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Jonas Olson's Evidence for Moral Error Theory

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Abstract

Jonas Olson defends a moral error theory in 2014. I first argue that Olson is not justified in believing the error theory as opposed to moral nonnaturalism in his own opinion. I then argue that Olson is not justified in believing the error theory as opposed to moral contextualism either (although the latter is not a matter of his own opinion). I conclude that Olson has not given us quite enough evidence for moral error theory.

Keywords

moral error theory – moral nonnaturalism – moral contextualism – Jonas Olson

Introduction

Jonas Olson defends a moral error theory in 2014. I will first argue that Olson is not justified in believing the error theory as opposed to moral nonnaturalism in his own opinion. I will then argue that Olson is not justified in believing the error theory as opposed to moral contextualism either (although the latter is not a matter of his own opinion). My arguments are not intended to show that the error theory is false, merely that Olson's evidence in favor of it does not warrant its acceptance.

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1 The Toothlessness of Queerness

Jonas Olson's book is a defense of moral error theory. According to him, error theories come in two varieties, standard and moderate. Standard error theories say that some area of thought and discourse D involves systematically false beliefs, as a result of which D-judgments are uniformly untrue (which means that they are either false or neither true nor false).¹ Moderate error theories attribute systematic error to thought *about* D, but deny that this leads to untrue claims. Moderate error theorists thus think that the error does not infect the semantics of D-claims or presuppositions relevant to their truth values.

Olson believes that standard moral error theory is true, and he also thinks, or so I take it, that he is justified in believing this. The reason why standard moral error theory (henceforth simply *error theory*) is true would be that moral facts and properties are queer, and that there are good explanations of our moral thought and discourse that do not appeal to their existence. The claim that moral facts and properties are queer presupposes what Olson calls *the conceptual claim*, namely that moral facts and properties have, as a matter of conceptual fact, certain problematic features. I will discuss the evidence for the conceptual claim in parts 2–4.

Olson thinks that justified belief in the error theory requires both establishing that moral facts and properties are queer and “debunking” explanations of moral thought and discourse. In this case, a debunking explanation is an explanation in which no appeal is made to moral facts and properties. That both feats are necessary first emerges in part I of the book when Olson discusses Bertrand Russell's rejection of a property of objective goodness.²

Russell denied the existence of objective goodness for reasons of theoretical economy. He thought that this property was inessential to explanations of our moral thought and practices. Olson disagrees that this suffices. According to him, a realist about the property can respond as follows: we are justified in

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- 1 Olson also uses a different characterization of moral error theory, according to which moral terms refer to properties that are (at least) uninstantiated and (perhaps) nonexistent. This kind of formulation seems best, since it is neutral on the question whether moral claims are untrue *as a consequence of* false beliefs, rather than as a consequence of various dispositions to use moral terms which justify an assignment of uninstantiated semantic values.
 - 2 It occurs again when Olson describes Mackie's argument from queerness as an argument based on two premises: (1) that moral facts are queer, and (2) that moral facts are not needed in explanations of our moral thought and practices. These two premises together would make it more plausible that there are no moral facts than that there are.

assuming the existence of objective goodness, because (a) it is described by certain moral statements and (b) the idea that such statements are uniformly false is extremely counterintuitive. Olson notes that debunking explanations may undermine this style of argument, but adds that:

Further arguments are required in order to cast serious doubt on objective moral properties. Moral realists may query why theories that assume only positive and negative attitudes that we mistake for perceptions of objective moral properties are more economical than theories that assume perceptions of instantiated objective moral properties, especially when we take into consideration the fact that some moral judgements seem obviously true. (p. 64)

Olson concludes that error theorists should isolate a problematic *feature* of moral properties, such as their queerness, to bolster the appeal to theoretical economy. So it seems that Olson thinks that if it cannot be shown that moral facts and properties are queer, then we are *not* justified in believing the error theory (perhaps we should be agnostic). The same would presumably be true if queerness does not carry additional evidential weight.

