

This is a draft of an article whose final and definitive form will be published in the Australasian Journal of Philosophy [2015]. The Australasian Journal of Philosophy is available online at:
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Good News for Moral Error Theorists: A Master Argument Against Companions in Guilt Strategies

Abstract: Moral error theories are often rejected by appeal to ‘companions in guilt’ arguments. The most popular form of companions in guilt argument takes epistemic reasons for belief as a ‘companion’ and proceeds by analogy. I show that this strategy fails. I claim that the companions in guilt theorist must understand epistemic reasons as evidential support relations if her argument is to be dialectically effective. I then present a dilemma. Either epistemic reasons are evidential support relations or they are not. If they are not then, the companions in guilt argument fails. If they are, then a reduction of epistemic reasons to evidential support relations becomes available and, consequently, epistemic reasons cease to be a viable ‘companion’ for moral reasons. I recommend this structure of argument over existing strategies within the literature and defend my claims against recent objections from companions in guilt theorists.

Keywords: Companions in guilt; moral error theory; epistemic reasons.

0. Introduction

Moral error theorists believe that our moral judgments are systematically mistaken [Marks 2013, Olson 2013, Streumer 2013]. In this regard moral judgments are, they claim, on a par with judgments of other, systematically mistaken regions of discourse such as astrology or pseudo-scientific theories [Joyce 2001]. If true, this is a striking result. Not only are moral convictions often strongly held but they are also of obvious practical importance. Yet this striking result follows from two intuitively plausible claims.

The first claim concerns the presuppositions that we make as ordinary moral judges.¹ An example illustrates the point. Suppose that I witness a stranger committing an act of gratuitous cruelty. I immediately judge that he morally ought not to act in this way. In making this judgment I presumably take it that there is some *reason* that he ought not to act in this way - perhaps his action causes avoidable suffering, or demeans the victim. And insofar as my judgment is *moral*, I take this to be a reason for the stranger not to act in this way even if he wishes to do so, or if some social convention happens to permit it. In doing this I presuppose the existence of what are typically referred to as *categorical reasons*

¹ Concerns with categoricity aren’t the only basis for a moral error theory. But they are the only basis with which I will be concerned here.

for action: reasons for action that don't just obtain in virtue of one's contingently held desires or of mere social convention.² The existence of this kind of reason is generally thought to be presupposed by ordinary moral judges when making moral judgments.³ Call this *the conceptual premise*. The second premise of the error-theoretic argument is that there are no categorical reasons for action. This premise is supported by the claim that reasons for action exist only where there is some desire or social convention to explain their existence [Garner 1990: 143]. This view is further supported by metaphysical considerations (more on this below). Call it *the metaphysical premise*. The conclusion of these two premises is that our moral judgments are systematically mistaken.

One of the most elegant and popular responses to this argument is the 'companions in guilt' strategy. This strategy undermines the moral error theory by drawing an analogy between morality and some non-moral region of discourse, typically that involving epistemic reasons for belief [Stratton-Lake 2002, Shafer-Landau 2003, Bedke 2010, Rowland 2013].⁴ The strategy can be represented by the following simple argument. The first premise – *the parity premise* – states that the metaphysical premise of the moral error-theoretic argument (as above) entails that there are no categorically normative epistemic reasons for belief. The second premise – *the epistemic existence premise* – states that there are some categorically normative epistemic reasons for belief.⁵ It follows that the metaphysical premise of the moral error-theoretic argument is false. So, the argument for the moral error theory is unsound. Companions in guilt arguments of this kind are increasingly influential in the present literature. In this article I show that they cannot succeed. This is good news for moral error theorists.

My argument has three stages. In the first stage (section 1) I claim that establishing the epistemic existence premise (in the dialectical context) requires understanding epistemic reasons for belief as evidential support relations. In the second stage (section 2) I argue that epistemic reasons for belief aren't just evidential support relations. So, the companions in guilt strategy fails. In the third stage (section 3) I show that even if epistemic reasons for belief are just evidential support relations, this undermines the parity premise and so, causes the companions in guilt argument to fail in a different way. It follows from these three steps that the companions in guilt argument *must* fail. I then show how my argument represents a development on the literature (section 4).

1. The Epistemic Existence Premise

² For further precision see Shafer-Landau [2003: 15] discussion of 'stance-independence'

³ For useful critical discussion see Finlay [2008].

⁴ For the distinction between 'analogy based' and 'entailment based' companions in guilt arguments see Lillehammer [2007].

