METAETHICAL PRINCIPLES, META-PRESCRIPTIONS, AND MORAL THEORIES

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Article:

Part I

Ethicists in the normative tradition seem to believe that moral knowledge is possible. Yet there is widespread disagreement about what the fundamental principle of morality is. Because of the presence of conflicting theories of rightness, it is important to ask how moral theories can be established and refuted.

At least three different methods of establishing a moral theory and refuting competitors have been employed. The first method appeals to moral intuitions. Advocates of a particular view will claim that theories in competition with theirs entail moral judgments that are rejected by most people, while their own moral theory yields acceptable results. This method of establishing and refuting moral theories is looked upon with suspicion, however, and for several reasons. First, it is not clear that there is a unique set of moral intuitions shared by most people. Second, an appeal to ordinary moral beliefs may be question-begging since most moral theories are reformist; that is, most theories recommend that we alter some of our moral beliefs. And third, people's moral intuitions may be false.[1]

The second method of establishing a moral theory involves an appeal to reason alone. Thus some ethicists have argued that to deny their first principle is contradictory. To adhere to any competing theory, then, is not just a moral mistake; it is irrational.[2] If this method can be employed successfully, then moral theories can be proved and refuted in the strict senses of those terms. Though most moral philosophers wish that this method of proof and refutation could succeed in ethics, few believe that it can.

A third method is to evaluate moral theories on the basis of certain principles, apparently metaethical in nature. When this method is employed, it seems that these principles are regarded as conditions that an adequate moral theory must satisfy. The argument form of the third method is this: (i) An adequate moral theory must satisfy principle *P*. (ii) Moral theory *M* does not satisfy principle *P*. (iii) Therefore, moral theory *M* is not adequate.

In this essay I shall examine this third method of evaluating moral theories. Because of the dissatisfaction with the first two methods, understanding the third is important. Yet, though many philosophers have employed this method, little has been done to investigate its nature and presuppositions. What is crucial but unclear is the *status* of the principles employed in this type of argument. They cannot be substantive moral principles or based on intuitions, it seems, for otherwise the third method will fall prey to the same objections as the first. Nor does it seem that these principles can be established by an appeal to reason alone; if they could, the third method would reduce to the second. But if these principles can be established by neither moral intuitions nor reason alone, what is their basis for support?

Part II

The third method of refutation surfaces most frequently in discussions of egoism. In order to examine some of these criticisms, we need first to state what ethical egoism says. All versions of egoism agree about how an agent should make first-person moral judgments: if I am an ethical egoist, I should perform an act if and only if doing so will produce at least as great a balance of good over evil for me as any alternative act. Egoists disagree among themselves, however, when it comes to making second- and third-person moral judgments. A *universal* ethical egoist (UEE) says that every person ought to do what will most further his own self-interest. Thus if I am a UEE I will judge that you ought to maximize your self-interest and Jones ought to maximize his self-interest. An *individual* ethical egoist (IEE) says that every other person ought to do what will further the interests of the individual egoist. Thus if I am an IEE, I will judge that you ought to maximize my self-interest and Jones ought to maximize my self-interest too. A *personal* ethical egoist (PEE) eschews second- and third-person moral judgments. If I am a PEE I will say only that I ought to maximize my own interest.[3]

Various criticisms have been leveled against these different forms of egoism. The usual criticism of PEE is that it is no moral theory at all; it is rather a private policy of action.[4] The underlying assumption of this objection is captured in the following principle:

> P1: Every moral theory must provide a basis for judging the rightness or wrongness of the conduct of any individual, oneself or another.

Since PEE provides no basis for assessing the actions of persons other than the egoist himself, it is not an adequate moral theory.

The major criticism of IEE is more complex. Initially , it might seem that IEE violates the principle of universalizability , the requirement that if one judges that act X is right, then one is committed to judging that any act like X in all relevant respects is also right.[5] This need not be the case, however, as can be seen by envisioning how the IEE responds to the challenge, "Why should your interests count more than anyone else's?" There are two responses that the IEE can make. First, he might point to some characteristic that he possesses which makes him alone deserving of special attention. In order not to violate the principle of universalizability, though, he must agree that we should promote the good of anyone else having this characteristic. It is unlikely that any person has a characteristic which is both possessed by no one else and is morally relevant. A more significant difficulty, though, is that the IEE will be altering his theory if he makes this response. It will no longer be his self-interest that all people ought to promote; rather, it will be the characteristic in question which serves as the supreme principle of his system.[6] The IEE' s second response is that the characteristic that makes an act right is that it maximizes _____'s interest, where the blank is to be filled in with the IEE's name. This response does not violate the principle of universalizability; the IEE does assess all actions by the same criterion. It does, however, violate another principle, the requirement of generality:

> P2: Every moral theory must be general; it must contain no referential terms designating particular agents, actions, or circumstances.[7]

But this version of IEE does contain a referential term designating a particular agent. So, in order to satisfy the principle of universalizability, IEE must either give up its egoistic basis or violate the requirement of generality.

