**"Error Theory"**
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**Richard Joyce**

Error theory is a kind of radical skepticism about morality. The moral error theorist holds that all moral judgments are mistaken—not necessarily mistaken in a *practical* sense, but in the sense that the world just doesn't contain the requisite "stuff" necessary to render any moral judgments true.

Consider, for example, a simple moral judgment like "Slavery is morally wrong." The first thing that the error theorist claims is that someone who makes this judgment is committed to the world being a certain way—namely, that slavery has a certain property: the property of moral wrongness. In claiming this the error theorist contrasts with the non-cognitivist, who maintains that moral judgments are not really assertions at all but, rather, perform some non-assertoric function, such as expressing one's disapproval of slavery (*see* NON-COGNITIVISM). So the error theorist is, first of all, a cognitivist, holding that when we make a moral judgment we are *purporting* to state a fact.

What kind of property is moral wrongness, then? The error theorist's distinctive second claim is that when one reflects on what features we expect this property to have, and compares this expectation to what the world is actually like, it turns out that no such property exists. Thus, although someone who judges that slavery is morally wrong has purported to say something true, they have failed to do so; slavery does not have that property. And the error theorist thinks this not just about slavery, but about everything: there is nothing that has the property of moral wrongness. Moreover, the error theorist thinks this not just about the property of moral wrongness, but about all moral properties. Just as nothing is morally wrong or right, so too nothing is morally good or bad or evil, nothing is morally obligatory or prohibited or permissible, nothing is morally praiseworthy or blameworthy, nothing is a moral vice or virtue, nothing is morally *anything*. In other words, the moral error theorist thinks that when we engage in moral evaluation we ascribe to the world (to actions, people, states of affairs, etc.) a range of properties and relations that simply aren't really there; morality is an illusion.

Moral error theory is an unusual view to hold and an unsettling one to contemplate, though nonmoral versions of error theory are more familiar and uncontroversial. We are all, for example, error theorists about phlogiston, bodily humors, and unicorns. Another familiar form of error theory is atheism, with which moral error theory may be usefully compared. Consider a simple religious judgment like "God loves you." Someone who made such a claim would be, presumably, purporting to say something true about the world; they would not merely be expressing their feelings. The religious believer, of course, thinks that the assertion is true: there really is a God, and this God really does love you. The atheist, by contrast, thinks that the world doesn't contain the requisite "stuff" to render the claim true. According to the atheist, God doesn't exist and therefore it is not true that God loves you.

Before asking the question of why someone would endorse moral error theory, one may pause to consider the analogous question about atheism: Why would someone be an atheist? Rather than inviting a comprehensive answer, the point of considering this question here is to draw attention to the fact that, at the broadest level, the answer is "It's complicated." What it takes to be an atheist is a straightforward matter (i.e., to believe that there are no gods), but

one's *grounds* for being an atheist are something else. There need be no master argument for atheism; there are potentially many different considerations in favor of the view; and one atheist might be persuaded by arguments that leave another atheist cold. The same is true of moral error theory. What it takes to be a moral error theorist is one thing, but one's grounds for being a moral error theorist are something else. There may be no master argument for moral error theory; there are potentially many different considerations in favor of the view; and different error theorists may be persuaded by different arguments.

The term "error theory" was introduced by John Mackie in his 1977 book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (*see* MACKIE, J. L.), though various forms of moral skepticism—some of which are arguably instances of the error theoretic stance—have been familiar to philosophers since ancient times (*see* SKEPTICISM, MORAL). As well as Mackie, other contemporary philosophers who have advocated moral error theory include Joyce 2001; Olson 2014; Streumer 2017; Kalf 2018; and Cowie 2023. It is Mackie's arguments, however, that have tended to dominate debate over the past few decades.

