

PRUDENTIAL PARITY OBJECTIONS TO THE MORAL ERROR THEORY

François Jaquet

AS OPPOSED to a success theory, an error theory states that all judgments of a specific domain are false (or untrue) because they entail (or presuppose) the existence of something that actually does not exist. John Mackie famously held such a view about judgments in the moral domain.¹ On his account, all moral judgments are false because they entail the existence of “objectively prescriptive” facts when there are really no such things. While this theory was not always treated as a serious alternative to expressivism, subjectivism, naturalism, and nonnaturalism, its popularity has increased considerably in the last two decades. It is now considered one of the main contenders in metaethics.

Until recently, most error theorists were *local* error theorists: they targeted moral judgments only. Concerning prudential judgments, they accepted a success theory—they held some such judgments to be true. This combination of a moral error theory with a prudential success theory has now come under attack. Advocates of the “prudential parity claim” maintain that the arguments supporting a moral error theory also support a prudential error theory.² In their view, if all moral judgments are false, then so are all prudential judgments. Not that parity claimers agree on which lesson to draw from this, far from it. Some conclude that moral judgments happen to be true; others, that both moral and prudential judgments are always false. All nonetheless converge on the claim that moral error theorists are committed to a prudential error theory.

This paper defends a prominent local error theory—the categoricity-based error theory—against such prudential parity objections. In section 1, I distinguish this theory from another account—the irreducibility-based error theory. In the remaining sections, I discuss three arguments that have been put forward in support of the parity claim. If I am correct, these objections fail when

1 Mackie, *Ethics*.

2 Bedke, “Might All Normativity Be Queer?”; Cline, “The Tale of a Moderate Normative Skeptic”; Fletcher, “Pain for the Moral Error Theory?”

targeted at the categoricity-based error theory, and they fail because they conflate it with the irreducibility-based error theory.

1. THE CATEGORICITY-BASED MORAL ERROR THEORY

Whatever the phrase “*the* moral error theory” implies, there are many moral error theories. But most share a basic structure: they combine the conceptual claim that moral judgments entail the existence of certain entities with the ontological claim that these entities do not exist. Where they diverge is around the entities in question. It has thus been argued that moral judgments are false because they entail the existence of free will, explanatorily dispensable facts, irreducibly normative facts, and nonconventional categorical reasons.³

Let me elaborate on the latter view, as this is the theory I will defend. On this account, moral judgments are false because they entail the existence of reasons that would be both nonconventional (i.e., independent from any institution or convention) and categorical (i.e., independent from their bearer’s ends or desires), but all the reasons we have are either conventional or hypothetical. You may well have a conventional categorical reason not to speak with your mouth full (derived from a local norm of etiquette) or a nonconventional hypothetical reason to quit smoking (derived from your desire not to get cancer), but you cannot have a nonconventional categorical reason not to set a cat on fire. Yet, this is precisely the reason whose existence is entailed by the moral judgment that you should not set a cat on fire. Hence, this judgment is false. Let me motivate this view somewhat.

Start with the conceptual claim, and consider again the judgment that you ought not to set a cat on fire. This judgment entails that you have a reason not to set a cat on fire—it would hardly make any sense to say that you ought not to set a cat on fire but have no corresponding reason. What kind of reason is that? By contrast with your reason not to speak with your mouth full, your reason not to set a cat on fire does not seem to depend on your partaking in some institution. By contrast with your reason to quit smoking, it does not seem to depend on your ends: you should not set a cat on fire whatever you happen to desire. Hence, the judgment that you ought not to set a cat on fire entails that you have a reason that is both nonconventional and categorical.

3 Haji, *Deontic Morality and Control*; Hincfuss, *The Moral Society*; Olson, *Moral Error Theory*; Streumer, *Unbelievable Errors*; Mackie, *Ethics*; Garner, “On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts”; Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*; Kalf, *Moral Error Theory*.

As for the ontological claim, it stems from the combination of two theses.⁴ On the one hand is an instrumentalist theory of nonconventional reasons: a subject *S* has a nonconventional reason to ϕ iff *S*+—an idealized counterpart who differs from *S* only in that she is fully informed and deliberates flawlessly—would advise *S* to ϕ . On the other hand is a constraint on *S*+’s advice for *S*: *S*+’s advice for *S* necessarily depends on *S*’s desires. Of course, they need not always coincide. It may be that *S* wants to ϕ because she makes a mistake in her deliberation, in which case *S*+ would not advise *S* to ϕ . Yet, being *S*’s counterpart, what she would advise *S* to do depends on what *S* desires. Assuming that Jim and Pam have very different aspirations, Jim+ would advise Jim to do things that Pam+ would advise Pam not to do. From this combination of claims, it follows that all the nonconventional reasons we have depend on our desires and, *a fortiori*, that there are no nonconventional categorical reasons.