Because UEE does not fall prey to the same objections that PEE and IEE do, it is usually thought to be the most plausible version of egoism. But even UEE has been subjected to criticisms. One argument claims that UEE must be rejected because it violates the following principle:

> P3: Every moral theory must be consistently promulgatable.[8]

Let us say that a moral theory is consistently promulgatable if it is possible (at least often) to advocate the doctrine publicly without thereby performing an action judged to be wrong by the doctrine itself. The critic contends that UEE violates P3 because of conflicts of interests. Often if others consistently pursue their own

interests, this will conflict with my interests. If I advocate UEE publicly, I will be urging others to pursue only their own interests. And to the extent that I succeed in convincing others to pursue only their self-interests, I will be acting against my interests, thereby violating UEE. So, since UEE violates P3, it is not an adequate moral theory.

A closely related objection focuses on giving moral advice.[9] According to this objection, UEE is not an adequate moral theory because it violates:

> P4: Every moral theory must (normally) allow its proponents to give others sincere moral advice (when solicited).

Let us say that a moral theory, *M*, allows its follower, *A*, to give *sincere moral advice* to another, *B*, if it allows *A* to recommend to *B* that *B* do what *A* has judged, in accord with *M*, that *B* ought to do. If *A* is a UEE and *B* comes to *A* for moral advice, *A* will *judge* that *B* ought to do that which is in *B*'s interest. But if the act that will most advance *B*'s interest is contrary to *A*'s interest, what should *A* advise *B* to do? A little reflection suggests that giving advice is itself an action performed by an agent. And if the person giving advice is a UEE, he should perform actions designed to further his own interests. Therefore, in the case in question, *A* will *judge* that *B* ought to perform that act which will maximize his own, *B*'s, interests; but if that act conflicts with *A*'s own interests, he will *advise B* to do something else. And, the critic assumes, these cases are commonplace. So, UEE violates P4.

Though there are many other criticisms of UEE,[10] the two stated here represent adequately the form of argument that I wish to examine.

Part III

I do not propose to examine the adequacy of ethical egoism, nor even to test the plausibility of the principles employed to refute egoism, but merely to investigate the method used in these attempted refutations. In assessing this method of argumentation, the crucial question concerns the status of the principles appealed to, P1-P4. Are these principles metaethical, normative, or something else altogether? Recall that the first method of refuting moral theories appeals to intuitions about particular cases. But while it seems obvious that egoism yields judgments that most find counterintuitive, appealing to this is rare and does not seem to be a convincing way to refute egoism.[11] Yet the alleged refutations of egoism just discussed do seem to have initial plausibility, even if they fail ultimately. This suggests that the principles employed in these arguments do more than appeal to moral intuitions; either they are metaethical principles or they are normative principles at a higher level of generality.

In order to discuss the status of these principles, let us distinguish, although crudely, between normative ethics and metaethics. Whenever one asserts that a certain action is right (or wrong), or that an action of a certain type is always right, or when one states the criterion of rightness, one is engaged in normative ethics. By contrast, metaethics is concerned with the analysis of ethical expressions, their meanings, their logical functions, and more generally with what is going on when people engage in ethical discourse.[12] It is often said that a defining characteristic of metaethical principles is that they are normatively neutral (though later we must question this). To say that metaethical principles are normatively neutral is to say, minimally, that they entail nothing concerning the rightness or wrongness of particular acts and that they make no moral recommendations whatsoever. According to this doctrine, no normative questions are answered by metaethical claims.[13] Since the task of the metaethicist is to give an account of the meanings of moral concepts and to explain moral reasoning, metaethical principles must be consistent with all moral judgments regardless of whether the metaethicist approves of those judgments. A.J. Ayer makes this point when he claims that "all moral theories, intuitionist, naturalistic, objectivist, emotive and the rest, in so far as they are philosophical theories, are neutral as regards actual conduct."[14] And R. M. Hare argues, "We cannot, even if we establish the meaning of moral words, pass from this to conclusions of substance about moral questions."[15]

It is reasonable to construe the principles employed in the third method of refutation as metaethical since many of the critics of egoism try to show that that doctrine is not adequate because it is not a moral theory at all. But if we construe this method of refutation in this way, there are several problems. First, it is difficult to explain how metaethical principles, which are supposedly normatively neutral, can be employed to refute substantive moral theories. Second, if these principles are advanced as stating defining characteristics of morality, it seems they will do little damage to egoism (or any other theory). The egoist can agree that his view is not a moral one and claim instead that he is offering a competing theory of conduct. As long as egoism is coherent, it will do little good to show that it is not a moral theory.

