

***A World Without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory***  
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**Introduction**

by Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin

[penultimate draft]

Just as history is written by the winners, so too is moral philosophy written largely by the believers. Although moral skepticism has been a theoretical presence in Western philosophy for as long as anyone can discern, the position has nearly always been presented by its opponents. Callicles was probably a historical figure, and Thrasymachus certainly was, but 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 for the sole purpose of the audience witnessing its crushing defeat. However, unlike the explanation for the paucity of historians from losing sides, the absence of the skeptic's voice from the dialectic of moral philosophy is not due to his having been defeated (either militarily or intellectually). Indeed, the very fact that moral skepticism needs to be countered again and again—centuries of novel stratagems and ingenious arguments—indicates a foe that cannot be defeated *easily*, implying that there must exist significant considerations in its favor. The real explanation for the dearth of real-life moral skeptics plying their wares in the philosophical marketplace may be nothing more insidious than a natural process of self-filtration: 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.

Of the handful of exceptions to this trend—of the handful of able-minded moral skeptics publicly championing the position—John Mackie must figure high on the list. His 1977 book, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, continues to challenge and motivate metaethicists in a way to which few books from that era can claim. Despite the fact that it is a slim book with modest production values, despite the fact that its contents have provoked far more disagreement than concurrence, and despite the fact that few readers explore beyond chapter 3, it must surely be acknowledged as one of the landmark texts of 20th-century metaethics. If it accomplished nothing more than staking out an extreme position that moral philosophers can use as an effective foil in the course of more “positive” theory-building, it would be an important book. Yet we think that it is much more than just a useful foil; it advocates a metaethical position to be taken very seriously, and employs arguments in favor of that position that, for all the intense critical scrutiny to which they have been subject, remain alive. The past

thirty years have seen a great deal written about Mackie's book, but more often than not the treatment reflects the history of moral skepticism mentioned above: His view is acknowledged only to be summarily dispatched, allowing the dialectic to proceed to other matters. However, Mackie's metaethical standpoint deserves discussion of a more focused and sustained sort—an end to which this anthology aims to contribute. Readers will note that we have not selected papers that eulogize or even concur with Mackie's views; some of the contributions barely even explicitly mention them, and, of those that do, a good many are robustly opposed. 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.

Although we have been referring to Mackie as a “moral skeptic,” 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. It is the attitude that sensible persons take towards phlogiston, astrology, the Loch Ness monster, and the existence of reliable causal relations between severed rabbits' feet and episodes of good luck. 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 Psychology and Philosophy* (soon to drop the “...*Psychology and*...”). 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>

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<sup>1</sup> See Warren 2002, p. 81

Nevertheless, it seems fair to say that it was not until *Ethics* that the option became clearly delineated in the minds of modern metaethicists.

### *Understanding the moral error theory*

Mackie introduces the term “error theory” by saying that most people’s moral judgments involve an implicit claim “to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive,” but “these claims are all false” (1977, p. 35). As far as trying to understand the error theoretic stance in general terms goes, the part about “objective prescriptions” can be put aside as optional; one would just as surely be advocating an error theory if one asserted, say, that most people’s moral judgments involve an implicit claim to the existence of pure autonomy, and all such claims are false. In light of this, let us say, as a first approximation, that one way of being an error theorist about morality is to hold that most people’s moral judgments involve implicit claim X, and all such claims are false. This needs to be refined in various ways.

First of all, it is presupposed by nearly all subsequent discussions of the moral error theory that the reference to “most people” is a mistake. What is distinctive about the error theoretic stance is that there is something faulty about moral judgments *per se*, not merely *most people’s* moral judgments. Were it just a matter of most people being at fault, then there would be room for these people to revise their ways into line with the faultless moral judgments of the minority, and thus the error theorist’s key claim that there is something wrong with morality *per se* would evaporate. Indeed, it is often put forward as an objection to Mackie’s view that even if it is true that most people imbue their moral judgments with a problematic kind of objective force, this is a dispensable aspect of moral discourse; a morality stripped of this flawed element would still deserve to be called a “morality.” (See Dreier, Kirchin, West, this volume.) Mackie expresses the stronger and more metaethically interesting view when he asserts that the claims of objective prescriptivity are “part of what our ordinary statements mean: the traditional moral concepts of the ordinary man as well as of the main line of western philosophers are concepts of objective value” (1977, p. 35).

