

***Introduction to special issue of Ethical Theory and Moral Practice (forthcoming)***  
**marking the 30th anniversary of the publication of**  
**John Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong***

**by Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin (editors)**

**Contributors:**

John Burgess: "Against Ethics"

Charles Pigden: "Nihilism, Nietzsche, and the Doppelganger Problem"

David Phillips: "Mackie on Practical Reason"

Don Loeb: "The Argument from Moral Experience"

Graham Oddie & Dan Demetriou: "The Fictionalist's Attitude Problem"

Richard Garner: "Abolishing Morality"

INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* marks the 30th anniversary of the publication of John Mackie's seminal book, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. The importance and influence of this book have not waned in the subsequent decades, and we are now in a position to acknowledge it as one of the landmark texts of 20th-century metaethics. Most commentators see Mackie's viewpoint as a challenge to be overcome; some celebrate it as pointing towards the truth. Either way, it stakes out a position that no serious metaethicist can ignore.

The position for which Mackie argues is something he calls "moral skepticism." It should be noted that he is not a skeptic in the classical sense of the term: He does not maintain that we cannot know whether moral claims are true and therefore ought to withhold passing judgment on the matter (as Pyrrho and his coterie held as a global position). Of the ancient trio of views—dogmatist (believer), nihilist (disbeliever), and skeptic (in a perpetual state of uncertainty)—Mackie's so-called skepticism actually has much more of the flavor of nihilism. He does not merely doubt morality, he denies it. This denial takes the form of arguing for a moral "error theory"—the view that (A) moral discourse has the aim of securing the truth, but that (B) it systematically fails to do so. In arguing for (A) the error theorist contrasts with the noncognitivist, who claims that moral discourse is not even in the market for truth (because, for example, it consists of commands veiled in the indicative mood); in arguing for (B) the error theorist contrasts with the "success theorist," in whose ranks appear all advocates of moral realism.

There is nothing terribly complicated, esoteric, or unfamiliar in the idea of taking the error theoretic stance towards a problematic subject matter. It is, after all, simply the attitude that atheists take towards religion (and that devotees of one religion take towards any other non-equivalent religion). Whenever people talk about a range of objects, relations, or properties for which a temptation arises to declare that the world doesn't contain the elements necessary to render their assertions true, we face the option of endorsing an error theory. Given that such temptations arise for an enormous range of perennial philosophical puzzles, the relevance of the error theoretic option is ubiquitous.

We find it, thus, somewhat surprising that it was not until 1977 that the possibility of a moral error theory became a well-defined metaethical contender. Of course, moral nihilism antedates Mackie's book. Mackie himself had advocated the view in his little-read 1946 article in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. Bertrand Russell articulated the idea in the 1920s (see Pigden, this volume). And one can trace its origins back as far as one pleases in Western moral philosophy (at least to Anaxarchus of the 4th century BC<sup>1</sup>). Nevertheless, it seems fair to say that it was not until *Ethics* that the option became clearly delineated in the minds of modern metaethicists. This is due not only to Mackie's characteristic knack for clear thinking and no-nonsense expression, but also to the fact that he does not merely describe the moral error theoretic position, but intelligently champions it. This makes him a rare thing in moral philosophy's long history, for typically the moral skeptic's case has been presented by his opponents. Though Callicles and Thrasymachus were probably historical figures (the latter certainly was), it is unlikely that the lines that Plato placed in their mouths are remotely close to a sympathetic transcript of anything they ever asserted; their role in the dialogue is to fall silent as Socrates bullies his way to inevitable victory. This pattern repeats through the centuries: Moral skepticism is wheeled on to the stage only so that the reader may witness its humbling defeat. And yet the very fact that moral skepticism needs to be defeated again and again—over millennia of novel stratagems and ingenious arguments—should in itself raise one's suspicion. So eternally recurrent a foe obviously cannot be defeated *easily*, implying that there must exist significant considerations in its favor. So why has moral skepticism had so few able advocates?

One reason, we hazard to suggest, is that those who are drawn to moral philosophy sufficiently to publish works on the topic are more likely than not to be antecedently hostile towards moral skepticism. By analogy, consider theology. One need not believe in God in order to be a capable theologian, but how many *atheistic* theologians does one really expect to find in the profession? The average atheist (as a matter of contingent fact) simply has little interest in the practice. Similarly, perhaps, the average moral skeptic tends to expend her intellectual energies elsewhere. We suspect that moral skepticism enjoys a higher proportion of support among philosophers in general than it does among moral philosophers in particular.