Mackie's case centers on the claim that when one engages in moral judgment, one imbues prescriptions and values with a kind of objectivity. Mackie doesn't think that this is true of all prescriptions and values; some values, for example, clearly count as *subjective*. Consider, for instance, when we evaluate something as *fashionable*. There is no temptation to think of "fashion values" as objective; everyone knows that they are invented by humans. If we all decide that top hats are fashionable, then they *are* fashionable; when we decide that top hats are no longer fashionable, then they cease to be so. But moral values, thinks Mackie, are not like this. Imagine someone's declaring that the moral wrongness of slavery is just a matter of human invention, such that if we all thought that slavery was morally acceptable then it would be morally acceptable. That such a declaration would likely meet with howls of protest is evidence, Mackie would claim, that moral values are thought of as an objective matter. Establishing this premise may be considered the *conceptual* step of Mackie's argument.

Mackie's next premise is the *ontological* step: he argues that the universe simply doesn't contain any such objective prescriptions or values. The idea that slavery (for example) has a kind of "not-to-be-doneness" somehow "built into it" (1977: 40), independently of any negative attitudes that we might take toward slavery, is too strange to countenance, Mackie thinks; the world just doesn't include such odd normative properties (*see* QUEERNESS, ARGUMENT FROM). Thus moral evaluative claims like "Slavery is morally wrong" or "You morally ought not practice slavery" are never true, in Mackie's view, whereas various nonmoral evaluative claims—such as "Top hats are unfashionable (here and now)" or "You ought to shut the window (if you're cold)"—can often be counted as true.

Mackie's error theory is often summed up as the view that there are no objective moral facts, and thus the natural opponent of this view is often assumed to be the moral realist, who holds that objective moral facts do exist (*see* REALISM, MORAL). But it is important to understand that the word "objective" in the sentence summarizing Mackie's position is, strictly speaking, redundant. According to a view that might be called "moral constructivism," moral facts do exist but are, in an important sense, a human creation—so the constructivist will also claim that there are no objective moral facts (*see* CONSTRUCTIVISM, MORAL). Error theorists are just as opposed to moral constructivism as they are to moral realism. They hold that there are no moral facts *period*—neither of an objective nature nor of a subjective nature.

Moral error theorists need not employ Mackie's arguments; they may be persuaded by alternative arguments. Consider a moral judgment of the form "S morally ought not φ." Mackie's argument is that in order for this to be true, the action φ will need to have certain properties—properties that it does not in fact have. But it is also the case that in order for this judgment to be true, the subject S will need to have certain properties. After all, if S is a lion (and φ is, say, the killing of a zookeeper), then nobody would make this moral judgment. We apply moral claims only to moral agents: agents who have moral responsibility. Moral responsibility is, however, a puzzling phenomenon in several respects, and some philosophers are skeptical that any such thing exists (see RESPONSIBILITY). The classic argument against the existence of moral responsibility centers on the claim that humans lack the kind of free will that is necessary for responsibility (see FREE WILL), though many skeptical arguments depart from this classic view and vary considerably (see Strawson 1994; Pereboom 2001; Haji 2002; Rosen 2004; Levy 2011). The error theorist may argue that the central mistake that moral discourse makes lies in presupposing the existence of a kind of agency that does not, in fact, exist. Of course, the error theorist may also think that moral discourse makes *many* mistakes.

Unsurprisingly, there is much opposition to moral error theory. Given how deeply engrained moral thinking is in our culture (as in all cultures)—in politics, in entertainment, in our everyday lives regarding both mundane and momentous matters—the proposal that it's all an illusion can be expected to meet with impassioned resistance. In any public discussion of a serious issue (e.g., concerning policy regarding euthanasia) the advocacy of the error theorist's viewpoint would likely leave listeners aghast and confused—perhaps even angry. The advocate would probably be considered a pernicious influence.

