ERROR THEORY AND THE CONCEPT OF MORALITY

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Abstract: Error theories about morality often take as their starting point the supposed queerness of morality, and those resisting these arguments often try to argue by analogy that morality is no more queer than other unproblematic subject matters. Here, error theory (as exemplified primarily by the work of Richard Joyce) is resisted first by arguing that it assumes a common, modern, and peculiarly social conception of morality. Then error theorists point out that the social nature of morality requires one to act against one's self-interest while insisting on the categorical, inescapable, or overriding status of moral considerations: they argue that morality requires magic, then (rightly) claim that there is no such thing as magic. An alternate eudaimonist conception of morality is introduced which itself has an older provenance than the social point of view, dating to the ancient Greeks. Eudaimonism answers to the normative requirements of morality, yet does not require magic. Thus, the initial motivation for error theory is removed.

Keywords: error theory, queerness, eudaimonia, metaethics, morality.

A common way to find oneself adopting an error theory about morality is to begin with a naturalistic point of view and to note that goodness or badness, as they figure in our moral thinking and practice, have an essential property (or properties) that cannot be understood in naturalistic terms. Therefore, as an empirical fact, moral goodness and badness do not actually exist (see Mackie 1977; Garner 1990; Joyce 2001, 2006, and 2008). And typically when these arguments are resisted by moral realists who are also naturalists, it is done by claiming that in fact there is nothing unnatural about moral goodness or badness, that they are no different from the properties we find unproblematic as they appear in other fields of inquiry; this is to naturalize morality (see, e.g., Bloomfield 2001). There is, however, another way to resist the arguments supporting error theory, and this is by denying the claim that the problematic property to which the error theorists point really is essential to moral goodness or badness, such that morality cannot get along without it: thus, the only reason to cry "error" disappears. It is one thing to accept a challenge and try to meet it, it is another to deny the validity of the conceptual framework that issues the challenge. The present argument is of the latter sort.

In order to proceed, we will have to become clear about the conception of morality that is being assumed by the error theorists and those with whom they typically engage. What we will find is that the mysterious or queer aspect of morality that the error theorist espies is, in fact, an artifact of a modern, peculiarly social conception of morality that is not shared by other older traditions. If these other traditions really did have theories of morality, then the supposedly mysterious bit to which the error theorist calls our attention cannot in fact be an essential bit of morality at all. It may even turn out to be the case that error theory is pointing to a part of our modern conception of morality that it would behoove us to do without, while doing without does not leave us bereft of morality.

The conception of morality that has been most common for early modern and contemporary moral philosophy comes from a rejection of the personal, eudaimonistic framework of the ancient Greeks and the adoption of an alternative conception in which morality is a purely social phenomenon. Approaching this history from the modern end, it was G. E. M. Anscombe who first pointed out, in 1958, that modern morality assumed a conception of its subject matter inherited from a religious, "divine command conception" of ethics, which relied on God's authority (Anscombe 1958). A more recent and in-depth study of the history is by Terence Irwin, who denies Henry Sidgwick's claim that this conception of morality comes from Joseph Butler, and who asserts that it in fact dates back to the Scholastics (Sidgwick 1988; Irwin 2008). Sidgwick himself argued that our practical reason is split in two, a "fundamental dualism of practical reason," where on the one side we have egoism, or prudence, or self-interest and on the other we have the general or social point of view, otherwise known as "morality" (Sidgwick 1981). Butler did have his version of this dichotomy in his contrast of self-love and conscience, but the idea was not original to him. Irwin argues that it was Scotus's break from Aquinas's eudaimonism that eventually broke practical reason in two. Irwin's case is intricately made, but the basic conclusion is that Scotus rejected eudaimonism because he thought that "[i]f happiness were our supreme end, we would not be free to choose justice over our own advantage, and we would not be free to love God above all else" (Irwin 2008, 163). On Scotus's astringent view, moral action requires *pure* motivation untarnished in any way by self-love. And were this the case, if morality must be completely independent from self-love and self-interest, then our practical reason, which mediates our decision-making processes, is split in two; we should not be surprised to find complaints that morality is a "peculiar institution" (Williams 1985) that leads to an alienated "schizophrenia" (Stocker 1976) of reasons and values. Nor should we be surprised to find that some are willing to both take this dichotomy-engendering part of morality as essential to it while also claiming that it cannot be explained in naturalistically respectable terms. Thus, error theory arises.