In light of this, it is surprising that Olson seems to admit that queerness cannot carry this weight. After examining four different potential sources of queerness, he settles on irreducible normativity. This is understood in terms of irreducible reasons, which are facts that have the irreducible property of favoring actions. It is the latter property that Olson thinks is queer. He puts it as follows:

The irreducibly normative favouring relation is not reducible to an action's property of being a means to the satisfaction of some desire, or an action's property of being in accord with some rule or norm. When the irreducibly normative favouring relation obtains between some fact and some course of behaviour, that fact is an irreducibly normative reason to take this course of behaviour. Such irreducibly normative favouring relations appear metaphysically mysterious. How can there be such relations? (2014, p. 136)

However, he immediately adds:

Non-naturalists can retort that it is not clear what kind of explanation we ask for here. They could maintain that it is a fundamental fact about reality that there are irreducibly normative reason relations, and they

could refuse head-on to admit they there is anything *queer* about such relations.³ (2014, p. 136)

I take it that Olson thinks that this retort is fair, but he proceeds to point out that such irreducible reason relations are not necessary to explain our moral practices (pp. 146–147). This, of course, is an appeal to debunking explanations. So if debunking explanations are not obviously better than vindicating explanations (because certain moral statements seem obviously true), it seems that Olson's case for error theory is unconvincing in his own opinion.

Perhaps this conclusion depends on whether it can also be reasonable for others to think of moral properties as queer. Might it be the case that, from Olson's perspective, a reasonable belief in queerness joined with debunking explanations tips the balance in favor of an error theory? This could make his acceptance of the view reasonable even if non-naturalists need not be swayed. However, one wonders *why* it should be reasonable for Olson to consider moral properties queer, if others can reasonably deny it. Olson himself acknowledges how counterintuitive it is to say that all non-trivial moral claims are false. He presumably also acknowledges that some facts simply have no explanation. Why would it be especially bad if moral properties were among them? So it is not clear that queerness can do the work Olson requires it to do, even from his own perspective.

Whether queerness is in fact toothless as an independent evidential factor depends on what it is. We are told surprisingly little about the nature of this feature in the book.⁴ I take it that queerness is strangeness, oddness, weirdness. But Olson himself thinks that weirdness is bad only when it doesn't figure in our best theories about the world. This is why he accepts the existence of all kinds of oddities: quantum superpositions, neutrinos, time dilation (p. 87). They play a role in confirmed explanatory theories (p. 87).

Suppose queerness is a matter of being different in some respect or some degree from certain other things. I take it that these other things are things known to exist, although if quantum superpositions are to be considered queer

3 If the nonnaturalist can indeed reasonably deny that there is anything queer about irreducible reasons, then this throws doubt on my understanding of queerness as being different in some respect or some degree from other things known to exist. For the nonnaturalist may well allow that this is true of moral reasons.

4 Of course, Olson does spend two chapters identifying and assessing different things that might have the property of being queer. But identifying what might *have* the property of being queer (the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral, or irreducible normativity) doesn't tell us what queerness itself *consists* in or *is a matter of*.

despite the fact that we know them to exist, we have to restrict our sources of information in determining the comparison class. Perhaps it should be restricted even further to things that are in some sense of the same type or category.

The idea that queerness is a matter of being different in some respect or degree from other things known to exist fits well with something that is implicit in much of Olson's book: namely that all other known forms of normativity (i.e. nonmoral normativity) are a matter of relating in certain ways to goals, desires, or interests. Moral normativity would be queer because it does not consist in such relations. This *difference* may cast doubt on its existence.⁵

Perhaps the reason why queerness is ontologically suspicious is that if a thing is very different in some respect or degree from certain other things (of the same type) that are known to exist, then the conditional probability of its existence is lower than if that thing is not so different. Given this characterization of queerness, a unicorn is fairly normal: a horse-like creature with a horn. The conditional probability of unicorns existing prior to particular details about the fossil record and zoology may be higher than the probability of time dilation prior to the theory of relativity (I don't know). But why should it matter? Metaethicists are supposed to determine the likelihood of moral facts in light of all relevant information and possibilities. So even if moral facts are less likely to exist prior to factoring in certain facts or possible (realist) explanations, why should this tell us much about their likelihood in light of all the facts?⁶

For this reason, I think that much of the philosophical work in establishing an error theory (granting the conceptual claim) lies in assessing the relative merits of explanations of moral thought and discourse that do and that do not involve moral facts. It is not clear that Olson has done quite enough of this to warrant confidence in his conclusions (e.g. there is no discussion of nonnaturalist epistemology).