Second, it may be prudent for the error theorist to say that the problematic claims in question are all *untrue*, rather than all false. To see why, consider that other paradigm of an error theoretic stance: atheism. The atheist thinks that the predicate “...is a god” has an empty extension (at least at the actual world), hence all sentences of the form “X is a god” are false. So far so good. But the word “god” functions not only as a count noun, but is often capitalized into the proper noun “God,” and what does the atheist say of the sentence “God is omnipotent”? It is not so obvious that this should be considered false. Peter Strawson’s well-known (though rather old-fashioned) view is that the atheist should consider the sentence neither true nor false (Strawson 1950). Sometimes *noncognitivism* is described as the view that sentences of the target discourse are neither true nor false—a characterization that leads to the embarrassing implication that, if Strawson is right, the atheist is a noncognitivist about (some) religious discourse. It is preferable to distinguish the noncognitivist from the error theorist by saying that the former denies, and the latter affirms, that moral utterances are assertions. Thus the atheist will not be a noncognitivist about “God is omnipotent,” since the sentence is typically used assertorically, even if

Strawson is correct about its truth value. We then distinguish the error theorist from the success theorist (e.g., the moral realist) by saying that the former, but not the latter, claims that moral utterances are all either false or (hedging her bets on Strawson's views) neither true nor false—a disjunction that can be captured by the claim that moral utterances are all untrue. (See Dreier, this volume, for possible problems with this taxonomy.)

This way of distinguishing the error theorist from the noncognitivist also reveals what is mistaken about the widespread (though, in truth, fairly innocent) tendency to express the error theory in ontological terms: as the view that X doesn't exist. The problem with this expedient is that noncognitivist also holds that the items in question do not exist (discounting the linguistic permissions that may be achieved via the quasi-realist program). The problem is circumvented if we insist that, when speaking carefully, the error theoretic claim is made of a *discourse* not any cluster of objects, properties, or relations. We are not error theorists about ghosts, we are error theorists about ghost discourse. The common expression “an error theorist about morality” harmlessly fudges this distinction.

To hold that moral judgments are all untrue is not to hold that every sentence containing a moral term is untrue. The atheist doesn't think that every sentence involving the count noun “god” or the proper noun “God” is untrue. Consider “No gods exist” or “Augustine believed in God.” Rather, the error theorist focuses on a proper subset of sentences containing the problematic terms: those that seem to imply or presuppose the instantiation of a moral property. “Stealing pears is morally wrong” will be such a sentence; “Augustine believed that stealing pears is morally wrong” will not be. (See Pigden, this volume.)

Not only is endorsing a moral error theory consistent with the continued use of moral terms (as in “Nothing is morally wrong”), it is even consistent with the continued use of atomic moral claims (such as “Stealing pears is morally wrong”). It is typically assumed that the moral error theorist must be a moral *eliminativist*: advocating the abolition of all atomic moral sentences. But in fact what the error theorist decides to *do* with the erroneous moral language is a matter logically independent of the truth of the moral error theory. Perhaps the moral error theorist will carry on asserting moral judgments although she believes none of them—in which case she will be lying to her audience (assuming her audience consists of moral believers). But if lying is a fault only in a *moral* sense, then the moral error theorist may remain unperturbed by this state of affairs. Or perhaps the moral error theorist carries on uttering moral sentences but finds some way of removing assertoric force from these utterances, in which case she need not be committing a moral or epistemological sin any more than does an actor reciting the lines of a play. The error theorist who advocates maintaining moral language in this way is endorsing a kind of *fictionalism* (a view which is further described towards the end of this introduction).

