Abstract
"On the Distinction Between a Better Moral Theory and a Theory of a Better Morality"

Normally, there is a sharp distinction between a better theory of X and a theory of a better X. That the theory of a better X is a theory according to which things are different from the way one's (so far) best theory says they are is (normally) no reason whatsoever to think one's (so far) best theory is wrong, just reason to wish X were different (and, if it is possible, reason to work to change X). That it would be better if all everyone were treated as equals is no reason whatsoever to think that they are; that it would be better that death came quickly, painlessly, and late in life is no reason whatsoever to think it does; that it would be better if we could fly is no reason whatsoever to think that we can…

In contrast (I maintain) when the subject matter is normative, this normally sharp distinction is elided and the difference between one's theory of the best X (the best morality, the best standards of inference, the best rules of justification…) and one's (so far) best theory of X necessarily provides a reason (though perhaps not a decisive reason) to think one's (so far) best theory is wrong.

The elision plays an essential role in a range of arguments concerning morality, practical rationality, and theoretical rationality, a few of which I discuss. Yet it smacks of depending crucially and unacceptably on wishful thinking – on supposing that the fact that things would be better if only they were a certain way provides some reason to think they are that way. As a result, it invites invocation of a restricted defense of "Wouldn't it be nice that p, therefore p" reasoning of a sort Thomas Nagel suggests there might be and David Enoch and Ryan Preston-Roeder sketch. I think that the invitation should be resisted. The elision is to be defended, I argue, not as an instance of defensible wishful thinking but as a reflection a constraint on acceptable normative theories that is itself explained by a distinctive characteristic of normative concepts that sets them all apart from descriptive concepts.