

THESIS

MORAL ERROR THEORY

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2016

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ABSTRACT

MORAL ERROR THEORY

J.L Mackie historically has been considered the primary defender of moral error theory. The position he defends is one of many metaethical positions an individual might hold. Moral error theory's central thesis is that all moral claims are false or neither true nor false because of moral discourse's commitment to some problematic thesis. Moral error theory has not always been taken seriously however. Many have responded to Mackie's moral error theory, but they often do so in a cursory manner. Moral error theory would seem to be a historical curiosity, but not a position often adopted.

In modern presentations and critiques of moral error theory the discussion often seems to be one-sided. The error theorist does not always consider the weaknesses of what he considers the best presentation of his position, and the critic does not always fully appreciate the appeal of, or fully engage with the strongest presentations of moral error theory. Often error theorists and critics of moral error theory recognize that moral error theory could be developed in a variety of manners, but limit their discussions to moral error theories which closely relate to Mackie's original presentation of moral error theory.

By developing an understanding of Mackie's original position and new variations on his position we can see what motivates individuals to develop error theories related in some manner to Mackie's error theory. We can also see the limits of moral error theories which build off Mackie's error theory however. In particular, I will examine the moral error theory of Jonas Olson. Olson identifies moral discourse's commitment to irreducible normativity as especially problematic. Identifying the limits and difficulties which plague error theories such as Olson's

should lead us to consider other manners in which one can develop moral error theories. In the end, I propose that one might be able to establish something like a moral error theory by arguing that moral beliefs are unjustified. Moral beliefs, it will be argued, are unjustified because they ultimately issue from an evolutionary source which is unreliable. Because those beliefs are unjustified, I claim that we are in error if we continue to hold those beliefs. While such a position has often been called moral skepticism, I argue that it can be seen as a sort of moral error theory.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“There is no moral fact that it is wrong to murder. There are no moral facts whatsoever.” Many would find these statements highly counterintuitive. Even if individuals disagree as to what it might mean for there to be a fact that murder is wrong, most would like to say that such statements are false. “Surely, it is a fact that it was morally wrong for Hitler to unjustly cause millions to die. How can you believe that this simply is not a fact?” This seems to be a reasonable response to the claim that there are no moral facts. Nonetheless, many intelligent individuals have argued—some more persuasively than others—that we should accept the conclusion that there are no moral facts. Historically, individuals have argued for this conclusion in many ways.

In the philosophical field of metaethics, there is an essay which has been often been anthologized in surveys of metaethics called “The Subjectivity of Values.” This essay, by J.L. Mackie, has been a highly influential contemporary presentation of a position which draws the conclusion that there are no moral facts. Mackie’s essay seems to be often included in surveys of metaethics because the position he argues for stands in stark contrast to the majority of contemporary metaethical positions. The position he defends, moral error theory, holds its place as one of many metaethical positions an individual might hold. Moral error theory has not always been taken seriously however. In metaethics, moral error theory deserves a mention because of its historical influence, but it would seem to be a position which is easily dealt with. Many respond to Mackie’s moral error theory, but they often do so in a cursory manner. Moral error theory would seem to be a historical curiosity, but not a position often adopted.

More recently however, moral error theory has gained a renewed interest.¹ It has been shown that moral error theory can be developed in a variety of manners. Contemporary moral error theorists often take Mackie as a starting point, but go on to develop the themes found in Mackie in greater detail.²

In modern presentations and critiques of moral error theory the discussion often seems to be one-sided. The error theorist does not always consider the weaknesses of what he considers the best presentation of his position, and the critic does not always fully appreciate the appeal of, or fully engage with the strongest presentations of moral error theory. Often error theorists and critics of moral error theory recognize that moral error theory could be developed in a variety of manners, but limit their discussions to moral error theories which closely relate to Mackie's original presentation of moral error theory. Less is said about how moral error theories could be presented in a new way.

For these reasons, it is useful to provide a new survey of error theoretic positions. By developing an understanding of Mackie's original position and new variations on his position we can see what motivates individuals to develop error theories related in some manner to Mackie's error theory. We can also see the limits of moral error theories which build off Mackie's error theory however. Identifying the limits and difficulties which plague error theories similar to Mackie's should lead us to consider other manners in which one can develop moral error theories. Examining new avenues for developing moral error theories can provide an impetus for further study.

¹ Richard T. Garner, "On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 2 (June 1990); Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001); Jonas Olson, "In Defense of Moral Error Theory," in *New Waves in Metaethics*, ed. Michael Brady (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Jonas Olson, *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² Garner, "On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts," 142-146; Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 30-52; Olson, "In Defense of Moral Error Theory"; Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 116-138.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the motivation for adopting an error theory similar to Mackie's, the limits of such a position, and to explore new possibilities for developing a moral error theory or something like a moral error theory. In doing so, the goal is to open up new avenues of study.

The form this thesis will take is as follows: In chapter one, I will begin by marking out moral error theory's place within the study of metaethics. Following this I will present the general form of moral theory as it has traditionally been understood, and the general form of arguments for moral error theory. We will then see the traditional form of moral error theory and arguments for moral error theory fleshed out in J.L. Mackie's presentation of moral error theory. Examining his error theory will allow me to present a contemporary relative of Mackie's error theory. This will lead us into chapter two. In chapter two, I will outline a contemporary presentation of moral error theory as developed by Jonas Olson. There I will attempt to provide an accurate interpretation of Olson's position, but by no means a full-scale defense. In chapter three, I will explore the limits of Olson's moral error theory. There we will see the different ways in which one might reject such a moral error theory. I will finish by presenting a new avenue for developing a moral error theory, or what might be called a close cousin of moral error theory. The argument I will provide will also rely on evolutionary biology. The aim of chapter four is to give us some guidance as to what direction further study of moral error theory might take—even if in the end the arguments for the moral error theory that I will present need work.

CHAPTER 2

1. MORAL ERROR THEORY'S PLACE WITHIN METAETHICS

Metaethicists have long concerned themselves with how to properly interpret moral statements. Most broadly the debate has been over whether moral statements are best construed realistically or whether they should be interpreted in an antirealist manner. As Geoffrey Sayre-McCord has famously noted however, there are many ways to be a realist about moral discourse as well as many ways to be an antirealist.³ In this thesis, I will be exploring the motivation for adopting a particular antirealist position—moral error theory. In order to get a better understanding of this position, it is helpful to have a general understanding of the metaethical landscape as a whole. In particular, it will be important to define moral realism in its most basic form so we may contrast it with the various types of moral antirealism. We will then be able to isolate moral error theory from the other antirealist positions metaethicists might hold. The metaethical map I provide is by no means the most detailed map that one could provide. However, the map should be sufficient to help us to gain an understanding of a very basic and traditional form of moral error theory.

David Brink provides a minimal definition of moral realism which adequately captures the main features of the various realist positions in metaethics. For Brink, to be a moral realist one must embrace at least two theses: “(1) There are moral facts or truths, and (2) these facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them.”⁴ These two theses are meant to capture two senses in which the moral realist thinks that ethics is objective. The first captures the sense in

³ Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “Introduction: The Many Moral Realisms” in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁴ David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 17.

which the moral realist thinks that there is a fact of the matter as to what is right/wrong, good/bad, etc. In Brink's terms, it captures the objectivity of ethics "insofar as it concerns matters of fact and insofar as moral claims can be true or false (some of them being true)."⁵ If the moral realist holds for example that stealing is wrong, then it is a fact that stealing is wrong—furthermore, the statement "Stealing is wrong" is able to express this fact. The second thesis which the moral realist must accept captures a different sense of objectivity. The second thesis captures the sense in which the facts about right/wrong, good/bad, etc. are independent of what we think or believe about them. Thus, if the moral realist holds that it is fact that stealing is wrong, this fact would obtain regardless of what I, or anyone else, might believe about it. Another way of capturing this type objectivity would be to say that the truth-conditions of moral claims are mind-independent.⁶ For the moral realist, moral claims are not rendered true by some individual or group of individuals thinking they are true.

Several types of antirealism reject the second thesis of moral realism. These positions hold that moral claims concern matters of fact, and that there are facts as to what is good/bad, right/wrong, etc. However, these moral antirealists argue that moral facts do not hold independently of our evidence for them, or that the truth-conditions for moral facts are in some way mind-dependent. Positions on which the truth-conditions for moral claims are subjective or intersubjective, e.g. relativism and certain types of constructivism, are thus antirealist given the above definition of realism. Subjectivism about truth-conditions is the position "that the truth of moral claims depends on the subjective states of individuals."⁷ A crude version of subjectivism would hold that the moral claim "Murder is wrong" is true if I think that it is the case that murder

⁵ Brink, *Moral Realism*, 20.

⁶ Sayre-McCord, "Introduction," 19-20.

⁷ Sayre-McCord, "Introduction," 16.

is wrong. It is rendered true by my thinking it so. Certain types of constructivism might also be subjectivist with regards to the truth-values of moral claims. Take the position, for example, that moral claims are rendered true by an ideal observer. This position would still be antirealist on our account in that it makes the truth of moral claims dependent on the subjective states of some individual—even if these are not exactly the subjective states of any particular moral agent. Intersubjectivism, like subjectivism, holds that the truth-conditions for moral claims are in some way dependent on people, but differs in that the truth of moral claims does not depend on the subjective states of any *particular* individual, ideal or otherwise. Intersubjectivism about truth-conditions is the position that the truth of moral claims depends on “the conventions or practices of groups of people.”⁸ On one version of intersubjectivism, the claim “Murder is wrong” is true if the society in which one lives holds that murder is wrong. The claim is rendered true by facts about one’s society, not by facts about any particular individual. In certain areas of discourse, positions which hold that the truth-conditions of the discourse are subjective or intersubjective might be considered realist. A realist about mental states could hold that the claim, “I am in pain,” is rendered true by my particular mental states, for example.⁹ In the moral case however, these positions are considered antirealist. The moral realist will argue that these positions fail in some way capture how we think about morality, or that they fail to capture how we think about the truth-conditions of moral claims.

Two types of moral antirealism reject the first thesis: noncognitivism, and moral error theory. Noncognitivism denies that there are moral facts and that moral statements are meant to state any purported moral facts. This type of antirealism holds that the claims of moral discourse are not literally true or false, and that moral claims are meant to serve some other purpose than to

⁸ Sayre-McCord, “Introduction,” 18.

⁹ Sayre-McCord, “Introduction,” 15-16.

state facts. Emotivism has been a popular noncognitivist position to hold with regards to moral discourse for example. Emotivism, in its most basic form, is the position that moral claims primarily serve to express emotions. A crude type of emotivism would hold that the statement “Stealing is wrong” amounts to something like “Boo! Stealing!” When one says, “Stealing is wrong,” one does not say anything about stealing itself, one simply expresses an emotion. Thus, on this view, there is no fact of the matter as to whether or not stealing is morally wrong.¹⁰

Moral error theory is the other prominent antirealist position one might hold if one rejects the thesis that there are moral facts or truths. The moral error theorist holds that moral statements are meant to be fact-stating, but denies that any moral statements successfully express moral facts because no moral facts exist. Another way of putting this is that moral statements are primarily cognitive, but all moral statements fail to be true. An error theorist about a given discourse usually holds that the claims of the discourse rest on a faulty presupposition which systematically renders those claims false or untrue. An atheist, for example, would likely be an error theorist about theistic discourse. She would hold that all substantive theistic claims rest on the presupposition that there exists some kind of supernatural entity. She would then claim that because no such entity exists, no substantive theistic claims are true. Thus, for the atheist, any instance of the claim “God is omnibenevolent” is false or untrue because God does not exist. Unlike the noncognitivist however, the error theorist here would admit that substantive theistic claims aim to be fact-stating. That is, the error theorist about theistic discourse wants to claim that a proper analysis of theistic claims would show that such claims are capable of being true or false—granting the claims in question and the presuppositions on which they rest are themselves internally coherent. The atheist error theorist holds that when theists claim “God is

¹⁰ We will discuss non-cognitivism in greater detail in the next section.

omnibenevolent,” they are trying to say something which could be true or false—they are saying that some entity has a certain property. She might even hold that this claim would be true *if* it were the case that God existed. However, because it isn’t the case that God exists, all of these claims fail to be true. The moral error theorist likewise holds that moral claims aim to be true, but then holds that moral discourse rests on some faulty presupposition which renders the claims of that discourse systematically false or untrue. Because moral error theorists want to claim that there are no moral facts *whatsoever*, moral error theorists will often reject antirealist positions of the first type that we mentioned, i.e. those which reject the second thesis of moral realism. Out of considerations of space, I will take it for granted that subjectivist and intersubjectivist accounts of moral claims are problematic in their own right, and for the most part I will only mention issues with these accounts in passing.

It is important to note here that as I have presented it above, the “error” in “moral error theory” has to do with a given discourse, and the sentences of that discourse. This seems to be how moral error theory is traditionally understood. Later, we will see that the “error” in “moral error theory” could be of another sort. For now however, it is more important to outline what seems to be the more traditional understanding of moral error theory.

J.L. Mackie’s defense of moral error theory in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* is widely considered the paradigmatic presentation of contemporary moral error theory. The goal of this chapter will be to motivate Mackie’s error theory, while using more recent criticism of the moral error theory to address issues Mackie missed or failed to deal with. In the next chapter, we will deal with a more contemporary presentation of error theory.

As we saw above, the moral error theorist agrees with the moral realist in holding that moral claims are capable of being true or false. That is, she holds that moral claims are primarily

cognitive. In holding that moral claims are cognitive, both the error theorist and the moral realist disagree with the noncognitivist. The moral error theorist and the noncognitivist both disagree with the moral realist however in holding that there are no moral facts. Establishing a moral error theory will require that we argue against both the moral realist and the noncognitivist in turn. We will begin by arguing, along realist lines, that moral claims aim to be fact-stating. We will show that noncognitivist analyses of moral claims are fundamentally inadequate. After successfully ruling out noncognitivist analyses of moral claims, we can then move on to reject the realist thesis that there are moral facts.

2. RULING OUT NONCOGNITIVISM

Richard Joyce notes that noncognitivist interpretations of moral language often seem to be presented in the form of “When people say X all they are really saying is Y.”¹¹ Joyce claims that this relation between “what people say”, and “what they are really saying” can be understood in at least two different ways.¹² On the one hand, we can understand the relation as a semantic relation, i.e. “When people say X what they *mean* is Y.”¹³ On the other, we might understand the relation as a pragmatic one, i.e. “When people say X, what they *intend* is Y.”¹⁴ We will examine both of these relations in turn.

Early noncognitivists such as A.J. Ayer seemed to consider the relation between “what people say” and “what they are really saying” to be a semantic one. Thus for the noncognitivist, to say “Stealing is wrong” is ultimately just to say something like, “Boo! Stealing,” or “Don’t steal!” Ayer typifies this view in claiming that the utterance “Stealing money is wrong,”

¹¹ Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 10.

¹² Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 10.

¹³ Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 10.

¹⁴ Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 11.

essentially amounts to writing, “‘Stealing money!!’—where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special sort of moral disapproval is the feeling which is being expressed.”¹⁵ More or less, a speaker could replace the moral claim with the emotion, and the same thing would be expressed. The meaning of moral utterances simply is the emotion. On this view, the grammatical form of moral utterances is wholly misleading.

Richard Joyce draws attention to issues with this type of “semantic noncognitivism”. One major problem seems to be that we cannot actually substitute the noncognitive meanings proposed by such interpretations for the moral claims we make in practice. Joyce invites us to imagine for example “a member of a hospital ethics committee expressing her judgments as a series of ‘Hurray!’s and grunts of disapproval.”¹⁶ Anyone to witness such a spectacle of course would be greatly confused and appalled. This should not be what we would expect however if the actual meaning of a moral claim is to express emotion. If “Stealing is wrong” and “Boo! Stealing” have the same meaning then we should be able to get by using either statement in practice, much as we are able to say “He locked his keys in his car” or “He locked his keys in his automobile” and mean the same thing. Joyce elaborates: “It is implausible that two types of sentence could *mean the same* if we would treat discourse conducted in terms of one as sober and serious, and reject discourse conducted in terms of the other not merely as inappropriate, but as utterly mystifying.”¹⁷ In other words, it seems unlikely that what we “really mean” can be some kind of emotive response because if we were to actually say “what we really mean” while participating in moral discourse on this picture, we would be rendered almost wholly incomprehensible and we would not even be recognized as participating in the discourse. This,

¹⁵ A.J. Ayer, “Critique of Ethics and Theology” in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 31.

¹⁶ Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 10.

¹⁷ Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 10.

among other reasons, should cast doubt on whether semantic noncognitivism can be made to work.

We turn then instead to the pragmatic interpretation of the relation between “what is said” and “what is really said” in moral discourse. The pragmatic version of the relation has to do more with how speakers *intend to use* moral utterances rather than what those utterances strictly mean. Joyce gives Charles Stevenson as an example of someone who apparently understood noncognitivism in this way. Stevenson claims that the “major *use* [of ethical judgments] is not to indicate facts but to create an influence.”¹⁸ On this view, the focus is on the speaker’s intention in using the moral claim as opposed to a strict semantic analysis of moral language itself. The pragmatic noncognitivist may admit that moral judgments appear by their very structure to be assertions and that a literal interpretation of moral claims would be such that they are assertions. He would maintain however that moral judgments are never actually *used* as assertions. This noncognitivist therefore might claim that all moral claims are similar to sentences such as, “I name this ship *The Beagle*.”¹⁹ Such a statement on its surface appears as if it could be descriptive, and if it were to be interpreted literally, or if one were not aware of what the sentence is actually used for, one could say that it is in fact descriptive, i.e. one would be talking about what one is currently doing. Still, the statement is never actually used to describe or report.²⁰ It is used to name a ship. Moral language likewise could be such that it appears to be assertoric, and if taken literally it would be considered assertoric. They claim, however, that it might be the case that we never actually use moral claims as assertions. The proposal is that we use moral utterances for some other purpose—for example, “to create an influence” or express

¹⁸ Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 11.

¹⁹ Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 11.