Although one could be a moral error theorist *by implication*—either because one endorses a radical global error theory (thus being skeptical of morality along with modality, colors, other minds, cats and dogs, etc.), or because one endorses an error theory about all normative phenomena—typically the moral error theorist thinks that there is something *especially* problematic about morality, and does not harbor the same doubts about normativity in general. The moral error theorist usually allows that

we can still deliberate about how to act, she thinks that we can still make sense of actions harming or advancing our own welfare (and others' welfare), and hence she thinks that we can continue to make sense of various kinds of non-moral "ought"s, such as prudential ones. (See Joyce 2007.) Thus we may observe the moral error theorist assert a claim like "One ought not harm others," adding that it is not a *moral* "ought" that is being employed. (In the same way, an atheist can assert that one ought not covet one's neighbor's wife, so long as it clear that this isn't an "...according to God" prescription.)

There is a certain kind of opponent to the error theory who finds this dubious. If so much normativity is conceded to be non-erroneous (the opponent maintains)—if one can make good sense of practical reasons, prudential norms, altruistic desires, and so forth—then the error theoretic position simply collapses, for these things are the very warp and weft of morality. The opponent might go so far as to say that so long as it is allowed that there are decisions to be made about how we shall live together, then the error theoretic position fails, for to engage in such a decision procedure *is* to endorse a moral point of view.

This dispute concerns the definition of "morality." An opponent may complain that the error theorist's definition is far too restrictive; the error theorist will respond that the opponent's definition is too liberal. We will discuss Mackie's particular way of defining morality below, but it is worth foreshadowing here. When discussing *the point* of morality, Mackie suggests that it is a mechanism for counteracting our limited sympathies (1977, p. 107). However, it seems unlikely that he intends to *define* "morality" by reference to a distinctive subject matter. Rather, what Mackie thinks is distinctive about morality is not its content but rather the unusual nature of its norms: an authoritative normativity that purports to bind agents "from the outside," irrespective of their desires, projects, or interests. (This will be described in more detail later in this introduction, and it is of course a theme that arises repeatedly in the papers in this volume.) Since there is no reason to doubt that a given action might be valued or prescribed by two or more different normative systems at once, it follows that we might not be able to "read off" whether a judgment counts as moral from its subject matter or surface form. Consider a token of the sentence "You must not take the rook." It might express a norm of chess (because taking the rook is an impermissible move), or a norm of prudence (because taking the rook is a poor move and you'd like to win the game), or a norm of etiquette (because taking the rook would be impolite), or even a moral norm (because you've made a non-trivial promise not to take the rook). It depends on the force with which it is uttered, of which the intentions of the speaker are surely an important component. (And, indeed, the speaker may be somewhat undecided, leaving the matter indeterminate.) In any case, because Mackie, like most other moral error theorists, wishes to damn morality while tolerating other forms of normativity, then he must not only convince us that this special kind of practical authority is irredeemably flawed, but also show us that it is not also a characteristic of the kinds of normativity that he endorses.

Even in advance of the outcome of that debate, however, one related point is clear and worth emphasizing: There are no grounds for assuming that the moral error theorist must be a sociopathic cad. The point is particularly worth stressing since much of the opposition to the moral error theory is motivated (we suspect) by an