Another reason for the unpopularity of moral skepticism is the widespread suspicion that it would, if broadly adopted, have a pernicious influence in society. Over two thousand years ago, Aristocles of Messina asked "What evil deeds would he not dare, who held that nothing is really evil, or disgraceful, or just or unjust?"<sup>2</sup> Paraphrasing Dostoyevsky, one might declare "If there is no moral truth, then everything is permitted." Such rhetoric, however, does not withstand careful scrutiny. There are no grounds for assuming that the moral error theorist must be *tolerant* of those actions that would usually be opposed on moral grounds. Mackie himself went to some effort to stress the logical independence of first-order and second-order ethical views. A second-order moral skepticism of the kind he advocated may leave one's first-order practical commitments untouched. It is a standard rhetorical move to attempt to embarrass the moral error

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Warren, *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics: An Archaeology of Ataraxia* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea in *Praeparatio Evangelica*, book 14, translated by E.H. Gifford (Clarendon, 1903).

theorist by saying (in a tone of outraged wonderment) something along the lines of: “*So you don’t think that strangling babies is morally wrong?!*”—to which the best response is: “I don’t think that strangling babies is morally good or morally acceptable. I don’t think it is morally *anything*. Putting aside that whole bankrupt conceptual scheme: The thought of someone strangling a baby sickens me and I oppose such behavior with every fiber of my being.”<sup>3</sup> The fear that moral skepticism will lead to social anarchy presupposes that our moral commitments are the *only* thing keeping us well-behaved (and the only thing that *could* keep us well-behaved), which, ironically, reveals just the kind of pessimism about the human spirit that the moral skeptic is often accused of indulging in.

A third reason for the relative paucity of advocates of moral skepticism in the philosophical literature is the widespread assumption that moral realism enjoys some sort of presumption in its favor that the skeptic has to work to overcome. Even Mackie acknowledges that since his moral error theory “goes against assumptions ingrained in our thought and built into some of the ways in which language is used, since it conflicts with what is sometimes called common sense, it needs very solid support” (35). He seems to be saying that the very fact that it clashes with common sense represents a methodological handicap for his brand of moral skepticism, and thus that the arguments in its favor need to be even more convincing than do those of the opponent if they are to command assent. This matter is discussed at length in one of the papers of this volume (by Don Loeb), so we won’t comment on it further here, bar one observation. In wondering about the status of widespread intuitions against moral skepticism, it is important to distinguish between the status of such intuitions *ex ante* and *ex post*. It may be granted (if only *arguendo*) that, prior to considering any evidence or reflecting on the matter, a widespread intuition against moral skepticism imposes upon its advocates some *prima facie* epistemological disadvantage. However, once the moral skeptic has deployed, to his own satisfaction, some positive argument(s) in favor of his viewpoint, then he may consider himself to have discharged that *ex ante* burden, and the sociological fact that people continue to regard his view as counter-intuitive cannot be legitimately raised by the epistemic conservatist as an ongoing consideration against it. Nor can the (supposed) counter-intuitiveness of the conclusion of the pro-skeptical arguments be cited as a mark against them in the course of assessing their acceptability, for to do so would beg the question. Mackie, of course, does deploy positive arguments in favor of his skepticism: most explicitly and famously, the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness. He sees these arguments as strong enough to discharge any burden-of-proof case against him.

The past thirty years have seen a great deal written about Mackie’s view and the arguments he gave for it. But more often than not the treatment of his work reflects the history of moral skepticism mentioned above: The error theory is acknowledged only to be summarily dispatched, allowing the dialectic to proceed to less “pessimistic” matters. However, Mackie’s metaethical standpoint deserves discussion of a more focused and sustained sort; this special edition of *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* aims to provide

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<sup>3</sup> This, incidentally, indicates what is confused in the pseudo-Dostoyevskyan slogan. What kind of permission does the paraphraser of Dostoyevsky intend to invoke? It cannot be *moral* permission, for if there are no moral facts then *nothing* is morally permitted. But if it is some other kind of permission, then one needs a reason for thinking that the non-existence of moral facts will affect it. (An analogous dilemma faces the real Dostoyevskyan dictum, concerning the death of God.)

such a forum. Readers will note that we have not selected papers that eulogize or even necessarily concur with Mackie's views; some of the papers barely even explicitly mention them. It is a testament to the fecundity of *Ethics* that it leads to philosophical encounters that Mackie did not explore, and that it continues to inspire lively and noisy critical debate.

At more or less the same time as Mackie was putting the finishing touches on *Ethics*, John Burgess (better known for his prolific work in logic and philosophy of mathematics) was penning an essay arguing for a position called "anethicism"—which turns out to be equivalent to the moral error theory. Burgess' paper was not published at that time—partly because Mackie beat him to the punch—but it was informally circulated for decades, especially among Princetonians with an interest in metaethics. In marking the 30th year of publication of Mackie's book, there seems something very fitting in opening the issue by presenting, for the first time, a paper directly from that era. (We judge that 1977 is now far enough behind us that we can speak of that time as an "era.") Naturally, there are certain anachronisms in Burgess' paper—in terms of some of the terminology and also the charmingly dated examples (e.g., referring to Nixon and Jackie Onassis)—but the content of the argumentation remains relevant and its quality ensures that it still makes a valuable contribution.