2 Moral Error Theory and *The Conceptual Claim*

Olson's defense of the error theory crucially depends on *the conceptual claim*, according to which moral facts entail irreducible favoring relations. Saying that

5 This would also explain why Olson is not persuaded by arguments from queerness that appeal to supposed queer features that might be shared by certain nonmoral facts.

6 Is the idea perhaps that there are more stringent demands on a theory in which they do figure precisely because the entities in question are queer? Should those theories receive a greater degree of confirmation, or have broader explanatory scope, or be more unified? If so, then one would expect Olson to investigate whether this is so for nonnaturalism in some considerable detail.

a fact favors *irreducibly* means that its favoring does not consist in the fact's explaining why an act is conducive to desire satisfaction, or to compliance with norms, or to fulfillment of some role. Favoring relations that *do* consist in such things would not be problematic.

Some of the motivation for the conceptual claim consists in alleged counterintuitive consequences of naturalist or reductionist analyses of moral language. For instance, Humeans (like David Brink) claim that whether an agent has moral reasons to act in some way depends on contingent facts about the agent's desires and interests. Olson responds by saying that

One cannot escape a moral reason to donate to Oxfam simply by advert-ing to one's lack of a relevant desire. Moreover, even if most or all people do have desires whose satisfaction would be promoted by their donating to Oxfam, or more generally by their compliance with moral norms, it is difficult to accept Brink's view that whether there are reasons for people to donate to Oxfam, or more generally to comply with moral norms, depends on whether doing so would promote fulfillment of their desires and interests. (p. 125)

This familiar complaint follows a distinction between desire-based and rule-based reason ascriptions, along the lines of Joyce (2001, chapter 2). Joyce and Olson admit that it can be perfectly appropriate to say of someone that she has reasons to do something, even if the correctness of the claim is not grounded in desires of the agent. Such truths can be grounded in certain rules or standards that govern an activity or institution (Olson, 2014, pp. 120–122). So Olson is aware that reductionists need not make the truth of moral reason claims depend on the desires of the agent, or even the desires of the speaker. They could (and do) hypothesize that moral claims are indexed to standards or ends held by the speaker. A theory of this kind is a stronger rival to Olson's view than Brink's, and the previous criticism of Brink does nothing to undermine it.

Olson would presumably say that people think differently about the nature of moral reasons than they do about the nature of institutional reasons. Perhaps he could do this as follows: although one can appropriately ascribe institutional reasons to people whose interests are not served by respecting such reasons, there are many contexts in which they don't seem bound by them. Or, in words reminiscent of Richard Joyce (2001, chapter 2): there are many contexts in which it seems legitimate for such people to ignore them anyway. The same would not be true for moral reasons: even if Hitler's interests were not served by ending the mass murder of Jews, he would still be bound by moral reasons and we do not feel that it would be legitimate for him to ignore them. In the context of an error theory, the million-dollar question is whether such

impressions affect the semantics of first-order moral language. They might instead be false theoretical beliefs that are irrelevant to assignments of semantic values. Given the importance of this issue for moral error theory, it is somewhat surprising that Olson does not explicitly discuss it (unlike Finlay (2008) and Joyce (2011)). However, his central argument against contextualism is most directly relevant. I will examine it in the next section.

3 Olson's Attack on Moral Contextualism

Suppose that ordinary speakers do not clearly believe that moral reasons favor irreducibly, or that moral facts entail irreducible favoring relations. Or suppose that the linguistic behavior of speakers did not clearly favor an assignment of semantic values to moral terms that have this implication. In that case, there would be no powerful arguments for the conceptual claim and thus none for moral error theory. In light of this, I found it surprising that Olson discusses only a fraction of Finlay's (2008) arguments for the conclusion that reductionist, standard-relational views can explain all relevant data equally well.

The only datum that Olson does explicitly discuss is the (purported) fact that we tend to pursue moral arguments even with people we take not to share our fundamental moral views. We would do this with the aim of convincing others that they are wrong, which would suggest that we take moral judgments to concern absolute rather than relativized matters.

Finlay calls this kind of evidence *disputation evidence*. He argues that there may be little of it, as we would rarely meet anyone who shares none or even few of our values. And even if we did meet such a person, we may not believe that she is quite so alien. So Finlay thinks that most debates can be explained by the hypothesis that people make the assumption that others share enough relevant values. That hypothesis is compatible with a contextualist semantics according to which moral claims are implicitly about the standards of the speaker.