inchoate practical fear of what might happen should moral skepticism be widely adopted. 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.” And Dr Johnson memorably said of the moral skeptic: “If he does really think that there is no distinction between virtue and vice, why, sir, when he leaves our houses let us count our spoons.” 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; her skepticism does not (in any obvious way) exclude the possibility of her being motivated by compassion, love, and altruism. There are many entirely non-moral considerations that speak against sneaky nastiness against one’s fellows, even when the chips are down.<sup>3</sup> Thus the moral error theorist need not be embarrassed by the common rhetorical trick of asking (in a tone of outraged wonderment) something along the lines of: “*So you don’t think that strangling babies is morally wrong?!*” The best response is: “No, but nor do I think that strangling babies is morally good or morally acceptable either. 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.” In the context of everyday conversation, to deny that there is anything morally wrong with X implies that one thinks that X is morally good or morally permissible—but a conversational context in which radical moral skepticism is live contender is precisely one where that implication breaks down. Attempts to discomfit the error theorist by forcing him to admit that he doesn’t think that there is anything morally wrong with [insert your favorite horrible transgression here] trade on equivocating between these contexts.

The fear that moral skepticism will lead to a breakdown of social cohesion 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. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to assume that morality plays *some* kind of role in motivating prosocial behavior, and thus becoming a moral skeptic can be predicted to have some kind of proportionate impact on one’s motivations. (See West, Garner, this volume.) We think that the starting point for making progress on this matter is the recognition that the cluster of relevant questions—what is the role of moral belief in motivation? what would be the practical impact of removing those beliefs? might some alternative available psychological mechanism(s) serve these ends just as well?—are all *empirical* issues, not to be pronounced upon with any confidence from one’s armchair.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea in *Praeparatio Evangelica*, book 14, c. 313-324 / 1903.

<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.)

*Arguing for a moral error theory*

It is important to keep separate in one's mind the error theoretic view and the arguments that Mackie employs in his attempt to establish that view. Yet again, it is useful to compare the atheist: What it takes to be an atheist is one thing (disbelief in any god); one's grounds for being an atheist are something else. There are many such grounds possible—some more plausible than others—and it is clear that defeating one kind of pro-atheist argument hardly proves the existence of a god. Yet we find in much of the metaethical literature a tendency to assume that exposing the flaws of Mackie's arguments in favor of the moral error theory provides a sufficient basis for the wholesale rejection of moral skepticism. This is not so; Mackie articulates just some of the considerations that might speak in favor of a moral error theory. Nevertheless, it is understandable that opposition to the moral error theoretic position has focused heavily on Mackie's two arguments in favor of that viewpoint: the Argument from Relativity and the Argument from Queerness. Before introducing these arguments, let us consider the strategy of arguing for an error theory in more general terms.

Such an argument typically has two steps: the conceptual and the ontological. First the error theorist may establish that moral discourse is centrally committed to some thesis X (or some theses X, Y, ...,  $n^4$ ). The phrase "centrally committed" is supposed to indicate that to deny X would be to cease to participate competently in that discourse. Imagine a phlogiston theorist who, upon hearing of the success of oxygen theory, claims that his theory has been vindicated; he asserts that he has been talking about oxygen all along but just by a different name. When the important differences between the two substances are pointed out to him (that phlogiston is stored in flammable materials and released during combustion, while oxygen combines from the atmosphere with flammable materials and is destroyed during combustion), he admits that he's had some false beliefs about the nature of the substance in question, but remains adamant that he was still talking about oxygen all along. This seems unacceptable, roughly because the thesis about *being stored and released* is a "central commitment" of phlogiston talk; to deny this thesis with respect to some substance is to cease to talk about *phlogiston*.

The ontological step of the error theorist's argument is to establish that thesis X (whatever it may be) is false. This may be achieved either through *a priori* means (demonstrating X to be incoherent, say), or through *a posteriori* methods (investigating the world and coming to the conclusion that nothing satisfies X). Which method is appropriate depends on the nature of the error that has been attributed to moral discourse. Sometimes the moral error theorist will hold that there is something *impossible* or *incoherent* about moral properties, such that the error theory is necessarily true. But it suffices for being an error theorist to hold that the non-instantiation of moral properties is a merely *contingent* affair. Mackie is often interpreted in the former way, but in certain moods (at least) he prefers the latter. In an often-overlooked passage he concedes that if theism were true, then "a kind of

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<sup>4</sup> We will drop this qualification in what follows, simply for brevity. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the moral error theorist might accuse moral discourse of a number of faults—any one of which would be insufficient to ground an error theory, but the sum total of which is sufficient.

objective ethical prescriptivity could be introduced” (1977, p. 48). Though an avowed atheist, Mackie did not, apparently, maintain that theism is *necessarily* false, and thus on the basis of this passage we must conclude that he took the moral error theory to be only contingently true.