These common and understandable responses must be treated with caution. Perhaps the most natural manifestation of the "aghast" reaction is to point to an action that would ordinarily be considered intensely evil (e.g., some action of Hitler's) and say to the error theorist, in a shocked tone, "What, you don't think there's anything wrong with *that*?!" The problem with this reaction is that implications that hold in ordinary conversations, where the domain of relevant hypotheses is restricted, may not hold in the context of metaethics. In ordinary conversations, if someone asserts "There is nothing morally wrong with X" then they may be taken to be implying that X is morally permissible and thus indicating a tolerant attitude toward X. But in the context of metaethics, where moral skepticism is a live hypothesis, these implications break down. The error theorist doesn't think that there was anything morally wrong with Hitler's actions, but nor does the error theorist think that Hitler's actions were morally good or permissible or acceptable. The error theorist may remain fervently opposed to Hitler's actions in *nonmoral* terms.

If, however, the error theorist is interacting with moral believers, then it might be inconvenient and confusing if, in order to ward off misunderstandings, the error theorist's metaethical views are having to be constantly raised and explained. If the conversation concerns, say, whether one found a movie about the Holocaust distressing, and does not concern any metaethical niceties, then the error theorist may consider it reasonable simply to employ the same moral language that everyone else is using. As was claimed at the outset of this entry, the error theorist does not necessarily consider using moral language to be a *practical* mistake. Even if moral judgments misdescribe the world, they might often do so in a manner that is, nevertheless, quite useful in various ways. This might be true not merely for the error

theorist who is interacting with moral believers; it might also be true of error theorists interacting among themselves, or of an individual error theorist's own practical deliberations. Thus moral error theorists do not necessarily recommend the elimination of all moral thought and language; they may recommend its retention with the status of a convenient fiction. This is the moral fictionalist's view. The fictionalist takes an interest in the familiar language of fiction (e.g., story-telling, acting, metaphor, etc.) because in these contexts we have pragmatic purposes for discussing and emotionally reacting to things that we know don't exist (witches, dragons, etc.), but without incurring any ontological commitment to their existence. Someone who says "Once upon a time there lived a dragon" does not make an error. (Proponents of moral fictionalism include Nolan et al. 2005; Joyce 2001, 2019; Jaquet 2021.)

Other moral error theorists, by contrast, reject the fictionalist's recommendation, arguing instead that the benefits brought by moral language are outweighed by the costs. They propose that even if the fictionalist option is psychologically viable (which, they add, it probably isn't), we would generally be better off, pragmatically, if we did away with moral thought and language. This is the moral abolitionist's view. The abolitionist might point out, for example, that when there are conflicts of interest, the tendency of parties to "moralize" their interests (e.g., "You're just morally wrong!") encourages the dispute to become more entrenched and intractable, which is generally no good for anyone (see Campbell 2014). (Proponents of moral abolitionism include Ingram 2015; Garner 2019; Sauer 2021. For debate between the fictionalist and the abolitionist, see Garner & Joyce 2019.)

Generally speaking, anxieties over what might happen if people became moral error theorists (e.g., whether it really is a pernicious view to promote), and the dispute between fictionalists and abolitionists over the costs and benefits of morality, are, at bottom, *a posteriori* questions. In advance of an examination of the relevant empirical data—much of which concerns far-fetched counterfactuals that are all but impossible to assess accurately—nobody should advocate a positive view on these matters with more confidence than is appropriate for educated speculation.

In addition to such practical worries about the prospect of the widespread adoption of moral error theory, numerous philosophical criticisms have been voiced against the view and the arguments employed to support it.

One such criticism is the so-called *companions in guilt* argument, according to which the very quality that leads the error theorist to deny moral normativity is also a quality of other kinds of normativity that the error theorist does not wish to deny. If morality is guilty of sin, the argument goes, then X would be guilty too; but the prospect of X's guilt—that is, the proposal that we should be error theorists about X—is so preposterous, possibly even incoherent, that consistency requires that we absolve morality of the original charge. The item that the placeholder "X" stands for is usually *epistemic normativity*: pertaining to what we ought to believe in various circumstances. The consequences of trying to maintain an error theory about epistemic normativity do indeed look deeply troubling: nobody would have any reason to believe anything, not even what the epistemic error theorist has to say (see Cuneo 2007; Shah 2011).