In order to understand the error theorist's argument and how it goes astray, we need to say more about what the contentious bit of morality is and the conception of morality in which it appears. The contentious bit is morality's categoricity, its authority, "desire independence," or "practical oomph." This is due to the way morality was seen as an institution designed to have nothing to do with making the agent happy; since it is defined independently of what is good for the agent, it must be "queer" to have the authority it is assumed to have.[1]

While the relations between the question "Why be moral?" and error theory have not been appreciated, not much is required to see their influence. (One can easily see the problematic nature of answering the question for error theorists who are also fictionalists [see Joyce 2001 and 2005].) It is not hard to see the troubling aspect about morality as whatever it is that gives moral goodness the power to demand or require that we always be willing to sacrifice for its sake what is in our self-interest. If morality cannot justify these demands by successfully answering the "Why be moral?" question, then its authority is either genuinely queer or else does not exist at all. Given that no one has successfully explained why we ought to be moral, the dilemma ensues, and rather than opt for the mystery, error theorists conclude that there is no such thing as moral goodness. (Of course, this does not eliminate the "Why be moral?" question for error theorists, it merely keeps them from appealing to moral realism for any sort of answer.)

If one is not convinced by the way in which Sidgwick's "fundamental dualism of practical rationality" shows how the queerness of morality is linked to the "Why be moral?" question, then consider how the internalism/externalism debate in morality bridges the same gap (for internalism see Williams 1981 and Korsgaard 1986; for externalist rejoinders see Brink 1989; McDowell 1995; and Bloomfield 2001). As McDowell (1995) notes, we do not wonder at the authority or motivational affect of self-interest, nor do we marvel at the way desires necessarily, perhaps analytically, motivate us. We do, however, wonder at the command that morality has, or is supposed to have, over our motivational structures and our faculties of judgment. Moral considerations are thought by many to necessarily motivate or at least necessarily bear on our judgments about what to do. Moral considerations are necessarily supposed to be reasons, if not actual motives, for people, and yet somehow this is supposed to be true even for those who do not care a fig about morality, who have no desire to be moral. The queerness of morality can be found quite clearly in

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[1] Are there other reasons why morality might be queer? Of course. One reason, namely teleology, is discussed briefly below. Might a defender of an error theory come up with another? Again, of course. But it is typically morality's authority in the face of self-interest that is the driving force behind charges of "queerness." The present claim is that defusing this concern will take a lot of the practical oomph out of error theory.

the question "What reason have I to be moral when it demands of me that I sacrifice my self-interest?" Externalists say such reasons exist, even if they have no resonance at all with a person's actual motivational structures or faculties of judgment. Williams-esque skeptics say that nothing is a reason without the resonance, the practical oomph; John Mackie (1977) says that since morality requires this impossible power over our psychologies it must not exist; and internalists insist that morality has this queer power over everyone who is rational or sane even when morality tells us to act against what we take to be in our self-interest. If a satisfactory answer could be given to the "Why be moral?" question, there would be no reason to be skeptical of morality, nor would anyone have to posit some queer power to give it automatic practical oomph.

Exactly how morality makes these practical demands of us is something about which it is actually difficult to be precise. (This is ironic when at least some people working with this conception of morality, like Prichard [1912], claim that people who doubt that they really ought to do what morality obligates them to do actually fail to understand the terms involved in the debate.) Mackie originally casts the worry about morality's "queerness" in terms of the "to-be-pursuedness" that is ontologically built into moral goodness, much akin to the way that the sun compels those who have left the cave in Plato's famous parable. (Unfortunately, when pushed about what is really so mysterious, queer, or even sui generis about morality's supposed queerness, Mackie's argument seems to fall apart [see Shepski 2008].) Richard Garner (1990) is perhaps more successful at casting the worry about morality in terms of its "objective prescriptivity" and the fact that it is "inescapable." Richard Joyce (2001, 2006) elaborates in terms of the unique categoricity of moral reasons, the way they are "authoritative" on top of being inescapable. According to Joyce, all these features together give morality its "practical oomph" (as a technical term). Problems with all these formulations have been pointed out, often (perhaps) because of difficulties with regard to the idea of a *reason*.[2] More recently Joyce has acknowledged that practical oomph may not be able to be clearly explicated but is rather "a primitive sort of feeling/thought which resists analysis, decomposition, explication, or naturalistic demystification" (2008, 259). Joyce contends,

> [I am] prepared to accept that it may turn out that this oomph can never be adequately analyzed, that it is a kind of magical and indescribable quality. So much the worse for moral naturalism, if that is so. But what I emphatically will

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[2] It seems to me that the problem with reasons involves the question-begging presupposition of a Humean theory of reasons, as advanced by Williams (1981). If we assume that all reasons are subjective, in Williams's sense, then any sort of objective reason is going to be incomprehensible when, in many ways, it is the cogency of this latter sort of reason that is the subject matter of the debate.

not accept is any naturalist attempting to sidestep the challenge by claiming that there is nothing especially unusual about the practicality of morality that requires any special explanation. Nor will I accept that this elusive practical element is just one moral platitude among many, and that extirpating this problematic component would leave us with a kind of normativity still warranting the name "moral." (2008, 261)

Perhaps the real question is what could have possibly led Joyce, or the rest of us, to a position in which morality requires magic if it is to count as "morality" at all.