There is a third difficulty that is more severe. It shows that the principles employed in these arguments against egoism cannot consistently be construed as metaethical, at least *if* metaethical principles are characterized as normatively neutral in the sense described above. Let us clarify this sense of neutrality. One philosopher puts it this way: "No definition of moral terms or analysis of moral reasoning shall favor one set of moral principles over another, nor one answer to a moral question over another."[16] In this same vein, another writes, "What is wanted is some general account of morality which will apply to all moralities, to those we are disposed to reject as well as to that which we are disposed to accept."[17] This account of normative neutrality, however, has the consequence that metaethical principles cannot be employed to refute moral theories. Suppose that I propose and argue for a metaethical principle which says that a moral theory must possess characteristic *C*. I argue further that egoism does not possess *C*, and therefore egoism is not a moral theory. To respond to this argument, the egoist need only point out that an adequate metaethical principle must account for *all* uses of moral language, and the proposed one does not; it does not account for the egoist's judgments and use of language.

Let me state this third difficulty another way. Assuming that metaethics must be normatively neutral, what counts as a moral doctrine must be decided in advance. Our ideas about what moral views are constitute the data that metaethical theories must explain.[18] Thus if egoism is regarded (pre-analytically) as a moral view, then any adequate metaethical principles will have to reflect the egoist's language, his judgments, and the like. Any principle which does not do so can be justly accused by the egoist of being inadequate because it does not square with all of the data; it is normatively selective. On the other hand, if at the outset egoism is not regarded as a moral view—that is, the discourse of egoists is not data that metaethicists must account for—then it would seem that any proof that egoism is not an adequate moral theory will be superfluous. One must conclude, then, that when the demand for normative neutrality is understood to require that metaethical principles account for all moral discourse, metaethical principles cannot be employed to refute what is regarded as a moral doctrine.[19]

The argument just pursued suggests that proponents of the third method of refutation must make one of two moves. One option is to maintain that principles P1-P4 are both metaethical and normatively neutral. This move requires the presentation of an alternative account of moral neutrality, one that is weaker than that given above. The other option is to acknowledge that P1-P4 are not normatively neutral, but deny that this undermines their adequacy.[20]

There is something appealing about the first move. The account of moral neutrality sketched above seems too strong. To take an extreme case, suppose that someone advances the principle that an adequate moral theory must not endorse contradictory claims. Now suppose we discover that moral theory *M* does endorse contradictory claims. It will follow that the proposed principle is not morally neutral because it favors some moral principles over others. Such a claim, however, is implausible. Though principles of logic are normative in one sense, their normative content does not violate the requirement of *moral* neutrality.

Consider a weaker account of the requirement of moral neutrality. A principle is morally neutral, we might say, if it does not endorse judgments about the rightness and wrongness of acts, nor, in conjunction with factual premises, entail such judgments.[21] Assessed by this account, principles P1-P4 are morally neutral. This account seems too weak, however. Suppose that someone proposes the following principle: An adequate moral theory must not allow the consequences alone to determine the moral status of actions. Such a principle does not say anything about the moral status of any particular acts, nor does it entail such judgments in conjunction with

factual premises. This is so because a theory different from but extensionally equivalent with a purely consequentialist theory will satisfy the proposed principle. Yet that principle is thoroughly anti-consequentialist and so is morally loaded. To avoid this consequence, it might be suggested that a principle is not neutral if it presupposes the truth of a particular moral theory. But this addition will not disqualify the proposed principle from the realm of the metaethical; that principle is satisfied by many conflicting anti-consequentialist theories. Alternatively, it might be suggested that a principle is not neutral if it entails the falsity of a particular moral theory. This addition, however, will face the same problems that plague the strong account of moral neutrality. Since any principle incompatible with a particular moral theory will have relinquished its claim to moral neutrality, it will follow that no metaethical principle can be employed to refute moral theories.