Why accept instrumentalism about nonconventional reasons? Here is a suggestion.⁵ There is something odd about the question “A rational version of myself would advise me to ϕ , but so what?” I would certainly have a reason to perform an act such a version of myself would recommend to me. The question “So what?” would be off the mark. By contrast, there seems to be nothing odd about the question “An impartial observer would advise me to ϕ , but so what?” or about the question “ ϕ -ing would maximize aggregate pleasure, but so what?” Intuitively, it makes rational sense to ignore the advice of an impartial observer or the amount of pleasure in the world, not so much to ignore the advice of an ideally rational version of oneself. *That* would be plainly irrational. Instrumentalism accounts for this fact.

Now, as I said, this categoricity-based error theory is often conflated with another one. On this alternative view, moral judgments are uniformly false not because they entail the existence of nonconventional categorical reasons but because they entail the existence of irreducibly normative facts—that is, normative facts that do not reduce to ordinary, empirically accessible, natural facts.⁶ The purported fact that you ought not to set a cat on fire, for instance, is distinct from

4 For the sake of illustration, I use Richard Joyce’s case for the ontological claim (see *The Myth of Morality*, 68–76). This is the most accessible version of an argument shared with other proponents of this error theory.

5 Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 81–85.

6 Streumer, *Unbelievable Errors*. When it comes to normative facts, I use the predicates “nonnatural” and “irreducibly normative” interchangeably. This is a simplification—strictly speaking, not all nonnatural facts are irreducibly normative. A normative fact that would be reducible to a supernatural fact could not be properly described as irreducibly normative. But this simplification is harmless, since we can assume that supernatural facts are ontologically dubious.

the fact that setting a cat on fire would cause the cat unnecessary pain—or from any other natural fact, for that matter. And that is what makes it ontologically suspicious. Call this other error theory the “irreducibility-based error theory.”

Although these theories are often lumped together, they are distinct. One can consistently accept the categoricity-based error theory’s ontological claim—namely, that there are no categorical reasons—and yet reject the irreducibility-based error theory’s ontological claim—namely, that there are no irreducibly normative facts. This is because one can consistently believe in the existence of nonnatural facts and yet accept instrumentalism about reasons. This possibility is obfuscated by a common mistake, that of equating instrumentalism with the following meta-normative account: the fact that *S* has a reason to ϕ is identical to the fact that *S*+ would advise *S* to ϕ . This meta-normative view entails that there are no irreducibly normative reasons, and presumably no irreducibly normative facts more generally.

This equation is misguided, for instrumentalism is not a meta-normative view, as can be seen through an analogy with utilitarianism. While utilitarians maintain that an act is right if and only if it maximizes pleasure, they are not committed to the metaethical view that moral facts are facts about pleasure. Likewise, instrumentalists maintain that *S* has a reason to ϕ if and only if *S*+ would advise *S* to ϕ , but they are not committed to the meta-normative view that facts about reasons are ultimately facts about rational counterparts. Just as utilitarianism is a first-order view that remains silent about the reduction of moral facts to facts about pleasure, instrumentalism is a first-order view that remains silent about the reduction of facts about reasons to facts about rational counterparts.⁷

As a result, categoricity-based error theorists may ban nonconventional categorical reasons from their ontology and yet let nonnatural facts in—and thereby reject the irreducibility-based error theory’s ontological claim. Maybe this will feel like an unstable position to some philosophers. After all, a key motivation behind instrumentalism lies in its ontological elegance: the view is appealing, those philosophers would say, mainly because it postulates the existence of nothing beyond natural entities. Why, then, would one accept both nonnaturalism and instrumentalism?

7 Dorsey, “Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism,” 217. One might object that a first-order version of instrumentalism cannot yield the needed claim that reasons depend on desires because such dependence claims belong to meta-normative theory rather than first-order normativity. I disagree. The first-order view that an act is right if and only if it maximizes pleasure entails that an act’s rightness depends on its effects on overall pleasure. In the same way, the first-order view that *S* has a reason to ϕ if and only if *S*+ would advise *S* to ϕ entails that an agent’s reasons depend on their desires. Because utilitarianism and instrumentalism provide us with criteria for rightness and reasons, they have implications regarding the grounds of rightness and reasons. This does not make them meta-normative views.

Here is why. One might buy into the above case for instrumentalism and yet be convinced of the existence of nonnatural facts by the following companions-in-guilt argument. Some philosophical judgments are true—the judgment that personal identity consists in psychological continuity (or that it consists in something else), the judgment that there are universals (or that there are no such things), and the judgment that moral properties are irreducibly normative (or that they are not). But these judgments do not state natural facts—the facts they state are not empirically accessible. Hence, true philosophical judgments are made true by nonnatural facts.⁸ Someone sensitive to this companions-in-guilt argument will reject the irreducibility-based error theory. She will nevertheless subscribe to the categoricity-based error theory insofar as she accepts instrumentalism.