Olson responds that Finlay underestimates the prevalence of fundamental moral disagreement in many contemporary societies:

Even a cursory glance at public political debate in many countries will reveal fundamental moral disagreements between conservatives and feminists; socialists and neo-liberals; cosmopolitans and nationalists; etc. (p. 128)

This response strikes me as weak. It is by no means clear that feminists and conservatives, socialists, and neo-liberals, or even vegetarians and speciesists

share so few values that our tendency to have an argument could not be explained by the assumption that enough values are shared for fruitful engagement. It could also be explained by the assumption that others would at least be *sensitive* to certain values when brought to their attention.

I suppose that the reason why Olson does not discuss any other arguments to the effect that contextualism can explain the data equally well is that he has an apparently powerful argument against the correctness of any such theory. Olson's argument is primarily aimed at Finlay's view (2009, 2014), but I think that it can be extended.

Before I explain the argument, we need to know a little more about the type of theory to which it applies. Theories of this type are known as *moral contextualism*, or *contextualism*, for short. Contextualism is the view that moral claims, like 'Abortion is wrong' are (implicitly) about the relation in which acts (etc.) stand to contextually relevant ends or standards. For example, a contextualist might say that 'Abortion is wrong' really means: 'Abortion is forbidden by standard S'. Most contextualists would say that the relevant standards are often those to which the speaker subscribes.

Olson raises a problem for such views (a problem which also occurs in Brogaard (2008)). He notes that one can make statements like:

- (1) 'Standard S is the correct moral standard'

and plausibly claims that if contextualism is true, such statements would also have to be relativized to standards. One natural idea is to say that statements about the correctness of standards are statements about whether those standards conform to some other standard. But if the speaker holds no more fundamental standards from which S can be deduced, it seems that the statement that S is the correct moral standard must be understood as a tautology:

- (1*) Standard S conforms to standard S (or something along those lines).⁷

7 Olson does not discuss the possibility that statements about the correctness of standards are relativized to higher-order standards, but I think that he does so for good reason. I expect higher-order standards either to have a content very similar to the first-order standards that we hold (as when they require that the standards are conducive to maximizing happiness) or to be too general to entail specific moral standards like utilitarianism (as when they require that standards be informed by relevant or general facts in some way). The former would not avoid the problem of trivial truth conditions, but the latter seems to condemn pretty much all statements about the correctness of standards to falsehood.

There is a minor complication. If S is a first-order moral standard which specifies which actions to perform, it is not clear what it means to say that the standard conforms to itself. After all, the standard does not specify anything about *standards*, only about actions. However, conformation can be understood as: not forbidding anything the other standard allows. If we do that, we can see that 'Standard S is the correct moral standard' is trivially true: of course S does not forbid anything that it allows! S is after all identical to itself.

Olson thinks that this raises four problems for contextualists like Finlay: (i) people who claim that utilitarianism is the correct moral standard (and hold no more fundamental standard from which utilitarianism follows) do not think that they are merely stating a tautology. (ii) People tend to think that moral standards can be mistaken, but if 'any claim to the effect that some fundamental moral statement is correct is trivially true, [...] there is no such thing as an incorrect fundamental moral standard' (p. 133). (iii) People tend to believe that utilitarians and deontologists disagree about the truth value of the same proposition, but the standard-relational approach entails that this is false. (iv) People tend to think that claims about the correctness of moral standards are informative, unobvious truths, or falsehoods.

As I argue in (2014) and Finlay notes with respect to his own view in (2009), this problem concerning trivial truth conditions (which I call *the problem of triviality*) is not confined to statements *about the correctness of standards*. It also applies to fundamental first-order moral claims. For example, suppose that I say:

(2) You ought to maximize happiness.

Further suppose that I am not committed to any standards from which this requirement can be deduced: utilitarianism is my most fundamental moral commitment. Since the contextualist says that normative statements are implicitly relativized to standards, it seems that the only standard to which (2) can be relativized is utilitarianism itself. But then the statement would mean (something like):

(2*) Utilitarianism requires you to maximize happiness / You ought to maximize happiness in relation to a utilitarian standard.

The problem is that (2*) is trivially true: utilitarianism *is* the view that you ought to maximize happiness. No one disagrees with that. But people do disagree about the question whether you ought to maximize happiness.