²⁰ Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 11.

emotion.²¹ For the pragmatic noncognitivist, the fact that moral claims appear to be assertions is often taken to be essential, in some way, to the intended use of the claims. For example, if the pragmatic noncognitivist holds that the intended use of moral claims is to create an influence, she might hold that the assertoric appearance of moral claims is a rhetorical device which allows one to influence others more effectively. She would claim that if one's goal is to influence the behavior of others the best way to achieve this is to appear to state facts rather than say what one "really means." Say for example, that by "Stealing is wrong" I really mean "Don't steal!" If I were to say what I really mean in such a case, the individual whom I am trying to influence could easily wave off my proscription if he does not like me nor value my opinion. Such a proscription is harder to wave off however if I appear to be stating that there is a fact independent of me which proscribes against such behavior—even if all I am really doing is telling someone not to perform some type of behavior. Because the form of moral claims is essential to their use, the pragmatic noncognitivist doesn't fall victim to the same type of problem the semantic noncognitivist does with regards to substituting the meaning of moral claims for the claims themselves. Because the appearance of moral claims is essential to their proper use, we should not expect that we would be able to substitute "what we say" with "what we are really saying." To do so would be to compromise the intended use of the moral claim.

If we look at the evidence in support of our use of moral judgments as assertions however, such a view becomes less plausible. Joyce, drawing off Peter Glassen²² and Peter

²¹ It is important here to stress the difference between using a statement to express emotion and saying that the meaning of a statement is an expression of emotion. I could for example use "That's awesome!" to express some sort of positive emotion without "That's awesome!" actually meaning "Yay! That".

²² Peter Glassen, "The Cognitivity of Moral Judgments," *Mind* 68, (1959): 57-72.

Geach,²³ provides nine pieces of evidence which support the fact that we use moral utterances as assertions:

1. They (moral utterances) are expressed in the indicative mood
2. They can be transformed into interrogative sentences
3. They appear embedded in propositional attitude contexts
4. They are considered true or false, correct or mistaken
5. They are considered to have an impersonal, objective character
6. The putative moral predicates can be transformed into abstract singular terms (e.g., “goodness” suggesting they are intended to pick out properties)
7. They are subject to debate which bears all the hallmarks of factual disagreement
8. They appear in logically complex contexts (e.g., as the antecedents of conditionals)
9. They appear as premises in arguments considered valid²⁴

The noncognitivist, if she hopes to maintain that moral utterances are not assertions, needs to explain why it is we use moral utterances in all of these ways, but it is unclear whether she can succeed in doing this. Take for example the fact that we can transform moral claims into questions such as “Is stealing wrong?” Why should we do this if moral claims are mainly used to express emotion? What is the question itself ultimately used to express?

One noncognitivist response might be that we use the question in order to express doubts about whether one should feel negative emotions about stealing. The issue with this answer and others like it however is that it is unclear why we should use the phrase “Is stealing wrong?” to achieve this effect instead of simply saying, “I’m not sure if I should have negative emotions toward stealing,” or “Should I have negative emotions toward stealing?”. While both of these utterances are of course somewhat bulkier, either would seem to more clearly express what it is the speaker intends to achieve in asking the question in the first place.

Another issue related to this concerns the fact that we seem to know how we intend to use moral language, and our intended use does not always line up with the pragmatic

²³ Peter Geach, “Assertion,” *Philosophical Review* 74, (1965): 449-465.

²⁴ Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 13.

noncognitivist's use. It seems that as competent users of language, we should be able to readily identify the ends to which we put our language to use. If we were unable to do this, we would not be very effective communicators. Take for example the statement, "Please pass the guacamole." We know that such a statement is used to politely request guacamole. If we uttered this statement in polite company, we would expect that someone would pass the guacamole. This is because we know how the statement is used, and what the proper response to that use is. If someone were to respond, "Guacamole is awesome!" we would assume this person does not understand the proper use of "Please pass the guacamole." In the moral case, if we were to ask a question such as "Is stealing wrong?" it likewise seems as if we should know what kind of response to expect. This seems to be because we know how we intend to use moral language. This is why, if the question "Is stealing wrong?" were asked, and someone responded "You should disapprove of stealing," we would be confused as to why someone would answer this way. We would likewise be confused if whoever we were talking with did not respond at all. We know that these are not proper responses to our question because we know that we are not using the question to express doubts or to express certain feelings. We are attempting to ask a genuine question about whether something has a certain property—wrongness. Therefore, unless there is a good reason why we are entirely misled about our intended use of moral language, it seems more plausible to suppose—especially in conjunction with other pieces of evidence in Joyce's list—that if we think we are using moral utterances as assertions, then we are using moral utterances as assertions.

3. FORMULATING THE ERROR THEORY

If the error theorist can show that moral utterances are in fact assertions, his next move is to show that those assertions all fail to be true. Deciding exactly how the error theorist should formulate her position has been subject to debate however.²⁵ Before we go on to consider just what it is that makes moral assertions fail to be true, we will examine how the error theorist should formulate her position.

Traditionally, error theory has been formulated such that all moral assertions are considered false. This seems to be how J.L. Mackie formulated his version, for example. He claims, “[A]lthough most people in making moral judgments implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false.”²⁶ According to Mackie all first-order moral claims are false, and our second-order theorizing about those claims has no effect on the status of those claims.²⁷ This formulation has been noted to face certain issues however.²⁸ For one, it has been argued that second-order theorizing about moral claims may affect the status of some first-order claims.²⁹ For example, it has been noted that if the error theorist claims all moral utterances are false, then by the law of the excluded middle, some moral claims would end up being true. Charles Pigden calls this “the Doppelganger problem.” Pigden puts the problem this way:

It seems that not all moral judgments can be false, for (in many cases at least) the negation of a moral judgment, X, is itself a moral judgment. And if X is false, its negation not-X must be true. But the error theory is precisely the thesis that all moral

²⁵ Jonas Olson, “In Defense of Moral Error Theory,” 68-70; Charles R. Pigden, “Nihilism, Nietzsche, and the Doppelganger Problem,” in *A World Without Values: Essays on John Mackie’s Moral Error Theory*, ed. Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin (New York: Springer, 2010).

²⁶ J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1977), 35.

²⁷ Mackie, *Ethics*, 16.

²⁸ Olson, “In Defense of Moral Error Theory,” 68-70; Pigden, “Nihilism, Nietzsche, and the Doppelganger Problem.”

²⁹ Olson, “In Defense of Moral Error Theory,” 68-70.

judgments are false (at least with respect to their core moral contents). So the error theory or metaethical nihilism is false; indeed, incoherent.³⁰

Thus, if the error theorist holds that the claim “Murder is morally wrong” is false, then by the law of the excluded middle it follows that “Murder is not morally wrong” is true.³¹ “Murder is not morally wrong” still seems to be a moral claim however, so the error theorist finds himself caught in a contradiction i.e. he holds simultaneously that all moral claims are false, and that “Murder is not morally wrong” is true.

In order to sidestep this issue, one might opt to formulate moral error theory such that all moral claims are neither true nor false (though still truth-apt).³² Joyce, borrowing from P.F. Strawson³³, claims that because moral properties fail to refer to anything, sentences in which such properties occur may be neither true nor false.³⁴ On Strawson’s account, statements that contain uniquely referring expressions (e.g. proper names, pronouns, etc.) exhibit a “truth-value gap” (they are neither true nor false) when those expressions fail to refer. To show this, Strawson relies on our intuitions about the truth-values of such statements. He claimed that if someone were to state, “The king of France is wise,” we would not respond to that person by saying, “That is false.” Rather we would say something along the lines of “I don’t know what you’re saying, there is no king of France.”³⁵ Because we would feel a certain uneasiness about responding with “That is false,” this is supposed to show that in circumstances in which uniquely referring expressions fail to refer we would not consider statements which contain those

³⁰ Pigden, “Nihilism, Nietzsche, and the Doppelganger Problem,” 27.

³¹ Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*; Olson, “In Defense of Moral Error Theory”; Pigden, “Nihilism, Nietzsche, and the Doppelganger Problem.” Strictly speaking the error theorist wants to hold that “Murder is not morally wrong” is true. The error theorist wants to claim that murder isn’t morally *anything*. We will get to this point later however.

³² Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 6-9.

³³ P.F Strawson, “On Referring” in *Classics of Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Robert R. Ammerman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1990).

³⁴ Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 6-9.

³⁵ Strawson, “On Referring,” 323.

expressions true or false.³⁶ For Strawson, this is because uniquely referring expressions such as “the king of France” *presuppose*, but do not *entail* or *assert*, that there exists a king of France.³⁷

When such presuppositions are false, the statement in question is rendered neither true nor false.

One might say then that the claim “Murder is morally wrong” is neither true nor false because the claim falsely presupposes that some property “moral wrongness” exists. On this picture, all moral statements are akin to statements such as “The present king of France is wise.” The upshot of adopting Strawson’s account is that because such claims are not false, the negation of those claims does not result in their being true. This formulation thus avoids running into contradiction.³⁸

While this formulation of error theory avoids formulating it in such a way that it is inherently contradictory, it still faces issues of its own. For one, it is unclear whether presuppositional failure results in a truth-value gap in all cases. Some have noted that Strawson himself saw “that *certain* uses of nondenoting definite descriptions would result in claims that are *false*, rather than neither true nor false.”³⁹ Intuitively, it would seem the statement “My friend went for a drive with the king of France” is false, for example.⁴⁰ This is despite the fact that such a statement falsely presupposes that there exists a king of France. It seems then that

³⁶ There are circumstances however in which we *would* consider such a statement true or false, e.g. if there were a king of France and he was wise, it would be true, whereas if there were a king of France and he was not wise, it would be false.

³⁷ Marga Reimer and Anne Bezuidenhout, “Presupposition and Truth-Value Gaps” in *Descriptions and Beyond*, ed. Marga Reimer and Anne Bezuidenhout (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 309. For Strawson, “A presupposes B iff A is neither true nor false unless B is true.”

³⁸ Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 8-9. One should note that even though moral claims are neither true nor false on this formulation, it is not *non-cognitivist*. As Joyce notes, moral utterances are still ultimately used as assertions that is, they aim to be true, and they could be used to state truths if moral properties actually existed. For the non-cognitivist however, moral utterances are not used as assertions.

³⁹ Reimer and Bezuidenhout, “Presupposition and Truth-Value Gaps,” 308.

⁴⁰ Reimer and Bezuidenhout, “Presupposition and Truth-Value Gaps,” 309. Provided that one is certain “my friend” really exists.

there are at least some cases in which presuppositional failure does not result in a truth-value gap.

If the error theorist wants to adopt the formulation in which moral claims are neither true nor false, it would seem he needs to show that in the moral case, presuppositional failure always results in a truth-value gap. Unfortunately, there are reasons for doubting whether this can be done. Jonas Olson for example, notes that intuitively, “claims that predicate non-instantiated properties of some individual or individuals seem false.”⁴¹ He notes, as an example, that if someone was to claim that an individual is a witch—i.e. that the said person has magical powers—we would consider such a claim to be false; despite the fact that there are no such things as witches or magical powers.⁴² Similarly, sometimes when we make moral claims, an allegedly non-instantiated property (goodness, badness, etc.) is predicated of a thing. If this is the case, it seems puzzling why we should strip moral claims of truth-values while allowing witch claims, or something similar to witch claims, to be false however. It seems that if some moral claims are of the same grammatical form as witch claims, then the rules governing when we would strip those claims of truth-values should extend across the board. Thus, if we are to consider witch claims false even in the presence of presuppositional failure, then it seems we should consider at least some moral claims false rather than neither true nor false.

Further evidence for this is given by the fact that according to Strawson’s account we should feel somewhat uneasy about attributing a truth value to a claim which is neither true nor false. Again, this is why we would not respond to “The king of France is wise” with “That is false.” However, in the moral case it does not seem as if we feel the same uneasiness. It seems reasonable that we would respond to “Maximizing happiness at any cost is morally good,” for

⁴¹ Olson, “In Defense of Moral Error Theory,” 81, n. 18.

⁴² Olson, “In Defense of Moral Error Theory,” 81, n. 18.

example, with “That is false.” Without any uneasiness accompanying this response, we lose much of our motivation to strip the claim of a truth value. It seems then that the error theorist would want to claim that at least some of our moral claims are false rather than neither true nor false. If this is the case however, then the error theorist still needs to find some way to deal with the Doppelganger problem.

Earlier when introducing the Doppelganger problem we gave an example in which the negation of a false first-order moral claim—“Murder is wrong”—resulted in what seemed to be a true first-order moral claim—“Murder is not wrong.” Some have argued that the reason we consider the claim “Murder is not wrong” specifically moral is because it seems that “not wrong” entails “morally right” or “morally permissible.”⁴³ In other words, by saying that “Murder is not wrong” is true, it seems we are saying that “Murder is morally permissible.” Again if this is the case, then we end up with some moral claims being true. It would seem that the error theorist can avoid this consequence however if he can show that “not wrong” does not entail “morally permissible”. If he can do this, he can deny that claims of the form, “X is not wrong” are strictly speaking moral claims, but instead second-order claims about the moral status of actions. Then, because these claims are not moral claims, their truth-values would not affect the truth of error theory as a whole.

Charles Pigden provides two entailments which seem to be at the heart of the Doppelganger problem for moral error theory. He calls these “RD” or “reinforced Doppelganger” principles:

- RD1 “It is not the case that action X is wrong” entails “Action X is right.”
- RD2 “It is not the case that action X is right” entails “Action X is wrong.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Olson, “In Defense of Moral Error Theory” 68-70; Pigden, “Nihilism, Nietzsche, and the Doppelganger Problem,” 27-32.

⁴⁴ Pigden, “Nihilism, Nietzsche, and the Doppelganger Problem,” 30. For these entailments, “right” can also be understood in the sense of “morally permissible,” and “wrong” can be understood as “morally impermissible.”

For Pigden, “A entails B if it cannot be the case that A is true and B false. Or A entails B if there is no conceivable situation (possible world) in which A is true and B false.”⁴⁵ If either of the RD principles holds, the moral error theorist is necessarily committed to some moral claims being true. Thus, if the error theorist wants to avoid the charge of incoherence, he must show that neither of these entailments holds.

Essentially, these entailments rest on the assumption that all actions must be exhaustively grouped into two categories: right and wrong. The assumption seems to be that if an action is not wrong then it must be right, and if an action is not right then it must be wrong. As Pigden notes however, to assume this is simply to reject the very possibility of an error theory at the outset.⁴⁶ It is to say that there is no possible world in which an action is *neither right nor wrong*, and this is simply to reject one of the central claims of moral error theory without argument. The defender of the RD principles relies on a false dichotomy in order to show that the RD entailments hold. But the error theorist can claim there is a third option which such a defender rules out—namely, an action might be neither right nor wrong. She is able to claim this is possible because she maintains that there are no moral facts or properties. In other words, the error theorist maintains there is at least one conceivable situation in which the claim, “It is not the case that X is wrong,” is true, yet it is false that “X is right.” This situation is the one in which there are no moral properties or facts. In such a situation, “X” isn’t morally *anything*.⁴⁷ Of course, the error theorist has to make good on the claim that there are no moral properties or facts if she wants to maintain that such a situation is our *actual* situation. Nonetheless, for our

⁴⁵ Pigden, “Nihilism, Nietzsche, and the Doppelganger Problem,” 30.

⁴⁶ Pigden, “Nihilism, Nietzsche, and the Doppelganger Problem,” 30.

⁴⁷ Pigden, “Nihilism, Nietzsche, and the Doppelganger Problem,” 30-31.

present purposes it is enough to show that such a situation is possible, and therefore that the RD entailments do not hold.

To summarize then, the error theorist should claim that all moral assertions are either false or neither true or false. While one might seek to formulate error theory such that all moral assertions are neither true nor false, it would seem that not all cases of presuppositional failure result in a truth-value gap. For this reason among others, it seems likely that moral error theory should be formulated such that some moral claims are false rather than all of them being neither true nor false. Although this formulation seems problematic on the surface, we have seen that it is not ultimately committed to a contradiction.

It is important to note here that the error theorist is not committed to the thesis that all statements in which moral terms occur are false. Error theorists can hold that statements such as “Jean believed murder is morally wrong” are true for example. For the moral error theorist, because such a statement does not commit one to the existence of anything like moral facts or properties, it is not distinctively moral. The statements that the error theorist is concerned with are those which commit one to moral properties or facts, or to some other error. As we saw earlier, the sentence in question could *presuppose* some error, or it could more straightforwardly *entail* an error. (In what follows, when speaking of entailment, I will take it that A entails B if there is no possible world in which A is true and B is false.) The error theorist is concerned with certain types of statements which are essentially problematic, and central to moral discourse.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin, “Introduction” in *A World Without Values: Essays on John Mackie’s Moral Error Theory*, ed. Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin (New York: Springer, 2010), xii-xiii.

4. ARGUING FOR A MORAL ERROR THEORY

The next step for the error theorist then is to show that moral discourse actually *is* in some way problematic. Usually, the error theorist's argument takes place in two steps: the first conceptual, the second ontological.⁴⁹ On the conceptual step, the error theorist tries to show that moral discourse is "centrally committed" to some thesis or set of theses.⁵⁰ Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin claim that to be centrally committed to some thesis X means, "that to deny X would be to cease to participate competently in that discourse."⁵¹ Take for example someone who participates seriously in ghost discourse. Presumably such discourse is committed to the thesis that there exist supernatural entities that somehow interact with the natural world. To give up that thesis would be to give up any serious talk about ghosts as they are commonly understood. The moral error theorist likewise seeks to identify the theses that moral discourse is committed to, where if one were to give up those theses it would no longer be considered moral discourse. In other words, we can say that on the conceptual step, the error theorist seeks to identify what it is that makes moral discourse distinctively moral.

As we can see in the example of ghost discourse, on the conceptual step, the theses which are identified as central to the discourse might make claims to the effect that some entity or property exists. These claims are of course ontological. Calling the step for an error theory which isolates these claims "the conceptual step" might therefore appear to be a misnomer. It is important to note however that the conceptual step of the argument is neutral with regard to whether such entities or properties actually exist. The purpose of the conceptual step is to *identify* the entities or properties a given discourse claims to exist or is committed to the

⁴⁹ Joyce and Kirchin, "Introduction," xv.

⁵⁰ Joyce and Kirchin, "Introduction," xvi.