Turning to prudence, most proponents of the categoricity-based error theory hold that prudential judgments involve no commitment to nonconventional categorical reasons. The judgment that you should quit smoking entails that you have a reason to quit smoking, and this reason transcends all conventions—prudentially speaking, you should quit smoking, whichever institutional practices you partake in. But this reason arguably applies only to the extent that you do not want to get cancer (or would not if you deliberated flawlessly). If getting cancer was your plan, then you should keep smoking. Thus, the reasons entailed by prudential judgments seem to be hypothetical and therefore conform to instrumentalism about nonconventional reasons. This suggests that the categoricity-based error theory does not generalize to prudential judgments.⁹

Some philosophers deny that. In order to criticize local error theories, they rely on the following parity claim: if any moral error theory is true, then an analogous prudential error theory will be true. Notice how general this parity claim is. Instead of targeting a specific local error theory, it is meant to apply to *all* local error theories—or at least to all *plausible* local error theories. Hence, it should apply to the categoricity-based local error theory. In the remaining sections, I will argue that it does not. Three arguments have been advanced in favor of the prudential parity claim. The first is based on the alleged irreducibility of prudential facts; the second, on the lack of a story about the normativity of hypothetical reasons; the third, on the very nature of reasons. I shall argue

8 Of course, these facts are not irreducibly normative—they are not normative in the first place. However, if irreducibly normative facts are queer, that must be because they do not reduce to ordinary natural facts.

9 For the sake of presentation, I will set aside conventional reasons from now on. This will be innocuous since all the parties in this debate agree that moral and prudential reasons are nonconventional.

that these arguments fail against the categoricity-based local error theory. As will become apparent in the process, they seem to work against this error theory only so long as one confuses it with the irreducibility-based error theory.

2. FLETCHER AND IRREDUCIBLE NORMATIVITY

Guy Fletcher uses the prudential parity claim as part of a companions-in-guilt defense of a moral success theory. This is his reasoning. If a moral error theory were true, then an analogous prudential error theory would be true. But all prudential error theories are false for, surely, there are prudential truths: “it seems undeniable that some things are good or bad for people, that some people lead lives that go well for them (or vice versa), and that some outcomes are better (or worse) than others for someone.”¹⁰ By way of consequence, all moral error theories are false.¹¹

Fletcher’s parity claim rests on the contention that prudential judgments resemble moral judgments in that they entail the existence of irreducibly normative facts and properties.¹² In support of this contention, Fletcher appeals to a thought experiment inspired by Terrence Horgan and Mark Timmons’ Moral Twin Earth scenario.¹³ So, let us start with a quick reminder of Horgan and Timmons’s scenario. Suppose that moral judgments on Earth are generally in line with hedonistic utilitarianism: Earthlings will say that an act is right just in case that act maximizes pleasure. Next, imagine another planet, Twin Earth, similar to Earth in all respects except that its (seemingly) moral judgments align with Kantian deontology: Twin Earthlings will say that an act is right just in case its maxim is universalizable. Apart from that, they use the term “right” just as we do—namely, to evaluate actions.

This description of both planets invites the following observation. If moral judgments ascribed natural properties, then the term “right” would refer to the

10 Fletcher, “Pain for the Moral Error Theory?” 478.

11 Fletcher phrases his parity claim in terms of various arguments for the moral error theory rather than various moral error theories: if an argument suffices to establish the moral error theory, then an analogous argument will suffice to establish the prudential error theory. This is because he uses the label “moral error theory” to refer to the claim that all moral judgments are false. By contrast, I take a moral error theory to consist of this claim together with an argument in its support. Since this difference is purely terminological, I take the liberty to rephrase Fletcher’s point in my own vocabulary.

12 On Fletcher’s characterization, a property is irreducibly normative if it “cannot be identified with any ontologically innocent, natural, property” (“Pain for the Moral Error Theory?” 475). Accordingly, a fact or property is irreducibly normative if and only if it is non-natural. This is in line with my use of “irreducibly normative” as a synonym for “nonnatural.”

13 Horgan and Timmons, “New Wave Moral Realism Meets Moral Twin Earth.”

property of maximizing pleasure on Earth and to the property of falling under a universalizable maxim on Twin Earth. But then Earthlings and Twin Earthlings would not disagree about moral value; they would talk past each other. This implication is counterintuitive—Earthlings and Twin Earthlings very much seem to disagree about morality. All this suggests that moral judgments do not ascribe natural properties but nonnatural properties.

