The Moral Error Theory Defended

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Almost everyone appears to believe that we face a world of objective facts—both facts about what there is and facts about what there ought to be. These beliefs are embraced without a second (or even a first) thought by ordinary users of moral language, and they are no less popular among moral philosophers, who are often more interested in discussing some theory about what is right or good than they are in asking whether anything is. Proponents of **the moral error theory** *do* ask whether anything is right or good, and by answering "No," they reject the very the idea that there are moral values, prohibitions, requirements, or rights that are "objective," or "real," or independent of what happens in human brains.

After locating the moral error theory in relation to other metaethical positions and asking what we can learn from "moral experience," I will revisit the two arguments John Mackie produced to support his claim that "there are no objective values," **the argument from relativity** and **the argument from queerness**. My discussion of these arguments will also address a question that moralists and moral philosophers are fond of asking: "How could so many people be wrong about something as important and familiar as morality?" Following the lead of Hume and Mackie, I claim that the answer to this question involves (among other factors) **projection** or **objectification**, and that, despite the popularity of the idea that we *see* morality as objective, objectification is more verbal than visual. Even if facts about our "moral experience" place the burden of proof on the error theorist (and they may not), that burden can be met. After I deal with a few final criticisms of the moral error theory, I raise the question of what we might *want* to do, and what we might *be able* to do, if we discover that we have come to share the skepticism of the moral error theorist.

1. The Moral Error Theory. John Mackie defended his moral error theory in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977) and in *Hume's Moral Theory* (1980).[1] Spinoza, Russell, perhaps Nietzsche, and assorted but unnamed free thinkers and skeptics throughout history have entertained the thought that morality may be a big mistake, but that thought has rarely been welcomed with open minds. In a 1986 survey of the state of the art, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord characterized **moral realism** as a combination of **cognitivism** (moral claims, "when literally construed, are literally true or false") and a **success theory** (some of those claims are literally true). A **moral error theory** is one form of **moral *anti*-realism**; it combines cognitivism with a **failure theory**, the belief that moral claims, "despite their being truth-valued, are none of them true (say, because they all share a false presupposition)." [2] The other form of moral anti-realism is **non-cognitivism**, the view that since "in using moral

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[1] John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, London, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977 and *Hume's Moral Theory*, Routledge, 1980.

[2] Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "The Many Moral Realisms." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* **24** (1986), Supplement, p. 3. He refers here to moral "claims," by which he seems to mean what others mean when they speak of moral judgments, assertions, or statements. Cognitivism and non-cognitivism are often called "descriptivism" and "non-descriptivism." Non-cognitivism is sometimes called "expressivism." The phrases 'literally construed' and literally true' leave out those "definists" who offer imaginative definitions of troublesome evaluative terms.

language we don't ascribe moral properties to people, actions, or institutions," the question of truth and falsity doesn't even arise.[3]

According to Mackie's error theory, moral claims are widely understood to be both objective and prescriptive.[4] An **objective** claim is a claim about the way the world is, one that is made true or false by the world, not by what people think about the world. An objective fact is a fact sitting there waiting to be discovered. If it is an objective fact that killing for amusement is wrong, then killing for amusement would remain wrong even in societies that tolerated or encouraged it.

To say that a claim is **prescriptive** is to say that it is a claim *on* us, not a claim *about* us, or about anything. A prescription prescribes—it tells us what to do, not what is true. If I say: "Get rid of capital punishment," this is what *I* am prescribing; it is *my* personal demand. But when I say "Capital punishment is morally wrong," I claim that there is some independent demand for its end, an objective prescription (or proscription) issued not by me, or by any person, or Person, or set of persons, but by Reason, or Nature, or some other objective source. The error theorist says that since demands and prescriptions only arise when people demand and prescribe, no prescriptions or demands could ever be objective.[5]

Mackie called his view "moral skepticism," but he was unskeptical enough to open his book with the "dogmatic" assertion that "there are no objective values." Ian Hinckfuss, another error theorist, wrote that there are no moral obligations to be known, and, even if there were, we are not possessed of the intuitive apparatus needed to apprehend them." He called this view "moral nihilism" and defined a moral nihilist as "one who believes that all moral statements . . . are false." After distinguishing between "objective values" and "subjective values," he added that "by 'moral nihilism' I shall therefore mean the belief that there are no objective moral values."[6]

