 39-40.

⁴³ It has been put to me that in the literature on abstract entities it is generally assumed that once we have some abstract entities there is no reason (of parsimony or otherwise) to refrain from holding that there are further kinds of abstract entities. But this is not the case. For proponents of (i) the Quine-Putnam indispensability argument and (ii) the view that there are abstract objects but no abstract objects that exist in space-time precisely hold that we should accept that there are some kinds of abstract entities but not others; see Cowling (2017: 47-57 and ch. 2 esp. 78, 101) and Cowie (2014: 417-418). Thanks to Justin Clarke-Doane and Jack Woods for pushing me on this.

in powers to trigger or disable pre-existing conditional reasons in the way that the grocer and I do in the above cases. And if we're committed to practical and epistemic reasons, we're committed to such triggering.⁴⁴

However, almost all theorists of normative powers agree that there is an intuitive contrast between: (i) the reason my grocer gives me and the reason that I give my partner on the one hand; and (ii) the reasons that we give and extinguish via normative powers on the other; such as the reasons that we seem to give others to refrain from touching us by withdrawing our consent to their touching us and the reasons we seem to give ourselves by making a promise. For instance, according to Heuer, the view that we have such normative powers involves the claim that we can magically 'create reasons, obligations or rights through certain actions intended to do so',⁴⁵ namely by promising, commanding, and consenting.⁴⁶ And Heuer follows H.A. Prichard in holding that this seeming creation of reasons and obligations is a distinct feature of promising, commanding, and consenting.⁴⁷ Whilst Owens holds that our normative powers to change the moral reasons that we and others have (via promising, consenting, withdrawing consent) are derived from our interest in having practical authority over others; an authority that I do not have in the train case and my grocer does not have in the avocado case.⁴⁸

This objection to the queerness and qualitative parsimony arguments gives an account of the reasons given or extinguished via the exercise of a normative power in terms of the triggering of conditional reasons, which is all that is happening in cases in which we manipulate other reasons without the exercise of a normative power such as in the avocado and train cases. My hunch is that we can't both have our cake and eat it here: any account of changes of reasons that derive from the exercise of normative powers in terms of the triggering of conditional reasons will either: (a) be unable to maintain and explain the important difference between such changes of reasons and the changes in the avocado and train cases; or (b) will enable us to explain the difference

⁴⁴ See Enoch (2011b).

⁴⁵ Heuer (2012b: 844)

⁴⁶ *ibid.* 844-845

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*, Heuer (2012a: 833), and Prichard (2002: 257).

⁴⁸ Owens (2012: 25). See also Chang (2010: 7) and Enoch (2011b: 3-5).

between these two types of changes of reasons but in so doing will entail a commitment to metaphysically odd qualitative additions to our ontology. On the first horn of this dilemma, accounts of what we do to moral reasons when we exercise normative powers will fail to give plausible accounts of these changes of reasons; on the second horn, accounts of what we do to moral reasons when we exercise normative powers will fail to show that the existence of normative powers would not involve mysterious additions to our ontology.⁴⁹

Consider a simple account on which all we do when we exercise normative powers is trigger pre-existing conditional reasons: we have pre-existing reasons not to interfere with others' bodily autonomy if they have not consented—or have withdrawn their consent—for us to do so and we have pre-existing reasons to keep promises that we've made unless the person to whom we have promised releases us from this promise. According to the simple account, we do not create or really change the moral reasons that we and others have when we exercise our powers we merely bring about the antecedents of these pre-existing conditional reasons. Without further supplementation, this simple account falls afoul of the first horn of the dilemma for it does not explain the intuitive difference between the reasons that we have (no longer have) as the result of the exercise of a normative power and the reasons in the avocado and train cases.

David Enoch has given the only such supplementation of the simple account that I know of. On Enoch's account, what distinguishes reasons that we have in virtue of the exercise of a normative power from other triggered reasons (such as those in the train and avocado cases) is that the triggering of conditional reasons by exercise of a normative power is dependent on the intentions of the person triggering the reason in a way that other triggered reasons are not: the grocer can trigger my reason to buy fewer avocados without intending to, I can trigger my partner having a reason to believe something without intentionally doing this; but we cannot change the reasons that others have by consenting or withdrawing our consent to something without intending that others' reasons be changed; and we cannot change the reasons that others have by releasing them from a