⁵ Terminology from Cuneo [2007] (though my use differs in important ways from his).

In this section I focus on the epistemic existence premise. I show that successfully establishing this premise (in the dialectical context) requires that categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief are just evidential support relations. This is the first premise of the overall argument of the article.

- (1) The epistemic existence premise can be successfully established (in the dialectical context) only if categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief just are evidential support relations.

As a preliminary, it is necessary to say something about evidential support relations. I don't think that it is necessary to say very much however, as my basic argument does not turn on any of the fineries of this complex matter. By 'evidential support relation' I'll understand a probability-raising relation that holds between the evidence, *e*, and some hypothesis, *h*. These probability-raising relations are usually understood against a background of information: *e* raises (or lowers) the probability of *h* *given* some background information, *b*. Different probability measures make use of different background information. So, for example, *e* may raise the probability of *h* against the background of some agent's prior beliefs. In this case, *e* can be said to raise *subjective probability* of *h* (for that agent). Alternatively, *e* may raise the probability of *h* against the background of some prior information that consists only of some specified set of *true* propositions. In this case, *e* can be said to raise the probability of *h*, though it may not raise the *subjective* probability of *h* (for any agent). In discussing (1), I won't specify how I understand the background information and so, the exact nature of the probability. This is so as to allow that my argument is effective for those who are most comfortable understanding epistemic reasons subjectively as well as those who are not. I am happy to allow that there is a subjective sense of 'epistemic reason' for which the relevant probability-raising relation is against a background of prior beliefs, and a more objective sense for which the relevant probability-raising relation to think about is restricted to some suitably specified set of true propositions.

I now return to (1). My claim is that the epistemic existence premise can be successfully established (in the dialectical context) only if categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief just are evidential support relations. The key point here is in parentheses. One might think that establishing the epistemic existence premise – that is, establishing that there are some categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief – is straightforward. Simply point to an apparent instance. Suppose I look at the departure board. It says that my train leaves at 0825. Surely this evidential consideration is a normative reason for me to believe that the train leaves at 0825. And surely it is so whether or not I *want* to believe that my train leaves at 0825. So the normative reason is also categorical. So the epistemic existence premise is true. So there are categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief.

In the present dialectical context however, this argument would of little use. Moral error theorists are already committed to denying the existence of categorical reasons for action and thereby biting all kinds of otherwise unattractive bullets about everyday thought and talk. They are committed, for

example, to denying that torturing the innocent is morally wrong. They are unlikely to flinch at biting the bullet as regards the 0825 to London. The moral error theorist will simply deny that she possesses a categorical, normative epistemic reason to believe that her train leaves at 0825. She will deny this precisely because she denies the existence of categorical reasons. What she will not deny is that the departure board provides evidential support that the train will leave at 0825. But she will deny that this entails the existence of a categorical, normative epistemic reason for belief.

Importantly though, this denial is not an option if evidential support relations just are categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief. If there is an identity here, the error theorist won't be able to acknowledge the existence of an evidential support relation without thereby committing herself to the existence of a categorical normative epistemic reason for belief. This is the basis of the argument for (1). Merely citing instances of 'everyday' categorical normative epistemic reasons for belief is dialectically insufficient against the error theorist. It is insufficient as the error theorist will admit the existence of evidential support relations but deny the existence of categorical normative reasons. What would be necessary in the present dialectical context is to shortcut this response by showing that evidential support relations just are categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief.

This basic point is borne out in some of the more sophisticated arguments that get offered for the epistemic existence premise. To see this, consider the three 'undesirable results' that Terence Cuneo [2007: Ch. 5] claims to follow from the denial of the epistemic existence premise (or as he calls it 'epistemic nihilism'). The first is that there could be no epistemic reason to believe anything, including the epistemic nihilism. The second is that there could be no epistemic 'merits or demerits'. The third is that there could be no valid arguments for anything, including the epistemic nihilism. These undesirable results are intended to motivate the epistemic existence premise. But their effectiveness in doing so – I shall now claim – is also dependent on understanding evidential support relations as epistemic reasons for belief. That is to say, it is also dependent on (1).