⁵¹ Joyce and Kirchin, "Introduction," xvi.

existence of, not to argue whether such entities or properties *in fact* exist. The ontological step is where the error theorist argues that the entity or property that is claimed to exist does not *in fact* exist.

The ontological step of the argument hopes to show that the theses identified in the conceptual step are false. The error theorist might attempt to do this in two ways. On the one hand, she might claim that moral discourse commits one to a thesis that is incoherent. Here, she hopes to show that moral discourse is *necessarily* problematic.⁵² On the other hand, the error theorist might try to show that it is a contingent matter of fact that moral discourse is problematic. To do this, she might show that some thesis moral discourse is committed to is empirically false, metaphysically queer, or dependent on some fact that does not obtain.

In this chapter, we will present a general overview of both the conceptual step and the ontological step as presented by J.L. Mackie. The goal will be to provide a clear exposition of each step while dealing briefly with the most obvious issues. The presentation of the conceptual and the ontological step in this chapter certainly falls short of a full-scale defense of Mackie's error theory. Nonetheless, in the next two sections, providing an explication of Mackie's error theory will allow us to put a more contemporary formulation of moral error theory into perspective.

5. THE CONCEPTUAL STEP

As noted above, on the conceptual step the error theorist attempts to show that moral discourse is centrally committed to some thesis or set of theses. J.L. Mackie held that moral discourse is committed to values which are *objective* (mind-independent), and *prescriptive*.

⁵² Joyce and Kirchin, "Introduction," xvi. I take *necessity* here to be *conceptual* necessity as opposed to *metaphysical* necessity.

Mackie isn't entirely clear what he means by objectivity. Much of Mackie's discussion of the objectivity of values consists of explaining what objectivity *isn't*. Mackie notes that to say values are objective isn't to say simply that there are things that are valued by everyone, nor is it just to say that values are universalizable. In the first case, Mackie explains, "There could be agreement in valuing even if valuing is just something that people do, even if this activity is not further validated."⁵³ In such a case, Mackie notes that we would have intersubjective agreement, but not objectivity. Objectivity, for Mackie, does not mean simply universalizability either. As Mackie notes, individuals might be willing to universalize their subjective approvals and disapprovals of things without any objective fact backing up their claims. I might for example be willing to universalize by subjective approval of chocolate ice cream by saying "Chocolate ice cream is the best ice cream." In such a case, I might be saying that everyone else should approve chocolate ice cream in the way that I do. Here I am universalizing my subjective approval, but presumably there is no fact of the matter about whether chocolate ice cream is the best kind of ice cream.

In identifying what objectivity isn't for Mackie we begin to see what objectivity is. For Mackie, to say that values are objective is to say that statements about those values are descriptive (fact-stating) in some way, and that they are supposed to be independent of what any particular individual or group of individuals think about them. Mackie claims that the deficiency of non-cognitive interpretations of moral language in part is that it leaves out the type of objectivity he thinks is essential to moral discourse. In rejecting non-cognitive analyses of moral discourse he claims, "The ordinary user of moral language means to say something about whatever it is that he characterizes morally, for example a possible action, as it is in itself, or

⁵³ Mackie, *Ethics*, 22.

would be if it were realized, and not about, or even simply expressive of, his, or anyone else's, attitude or relation to it.”⁵⁴ Here, Mackie seems to indicate that moral discourse is committed to the type of realism we introduced at the beginning of this chapter. For Mackie, the ordinary user of moral language is committed to both forms of objectivity that are essential to realism: namely, 1) there are moral facts, and 2) that these facts are independent of our beliefs about them or attitudes. When we say that an action is wrong, we are saying *something* about the action in question, and we are not simply saying something about an agent's or any group of agents' relation to the action. We seem to be trying to characterize the action as it is independent of any agent's relation to that action. We seem to be trying to characterize the action as if it has some property, e.g. wrongness, such that it would have this property even if no one thought so.

That moral discourse is committed to these two forms of objectivity seems fairly clear when we consider the manner in which we morally condemn others. Say for example you have a friend who tends to steal. If you were to confront that friend and tell him “Stealing is wrong,” presumably when you say this you intend to say something about his actions independently of what you or anyone else thinks about them. You are not simply saying that you disapprove of his actions, nor are you saying that society as a whole disapproves of his actions. You seem to be saying that the act of stealing is itself wrong. If you do disapprove of his actions, and society disapproves of his actions, it would seem that this is *because they are wrong*. They are not wrong because of your disapproval or society's disapproval.

In addition to its commitment to objectivity, Mackie holds that moral discourse is committed to some form of prescriptivity. As with objectivity, Mackie is not always explicitly clear about moral discourse's commitment to prescriptivity. Most broadly, prescriptivity for

⁵⁴ Mackie, *Ethics*, 33.

Mackie has to do with the purported action-guiding feature of moral claims. Whereas any non-cognitive analysis of moral discourse leaves out its claim to objectivity, for Mackie, any naturalist analysis of moral discourse will leave out its prescriptivity. For Mackie, a naturalist analysis of moral discourse would render our moral claims “wholly descriptive” or “inert.”⁵⁵ As Richard Garner explains, if we abandon moral discourse’s commitment to prescriptivity, moral judgments “would make no demands and require nothing from us, but would merely express the information that an action belongs to the class of right or wrong actions. Learning that something is wrong would be like learning what time it is—its relevance would depend on other commitments.”⁵⁶ As Mackie notes, moral judgments do require *something* from us, or at the very least they are supposed to play some role in guiding our behavior. If one were to tell one’s friend that his act of stealing is wrong, this of course is quite different than simply saying that it is an act of stealing. Whereas the latter case is wholly descriptive, the former case seems to say something more. It isn’t entirely clear what this difference amounts to however.

Mackie’s mention of Plato’s Forms as “a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be,”⁵⁷ has led to much confusion as to what he meant by prescriptivity. Mackie claims,

An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it. Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-doneness somehow built in to it.⁵⁸

What Mackie means in this passage by “to-be-pursuedness” and “not-to-be-doneness” is not clear, nor is the conceptual connection between “principles of right and wrong” and “to-be-

⁵⁵ Mackie, *Ethics*, 33.

⁵⁶ Garner, “On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts,” 139.

⁵⁷ Mackie, *Ethics*, 40.

⁵⁸ Mackie, *Ethics*, 40. My italics.

doneness” or “not-to-be-doneness.” This ambiguity has led commentators to interpret Mackie in a variety of ways. On the one hand, commentators have interpreted “to-be-pursuedness” as meaning that one is actually moved to pursue whatever ends are outlined by the moral fact in question. On the other, commentators have interpreted Mackie as holding that the truth of the moral fact provides strong reasons to act in accordance with the moral fact, where “reasons” here are understood as justifying or counting in favor of the action in question,⁵⁹ even though the fact itself might not move one to act in accordance with it.

If we interpret Mackie as holding that the “to-be-pursuedness” of moral facts motivates one to act in accordance with those facts, then moral discourse would be committed to what has been called *internalism about motives*.⁶⁰ David Brink defines internalism about motives as the thesis that “it is a conceptual truth that moral considerations motivate.”⁶¹ For Brink, the term “considerations” may refer to either beliefs or facts. If Mackie were to hold that it is a conceptual feature of moral considerations that they motivate, Mackie would hold that moral discourse commits one to the thesis that it is a built-in feature of moral beliefs or facts that they motivate in some way. If internalism about motives with regards to morality were true, then if it is a moral fact that “Giving to charity is good,” the agent who accepts or is aware of this moral fact would be moved to give to charity in virtue of that fact being true or believing that fact to be true. While many have rejected internalism about motives outright, there does seem to be a sense in which one should be moved to act in accordance with moral facts if one holds those facts to be true. If one really does think giving to charity is morally required, it seems like one ought to be moved in some way to give to charity. If one has no inclination whatsoever to give

⁵⁹ I will expand on what is meant by “reason” later on.

⁶⁰ Brink, *Moral Realism*, 38-39.

⁶¹ Brink, *Moral Realism*, 40.

to charity if she believes it is required, it could seem that she doesn't really believe that it is required. Few have held that internalism about motives with regards to moral facts is plausible however, and this has led many to reject Mackie's conceptual step outright.

Mackie need not be interpreted as holding that moral discourse is committed to internalism about motives however. It could be the case that moral facts provide us with reasons to act in accordance with those facts, even if those facts don't motivate us to act in accordance with those facts. If we read Mackie in this way, he would have held that moral discourse is committed to *internalism about reasons*. Internalism about reasons is the thesis that moral facts necessarily provide the agent with reasons for acting in certain ways. In support of this reading of Mackie, at one point he claims that his rejection of objective values amounts to a rejection of any "categorical imperative element"⁶² in ethics or elsewhere, where a categorical imperative "would express a reason for acting which was unconditional in the sense of not being contingent upon any present desire of the agent to whose satisfaction the recommended action would contribute as a means."⁶³ As with objectivity and prescriptivity, Mackie's use of the term "reason" is ambiguous. This seems to be in part due to the fact that at the time of Mackie's writing clear distinctions between different types of reasons were not always drawn. What Mackie seems to have in mind is that the reasons given by objective values would *justify* one's acting in a particular way—that is, the reasons given by objective values are *justifying reasons*. This is in contrast to reasons which are simply *explanatory* or *motivational*. To clarify, say I believe that the Chicago Cubs are the best team in baseball and this leads me to cheer for the Cubs. We might say that the reason why I cheer for the Cubs is that I believe that they are the best team. This reason *explains* why I cheer for the Cubs, but it does not necessarily *justify* my

⁶² Mackie, *Ethics*, 29

⁶³ Mackie, *Ethics*, 29.

cheering for the Cubs (it could be the case, for example, that in reality they are terrible.) If we read Mackie's use of "reason" as "justifying reason," when Mackie says that the recognition of a moral fact would provide us with a reason, this reason would justify performing or refraining from performing a certain action. The fact would not necessarily move us to act in accordance with it however. If, for example, "Giving to charity is morally good" were true, such a fact would justify one's giving to charity. The truth of the fact would give one a *good* reason to give to charity. Nonetheless, it is wholly possible that one might not be motivated by this fact to give to charity.

Moral discourse's commitment to internalism about reasons seems to be far more plausible than its commitment to internalism about motives. The implausibility of internalism about motives lies in the fact that it seems at least possible that there could be individuals who recognize that some action is right or wrong, but fail to be moved by that recognition. It seems at least possible, for example, for one to believe that eating meat is morally wrong, yet fail to act in accordance with the belief. In order for one to deny that this is possible, one would have to say that such an individual doesn't really believe that meat eating is wrong or that she is using "wrong" in some sort of non-standard sense. Difficulties in explaining just what such an individual might mean have led many to reject internalism about motives.

Internalism about reasons does not share such difficulties. If there are moral facts, it would seem that at the very least those facts would justify one's acting or refraining from acting in certain ways. If it is a fact that "Giving to charity is morally good," it seems reasonable that one would cite such a fact as a good reason to give to charity. When asked why one gives to charity and one cites such a fact, one seems to be doing more than just explaining why one gives

to charity. One seems to further indicate that one is warranted in giving to charity because the moral fact holds.

Contemporary moral error theorists all seem to agree that Mackie should be understood as holding that moral discourse is committed to some form of internalism about reasons if his position is to be taken seriously.⁶⁴ While Mackie does seem to indicate that moral facts would have *some* motivational force if they were to exist, most contemporary error theorists have insisted that Mackie's worries about the problematic nature of moral facts are fairly broad when it comes to their prescriptivity. Because his worries are fairly broad, Mackie *can* be construed as targeting moral discourse's commitment to internalism about reasons even if he did not explicitly identify internalism about reasons as a problematic feature.

6. THE ONTOLOGICAL STEP

The ontological step for Mackie may be seen as consisting of two arguments: the argument from relativity, and the argument from queerness. The ontological step for Mackie is supplemented by an explanation of why we would come to believe there are objective values when there are none.

The first argument Mackie provides to support his claim that there are no objective values is "the argument from relativity." The argument begins with the observation that it is a matter of empirical fact that there is wide variation in "moral codes" between different groups. Mackie claims that "the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them

⁶⁴ Garner "On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts," 142-144; Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 1-52; Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 79-138.

seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values.”⁶⁵ As Mackie notes his argument from relativity should be seen as an inference to the best explanation. As such, the argument from relativity isn’t meant to conclusively establish that there are no objective values. It should however provide some impetus to reject the existence of objective values.

As many have noted, we see disagreement in many areas of discourse, e.g. science, but such disagreement doesn’t lead us to endorse anti-realism in those areas. Despite disagreement, we think there is a fact of the matter which is independent of our attitudes. Here Mackie needs to claim that disagreement in the moral case is different than disagreement in other areas of discourse. Mackie indeed addresses this “partners in crime” objection: he claims, “Disagreement on questions in history or biology or cosmology does not show that there are no objective issues in these fields for investigators to disagree about. But such scientific disagreement results from speculative inferences or explanatory hypotheses based on inadequate evidence, and it is hardly plausible to interpret moral disagreement in the same way.”⁶⁶ Mackie’s claim is that disagreement in other cases results from inadequate evidence, but that in the moral case this explanation of disagreement cannot be given. Purportedly, Mackie would claim, we have the evidence required to arrive at objective truth in the moral case, yet disagreement is still prevalent. Mackie unfortunately does not expand on what he means by evidence, or how disagreement given adequate evidence should support the conclusion that there are no objective values however.

Few have taken the argument from relativity very seriously. If we look at the general form Mackie’s argument takes however—as an inference to the best explanation—we can see that his argument could be modified in many ways. In chapter four, I will present an argument

⁶⁵ Mackie, *Ethics*, 110.

⁶⁶ Mackie, *Ethics*, 36.

which might be seen as analogous to Mackie's argument from relativity. There, I will argue that our belief in moral facts can be better explained through an evolutionary genealogy. For the time being however, we will put Mackie's argument aside.

Mackie's most forceful argument is the argument from queerness. Mackie's argument from queerness is split into two strands: one metaphysical, the other epistemological. Mackie explains: "If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else."⁶⁷ Mackie's claim is that objective values, if they were to exist, would be unlike anything we would accept on a plausible ontological picture. Mackie, among others, finds it difficult to imagine what it would mean for moral facts realistically construed to give us objective reasons to act in certain ways. Richard Garner gives this explanation of Mackie's worry: "We know what it is for our friends, our job, and our projects to make demands on us, but we do not know what it is for *reality* to do so. A black hole swallows everything, but it demands nothing."⁶⁸ What does it mean for reality to give us objective reasons to act in certain ways? Presumably, reality itself would give us reasons to favor certain courses of behavior, and these reasons wouldn't be dependent on our desires, projects, or our beliefs about these reasons. Difficulty in imagining what this could mean is what provides Mackie and other error theorists impetus to reject such an introduction to our ontology.

This problem is exacerbated when we consider the epistemological consequences of such an introduction to our ontology. Mackie wants to further claim that introducing such values into

⁶⁷ Mackie, *Ethics*, 38.

⁶⁸ Garner, "On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts," 143.

our ontology would require radical revisions to our epistemology. Richard Garner frames Mackie's epistemological worry in this way:

If moral disagreement is disagreement about properties that are *really there*, then we do need to say something about them and our apprehension of them. We learned our colour words in front of observable coloured objects, and properties like yellow are integrated into a network of beliefs about the relation of colour to light, paint, perception, physiology, prisms, and photography. Intrinsic values and moral obligations don't fit into any system like this. We have no duty receptors or instruments to detect the presence of trace amounts of intrinsic value.⁶⁹

If we introduce objective values into our ontology, we have to say something about how we come to know about those values. The worry is that where we can explain other sorts of claims to knowledge, knowledge of objective values resists such an explanation. By what physiological mechanism do we detect moral facts? Are they detected by the intellect? If so, the realist must provide a plausible account of how this is supposed to work. If they are unable to do so, this should count against the existence of moral facts.

As Mackie notes, the most important type of objection to his argument from queerness is one which searches for "companions in guilt."⁷⁰ Such an objection would point to properties and facts which resist explanation on a broadly empiricist picture. The claim is that if we find such properties and facts metaphysically and epistemologically unproblematic, we should find moral facts unproblematic also. Mackie explains:

[T]he best move for the moral objectivist is not to evade this issue [queerness], but to look for companions in guilt. For example Richard Price argues that it is not moral knowledge alone that such an empiricism as those of Locke and Hume is unable to account for, but also our knowledge and even our ideas of essence, number, identity, diversity, solidity, inertia, substance, the necessary existence and infinite extension of time and space, necessity and possibility in general, power, and causation.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Garner, "On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts," 141.

⁷⁰ Mackie, *Ethics*, 39.

⁷¹ Mackie, *Ethics*, 39.

Here, Mackie casts “companions in guilt” arguments primarily in terms of knowledge, but such arguments of course have a metaphysical analog.

Mackie only briefly addresses “companions in guilt” type objections to his argument from queerness. Mackie seeks to counter such objections by claiming that other sorts of entities or properties which seem queer on the surface can be adequately accounted for on a broadly empiricist picture. Whether Mackie is correct here is certainly open to debate. As we will see below, “companions in guilt” type objections to moral error theories continue to garner a lot of attention. These sorts of objections typically point out that if one is to reject the types of moral reasons Mackie sought to reject, one must also reject other sorts of reasons (e.g. hypothetical and epistemic reasons). Because rejecting these other sorts of reasons would seem to come at a high price, this has led many to reject moral error theory. As we will see later, “companions in guilt” type objections to a more contemporary formulation of moral error theory seem to count against formulating moral error theory in terms of reasons. For the moment however, I will put this issue aside.

If we accept the conclusion of Mackie’s ontological step, it would seem that we need some explanation as to why we would come to believe that there are moral facts when there are none. Mackie seeks to satisfy this requirement by outlining what he calls “patterns of objectification.” Mackie’s explanation as to why we believe there are moral facts has to do with our tendency to project our feelings upon the world. Mackie recognizes however that there could be several explanations as to why we would believe there are moral facts. Whatever explanation we choose, such an explanation is supplementary to the core of the ontological step. A precise explanation of why we come to believe in moral facts is much to be desired, but even if a precise

explanation is not available, the ontological step can still stand. One simply should provide some hint as to why we would believe there are moral facts when there are none.