⁴⁹ That all accounts of how the reasons that are triggered or disabled by normative powers should be stuck with the dilemma that I've been discussing shouldn't be too surprising for a similar dilemma is often argued to affect accounts of promissory obligation; see Heuer (2012a).

promise without intending to do so. On Enoch's account, triggerings of reasons that are due to the exercise of a normative power are essentially related to our intending to trigger these reasons and, when triggering another's reasons, communicating this intention to this other. To get clear on the specifics of Enoch's account, take an example. On Enoch's account, Alex successfully disables the reason Ben had to refrain from doing something to Alex's body due to his lack of consent to Ben's doing this when (and only when): (i) Alex consents to Ben's doing this with his body; (ii) Alex intends for Ben no longer to have a lack-of-consent-based reason to refrain from doing this thing to Alex's body; (iii) communicates this intention to Ben; (iv) intends for Ben to recognize this intention; and (v) intends for whether Ben has a reason not to do this thing with his body to depend in an appropriate way on Ben's recognition of his intentions.⁵⁰

However, Enoch's supplementation of the simple account falls afoul of the second horn of the dilemma. For many find changes of reasons and obligations that are the result of an exercise of a normative power to be metaphysically mysterious precisely because these changes are changes that are necessarily dependent on our willing them; these changes happen and can only happen if we will them. For instance, according to Hume, promissory obligations involve metaphysical magic because when someone has an obligation in virtue of making a promise his 'obligation arises from his will'. And Hume makes clear that it is the essential role of intentions that is key here when he says that such obligations are 'one of the most mysterious and incomprehensible operations that can possibly be imagined' because these obligations are the result of 'a certain form of words, along with a certain intention'; this is why (and where) he compares the existence of such normative power derived obligations to transubstantiation and holy orders.⁵¹ Similarly, Heuer emphasises that it is the essential relationship between the changing of reasons and the intention to do so, which normative powers involve, that makes them appear magical.⁵² So, if we accept Enoch's account, we can explain the difference between changes of reasons that are the result of exercises of normative powers and changes of

⁵⁰ Enoch (2011b: 15)

⁵¹ Hume (1978 [1740]: 3.2.5–14/15–524)

⁵² See Heuer (2012b: 844–545). See also Chang (2010: esp. 1–6).

reasons that are not. But this comes at the cost of the metaphysical demystification of normative powers that the simple account seemed to secure.

Similarly, if we accept Enoch's account, the existence of normative powers to change our non-conventional reasons still involves the existence of new powers to shape the normative landscape that we are not committed to the existence of by being committed to irreducibly normative reasons; and so, the qualitative parsimony argument against second-personal reasons still succeeds. For on Enoch's account, if we have normative powers, then A 's having a reason to perform an action in virtue of B 's exercise of a normative power directly depends on B 's intending that A has this reason. So, normative powers involve our intentions playing a direct and necessary role in triggering reasons. Whereas the triggering of non-second-personal reasons involves no such direct and necessary triggering via the will; Enoch's account provides exactly an account of how the existence of normative powers to trigger and disable reasons goes beyond other ways of interacting with the normative world that we are committed to by being committed to irreducibly normative reasons. A worldview that involves the existence of witches is less qualitatively parsimonious than one that does not because the existence of witches involves the existence of beings that can interact with the world in new (supernatural) ways. (We are not otherwise committed to the view that some people can interact with the world in these ways). Similarly, a view that involves the existence of Enoch's normative powers is less qualitatively parsimonious than a view that does not involve the existence of these powers because it involves the existence of powers to interact with the normative world in ways that we are not otherwise committed to. (We are not otherwise—just by being committed to irreducible normativity—committed to the claim that it is possible to interact with the normative world in these ways). So, Enoch's account does not block the qualitative parsimony argument or the queerness argument for

Metaphysical. Although there are, or may be, irreducibly normative reasons there *are no* irreducibly normative second-personal reasons.⁵³

⁵³ For other problems with Enoch's account see Peter (2014) and Enoch (2011b: 20).

6. Conclusion

In §3 I gave three arguments for

Conceptual. Facts and claims about moral right and wrong entail facts and claims about irreducibly normative second-personal reasons.

I argued that we incur serious explanatory debts if we do not accept

Morality is Second-Personal. Facts and claims about moral right and wrong entail facts and claims about second-personal reasons.

