# How to be a Moral Error Theorist: An Error Theory about Second-Personal Reasons

The moral error theory consists in the following two claims:

> *Conceptual.* Facts and claims about moral right and wrong entail facts and claims about irreducibly normative reasons;
> *Metaphysical.* There are no irreducibly normative reasons.

Many have recently plausibly argued that if moral facts and claims entail irreducibly normative reasons, then epistemic reasons are irreducibly normative reasons (call this claim *Parity*); but there are epistemic reasons. In this case, if *Conceptual* is true, then *Metaphysical* is false. This paper investigates whether a version of the moral error theory can be constructed that does not have implications for epistemic normativity. (In doing so, this paper assumes *Parity* and assumes with error theorists that moral reasons are irreducibly normative reasons). In relation to the theme of the conference, this paper seeks to go beyond the relationship between practical and epistemic normativity in thinking about the plausibility of the error theory. And this paper makes a case for future work on normativity developing a skepticism about second-personal reasons.

Second-personal (SP) reasons are reasons that we have in virtue of another's having the requisite practical (non-epistemic non-instrumental) authority or standing to demand something of us. Privates have SP reasons to obey their sergeants just in virtue of their sergeant's authority. SP reasons that flow from such practical authority relations are dependent upon the existence of normative powers: the sergeant has a normative power to change the reasons that her privates have by making commands. Many moral reasons are plausibly SP reasons too. We seem to have moral SP reasons not to break our promises in light of promisees' authority to demand that we do as we promised. I have SP reason not to cheat on my partner in light of her authority to demand that I don't. And we have normative powers to enable people to do things to our bodies by consenting to their doing these things; when we so consent, we change the non-derivative moral reasons that others have by extinguishing the SP reasons for them not to interfere with our body. (This is all part of the normal account of SP reasons provided by Darwall and others).

This paper argues for the following error theory:

> *Conceptual SP.* Facts and claims about moral right and wrong entail facts and claims about irreducibly normative second-personal reasons.
> *Metaphysical SP.* Although there are or may be irreducibly normative reasons there *are no* irreducibly normative second-personal reasons.

Such an error theory does not have implications for epistemic normativity because. For, I argue (following such as Enoch), that epistemic reasons are not all dependent on authority relations or normative powers in the way that SP reasons are.

Darwall and Bedke have argued for *Conceptual SP*. And I argue that unless we accept *Conceptual SP* we are unable to explain (i) the relationship between moral wrongness and the reactive attitudes and (ii) the difference between supererogatory and morally required actions.

I make 3 arguments for *Metaphysical SP*.

*1. Bare Queerness.* Many have thought that normative powers to create non-derivative reasons are particularly metaphysically queer. For instance, Hume famously wrote that normative powers to create obligations involve 'one of the most mysterious and incomprehensible operations that can possibly be imagined, and may even be compared to transubstantiation or holy orders'. SP reasons require the existence of such normative powers.

*2. Qualitative Parsimony.* The view that (a) there are irreducibly normative SP reasons in addition to irreducibly normative non-SP reasons is less qualitatively parsimonious than the view that (b) there are only irreducibly normative non-SP reasons. This is because (a) entails the existence of new kinds of powers to interact with the normative world, namely normative powers to create and extinguish non-derivative reasons and (b) does not entail this. This argument against the existence of irreducibly normative SP reasons mirrors the argument against the existence of witches. If witches exist, this just means that more people exist in the physical world who are able to influence the physical world in particular new additional ways. I argue that the reason why the view that there are no witches is more qualitatively parsimonious than the view that there are has to be that the existence of witches involves the existence of additional powers to causally influence the world in particular new ways. So, I argue, if we do not hold that (b) is importantly more qualitatively parsimonious than (a), we are forced to the unpalatable conclusion that the view that there are no witches is no more qualitatively parsimonious than the view that there are witches.

One line of response to these first two arguments is to argue that moral SP reasons only rely on normative powers to alter the derivative reasons there are. But I argue that such a view cannot explain how some of Darwall's paradigm cases of SP reasons are in fact SP reasons.

*3. Evolutionary Debunking.* Error theorists often utilize evolutionary debunking arguments as part of their arguments for the error theory. I argue that the prospects of evolutionarily debunking SP moral reasons are better than the prospects of evolutionarily debunking irreducibly normative reasons. In previous work, I've argued that irreducibly normative reasons in general cannot be evolutionarily debunked because so long as we believe that there is thought we could not fail to have epistemic reason to believe that there is thought. For the purpose of this paper I'm assuming that epistemic reasons are irreducibly normative reasons; see above. And in this case, there is no scenario in which there are no irreducibly normative reasons. But the same cannot be said of moral SP reasons. Furthermore, the moral beliefs (reasons to stick to our agreements, keep our promises, return favours, and punish perpetrators) that proponents of debunking arguments normally focus on are beliefs in paradigmatically SP reasons. And others, such as Singer, Lazari-Radek, and Bramble, have plausibly argued that unlike such beliefs, some people's beliefs in impartial reasons are invulnerable to evolutionary debunking.