As noted, the answer begins with Scotus's rejection of eudaimonism. We are left with "morality" as something that, by definition, does not serve self-interest; rather it is seen as a check on self-interest, operating either through the fear of God, or the dictates of conscience, or perhaps the needs of society. As the modern period developed, morality lost its divine genesis but gained a social one. The conception of morality that arose in the early modern period is one in which morality is seen to be essentially *social*, since all aspects of self-love (self-regarding concern) had been expunged from the "moral point of view."

This modern view might be rightly called "the social conception of morality." On the fully secularized view, morality is primarily a social, interpersonal phenomenon. It is clear that Joyce is thinking of morality in this way. In *The Evolution of Morality* he writes, "When we think of ourselves in moral terms we are thinking of ourselves in social terms, we are evaluating actions against the background of a collective justificatory framework" (2006, 123). "Morality," he says, "seems to be designed to serve society" (65), and its distinctive subject matter is "interpersonal relations" (70–71). Employing the social conception of morality, he goes on to explain morality in evolutionary terms. According to him, "the evolutionary function of moral judgment is to provide added motivation in favor of certain adaptive social behaviors" (117). Moral judgments function as a kind of "social glue, bonding individuals together in a shared justificatory structure and providing a tool for solving many group coordination problems" (117).

The social conception of morality would not matter much if it were only attractive to error theorists, but it is, as noted, the result of a well-established normative tradition, expressing what seems to be the dominant conception of morality. Perhaps its roots are in the Judeo-Christian religions, but in any case, we can see it assumed in theories which hold that morality begins in other-regarding sentiments like empathy and sympathy, as well as in deontological theories that take the eminently reasonable Golden Rule as the starting point. It is obviously at the center of both utilitarianism (Mill 1989) and Kantian deontology (the latter insofar as morality is set against self-interest or happiness). As noted, at the dawn of contemporary moral philosophy, it is found at the end of Sidgwick's

Methods of Ethics (first published in 1902), in his "fundamental duality of practical reason" between the norms of morality and the norms of egoism or prudence. Fifty years past this, the social point of view can be found, for instance, in Kurt Baier's book *The Moral Point of View* (1958), in which Baier argues that morality is a first-person-plural phenomenon, and he entitles the final chapter of the book "Why Should We Be Moral?" And almost fifty years after Baier, the first person drops out completely in Stephen Darwall's 2006 book *The Second Person Standpoint*. Perhaps this is best expressed by the character "Out" from the opening dialogue in W. D. Falk's "Morality, Self, and Others," which begins with a statement from Out's counterpart:

> In: . . . One would hardly be a human being if the good of others, or of society at large, could not weigh with one as a cogent reason for doing what will promote it. So one has not fully learned about living like a rational and moral being unless one has learned to appreciate that one ought to do things out of regard for others, and not only out of regard for oneself.

> Out: No, you have still not got my point, I am saying that only insofar as you ought to do things—no matter whether for yourself or for others—for the sake of others, is the reason a moral reason and the ought a moral ought. Reasons of self-regard are not moral reasons at all, and you can forget about them in the reckoning of your moral obligations. (2008, 223)

Moving from the normative to the metaethical side of moral philosophy, aside from error theory, the social conception is often assumed as the explanandum of metaethical theories in both relativistic and contractarian theories of morality, especially where morality is conceived as the result of convention or negotiation. Even expressivist theories often take the social as the starting point (for a relativistic analysis, see Harman 2000; for a contractarian analysis, see Gauthier 1986; for an expressivist analysis, see Gibbard 1990; for explicit adoption of the social point of view, see Finlay 2008).

Given this social conception of morality, it is no surprise that charges of queerness arise to plague it, since morality on this view is the expression of "society's authority over the individual."[3] It is, in this sense, hegemonic toward individuals, imposing upon them from outside their own self-interest and set against it. And while we have already seen the difficulty in articulating exactly what it is that makes the social conception of morality queer, the question of why people should ever (if not always) sacrifice their self-interest for the sake of morality is germane, and morality has never really come up with a satisfactory answer. This explains the perennial interest in the question "Why be moral?" as well as the difficulty in answering it adequately. Given all this, one might reasonably inquire

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[3] This phrase is, of course, from the title of chapter 4 of Mill's *On Liberty* (1989).

whether there is an alternative conception of morality that avoids problems stemming from the opposition of morality and self-interest, and there is.