The above outline of Mackie's error theory is only a rough outline. However, we can see where Mackie's error theory is in need of improvement. Particularly, Mackie's discussion of prescriptivity is in need of some clarification. As we saw, Mackie could be read as claiming that moral discourse is committed to some sort of internalism about motivation rather than internalism about reasons. When read this way, Mackie's position seems fairly weak. In addition to this difficulty in interpretation, Mackie does not seem to always fully support his claims. In particular, it would seem that he needs to deal more fully with companions in guilt type of objections to his position. For these reasons, modern error theorists have found the need to expand upon Mackie's position—providing some clarification as to what Mackie *should* have said, as well as providing further lines of argument in support of moral error theory. In the next chapter, we will see what a modern error theoretic position looks like.

CHAPTER 3

1. A CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENT FOR A MORAL ERROR THEORY

Jonas Olson has provided the most recent defense of a moral error theory.⁷² Above, we saw that Mackie held that moral discourse is committed to objective values which are mind-independent and prescriptive. Olson, for the most part, leaves aside mind-independence and claims that the most promising formulation of a moral error theory will target moral discourse's commitment to a particular form prescriptivity.⁷³ Olson claims that moral discourse is committed to a particular form of normativity that is problematic, and thus problematic in the moral case. Olson claims that moral discourse commits one to the thesis that moral facts are, or entail⁷⁴ *irreducibly normative reasons*.⁷⁵

2. NORMATIVITY AND REASONS

In order to understand Olson's claim, several distinctions must be drawn. Olson discusses two different notions of normativity, and examines the relation between normativity and reasons. He explains the sense in which a reason might be a normative notion and the sense in which a reason might be a non-normative notion. Olson then draws the distinction between *irreducible normativity* and *reducible normativity*. Following this, he shows the way in which moral facts are or entail irreducible reasons.

⁷² Olson, *Moral Error Theory*. Particularly in Chapters 5 and 6.

⁷³ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 116-117.

⁷⁴ It is unclear whether Olson takes this entailment to be metaphysical or conceptual.

⁷⁵ Jonas Olson, *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 124.

In order to clarify what he means by irreducible normativity, Olson builds off of John Broome's work on reasons and normativity.⁷⁶ Broome notes that there are at least two senses in which we use the term "normative". On the one hand, he notes that "normative" means having "to do with norms, rules, or correctness."⁷⁷ Any set of norms, rules, or standards of correctness is normative according to this usage. For example, we might say that chess, grammar, etiquette, and religion are normative, and by this mean that these activities in some way have to do with rules, or that there are things which are correct or incorrect according to the standards outlined by these activities. Broome goes on to note however that there is different sense of "normative" that has to do with ought or reasons. Here, "normative" has to do with whether we ought to act in accordance with, or have reasons to act in accordance with some given set of rules, norms, or standards of correctness.⁷⁸ In Broome's words, "Given a rule or a requirement we can ask whether you ought to follow it, or whether you have reason to do so."⁷⁹ When Broome speaks of normativity, he refers exclusively to this latter notion. For Broome, the *fact* that according to Catholicism one should abstain from eating meat on Fridays is not normative. Normativity, for Broome would have to do with whether one ought to act in accordance with, or whether one has reasons to act in accordance with the fact that according to Catholicism one should abstain from eating meat on Fridays.⁸⁰ Again, on this picture normativity has to do with ought and reasons to act in accordance with certain rules, not necessarily the rules themselves.

⁷⁶ Broome, "Is Rationality Normative?" Special issue, *Disputatio* 2, no. 23 (November 2007): 161-178; Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 119.

⁷⁷ Broome, "Is Rationality Normative?", 162; As quoted in Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 119.

⁷⁸ Broome, "Is Rationality Normative?", 162; Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 119

⁷⁹ Broome, "Is Rationality Normative?", 162; As quoted in Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 119.

⁸⁰ Broome, "Is Rationality Normative?", 162; Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 119.

The problem Olson notes with Broome's notion of normativity is that the terms "ought" and "reason" have many uses, some of which are non-normative on Broome's account.⁸¹

Consider the ways in which one might respond to the question "What reason does one have to abstain from eating meat this Friday?":

- (r1) It is incorrect according to the rules of Catholicism to eat meat on Fridays.
- (r2) It is a family tradition to abstain from eating meat on Fridays.
- (r3) I do not like meat.
- (r4) Eating meat is unhealthy.
- (r5) I am a vegetarian.⁸²

Despite the differences between (r1) - (r5), these all seem to be perfectly acceptable responses to the above question. Thus it seems as if there must be a sense in which (r1) - (r5) are all "reasons" to abstain from eating meat this Friday. The sense in which these are "reasons" differs from what many, including Broome, would consider reasons however. We will call responses of the type given in (r1) - (r5) *reasons₁*. *Reasons₁* would be non-normative on Broome's account. Broome seems to hold that *reasons₁* tell us nothing about what we ought to do, or that *reasons₁* are bare statements of fact—where "fact" here should be understood as a true statement which gives one no reason in and of itself (here we are using "reason" in a different sense than *reasons₁*) to favor one course of action over another. In (r1), one is simply stating a fact about what is correct according the rules of Catholicism. In (r2), one is stating a fact about one's family traditions. In (r3), one is stating a personal preference. While (r4) is open to a variety of interpretations, on one reading, one might simply be stating a fact about the consumption of meat and its relation to human well-being. Here the statement, "Eating meat is unhealthy" would be akin to a statement such as "Arsenic is poisonous for human beings." In such a case, one is

⁸¹ Olson focuses primarily on the term "reason", and here we will do the same. He does note however that much of what he says regarding reasons will carry over to "ought".

⁸² Olson provides similar examples in Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 120.

simply stating a fact about human biology, and it is non-normative in Broome's sense. In (r5), I am just stating that I identify with some role. For Broome, each reason₁, considered in itself, is missing a key component which tells one what to do. The point Broome makes regarding each of these reasons₁ is that one can always ask the question of whether or not one has further reasons, what we will call *reasons*₂, to act in accordance with, or ought to act in accordance with the above reasons₁. This question is what he calls *the normative question*.⁸³ We might formulate the normative question for each of the above reasons₁ in this way:

- NQ1. What reason₂ does one have to act in accordance with the rules of organized religion, e.g. Catholicism?
- NQ2. What reason₂ does one have to act in accordance with family tradition?
- NQ3. What reason₂ does one have to act in accordance with one's preferences?
- NQ4. What reason₂ does one have to be healthy?
- NQ5. What reason₂ does one have to act in accordance with the roles with which one identifies, e.g. being a vegetarian, being a soldier, being a student, etc.?

Here, the reason₂ should give you an answer as to why you should perform, or favor performing, the action in question. However, we can see that the answer given by the reason₂ must be of a certain type if it is to be normative in Broome's sense. To see why this is so, consider one possible response to Q4. Take the response, "I want to live a long life." This seems to be a perfectly natural response. However, this response is just a statement about my desires, and statements about our desires, for Broome, do not by themselves tell us what to do—that is, statements about our desires are reasons₁. We can always ask, "What reason₂ do I have to act in accordance with my desires?" Of course, one could respond, "I have the desire to fulfill my desires." But this is just a statement about another desire that I have, and thus we could question whether we should act in accordance with that desire. In such a case, we would have a long list—possibly infinitely long—of reasons₁, but on Broome's account, we would have no

⁸³ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 120.

normativity. That is, we would simply have a list of facts that in no way tell us what we ought to do, nor would they tell us what why we should favor performing certain actions. Normativity for Broome requires reasons₂, and reasons₂ *in themselves* tell us what we ought to do, or why we should favor certain types of behavior. For Broome, these would be the only types of reasons we could properly call normative.

What I have been calling “reasons₂” corresponds to what Olson calls *irreducibly normative* reasons.⁸⁴ For Olson, “To say that some fact, F, is an irreducibly normative reason for an agent, A, to behave in a certain way, e.g., to comply with N, is to say that F counts in favour of A’s complying with N where the favouring relation is irreducibly normative.”⁸⁵ Irreducibly normative reasons may not be restated as facts about an agent’s desires, facts about institutions or rule-based activities, or facts about certain roles an agent might occupy. To do so would be to provide reasons₁ for why one should perform or favor performing the action in question, and this would be to provide a list of facts without giving *why* one should act in a specific way. Here it is important to note that an irreducibly normative reason, or reason₂, may not be the *best* or *only* reason to act in any particular way. An irreducibly normative reason would *justify* performing some action however. This is to say that an irreducibly normative reason to act in some way would explain an agent’s actions insofar as she is fully rational.⁸⁶

Olson calls what I earlier termed “reasons₁” *reducibly normative* reasons. For Olson, a reason is reducibly normative if that reason is “reducible to facts about what promotes desire satisfaction, or to correctness norms that may or may not be conventional.”⁸⁷ These facts do not *in themselves* tell us why we ought to act in any specific way, nor why we ought to favor acting

⁸⁴ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 122.

⁸⁵ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 122.

⁸⁶ Brink, *Moral Realism*

⁸⁷ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 121.

in any certain way. On Broome's account, reducibly normative reasons would not be considered normative. For Broome, reducibly normative reasons would simply be a list of facts which in no way tell us what we ought to do. Olson wants to maintain however that reducibly normative reasons *are* normative in a weak sense—i.e. in Broome's first sense. That is, reducibly normative reasons are normative in the sense that they have to do with rules, norms, or standards of correctness. They do not however, tell us what we ought to do *in themselves*.

(Before moving forward, it is important to note that in what follows, if I do not specify that the reason which I am referring to is reducibly normative or irreducibly normative, and use "reason" without the subscript, this should be taken to mean that I am referring to reasons in the broadest sense. That is—the reasons in question might be either reasons₁ or reasons₂.)

The distinction between irreducibly normative and reducibly normative reasons will become clearer by the means of a few examples. Say for example I have the desire to prevent my teeth from falling out, and brushing my teeth will prevent my teeth from falling out. If this were the case, then we would say I have a reducibly normative reason, or reason₁ to brush my teeth. The reducibly normative reason would be the very fact that I have the desire to prevent my teeth from falling out. The reason for me to brush my teeth reduces to or may be restated as my desire to prevent my teeth from falling out. This is to say that if someone were to ask me, "What reason do you have to brush your teeth?" that it would make perfect sense to respond, "I have the desire to prevent my teeth from falling out."⁸⁸ Again, this response, and the corresponding fact that I have the desire, is a reason₁ for me to brush my teeth. Such a response does not *in itself* tell me why I ought to brush my teeth, nor why I should favor brushing my teeth, and one can always ask some further question as to why I should act in accordance with

⁸⁸ Some might argue that facts about desire satisfaction are irreducibly normative. We will address this issue in the next chapter.

the reason₁ given—e.g. “Why should you act in accordance with what you desire?” If I had an irreducible reason or reason₂ to brush my teeth, there would exist some fact which would *in itself* tell me why I ought to brush my teeth—directly or indirectly.

Reducible reasons may also be reduced to other sorts of facts which are not dependent on my desires. There is, for example, a reducible reason to not exceed the speed limit when driving. This reducible reason is that there is a law that prohibits me from speeding. In my words, this would be to say that the fact “It is against the law to speed” is a reason₁ to not speed. This reason₁ exists even if I have no desire to drive the speed limit, and I do not care whether I get caught speeding. The fact that it is against the law to exceed the speed limit is not in any way dependent on my desires. This fact however does not in itself tell one why one should not speed, nor why one should favor not speeding. This is because we can ask whether there is some further reason to act in accordance with the fact, “It is against the law to speed.” One might ask for example, “What reason do I have to act in accordance with the law?” Here, we might answer with another reason₁ such as: “It is in your best interest to act in accordance with the law,”⁸⁹ or we might be looking for a reason₂ which would *in itself* tell one why I should act in accordance with the law.

The next important point to make here is that, for Olson, reducibly normative reasons need not be conventional as in the above case. Olson wants to claim that even facts such as $2+2=4$ may be reducibly normative reasons. We would not want to say that facts of this type are dependent on our desires or on particular conventions however. For Olson, the fact that $2+2=4$ would be a reducibly normative reason to believe that $2+2=4$. That is to say, if one were to ask, “What reason do you have to believe that $2+2=4$?”, that one could respond, “It is a fact that

⁸⁹ Some might argue that this fact itself is a reason₂ or irreducibly normative. Again we will get to this possibility in the next chapter.

2+2=4". Again, because this fact is a reducibly normative reason for Olson, the fact itself does not tell one why one should believe the fact. For Olson, the fact 2+2=4 won't *by itself* explain why I ought to believe the fact. This is of course a contentious claim. In considering objections to Olson's moral error theory in chapter three, we will see some difficulties with the claim that the only types of reasons are reducibly normative reasons.

3. THE CONCEPTUAL STEP

Earlier, we said that Olson's conceptual step of the argument for the moral error theory is that moral facts are or entail the existence of irreducibly normative reasons. At this point however it remains to be seen in what sense moral facts are actually committed to the existence of irreducibly normative reasons. Olson is not entirely straightforward in showing how moral discourse is committed to irreducibly normative reasons. Here I will try to provide what seems to me a more straightforward argument to the effect that moral discourse is committed to irreducibly normative reasons.

Take the apparent moral fact that it is wrong to murder. In what sense would this fact be committed to irreducibly normative reasons? On the one hand, some might consider this fact itself to be an irreducibly normative reason to not murder where this reason would justify one's not murdering. Again, in my words, this would be to say that the apparent fact that it is wrong to murder is a reason₂ not to murder. What this would mean is that the moral fact that it is morally wrong to murder in itself tells one why one ought not murder or should favor not murdering. This is what it means for it to be a reason₂ or an irreducibly normative reason. If moral facts simply are irreducibly normative reasons, then it is clear that moral facts are committed to the existence of irreducibly normative reasons.

It might be argued, however, that any supposed moral facts are not themselves reasons₂. One might claim that given any particular moral fact, we can always ask the further question: “What reason do I have to act in accordance with moral facts?” Because we can ask this question, it would seem that the supposed moral facts of the type above may be reducibly normative or reasons₁ rather than reasons₂. Here, I will argue that moral practice is best understood on the assumption that we believe we have at least one irreducibly normative reason to act in accordance with moral facts—whatever the facts themselves may be. To see this, we will consider the ways in which one might try to respond to the question, “What reason do I have to act in accordance with moral facts?” I will consider three responses to this question: first, that there are no reasons whatsoever (reasons₁ or reasons₂) to act in accordance with moral facts, second, that there are only reasons₁ to act in accordance with moral facts, and lastly, that there is an irreducibly normative reason or reason₂ to act in accordance with moral facts. We will see that the best response—i.e. the response which seems most faithful to a common understanding of moral practice—involves reasons₂.

The first response would be to say that we never have any reason (reasons₁ or reasons₂) to act in accordance with moral facts. This response seems to be the least plausible. This would mean that there is no answer whatsoever to the question: “What reason does one have to act in accordance with moral facts?” One could not respond by stating facts about one’s desires, by stating facts about correctness norms which may or may not be conventional, nor could one state any sort of fact which in itself tells one why one ought to act in accordance with morality. This seems problematic. At the very least, it would seem that we would want to say that it makes sense that one *could* respond “I have the desire to act in accordance with morality,” even if this fact does not in itself give one a reason₂ to act in accordance with morality. If there were no

reason whatsoever to act in accordance with moral facts however, this response would be problematic. Either it would not even count as a response to the question, or it would always be false. The problem is that it does make sense to respond by stating that one has the desire to act in accordance with morality, and it seems that in some cases this response could be true. It seems then that we should conclude that at least in some cases one may have a reason₁ to act in accordance with morality. But if this is the case, then we should conclude that it is false that there is never any reason whatsoever to act in accordance with morality.

The question remains however whether moral facts are committed to anything beyond reasons₁. One could try to argue that moral facts are not committed to reasons₂ but only reasons₁. The second response to the above question then would be to provide *only* reducible reasons or reasons₁ as to why one should act in accordance with moral facts. Again this would be to say that that there are reasons to act in accordance with moral facts which are “reducible to facts about what promotes desire satisfaction, or to correctness norms that may or may not be conventional.”⁹⁰ These facts do not *in themselves* tell why one ought to act in accordance with moral facts, nor why one should favor acting in accordance with moral facts. If it is plausible that the only reasons why we ought to act in accordance with moral facts are reducibly normative reasons, then we might conclude that morality is not committed to irreducibly normative reasons or reasons₂. We must ask therefore if we can adequately account for why we think we have a reason to act in accordance with moral facts using only reducibly normative reasons. One way we might attempt to do this would be to say that the reason (in this case reason₁) we have to act in accordance with moral facts reduces to facts about our desires. We might say for example, that the reason I have to be moral reduces to the fact that humans have some deep-seated desire

⁹⁰ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 121.

to be moral. When asked why one should act in accordance with moral facts, one would respond by stating that one has the desire. The problem with this suggestion is that, on this picture, the reason₁ to be moral evaporates if one does not have the deep-seated desire, and it seems at least possible that some humans might not have the deep-seated desire to be moral. If the reason₁ to be moral simply is the fact that I have the desire to be moral, then if you take away the desire, you in turn take away the reason₁. This isn't generally how we think about the reasons why we should act in accordance with moral facts however. Generally, it seems we would think that we have a reason to act in accordance with moral facts even if we do not have the desire to do so.