So the problem of triviality applies not just to Finlay's version of contextualism, nor only to statements about the correctness of standards, but also to fundamental first-order moral claims. Olson thinks that this problem is so pressing that contextualism is unlikely to be true. This is probably the reason why he isn't very interested whether Finlay can explain the data that convince some philosophers of the truth of the conceptual claim. But I will argue that the problem of triviality touches (a plausible version) of his own view too, and that there is a good explanation of (i) – (iv) above to which contextualists can appeal. If I am right, then the problem of triviality is not a good reason to prefer the conceptual claim over a less metaphysically demanding view of moral language.

Modal auxiliary verbs like 'ought,' 'must,' and 'can' are systematically ambiguous between various readings in apparently unrelated languages (see, e.g., Von Fintel & Iatridou, 2008; Finlay makes much of it in 2014). For example, 'ought' allows epistemic readings ('Sugar ought to dissolve in water') and normative readings ('John ought to add sugar to his cup'). Within normative readings, 'ought' is also ambiguous: 'John ought to add sugar to the cup' can be a prudential ought, a moral ought (depending on the consequences), or any number of different readings. And this appears to be true for the analogues of 'ought' in all kinds of unrelated languages. If moral readings of 'ought' shared no semantic core with other normative and non-normative readings, it would be an incredible coincidence that the analogues of 'ought' in other languages allowed exactly the same readings. The situation would be the same as when all kinds of unrelated languages happened to use 'bank' both in the sense of financial institution and in the sense of sofa (as is now the case in Dutch and German, but not English or Swedish, for example). So there is good reason to suppose that 'ought' and other modal auxiliary verbs share a common semantic core.

What this means is that if "modals" in nonmoral contexts are relational terms, they are very likely relational terms in moral contexts too. And the antecedent of this conditional appears to be satisfied. For instance, 'Rooks must not be moved diagonally' seems to be a statement about the relation between moving rooks diagonally and the rules of chess. 'One ought to use a knife and fork at dinner' seems to be a statement about the relation between using knives and forks at dinner and the rules of etiquette. Not only does this seem plausible for independent reasons, but Olson himself is probably committed to this view. Although he does not explicitly say that nonmoral normative *ought* claims can be understood in the way I have suggested, it fits his reductionist view of claims about reasons in relation to hypothetical imperatives. Olson says that statements like 'You have a reason to add sugar to your cup' (when

understood hypothetically) can be reduced to statements about the relation in which acts stand to desire satisfaction. And he clearly believes that institutional reason claims can be reduced to claims about the relation between acts and meeting certain norms. So I take it he would say something similar about the ought claims that I just mentioned.

To be a little more precise, I take it that Olson holds on to his view in (2010) that reasons are 'facts that explain why some agent ought (*pro tanto*) to behave in certain ways, or why some form of behaviour would be (in)correct or (im)permissible' (footnote 7). This strikes me as justified for various reasons. What *makes* eating with your fingers incorrect or impermissible in the case of etiquette is the fact that the norms of etiquette forbid it. But if the fact that you ought not "etiquettically" to do this *consists* in its being forbidden by the norms of etiquette, and 'ought' in moral contexts shares a common semantic core with other normative uses, it is tempting to say that 'ought' in moral contexts means something similar. The only difference is that while 'ought' in the context of etiquette is about the relation between acts (say) and the norms of etiquette, 'ought' in moral contexts is about the relation between acts and *moral* norms. This would explain why 'ought' in many unrelated languages allows both moral and nonmoral normative readings: these readings are possible with the same word because it always expresses a relational concept.

People often more or less implicitly assume that error theorists cannot accept that terms like 'ought' or 'must' are relational terms. For example, Finlay (2008) takes Joyce to be saying that moral statements describe non-relational facts, facts that do not involve a relation to anything. Perhaps some remarks of Joyce suggest this (e.g. in (2011), p. 527), but he need not accept this view. The idea that moral norms and reasons are absolute or objectively binding does not entail that moral statements are non-relational. The relation described may be one to *absolute* or *objectively binding* norms, and the difference in the nature of the norms can explain the difference between moral and nonmoral oughts and reasons. So I think that the error theorist should say that the content of 'You ought to maximize happiness' is also a claim about the relation between acts and moral norms.⁸

Presumably, the norms that get to be part of the content of a moral statement are determined by commitments of the speaker (since the error theorist accepts that speakers base their moral claims on their own commitments).