The plausibility of the companions in guilt argument depends on what argument(s) the error theorist has used in support of their skepticism. If the error theorist has been bothered by a single seemingly strange quality of moral normativity, and if epistemic normativity also has

this quality (and assuming that epistemic skepticism is a non-starter), then the argument will have some probative weight. But if, on the other hand, the error theorist has been persuaded by a *range* of problematic features of moral normativity, or a *variety* of interlocking skeptical arguments, then in order for the companions in guilt argument to be applicable, epistemic normativity will also need to possess this same range of features or be subject to the same variety of analogous interlocking skeptical arguments. Given that it is not difficult to generate a list of differences between moral normativity and epistemic normativity (e.g., epistemic norms appear to be compatible with involuntarism in a way that moral norms do not), the more complex a case that the moral error theorist can build up in support of their skeptical view, the less likely it is that the companions in guilt argument will represent a serious objection. (For debate over the companions in guilt argument, see Cowie & Rowland 2019.)

Another challenge for the moral error theorist comes from Moorean epistemology. G. E. Moore famously sought to defeat skepticism about the external world by raising his hand and declaring "Here is a hand" (Moore 1939)—the force of which seems to be that surely everyone is more confident in the existence of their own hands than they are in at least one of the premises of whatever argument a skeptical philosopher might put forward to the conclusion that we do not know whether the external world exists. In a similar way, one might claim that surely we are all more confident in our judgment that (say) slavery is morally wrong than we are in at least one of the premises of whatever argument a skeptical philosopher might put forward in support of moral error theory. In both cases (the thought goes) this disparity in initial confidence is sufficient reason to reject the skeptic's argument. (For this kind of anti-skeptical strategy, see Huemer 2005; Enoch 2011.)

The error theorist may respond by raising doubts about the reliability of these moral intuitions that, on first consideration, seem so obviously true. If we have a plausible hypothesis of why humans would have such intuitions and why they would seem so obviously true, *even if they aren't true*, then these intuitions lose their dialectical force within the debate. Such a hypothesis would not show that these intuitions are false, but may well show them to be less justified than we would otherwise take them to be.

Mackie's preferred hypothesis for playing this role is his projectivist account of moral psychology (1977: 42-46; 1980: 70-74), which draws inspiration from Hume's observation "that the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects" ([1740] 2007: 112). According to the projectivist, our moral experience is the product of our "objectifying" our subjective emotional responses: we respond to a situation with a feeling of disapproval, say, and then this disapproval prompts us to see the situation as *demanding* disapproval—that is, as being morally bad. The significance of the projectivist hypothesis in relation to the challenge from Moorean epistemology is that the former, if true, would reveal moral intuitions to be unreliable, regardless of how compelling or natural they might "feel."

Alternative or supplementary hypotheses to Mackie's projectivism may play the same debunking role. For example, there is plenty of evidence that people's moral views are often self-serving and shift to fit with self-interested gain (Bocian & Wojciszke 2014; DeScioli et al. 2014; Melnikoff & Bailey 2018). If a type of judgment is known to have this general character—of being clouded by self-interest—then we would usually deem it as unreliable; that is, as something that should be checked before being trusted, rather than the other way round. (If, for example, a parent judged their own child's performance in the school musical to be by

far the best, then although we should not assume that the parent is mistaken, we would be well-advised to seek a second opinion.) Another type of debunking argument is the genealogical variety, which attempts to show that moral judgments lack justification in virtue of being the product of processes and faculties that evolved and operate independently of any tendency to track moral facts (see Joyce 2016). If the moral error theorist can, in such ways, explain moral intuitions in a manner that reveals them to be unreliable, then it would seem that the Moorean opponent cannot appeal to the confidence we have in these intuitions as the ground for rejecting arguments in favor of moral skepticism.