We might be inclined to say then that the reason to be moral reduces to correctness norms which may or may not be conventional. The reason₁ I have to be moral here would be similar to the reason₁ I have to drive the speed limit. The reason₁ would not evaporate simply because I lack the desire to act in accordance with it or because I cease to care about it, but it still would not in itself tell me why I ought to favor acting in accordance with morality. It might be the case, for example, that insofar as I occupy the role of a moral agent, I have a reason₁ to be moral. Thus, the answer to the question, "What reason do I have to act in accordance with morality?" would be "I am a moral agent." The reason to be moral would reduce to facts about me, and what it means to be a moral agent. This answer does not seem to make any headway however. I can still ask what reason I have to act in accordance with my role as a moral agent. The problem with providing reasons₁ to the question "What reason do I have to be moral?" is that further reasons may always be asked for as to why we should act in accordance with those reasons₁. There is no well-defined place where the questioning stops. Providing reasons₁ fails to capture the sense in which we think there are things which we simply ought to do, *no questions asked*. We might say

that reasons₁ fail to capture the *authority* which we think separates moral reasons from other sorts of reasons.⁹¹

This leads us to the final way in which we might respond to the question: “What reason do I have to act in accordance with moral facts?” This would be to say that we have an irreducibly normative reason to act in accordance with moral facts. This to me seems to be the best response to this question. It would be to say that there is a fact such as, “One ought to act in accordance with moral facts” which is a reason₂ that *in itself* tells us why we ought to act in accordance with moral facts. This seems to capture how we think about the reason we have to act in accordance with moral facts most accurately. First of all, if the reason we have to act in accordance with moral facts is an irreducibly normative reason, that reason₂ is not dependent on our desires in any way. This captures the notion we have that the reason we have to act in accordance with moral facts does not evaporate based on the particular set of desires we may have. The reason₂ is given by the fact itself. Secondly, this captures the sense in which the reason for me to act in accordance with moral facts does not depend on my beliefs in any way. Because the irreducibly normative reason is given by the fact itself, the reason remains even if I have a deeply flawed set of beliefs or desires. This is why we think we are warranted in saying that people such as Hitler, Charles Manson, and Caligula each had a reason to act in accordance with what morality requires. They may not have cared about the reason they had to be moral, believe they had a reason to be moral, or they may have been wildly mistaken about what it means to act in accordance with what morality requires. Nonetheless we would want to say they had a good reason—specifically, a moral reason—to act in accordance with what morality actually requires. Finally, if the reason to act in accordance with what morality requires is

⁹¹ Richard Joyce often mentions that the problem with moral facts is their claim to authority. Citation

irreducibly normative, this captures the sense in which we think we simply ought to act in accordance with what morality requires, *no questions asked*. In this way, the irreducibly normative reason to act in accordance with morality captures the authority which moral reasons purportedly have more fully than reducibly normative reasons.

To conclude my reading of Olson's conceptual step then, we can say that moral discourse commits one to the thesis that moral facts are, or entail irreducibly normative reasons. Much of the error theorist's argument turns on the plausibility of the conceptual step. If the error theorist fails to provide a plausible account of what morality is conceptually committed to, the argument for error theory falls apart. The ontological step is to show that there are no irreducibly normative reasons. It is to this step that we will now turn.

4. THE ONTOLOGICAL STEP

On the ontological step of Olson's argument for the moral error theory he hopes to show that irreducibly normative reasons are in some way metaphysically "queer", and furthermore that there are no such metaphysically queer entities. To do this, Olson must identify what it means to be metaphysically "queer", show that irreducibly normative reasons are in fact metaphysically queer, and show that there are no such queer things in the universe.

Olson's argument that irreducibly normative reasons are metaphysically "queer" is a variation on Mackie's argument from queerness. Olson leaves aside Mackie's epistemological strand, and puts the argument this way:

- Q1: Moral facts entail that there are facts that favour certain courses of behaviour, where the favouring relation is irreducibly normative.
- Q2: Irreducibly normative favouring relations are queer.
- Q3: Hence, moral facts entail queer relations.
- Q4: If moral facts entail queer relations, moral facts are queer.

Q5: Hence, moral facts are queer.⁹²

Although Olson leaves premises Q6 and Q7 out of his argument from queerness, such premises are necessary if one is to draw the conclusion that there are no moral facts. Thus, we will add:

Q6: There are no queer facts.

Q7: Therefore, there are no moral facts.

Olson's argument from queerness is somewhat radical in that he claims that all irreducibly normative reasons are metaphysically queer, and that no irreducibly normative reasons exist whatsoever. This argument from queerness extends to all irreducibly normative reason relations. Specifically, such an argument might lead one to reject both hypothetical reasons—that is, reasons which are contingent on some kind of ends—and epistemic reasons as possible instances of irreducibly normative reasons. Olson thinks that one must reject irreducibly normative reasons across the board if one is to claim that they are queer in the moral case—we will see why in the next chapter. For Olson, hypothetical and epistemic reasons can be adequately explained in terms of reasons₁, while moral reasons cannot. We will examine Olson's queerness argument in greater detail in the next chapter.

The argument as we have presented it is fairly simple. Premise Q1 is the conceptual step. If one accepts that step, it would seem the argument hinges on premises Q2 and Q6. Olson has to show the way in which irreducibly normative reasons/favoring relations are queer, and further that there are no such queer things in the universe.

On one reading of queer, Olson's argument seems to hold no weight. The defender of irreducibly normative reasons can grant that irreducibly normative reasons are queer, but then go on to say that there are all sorts of queer things in the universe. This essentially amounts to rejecting premise Q6. It is to argue that a thing's purported queerness should not lead us to

⁹² Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 124.

question its ontological status. As Mark Platts notes, neutrinos, aardvarks, and impressionist paintings are fairly queer, but this does not lead us to question their existence.⁹³ If the universe is populated with all sorts of queer things, then even if irreducibly normative reasons are queer, this queerness itself should not lead us to question their ontological status. Irreducibly normative reasons might just be one type of queer thing among many others. It seems then that if the argument from queerness is to hold any weight, Olson must show that irreducibly normative reasons must be queer in a different way than the sorts of things listed above, or it must be that neutrinos, aardvarks, and impressionist paintings, and other seemingly queer things are not really that queer.

Here, Olson points out how on reflection, some purportedly “queer” things fit within our best explanations of our beliefs and observations, while this is not the case with regards to irreducibly normative reasons.⁹⁴ When we say things such as neutrinos, aardvarks, and impressionist paintings are queer, often this is to indicate that they are unlike other things we normally encounter in experience. The sorts of entities listed above are “queer” in a way analogous to the way in which we might find a close friend’s behavior strange if it were to deviate from the status quo. Say for example that on a certain occasion, a friend who is normally lively and talkative, is quiet and withdrawn. We might be inclined on such an occasion to call such behavior “queer”. Suppose however we discover that our friend’s favorite pet had died the day before. It would seem that in such a case, we would no longer consider our friend’s behavior “queer”. Given a certain explanation and the knowledge of certain facts, the behavior makes perfect sense. In a similar fashion, upon reflection and given the knowledge of certain facts, we find that entities such as neutrinos, aardvarks, and impressionist paintings fit perfectly well

⁹³ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 87. Olson mentions that this is Mark Platts’s view.

⁹⁴ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 87.

within our explanations of our beliefs and observations. Explanations which presuppose or imply that these entities exist are by and large more plausible than explanations which reject their existence.⁹⁵ We may in the end still find such entities strange, but given a certain explanation we are no longer wholly puzzled by them. Olson argues that this is not so with regards to irreducibly normative reasons. Olson contends that our best explanations of our beliefs and observations do not include things such as irreducibly normative reasons. The claim is that irreducibly normative reasons remain puzzling even upon adequate reflection.

If Olson is to reject irreducibly normative reasons across the board, the most important type of objection he must overcome is that, to many, irreducibly normative reasons seem indispensable as part of the best explanations of some our beliefs and observations. To those who hold that irreducibly normative reasons are indispensable to certain explanations of our beliefs and observations, rejecting all irreducibly normative reasons as metaphysically queer would come at a great cost. To counter these types of objections, Olson attempts to show that reason relations which are often considered to be irreducibly normative may be adequately explained in terms which are less metaphysically objectionable than irreducibly normative reasons. He contends that no explanation whatsoever of our beliefs or observations requires that we posit irreducibly normative reason relations, and thus it would seem he is warranted in concluding that irreducibly normative reasons truly are metaphysically queer. We will examine arguments to this effect in the following chapter.

⁹⁵ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 87.

CHAPTER 4

1. HOW MIGHT ONE REJECT MORAL ERROR THEORY?

So far, we have examined two formulations of moral error theory: Mackie's traditional formulation, and Olson's more recent formulation. In this chapter, I will examine the various ways in which one might reject or critique moral error theory as I have presented it above. As I have noted, arguments for moral error theory take place in two steps: one conceptual, the other ontological. In its broadest form, the argument for moral error theory takes this form:

- E1: Moral discourse is centrally committed to thesis X.
- E2: Thesis X is false.
- E3: Therefore, moral discourse is hopelessly flawed.

In order to reject the conclusions of a moral error theory, one may reject either premises E1 or E2, or one may reject the conclusion, E3.

Rejecting E1 amounts to rejecting the conceptual step. If we adopt Mackie's error theory, this would be to reject the claim that moral discourse is committed to objectively prescriptive values. If we adopt Olson's formulation, it would be to reject the claim that moral discourse is committed to irreducibly normative reasons/favoring relations. I will examine one possible rejection of Olson's conceptual step in the following section.

Rejecting E2 amounts to rejecting the ontological step. Most who have adopted this strategy have rejected the argument from queerness. Above, we saw a couple ways one might do this. One might reject the claim that whatever thesis moral discourse is committed to isn't queer, or one might claim that there are all sorts of queer things in the universe. If one were to direct one's criticism at Mackie this would be to say that objectively prescriptive values aren't queer (metaphysically or epistemologically), or that they are just as queer as other sorts of things. If

one directs one's criticism toward Olson, this would be to reject the claim that irreducibly normative reasons are queer, that they are just as queer as other sorts of things. The most promising strategy for rejecting the ontological step is to show that Mackie's objectively prescriptive values, or irreducible normativity in Olson's case have "companions in guilt." We will examine "companions in guilt" types of objection to Olson's error theory in sections three through five.

Some who reject moral error theory have focused their attention toward premise E3.⁹⁶ The idea is that even if moral discourse is in some sense committed to an error, nevertheless this does not support the conclusion that moral discourse is hopelessly flawed. As Stephen Finlay has noted, historically, much of our discourse about water was centrally committed to theses which were false.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, this did not support the conclusion that we should abandon water discourse. Instead such discourse was revised. Presumably some people said some things which were true about water even though much of our discourse about water was committed to theses which were false. One could contend that the moral discourse is analogous to the case of water discourse. Even if moral discourse as it is commonly understood is committed to an error, this does not mean that moral discourse is hopelessly flawed. Moral discourse could be revised much in the same way we revised water discourse. It might be the case that some things we say about or within moral discourse are true.

It should be noted that this third strategy is directed primarily toward a stronger, abolitionist form of error theory⁹⁸, but is congenial to a weaker form of error theory. The abolitionist error theorist hopes to abandon all forms of moral discourse as hopelessly flawed. A

⁹⁶ Stephen Finlay, "The Error in the Error Theory," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 3 (September 2008): 347-369.

⁹⁷ Finlay, "The Error in the Error Theory," 362-363.

⁹⁸ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 179-181.

weaker version of error theory would say that by and large, moral discourse is flawed, but that there is some hope of revising moral discourse in much the same manner that we revised water discourse. Nonetheless, this weaker position is still an error theory.

In what follows, I will direct my attention primarily toward critics who reject premises E1 and E2. Much of the literature that critiques moral error theory has been directed toward Mackie's formulation of error theory. While much more could be said about Mackie's error theory, I will direct my focus primarily towards Jonas Olson's error theory. We will see that although it is promising in certain respects, it proves too much. In the end we will see that versions of moral error theory which target reasons and normativity face significant issues. Because of this, I will suggest that the moral error theorist should direct his criticism towards other features of morality.

2. THE CONCEPTUAL STEP AND IRREDUCIBLE NORMATIVITY

How might one reject Olson's conceptual step? The critic who rejects moral discourse's commitment to irreducibly normative reasons could claim that we can make sense of ordinary moral practice without positing irreducibly normative *moral* reasons. The critic who rejects the conceptual step in this manner hopes to show that the moral error theorist attributes moral discourse with a problematic feature that isn't actually there. He may agree with the error theorist in holding that *if* moral discourse were committed to irreducibly normative moral reasons, then such discourse would be problematic. The critic departs from the error theorist however in holding that moral discourse is not committed to such reasons however, and thus concludes that moral discourse is unproblematic.

Philippa Foot in her paper “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives” would seem to be the paradigmatic case of a rejection of moral discourse’s commitment to anything like irreducibly normative moral reasons.⁹⁹ As the title of her paper suggests, she indicates that moral discourse can be made sense of wholly in terms of hypothetical imperatives. Hypothetical imperatives are considerations which gives us reasons to act based on the ends we adopt. In her paper, Foot seeks to identify some feature of moral statements which sets those statements apart from other sorts of normative statements—e.g. club rules, statements of etiquette. Foot recognizes that moral statements seem to have some kind of special status which sets them apart from other types of normative statements. The problem, Foot notes, lies in identifying just what gives moral statements this special status. In the end, this difficulty leads Foot to conclude that moral statements are not in fact importantly different from other sorts of normative statements.

One feature Foot considers is the purported “reason-giving” aspect of moral considerations. The idea is that “although people give as their reason for doing something the fact that it is required by etiquette, we do not take this consideration as *in itself giving us reason to act*. [...] [B]y contrast, it is supposed that moral considerations necessarily give reasons for acting to any man.”¹⁰⁰ Here, Foot seems to implicitly draw on the distinction between reducibly normative reasons (reasons₁) and irreducibly normative reasons (reasons₂). Whereas one can always ask for further reasons why one should act in accordance with considerations of etiquette, moral considerations are supposed to be such that they give one reasons to act *in themselves*—in our terms, it is supposed that moral considerations give one reasons₂ to act. The difficulty for Foot is in making sense of the special “reason-giving” feature of moral considerations however.

⁹⁹ Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” *The Philosophical Review* 81, no. 3 (1972): 305-316. It is unclear whether Foot would reject morality’s commitment to irreducibly normative reasons across the board.

¹⁰⁰ Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” 309.

Ultimately this difficulty leads Foot to reject such a feature as essential to moral statements. She concludes, “[M]oral judgments have no better claim to be categorical imperatives than do statements about matters of etiquette. People may indeed follow either morality or etiquette without asking why they should do so, but equally well they may not. They may ask for reasons and may reasonably refuse to follow either if reasons are not to be found.”¹⁰¹ In my terms, what Foot is saying here is that moral considerations do not in themselves give us reasons₂ to act.

On Foot’s account, the reason one has to act in accordance with morality depends entirely upon one’s desires and the ends one adopts; it is not given by moral considerations themselves. Foot seems to think the reasons given by one’s desires and the ends one adopts are reasons₂. That is, one’s having the desire or adopting the end in itself gives one a reason₂ to act in accordance with that desire, or gives one a reason₂ to act in order to satisfy the end in question. For Foot, I have a reason₂ to perform some action, ϕ , if my ϕ -ing contributes to the satisfaction of some end, E , that I care about. For example, my caring about the well-being of other individuals gives me a reason₂ to help others. My caring about some end, e.g. the well-being of others, provides me with a reason₂ to act in ways which would promote that end. If however, I cease to care about that end, or find out that my ϕ -ing does not contribute to the satisfaction of the end in question, I cease to have reasons₂ to ϕ .

On the face of it, this seems to lead to some troubling consequences. For example, her view leaves open the possibility that individuals who do not care whatsoever about others or do not care about the ends prescribed by morality have no reason to act in accordance with morality. In Foot’s eyes however, this is not a troubling consequence. Foot maintains that most people do in fact care about the ends prescribed by morality, and that it is unlikely people will cease to care

¹⁰¹ Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” 312.

about those ends. Thus, most people do have reasons to act in accordance with morality, and those who don't are relatively few and far between. She explains,

I am [...] putting forward quite seriously a theory that disallows the possibility of saying that a man ought (free unsubscripted 'ought') to have ends other than those he does have: e.g. that the uncaring, amoral man ought to care about the relief of suffering or the protection of the weak. In my view we must start from the fact that some people do care about such things, and even devote their lives to them; they may therefore talk about what should be done presupposing such common aims.¹⁰²

The problem with Foot's position is that we *do* think that we can say a man ought to have ends other than those he does actually have. Take for example a CEO who stands to make a lot of money by promoting policies which destroy the environment. For the sake of argument, say this individual cares nothing about the environment, the well-being of future generations, etc.: i.e. he adopts no ends which would be promoted through his refraining from destroying the environment. On Foot's account, it would seem there is nothing we can say to this individual. We cannot say that he should adopt ends other than those he has, he simply has his ends, and those ends give him no reason to protect the environment. The problem with is that it seems we would want to say that he *should* care about the well-being of future generations and the environment despite the particular ends he happens to care about. We seem to want to say that despite the fact that his refraining will not promote his ends, he nonetheless has a reason to refrain from destroying the environment. Foot wants to claim that he has *no* reason to refrain from destroying the environment, but it seems as if many would like to say he simply does not *respond properly* to a reason he does have. If we are to say this however, it seems we must allow for the possibility that there are reasons which do not depend on the ends adopted by

¹⁰² Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 169-170

particular agents. In particular, it seems as if we would want to say that there are reasons₂ which *in themselves* tell us why we should adopt some ends over others.

3. THE ONTOLOGICAL STEP: COMPANIONS IN GUILT

Although Foot rejects moral discourse's commitment to anything like irreducibly normative *moral* reasons, Foot does share some common ground with Olson and other error theorists. They would all agree that irreducibly normative *moral* reasons are strange. Where this leads Olson and others to claim that moral discourse is hopelessly flawed, it leads Foot to explain such discourse in terms of hypothetical imperatives. Whether such a project can succeed is an open question.

Nonetheless, implicit in Foot's move is the assumption that the reasons supplied by hypothetical imperatives—hypothetical reasons—are themselves unproblematic. Here we see some overlap with Mackie and other error theorists. Mackie found moral reasons especially problematic, but allowed that other sorts of reasons may be metaphysically respectable. For example, he held with Foot that hypothetical reasons are unproblematic.¹⁰³ In fact, in Mackie's writing, he could be interpreted as holding that hypothetical reasons are reasons₂.¹⁰⁴ Generally speaking, moral error theorists and non-error theorists alike want to claim that at least some types of non-moral reasons are metaphysically respectable. Along with hypothetical reasons, most find epistemic reasons—that is, reasons to believe—unproblematic. Most want to say that there are at least some uses of the word “reason” where it makes sense to claim that we have reasons

¹⁰³ Mackie, *Ethics*, 65-66.