There may, of course, be a more plausible account of moral neutrality than I have considered here. But unless such an account is advanced, proponents of the third method of refutation will have to make the second move mentioned above. But if they acknowledge that the principles they are employing possess normative content, this creates a difficulty. It seems question-begging to use normative principles to defeat any moral theory, including egoism. It seems, then, that proponents of the third method of refutation face a dilemma. On the one hand, if they maintain that the principles they employ are metaethical and morally neutral in the strong sense, it seems that these principles cannot be utilized to reject moral theories. On the other hand, if the principles have normative content, then it seems that the arguments advanced are open to the charge of question-begging. Wrestling with this dilemma will be the major task pursued throughout the remainder of this essay. The completion of it should give us a better understanding of the third method.

Part IV

For now, let us focus on principles P3 and P4. It will be useful to compare these principles with other familiar moral precepts. Consider particular moral rules, such as prohibitions against killing, stealing, and breaking promises. One major difference is that moral rules are action-guiding, while P3 and P4 are not. Another difference concerns their level of generality. Each of the specific rules is limited to a particular act-type. By contrast, consider P4. The activity that this principle refers to is applicable (when advice is sought) whether the act in question concerns killing, stealing, keeping a promise, or some other act. P3 is general in this same way.

There are, however, other precepts which are also more general than moral rules but which have a status different from P3 and P4. Consider, as examples, the principle of utility and Kant's categorical imperative. Like P3 and P4 but unlike specific rules, these two principles purport to apply to all moral acts. There are, however, differences between P3 and P4, on the one hand, and the principle of utility and the categorical imperative, on the other. The most important difference is that the principles of utility and the categorical imperative, in conjunction with factual claims, imply moral conclusions about particular acts and serve as a basis for justifying specific moral rules. Principles P3 and P4, by contrast, cannot be employed to justify particular moral rules, nor do they, in conjunction with factual claims, yield conclusions regarding the status of killing, stealing, or keeping one's promises. To emphasize this point, consider again P4. Because of the inclusion of the word "sincere," this principle might be confused with a moral rule requiring one to be truthful. P4 differs from such a rule, however; it is consistent with a theory which permits (or even requires) an agent to be untruthful on occasions. All that P4 requires is that a moral theory normally permit its proponents to give others sincere moral advice.[22]

Principles P3 and P4 do seem to be normative; yet they differ from other familiar moral precepts. Since P3 and P4 appear to have normative content, are more general than specific moral rules, and at the same time are compatible with competing moral theories, I propose that we call them *meta-prescriptions* .[23] Calling them prescriptions accurately reflects that they possess normative content; using the prefix 'meta' conveys their higher level of generality and apparent compatibility with many (or all) competing moral theories.[24]

In order to clarify the normative nature of meta-prescriptions, it will be helpful to try to discover the rationale underlying P3 and P4. As a first step in this direction, note that there is a more general meta-prescription that captures a common thread running through P3 and P4.[25]

P5: It is morally desirable that agents perform their actual moral obligations.

The idea behind P5 is this: if the only change in a world is that an agent fulfills an actual obligation, the change is a morally desirable one. The principle is stated with reference to actual requirements, and the word 'actual' is intended to do double duty. First, this qualification restricts the principle to actual obligations, not prima facie ones. If a relatively trivial prima facie obligation conflicts with a serious one, it will be morally undesirable for an agent to fulfill the first of these prima facie obligations. The second job that the qualification does is to indicate that the obligation is one that the agent really has, not just one that he believes he has. It may not be desirable to have a person perform an act that he believes is his duty, when in fact the act is the worst that he can perform.

One other point of clarification is in order. Though P5 possesses normative content, it is neither a consequentialist nor a deontological principle. In P5 no account of the basis or ground of obligations is given or presupposed; it is compatible with consequentialist and deontological theories alike. Proponents of conflicting theories of rightness can agree that it is desirable that agents fulfill their actual obligations. It is not unusual to have principles that are normative but compatible with conflicting moral theories.[26]

In order to say more about the rationale for meta-prescriptions P3 and P4, let us draw a distinction. Let us say that *first-order* moral activities are those that involve agents fulfilling (or failing to fulfill) their obligations, such as keeping promises, telling the truth, and the like. *Second-order* moral activities are typically designed to promote the occurrence of first-order activities. Examples of second-order activities include giving moral advice, promulgating one's moral views, and minimizing the occasions on which one faces situations where one will (probably) do the wrong thing because of one's own moral weakness. These latter activities are second-order in that they are parasitic on first-order activities. If it were not for the fact that some actions are morally required and some are forbidden, questions about giving moral advice, promulgating one's moral views, and guarding against one's own moral weakness would not arise.