To see this, begin by thinking about the first undesirable result – that if the epistemic error theory is true, then there could be no reason to believe it. This gives epistemic nihilism the ring of self-defeat or internal inconsistency. But, as a number of error theorists have noted, this undesirable result does not in fact show epistemic nihilism to be either self-defeating or internally inconsistent. An epistemic error theorist can admit that there is no categorical, normative epistemic reason to believe epistemic nihilism. But she can deny that this undermines the *truth* of epistemic nihilism. It is possible that there is no categorical normative reason to believe a theory because there are no categorical normative reasons. Yet the theory may still be true. This claim is explicit in a

number of authors who are skeptical of the companions in guilt approach [Fletcher 2009, Streumer 2013, Olson 2013].⁶

This dialectical move is only open to the error theorist however if she draws a distinction between evidential support relations and categorically normative epistemic reasons for belief. If this distinction is not available, then the first undesirable result entails the third (on the assumption that valid arguments require evidential support relations to obtain between their premises and conclusion).⁷ And this would be a very troubling result for the error theorist indeed – perhaps sufficient to warrant rejection of epistemic nihilism even from her perspective. So, the success of the argument for the epistemic existence premise turns on the identification of categorical, normative epistemic reasons with evidential support relations.

This is further illustrated by reflection on the second undesirable result. According to this result, epistemic nihilism entails that there could be no epistemic merits or demerits including justification, rationality and warrant. This is a worrying result. But once again it would not be sufficient to establish the epistemic existence premise in the present dialectical context. Just as the moral error theorist will deny that torturing the innocent is wrong precisely because she denies that there are any categorical reasons, so, she may deny that certain beliefs are justified, rational, warranted (etc) just because there are no categorical reasons for belief. This, she will maintain, is consistent with the existence of evidential support relations holding in relation to those beliefs. Once again, the success of the argument for the epistemic existence premise will turn on the identification of categorical, normative epistemic reasons with evidential support relations.

⁶ These authors may accept that there are *hypothetical* normative reasons to believe the epistemic error theory [Olson 2013: 160]. This allows them to respond to Bedke's worry (on behalf of companions in guilt theorists) that "If we dispense with support or favouring relations, we no longer have the resources to say anything about which beliefs one *should* hold based on one's evidence." [Bedke 2010: 52]. Error theorists should claim that there exist hypothetical reasons for evidence-based belief

⁷ Cuneo is working with a conception of a valid argument as "in the paradigmatic case" premises "offered in support its conclusion in the sense of being offered as evidential support for [it]." [Cuneo 2007: 121]. One might wonder, following Harman [1986], whether it is really the non-existence of *valid arguments* so understood that would follow from the non-existence of evidential support relations. Cuneo is sensitive to this worry. He suggests that if Harman is right to distinguish arguments from inferences, then it is the possibility of a 'good inference' (and not the possibility of a valid argument) that would be undermined by epistemic nihilism. Cuneo takes this to be an 'undesirable result' in its own right.

An important case-study of the error-theorist's argument here concerns *knowledge*. Richard Rowland [2013] considers the implication of the lack of epistemic merits and demerits for knowledge ascriptions. Knowledge, he claims, entails justification. If one knows that *p*, then one is justified in believing that *p*. And an epistemic error theory entails that, for any *p*, one isn't justified in believing *p*. So, the epistemic error theory entails that no-one knows anything: global skepticism. This case is important as it might be thought to represent a counter-example to (1). This is because Rowland's argument doesn't seem to rely on an identity between categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief and evidential support relations in generating an absurdity for the epistemic nihilist. His argument simply relies on knowledge entailing justification.

Consider, however, how an error theorist will respond to Rowland. The error theorist will argue that there are really two ways of thinking about the justification entailed by knowledge. We can think of it *merely* in terms of evidential support relations, or we can think of it in terms of categorical normative reasons. Understood as the latter, one possesses justification for a proposition only if one possesses some categorical, normative epistemic reason to believe that proposition. The epistemic error theorist will deny that *this* ever happens. Understood as the former however, one possesses justification for a proposition only if one possesses evidence (of some degree) for the proposition. The epistemic error theorist will be happy to accept that *this* does happen. In short, she will claim that we possess evidence for some of our beliefs, but not categorical normative reasons to hold those beliefs. And so, we do have knowledge. This might seem to be a substantial bullet to bite – it perhaps requires a revision of ordinary thoughts about knowledge. But recall that moral error theorists have already bitten the bullet in accepting that that torturing the innocent for fun is not morally wrong. Comparatively, the response to Rowland outlined above doesn't look too bad.

The aim of this section has been to show that if the companions in guilt theorist is to establish the epistemic existence premise (given the dialectical context), then she must identify epistemic reasons for belief with evidential support relations. In the above discussion I hope to have made a presumptive case for this conditional conclusion. So, I take there to be a presumptive case in favour of (1).