The second paper begins by examining one of the historical antecedents of Mackie's metaethical view—namely, Nietzsche's convoluted moral philosophy. Charles Pigden argues that Nietzsche was indeed an error theorist, and in doing so he counters an objection that may be made to moral nihilism in general (an objection that Pigden finds articulated in the work of Crispin Wright and Simon Blackburn). The final sections of Pigden's paper help us to formulate the error theory more carefully. Mackie described the view as holding that all moral claims are false, which, Pigden notes, leads to trouble (the "Doppelgänger Problem"). If "X is P" is a false moral claim, then "It is not the case that X is P" must be true (by classical standards); but if the latter claim also counts as *moral*, then it cannot be that all moral claims are false. Pigden provides a tidy solution to the problem.

Having formulated the error theory, it is natural to wonder what arguments might be used to support it. The next two papers undertake this.

David Phillips provides a penetrating analysis of Mackie's neglected view of practical reason, and illuminates the role of practical reason in the argument from queerness. Phillips contrasts Mackie's position on practical reason with that of Bernard Williams, and argues that the former is superior in several respects. (Incidentally, one of the editors of the present volume is the target of some of Phillips' admonition, and hereby acknowledges that he finds the critique generally convincing.)

Don Loeb critically confronts an argument that is frequently leveled against the moral skeptic, which he calls "the Argument from Moral Experience." It consists of two premises: (1) that the phenomenology of moral experience is in line with the moral realist's perspective, and (2) that this creates a burden of proof that the moral skeptic has to work harder to overcome. In other words, the world's *seeming to be* a moral way creates a presumption in favor of the world's *being* a moral way. Loeb questions both premises. Should our moral phenomenology be characterized in the way that moral realists typically paint it? And, even if it should, is the moral realist justified in thinking that this favors her case?

The final two papers collected here deal with the aftermath of a moral error theory—in particular, what should we do with our moral talk and thought if we were to become convinced that Mackie is correct? There are broadly two camps. Until recently the assumption was that the error theorist should also be an *abolitionist* (a.k.a. eliminativist): eschewing moral talk in the same way as we all now eschew positive talk of, say, witches. Thus, it has been supposed, if we catch a professed moral error theorist employing moral language, we can triumphantly cry “Aha!” (Any such accusation would be an argument not against the moral error theory but against the theorist—showing her to be a hypocrite, disingenuous, in bad faith, or vacillating between belief and disbelief.) But the increasingly popular alternative (or, at least, the increasingly *discussed* alternative) is that the error theorist might adopt the *fictionalist* stance: a commitment to continue to make moral *utterances* and have moral *thoughts*, while withholding assertoric force from the utterances and withholding doxastic assent from the thoughts. On the assumption that morality is in various respects useful when it is asserted and believed, eliminativism will (*ceteris paribus*) constitute a practical cost. The fictionalist option, therefore, becomes attractive if (and only if) it promises to recoup some of these costs. The advocate of fictionalism holds that some of these losses may be recovered by adopting a policy of employing moral language, engaging in moral deliberation, and being moved by moral emotions, but throughout it all remaining disposed to deny the truth of any moral proposition if pressed in an appropriately serious manner (e.g., when in the philosophy classroom), thus not really believing any of it (thus not violating any epistemic norms). The debate between the fictionalist and the abolitionist is one of the more intriguing recent legacies of *Ethics*, yet it is hard to discern Mackie’s own thoughts on the topic. On the final page of the book he hints that morality might continue with the status of a “useful fiction”—but one searches in vain for any discussion of *how* he thinks this might be supposed to work.

Taking the moral fictionalist Mark Kalderon as their principal target, Graham Oddie and Dan Demetriou (in a joint paper) raise a serious challenge for the fictionalist (and not just the *moral* fictionalist), which they call the “acceptance-transfer problem.” They argue that, as with the well-known Frege-Geach challenge to noncognitivism, there is a worry about how there can be any rational transfer between various claims in a piece of everyday moral reasoning (say, moral *modus ponens*) *if* the attitude taken by the speaker towards one of the premises (the moral claim) is something unlike belief and more akin to make-belief.

In the sixth and final paper of this issue, Richard Garner (who is sympathetic to moral skepticism) puts the case for abolitionism most forcefully, reminding us of the reservations that Mackie himself had about morality (voiced not in *Ethics* but in *Hume’s Moral Theory* of 1980). Garner has grave doubts about the fictionalist program: doubts about its psychological viability, doubts about its touted pragmatic pay-offs. He makes a strong case that abolitionism may be the most honest and practical attitude for the moral error theorist to adopt.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> We would like to thank the authors for their work in preparing this special edition, as well as the rest of the editorial team at ETMP for their support. A further edited anthology—*A World Without Values: Essays on John Mackie’s Moral Error Theory*—containing these along with a number of additional papers, is forthcoming from Springer Press.