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[3] *Ibid*., p. 5. This taxonomy is simple but helpful. Theories have multiplied like rabbits and so have their designations, but it may do for now to say that the three positions we are comparing claim that moral judgments are sometimes true, always false, or never either. There are so many variations because philosophers are congenitally unwilling to adopt the exact beliefs, or the terminology, of their predecessors, and because moral philosophers will claim or do almost anything to be able to say that some moral judgments can be true. Some even offer their own definitions of the word 'true'. In "Metaethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism" (*Philosophical Perspectives, 18, Ethics*, 2004), James Drier explains how things have gotten out of hand.

[4] Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 35.

[5] At one point Mackie remarks that "if the requisite theological doctrine could be defended," and he did not think that it could be, we might be able to defend "a kind of objective ethical prescriptivity." (*Ethics*, p. 48) This is far from obvious. Even God only supplies a most unusual subjective source (or Subjective source) of value or obligation.

[6] Ian Hinckfuss, "The Moral Society, its Structure and Effects," *Discussion Papers in Environmental Philosophy:* Canberra: Australian National University,1987, p. 1, p. 4, and p. 8. As I have just mentioned, "There are no objective values" are the opening words of Mackie's 1977 book defending the error theory.

In a 1992 survey of ethics at the end of the century, Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton observed that work done by Mackie and by Gilbert Harman (who is also an anti-realist but not an error theorist), makes certain questions about the semantic, epistemic, metaphysical, and practical status of morality "hard to ignore." Hard perhaps, but not impossible, because, as the three authors admit, they give "scant or no attention" to "approaches to metaethics based on blanket irrealism or antirealism." They mention this once more when they note that Mackie's error theory is to be one of those "passed over in what follows."[7]

For much of the rest of the century, irrealism, anti-realism, nihilism, or the error theory by several other names, was routinely "passed over" by most moral philosophers, and attacked by almost all the others. For example David Brink is a *naturalist* moral realist and Russ Shafer-Landu is a *non-naturalist* moral realist.[8] Brink attacks non-cognitivism and non-naturalism, and Shafer-Landu attacks non-cognitivism and naturalism. In all this, the error theory is barely mentioned, but it is the error theorist who will remind us that neither moral realists nor non-cognitivists can "accommodate" each others' insights. As Mackie pointed out, "both naturalist and non-cognitive analyses leave out the apparent authority of ethics, the one by excluding the categorically imperative aspect, the other the claim to truth."[9]

In *this* century, the error theory has gained attention, sophistication, adherents and critics. Anthologies are now more likely to include a selection from Mackie's 1977 book, and ethics textbooks have begun to mention the error theory (by whatever name) as one of those bugaboos that, like relativism, skepticism, and egoism, must be dispatched before turning to the usual views about what is really right or really good—and to the usual ways to refute them.[10]

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[7] Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, "Toward *fin de siècle* Ethics: Some Trends." *The Philosophical Review* **101** (January, 1992). See footnote 24 on p. 124 and footnote 35 on p. 131. One exception to this *fin de siècle* dismissal of the error theory was the publication in 1987 of *The Moral Society, its Structure and Effects* by Hinckfuss.

[8] A naturalist moral realist thinks that moral properties are natural properties and a non-naturalist moral realist thinks that moral properties are nonnatural properties.

[9] Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 33. Shafer-Landau, in *Moral Realism: A Defense* (Oxford, 2003), refers to his admittedly less than decisive criticism of ethical naturalism and his case against non-cognitivism, and then remarks that if we add in his defense of non-naturalism, that "should leave us at least provisionally convinced of non-naturalism's merits." (p. 115) This ignores the error theory, as does a similar passage on p. 18. Shafer-Landau was aware of Mackie's error theory, but he just didn't invite it to the argument, so concerned was he with his main rivals. In Brink's *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge, 1989) the error theory is barely mentioned and the opponents of concern are non-cognitivists and nonnaturalists. David McNaughton, in *Moral Vision* (Blackwell, 1988), considers his true enemies to be the naturalist and the non-cognitivist, and he classifies Mackie, wrongly, as a non-cognitivist (p. 88).