2. Epistemic Reasons for Belief Aren't Evidential Support Relations

In the next two sections I show that (1) leads to the failure of the companions in guilt strategy. The most obvious way to do this is by establishing the following additional premise:

- (2) Categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief are *not* evidential support relations.

If (2) is true, then we have sufficient resource to reject the companions in guilt argument. This is because the conjunction of (1) and (2) entails that one of the

two premises of the companions in guilt argument cannot be successfully established. Specifically:

- (3) The epistemic existence premise cannot be successfully established (in the dialectical context).

The contentious premise here is (2). It is sometimes thought that the identity between epistemic reasons for belief and evidential support relations is obvious (perhaps even analytic). So how can one plausibly deny (2)? My basic claim is that whilst one could reasonably claim that epistemic reasons for belief and evidential support relations are the very same thing, one would thereby be making use of a *non-normative* sense of 'epistemic reason for belief'. This basic claim has been mooted by a number of authors who are skeptical of the companions in guilt strategy.⁸

Begin by noting that this *kind* of claim has precedent. There are many standard uses of 'reason' that are clearly non-normative. Causal, motivating and explanatory reasons all fit this description. More relevant are 'institutional reasons' such as the reasons associated with games and sports, etiquette and the law [Joyce 2001]. In these cases, one may possess a reason of the relevant sort without thereby possessing a *normative* reason. For example, in a country with unjust laws, one may possess a legal reason to perform some reprehensible act, though one possesses no normative reason to do so [Lillehammer 2002]. In order for one to possess a normative reason it would be necessary that one also possesses a reason to 'take part' in the relevant institution. It is at least coherent to think that epistemic reasons are of this kind. If so, it is coherent for one to possess evidence for some proposition, though no categorical, normative epistemic reason to believe it. One would also require a reason to engage in the business of believing (the truth) with respect to that proposition.⁹

To see why this reading is actually *plausible* begin by thinking about what a normative reason is. There is no settled answer to this question. But one popular (and feasible) place to start is with the relations of reasons to facts about what one *ought* to do or to believe. According to a popular version of this claim, a normative reason for believing a proposition is evidence that one ought to believe it.¹⁰ Let's start by working with this account. I believe that it should make us question the identity between epistemic reasons for belief and evidential support relations. To see this, suppose that we conjoin (i) the above account of normative reasons with (ii) an identity between evidential support relations and normative epistemic reasons for belief. The result would be that (iii) the

⁸ It is possible to read Fletcher [2009] in this way.

⁹ One might argue that engaging in the 'institution of believing' is relevantly disanalogous from other institutional practices by being non-optional [cf. Railton 2005]. I am not sure whether this is true, but in any case it would not be of any obvious normative significance – a point forcefully made by Enoch [2011a].

¹⁰ Kearns and Star [2009]. A variant reads reasons as an *explanation* of why one ought to respond in some way [Broome 2013]. My arguments apply equally to both.

possession of evidence for a proposition is *always* evidence that one *ought* to believe that proposition. Although some philosophers have accepted (iii), I think it highly implausible. The basic reason for this stems from reflection on so-called ‘trivial truths’ – propositions that it is of no practical value (or disvalue) to hold a true (or false) belief about.¹¹ Suppose that I possess, and am aware of possessing, evidence, *e*, that bears on some proposition, *p*. But suppose that I have no interest in arriving at a true or evidentially supported belief about that proposition. And suppose that it would not serve any practical end for me to do so. If one nevertheless maintains that *e* is evidence that I *ought* to believe that *p* (and not merely that *e* is evidence for the *truth* of *p*), the burden is surely very much on them to explain why. So – on the present understanding of normative reasons – the burden is very much on one who denies (2) rather than on one who accepts it. This is especially the case given that the institutional model of epistemic reasons is already on the table. For on this model epistemic reasons for belief construed as evidential support relations will be normative – that is, will be evidence that one *ought* to believe in some way – only if one possesses a prior reason to engage in the institutional practice in question. In the case of trivial truths no such reason exists. So, the institutional model explains the intuitive problem with trivial truths without fuss. Of course, this very simple argument requires further support. There is a substantial literature that I can’t claim to do justice to it here.¹² But the burden would very much be on one who wants to establish a positive claim here.