Fletcher constructs a similar thought experiment about prudence.¹⁴ Suppose that prudential judgments on Earth are generally in line with hedonism: Earthlings will say that a state of affairs is good for a subject just in case that state of affairs maximizes her pleasure. Next, imagine another planet, Twin Earth, that is similar in all respects except that its (seemingly) prudential judgments align with the desire satisfaction theory: Twin Earthlings will say that a state of affairs is good for a subject just in case that state of affairs best satisfies that subject's informed preferences. Apart from that, they use the term "good" just as we do—namely, to evaluate states of affairs.

Fletcher makes the following observation: "It seems plausible that agents in both worlds make prudential judgments and that they manifest a disagreement in conceptions of prudential value. . . . This suggests that we cannot reduce prudential properties to hedonic properties in particular, and it seems like the argument can be run with equal plausibility for other ontologically innocent properties."¹⁵ If prudential judgments ascribed natural properties, then Earthlings and Twin Earthlings would not disagree about prudential value; they would talk past each other. Yet, they do disagree about prudential value. Hence, prudential judgments do not ascribe natural properties. Just like moral judgments, they ascribe nonnatural properties.

While this thought experiment indicates that prudential properties are non-natural, it does not support Fletcher's general prudential parity claim. Surely, it supports *a* prudential parity claim: if moral judgments are uniformly false because they presuppose the existence of nonnatural facts, then prudential judgments are uniformly false too. Fletcher's thought experiment is evidence that those moral error theorists who locate moral queerness in irreducible normativity are committed to a prudential error theory. However, as we saw earlier, not all moral error theorists locate moral queerness in irreducible normativity. In particular, those error theorists who locate moral queerness in categoricity are immune to this objection. They can grant that prudential facts are irreducible to natural facts and yet welcome them in their ontology, provided that

14 Fletcher, "Pain for the Moral Error Theory?" 479.

15 Fletcher, "Pain for the Moral Error Theory?" 480.

these facts generate only hypothetical reasons. And this seems sufficient for Fletcher's parity claim to be toothless against them.

Not so fast, Fletcher would respond. In his opinion, local error theorists cannot appeal to this strategy, for *all* moral error theorists must locate queerness in irreducible normativity; *all* moral error theorists must deny the existence of nonnatural facts and properties. This is his argument:

The property commonly focused upon in discussion of error theory is the property of being a categorical reason for action. . . . However, the moral error theorist is not only worried about moral *reasons*. The scope of Mackie's error theory is clear when he writes: "There are no objective values. . . . The claim that values are not objective, are not part of the fabric of the world, is meant to include not only moral goodness . . . but also other things that could be more loosely called moral values or disvalues—rightness and wrongness, duty, obligation." According to error theorists, moral discourse is committed to an *array* of normative properties that are *sui generis*, irreducibly normative, features of actions, etc. In holding that the properties ascribed within moral discourse are *sui generis* irreducibly normative features of actions, the error theorist contends that they cannot be identified with any ontologically innocent, natural, property.¹⁶

Since all moral error theorists are concerned not only with moral reasons but also with moral values, duties, and obligations, they *must* say that these entities are queer too. But these entities cannot be queer because they are categorical reasons—they are not. If they are queer at all, this must be because they are irreducibly normative. Accordingly, all moral error theorists must locate queerness in irreducible normativity. And all moral error theorists must say that prudential facts and properties are queer too.

What should we make of this argument? Certainly, moral error theorists are not concerned solely with moral reasons; they deny the existence of moral facts and properties generally. That they take these facts and properties to be nonnatural is generally true as well. But it does not follow that they must object to the existence of moral facts and properties *on the grounds that these entities would be nonnatural*. They can coherently object to the existence of these facts and properties *on the grounds that they would generate categorical reasons*. On this view, the fact that you should not set a cat on fire is queer, and it may well be nonnatural. Nevertheless, it is not queer *because* it is nonnatural. It is queer because it would provide you with a queer, categorical reason not to set a cat on

16 Fletcher, "Pain for the Moral Error Theory?" 475.

fire. In order to reject moral values, duties, and obligations, moral error theorists need therefore not say that these entities are queer because they are nonnatural.

Let me sum up the present section. Fletcher might be correct to the extent that both moral and prudential facts and properties are nonnatural. But this does not entail that both moral and prudential reasons are categorical—prudential reasons might be hypothetical even though prudential facts and properties are nonnatural. Since the error theory under scrutiny locates moral queerness in categoricity, it is therefore not committed to the queerness of prudential reasons, nor does it entail a prudential error theory. Insofar as it is carefully distinguished from an irreducibility-based error theory, it evades Fletcher's prudential parity objection.

3. CLINE AND THE NORMATIVITY OF HYPOTHETICAL REASONS

Fletcher uses the prudential parity claim to build a companions-in-guilt argument against moral error theorists. The philosopher whose view we are going to discuss now instantiates an opposite trend. Brendan Cline appeals to the prudential parity claim in defense of a global error theory. Another difference is that he specifically targets categoricity-based error theorists.