The two steps of the error theoretic argument produce two kinds of opposition: the “concessive” response and the “head-on” response. The challenger may concede that the putatively defective attribute that the error theorist assigns to morality really is irredeemably defective, but deny that this attribute is an essential component of morality; a normative framework stripped of the troublesome element will still count as a morality. Alternatively, opponents may accept that the putatively defective attribute is a non-negotiable component of anything deserving the name “morality,” but deny that it really is problematic; they embrace the challenge head-on of making sense of the *prima facie* puzzling aspect. So, for example, if the error theorist is claiming that moral properties require a kind of pure autonomy which the universe does not supply, then one type of opponent will insist that morality requires nothing of the sort, while another will insist that the universe does indeed contain such autonomy. The error theorist must be prepared to defend herself on both fronts.

Mackie offers two arguments for his metaethical position. The first, the Argument from Relativity (often more perspicaciously referred to as “the Argument from Disagreement”), begins with an empirical observation: that there is an enormous amount of variation in moral views, and that moral disagreements often seem unusually intractable. Mackie argues that the best explanation of these phenomena is that moral judgments “reflect adherence to and participation in different ways of life” (1977, p. 36). This, at least, is a better explanation than the hypothesis that there is a realm of objective moral facts to which some cultures have inferior epistemic access than others. The example he uses is of two cultures’ divergent moral views regarding monogamy. Is it really plausible, he asks, that one culture enjoys access to the moral facts regarding marital arrangements whereas the other lacks that access? Isn’t it much more likely that monogamy happened to develop in one culture but not in the other (for whatever cultural or anthropological reasons), and that the respective moral views emerged *as a result*?

Opposition to the Argument from Relativity can, broadly speaking, take two forms. First, one might deny the empirical premise, arguing that moral disagreement is not really as widespread as it is often made out to be, or at least arguing that much of the conspicuous disagreement masks extensive moral *agreement* at a deeper level pertaining to more fundamental moral principles. Mackie makes some brief remarks in response to this argument (1977, p. 37). Second, one might accept the phenomenon of moral disagreement at face value but deny that the best explanation of this favors the error theory. Often both strategies are deployed side by side.

Mackie’s second skeptical argument, from Queerness, has two strands: one metaphysical and one epistemological. The first states that our conception of a moral property is essentially one of a very unusual kind of property, such that countenancing its instantiation requires us to posit in the world “qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe” (1977, p. 38). The second states that in order to track such weird properties we would need “some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary

ways of knowing everything else” (ibid.). These are not independent arguments, since we are forced to posit weird epistemological equipment only if it has already been established that the properties in question are weird. Thus really it is the metaphysical strand of the Argument from Queerness that is load bearing.

The Argument from Queerness may be taken to refer to Mackie’s specific version or may be considered in a generic sense. In the generic sense, whenever one argues (A) that morality is centrally committed to some thesis X, and (B) that X is bizarre, ontologically profligate, or just too far-fetched to be taken seriously, etc., then one has presented a kind of Argument from Queerness. (Arguments for the moral error theory need not take this form; one might, for example, simply discover that X is empirically false.) This is generic since “X” could denote any of an open-ended range of options. But even understanding the Argument from Queerness in a non-generic sense is no straightforward matter, since it is not entirely clear what Mackie puts in place of “X.”