¹⁰⁴ Mackie, *Ethics*, 66; In the context of discussing hypothetical oughts, he says, “‘Ought’, as we shall see, says that the agent has a reason for doing something, but his desires along with these causal relations *constitute* the reason.” My italics.

which are given by ends, and that we have good reasons to believe certain facts—whether these reasons are reasons₁ or reasons₂.

If moral error theorists find moral reasons problematic but maintain that other sorts of reasons are metaphysically respectable however, one issue they face is in explaining what distinguishes these other sorts of reasons from moral reasons. If hypothetical reasons and epistemic reasons are irreducibly normative, then error theorists must explain why irreducible normativity is problematic in the moral case but unproblematic in non-moral cases. Jonas Olson correctly notes that it is doubtful whether this can be done. This leads Olson to reject all irreducibly normative reasons including irreducibly normative hypothetical and epistemic reasons. Understanding why Olson rejects all irreducibly normative reasons will put his position, and critiques of his position, into context.

Matthew S. Bedke has argued persuasively that if the one finds moral reasons strange, she should find hypothetical and epistemic reasons equally strange.¹⁰⁵ Bedke claims, “if moral reasons are metaphysically queer, all reasons are metaphysically queer, including without exception reasons to advance one’s ends.”¹⁰⁶ While Bedke’s focus is primarily on hypothetical reasons, we will see that his argument extends to epistemic reasons as well. Bedke seeks to make his case by analyzing the general form of reason relations. On Bedke’s account, reason relations are relations between sets of facts, agents, and actions in specific circumstances. In symbolic form, the reason relation is: $R(F, A, \phi)$ in C , where R is the reason relation between: F , some set of facts, A , some agent, and ϕ , some action, in circumstances C . Bedke translates the above relation as, “ F counts in favour of (or disfavors) A ’s ϕ ing in circumstances C .”¹⁰⁷ On

¹⁰⁵ Matthew S. Bedke, “Might All Normativity be Queer?” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88, no. 1 (March 2010): 41-58; I take Bedke to mean irreducibly normative reasons.

¹⁰⁶ Bedke, “Might All Normativity be Queer?” 42.

¹⁰⁷ Bedke, “Might All Normativity be Queer?” 48.

Bedke’s account, all reason relations (moral, hypothetical, and epistemic) may be accounted for by this formula, and Bedke specifically seems to have in mind reason₂ relations.¹⁰⁸ Bedke claims that if we analyze the components such a relation, we will find that F, A, ϕ , and C are metaphysically unproblematic. A table will help to see what Bedke has in mind.

	Hypothetical	Epistemic	Moral
F (Facts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Brushing one’s teeth everyday will likely prevent them from falling out. ● Desire to keep one’s teeth from falling out. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Barack Obama is President of the United States. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Giving to Oxfam will help prevent suffering.
R (Gives one reason to/counts in favor of)	↓	↓	↓
Φ (Action/Belief)	Brush one’s teeth.	Believe Barack Obama is President of the United states.	Give money to Oxfam.

In the above table, we could of course add many more facts for each case, and in each case, the facts listed could be of different types. The facts however must be such that they would justify the action or belief in question. As we can see in the above table, the fact relata and action relata in each of the above reason relations certainly seem metaphysically unproblematic. We are not metaphysically puzzled by what it means to have the desire for our teeth not to fall out, by the fact that brushing one’s teeth will prevent them from falling out, or by what counts as performing the action of brushing one’s teeth for example. Likewise, in the moral case it would seem we are not metaphysically puzzled by the fact that donating money to Oxfam would relieve suffering, nor are we puzzled by what counts as giving money to Oxfam. If this is the case however, then it

¹⁰⁸ Bedke, “Might All Normativity be Queer?” In particular see sections II-IV.

must be the reason relation itself which is metaphysically queer. The issue for Bedke is that it is unclear why we should find the relation unproblematic when F's are facts about one's desires, and the means of satisfying those desires, yet find the relation problematic when F's are morally relevant facts. We might add that it is unclear why we should find reasons relations unproblematic when F's are epistemically relevant facts, yet find them queer when they are morally relevant facts. Because there seems to be no discernible difference between morally relevant facts and other sorts of relevant facts, if the reason relation is queer in the moral case then it must be queer in the hypothetical and epistemic cases as well. Thus, if irreducibly normative moral reasons are queer, then—barring any difference between morally relevant facts and hypothetically/epistemically relevant facts—irreducibly normative hypothetical/epistemic reasons must be queer as well. But if the queerness of irreducibly normative moral reasons leads us to doubt their existence, then what this means is that we must doubt the existence of all irreducibly normative reasons including irreducibly normative hypothetical/epistemic reasons.

The parity between moral reason relations and other sorts of reason relations has invited what J.L Mackie called “companions in guilt objections” to moral error theories, including Olson's, which have targeted the normativity of moral discourse. These types of arguments have gained widespread popularity among critics of moral error theory. Recently Terence Cuneo¹⁰⁹ and Richard Rowland¹¹⁰ have argued that if there are no irreducibly normative reasons, then there are no epistemic reasons because they take epistemic reasons to be irreducibly normative. This is an unacceptable consequence according to Cuneo and Rowland because they maintain that there *are* irreducibly normative epistemic reasons. Arguments similar to Cuneo's and

¹⁰⁹ Terence Cuneo, *The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 121-122.

¹¹⁰ Richard Rowland, “Moral Error Theory and the Argument from Epistemic Reasons,” *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (January 2013): 1-24.

Rowland's could be taken up by critics who want to maintain that there are irreducibly normative hypothetical reasons. Building off of Richard Rowland's argument which claims that if there are no irreducibly normative reasons, then there are no epistemic reasons, we may see the general form of "companions in guilt" type objections to Olson's error theory and other moral error theories which target the normativity of moral facts.¹¹¹

- P1. According to the moral error theory, there are no irreducibly normative reasons.
- P2. If there are no irreducibly normative reasons, then there are no irreducible epistemic/hypothetical reasons.
- P3. But there are irreducible epistemic/hypothetical reasons.
- P4. So there are irreducibly normative reasons (2, 3).
- P5. So the error theory is false. (1, 4).

Put this way, P1 is Olson's ontological step. As we saw above, P2 is also a premise which is fairly plausible, and one which Olson would accept. As I understand it then, "companions in guilt" type objections to Olson's view turn on P3.

Because Olson rejects all irreducibly normative reasons as metaphysically queer, then insofar as our commonplace understanding of hypothetical and epistemic reasons presupposes that they are irreducibly normative, such commonplace understanding is in error. The difficulty for Olson is that it would seem that there is at least *some* sense of the term "reason" where it makes sense to say we have hypothetical and epistemic reasons to act in certain ways or believe certain things. If in rejecting irreducibly hypothetical and epistemic reasons one was forced to conclude that there is no sense of the word "reason" where it makes sense to claim we have reasons given by ends or reasons to believe certain things, this would certainly count against adopting Olson's error theory. So the question Olson must answer is: in what sense *are* there hypothetical and epistemic reasons?

¹¹¹ Rowland, "Moral Error Theory and the Argument from Epistemic Reasons," 1. Rowland refers to "categorical normative reasons" in constructing his argument rather than "irreducibly normative reasons."

The strategy Olson adopts for countering “companions in guilt” type objections is to show that non-moral reason relations may be adequately explained in terms of reducible normativity, while maintaining that moral reason relations must be irreducibly normative. Because Olson finds reducibly normative reasons unproblematic, he is not forced into an error theory with regards to at least *some* hypothetical reasons and/or epistemic reasons, and is able to maintain that moral discourse is particularly strange.

4. HYPOTHETICAL REASONS AS REDUCIBLY NORMATIVE

If Olson is to reject irreducibly normative reasons across the board, he must first claim that the hypothetical reason relation is best understood as reducibly normative. Olson holds that “hypothetical reasons claims are true only if they reduce to empirical claims about agents’ desires and (actual or believed) efficient means of bringing about the satisfaction of these desires.”¹¹² He elaborates through an example,

[W]e might say that there is reason for Sleepy to have an extra cup of black coffee in the morning. On one reading of this claim that in some contexts will be the correct one, it means only that Sleepy has some desire (e.g., a desire to stay up late) that would be satisfied, or would likely be satisfied, were he to have an extra cup of black coffee.¹¹³

Thus, for Olson, to say one has a hypothetical reason to perform some action, ϕ , is simply to say that one has some desire that would be satisfied or would likely be satisfied by ϕ -ing and nothing more. The fact that ϕ -ing would satisfy one’s desire does not *in itself* give one a reason₂ to ϕ . Going back to Bedke’s symbolic formulation of reason relations, essentially Olson severs the tie between F’s and ϕ ’s. To say one has a hypothetical reason to act in a certain way is just to state F’s.

¹¹² Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 153.

¹¹³ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 154.

Here we can ask whether such an account captures our intuitions with regards to hypothetical reasons however. The main worry Olson must deal with is whether a reduction of hypothetical reasons to empirical claims can capture their normativity. Olson himself realizes this might be an objection to his account. He states, “It might be objected that reducing claims about hypothetical reasons to empirical claims about agents’ desires and means to bringing about their satisfaction, removes the normativity of claims about hypothetical reasons since the reduction involves no mention of facts counting in favour of certain courses of behaviour.”¹¹⁴ Olson however does not see this as an issue. He claims, “[F]rom the error theorists’ perspective it is just as it should be; it is the counting-in-favour-relation that is being reduced, and reducing claims about hypothetical reasons to empirical claims is the only way of saving them from being uniformly false.”¹¹⁵ The issue for Olson is that while this may be an acceptable move for the error theorist, he provides no clear answer as to why a non-error theorist should accept this reduction other than “irreducibly normative reasons are queer.”

Olson does notes that sometimes when we speak about hypothetical reasons to do something, all we do is mention facts about desires and the fulfillment of these desires. The mention of these facts may sometimes be a way of giving advice. Going back to Olson’s example of Sleepy, to say that Sleepy should have an extra cup of coffee in the morning might be a just a way of saying that Sleepy has a desire that would be satisfied if he had an extra cup of coffee. The issue which Olson misses is that it is unclear how this piece of advice is supposed to translate into a consideration if the counting-in-favour-relation is reduced. It would seem as if there must be *something* about the fact that Sleepy has the desire that makes it possible for that fact to play some role in his deliberation of how he should act. This *something* seems to be the

¹¹⁴ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 154.

¹¹⁵ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 154.

counting-in-favor-relation. The counting-in-favor-relation is what seems to give the fact that Sleepy has the desire salience over any other myriad number of facts that he might be aware of at the same time (e.g. that there are five books on his desk). Olson might respond that it is simply a fact about humans that our desires have salience over other sorts of facts. The issue Olson must overcome is in explaining *why* our desires have salience over other sorts of facts. The defender of irreducibly normative hypothetical reasons has an answer to this question: our desires have salience over other sorts of facts because they are irreducibly normative. Because the defender of irreducibly normative hypothetical reason can give this explanation, this would seem to favor endorsing the view that there *are* irreducibly normative hypothetical reasons. Olson, in denying that there are *any* irreducibly normative reasons removes the possibility of such an explanation.

5. EPISTEMIC REASONS AS REDUCIBLY NORMATIVE

We might ask: does Olson fare any better when it comes to irreducibly normative epistemic reasons? Olson's strategy for dealing with epistemic reasons is again to cut the tie between F's and ϕ 's. For Olson, to say one has an epistemic reason is more or less just to state F's. For Olson, these F's could be of at least three types. On the one hand, saying that one has a reason (this would be a reason₁) to believe something could simply be to say that one has a desire that would be fulfilled by one's believing something. For example, say for the sake of argument that moral error theory is true. On Olson's account, the reason one has to believe that it is true could simply be that one has the desire to have true beliefs on matters of metaethics, and one's belief in the truth of moral error theory would satisfy this desire. These facts do not in themselves tell one why one ought to believe moral error theory however. Other epistemic reasons₁ might have to do with the roles that one occupies. For example, insofar as one occupies

the role of a “responsible believer,” one might have a reason₁ to hold true beliefs.¹¹⁶ The reason₁ to hold true beliefs would be “I occupy the role of a responsible believer.” Part of the definition of a responsible believer presumably would be that one holds true beliefs. This would be similar to saying one has reasons₁ to march in line because marching in line is correct according to the standards of being a soldier. Finally reasons (again reasons₁) one might have to believe something might have to do with correctness norms related to rule-governed or goal-activities. Olson notes that it is the end of some intellectual endeavors to get at the truth. For example, one of the standards of metaethics is to have true metaethical beliefs. If moral error theory is true, then believing it would satisfy this standard given by metaethics. Thus, one reason₁ to believe the moral error theory simply could be that believing moral error theory is correct according to the standards of metaethics. This would be similar to saying that the reason₁ I have to move the bishop diagonally is that moving the bishop diagonally is correct according to the standards of chess.

Olson, in defending an error theory with regards to irreducibly normative epistemic reasons considers three objections from Terence Cuneo which might be lodged against such an error theory. Such objections are: 1. *‘Epistemic error theory is either self-defeating or polemically toothless’*, 2. *‘Epistemic error theory implies that there can be no arguments for anything’*, and 3. *‘Epistemic error theory rules out the possibility of epistemic merits and demerits’*.¹¹⁷ Olson deals with these objections by appealing to the reasons₁ given above. In what follows, I will focus on the second objection to Olson’s error theory with regards to epistemic reasons₂. In doing so, we will see the radical nature of such an error theory.

¹¹⁶ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 159.

¹¹⁷ Cuneo, *The Normative Web*, 117-123; Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 157-166.

Cuneo's second objection to an error theory along the lines of Olson is that if an error theory with regards to epistemic reasons₂ is true, there can be no arguments for anything. Cuneo claims that the paradigmatic view of arguments is that the premises of an argument provide *evidential support* of its conclusion. He goes on to say, "A statement's being offered as evidential support for a conclusion, however, is just a matter of its being offered as a *reason* for accepting that conclusion. And, when all goes well, premises *are* reasons to accept a conclusion."¹¹⁸ Cuneo takes such reasons to be irreducibly normative epistemic reasons. For Cuneo then, the premises of an argument, *in themselves*, favor one's believing the conclusion. This is what it means to say that the evidential support for a conclusion is an irreducibly normative reason to believe the conclusion. Because Olson's error theory with regards to epistemic reasons₂ denies that there are any such reasons, this in turn amounts to denying that there can be evidential support for conclusions. If this is the case however, there can be no such thing as an argument—for an error theory with regards to epistemic reasons₂ or anything else for that matter. This, Cuneo notes, is an "undesirable result" for an error theory along the lines of Olson's.¹¹⁹

Olson attempts to respond to this worry by cashing out "evidential support" in non-normative terms. In order to do so, he builds upon Thomas Kelly's notion of *indicator evidence*. For Olson, "*q* is evidence that *p* just in case *q* reliably indicates that *p*."¹²⁰ For example, smoke is evidence of fire if the presence of smoke reliably indicates that there is a fire.¹²¹ Such evidence is non-normative in that the presence of smoke does not in itself give one a reason₂ to believe

¹¹⁸ Cuneo, *The Normative Web*, 121.

¹¹⁹ Cuneo, *The Normative Web*, 121.

¹²⁰ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 162.

¹²¹ Thomas Kelly, "Evidence," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014), under "3. Evidence as a Guide to Truth: Evidence as Sign, Symptom, or Mark," <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evidence> (accessed October 15, 2015).

there is a fire, it simply reliably indicates that there is a fire. Using such a non-normative notion of evidence, Olson is able to distinguish between a) arguments, or evidence to the effect that p , and b) reasons to believe p . For Olson then, the premises of an argument do not in themselves favor one's accepting the conclusion, but they reliably indicate the conclusion. For Olson, whether one believes the conclusion of the argument has to do with whether one acts in accordance with one's role as a "responsible believer," whether one has the desire to have true beliefs, or it has to do with standards given by rule-governed activities.

The difficulty with Olson's rejection of all irreducibly normative reasons is that it would seem to require a radical revision to epistemology as it is commonly understood. If we recall from above, one of the worries Mackie had with introducing objective values into our ontological picture is that such an introduction would also require one to adopt an implausible epistemological picture. We might ask: if rejecting all irreducibly normative reasons requires a radical revision to epistemology, how does such a rejection fare any better than the introduction of objective values into our ontology? One issue with Olson's error theory about epistemic reasons₂ is that indicator evidence seems to be more closely tied to reasons to believe than he would allow. If smoke reliably indicates fire, this fact itself would seem to give one a reason₂ to believe there is a fire. If one were to be asked why one should believe there is a fire, presumably one would reply, "Where there's smoke there's fire." The truth of this statement would *in itself* give one a reason₂ to believe there is a fire. But on Olson's view, we would be mistaken if we replied this way. The only types of reasons₁ we can give for belief on Olson's view have to do with our desires, roles we occupy, and standards given by rule-governed activities.

Suppose Olson is correct: what would that mean? Take the case of Fred. He is lying in bed and he sees smoke coming from underneath his door. He is aware of the fact that smoke

reliably indicates fire. Presumably Fred has some reason₁ to believe there is a fire. What reason₁ might Fred have? Olson can say if Fred has the desire to hold true beliefs, he has a reason₁ to believe there is a fire. But say Fred does not have the desire to hold true beliefs; he only has the desire to believe what it is most practical to believe. On Olson's view we would have to say that he does not have a reason₁ for him to believe there is a fire given by the desire to hold true beliefs. It would seem that we would want to say that there must be some sense of "reason" for him to believe there is a fire however. So what other kind of reason₁ might he have? Olson might say that if he has the desire to live, he has a reason₁ to believe there is a fire. But say Fred is extremely depressed, he doesn't care whether he lives or dies. Fred is also very tired. It would be most practical for him to believe that there is no fire so he can go to sleep. Again, on Olson's view he doesn't have a reason₁ to believe there is a fire. Olson can reply that if he is to be a "responsible believer" part of being a responsible believer means that one holds true beliefs. Insofar as Fred is a responsible believer he has a reason₁ to believe that there is a fire. But suppose Fred is not a responsible believer, he holds all sorts of beliefs, many of which are not true. In addition, he does not care whether he is a responsible believer. Again in such a case, he has no reason₁ to believe there is a fire. Just as one has no reason₁ to march in line if one is not a soldier, Fred has no reason₁ to believe there is a fire if he is not a responsible believer. It would seem then that Fred has no reason₁ to believe that there is a fire. This of course seems to be a strange conclusion.