[10] Chapter 1 of Mackie's *Ethics* was included in Sayre-McCord, *Essays on Moral Realism* (Cornell, 1988), and in Louis Pojman's 1989 edition of *Ethical Theory: Classical and*

In his 2001 book, *The Myth of Morality*, Richard Joyce offered the first thorough discussion of the moral error theory since the books by Mackie and Hinckfuss.[11] Like Mackie, Joyce is an error theorist who believes that moral judgments are false but too useful to abandon.[12] This position is called **moral fictionalism**, and those few moral error theorists who believe that morality is overrated and who encourage us to abandon moralizing are called **moral abolitionists**.[13]

2. Making Moral Judgments. The jumping-off place for metaethicists is a question: "What is really going on when people make moral judgments?" To ask this is to ask what practicing moralists say, and what, in saying what they say, they are thinking, intending, and achieving. All the parties to the disputes about these matters insist that we pay close attention to "genuine moral interactions," but when they turn their gaze in that direction they often see different things, and even when they see the same thing, they manage to draw different conclusions.

a. The Words and Deeds of the Moralists. There may be some things about the "phenomena" of moralizing on which we can all agree. Moral claims are framed in declarative sentences, and delivered as statements about the way things are. When a moralizing moralist says "X is good" or "A is right," we can usually assume that he or she has certain intentions, among which is the intention to go on record about the value of X or the propriety of A. Someone with such an intention who utters those words in normal conditions does assert something that he or she believes, or at least presents himself or herself as believing.[14]

Contemporary Readings. (Wadsworth). The 1988 edition of *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, an anthology by Steven Cahn and Peter Markie, contained nothing by Mackie, but the 2009 edition contains a brief selection from his *Ethics*. The most recent edition of *The Right Thing to Do* (edited by Rachels and Rachels) *opens* with a selection from Mackie's *Ethics*.

[11] Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002. See his more recent *The Evolution of Morality*, MIT Press, 2006.

[12] Joyce would prefer to say that moral judgments are "untrue" because of technical points about assertion and presupposition. See the introduction to *A World Without Values* edited by Joyce and Simon Kirchen, Springer, 2010, p. xii.

[13] Or less felicitously, "moral eliminativists." This most extreme move for the error theorist has received the same welcome the error theory once enjoyed. It is usually "passed over," and sometimes mentioned as a distasteful pill error theorists might have to swallow. In an essay on the error theory ("Moral Error Theory," *Aristotelian Soc.* Jan 2004), Hallvard Lillehammer asks if it makes sense to continue with moral thought once the error theory is granted. He mentions three options: renounce moral thought (Hinckfuss), moralize as a "constructive relativist," which is a kind of naturalist (Harman), or proceed as a moral fictionalist (Joyce), and then he spends his time discussing the second two options. On the matter of renouncing morality, he remarks *only* that history suggests that it is based on excess optimism. (98)

[14] Terence Cuneo, "Saying what we Mean: An Argument against Expressivism," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Vol. 1* (ed.) Russ Shafer-Landau, 2006. Cuneo characterizes

Ordinary moralists have not attended to the uses of moral language with the same dedication as moral philosophers, but they do speak and behave as if they think of the demands of morality as independent of the preferences or agreements of any one person or group. They expect and require compliance with the requirements and prohibitions of morality, even from themselves; and they argue about what is right and wrong just as they do when they disagree about straightforward matters of fact. When Gallup pollsters asked a group of pollees if sex between an unmarried man and woman is "morally acceptable or morally wrong," 53% said it is morally acceptable and 42% said it is morally wrong.[15] Those who answered either way almost certainly understood that they were not being invited to express their approval or disapproval of unmarried sex, to say whether unmarried sex is forbidden by whatever standards they embrace, or to speculate about whether unmarried sex would be frowned upon by someone who knew everything there was to know, reasoned logically, and had no desires. They were asked if unmarried sex is morally wrong or morally acceptable, and that is the question they answered.