Mackie says that for moral properties to exist would require the existence of “objective values” and “objective prescriptions,” and it is evidently these values and prescriptions that he finds metaphysically queer. He claims that in denying the existence of such values he is denying that any “categorically imperative element is objectively valid” (1977, p. 29). A categorical imperative is an imperative (“Do  $\phi$ ”) that is applied to a subject irrespective of that person’s ends. It is to be contrasted with a hypothetical imperative, which does depend on a person’s ends. Thus “Go to bed now” is usually understood to be tacitly conditional, depending on something like “...if you want to get a decent night’s sleep.” If it turns out that the person lacks this desire (and any other desire that promises to be satisfied by following the advice), then the imperative should be withdrawn. By contrast, the categorical imperative “Don’t murder children” cannot be begged off by the addressee explaining that he really enjoys murdering children, that he lacks any desires that will be satisfied if the imperative is obeyed; it is not a *piece of advice* at all. Note that it does not appear to be categorical imperatives *per se* that trouble Mackie, but categorical imperatives that purport to be “objectively valid.” Quite what he means by this restriction, however, remains the subject of debate.

He gives two concrete illustrations of what he has in mind—of what the world would have to be like in order for these putatively weird moral properties to be instantiated. First, he mentions Plato’s account of the Form of the Good, which is such that the mere comprehension of the fact that something participates in the Form (i.e., is good) somehow automatically engages the motivation to seek that thing. The Good, for Plato, has a kind of magical magnetism built into it. Second, Mackie mentions Samuel Clarke, who in the early 18th century argued for (in Mackie’s words) “necessary relations of fitness between situations and actions, so that a situation would have a demand for such-and-such an action somehow built into it” (1977, p. 40). The fact that these two illustrations are subtly but importantly different is responsible for at least some of the confusion surrounding the putative source of queerness. The Plato example suggests that the weirdness resides in properties the recognition of which *compels* motivation; the Clarke example suggests that the weirdness resides in properties that *demand* action (and thus motivation). The latter is arguably the more charitable interpretation, and also seems to fit better with comments made elsewhere by Mackie concerning the role of practical *reasons* in the

Argument from Queerness. (See Garner 1990; though compare Sinnott-Armstrong, this volume.) He writes that “to say that [objective prescriptions] are intrinsically action-guiding [which is one way Mackie sometimes describes the queerness whose existence he is denying] is to say that the reasons that they give for doing or for not doing something are independent of that agent’s desires or purposes” (Mackie 1982, p. 115).

It would make sense if Mackie were, then, simply to deny the existence of such “desire-transcendent” reasons (in the vein of Williams 1981); but his position is characteristically more nuanced than this. He allows that we often legitimately employ talk of reasons regarding persons who have no desires that will be satisfied by performing the action in question. If another individual is suffering, for example, and there is some course of action I can take to relieve that suffering, then “it would be natural,” Mackie says, to claim that these sufferings “constitute some reason ... independent of any desire that I now have to help these other people” (1977, pp. 78-9). Though Mackie doesn’t attempt to discredit appeals to such desire-transcendent reasons, what he does insist on is that such reasons talk is made legitimate only by the presence of an *institution*: What allows the transition from “There is a stranger writhing in agony before me” to “I have a reason to help” is a cluster of institutional facts, not brute facts. Examples of institutions, given by Mackie, include the rules of chess, social practices such as promising, and the thoughts and behaviors associated with the idea of a person’s identity persisting through time. Such institutions have rules of conduct which guide the behavior and speech of adherents, and transgressions of which are condemned. Importantly, such requirements “are constituted by human thought, behaviour, feelings, and attitudes” (1977, p. 81), and thus any such requirements are, in a central sense, *mind-dependent*. This, perhaps, provides insight into why Mackie objects not to categorical imperatives *per se*, but to *objective* categorical imperatives: It is categorical imperatives that profess to transcend all institutions, that purport to depend for their legitimacy on “requirements which simply are there, in the nature of things” (1977, p. 59), that are singled out as erroneous. As with categorical imperatives, so with reasons: It may not be false to claim “Anyone has a reason to ease the suffering of others,” but its truth is guaranteed only by invoking an institutional way of speaking—an institution of which one may *or may not* be an adherent. (Mackie writes that one is never “logically committed” to offer allegiance to an institution.) It is only when such a reason claim purports to transcend all institutions—when it is imbued with ambitions of objectivity—that it oversteps the mark. In light of these observations, the error theory arises because (Mackie thinks) moral discourse is pervaded through and through with aspirations to robust, institution-transcendent objectivity.