The defender of irreducibly normative epistemic reasons is not forced to adopt this conclusion however. He can say that the fact that smoke reliably indicates fire *in itself* gives Fred a reason to believe there is a fire. Fred has this reason regardless of whatever desires he may have, or whether or not he is a "responsible believer." The suggestion that indicator

evidence *in itself* gives one a reason₂ to believe it seems far more plausible than Olson's suggestion that we should completely sever indicator evidence from reasons₁ to believe. If Olson is correct, it must be the case that we are mistaken when we say that indicator evidence *in itself* gives one a reason₂ to believe it. Claiming we are mistaken in this way would seem to prove too much however.

If, as the above discussion indicates, it is at least plausible that there are irreducibly normative hypothetical/epistemic reasons, then it would seem unclear why we should reject irreducibly normative reasons in the moral case. As Matthew Bedke suggests, irreducibly normative favoring relations stand or fall together. "Companions in guilt" type objections to moral error theories which target the irreducibly normativity of moral facts thus seem to have some plausibility, especially with regards to irreducibly normative epistemic facts. But if this is the case, it would seem that the moral error theorist needs to adopt some other strategy if she is to claim that moral discourse is flawed.

CHAPTER 5

1. MORAL SKEPTICISM: AN ALTERNATE PATH TO MORAL ERROR THEORY?

In Chapter One we presented a relatively standard formulation of moral error theory. In its most basic form moral error theory was construed as the view that moral statements are assertions, and that all assertions central to moral discourse are either false or neither true nor false. When construed this way, the *error* in “moral error theory” has to do with a discourse and whether or not the statements of that discourse are false or neither true nor false. What we *say* is uniformly false or neither true nor false because of moral discourse’s commitment to some problematic thesis. In formulating moral error theory in this manner, we followed what would seem to be more standard formulations of moral error theory. Richard Joyce certainly formulates moral error theory in such a way¹²², and J.L. Mackie sometimes seems to indicate that the error we commit has to do with how we speak. Mackie states for example, “[T]he denial of objective values will have to be put forward not as the result of an analytic approach, but as an ‘error theory’, a theory that although most people in making moral judgments implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false.”¹²³ In this passage, we can see that Mackie indicates that the *error* in “moral error theory” has to do with what most people *claim*.¹²⁴

Some have questioned whether the *error* in “moral error theory” should be construed as an error with regards to the sentences of a given discourse. It can be claimed that the primary error which moral error theory points to should have to do with what we *believe*. Mark Eli

¹²² Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 1-5.

¹²³ Mackie, *Ethics*, 35.

¹²⁴ Mackie, *Ethics*, 35. To be fair to Mackie, he also sometimes indicates that the error has to do with concepts which are “ingrained” in moral thought,

Kalderon formulates moral error theory in such a manner. As with our formulation of moral error theory in Chapter One, Kalderon formulates moral error theory in contrast to moral realism:

The error theorist, like the moral realist, maintains that moral sentences express moral propositions. Moreover, the error theorist, like the moral realist, maintains that the acceptance of a moral sentence (in moral practice as it actually stands) involves *belief* in the moral proposition expressed. The error theorist, however, differs from the moral realist in further maintaining that we are in error in *believing* the moral propositions expressed by the moral sentences that we in fact accept, and hence we should not believe them.¹²⁵

As we can see, for Kalderon, the *error* in “moral error theory” has to do with believing propositions that we should not believe. If Kalderon is correct in maintaining that we are in error with regards to what we believe however, this would seem to widen the scope as to what counts as a moral error theory. As Kalderon notes, when construed in terms of belief, moral error theory would include metaethical positions which could be called something like “moral agnosticism” and which have often gone by the name “moral skepticism”. Moral skepticism has often been construed as the position that moral beliefs are unjustified in some manner. If it can be shown that our moral beliefs are unjustified, according to the moral skeptic, we should suspend our belief in moral propositions. We can see then how on Kalderon’s formulation of moral error theory, moral skepticism would count as a moral error theory. Because moral beliefs are unjustified, we should not believe moral propositions. If we were to believe moral propositions, we would be in error. Mark Eli Kalderon’s formulation is not meant to entirely exclude more standard formulations of moral error theory however. The difference is that in standard formulations, we should not believe moral propositions because they are false rather than our moral beliefs being unjustified. For the moral skeptic, there very well could be moral

¹²⁵ Mark Eli Kalderon, *Moral Fictionalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 101. My italics.

facts. Nonetheless, moral thought construed realistically is infected by a pervasive error—namely, that individuals believe propositions that they should not believe.

If Kalderon is correct in formulating moral error theory in terms of belief, this opens up several new strategies for establishing moral error theories. To establish a moral error theory, one need not show that moral sentences are false or neither true nor false—as we have been trying to do up until this point—one could show instead that moral beliefs are unjustified. In what follows we will hint at a couple of ways one might do this. Of course, whether Kalderon’s formulation of moral error theory is the correct formulation is open to debate. At the very least however, formulating moral error theory in terms of what we should believe opens up interesting and novel strategies for adopting something close to a moral error theory. Even if such strategies do not ultimately establish full-blooded moral error theories, the novelty and uniqueness of such strategies would seem to warrant further investigation.

2. ACCOUNTS OF JUSTIFICATION AND UNDERMINERS

If we are to indicate the ways in which moral beliefs might be unjustified it will help to consider different accounts of justification and what might undermine one’s justification for a belief.

Most broadly speaking, beliefs are justified by what may be called *justifiers*.¹²⁶ Justifiers are the components of the justification of a particular belief. Justifiers might be of several types. They could consist of one’s experiences, other beliefs, states of affairs, or facts about the source of one’s belief. For example, one might be justified in believing that it is sunny outside based on

¹²⁶ George Pappas, “Internalist vs. Externalist Conceptions of Epistemic Justification,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014), under “3. Justification and Internalism,” <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justep-intext/> (accessed October 15, 2015).

the testimony of a trustworthy friend, one might be justified by checking the weather channel, one might be justified by actually going outside and seeing that it is sunny, etc.

One question which has concerned epistemologists is whether one must be aware of the justifiers for one's belief in order to be justified. This is the debate between internalism and externalism in epistemology. Internalism in its most general form is the thesis that one must be aware, or capable of being aware of the justifiers for one's belief in order to be justified. Externalism may be seen as a rejection of this thesis. Externalism is the thesis that there may be cases in which a belief may be justified even though one may not be capable of being aware of the justifiers of that belief.¹²⁷ One prominent version of externalism in epistemology is *reliable process externalism*. Reliable process externalism can be understood as the thesis that a belief may be justified if it is produced by a process that tends to produce or sustain true beliefs.¹²⁸ The tendency to produce or sustain true beliefs is what makes the relevant process reliable.

One's justification for a belief might be removed by what are called *defeaters*. Like justifiers, defeaters can be of different types: e.g. beliefs, states of affairs, facts about the source of one's belief. One type of defeater that Walter Sinnott-Armstrong identifies is called an *underminer*.¹²⁹ It will be clearer how an underminer functions as a defeater by means of an example. Say for example an acquaintance tells you it is sunny outside, but you later discover that this acquaintance is a pathological liar. The fact that this acquaintance is a pathological liar here *undermines* the justification of your belief that it is sunny outside. For all you know it may still be sunny outside, but based on the facts available to you, you would be unjustified in believing that it is sunny outside. Absent any additional information about the weather, the facts

¹²⁷ Pappas, "Internalist vs. Externalist Conceptions of Epistemic Justification."

¹²⁸ Pappas, "Internalist vs. Externalist Conceptions of Epistemic Justification."

¹²⁹ Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 68.

available to you are not adequate for justifying one's belief. You have no reason to believe that it is sunny any more than you have reason to believe that it is rainy.

Underminers may be understood from either an internalist or externalist perspective. In the previous paragraph, the example of the underminer given would be internalist. Your awareness of a certain fact—the fact that your acquaintance is a pathological liar—is what undermines the justification of your belief that it is sunny outside. From an internalist standpoint however, absent the awareness that your acquaintance is a pathological liar you might still be justified in believing it is sunny outside. Underminers may also be understood from an externalist perspective. From a reliable process externalist perspective, you would be unjustified in believing that it is sunny outside even if you were not aware that your friend is a pathological liar. Here, the process by which you form the belief—testimony from a pathological liar—does not have the tendency to produce or sustain true beliefs, and therefore you are unjustified in believing it is sunny outside. This is regardless of whether you know that the process by which you form the belief is unreliable.

If we are to say that all moral beliefs are unjustified, it would be ideal to show that moral beliefs are unjustified from both an internalist and externalist point of view. The difficulty here is with the internalist conception of justification. The worry is that it might be the case that individuals might seem to be adequately justified given the information available to them while being unaware of the defeaters of their moral beliefs. The problem will become clearer if we consider a distinction made by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong between *personal* and *impersonal justification*. Sinnott-Armstrong provides an example modified from Bertrand Russell to illustrate the distinction. Say a clock stops at 8:00. Without knowing that the clock has stopped Bethany looks at the clock twelve hours later and believes that the time is 8:00. Bethany's belief

is true. Supposing Bethany has no way of telling that the clock is defective, she seems justified in her belief in at least one way. She bases her belief on grounds—e.g. facts about clocks in general, knowledge that the clock has worked for years—which would seem to be adequate given the information she possesses. Any rational person with the same information would form the same belief. In such a case, we might say Bethany is *personally justified*. The difficulty is that in another sense Bethany seems unjustified. If Bethany had more information, she would not form her belief in the same manner. We know that Bethany forms her belief on false information, i.e. that the clock works. We know that Bethany is simply lucky. In such a case, Sinnott-Armstrong claims, Bethany isn't *impersonally justified*. For Sinnott-Armstrong, "A believer is *impersonally justified* if and only if the believer's grounds are adequate, given full and accurate information."¹³⁰

3. UNDERMINING MORAL JUSTIFICATION: UNRELIABLE SOURCES

Now that we have some sense of the different accounts of justification and what undermines justification we can begin to ask whether any moral beliefs are justified. One consideration that plays a role in deciding whether or not moral beliefs are justified has to do with whether the process by which moral beliefs are formed is reliable. If the process by which one forms moral beliefs is unreliable then on an externalist perspective the justification for moral beliefs is undermined—whether or not one is aware of the unreliability of that process. If one *is* aware of the unreliability of the process by which one forms moral beliefs, then the justification for one's moral beliefs would seem to be undermined from an internalist perspective as well.

¹³⁰ Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Scepticisms*, 72.

Out of considerations of space, I will restrict my discussion to whether moral beliefs could be undermined in these ways.

How might the fact that moral beliefs issue from unreliable sources undermine the justification for those beliefs? For reliable process externalism, it seems clear. If the process by which a belief is formed does not tend to produce or sustain true beliefs, the belief in question is unjustified. For example, say one has extremely poor vision and one forms beliefs about one's surroundings solely on the basis of one's poor vision. For the reliable process externalist, because one's poor vision does not have the tendency to form or sustain beliefs about one's surroundings one is unjustified in one's beliefs about one's surroundings. For internalists, one might be justified in one's beliefs about one's surroundings if one did not know that one's beliefs issued forth from poor eyesight. If one were to discover that one has extremely poor eyesight however, it seems as if one would be unjustified much in the same way the externalist would say one is unjustified. If one were to discover that one forms one's beliefs on poor eyesight, it would seem as if one should be very skeptical about one's beliefs about one's environment. Say for example one sees a brown fuzzy blob in the distance. If one knows one has terrible vision, it would seem as if one should suspend judgment as to whether the blob is a dog, a bush, a bear, etc. If one were to form the belief that the brown fuzzy blob is any of these things, it seems clear that one would be unjustified. This is because one knows that one's vision is unreliable and that absent further evidence one has no way of telling exactly what the brown fuzzy blob might be.

The question remains whether one is justified on an internalist perspective if one does not know that the source from which one forms one's beliefs is unreliable. This is a difficult question, and here I do not have the space to provide a decisive answer. Certain considerations do come to mind however. One difficulty seems to be that such an account of justification seems

in certain ways to be too permissive. It seems we would have to maintain that all sorts of problematic beliefs are justified. Say for example Tony believes that cosmological signs are reliable indicators of what will happen in the future. Tony falsely believes that he has good evidence to support this belief. Based on Tony's prior beliefs, he may even be unable to discover that cosmological signs are an unreliable source for beliefs. Say on the basis of cosmological signs Tony believes he will win the lottery within three months. If the internalist of the type we are considering is correct, Tony is justified in this belief. Something seems off with this suggestion however. It seems we would want to say that Tony *should not* believe that he will win the lottery in three months. This is not because we know his belief is false—for all we know his belief could turn out to be true. The fact that Tony should not believe that he will win the lottery seems more closely tied to justification. Again, this is by no means a decisive criticism of internalist forms of justification.

In what follows, I will attempt to be concessive to internalist forms of justification, but it seems to me that if an error theorist of the type I am considering wants to build a strong case for her position, she should argue that externalist accounts of justification fare much better than internalist accounts. In such a case, the error theorist can claim that anyone who believes in moral facts is in error, and not just those who are aware of the unreliable source of moral beliefs.

4. EVOLUTIONARY GENEALOGY: AN UNRELIABLE SOURCE

Here we can ask: what reason do we have to believe moral beliefs issue from an unreliable source? Richard Joyce has argued that an awareness of the evolutionary genealogy undermines the justification of moral beliefs. More or less, Joyce's claim is that evolutionary influences lead indirectly to our forming moral beliefs, and that we would believe moral facts to

be true regardless of whether or not any of them are actually true. What is important from an evolutionary perspective is that our belief in moral facts gets us to act in certain ways—moral facts need not exist. Because the process by which moral beliefs are formed is in no way sensitive to the truth, the evolutionary genealogy proves to be an unreliable source for our moral beliefs. As Joyce notes, evolutionary influences did not lead us to form specific moral beliefs, but rather evolutionary influences led us to form moral concepts. These moral concepts in turn affect our moral beliefs. In the example above of poor vision undermining beliefs about one’s surroundings, the unreliable process in question directly generates one’s beliefs. In the case of evolution as an unreliable process, we might say that the evolutionary influences give us poor “moral vision”, and having such poor “moral vision” undermines the justification for one’s moral beliefs.

Here we can ask the question: In what way would judging things to be good/bad, right/wrong, shameful/laudable be evolutionarily beneficial? Most broadly, the answer to this question has to do with helping. Joyce defines helping simply as: “Behaving in a way that benefits another individual.”¹³¹ As Joyce notes, a certain level of helping behavior seems to increase our chances of survival—both on an individual and on a group level. Joyce outlines several ways in which helping behavior might be selected for.¹³² In certain cases, helping behavior might benefit both parties involved—say in working together to hunt—while in other cases helping behavior might benefit one party immediately while benefitting the other in the long term—e.g. sharing food with another party might increase the chances the other party shares with you in the future. As we can see in both of these examples, helping behavior would

¹³¹ Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 13.

¹³² Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, 13-44.

increase one's chances of survival—helping behavior decreases the chances that one will starve. It seems plausible therefore that at least some form of helping behavior could be selected for.

Joyce contends that the possession of moral concepts and the development of something like a moral conscience serve to increase the likelihood that helping behavior will occur—especially in cases where immediate benefit is not gained by the helper, or in cases where the helper receives no benefit whatsoever. The latter cases could be cases in which for example one feels a moral duty to help one's kin. In such a case, one would increase the chances of survival for one's group while possibly receiving no benefit in return. Moral concepts and a moral conscience get us to act in ways we might not choose to act if we acted solely on our strongest desires. For example, one might not *want* to share one's food with one's neighbor especially if it means one has less to eat. If one possesses the concepts or moral goodness/badness and one believes that it is *morally good* to help others or *morally bad* to not help others however, then even if one does not *want* to share one's food, it would seem as if one would be more likely to share in the end. One would feel, at least in a certain sense, *bound* to share. In this way, moral concepts keep one from endlessly calculating whether or not helping is worth it, and just get us to act. Because moral concepts lead to helping behavior becoming more prevalent, they in turn increase the chances of survival for the individual and those around the individual. Moral concepts thus serve as a mechanism for increasing the chances of survival. Because those with moral concepts are more likely to survive than those without moral concepts, one would expect the “trait” of having moral concepts to be selected for over time.

Now that we have a rough sense of *why* having moral concepts would be a trait that is selected over time, it still remains to be seen exactly *how* this would work. Understanding just how natural selection might have selected for our having moral concepts will strengthen the case

for skepticism with regards to moral facts—as we will see later. As Joyce notes, the precise story as to how we would come to develop the trait of having moral concepts would require extensive neurological and genetic research.¹³³ Unfortunately such a precise story is unavailable at this point. Joyce suggests that recent empirical studies with regards to the role of emotions on moral thinking can provide us with some clues as to how the development of moral concepts would come about however. Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt for example have amassed a great deal of empirical research that indicates emotion plays a significant role in moral thinking.¹³⁴ As Greene and Haidt note, research indicates that damage to emotional centers of the brain results in a decreased capacity for moral judgment.¹³⁵ Such research seems to support the conclusion that moral judgment is importantly dependent on some sort of emotional capacity. Joyce takes findings of these sort to support the conclusion that it is likely moral concepts emerged through natural selection affecting the emotional centers of the brain.

At this point we have the tools to begin to paint a rough picture of the evolutionary genealogy of moral *beliefs*. Presumably somewhere in our evolutionary past our ancestors developed emotional capacities which were in some way integral to our developing moral concepts. The concepts Joyce has in mind here are fairly general: e.g. rightness, wrongness, fairness, desert, etc.¹³⁶ For Joyce, full-fledged moral judgments and the beliefs which accompany them come into play later. The development of moral concepts figures in our ability to make moral judgments and to have any sort of moral beliefs. The content of moral judgments and beliefs is the result of a variety of causes however. Culture and reason, for example, play a

¹³³ Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, 123-124.

¹³⁴ Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt, “How (and where) does moral judgment work?” *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences* 6, no. 12 (December 2002): 517-523.

¹³⁵ Greene and Haidt, “How (and where) does moral judgment work?” 517-518.