Meta-prescriptions P3 and P4 refer to second-order activities which, the principles say, must be consistent with or permitted by a moral theory. These activities are related to P5. An agent who promulgates his moral theory or offers sincere moral advice, unless he is being unduly sanctimonious, usually hopes to encourage others to do what he understands to be the right thing.[27] And if he is successful, others will believe that they ought to perform certain acts. One would think that, minimally, proponents of a moral theory would approve of behavior which has (or is intended to have) the result that agents fulfill their actual obligations (specified by the theory).

To demonstrate how central P5 is, let us compare UEE with (act) utilitarianism. It may seem that any act-consequentialist theory will conflict with P3 and P4 because such theories evaluate the acts of promulgating a moral theory and giving sincere moral advice in terms of the consequences those acts produce. And indeed there will be occasions when utilitarians will not give sincere moral advice or will not promulgate their theory. This will be so if, for some reason, promulgating utilitarianism or advising someone to act according to utilitarianism will cause that agent to act contrary to the dictates of utilitarianism. In short, utilitarians will not give sincere moral advice or will not promulgate their theory if these acts will fail to be a means to the desired end, namely, that others act according to utilitarianism. But this shows that utilitarians have as their goal that all agents *do* what the utilitarian theory says that they should do; utilitarians accept P5. The arguments that appeal to P3 and P4, however, show that UEEs do not accept P5; they do not have as their goal that others act in accord with UEE.

Meta-prescription P5 seems basic. It seems that, minimally, a moral theory is to serve as a guide for the behavior of all those agents who are bound by it. UEE, by definition, applies to all moral agents. When a moral theory yields the judgment that a person ought (all thing considered) to perform an action, then the "ought" has an action-guiding function. One who endorses the theory must endorse the particular judgment, and so has a stake in people's doing as they ought.[28] But if UEE conflicts with P3, P4, and P5, then it is not action-guiding in this sense. This, I hope, helps to clarify the rationale underlying meta-prescriptions P3 and P4.

In concluding this section, something about the status of P1 and P2 must be said. Since I have called P3 and P4 meta-prescriptions and since I have not affixed that label to P1 and P2, this suggests that I think there is a difference between the former two principles and the latter two. And, indeed, there is one obvious difference. P3 and P4 refer to second-order *activities* which are performed in moral contexts. By contrast, P1 and P2 do not refer to activities at all; rather they demand that moral theories be able to make certain judgments and that they satisfy certain restrictions in stating the criterion of right actions. Whether we call P1 and P2 meta-prescriptions, however, is not important. What is significant is that none of the four principles is normatively neutral in the strong sense discussed earlier. And this suggests either that the doctrine of the normative neutrality of metaethics is unrealistic or that the line between metaethics and normative ethics is much fuzzier than many have supposed.

Part V

The major issue still outstanding concerns the conclusions to be drawn about the general form of argument that appeals to principles like P1 -P4. If these arguments simply posit conditions that a moral theory must satisfy and if the principles cited have normative content, theorists whose views have been defeated by such arguments will raise the charge of question-begging. Seeing what can be said, in general terms, in support of P1-P4 can show the degree to which this objection can be combated.

It seems that what we normally call moral views satisfy the conditions set out in P1-P4. We can put the point this way. There is an activity practiced by many people. On many points, these people disagree. They even disagree about the central question around which the activity revolves (namely, what makes an action right). But there is much about which they agree, and this serves to delineate the activity they are pursuing. They agree that that for which they are searching is to guide the behavior of all moral agents, that it must be general, and that agents may encourage others to do what is right by promulgating their theories or by offering sincere advice. So in spite of the differences that divide utilitarians, Kantians, simple rule-oriented theories, and others, there are enough similarities to justify saying that they are operating from a similar point of view and that they are pursuing the same activity. It is neither question-begging nor an error to notice these important similarities and to develop corresponding categories, such as that of a moral theory. Such a categorization has the consequence that some views, called "moral" by their proponents, are so different from the others that they fall outside the category. This should be neither surprising nor disturbing. If someone, after studying physics, chemistry, biology, and geology, develops an account of what it is to be a science, we would not immediately dismiss the account as skewed simply because it entails that neither the work of astrologists nor the work of creationists is genuine science.[29] To demand otherwise is to hold that an adequate account of what morality (or science) is must admit into the category *any* view described by its proponents as moral (or scientific). Such a demand is too strong. It renders any sort of metatheoretical activity virtually impossible.