This basic thought is not restricted to analyses of reason in terms of what one *ought* to believe. Another popular analysis of a normative reason is the ‘favouring’ account whereby a normative reason is a consideration that counts in favour of a response [Scanlon 1998]. So understood, a normative reason for believing a proposition is a consideration that counts in favour of believing that proposition. This understanding – I claim – also places a burden on one who would argue that evidential support relations are normative reasons. To see this, suppose that we conjoin (iv) the favouring account of a normative reason with (v) an identity between evidential support relations and normative epistemic reasons for belief. The result would be that (vi) the possession of evidence for a conclusion always counts in favour of believing that proposition. Once again, although some philosophers may accept this, I find it highly implausible owing to reflection on trivial truths. Possession of evidence for a trivial truth certainly counts in favour of the truth of that trivial truth. But it doesn’t follow that it counts in favour of believing that truth. For it to do so would require an additional premise that considerations that count in favour of the truth of relevant propositions (perhaps ‘considered’ propositions) also count in favour of believing them. And whilst I don’t have any knockdown argument against this premise, I don’t know of any good reason to accept it – the burden of proof is

¹¹ It is questionable whether there are any such beliefs [Kornblith 2002, Schroeder 2007]. This doesn’t matter for present purposes provided such cases are metaphysically possible.

¹² For a useful back-and-forth see Kelly [2003, 2007] and Leite [2007]. See also Steglich-Petersen [2011].

surely on one to establish it. Trivial truths provide a prima facie counter-example. And once again, this burden is avoidable on the institutional model.

These considerations lead me to accept (2) and hence to reject the companions in guilt strategy. I acknowledge however that these considerations are unlikely to convert philosophers who already reject (2). The result is stalemate. I won't press the point. Nor does it matter for my purposes. This is because – as I argue in the next section – these philosophers are committed to the failure of the companions in guilt strategy in any case, albeit for a very different reason.

3. And if They Are, then The Parity Premise is False

I have argued above that if (2) is true, then the companions in guilt strategy fails. I now argue that if (2) is false, then the companions in guilt strategy also fails (albeit for a different reason). So, the companions in guilt strategy *must* fail. This is an extremely strong result. To see the structure of the argument suppose that (2) is false. In other words:

- (4) Categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief *are* evidential support relations.

In this section I argue that if (4) is true it follows that:

- (5) The parity premise is false.

Why would (4) entail (5)? My basic claim is that it would do so by providing a *reduction* of categorical normative epistemic reasons; a reduction which is not available for moral reasons. This requires a little stage-setting.

Begin by thinking again about the argument for the moral error theory. This argument is premised on the denial of categorical reasons ('the metaphysical premise'). The important point for present purposes concerns *why* the existence of these reasons is often denied: what is the problem with categorical reasons? The most prominent problem in the literature is that categorical reasons for action would be *irreducibly* normative. That is to say, they would not be reducible to non-normative (i.e. 'descriptive') facts or properties [cf. Streumer 2008]. And – for independent, metaphysical and epistemological reasons – irreducibly normative entities are thought not to exist. My claim in support of (5) is that this opens up a disanalogy between moral reasons and epistemic reasons for belief. The disanalogy is that if (4) is true, then epistemic reasons would be categorical and normative *though not irreducible*. They would be reducible to evidential support relations. So, epistemic reasons may be categorical without being metaphysically and epistemologically problematic. This would warrant rejection of the parity premise. Hence (5).

A useful way to get clear on my central claim here is to ask *why* the categoricity of moral reasons (supposedly) renders them irreducible. As I understand it, the basic argument is abductive. The first premise is that (by definition) categorical reasons for action aren't reducible to facts about our desires and the means that

would promote them. The second premise is that this reduction (i.e. to desires and means) is much the most plausible candidate for a reduction of reasons for action. The abductively supported conclusion is that categorical reasons for action are irreducible. This opens up a disanalogy because if we assume (4) then there is no such abductive argument for the irreducibility of categorical epistemic reasons for belief. If we assume (4) there is a very good candidate reductive-base for categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief: evidential support relations. So, if we assume (4) then the categoricity of normative epistemic reasons for belief does not support epistemic nihilism. And this is the case even if the categoricity of moral reasons still supports a moral error theory. So, the parity premise is undermined.