8 Anyone who worries about particularism, which denies the validity of any general moral principles, should remember that "standard" is in this context just a general term for whatever it is that contextualists think moral claims are implicitly about. Relativizing to ends instead of standards seems to allow for particularism (as would highly context-specific standards).

However, if the speaker's deepest moral commitment is utilitarianism, the error theorist faces a version of the problem of triviality, since the content of 'You ought to maximize happiness' would then be (something like):

- (2**) Maximizing happiness is required of you by absolutely binding utilitarian norms.

That maximizing happiness is required by utilitarian norms is trivial. True, it is not trivial that utilitarianism *is* absolutely binding. But Olson has to ask himself: does he think it is plausible that speakers who make claims like 'You ought to maximize happiness' are aware of the fact that they are making statements about what utilitarianism requires, where this doctrine may in addition be thought to have a special status? I expect him to say: No. Mill did not think he was stating something like: 'Maximizing happiness is required of you by the absolutely binding doctrine of utilitarianism'. He was not conscious of making statements about what utilitarianism requires at all (he was trying to determine the content of our most fundamental moral obligations). But if speakers are not conscious of such things, and terms like 'ought' are nonetheless plausibly relational even in moral contexts, then it seems that the problem of triviality cannot favor the conceptual claim over error-free rivals.

There is also a natural way of representing what speakers *are* thinking which retains both the relational nature of terms like 'ought' and the opacity of the content of the norm relatum. We can say, for instance, that the content of the thought 'You ought to maximize happiness' (where utilitarianism is the thinker's deepest moral commitment) is something like:

- (3) Maximizing happiness is required of you by morality.

The reference to 'morality' may consist of certain norms with utilitarian content, but this need not be obvious to speakers. Olson would say the notion of morality entails absolute bindingness, and contextualists will say that it does not. This way of representing fundamental moral thoughts disarms the problem of triviality for contextualists as well as error theorists. Olson objected to contextualism on the ground that relativizing claims about the correctness of moral standards to standards would lead to trivial truth conditions in cases where the standards judged are identical to the ones to which the statement is relativized. This in turn generated four problems:

- (i) People who claim that utilitarianism is the correct moral standard do not think that they are merely stating a tautology.

- (ii) People tend to think that claims about the correctness of moral standards can be mistaken, but at least statements with tautological truth conditions cannot be (as a result of which the standards involved cannot be mistaken either).
- (iii) People tend to believe that utilitarians and deontologists disagree about the truth value of the same proposition, but the standard-relational approach entails that this is false.
- (iv) People tend to think that claims about the correctness of moral standards are informative, unobvious truths, or falsehoods.

However, if what speakers are thinking is accurately represented by (3), we can explain why it is not obvious to them that fundamental moral claims have trivial truth conditions even though they do. For it need not be obvious exactly what the content of the system of norms is to which they are referring with 'morality.' I have argued that the error theorist too has reason to relativize moral statements to moral norms, and that they will nevertheless maintain that the content of those norms is not always clear to people. If so, then this form of semantic blindness is shared between error theorists and contextualists, and contextualists can appeal to it to explain why (i) – (iv) are true.⁹

What this means is the following: Olson does not discuss in much detail whether the beliefs and linguistic behaviors of speakers that are supposed to be evidence for the conceptual claim are in fact compatible with a contextualist theory. This seemed justified because contextualist theories run into the problem of triviality. However, this problem is not in fact something that makes the difference between the conceptual claim and the contextualist's understanding of moral language. So Olson is not justified in accepting the conceptual claim. And since the error theory depends on it, he is not justified in accepting the error theory either.

9 I am not entirely sure that all of (i) – (iv) are true. I am especially doubtful of (ii) and (iii). I suspect that (iii) involves far too sophisticated a vocabulary for ordinary speakers. In my experience, non-philosophers are not very good at distinguishing sentence meaning from content communicated in other ways. Laymen opinions about the semantic content of sentences should thus be treated with considerable caution. The fact that speakers find it hard to distinguish strict linguistic meaning from other aspects of language is also relevant to the question whether we should expect speakers to believe that their fundamental moral claims are (sometimes) tautologous. The sense that they are not stating a tautology (if such sensings can be ascribed to speakers at all) may be explained by the fact that non-tautologous information is also communicated, such as demands that others conform to their moral principles (see Finlay (2009) for the idea that the point of stating tautologies may be rhetorical in this way).