There are many reasons to think that when we make moral judgments we are trying to say true things—that is what we think we are doing, it is what we say we are doing, it is what we intend to do, and it is what we are usually understood to be doing. An entire community, or even everyone on the planet, can be mistaken about some universally accepted belief, but it makes no sense to say that everyone in a community could be mistaken about the rules of their language or the meanings or conventional uses of their words.[16] When we learned to form descriptive sentences, we did not learn to discriminate the "factual" from the "normative." As Brink observes, "we begin as (tacit) cognitivists and realists about ethics."[17]

The non-cognitivist, who lives by the distinction between the factual and the normative, makes three important observations: (i) when we make a moral judgment we are often under the influence of strong feelings and desires, (ii) when we make a moral judgment we often perform one or more non-assertive speech acts, and (iii) when we make a moral judgment we are often trying to influence attitudes and behavior. The cognitivist can agree with each of these observations because it is easy to feel, do, and intend these things while making a statement attributing objective value to something or objective moral obligations to someone. What the cognitivist emphasizes is that no matter what other speech acts may be in the offing, the number, authority, and intentions of practicing moralists is sufficient to guarantee that moral judgments are almost always attempts to make true statements about moral facts. The error theorist is a cognitivist who only adds that there *are* no moral facts.

> the expressivist's "guiding rationale" as a dedication to "avoid an error theoretic account of ordinary thought and discourse." He argues that expressivist critics of the error theory neglect or deny much of what we have come to understand about speech-acts and about the role of the illocutionary act intentions of speakers. (pp. 38-39)

[15] http://www.gallup.com/content/login.aspx?ci=3163

[16] If everyone thought 'cow' meant 'horse', it would. Sadly, the expression 'begs the question' is well on the way to meaning 'raises the question' and there is no way to stop it.

[17] David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, p. 23.

Facts about what moralists actually say when they moralize are relatively easy to gather. Facts about what they believe and intend are less accessible, but still open to investigation. Something else that is open to investigation is the behavior of those who are under the influence of morality. Whatever the content of our moral opinions, belief in our moral rectitude fills us with confidence and makes it easier for us to talk ourselves into coercing others to act as we think they ought, and to punish them when they do not. The best evidence that we believe that our moral judgments are objectively true and binding may be our willingness to move heaven and earth to enforce the many prohibitions and requirements we have placed on ourselves and others.

b. The Experience of the Moralists. So far we have focused on what moralists say and do. Linguistic and behavioral evidence appear to support cognitivism, but there may be facts about moral experience that can be brought in to help cognitivists decide between a success theory and an error theory. Those who think that moral experience itself can be offered as evidence for the truth of moral objectivity can be found claiming that that "moral obligations are *felt* as something imposed from a source external to and independent of the agent having the experience," and this leads them to "talk of recognizing moral obligations" and of "observing value in the world."[18]

David McNaughton, who actually deploys a version of this "argument from moral experience," starts from the assumption that "a moral demand is experienced as something to which we must conform."[19] Critics of these arguments point out that the feeling that we *must* do something may be an inclination, a compulsion, or anything in between. Unnamed raw feelings lend no support to moral objectivity, but when our impulses and reservations have been identified, cultivated, and their evolution and function explained by those who study them, it becomes less and less likely that they are responses to the demands of a morally biased universe.

In "The Argument from Moral Experience," Don Loeb maintains that our moral experience is not as uniform as those who think that we "experience morality as a realm of fact" appear to believe. He does not try to show that we don't experience morality in this way, but he argues that moral experience offers less support for moral objectivism than moral realists (and anti-realists like Mackie) suppose. He says that "even if moral experience *were* to display morality as a realm of fact (or presuppose that it is), that would not in itself support objectivism."[20] There might, after all, be a very good anti-objectivist explanation for that phenomenon.

In "Variability and Moral Phenomenology," Michael B. Gill argues that the great variety of what is included under the heading of "moral experience" makes it unlikely that phenomenological considerations will support any one moral theory over the others. This is because "how people experience morality is often infected by their theoretical beliefs or prior

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[18] For these characterizations of the beliefs and the language of those who argue from moral experience see Mark Timmons*, Morality without Foundations*, Oxford, 1999, p. 75.

[19] David McNaughton, *Moral Vision*, 1988, Blackwell, pp. 13, 19, 39, and 48.