And I also argued that there are strong advantages to accepting this claim. One of the assumptions of this paper, which is shared by error theorists and non-naturalist realists, is that moral reasons are irreducibly normative. Given this assumption, if *Morality is Second-Personal* holds, then *Conceptual* holds. In §3 I also argued that the case for *Conceptual* is at least as strong as the case for the conceptual component of the traditional error theory.

In §4-6 I showed that there are two good arguments for accepting

Metaphysical. Although there are, or may be, irreducibly normative reasons there *are no* irreducibly normative second-personal reasons.

The combination of *Conceptual* and *Metaphysical* yields a moral error theory that does not entail any claims about epistemic reasons. For, as I argued in §2, epistemic reasons are not second-personal reasons. So, this error

theory is immune to objections regarding the relationship between moral and epistemic reasons and can evade the epistemic companions in guilt argument. There are good reasons to be skeptical about irreducibly normative second-personal normativity. And such scepticism yields a moral error theory without an epistemic error theory.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ An anonymous referee raises a useful issue regarding the core argument of this paper. They consider the following line of thought. It might seem that moral facts do not *necessarily* entail irreducibly normative second-personal reasons because for dedicated utilitarians there are things that we ought to do, but this does not *necessarily* establish that there are any specific others with normative claims upon us. If moral facts do not *necessarily* entail irreducibly normative second-personal reasons, then the argument of this paper supports the view that we should accept an error theory about second-personal ethical systems, such as Scanlon and Darwall's, but realism about consequentialist ethical systems. According to this referee, this line of thought raises the possibility of the following (perhaps slightly odd) argument for consequentialism: consequentialism is the only normative ethical theory that does not involve irreducibly normative second-person reasons. Since there are no such things, it is the only normative ethical theory with any chance of being true. So, if we ought to do anything at all, we ought to maximize the good.

I am attracted to this partial moral error theory about second-personal normativity and realism about other kinds of practical normativity such as value-based practical normativity. But, first, it seems to me that such skepticism about second-personal normativity in particular would not establish that we should accept a view according to which we should maximize the impartial good rather than a view according to which we should satisfy the impartial good or maximize or satisfy the impartial and partial good (where the partial good is that which is good *for* us and those to whom we bear a special relationship).

Second, although I am myself attracted to the referee's line of thought there are problems with it, which I have not yet been able to solve. In §3 I gave several arguments that seem to establish that moral facts entail irreducibly normative second-personal reasons. These arguments also seem to favour the view that morality is necessarily second-personal. If we are to accept a limited skepticism about second-personal normativity, we would need to explain why the claims that these arguments rely on seem so plausible but are in fact false.

Perhaps instead we could accept a revisionary ethical theory. Some consequentialists, such as Crisp (2006: ch. 1) and Norcross (2006), endorse revisionary ethical theories. According to these theories, certain moral and deontic properties, such moral obligations and moral wrongness, do not exist or should play no role in our ethical theories. Instead these theories only involve the claims that certain actions are better/worse than others and that we have more reason to perform certain actions rather than others. If we may accept revisionary ethical theories according to which there are no moral obligations or moral wrongness, we may accept a revisionary ethical theory according to which there is no second-personal moral normativity.

However, moral error theorists have argued that holding an account of moral reasons according to which they are all hypothetical reasons—or reasons that are otherwise not irreducibly normative—would not count as holding an account of moral reasons rather than something else; see *supra* note 1. Suppose that error theorists are right about this. In this case, given the strong ties between morality and second-personal reasons, which I articulated in §3, it seems that we should similarly hold that: if we adopt an account of morality according to which there are no second-personal moral reasons, we would not be adopting an account of morality at all but rather adopting an account of something else. Alternatively, perhaps error theorists are mistaken that an account of moral reasons according to which they are hypothetical (or something similar) would not genuinely be an account of moral reasons. But in this case, we should reject an error theory about any part of morality. (The only remaining possibility is that although it is essential to our concept of morality that moral reasons are not hypothetical reasons it is not essential to our concept of morality that moral reasons are second-personal. But the latter view would involve severing the tie between morality and moral reactive attitudes such as blame—see §3—and arguing for this view would also involve addressing all the other arguments that I gave in §3).

⁵⁵ I am grateful for feedback on previous versions of this paper from Chris Cowie, the audience at the Future of Normativity Conference at the University of Kent, and the participants in the ACU Companions in Guilt Arguments in Metaethics conference in Rome.

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