In providing an account of the origins of human moral thinking that reveals it to be unreliable, not only would the error theorist potentially silence the Moorean critic, but may also have the basis of answering a question that it is very natural to address to the error theorist: why would humans—across all cultures, throughout all history—commit this enormous (alleged) error? Having a plausible answer to this question undoubtedly strengthens the error theorist's overall case for skepticism. However, to what extent the moral error theorist is *required* to provide such an explanation is debatable. Consider again the analogy with atheism. The atheist's defining disbelief implies that a very widespread type of belief system—religion—is mistaken. Yet it is not at all clear that it is incumbent on an atheist to provide an explanation of the historical and psychological origins of (false) religious belief in human society. Perhaps it's enough if they maintain, in a fairly rough way, that humans are gullible creatures who are prone to embracing mistaken beliefs—an assumption for which there is, surely, no shortage of supportive evidence. The error theorist may similarly have nothing terribly detailed to say about the origin of moral error, beyond an appeal to a general pessimism about the human epistemic condition.

Different moral error theorists may advocate positions that vary in modal strength. Once more, the comparison with the more familiar case of atheism is clarifying. In order to be an atheist, all that is required is that one believes that no gods actually exist. Some atheists may, however, allow that gods are *possible* entities, whereas others will hold the stronger view that gods could not possibly exist. (Which view one holds will depend on what arguments have persuaded one of the truth of atheism.) The same goes for the moral error theorist: there are those who hold that the errors of moral discourse are only contingent, while others may hold the stronger view that moral properties could not possibly be instantiated. (Note also that what makes one an atheist or a moral error theorist is *disbelief*—neither need be so bold as to make a claim of *knowledge*.)

Another difference among error theorists lies in whether they hold the view to be established solely on *a priori* grounds, or whether they think that empirical arguments play an important role. Suppose, for example, that someone came to the conclusion that moral properties cannot be accommodated within the naturalistic world described by science (*see* NONNATURALISM, ETHICAL; NATURALISM, ETHICAL), and suppose also that this person were committed to a naturalistic global worldview—a combination of premises that would provide the foundation of an argument for moral error theory. It is worth noting that the second premise—the general commitment to ontological naturalism—may be at bottom an empirical conclusion, established by comparing the remarkable success of naturalistic explanations with the considerably less impressive achievements of nonnaturalistic explanations over many centuries of human empirical endeavor. Debates over error theory may also turn on whether

moral facts are needed to explain any phenomena, or on what is the most plausible hypothesis concerning the origin of moral judgments (evolutionarily, historically, psychologically). Thus the case for moral skepticism may depend on empirical matters at numerous points.

The general strategy for arguing for moral error theory, as we have seen, combines a conceptual premise and an ontological premise. This strategy throws up two different kinds of opponent. One kind agrees with the error theorist about what moral discourse is committed to, conceptually speaking, but disagrees with the error theorist by maintaining that the world actually does satisfy these commitments. (Various moral nonnaturalists and moral rationalists fall into this category.) Another kind of opponent agrees with the moral error theorist about what kinds of things exist in the world, ontologically speaking, but disagrees with the error theorist by maintaining that our moral discourse never commits us to anything more extravagant than what exists. (Various moral naturalists and moral constructivists fall into this camp.) Thus neither of the error theorist's two premises, when considered in isolation, exceeds anything that is not already widely supported and argued for by many opponents of moral skepticism. The error theorist's characteristic strategy arises by *combining* the premises in an unusual way. One may, then, sum up the standard moral error-theoretic strategy with the observation that it combines a rich view of moral concepts with a meager ontological view of the world. Some will complain that its conceptual theses are *too* rich, and many will protest that its ontology is *too* meager. But there is no obvious *a priori* or methodological pressure to take the same attitude to both domains—i.e., both rich or both meager—and there is no philosophical consensus on how either kind of dispute should be settled, and thus this radical form of moral skepticism remains a perennial contender.

*See also*: CONSTRUCTIVISM, MORAL; FREE WILL; MACKIE, J. L.; NATURALISM, ETHICAL; NON-COGNITIVISM; NONNATURALISM, ETHICAL; QUEERNESS, ARGUMENT FROM; REALISM, MORAL; RESPONSIBILITY; SKEPTICISM, MORAL

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