### *Preview of this book*

In 2007, to mark the 30th anniversary of the publication of Mackie’s *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, we edited a special issue of the journal *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* in which six papers were presented. The one element of that project with which we were disappointed was its modest length. We therefore decided to have another run at the project, this time as a full-length anthology. We here reproduce the

six original papers (Burgess, Demetriou and Oddie, Garner, Loeb, Phillips, and Pigden), plus five more invited contributions, and two additional papers from the editors. We believe that the rich and varied result indicates the enormously fruitful influence that Mackie's work continues to have on contemporary metaethics.

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. Publication had to wait until the 2007 special issue of *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, by which time, of course, certain anachronisms of terminology had become apparent (e.g., a seemingly odd use of "cognitivism") and many illustrative examples (e.g., references to Nixon and Jackie Onassis) had become charmingly dated. Despite these extrinsic qualities—which, in our opinion, add to the "time capsule" appeal of the paper—the case that Burgess develops remains highly relevant to the modern debate, so much so that we judge that whatever made it fitting to open that special issue with Burgess' paper provides warrant for doing so again.

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.

There follow three papers that can be loosely grouped as attempts to *analyze* Mackie's argument or the status of its conclusion. (Of course, all papers in this collection do this to a certain extent; it's a matter of focus.)

Richard Joyce is interested in the logical relation between Mackie's skepticism and Mackie's "objectification thesis": the idea that moral judgments are the result of our having "projected" our affective attitudes onto our experience of the world. Rather than just being an explanation for where this huge flaw in human moral thinking comes from (for the curious, as it were), the objectification thesis plays an important live role in Mackie's case for moral skepticism. Though he has defended moral skepticism on several occasions before, Joyce's position here is officially neutral; his objective is to understand the argument rather than advocate it.

So too with the next paper, from Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. Most modern commentators share the view that some thesis or other going by the name "internalism" must play some kind of important role in Mackie's argument for moral skepticism; yet opinions differ as to how most properly to formulate this thesis—both with regard to Mackie's intentions and concerning the construction of the best

argument for moral skepticism. Sinnott-Armstrong draws attention to the many variables hidden in “internalism” and proceeds to tease apart an almost-bewildering array of internalist theses. Many of these are rejected as far-fetched or as not serving Mackie’s ambitions, and in doing so Sinnott-Armstrong homes in on those theses that might be both defensible and useful for Mackie.

Jamie Dreier’s opinion is considerably less sympathetic towards the moral error theory, but nevertheless the principal goals of his paper are largely neutral. He first presents the jaw-dropping claim that Mackie was in fact a moral *realist*, and then spends most of the paper trying to convince us of this startling contention. Dreier’s case begins with the recognition that the rise of quasi-realism and minimalist accounts of such notions as *truth*, *property*, and *assertion* have made it increasingly difficult, in recent decades, to distinguish the moral antirealist from the realist. Dreier offers a new way of drawing the boundary, pertaining to whether, in our attempts to explain philosophical puzzles surrounding morality, we look to properties in the world (as the realists think) or look to moral concepts and the relations among them (as the anti-realists think). The surprising outcome is that when the boundary is drawn using this criterion, Mackie’s view seems to come out as *realist* (though this need not be true of the moral error theorist in general).