What may be called, perhaps a bit tendentiously, the "Socratic conception of morality" is one in which the starting point for morality is not the social but the personal, in fact, the first-person singular.[4] On this view, morality begins with the question "How ought I to live?" Now, of course, answering this question is going to require an answer to the question "How ought I to behave toward others?" But morality is far from exhausted by this socially oriented question. When morality is conceived Socratically, it ceases to require anything queer to have first-person authority, since this authority will emerge out of the correct answer to the question of how to live. To see this, assume that one obvious form of an answer to "How ought I to live my life?" is "You ought to live as well as possible, you ought to live the best life you possibly can." Of course, this does not get us far: there will be extensive debate over what counts as the best life possible, and, on this conception of morality, this is the subject matter of normative moral philosophy. Nevertheless, given such an answer, we need not worry about some queer force imposing itself on us from outside our lives, alienating us from ourselves and what is best for creatures like us. "The best life possible" has its practical authority built in and requires no extra queer force to compel or motivate people, because people, unless they are pathologically self-destructive, will naturally have at least some motivation to do as well for themselves as they can. The idea is not that people invariably and literally take "living the best life possible" as their explicit goal but that, barring self-defeating tendencies, we naturally want to do what seems best, all things considered. While this is consistent with a thoroughgoing egoism, it is equally consistent with a thoroughgoing altruism, since a person might find in life other people or causes that become more important to that person than selfish egoism allows.[5]

This conception of morality obviously comes from the ancient Greeks, who took eudaimonia as the telos of life; they did not debate much over the structure of morality but rather debated over what counted as the happiest life.[6] Happiness is the goal, and people ought to live in the way that will make them be as happy as they can be.[7] All the Greek debates

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[4] I do not intend to be doing historical work on Socrates's actual view. For difficulties see Penner and Rowe 1994.

[5] For more on why eudaimonism does not entail egoism, see Annas 2008.

[6] This claim is made and defended in great detail in Annas 1993.

[7] There is a notorious aspect to this debate about the translation of "eudaimonia" to "happiness," since many think that "happy" in English most properly refers to a pleasant feeling or mood that can come and go, as if the word were solely the antonym of something like "grief" or "sadness." There are, however, other senses of the word "happy" in English, as we may refer to someone who lived a "happy life" where this does not imply that the person was always in a good mood. "Happy" in the sense of "a happy life" rides on top of moods that come and go.

concerned which sort of life was happiest: some said it is the life of virtue, others said it is the life of pleasure, and so on. One's morality, on this conception, was whatever values and norms one adopted that ultimately guided one's life to that end, given how one happened to conceive of that end. Thus, both Epicurianism and Stoicism were moral theories. In neither is morality some external point of view that is imposed on agents, it emerges from the agent's own natural goals and so cannot be "set against" the agent's self-interest in a way that implies something queer.

To see this conception of the relationship of agents to their own happiness, one can turn, surprisingly, to Immanuel Kant, who wrote:

> There is, however, *one* end that can be presupposed as actual in the case of all rational beings (insofar as imperatives apply to them, namely as dependent beings). And therefore one purpose that they not merely *could* have but that we can safely presuppose they all actually *do have* by a natural necessity, and that purpose is *happiness*. . . . It may be set forth not merely as necessary to some uncertain, merely possible purpose but to a purpose that can be presupposed surely and a priori in the case of every human being, because it belongs to his essence. (1998, 26)

Consistent with Sidgwick's "fundamentally duality of practical reason," Kant famously contrasted the imperatives of prudence, which he saw as guiding one's pursuit of happiness, to the imperatives of morality. Contrary to Kant, on the Socratic conception prudence is a proper part of morality, just as *phronesis* in the Greek and *prudentia* in the Latin are the names of the virtue governing practical rationality or practical wisdom.[8] Kant's subjectivist picture of happiness, something close to "having one's desires satisfied," is tied to our animal nature, taking pleasure and pain as its basic values, compared to the Greek conception of it as living well or flourishing in the most excellent or virtuous of ways (see Irwin 1996). (The way the Socratic view of morality conceptualizes the contrast between categorical and hypothetical imperatives is addressed toward the end of this article.)

It is easy to misconstrue what the Socratic picture is committed to. For example, some confusions can arise from an imprecise understanding of the idea that there is a single sort of good life for everyone, that taking eudaimonia as our goal requires taking a single kind of life as good in a way that undermines our individuality. This is not the idea, however. As an apt analogy, consider nutrition. Each of us has a diet that would be best for us, given who we are, our ages, gender, physical idiosyncrasies, and so

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[8] This is similar to how Philippa Foot, following Warren Quinn, sees it. The difference is that they see morality as a part of practical rationality instead of seeing practical rationality as part of morality. I think that either way is consistent with the Socratic conception of morality, for in either case being a morally good person is at least partly constitutive of living the best life possible. See Foot 2001 and Quinn 1993a.

forth; a diet that is tailor-made for each of us. There will be a great deal of difference between the diets, but every human being needs proteins, vitamins, and calories. Our best diets are simultaneously generic and specific. The Socratic picture takes our happiness to be similarly generic and specific. The generic aspects are those that are due to our bare agency or our human natures, as creatures who are mortal and can feel pain and fear while also having appetites and passions, creatures who need to make long-term plans and be able to execute them, live among conspecifics, and so on. The specific aspects will concern what differentiates one person from another: personal temperament, particular needs, talents, and abilities, and so on. The idea is that we need not think that there is a single true answer to the question "Which life is happiest?" for all people, just as there is no single true answer to the question "Which diet is healthiest?" for all people. This does not of course leave us with nothing to say about how to live well, and even perhaps to point to elements of the good life of which all good humans lives must partake, just as there are elements of a good diet that all humans must share.