[20] Don Loeb, "The Argument from Moral Experience," in Joyce and Kirchin, *A World Without Values*, p. 104.

commitments concerning the nature or origin of morality."[21] A dedicated moral error theorist or a child, for example, would not be likely to count any experience as a perception of goodness, or to think of some urge as a "felt" objective moral obligation.

Moral objectivists who rely on the argument from moral experience will insist that their moral experience results from encounters with objective moral facts and properties. The assignment for error theorists, who believe there are no such facts or properties, is either to find a more plausible explanation for the moral objectivists' moral experiences, or to come up with a way to throw doubt on those very experiences.

Error theorists who want to *explain* moral experience say that those who claim to be perceiving, observing, noticing, apprehending, detecting, or just seeing moral properties are actually experiencing natural (non-moral) properties, but in the process they "project" positive or negative feelings onto whatever they are observing, giving it a distinctive moral aura or coloring.[22]

Error theorists who want to explain moral experience *away* also say that those who believe themselves to have detected detect moral properties are actually experiencing natural (non-moral) properties, but these error theorists add that when people see behavior they have been taught to deplore, they manage to believe (mistakenly) that they have actually experienced the wrongness of the act or the evil of the one who did the deed. They allow that projection may play some role in our moral thinking, but suggest that Hume, Mackie, and Joyce may have been too tolerant of the visual metaphors used by moral objectivists who lean on the argument from moral experience. *Something* is going on when people claim to experience evil or moral obligation, but error theorists who have never experienced anything they would now describe in that way are like skeptics in a group of people who claim to see auras.[23]

But can we really make light of the claim that people "seem to have moral perceptions?" We can if we believe that *seeming* to have a moral perception is no different from having a non-moral perception that is embedded in a matrix of beliefs, feelings, and impulses. After being alerted to Bernie Madoff's theft of billions of dollars, we are more likely to notice some of his tell-tale body language and micro-expressions, but this new information

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[21] Michael B. Gill, "Variability and Moral Phenomenology," *Phenom Cogn Sci* (2007). Gill also points out how our moral experiences are influenced by other factors. Similar doubts about the probative value of moral experience are expressed by Simon Kirchen in "Ethical Phenomenology and Metaethics," ETMP, 2003.

[22] In *Moral Vision*, David McNaughton makes heavy use of examples from visual art, where it might be rash to deny that our feelings and beliefs influence our perceptions.

[23] We are reminded of Hume's tactful reaction to those who claim to have detected within themselves a non-corporeal self. He wrote that if any one, "upon serious and unprejudic'd reflection," thinks he has the notion of himself as a simple subject, "I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls himself; tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me." *Treatise*: Book One: Part 4, Section 6.

does not shine a light on some hard-to-detect and impossible-to-define moral quality of wickedness that his victims failed to notice as they were handing him their money.

Moral objectivists who depend on the argument from moral experience often resort to the language of "**seeing as**" to characterize their experience. For example, sincere moralists claim to have *seen* someone *as* wicked, or some behavior *as* morally right or wrong. Wittgenstein made famous a figure that the least artistic among us could draw, and that anyone could easily see as a duck or as a rabbit. But I fear that this and the many other familiar examples of *visual* aspect-shifts are too optical and too well-understood to throw much light on "moral vision."

More to the point is a kind of Gestalt shift discussed by Bernard Rollin, who writes of a hunter giving up hunting after suddenly *seeing* a deer *as* a living thing, and realizing that he was "killing a living thing for amusement, rather than merely innocently participating in a sport."[24] Because it is more conceptual and motivational than visual, this type of Gestalt shift will be of interest to anyone who is suspicious of "moral perceptions." It reminds us that coming to see someone, or some thing, in a new light has little to do with our eyes. Coming to "see" someone as evil is coming to *think* that he or she is evil, which involves making that judgment in words to oneself (and perhaps to others), and accompanying that act with a stream of negative feelings and aversive impulses. What we call "seeing someone as evil" is nothing like seeing the duck/rabbit as a duck. It is not a special way of seeing, but a special way of thinking and talking. Moral vision is more ***saying as*** than ***seeing as***.

c. The Beliefs of the Moralists. If moral experience is personal, variable, interest-guided, theory-laden, and possibly imaginary, then it will be of little use to moral objectivists who hope to place the burden of proof on the error theorist. That is why some moral objectivists base their defense not on the claim that they experience morality as a realm of fact, which is easy to question and doubt, but on the widely accepted **belief** that morality *is* a realm of fact. Unlike feelings, beliefs can be put into words, so perhaps the more public and determinate status of moral beliefs, and broad agreement about what is good, bad, right, and wrong, can be called upon to return the burden of proof to the error theorist, who (by definition) contradicts commonly held moral beliefs and beliefs about morality.