I now discuss two objections to this argument. The first objection is that identifying categorical normative epistemic reasons for belief with evidential support relations wouldn't be *reductive* – or at least not in the required sense – at all. One way of phrasing this worry is as follows. The problem with irreducible normative facts is that they are metaphysically queer and/or epistemologically inaccessible. But aren't facts about probabilities just as bad? And so, doesn't a 'reduction' of normative epistemic reasons to probabilities lose the benefits that a reduction was meant to provide? I concede that there is something to be said for this worry. But I think that it can be set-aside for present purposes. Firstly, the queerness (or not) of probabilities is a separate issue; some moral error theorists may accept it, others may not. In support of this, note that arguments for the non-existence of irreducible normative entities do not typically turn on considerations that apply equally to probabilities – they may, for example, turn on the supposed incoherence of 'demands without a demander' [Garner 1990, Marks 2013]. Secondly, probabilities are arguably on a better footing on ontological grounds in any case: they are unquestionably indispensable to best science in a sense that is less clearly true (if true at all) of normative entities.¹³

There is an alternative way of making this objection (i.e. that identifying categorical normative epistemic reasons for belief with evidential support relations wouldn't be *reductive*). It is that evidential support relations shouldn't be explained non-normatively. Specifically, it might be thought that facts about probabilities are best explained in terms of how it is reasonable for agents to believe. There are several points to make in response to this worry. The first is that *prima facie*, the companions in guilt theory and the normative interpretation of probability are independent of one another. It would be an interesting result for the companions in guilt theorist – and, I think, an unwelcome one from her perspective – if her strategy rested on the truth of the normative theory of probability. A second, more substantive response owes to Chris Heathwood [2009]. Heathwood defends a reduction of epistemic reasons to evidential support relations (understood in terms of probabilities) and considers the above worry. His response takes the form of a modified Euthyphro dilemma. Let

¹³ I acknowledge that it is sometimes claimed that normative entities are indispensable to best science [e.g. Macarthur 2010]. I don't buy this nor, for what it's worth do many contemporary moral realists [e.g. Enoch 2011b, Parfit 2011, Scanlon 2014].

evidence *e* be that the streets are wet and hypothesis *h* be that it rained last night. Should we think that *e* probabilifies *h* because *e* renders it reasonable to increase one's confidence in *h*? Or should we think that *e* renders it reasonable to increase one's confidence in *h* because *e* probabilifies *h*? The latter interpretation is, he claims, preferable. This seems correct – at least pre-theoretically. What explains why seeing wet streets makes it reasonable for us to increase our confidence that it rained last night is that the probability of the former is raised by the latter (and not the other way round).

I'll now consider a second objection to my claim that (4) entails (5). It is that if we assume (4), then we can no longer assume that there is an abductive case for the irreducibility of categorical *moral* reasons. According to this objection, assuming (4) amounts to assuming that categorical reasons *can* be reduced. And so, we are equally well entitled to assume that categorical *moral* reasons can be reduced too; perhaps by a sophisticated conceptual analysis ('Canberra-planning'), perhaps by a posteriori identity. Another way of putting this objection – used by both Stratton-Lake and Rowland – is in terms of the apparent arbitrariness of admitting that a reduction of categorical reasons for belief is possible, but that an analogous reduction of moral reasons isn't. Given that the relation is the same in both cases (i.e. being a categorical reason) why should a mere change in the relata (i.e. action in one case, belief in the other) mark a metaphysical difference [Stratton-Lake 2002, Bedke 2010, Rowland 2013]? An explanation is owed here. Although this objection is fair, the resources available in response to it are rich – much richer than the rhetorical question above presupposes. I'll briefly sketch three different kinds of explanation that are available. Interestingly, some of these responses may be appealing to some error theorists, other responses to other error theorists. This implies that the success or failure of the companions in guilt strategy may turn on subtleties of the error-theoretic view against which it is targeted – a matter that may vary from case-to-case.

The first response is premised on a difference between action and belief at the level of *motivation*. On standard (e.g. Humean) approaches, one can come to (intentionally) act in some way only if one possesses the relevant motivational state such as a desire or other pro-attitude. This is not true of belief. On standard models, one can come to form a belief without any such desire or pro-attitude. This psychological asymmetry under-writes an asymmetry between the prospects of reducing categorical reasons for action and for belief respectively. To see this, suppose that one holds – as many error theorists do [Mackie 1977] – a motivational constraint on something's counting as a normative reason; roughly, motivational internalism. It would follow (via a familiar argument) that categorical reasons for action are a non-starter.¹⁴ This is because such (putative) reasons couldn't both be categorical (i.e. desire-independent) *and* motivational. But, owing to the non-necessity of desires for belief-formation no such argument follows as regards categorical reasons for belief. Now of course there are difficulties here that a companions in guilt theorist will note. She might, for example, question to truth of motivational internalism or its applicability to

¹⁴ See Shafer-Landau [2003: 180] for a clear presentation.

reasons for belief. Fair enough. Insofar as she does so however, she will be *directly* rejecting moral error theories rather than proceeding via a companions in guilt strategy.