Another possible worry might be about the teleology involved in eudaimonist theories, and whether this is a source of ontological queerness which putatively infects the concept of eudaimonia. A first response is to note that however many the challenges teleology must and does face, no error theorist has argued that the queerness that infects morality is the same phenomenon that underlies the way a sunflower tracks the sun or the way an embryo develops in its natural environment. To admit this would be to admit that the queerness of morality is, in fact, a part of nature, which is not something the error theory wants to do. But perhaps teleology is a problem, ontologically speaking, for other reasons: obviously, it has a checkered history, at best. In fact, there is some reason to think that whatever phenomenon the Greeks were alluding to with the word "teleology" is one that modern biology also needs to explain or explain away (see, e.g., Wimsatt 1972; Walsh 2008). The concept the Greeks employed was that of proper function as it is used in the "ergon" argument, first found in Plato's *Republic* (352d–54c) and then, more famously, in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1097b22–98a20). The point is not that issues of teleology and proper function present no problems for the Greeks, only that their view unabashedly appeals to human nature through human biology and that modern biologists wrestle with the same problems regarding teleological explanations and whether or not proper functions are reducible. In general, either teleology is a genuine phenomenon, for biologists and eudaimonists, or it is not; either biological or moral proper functions reduce to lower-level phenomena or they do not. The point is that eudaimonists can take their naturalistic lead from the biologists one way or the other.

Still another possible confusion may be that the Socratic conception of morality would require some form of internalism about reason or

motivation, since it seems as if, on this view, the reasons we have are determined by our own internally accepted goals. Surely, there may be internalist variations on the theme, and Plato's parable about coming out of the cave into the sunshine comes quickly to mind. But just as surely, externalist versions are possible as well. For example, Foot (2001) thinks that flourishing is determined by human nature and that people may become so alienated from what would cause them to flourish that they are psychologically incapable of being motivated to do what they ought to do. (Think of an old and recalcitrant miser or racist beyond redemption.) A simple and admittedly too brief way of glossing the idea of an external reason is to draw a simple distinction between "X's having a reason to φ" and "there being a reason for X to φ": we can analyze the former phrase in Williams's (1981) terms as being a member of (or implied by) a person's contingent and subjective motivational set and the latter phrase in terms of what would actually bring about a person's flourishing (for a similar distinction see Thomson 2003, 23). So, one may hold, as an externalist would, that there could *be* a reason for a person to do something even if it is psychologically impossible for that person to *have* that reason to do it; the recalcitrant miser's life would go better if his miserly ways were abandoned, even if, as a psychological fact, the miser is beyond redemption (see Wong 2006). Sometimes one can't teach an old dog new tricks even if the old dog's life would go better if those tricks could only somehow (perhaps *per impossible*) be learned.

A final confusion about the Socratic conception of morality involves, unfortunately, a set of debates that are themselves so large and complex that they cannot be addressed here. These result (again) from the idea that there is a *single* end to life, and take up a variety of worries regarding the possible incommensurability of our values and also worries that practical rationality cannot be unified in the manner under consideration. For the moment, these issues will have to be set aside as subject matter for future work.[9] And while there are surely still other misconceptions of the Socratic view of morality, this view should be both familiar and plausible enough for us to continue to develop it so that we may appreciate its bearing on error theories of morality.

Despite the prevalence of the social conception of morality, especially in today's philosophical literature, the Socratic conception is still in play in commonsense morality in some important ways. It comes out clearest when people say that those who have bad moral values still have moral values, even if these moral values do not lead them to treat other people with the consideration that is found in people with good moral values. Bad, immoral people have their moralities, they are just pernicious moralities. Taliban morality says it is permissible to stone adulteresses, while

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[9] For the incommensurability of our ends, see Chang 1997, especially the introduction. Also Chang 2004; Annas 1993; and Anscombe 1995. For a contrary view, see Copp 1997.

Dick Cheney's morality says it is permissible to torture *suspected* terrorists. Vicious moralities are still moralities, in the way that bad reasons are still reasons. We certainly want to say that even someone like Hitler is a moral agent, in possession of a moral view of the world, regardless of how depraved and immoral it might be.[10] What makes vicious or defective moralities still moralities is that they are the expression of the person's ultimate values, where these are the values by which the person strives to live; they are the person's finally authoritative rule of life, whatever it may be. On the social conception, people who don't give a tinker's dam for other people have no moral values at all. It seems perfectly reasonable, however, to say, on the contrary, that they do have moral values, just bad moral values.