Mackie did admit that the error theory "goes against assumptions ingrained in our thought and built into some of the ways in which language is used," and that "since it conflicts with what is sometimes called common sense, it needs very solid support."[25] What the error theory conflicts with is an assortment of common sense moral *beliefs*, and the main "assumption" Mackie was alluding to is the assumption that some (perhaps many) of those beliefs are objectively true.[26] It was to combat that assumption that Mackie produced his two

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[24] Bernard Rollin, *Animal Rights and Human Morality,* Prometheus, 1981, pp, 44-45.

[25] Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 35.

[26] There is no need to imagine that ordinary moralists will use the same words as the philosophers, or, if they do, that they will use them in the same way. There are many ways to manifest a belief in moral objectivity. No one unfamiliar with Mackie's work would say that moral claims are "objectively prescriptive," but people commonly and frequently speak of *a higher law*, or of *doing the right thing*, or of what everyone *just*

arguments. Loeb may be right to say that he yielded too quickly to the demand to accept the burden of proof, but this will not matter if the arguments succeed at the job for which they were designed.

Joyce similarly suggests that Mackie was under the spell of a conservative principle according to which "the counter-intuitiveness of moral skepticism in itself represents a burden of proof that the error theorist must strive to overcome."[27] He thinks that even if Mackie's arguments from relativity and queerness are effective against the moral objectivist, they do not erase the counter-intuitive nature of the conclusion, and it is in an attempt to deal with that left-over worry that he turns to Mackie's "thesis of objectification."

Before we turn to that thesis, let us reflect on the fact that counter-intuitiveness is a relative notion; a counter-intuitive claim is counter-intuitive *to someone.* The claim that no moral belief is ever true will be counter-intuitive to anyone raised in our society who has never seriously considered its opposite. It will *not* be counter-intuitive to anyone who has discovered the virtues of the moral error theory and been made aware of some of the liabilities of moral objectivism.

According to Joyce's reconstruction of Mackie's strategy, the moral skeptic needs two "lines of reasoning." The first combines the arguments from relativity and queerness and aims to show that "there is something fishy about moral facts." But if moral facts are certifiably fishy, why do people still continue to believe in them, and why did they believe in them in the first place? The second line of reasoning brings in the psychological habit of objectification to explain how "**if there are no objective values people might not only have come to suppose that there are but also persist firmly in that belief.**"[28]

Joyce begins by distinguishing a weak ("minimal") version of the thesis of objectification from a strong one, and by showing that neither version alone is capable of establishing the truth of the error theory. The **strong version** says that

> "our feelings of disapproval and aversion lead us to see the world as containing moral qualities *that it does not really contain*."[29]

and since it is explicitly committed to a denial of moral objectivity, it would be question-begging to use it as a premise in an argument for the error theory. The corresponding **weak version** can be stated in this way:

> our feelings of disapproval and aversion lead us to see the world as containing moral qualities *that it may or may not contain.*

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has to do, and they resist subjectivism and relativism when the matter in question is something about which they care.

[27] Joyce, "Patterns of Objectification," in Joyce and Kirchen, *A World Without Values,* p. 45.

[28] Joyce, "Patterns of Objectification," p. 46, quoting from Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 49.

[29] Joyce, "Patterns of Objectification," p. 43.

This version would also be ineffective at "providing a skeptical conclusion," since it is metaethically neutral.