Here is his argument. Categoricity-based local error theorists criticize moral success theorists for lacking an account of the normativity of categorical reasons. Yet, they lack an account of the normativity of hypothetical reasons. As Cline puts it, "there is simply no story offered about how the prescriptive force of desire works," "no positive story about the normativity of desire."¹⁷ But, the argument continues, if the absence of a story of the former kind suffices to establish that all moral judgments are false—and indeed it does—then the absence of a story of the latter kind suffices to establish that all prudential judgments are false. By their own lights, categoricity-based error theorists should apply their criticism to prudential judgments.¹⁸

17 Cline, "The Tale of a Moderate Normative Skeptic," 155, 156.

18 This is actually only one of two arguments Cline opposes to a local error theory. The argument I leave aside relies on a general parity claim: any moral error theory entails a global error theory. In support of this claim, Cline points out that normative cognition is a unified system rather than a set of diversified mechanisms corresponding to moral norms, prudential norms, epistemic norms, and so on. However, this case rests on Stephen Stich's account of normative psychology, which is highly contentious and does not clearly entail that all normative reasons are of the same kind (see Kumar, "Moral Judgment as a Natural Kind"; Joyce, "Replies"). There surely are similarities between all normative thoughts—the opposite would be surprising. But nothing indicates that all normative thoughts are similar in that they entail the existence of categorical reasons. Yet, this is what Cline would need to show to back up his parity claim.

Cline's parity claim hinges on two claims. First, categoricity-based error theorists deny the existence of moral facts on the grounds that we lack an account of the normative significance of categorical reasons. Second, they lack an account of the normative significance of hypothetical reasons. What should we make of these two claims? I am reluctant to give this question a clear-cut answer as it is unclear to me what is meant by the phrase "a story about the normativity of." Nonetheless, my impression is that (at least) one of these two claims will be false no matter what interpretation is correct.

Does any argument to the effect that reasons depend on desires constitute such a story? If so, then Cline's second claim is false, for categoricity-based error theorists do supply an account of the normativity of desires in this sense. As we saw above, they put forward the following argument: a subject *S* has a reason to ϕ if and only if *S*+ would advise *S* to ϕ , but *S*+'s advice for *S* necessarily depends on *S*'s desires, so *S*'s reasons necessarily depend on *S*'s desires. These error theorists even deliver a defense of instrumentalism: there is something very odd about the question, "A version of myself who would be fully informed and reason flawlessly would advise me to ϕ , but so what?"

Suppose alternatively that this is not the kind of story Cline is after. Maybe he is rather demanding an account of *how* facts about desires could have that kind of normative force, or *how* facts about desires could give us reasons. The concern would be that one hardly understands how hypothetical reasons could have genuine normative force if they were identical to natural facts about desires. Categoricity-based error theorists might be compelled to appeal to irreducibly normative facts to account for the normativity of hypothetical reasons. Notice, however, that the issue would then pertain to meta-normative theory, a domain in which categoricity-based error theorists remain silent. These philosophers do not deny the existence of moral facts because we lack a meta-normative conception of the relation between natural facts and moral facts that would account for the significance of categorical reasons; they deny the existence of moral facts because these would generate categorical reasons that we do not have according to instrumentalism.

To see the point more clearly, recall that these error theorists can combine their instrumentalist take on prudential reasons with a nonnaturalist account of prudential facts. If this is their position, they will quietly concede that they lack a positive story about the normativity of desires and yet insist that instrumentalism is true; they will concede that they cannot explain *how* desires ground reasons and yet insist that they do. This should come as no surprise. After all, if both prudential instrumentalism and meta-prudential nonnaturalism are true, then it is a brute fact, an ungrounded metaphysical truth, that we have a prudential reason to do something just in case our rational counterparts would

advise us to. Compare: if both hedonistic utilitarianism and metaethical non-naturalism are true, then it is a brute fact, an ungrounded metaphysical truth, that an act is right just in case it maximizes pleasure. If ethical nonnaturalism is true, utilitarians need not explain why facts about pleasure have normative force. The same is true of instrumentalists if prudential nonnaturalism is true.

To recap, what we have is a dilemma for Cline's parity claim. Either a story about the normativity of X amounts to a substantive argument to the effect that a certain normative property depends on X , in which case categoricity-based error theorists do supply us with a story about the normativity of desires. Or a story about the normativity of X amounts to a meta-normative account of the relation between X and normative facts, in which case categoricity-based error theorists do not reject moral facts because we lack a story about the normativity of categorical reasons. Either way, no analog to their argument will suffice to establish that all prudential judgments are false, and Cline's prudential parity claim collapses. Just like Fletcher's, it appears plausible only so long as one conflates the categoricity-based error theory with the irreducibility-based error theory.