Thought of in this way, the Socratic conception of morality is an example of what William Frankena calls a "formal conception of morality." Frankena says that a formal conception of morality is one which holds that all an "action guide" need be in order to count as a "morality" is that a person regard it as prescriptive, universalizable, and "definitive, final, over-riding, or supremely authoritative" (1966, 688). It seems reasonable, however, to reject the criterion of universalizability, since the Socratic conception would deem a free rider to have a morality, albeit defective, and non-self-defeating free riders cannot universalize their morality on pain of there not being anything left upon which they may ride freely.

So, the Socratic conception of morality says that a person's morality is constituted by the person's moral values, whatever they may be, where these are taken to be those values or norms that are prescriptive and have a final authority for that person. How a person relates to other people will of course be a part of the person's morality, unless the person is a hermit or stranded, like Robinson Crusoe. But even hermits have characters, based on their values, and these can be good or bad, better or worse; even hermits may choose between life and suicide, and this is a paradigmatically moral choice. Hermitic lives can be happy or miserable.

This is not to say that the Socratic conception is recognizable today only by adverting to the eccentric good lives of hermits or the bad lives of immoral people; it does rear its head within everyday morality as well. Since it holds that morality consists in both other-regarding and self-regarding considerations in a unified conception of practical rationality, the Socratic conception will show itself most clearly in those cases in which what one morally ought to do is to favor one's self-interest over the interests of others. A simple, fabricated example of this is given by Falk, who, in articulating the Socratic conception of morality (though not under

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[10] Without taking a stand on Hitler's sanity, it is worth noting that limiting cases seem to be sociopaths or psychopaths who are considered insane and therefore not responsible for their actions. Insanity relieves one of responsibility and changes one's nature, much like being rabid.

that name), writes: "It may also be that . . . someone ought to stand up for his own good even to the detriment of another. It could be sound advice to say to a woman in strife with herself and tied to a demanding parent, 'You ought to consider yourself, and so break away now, hard as it may be on the parent'" (2008, 240).

It may also be seen in sadly common, real-life examples in which one's self-interested considerations have as much moral salience in a decision as other-regarding considerations. As an example, consider the case of Herbert Freeman Jr., a victim of the devastation caused by the breaking of the levees in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (see Lee 2006). After bringing his aged mother to the Superdome and watching her die, he was then, days later, pressed by the National Guard to get on a bus before paying his final respects to her. He tells the story choked with evident filial piety, as follows:

> My mother died September on the first, and she had to stay out there in the heat for four days; because I left on the fourth, and she was still there. I wanted to go and be with her. The National Guard told me I had to get on the bus, and they all had AK-47s. He told me he was doing his job. I said, "Well, let me, let's go back there just to see her before I leave," and he said, "No, you're not going to do anything. You're going to get on this bus and stay on this bus." Just like that. So, I had to make a decision whether to go against authority and get myself in trouble, or to just, you know, leave it alone and I could handle it a little better later on. You know. So, I prayed to myself and the voice within me told me just to get on the bus, don't do anything, just stand still, and watch my salvation. (Lee 2006, act 2; my transcription)

This is a real-life moral decision. Relevant for us are the many considerations faced by Freeman at the moment of his making this decision: there were self-interested considerations that concerned maintaining his safety, integrity, and self-respect, familial and filial considerations, social considerations regarding the other evacuees, considerations about the use or abuse of power on the part of the National Guardsman, considerations of whether or not Freeman's case merited special consideration, and whether or not it would have mattered at all to the effective flow of aid to those in need if Freeman had gone back to pay his last respects. What is crucial is that he was faced with a distinctly moral decision and *all* the considerations involved in it merited being regarded equally as moral considerations. Morality demands that we be fair to ourselves just as much as it demands that we be fair to others. If it is said that charity begins at home, we might note that justice does as well (Bloomfield 2011). Insofar as this is true, self-regarding considerations are neither more nor less *moral* than other-regarding considerations. It would be invidious to parse out some of the considerations and confer upon them the elevated status of overriding morality while discounting the others as merely self-interested or prudential.

Crucially, none of these considerations has any rational or motivational queerness attached to them that other considerations lack: there is a problem in need of a solution; some facts are more salient than others, but none is in any way queer or has some automatic authority. Deliberatively, they are all of a piece (see Quinn 1993b; Foot 2001; Thomson 2003; Setiya 2007; Annas 2011). And this does have a practical impact on how we ought to deliberate; the shift from the social to the Socratic point of view is not merely a semantic change. There is no point to making a weighted distinction among all the considerations Freeman had to deliberate upon, and no reasonable way to deny that the decision Freeman made was a moral decision. Nor is there any moral presumption that the other-regarding considerations trump the self-regarding considerations. The social conception of morality does not do justice to the range of considerations that merit genuinely moral concern.