Viewing arguments that appeal to principles such as P1-P4 in this way absolves them of the charge of question-begging, I think, but at a price. We are not justified in concluding that a theory which fails to satisfy these principles is false; we must draw the more modest conclusion that it is not a genuine moral theory. This suggests that we ought to look at theories which fail to satisfy these principles in a different way.

How we should regard ethical egoism can best be illustrated if we think of discussions about morality occurring at two different levels. At one level, moral disputes occur among those who already take morality seriously. At this level the disputants agree that some acts are right and some acts are wrong; these are not assumptions they are inclined to challenge. They disagree, however, about the moral status of some particular acts and about what makes acts right. If members of this group are sufficiently thoughtful, different theories of rightness will emerge. We can imagine that some will be act-utilitarians, some rule-utilitarians, others Kantians, or followers of Ross, or Thomists. These people argue among themselves, each trying to convince the other of the correctness of his position.

There is a more fundamental level at which disputes about morality occur. Some challenge the very assumption operative at the first level, namely, that some acts are right and some are wrong. These people, whom we shall call amoralists, think that the entire debate among utilitarians, Kantians, and others is pointless. Morality, they say, is a sham. Amoralists do not believe that there is a rational basis for moral judgments. So, if morality requires sacrifice, agents have no good reason to be moral.

Now suppose that a moral dispute is occurring and an ethical egoist comes along. He purports to give an alternative account of what makes acts right, and so he seems to be debating at the first level, on a par with utilitarians, Kantians, and the others. All of the others reject the egoist's theory of right. But one of the more reflective opponents notices how different egoism is from the theories proposed by his cohorts and himself. He notices that even though utilitarians, Kantians, and others disagree about the moral status of particular acts and about the criterion of rightness, they agree that it is (normally) appropriate to promulgate one's moral theory and to offer sincere moral advice (when asked). Egoism, however, rejects these claims. And unlike the others, the egoist does not have as a goal that those who are judged by his theory shall abide by it.[30] The reflective opponent begins to think that the egoist is not competing on the same level with utilitarians, Kantians, and the others; instead, the egoist is challenging the very enterprise in which they are engaged. Put another way, the egoist's *language* suggests that he is arguing at one level; the *content* of his position, however, indicates that we will achieve a better understanding of egoism if we regard it as presenting a challenge at a more fundamental level. The egoist is better understood as an amoralist.[31]

If this suggestion is correct, then arguments such as those that appeal to P1-P4 have the effect, collectively, of demonstrating that egoism is not a moral theory on a par with utilitarianism and Kantianism. The egoist instead is an amoralist in disguise. Thus, arguments of the sort discussed here *do not defeat* egoism (that is, show that it is false). To do that, one will either have to show that not taking the interests of others into account is itself irrational, or one will have to demonstrate that there is a moral principle which reason alone requires that we follow.[32] Instead of defeating egoism, the arguments discussed here relocate the challenge the egoist is making.

Arguments against egoism that appeal to principles P1-P4 seem more convincing than those that appeal to intuitions about particular cases, and for several reasons. First, arguments of the former sort have a more modest aim than those of the latter type. While the latter arguments purport to show that egoism is false, the former simply attempt to show that it is not a genuine moral theory. Even if the former arguments are correct, egoism cannot be dismissed; rather, its challenge must be understood differently. Second, it is hardly surprising to learn that egoism yields judgments that most people find counterintuitive (perhaps because we think of egoists as amoralists). It is more striking, however, to learn how at odds egoism is with second-order activities that we commonly associate with morality. This gives arguments that appeal to P1-P4 an impact that arguments which appeal to moral intuitions lack. And third, the basis of the appeal of P1-P4 seems to be linguistic (rather than moral) intuitions. P1 and P2 seem to be based directly on the meanings of moral terms; and though P3 and P4 refer to activities and not to meanings, they gain whatever plausibility they have from the fact that they are tied to behavior that, in ordinary discourse, delineates the moral realm. Of course, linguistic intuitions are not infallible; they may be incoherent or false.[33] But if these principles really are supported by linguistic intuitions, their appeal is widespread; they are supported by advocates of conflicting theories. This does not ensure their truth, but it does indicate that it is appropriate to regard them as determining, in part, the realm of the moral. Arguments that appeal to principles such as P1-P4 might therefore be called "realm of the moral" arguments.[34]

One other qualification should be made. Though arguments that appeal to principles such as P1-P4 seem to depict each of these principles as setting out a necessary condition for something's being a moral theory, such a position is too strong. If a view fails to satisfy only one of these principles, we may not be entirely confident in asserting that it is not a genuine moral theory; concepts like 'moral theory' do not have such

sharply defined borders. It is when a view fails to satisfy several (or many) such conditions that we begin to feel confident placing it outside the realm of the moral.