A second, slightly more speculative, response draws on a further potential difference between belief and action. It is often claimed that belief ‘aims’ at truth (or knowledge) and that this feature of belief grounds the existence of epistemic reasons for belief. Roughly speaking, the thought is that it is in virtue of belief having the ‘aim’ that it does that there exist *epistemic* reasons for belief. Of course this claim requires unpacking. What exactly is an ‘aim’ and how does it ground the existence of reasons to hold the state for which it is an aim? There are a number of different responses to these questions and a full treatment is not possible here. But if some answer is forthcoming, then a response to the above challenge opens up. This is because it is feasible that action-guiding mental states do not have an analogous aim – or at least not one that could ground the existence of anything like moral reasons [Darwall 2003, Millar 2004, Lillehammer 2007, FitzPatrick 2009, Cowie 2014b]. Here is one way of thinking about it: a belief ‘goes right as the kind of thing that it is’ (i.e. fulfills its aim) just in case it represents veridically. A desire or action guiding mental state, by contrast, goes right as the kind of thing that it is (i.e. fulfills its aim) just in case it is satisfied.¹⁵ If we think along these lines, then an asymmetry in the grounds of epistemic reasons for belief and moral reasons respectively opens up. We can potentially provide an account of the grounds of epistemic reasons in terms of the nature of belief. But no such account is obviously forthcoming for moral reasons in terms of the nature of action or action-guiding mental states.¹⁶ I acknowledge that this response requires substantial work to rise to the level of an argument. Ultimately, it may prove that categorical normative epistemic reasons for belief can’t be grounded in the sense that I have suggested, or that there is no relevant disanalogy with action.¹⁷ But at the very least there is an issue to be discussed here – one certainly can’t *assume* that the existence of categorical normative reasons for belief poses the same problems as would the existence of categorical normative reasons for action.

The two responses considered above draw on deep-seated differences between intentional action and belief (in terms of their motivational profiles and aims respectively). But a simpler argument may also be available. Suppose that the reduction of categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief to evidential support relations proceeds on the model of Jackson’s analytical functionalism.¹⁸ First we find the platitudes that surround the concept, then we make the relevant substitutions of bound variables. It may simply be that no such reduction of categorical moral reasons is available because the platitudes on our

¹⁵ See Millar [2004], Cowie [2014b].

¹⁶ Admittedly, this would not show that categorical normative epistemic reasons for belief are *reducible*. It would however show that they are *grounded* (i.e. non-fundamental).

¹⁷ It is possible to read some contemporary ‘constitutivists’ in this way [Evans and Shah 2012].

¹⁸ See Jenkins [2011] for discussion.

moral concepts are insufficiently determinate to allow for it. It may be, that is, that well informed and conceptually competent users of a 'mature' folk morality would fail to converge. On the assumption that convergence is itself a condition on the existence of moral facts and properties, a moral error theory would follow [Lillehammer 2004]. Jackson has, of course, expressed optimism that this is not the case [Jackson 1998: 137]. But reflection on moral disagreement poses at least a *prima facie* problem for this. And there need be no 'deep' source of a lack of convergence here. A lack of convergence may rest only on contingent facts about the origin and function of our moral concepts. Given this, it may be that a Jackson-style reduction of categorical normative epistemic reasons for belief goes through (if (4) is true on this model, it does) but that nothing analogous is true for morality.¹⁹

4. The Master Argument

I am now in a position to present the 'master argument' against companions in guilt theorists. The first premise of the argument concerns the epistemic existence premise of the companions in guilt strategy:

- (1) The epistemic existence premise can be successfully established (in the dialectical context) only if evidential support relations just are categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief.

This forms the basis of my rejection of the companions in guilt strategy. Firstly, suppose that the consequent of (1) is false, that is:

- (2) Categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief are *not* evidential support relations.

It would follow that:

- (3) The epistemic existence premise cannot be successfully established (in the dialectical context).

Suppose, however, that that the consequent of (1) is true. That is:

- (4) Categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief *are* evidential support relations.

As I argued above, it would follow that:

- (5) The parity premise is false.