On the social conception, the problem of morality is not how one should fit other-regarding considerations into one's well-lived life but rather how to sublimate self-regarding considerations to one's other-regarding concerns. The queer authority of "moral" considerations requires us to discount or even silence self-interested considerations, since these are mutually exclusive. Again, it should be no surprise that this understanding of morality alienates us from ourselves. If such a thing were the case, it would indeed be queer. On the Socratic conception, the problem of how to fit others into one's well-lived life does still remain. The idea is not that somehow adopting the Socratic conception, by itself, removes all possible tension or conflict between self-regarding and other-regarding considerations. What the conception does do is treat all these considerations as being on a par qua moral considerations, as opposed to treating "moral" considerations as if they were intrinsically at odds with self-interested ones. It treats all these considerations as being inextricably intertwined with each other, so that how we treat others cannot be considered independently of how we treat ourselves, and vice versa. No consideration has a somehow sui generis rational or motivational authority or practical oomph that attaches to it in virtue of its "moral" nature. As the quotes above from Falk and Freeman suggest, it is all moral deliberation.

The problem of morality then takes a shape different from the one it has under the social conception. There is no "fundamental duality of practical reason" à la Sidgwick, nor is someone who comes close to the moral ideal, a "moral saint," going to be some disfigured character that no one would want as a friend or a family member, much less be such a character oneself (see Wolf 1982). The problem of morality ceases to be the search for a justification for morality, given its special (queer) status, but rather becomes the problem of figuring out what sort of life is best for human beings to live, all things (including other-regarding things) considered. Answering this question, in light of all the relevant facts (about oneself and one's options) and without making any errors, will yield the

best possible morality, the correct morality, for each of us to adopt. (Recall from the discussion above of nutrition that this correct morality will be a mixture of the generic and the specific.) Call this correct morality, the morality that we in fact ought to be living in accord with, "ultimate morality."[11] Ultimate morality will probably require us to modify what we pretheoretically take "morality" to require, as well as require us to reevaluate what we had thought was in our self-interest: for example, correcting for moral mistakes would lead people who think they have a right to oppress others to stop, and what many people with bad moralities take to be sacrifices to their self-interest might turn out not to be sacrifices at all, given a correct understanding of what is in one's self-interest. As an example of the latter, imagine some honor that I can only gain by cheating. It might seem that not cheating causes me to sacrifice the benefit of being honored. But after the reevaluation of what is truly in my self-interest, I will see an undeserved honor not as a benefit but rather as a cause of shame.

The point here is not really to normatively vindicate the Socratic conception over the social. That would be a large project, going far beyond the conclusion that we started off trying to reach. Rather, this narrow conclusion is reached by demonstrating that the Socratic conception is a viable and attractive metaethical alternative to the social one. What makes it viable is that it can do everything required by the concept of morality, everything that the social conception can do. What makes it pragmatically important is the way it forces us to change our view of what counts as morally significant or relevant in a given situation. What makes it meta-ethically attractive is not only that it makes good sense out of this normative project but also that its authority is not queer. If we take morality to be primarily a social phenomenon, then it has got to be queer in order for it to have guaranteed authority over our individual deliberative procedures. If, on the other hand, we take a person's morality to be whichever set of norms that person takes to have final authority, and ultimate morality to be the norms that person ought to have, the entire issue of morality's supposed queerness drops out. On the Socratic conception of morality, ultimate morality will bear the right normative relation to the goal of living as well as possible which gives it action-guiding authority, even though ultimate morality will not be logically dependent on an agent's actual, contingent motivational set. If a person's actual morality has a (non-queer) final authority for a person, then ultimate morality, which is really a corrected version of a person's actual morality, will also have

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[11] It is worth emphasizing that the Socratic conception of morality and the idea of ultimate morality do not, by themselves, require moral realism. The improvements that bring people from their personal moralities to ultimate morality might only be improvements in non-moral knowledge and rationality or coherence of thought. Moral realism only comes into play if there are, in fact, moral properties or facts in the world that must be accounted for by ultimate morality.

authority for that person. And this is the case regardless of whether or not it is psychologically possible for a person to be motivated as ultimate morality dictates: to use an example of Wong's (2006), a man has good reason to stop beating his wife, regardless of what happens to be in or implied by his subjective motivational set.[12]