4. BEDKE AND THE NATURE OF REASONS

In contrast with both Fletcher and Cline, Mathew Bedke defends neither a moral success theory nor a prudential error theory. Although he relies on the prudential parity claim, he remains neutral as to which conclusion to draw from it. His point is merely that prudential reasons are just as queer as moral reasons. Whether both kinds are queer enough to warrant a ban from our ontology is an issue he leaves for another day.

Bedke's defense of the parity claim is straightforward.¹⁹ At the bottom, reasons refer to relations. They may be represented formally as predicates of the form $R(F, S, \phi)$ in C . A subject S has a reason to ϕ in conditions C if and only if, in C , there is a fact F that counts in favor of S 's ϕ -ing. Pam has a moral reason to pay her taxes given her living standard if and only if, given her living standard, the fact that taxes help fund public schools counts in favor of Pam's paying her taxes. It follows from this account of reasons that if there is anything queer about moral reasons, then it must be one of these elements: the conditions C , the fact F , the subject S , the action ϕ , or the relation *counting in favor of*. But C , F , S , and ϕ are very unlikely to be queer: Pam's living standard, the fact that taxes help fund public schools, Pam herself, and the act of paying one's taxes are ontologically banal entities. The only thing that could be objectionable about moral reasons is the relation *counting in favor of*.

19 Bedke, "Might All Normativity Be Queer?" 48–51.

But then, Bedke proceeds, prudential reasons must be queer too since they involve the same favoring relation. Just like moral reasons, prudential reasons are predicates of the form $R(F, S, \phi)$ in C . Jim has a reason to jog given that his bones are fragile if and only if, given that his bones are fragile, the fact that jogging strengthens bones counts in favor of Jim's jogging. Just like Pam's moral reason, Jim's prudential reason involves the relation *counting in favor of*. If one is queer, so is the other. Hence a general version of the prudential parity claim: if any queerness-based argument establishes that all moral judgments are false, then an analogous argument will establish that all prudential judgments are false.

Central to Bedke's demonstration is the claim that error theorists must locate moral queerness in the relation *counting in favor of*. In particular, assuming as he does that the facts that do the favoring are ordinary natural facts, there cannot be anything suspicious about them: the fact that taxes help fund public schools and the fact that jogging strengthens bones are ontologically irreproachable. But one might reject this assumption and argue instead that the facts that do the favoring must be evaluative. For example, the fact that paying taxes is morally good might count in favor of Pam's paying her taxes. Likewise, the fact that jogging is good for Jim might count in favor of Jim's jogging. Call this the "value-first view."

On this account of the nature of reasons, one might argue that the fact that does the favoring is queer in the moral case (where it involves objective, desire-independent goodness) while it is not in the prudential case (where it involves only subjective, desire-dependent goodness). There is something queer about the moral fact that Pam's paying her taxes is good regardless of her desires; there is nothing queer, by contrast, about the prudential fact that jogging is good for Jim in light of his desires. Accordingly, the parity claim would be false: one argument that suffices to establish the falsity of all moral judgments would have no analog sufficient to establish the falsity of all prudential judgments. This sounds like a natural line of objection for categoricity-based error theorists.

In response to this objection, Bedke maintains that prudential reasons would be queer even if the favoring facts were evaluative: "the value-first view does not do away with reason relations; it simply relocates them between evaluative considerations and actions rather than non-evaluative considerations and actions. In addition to that, the view introduces another metaphysical entity subject to queerness."²⁰ In other words, what counts in favor of Jim's jogging may be the natural fact that jogging strengthens bones or the evaluative fact that jogging is good for Jim. In either case, the relation *counts in favor of* will appear somewhere in the equation. Since this relation is queer, prudential reasons will also involve a queer element, even on the value-first view. The parity claim still stands.

20 Bedke, "Might All Normativity Be Queer?" 51.

This rejoinder is unconvincing. Why should the value-first theorist admit that the favoring relation is queer at all? Once one buys into evaluative facts, *counting in favor of* appears to come as a free bonus. Assuming that paying taxes is good, it is pretty clear that this fact counts in favor of paying one's taxes. In what sense would paying taxes be good if that did not count in favor of doing it? Local error theorists might therefore just as well contend that only the favoring evaluative fact (objective, desire-independent goodness) is queer in the moral case. Since the favoring evaluative fact (subjective, desire-dependent goodness) is not queer in the prudential case, prudential reasons would not be queer, and the parity claim would turn out false.²¹

But this is not the main point I want to stress, so let us grant Bedke that the value-first view is flawed for the sake of argument. A more serious concern with his demonstration has to do with the assumption that the queerness of moral reasons must be traced to the queerness of one of their components. Admittedly, this assumption is plausible enough as long as queerness consists in irreducibility. If moral reasons are queer because they are nonnatural, then they must inherit their queerness from the conditions *C*, the fact *F*, the subject *S*, the action ϕ , or the relation *counting in favor of*—moral reasons could not be nonnatural if all their components were reducible to natural entities. Bedke's objection might therefore work against an irreducibility-based local error theory.