4 Normativity to the Rescue?

Perhaps the following could still affect the balance in favor of the conceptual claim: it is a popular thought that statements about the relation between acts and standards are not *really* normative or not normative in the right way, whereas moral statements would be. It is of course notoriously difficult to say exactly what this means, but I don't think that this consideration provides enough justification for reasonable belief in the conceptual claim, for two reasons.

(1) The question 'Why be moral?' is not clearly conceptually confused. But it would be if moral facts entail facts about moral reasons that are binding irrespective of desires, interests, commitments to institutions, etc. Similarly, it is not clearly commonsensical to think that knowingly bad people are necessarily irrational. But this would be so if the conceptual claim were true. Finally, it is not obvious that moral reasons could never, as a matter of conceptual fact, be relatively weak (e.g. a reason not to waste some food, or to return a relatively cheap item one has accidentally taken from a shop without paying). The conceptual claim entails that moral reasons are always very weighty, for the following reason: Olson argues that beliefs about objective bindingness are good psychological buttresses against certain transgressions. This means that those beliefs will have to involve information about weight, for if the belief that a consideration is objectively binding did not entail that it is weighty, there is little reason to expect it to exert psychological pressure. So if a consideration is objectively binding it must be weighty.

I do not think that these three considerations are by themselves powerful enough to cast significant doubt on the conceptual claim. That claim may still be the best way of making sense of all the various commitments and behaviors that people display, even if it means that some commonsensical beliefs are false. However, if we have to jettison some commonsensical beliefs as content-determining, the error theorist needs to provide a convincing reason why the foregoing beliefs are false, as opposed to the belief that moral reasons are irreducibly normative or objectively binding. I am not sure what this reason is.

(2) Let's assume (as seems plausible to me) that claims about desire-based reasons are normative in some sense.¹⁰ Olson believes that such claims are

10 It is not entirely clear whether Olson accepts this. On the one hand, he says that if you reduce hypothetical reason claims to claims about 'desires and means to bringing about their satisfaction,' you lose their normativity (p. 154), but he also says that 'the counting-in-favour-relation [...] is being reduced' (p. 154). Since reduction is not the same as elimination, this suggests that hypothetical reason claims are after all normative (if we also

reducible to claims about the relation between acts and desire-satisfaction (p. 154). More specifically, desire-based reasons would be facts that explain why an act is likely to satisfy a desire. This suggests that the normativity of the claim 'You have a reason to drink a glass of water' is a derivative property: it depends on the significance (to us) of what the reason explains (relieving thirst), but this significance is not part of the linguistic content of the statement: its content concerns the relation between drinking the glass and quenching your thirst. So perhaps the impression that moral statements are normative in some special way isn't due to their linguistic content either. This would be even more likely if there are good explanations *why* people consider them to be normative in some special way that do not appeal to their content. Such explanations seem available. Take statements about moral reasons. If reasons are facts that explain why certain behaviors are in accordance with moral standards, the significance of these standards may seem to transcend our individual commitments because of the emotional significance that they have for us. We have not been raised to insist that everyone quench their thirst whenever possible, or to be particularly angry with someone who doesn't.¹¹ Moral values have a different psychological profile.

Conclusion

My conclusions are as follows: (1) it is not clear that an appeal to queerness adds anything to considerations of parsimony, explanatory scope, etc. I argued this in section 1. Since Olson thinks that such considerations do not by themselves suffice to fend off moral nonnaturalism, he cannot consider his defense of the error theory to be adequate. My view is that considerations of parsimony, explanatory scope, etc. can in fact suffice, but that this would require some detailed work on the merits of nonnaturalist epistemology (among, perhaps, other things). (2) There is not quite enough evidence for the conceptual claim that moral facts would entail irreducible favoring relations. Since this claim is essential to the error theory, we have to look in more detail whether non-error-theoretic approaches to moral language can explain all relevant data equally well. Until this is done we should not accept (nor perhaps reject) the moral error theory.

assume that being normative is a matter of counting in favor of something). I would say that even if they are not "genuinely" normative, they still *appear* to be so to most people. If claims that are not genuinely normative can appear to be normative, this option opens up for moral statements too.

11 Unless life is at stake, perhaps.

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