What is supposedly queer about the practical oomph of the social conception of morality is its authority, its non-hypothetical or categorical demandingness. What we have found is that a person's moral values have built-in authority, and nothing queer need be involved. Nor will ultimate morality's authority be queer, since its provenance is no different from a person's actual morality: the authority derives from what will lead the agent to live the best life possible. Since everyone who is not pathologically self-defeating wants to live as well as possible, we would all abide by ultimate morality, as best we could, on pain of living in a self-defeating manner, for by definition this is just our morality or rule of life purged of any mistakes, and we presumably only make these mistakes inadvertently. Still, no queerness is involved, as noted, since it is a given that everyone, or at least everyone not pathologically self-destructive, wants to live as well as he or she can. There is no difference in the logic of a hypothetical imperative that applies in virtue of a goal that all agents necessarily have and a categorical imperative that necessarily applies regardless of what goals agents have, since the quantifiers in the imperatives will range over the same agents. (I return to this logical point below.) While the prescriptions of ultimate morality will at bottom be hypothetical, since they are designed to lead to the best-lived life of the agent, they may *appear* categorical (hegemonic, alien) to the agent, since the agent's actual motivational set may be quite out of line with what it ought to be.[13]

This point merits repetition: it may *appear* as if the prescriptions of ultimate morality are categorical, since they are not constrained by what can actually motivate the agent. (Remember the externalist distinction from above between having a reason and being a reason.) This is only an appearance, however, since *ex hypothesi* ultimate morality is what will in fact lead the agent to the happiest, best-lived life possible, and this is a goal we can assume, following Kant, that all nonpathological agents possess.

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[12] The point here is not that ultimate morality will have the content that I happen to think that it does, Western academic that I am; rather, the point is that ultimate reality will lead people to live the best life possible for them, whatever this may turn out to be.

[13] There are many ideas that go under the name "categorical imperative." Here I focus on the one that contrasts to "hypothetical imperative." Another contrasts to imperatives derived from desires or preferences of the agent: categorical reasons apply to us by virtue of our human nature, regardless of our actual desires or preferences. If one assumes this second idea of categoricity, then there is a sense in which the Socratic conception can yield categorical imperatives. A person ought to do what will lead to the best life for the person, regardless of what the person happens to want or desire or prefer, for all this may be quite mistaken indeed. There would be nothing queer whatsoever about this sort of categoricity. See Anscombe 1995 and Foot 2001.

Both categorical imperatives and the imperatives of ultimate morality apply necessarily, but it is only the former kind of imperative that is queerly imposed on the individual from the outside.

Joyce has tried to anticipate this move in the following way. He writes:

> Moral imperatives rarely depend on the goals of those to whom they are addressed. Even if, as a matter of fact, it is in our nature to have a certain end (as Kant thought, claiming that Mother Nature provides each of us with a desire for his or her own welfare), the hypothetical imperative advising us how to satisfy that end would still not have the kind of practical oomph we require of a moral imperative, for moral imperatives are not merely the ones that people *do not* evade by citing special goals, they are the ones that people *cannot* evade by citing special goals. This is what makes them *inescapable.* (2006, 60–61)

The problem with this response is that the imperatives of ultimate morality *cannot* be evaded by citing special ends, like the special end of wealth or fame, and are thus just as logically inescapable as categorical imperatives, despite their being hypothetical imperatives that take the agents' happiness, or the best possible life for them, as their end. The point Joyce fails to appreciate is that people can be radically alienated from what would lead to the best possible life for them, such that they cannot be motivated by what inescapably ought to motivate them.

The point above about deontic logic can be elucidated as follows. Remember, each person is necessarily pursuing happiness or the best possible life for himself or herself. Now, consider the following logical possibility: assume the Socratic conception of morality and imagine we learn that ultimate morality says that all people will live the best life possible if they always behave toward themselves and others with good will or as if they are members of the Kingdom of Ends. This may be false from an empirical point of view, but it is certainly a logical possibility that this is what makes people live the best lives possible for them; it is far from contradictory to think that acting with good will may make people flourish as much as possible. And given this possibility we can see that the hypothetical imperatives of ultimate morality would apply to exactly the same people and have exactly the same content as the queer categorical imperatives that a Kantian might prescribe, given the social conception of morality. The only difference is that on the Socratic conception, non-queer prescriptions apply to people hypothetically in virtue of their pursuit of the best lives they can live, while on the social point of view, queer prescriptions apply to people categorically in virtue of being independent of any of their pursuits. But the content of the imperatives will be the same. And they apply to the same range of people with the same modal strength. What makes them moral is their content, the fact that they concern situations in which quality of life comes into play, and the

importance of this to those ends about which we care most. Insisting that they are still not moral imperatives despite having the same content and modal strength as categorical imperatives is simply to insist on differences that make no practical difference. And differences that make no practical difference cannot be moral differences. Therefore, morality need not be queer to be bindingly and inescapably authoritative.

And if this is the case, then the argument that gets error theory about morality going does not get off the ground. If morality is a social phenomenon, as the error theorist presumes, then it does need to be queer to gain authority over people's behavior. But morality need not be thought of in these purely social terms and can cogently be conceived as the subject matter involved in answering the question "How ought I to live my life?" When conceived in this way, there is nothing queer about it in the least.

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