Given that (2) and (4) are jointly exhaustive, it follows that:

- (6) Either the epistemic existence premise can't established or the parity premise is false.

¹⁹ This is, I think, Fletcher's point [2009: 366].

So:

Conclusion: The companions in guilt argument fails.

I refer to this as a ‘master argument’ as it takes the form of a single argument that synthesizes the existing worries with the companions in guilt arguments in the literature. We can think of it as a dilemma. Either categorical, normative epistemic reasons for belief *are* evidential support relations or they are not. If they are, then the parity premise is false. If they are not, then the epistemic existence premise isn’t established. In either case, the companions in guilt strategy fails. I now demonstrate how this argument synthesises and develops the existing worries with companions in guilt arguments in the literature.

Firstly, and as noted above, some of the existing worries with the companions in guilt argument in the literature centre on – or at least allude to – the possibility that evidential support relations are non-normative. I have claimed that this possibility is in fact correct. In this sense, my argument factors in these existing concerns. There are problems with using these existing concerns as the basis of a refutation of the companions in guilt strategy however. Most obviously, many philosophers will simply resist the claim that evidential support relations are non-normative. This can easily lead to a stalemate. My argument is effective in that it provides a way out of that stalemate. Specifically, the argument (4)-(5) demonstrates that even those who don’t accept (2) should still reject the companions in guilt strategy.

Secondly, some of the existing worries with the companions in guilt argument in the literature are based on the possibility of an identity between evidential support relations and categorical normative epistemic reasons for belief. As cited above, Heathwood is the best example. My argument (in (4)-(5)) factors in this existing consideration. But my argument is not based on it. Even if it should turn out that no such identity holds true, I *still* claim that the companions in guilt strategy fails. This is because the failure of the identity would entail (2). And this causes the companions in guilt strategy to fail for reasons outlined above.

Thirdly, some of the existing worries with the companions in guilt argument in the literature turn on seemingly disconnected disanalogies. For example, some philosophers mention the disanalogy between the aims of belief and action. Others discuss the worry with a lack of convergence in moral judgment across cultures. I hope to have provided a single framework in which to integrate these concerns. I have shown that they can all be understood as instances of the tension between the epistemic existence premise and the parity premise (i.e. instances in support of (5)) that follow from the identity of evidential support relations with epistemic reasons for belief (i.e. (4)).

Fourthly, my argument picks up on a worry expressed but imperfectly developed in ‘Why Companions in Guilt Arguments Won’t Work’ [Cowie 2014a]. The worry expressed in that article is that the two premises of the companions in guilt argument are in tension. I argue that (i) the epistemic existence premise is

adequately supported only to the extent that epistemic reasons possess some 'special property' (for example, the property of being such that denying their existence is self-defeating), and that (ii) this undermines the parity premise. It undermines the parity premise because moral reasons don't also possess the relevant 'special property' (denying their existence isn't self-defeating). So, adequately establishing the epistemic existence premise undermines the parity premise. One obvious worry with this argument is that it is not clear that establishing the epistemic existence premise by appeal to the 'special properties' of epistemic reasons undermines the parity premise *in the right way*. To see this, consider how companions in guilt theorists have responded. They have claimed that my argument seems to concede the truth of the epistemic existence premise. It thereby concedes the existence of categorical reasons. And this is sufficient for the companions in guilt strategy to work. This article provides a response. Firstly, I pick up on the basic claim that there is a tension between the premises of the companions in guilt argument: in (4)-(5) I claim that if categorical normative epistemic reasons are evidential support relations then the parity premise is undermined. Secondly, it strengthens the claim that this undermines the parity premise. It does so by showing that if normative epistemic reasons are identical to evidential support relations then those reasons (unlike moral reasons) are not *irreducibly normative*. This is important because it is the apparent irreducible normativity of moral reasons that lies behind so much of the metaphysical and epistemological unease with them. So, I now *explain why* epistemic reasons may be categorical yet not metaphysically and epistemologically problematic in anything like the sense that moral reasons are.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that the companions in guilt argument – at least if it is understood as an argument by analogy with epistemic reasons – fails. Showing otherwise would require either denying (1) or jointly establishing (4) and denying (5). The former strategy would render the companions in guilt argument dialectically ineffective. The latter would require the companions in guilt theorist to respond to the arguments offered in sections 2 and 3. At the very least the companions in guilt strategy is not a shortcut to the denial of the error theory. This is good news for moral error theorists.²⁰

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²⁰ I am grateful to Joe David and to Editors and Referees at the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* for helpful comments.

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