My account suggests that arguments against any theory that appeal to principles like P1-P4 are limited in value.[35] They cannot show that a theory is false. At best, they show that a theory must be understood as presenting a challenge at a different level. If we regard the arguments this way, they lead us (if plausible) to the same conclusion about egoism that Rawls drew, though by a different route. As Rawls expressed it, "The significance of egoism philosophically is not as an alternative conception of right but as a challenge to any such conception."[36] More generally, if these arguments have such limited value, then unless the method of appealing to intuitions can be salvaged or unless the methods can be combined,[37] proof in ethics will have to be proof in the strict sense.[38]

Notes

1. These points are made by Jane Singleton, "Moral Theories and Tests of Adequacy," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 31 (1981), pp. 32, 35, and 38. See also, R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 12 and 40.
   I do not mean to dismiss completely appeals to intuitions, but only to show why there might be a special interest in the third method. For a more balanced treatment of appeals to intuitions, see Baruch A. Brody, "Intuitions and Objective Moral Knowledge," *The Monist*, vol. 62 (1979), pp. 446-456, and William H. Shaw, "Intuition and Moral Philosophy," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 17 (1980), pp. 127-134.
2. The best known presentation of this position is Alan Gewirth's Reason and Morality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
3. For explanations of the various forms of egoism, see Paul W. Taylor, *Principles of Ethics* (Encino: Dickenson Publishing, 1975), pp. 32-33.
4. *Ibid*., pp. 52-53.
5. See William K. Frankena, Ethics (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 25.
6. See Taylor, op. cit., p. 51, and James P. Sterba, *The Demands of Justice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), pp. 7-9.
7. See Paul W. Taylor, "On Taking the Moral Point of View," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. III (1978), p. 42 and John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 131.
8. This argument is suggested in Brian Medlin, "Ultimate Principles and Ethical Egoism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 35 (1957), pp. 111-118. For a clear and critical discussion of the argument, see Fred Feldman, *Introductory Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1978), pp. 93-95.
9. Frankena, op. cit., p. 19, seems to have this objection in mind.
10. The best known criticism of UEE is that it leads to inconsistent moral judgments. For a presentation of this argument, see Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), pp. 189-191. See also, Feldman, *op. cit*., pp. 92-93.
11. Some have argued that egoism does not entail counterintuitive judgments. See Tibor R. Machan, "Recent Work in Ethical Egoism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 16 (1979), pp. 8-10, and Edward Regis, Jr., "Ethical Egoism and Moral Responsibility," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 16 (1979) pp. 45-52. It seems to me that the counterintuitive judgments are avoided by these authors only by construing egoism as something other than a purely consequentialist theory; and perhaps that is the most plausible construal of egoism. But throughout this essay I take egoism to be a purely consequentialist view.
    For two who *do* reject egoism because it yields counterintuitive results, see Feldman, *op. cit*., pp. 95-96 and James Rachels, "Two Arguments Against Egoism," *Philosophia*, vol. 4 (1974), pp. 297-314.
12. See H. J. McCloskey, *Meta-ethics and Normative Ethics* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), p. 1 and Frankena, *op. cit*., pp. 4-5.