Be that as it may, it is powerless against the categoricity-based error theory. The idea that moral reasons must inherit their queerness from one component of the moral-reason relation is much less plausible if queerness consists in categoricity. On that assumption, there need be nothing queer about the conditions *C*, the fact *F*, the subject *S*, the action ϕ , and the relation *counting in favor of*. Reasons will be queer only when they combine some such elements—only when a fact that obtains regardless of the agent's desires is supposed to count in favor of an act. Since this would happen in the case of (categorical) moral reasons, moral reasons are queer. However, this does not happen in the case of (hypothetical) prudential reasons. As a result, these are ontologically respectable. Again, this sounds like a perfectly natural line of thinking for proponents of a local error theory based on categoricity.

- 21 Bedke levels two independent objections against the value-first view: natural facts are all it takes to account for practical reasons, and the idea that both a natural fact and an evaluative fact count in favor of every rational act involves a problematic kind of double counting ("Might All Normativity Be Queer?" 52). As they stand, I find both objections unpersuasive. The first appears to beg the question against the value-first theorist, who presumably believes that evaluative facts *are* needed to account for reasons—why would she not? The second commits a strawman fallacy: according to the value-first theorist, only the evaluative fact does the favoring. No double counting is involved there.

Bedke anticipates something like this objection. On the view he discusses, we should distinguish between an objective favoring relation (where F is unrelated to S 's desires) and a subjective favoring relation (where F depends on S 's desires). In response, he argues that this distinction is confused: "I do not know what it would mean to say that some of these considerations favour objectively versus favour subjectively. They either favour or they do not."²² So far, we are in agreement. I do not mean to suggest that we are dealing with different favoring relations depending on the nature of the favoring fact. But Bedke goes further and concludes that, if anything is queer, it has to be the favoring relation itself. He supports this assertion with an analogy:

Suppose that someone claims that certain witches are not metaphysically queer, viz., witches who can cast spells on themselves only. These witches are "subjectively magical," the claim goes, and so the queerness objection does not apply to them. The appropriate reply is that the queerness resides in spell-casting quite generally. It does not matter what the spells affect. I think we can say the same kind of thing to those who claim that favouring relations flow only from ends. The queerness objection applies to the favouring relations quite generally, and it does not matter wherefrom the favouring flows. If you recognize one kind of witch, objections to other witches cannot be based on metaphysical queerness; if you recognize one kind of reason, objections to other kinds of reasons cannot be based on metaphysical queerness.²³

This is where we part ways. Bedke seems to think that whenever a relational fact is queer, this must be in virtue of one of its components: either the relation or a relatum. I disagree. We certainly want to say that facts about spells derive their queerness from one of their components. But this is because we know that one of their components is queer—namely, the relation *casting a spell on*. Now, this is an accidental feature of this example. Other relational facts appear to be queer even though all of their components are individually fine. For instance, there would be something odd about a future event causing a past event, yet there is nothing particularly odd about causation, future events, or past events. In cases like this, it is the combination of a certain relation with a certain relatum that makes the resulting relational fact suspicious.

According to the present objection, this is what happens with moral reasons. Individually, none of the components of the reason $R(F, S, \phi)$ in C is queer. Still, that reason is queer because it combines these elements in a problematic

²² Bedke, "Might All Normativity Be Queer?" 54.

²³ Bedke, "Might All Normativity Be Queer?" 54.

way—a fact that is unrelated to the agent's desires features as a relatum of the relation *counting in favor of*. Again, this line of reasoning is very congenial to categoricity-based error theorists. For these philosophers, the relation *counting in favor of* is akin to the relation *causing* more than it is to the relation *casting a spell on*. You may admit one kind of causal relation and yet object to others on grounds of metaphysical queerness; you may admit one kind of reason and yet object to others on grounds of metaphysical queerness.

At the end of the day, Bedke's argument rests on a false dilemma. The local error theorist need not pick a queer element in the set $\{C, F, S, \phi, R\}$ in order to say that $R(F, S, \phi)$ in C is queer in the moral case. Even though C, F, S , and ϕ are perfectly fine, she is therefore not committed to the view that R is queer. As a result, she can concede that prudential reasons have the relation *counting in favor of* as one of their components while maintaining that these reasons are ontologically unproblematic. Just like Fletcher's and Cline's, Bedke's prudential parity claim seems fairly plausible if queerness has to do with irreducibility, not so much if queerness is located in categoricity.