The fifth and sixth papers of the anthology return to the actively supportive attitude towards the moral error theory that was evident in Burgess and Pigden.

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?

Following Phillips’ and Loeb’s essentially pro-Mackie stance come four contributions from the opposition—from Michael Smith, David Copp, Simon Kirchin, and Caroline West.

Both Smith and Copp respond to Mackie’s Argument from Queerness in what was described earlier as a “head-on” manner: They attempt to show that objective prescriptions are not mysterious within a naturalistic framework, after all.

Smith argues that Mackie’s moral skepticism would be defused if we were able to make sense of “ends that are absolutely prescribed by reason.” He outlines several attempts to provide the goods, settling ultimately (though tentatively) on the view that there may be certain desires the having of which is constitutive of being rational, and, thus, Mackie’s challenge is answerable.

Like Smith, Copp investigates the possibility of opposing Mackie “head-on” by making sense of actions prescribed by reason, actions that it would be irrational to refrain from performing. Copp maintains that it is only if one comes to the puzzle with an instrumentalist theory of practical rationality in hand that such actions seem so problematic; but such a theory is strictly optional. He uses his “society-centered theory” of moral properties as an illustration of a kind of moral naturalism that (A) provides reasons for actions that it would be irrational to ignore, but (B) does not involve any dubious metaphysical excesses.

Kirchin’s opposition to the Argument from Queerness can, by contrast, be classified as of the “concessive” type. Perhaps objective prescriptions of the kind outlined by Mackie would be too weird to countenance, but who says that ordinary moral discourse is committed to *that*? Kirchin argues that moral discourse is in reality a messy business, with speakers’ commitments far more nebulous, inchoate, and varied than the error theorist typically acknowledges. But this very messiness counts against the plausibility of the error theory, since it counts against the likelihood of our locating “non-negotiable moral commitments” which can then be successfully charged with error.

West’s position also makes limited concessions to Mackie. She agrees with Mackie’s (apparent) claim that moral discourse is committed to some thesis of internalism, and she thinks that the internalism in question is untenable. As evidence for this commitment, she explores several pragmatic uses to which we put our morality (why do we have it at all?), explaining how a belief in internalism would be crucial for each practical purpose. But if we really are in such a predicament, then how should we proceed? West outlines several options, without firmly taking sides. At least one of these options concedes the whole game to the error theorist (fictionalism), whereas others hope to resurrect a kind of moral realism from the situation. It is on the strength of her sympathetic description of a “revisionary moral realism” that we categorize West’s paper as charting a route for the concessive opponent to the error theory. Though morality may heretofore have committed us to some strong internalist thesis—a thesis that is false—it is possible that this commitment was never “non-negotiable”: perhaps a weakened internalism can be embraced in good faith while still underwriting enough of the pragmatic purposes to count literally as a (revised) *morality*.

While the latter sections of West’s paper address the question of how we might proceed if the error theorist turns out to be largely correct, the final two contributions of this collection deal entirely with the aftermath of a triumphant moral error theory. 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 gleefully 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. To suppose that this somehow undermines the possibility of the moral error theory being true is to commit an *ad hominem* fallacy.) 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 and thus not violating any epistemic norms.<sup>5</sup> 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 thirteenth and final paper of this issue, Richard Garner—a firm supporter of moral skepticism—puts the case for abolitionism most forcefully, reminding us of the reservations that Mackie himself had about the institution of morality (voiced not in *Ethics* but in *Hume's Moral Theory* of a few years later). 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.

— Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin

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<sup>5</sup> The kind of fictionalism being described here is *revolutionary* and *noncognitivist*. In being revolutionary it contrasts with hermeneutic fictionalism, according to which we *are already* doing something like engaging with a fiction when we make moral judgments. In being noncognitivist it contrasts with cognitivist fictionalism, according to which moral judgments are truth-evaluable assertions whose content concerns some fiction (e.g., "X is morally wrong" = "According to fiction F, X is morally wrong").

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