13. See William T. Blackstone, "Are Metaethical Theories Normatively Neural?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 39 (1961), pp. 65-74, L. W. Sumner, "Normative Ethics and Metaethics," *Ethics*, vol. 77 (1967), pp. 95-106, and O. H. Green, "The Doctrine of Metaethical Neutrality," *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 13 (1982), pp. 131-137.
14. A.J. Ayer, *Philosophical Essays* (London: Macmillan Co., 1954), p. 246. By "moral theories" Ayer means "metaethical."
15. R. M. Hare, *Essays on the Moral Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 42.
16. Robert M. Gordon, "Socratic Definitions and 'Moral Neutrality'," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61 (1964), p. 433.
17. R. G. Durrant, "Moral Neutrality and the Analysis of Morality," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 36 (1958), p. 169. See also, Alan Gewirth, "Metaethics and Moral Neutrality," *Ethics*, vol. 78 (1968), p. 221.
18. This same point is being made in a slightly different context by Jon Moline, "On Philosophical Neutrality," *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 1 (1970), pp. 29-30.
19. A stronger conclusion may be warranted here. Moline, *op. cit*., pp. 34-35, argues that if the doctrine of normative neutrality is too strong, it will render it impossible to construct any metaethical theory. The argument that I present here may seem to show a lack of sensitivity to the way in which there is give an take between theory and data. But my point is that those who insist that the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics is a sharp one and that metaethical principles must be normatively neutral are forced to accept my argument. Two of the upshots of this paper are that the distinction between normative ethics and metaethics is fuzzier than many have supposed and that the normative neutrality of metaethics is open to serious question.
20. For a discussion of whether metaethical principles must be normatively neutral, see Blackstone, *op. cit*., Sumner, *op. cit*., Gewirth, "Metaethics and Moral Neutrality," and Green, *op. cit*.
21. For such an account, see R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 97.
22. I use the word "normally" because there may be extreme circumstances where giving a person sincere moral advice would be wrong (for example, when doing so would lead to disastrous consequences).
23. I borrow this phrase from Diana T. Meyers, "The Rationale for Inalienable Rights in Moral Systems," *Social Theory, and Practice*, vol. 7 (1981), p. 132. I should point out that the context in which Meyers is writing is different from my own.
24. If these meta-prescriptions serve as conditions of adequacy, then they are presumably *not* compatible with all moral theories. But if they are conditions that determine what constitutes a moral theory, then they are compatible with all moral theories (since a theory is not moral unless it satisfies these conditions).
25. For slight variations of this meta-prescription, see Meyers, *op. cit*., pp. 132-134 and Warren Quinn's principle P4 in "Egoism as an Ethical System," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 71 (1974), p. 466. Quinn shows that egoism cannot satisfy this principle without incurring even more serious problems.
26. An example of such a principle is this: If an agent knows that, because of his own moral weakness, he is likely to do something wrong in circumstances *c*, then he ought to avoid *c* to the extent possible. Other examples are the principles of dated rightness developed in Holly S. Goldman, "Dated Rightness and Moral Imperfection," *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 85 (1976), pp. 449-487.
27. One might promulgate one's moral views, even though there is no hope of convincing others of their correctness, "as a matter of principle." One might even believe that one has a duty to do so. For an interesting discussion of this topic, see Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Symbolic Protest and Calculated Silence," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 9 (1979), pp. 83-102.
28. See Mary Gore Forrester, *Moral Language* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 164 and Quinn, *op. cit*., pp. 465-466.
29. See Moline, op. cit., pp. 34-35 and Alan Gewirth, "Positive 'Ethics' and Normative 'Science'," *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 69 (1960), pp. 315-317.

30. I do not mean to suggest that egoism shares no features in common with moral theories. Egoism and moral theories are theories of conduct, and as such they provide a basis for assessing an agent's decisions, they give one a perspective from which to criticize society's rules, and they imply that an individual's desires may lead him to adopt an unrecommended alternative.
31. Others have been more direct in placing egoism outside the realm of the moral. Thus some have said that a characteristic feature of morality is that it can require an agent to act in ways that may conflict with his self-interest. See Dan W. Brock, "The Justification of Morality," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 14 (1977), pp. 75-77 and William K. Frankena, "The Concept of Morality," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 63 (1966), p. 689.
32. The former of these tasks is pursued by Thomas Nagel in *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970); the latter, by Gewirth in *Reason and Morality*. For a more recent and somewhat different approach to the rationality of ethics, see Stephen L. Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).
33. For conflicting positions on the appropriateness of appealing to linguistic intuitions, see David Zimmerman, "Meta-Ethics Naturalized," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 10 (1980), pp. 644-645, Richard B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 2-10, and Hare, *Moral Thinking*, pp. 9-12.
34. For the introduction of this phrase, see James R. Flynn, "The Realm of the Moral," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 13 (1976), pp. 273-286.
35. Flynn, *ibid*., contends that arguments of this sort have minimal value and suggests that we abandon them in our attempts to refute Social Darwinists and Nietzscheans (see pp. 285-286). Curiously, however, Flynn seems to concede that these arguments work against egoism (see pp. 273, 274, and 284).
36. Rawls, *op. cit*., p. 136.
37. For an interesting attempt to defend appeals to intuition that involve what Rawls calls reflective equilibrium, see Norman Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 76 (1979), pp. 256-282 and "Reflective Equilibrium and Archimedean Points," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 10 (1980), pp. 83-103.
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