5. CONCLUSION

Local error theories combine a moral error theory with a prudential success theory: all moral judgments are false, but some prudential judgments are true. According to prudential parity objections, all such theories are flawed: for any argument to the effect that all moral judgments are false, there is an equally good argument to the effect that all prudential judgments are false. Notice one last time how general these objections are: they are meant to impair *all* local error theories. Consequently, they will be refuted if we can find *one* moral error theory that does not entail a prudential error theory. This is what I have attempted to do in this paper. More precisely, I argued that the categoricity-based local error theory is immune to the main three prudential parity objections on the market.

Guy Fletcher's objection succeeds to the extent that it establishes a parity claim: if all moral judgments are false because they state irreducibly normative facts, then all prudential judgments are false too. Unfortunately, this objection is powerless against the categoricity-based local error theory, which is consistent with the existence of irreducibly normative facts. As we have seen, Fletcher believes that all moral error theorists are committed to an irreducibility-based error theory. But we have also seen that this belief is unfounded.

Brendan Cline's parity objection targets proponents of the categoricity-based error theory specifically. Here is his parity claim: if all moral judgments are false because we lack a story about the normativity of categorical reasons, then all prudential judgments are false too, for we also lack a story

about the normativity of hypothetical reasons. Alas, this parity claim is either irrelevant or false, depending on what is meant by “a story about the normativity of *X*.” The parity claim is irrelevant if this means a meta-normative account of *how X* grounds normative facts, for categoricity-based error theorists do not object to moral truths on the grounds that we lack such an account. The parity claim is false if this means a substantive argument to the effect *that X* grounds a normative property, for categoricity-based error theorists do provide us with such an argument in the case of prudential reasons.

For Mathew Bedke, all moral error theorists are committed to saying that moral judgments are false because they entail the existence of the relation *counting in favor of*, but prudential reasons entail the existence of this relation too. As a consequence, if all moral judgments are false, then all prudential judgments are false too. This objection does not succeed, however, because moral error theorists need not deny the existence of the relation *counting in favor of*. Proponents of the categoricity-based error theory will simply insist that the fact that does the favoring cannot be unrelated to the agent’s desires—such a combination would be queer. Ultimately, this is just another way of saying that moral reasons would be queer because they would be categorical.

In the end, all the extant defenses of the prudential parity claim seem to collapse as far as the categoricity-based error theory is concerned. This is a major worry for three reasons. First, considering that the categoricity-based error theory has at least as many defenders as the irreducibility-based error theory, it is not the kind of view that one can dismiss as unimportant. Prudential parity objections are much less interesting if they do not affect it. Second, most proponents of the irreducibility-based error theory are global error theorists, which suggests that prudential parity objections should focus primarily on the categoricity-based local error theory.²⁴ Finally, prudential parity claimers explicitly target leading categoricity-based error theorists. Pending a better objection, this combination of a moral error theory and a prudential success theory remains a live option.²⁵

Université de Strasbourg
fjaquet@unistra.fr

24 The main two irreducibility-based error theorists are Bart Streumer and Jonas Olson. While Streumer explicitly argues that all prudential judgments are false, Olson is very much open to that idea.

25 This work was supported by Montreal’s Center for Research on Ethics and the AHP-PRÉST (UMR 7117—Université de Strasbourg, Université de Lorraine, CNRS). For helpful feedback on previous drafts, I would like to thank Charles Côté-Bouchard, Florian Cova, Nils Franzén, Martin Gibert, Valéry Giroux, Jessica Isserow, Florence Larocque, Stephanie

REFERENCES

- Bedke, Matthew S. "Might All Normativity Be Queer?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88, no. 1 (2010): 41–58.
- Cline, Brendan. "The Tale of a Moderate Normative Skeptic." *Philosophical Studies* 175, no. 1 (January 2018): 141–61.
- Dorsey, Dale. "Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism." *Noûs* 51, no. 1 (March 2017): 196–217.
- Fletcher, Guy. "Pain for the Moral Error Theory? A New Companions-in-Guilt Argument." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 3 (2018): 474–82.
- Garner, Richard T. "On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1990): 137–46.
- Haji, Ishtiyaque. *Deontic Morality and Control*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Hinckfuss, Ian. *The Moral Society: Its Structure and Effects*. Canberra, Australia: Australian National University, 1987.
- Horgan, Terrence, and Mark Timmons. "New Wave Moral Realism Meets Moral Twin Earth." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 16 (1991): 447–65.
- Joyce, Richard. *The Myth of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- . "Replies." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 77, no. 1 (July 2008): 245–67.
- Kalf, Wouter F. *Moral Error Theory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Kumar, Victor. "Moral Judgment as a Natural Kind." *Philosophical Studies* 172, no. 11 (November 2015): 2887–2910.
- Mackie, John L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.
- Olson, Jonas. *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Streumer, Bart. *Unbelievable Errors: An Error Theory about All Normative Judgments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.