¹³⁶ Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, 181.

role in our making the moral judgments we in fact make and affect the beliefs we hold. Nonetheless, our capacity for moral judgment and belief is in some way parasitic on the development of moral concepts.

From an evolutionary perspective, what is important is that the possession of moral concepts and holding moral beliefs gets us to act in certain ways. Nowhere is it presupposed that one's moral beliefs must be true in order for one to act in the ways which increase one's chances of survival. If the mechanism by which we form moral beliefs—i.e. through the evolutionary development of moral concepts—has nothing to do with truth however, it would seem as if this fact undermines the justification for one's moral beliefs. Take an analogous case. Say one discovers that one's parents told one Santa Claus exists only because doing so would increase the chances one would not misbehave. If one is still unsure whether Santa Claus exists, at the very least, it would seem one's justification is undermined. The reason why one believes he exists has nothing to do with the truth of whether he exists. In the moral case, evolutionary pressures are one's parents and Santa Claus would be moral facts. From an evolutionary standpoint, we see that the reason why we believe there are moral facts has to do with getting us to act in certain ways.

Some might counter that Joyce and others like him fail to tell an accurate evolutionary story however. Evolutionary pressures tracked the truth, they would say, in leading to the development of moral beliefs. One suggestion here could be that false beliefs in the long run lose out to true beliefs in terms of survival value. Joyce notes that Peter Carruthers makes something like this point—though Carruthers does not do so in direct connection to moral beliefs.¹³⁷ Carruthers provides an example in which he is walking through the desert in order to

¹³⁷ Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, 212; Peter Carruthers, *Human Knowledge and Human Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 111-126.

find water to illustrate his point. Carruthers notes that by and large success in such a project will increase in likelihood if the actions which one takes issue from beliefs which are true or sufficiently close to the truth. Say one falsely believes that one knows the direction in which to find water. Chances are that, unless one gets lucky, one is not going to find water. If one has a true belief or a belief close to the truth as to where one might find water however, it seems clear that one will be more likely to find water. This leads Carruthers to conclude, “[O]rganisms (of the sort that act on beliefs) will only survive, in general and in the long run, if they base their actions on beliefs that are true, or at least close to the truth. So if any innate beliefs have arisen through natural selection, we should expect them to be at least approximately true.”¹³⁸ Applied to the moral case, if moral beliefs are the product of natural selection, then it is likely that they are at least “approximately true.” Moral beliefs would not have been selected for if they were false beliefs. Moral beliefs increase survival value because they are true.

Carruthers’s suggestion is appealing for some beliefs which are plausibly the product of natural selection. Say, for example, beliefs about which types of things are edible arise from natural selection. We would not expect individuals who hold false beliefs with regards to which types of things are edible to survive. If one were to hold the false belief that rocks are edible, for example, one would not last very long. Beliefs about which types of things are edible would only help one to survive if such beliefs were true. It isn’t clear however that this is true of all beliefs which might be the product of natural selection. Carruthers himself provides us with something of a counterexample: “It is possible to imagine cases where an innate *false* belief would be an aid to survival. For example, an innate belief in the magical properties of a particular plant, which in fact contains a powerful medicine, might prove very useful to those

¹³⁸ Carruthers, *Human Knowledge and Human Nature*, 112.

who live in the region where that plant flourishes.”¹³⁹ He concludes however that “such cases are rendered unlikely when one remembers that in order to have been selected through evolution, a belief would have to prove useful over a time-span that is extremely long in comparison to human history, and in a wide variety of differing circumstances.”¹⁴⁰ Carruthers seems to brush off such his own counterexample too quickly. One issue seems to be that Carruthers focuses primarily on the selection of particular beliefs over time. If we recall however, Joyce suggests not that particular moral beliefs have been selected for over time, but that moral concepts have been selected for. Particular moral beliefs are the result of and responsive to a variety of environments. We might consider instead then a type of concept which could be selected for and which would result in a multitude of false beliefs. Take for example the concept of an evil spirit. It seems plausible that beliefs which are the result of such a concept, although false, could be evolutionarily beneficial. For example, say a group tends to hold the belief that the woods surrounding their community are inhabited by evil spirits at night, and this prevents them from venturing into the woods at night. If the woods are full of predators, this belief certainly would increase the group’s chances of survival. It is clear however that the concept of an evil spirit need not result only in beliefs about woods at night. If the concept of an evil spirit results in beliefs which generally prevent individuals from getting in dangerous situations, then it would seem those beliefs would be selected for even though they are false.

The “error theorist” of the type we are considering can point out that moral beliefs are similar to beliefs about evil spirits in the sense that what matters in the long run is that the type of belief in question gets one to act in certain ways. The type of belief in question need not be true however in order to increase one’s chances of survival. The “error theorist” of the type we are

¹³⁹ Carruthers, *Human Knowledge and Human Nature*, 113.

¹⁴⁰ Carruthers, *Human Knowledge and Human Nature*, 113.

considering needs only to show that natural selection isn't always a reliable source for some beliefs. True beliefs do not seem to always win out in the long run. In order to cultivate skepticism, she simply needs to show that moral beliefs *might* be the type of belief that doesn't need to be true in order to increase one's chances of survival.

Another objection to the evolutionary skeptic has to do with the ability to rationally reflect on beliefs on which are formed through unreliable processes. The critic of the evolutionary skeptic here could grant that natural selection is an unreliable source for moral beliefs. The critic can point out however that what is important is that we have the ability to autonomously reflect upon our moral beliefs, and that reason serves as a corrective measure to get us closer to moral truth. What matters is not the source of our moral beliefs, but the reasons we give for our moral beliefs. Perhaps, they might say, one reason we hold moral beliefs is that it was evolutionarily beneficial to do so. This however is not the *only* reason we hold moral beliefs. We might go back to our example of forming beliefs on the basis of poor vision to illustrate the point. If one were to form one's beliefs about one's environment solely on the basis of poor vision, we concluded that we would be unjustified in those beliefs. If we saw a brown fuzzy blob in the distance we should be skeptical about whether it was a dog, bear, etc. Say one does not wholly base one's beliefs on poor vision however. Perhaps one hears a barking noise as well. It seems one can *infer* from this experience that it is likely that the brown fuzzy blob is a dog. One has an *independent reason* to believe that there is a dog in one's vicinity. In the evolutionary case, one might claim we have an independent reason to be justified in believing some moral claims despite the fact that our moral beliefs are influenced by evolutionary pressures.

The evolutionary moral skeptic should respond here by claiming that evolutionary influences on moral concepts so thoroughly infects our moral beliefs that autonomous reflection of the kind above isn't possible. One response which the evolutionary skeptic can provide has been called the 'mere rationalization hypothesis'.¹⁴¹ William Fitzpatrick explains that according to this hypothesis:

Rather than engaging in autonomous reflection and reasoning, and coming to believe certain moral propositions for the reasons that emerge from that reflection [...] what is happening instead according to this hypothesis is that (1) our moral beliefs are simply caused by emotions or 'moral instincts' we have largely due to our evolutionary background, and (2) we then invent rationalizations for these resulting beliefs in order to try to make sense of them to ourselves, unaware of their real causal origins.¹⁴²

Moral reasoning here would be akin to how one might reason about one's favorite sports team. Say for example Dave really likes the Denver Broncos and thinks that they are the best football team when in reality they are mediocre. The reasons why Dave roots for the Denver Broncos is because he grew up in the Denver area, his parents rooted for the Broncos, and his friends liked the Broncos. Dave does not know that these are the reasons he roots for the Broncos however. When the Broncos lose he invents all sorts of rationalizations of why they lost: for example, perhaps he will say that the other team cheated, the referees were unfair, etc. Because Dave has the belief that the Broncos are the best team, Dave is incapable of autonomous or unbiased reflection on why the Broncos might lose a game. In the evolutionary case, the reason why one reasons the way he or she does is because evolutionary pressures led one to form certain moral beliefs. When one reasons morally, one cannot stand back unbiased and reason in a way that gets one closer to truth, one simply reasons in such a way that one's moral beliefs can make

¹⁴¹ William Fitzpatrick, "Morality and Evolutionary Biology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014), under "2.5 The Challenge to the Autonomous Reflection Model: Post Hoc Rationalization of Emotionally Caused Judgment," <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-biology> (accessed October 15, 2015).

¹⁴² Fitzpatrick, "Morality and Evolutionary Biology."

sense. The evolutionary skeptic should say moral reasoning is *post hoc rationalization*.¹⁴³ When one recognizes the evolutionary genealogy of one's moral beliefs, one should recognize that one is incapable of autonomous moral reflection. Rather than moral reflection getting closer to moral truth, moral reflection is itself tainted, and this is because of the influence of evolutionary pressures on moral beliefs.

The evolutionary skeptic can maintain then that an evolutionary genealogy of moral beliefs should lead us to conclude that the source of moral beliefs is an unreliable one. In the moral case, evolutionary pressures do not lead to moral beliefs tracking the truth, nor can moral reasoning help in any way. As we argued earlier, when we recognize that the source of a belief is unreliable we should recognize that the type of belief in question is unjustified however. Again, if we adopt an externalist account of justification, one is unjustified whether one recognizes this or not. On an internalist account, when one recognizes that the source of one's moral beliefs is unreliable one should recognize one's moral beliefs are unjustified and adopt the position of the moral skeptic or agnostic. One *may* be justified in a very limited sense however from an internalist perspective if one does not recognize that moral beliefs issue from an unreliable source. In Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's terminology, one would be personally justified if one was unaware, but one would not be impersonally justified.

It would seem however that if one isn't impersonally justified, this is enough to establish an error theory of the type Mark Eli Kalderon presents. If we recall, Kalderon's version of error theory focuses on belief, and the *error* in "moral error theory" has to do with whether one believes something one should not believe. It would seem as if the error theorist of this type can claim that when someone is personally justified but not impersonally justified, someone believes

¹⁴³ Fitzpatrick, "Morality and Evolutionary Biology."

something that they should not believe. We can use the example of Bethany to illustrate this. Bethany, in believing that it is 8:00, is personally justified because given the information that is available to her any rational being would form the same belief. If she had full information about the clock however she would not form the same belief she had formed. Say Bethany watches the clock for a minute and recognizes the clock does not work. By her own standards, she would recognize that she should not have formed the belief that it is 8:00. It seems likely that she would be unsure just what time it is. She would recognize that she was unjustified in her belief—in other words, she would recognize she had made an error.

The error theorist should maintain that one is not impersonally justified in believing moral propositions. Again, this is because when we have full information as to how moral beliefs are formed, and if some sort of evolutionary account of the type above holds, it seems that moral beliefs issue from an unreliable source. (There might of course also be other reasons to suppose that moral beliefs are unjustified.) The error theorist should say that when one isn't impersonally justified in believing moral propositions one is committing an error.

5. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have presented a detailed examination of moral error theory. In the process of doing so, we have seen the how one might motivate two more traditional moral error theories: one which targets on the objective prescriptivity of moral facts, and one which targets irreducible normativity. Finally, we have seen a less traditional formulation of moral error theory presented by Mark Eli Kalderon. Each position I have motivated has its relative strengths and weaknesses. Of course, no argument I have provided for or against the error theories presented are entirely decisive. Nonetheless, the broad examination of moral error theory

provided is not without merit. In seeing how moral error theories have been presented in the past, the hope is to open up new strategies for establishing error theoretic positions.

It seems to me that the most interesting avenue for establishing something like an error theory is the final position presented in this thesis. One difficulty traditional moral error theorists have faced is in explaining what we should do after adopting a moral error theory. Should we abandon moral discourse altogether? Could we in some way revise the discourse so that it is not infected with a pervasive error? Should we leave moral discourse as it is, knowing that when we speak morally what we are saying is strictly speaking false? The final position presented in this thesis seems more readily able to deal with these questions which arise on accepting a moral error theory. Of course even if the traditional moral error theorist has difficulties with the above questions, this does not necessarily mean that the position he presents is false. Nonetheless, it seems to me that a position which is able to deal with these problems has some draw over positions which deal with these problems poorly.

The difficulty for the more traditional moral error theorists here can be clarified by considering similar difficulties other sorts of antirealists face. Say, for example, one is an antirealist about colors. Through some line of argument one becomes convinced that strictly speaking there are no colors, and that all color discourse is strictly speaking false. If all color discourse is false, what becomes of that discourse? On adopting an antirealist position with regards to colors, one could resolve to completely abandon the discourse. The problem with abandoning color discourse is that it would be very difficult to do so. Statements like, "Pass me the screwdriver with the red handle" are undeniably useful. On the other hand, if one were to continue to participate in color discourse, one would knowingly be speaking falsehoods. Color discourse becomes some sort of fictional discourse. Talking about colors would be akin to

talking about Sherlock Holmes. The problem here is whether or not we can make sense of color discourse as a wholly fictional discourse.

Similar problems face moral error theorists. On the one hand, it is unclear whether we could completely abandon moral discourse. When a child asks for example why he shouldn't steal from his classmate, it seems natural to reply "Because it is wrong." On the other, it would seem strange to participate in moral discourse knowing that everything one is saying is strictly speaking false. Saying that one should not do something because it is wrong would be akin to saying one should not do something because Santa Claus is watching them. Moral discourse becomes a sort of fictional discourse. As with color discourse, it is unclear whether moral discourse can be made sense of as a fictional discourse.

When cast in terms of belief, it becomes clearer what one should do on accepting an error theory however. If the *error* in "moral error theory" is that we believe something that we should not, to resolve this error one should withhold belief. One can still *speak* in moral terms however. For more traditional formulations of moral error theory, the error has to do with the way we speak however. On such an account, if we continue to speak in moral terms, we are knowingly speaking falsehoods, and knowingly in error when we do so. Unless we abandon speaking in moral terms, we are left with this tension between wanting to speak morally, and knowing that we are saying things that are strictly speaking false. The tension here would be like that of an atheist who still wants to participate in theistic discourse. This tension is not as strong when we cast moral error theory in terms of belief however. Insofar as some level of participation in moral discourse does not require that we *believe* moral facts, we can still participate in the discourse to some degree without treating moral discourse as wholly fictional. To many, this would be a desirable feature of such an "error theory".

Of course, there are still difficulties which arise on adopting the final “error theory” of this thesis. Whereas in more traditional error theories one knowingly speaks falsehoods if one continues to participate in moral discourse, in this final “error theory” one might knowingly say things one does not strictly speaking believe, and it would seem as if when one withholds belief in moral statements one does not fully participate in the discourse. Full participation would seem to require that we believe at least some moral claims. This might leave us asking about what level of participation we are left with if we withhold belief in moral claims, and whether that level of participation get us what we want out of moral discourse. Unfortunately answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this paper. I will however say one thing: at least part of the purpose of participating in moral discourse seems to be to get people to act in certain ways and refrain from acting in others. By my lights, it would seem as if we could achieve these ends without fully participating in the discourse. Thus, even if withholding belief in moral claims results in our not fully participating in moral discourse, it seems we might still be able in some way to get what we want out of moral discourse.

The final position I present in this thesis has traditionally fallen under the umbrella of “moral skepticism.” It certainly may be questioned whether such a position deserves the title “moral error theory.” If we are concerned with what has historically gone by the name “moral error theory” we would likely conclude that the final position that I have presented is not a moral error theory. As I have mentioned, moral error theories traditionally have had to do with the errors of a discourse and the statements of that discourse. The error occurs within the discourse because of the discourse’s commitment to some problematic thesis. In more traditional error theories, this is the conceptual step. In the “error theory” considered in the prior section, the concern is less with what moral discourse is conceptually committed to. Nonetheless, in such an

“error theory” there does seem to be something of a conceptual step. As Kalderon notes in presenting his version of error theory, the acceptance of moral sentences involves belief in the propositions expressed by those sentences.¹⁴⁴ Presumably, to fully participate in moral discourse, one must accept some of the sentences within that discourse. Moral discourse would be conceptually committed to speakers of that discourse believing some of the propositions expressed within that discourse. The difference between this conceptual step and more traditional versions of the conceptual step seems to be that moral discourse doesn’t *necessarily* require that we accept the sentences of moral discourse or believe the propositions expressed by those sentences. Furthermore, it seems possible in this account of error theory that one could accept the sentences of moral discourse without that acceptance amounting to belief. For example, one could say one “accepts” the sentences of moral discourse and by this mean that one has a positive emotional reaction to the propositions expressed by those sentences.

Even if such a position does not amount to a full blooded moral error theory, it seems that the position deserves a name which is less general than “moral skepticism.” Mackie at certain points even calls his moral error theory “moral skepticism.”¹⁴⁵ “Moral skepticism” is probably too general a term to be truly useful except in distinguishing one broad class of antirealist positions from another. If I were to give a name to the error theory of the kind I am considering, it would seem as if “epistemic moral error theory” would be appropriate. On my view, the position certainly does involve identifying an error, but this error is not quite the same as in more traditional error theories. “Epistemic moral error theory” therefore could be distinguished from what I would call “discursive moral error theory.”

¹⁴⁴ Kalderon, *Moral Fictionalism*, 101.

¹⁴⁵ Mackie, *Ethics*, 15-17.

We might ask here: what value (practical or otherwise) might there be in establishing an error theory (of either sort)? Moral error theory can be seen as a dangerous position to adopt. It may be seen as a position that, if adopted, would seem to permit all sorts of what would be considered “immoral” behavior. If there is no moral fact “Murder is wrong,” or if we can’t be justified in believing whether there is such a fact, why shouldn’t one murder? As Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin point out however, this objection rests on a misunderstanding of why people act in accordance with purported moral facts however.¹⁴⁶ It presupposes that humans only act in accordance with purported moral facts because they believe there are moral facts. It should be stressed however that often individuals act in accordance with “moral facts” for other reasons, e.g. disgust, feelings of shame, sympathy etc. Acting for these reasons may be important to individuals whether or not there actually are moral facts.

If we put aside fears that establishing a moral error theory will lead to all sorts of “delinquent” behavior becoming prevalent, we might see a practical benefit which could be the result of the above examination. Such an examination could be a benefit for the moral realist and the error theorist alike. The error theorist can draw out issues the realist might need to address, and the realist can challenge the error theorist in turn.

¹⁴⁶ Joyce and Kirchin, “Introduction,” xv.