If the thesis of objectification alone will not provide a skeptical conclusion, what is its role? Joyce reminds us that immediately after offering his arguments from relativity and queerness, Mackie remarked that "considerations of these kinds suggest that it is in the end less paradoxical to reject than to retain the common sense belief in the objectivity of moral values, provided that we can explain how this belief, if it is false, has become established and is so resistant to criticism."[30] Joyce considers the possibility of satisfying this proviso by explaining how our "standing intuitions in favor of morality" are "the result of an unreliable process of formation."[31] This would somehow empower or release Mackie's original two arguments, to which we now turn.

3. The Argument from Relativity. It is clear that Mackie understands the argument from relativity to be an argument to the best explanation, so if we are error theorists in search of the best explanation for widespread moral belief and obstinacy, our search will require us to investigate various accounts of the ways moral objectivists acquire and secure their mistaken moral beliefs.[32] This means that we can't complete the argument from relativity without, in the process, satisfying Mackie's proviso. With this in mind let us look more closely at that argument.

Mackie introduced his argument from relativity by noting "the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community." But he immediately added that "it is not the mere presence of disagreements that tells against the objectivity of morality."[33] We can find as much disagreement and agreement as we want, both within and among cultures, but the argument traces our moral disagreement *and* agreement to our different versions of reality and to our varying feelings, needs, interests, and traditions. We agree about morality and have moral "intuitions" because we have learned our lessons; and we disagree because we haven't all learned the same lessons, and because our interests often conflict.

Critics often treat Mackie's argument from relativity as an inference from actual (or imagined irreconcilable) *disagreement* to the absence of moral objectivity. Russ Shafer-Landau devotes a chapter of his 2004 book, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil*?, to the destruction of an argument he calls "the argument from disagreement," and characterizes as saying that wide and deep moral disagreement among informed and intelligent parties provides "excellent evidence for skepticism."[34] But Mackie's denial of moral objectivity is

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[30] Joyce, "Patterns of Objectification," p. 44, quoting from Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 42.

[31] Joyce, "Patterns of Objectification," p. 46.

[32] For his views on the ubiquity of "arguments to the best explanation" in philosophy, science, and everyday life, see Mackie's remarks in *The Miracle of Theism*. Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 4 – 8.

[33] Mackie, *Ethics,* p. 36.

neither a deduction nor an induction from any amount of disagreement, as he made clear when he said that "it is not the mere presence of disagreements that tells against the objectivity of morality." In fact there will probably always be disagreement about how much moral disagreement there really is. Some moralists even argue that there is already more agreement than disagreement, and insist that there might be more if we could calm our emotions and eliminate bias and factual errors. They may be right, but what makes this issue irrelevant is the fact that the error theorist could be right even if everyone agreed about what is right, and moral realism could be true even if no one realized it. No wonder Mackie was unwilling to rest his case on an argument from *disagreement*.

In the argument from *relativity*, moral disagreement is taken alongside moral agreement, as something to be explained. If we think about it, what we really need to explain is not so much moral agreement and disagreement, as moral belief and disbelief itself. Mackie would have agreed, for he made it clear, more than once, that what *he* hoped to explain was how, "if there are no objective values people might not only have come to suppose that there are but also persist firmly in that belief."

The moral objectivist's explanation of both the supposition and the persistence involves the claim that there are objective, *sui generis*, nonnatural moral properties that we apprehend (visually, rationally, or intuitively). Error theorists think they can improve on this thin and mysterious account of the source of our moral beliefs. They build their explanations on what we have learned about our nature and our history, and on what we know about the effect that propaganda, positive and negative reinforcement, and human credulity can have on what we believe about morality.

Objectification or projection is an important matter, but as I claimed while discussing the argument from moral experience, it is hard to know what people have in mind when they speak of experiencing morality as "a realm of objective fact." Here I will bypass arguments based on moral *experience*, and focus instead on ones that take their clue from moral *beliefs*, and on the fact that most people undoubtedly have them. This will keep our attention on the phenomena that interested Mackie.

If we adapt Joyce's weak version of the thesis of objectification to beliefs, we can form a **strong belief version** of that thesis:

> Our feelings of disapproval and aversion lead us to believe that the world contains moral qualities that it does not really contain.[35]

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[34] Russ Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* Oxford, p. 68. David Brink offers a variation on the argument. He says that "Mackie argues that if moral realism were true, all moral disputes should be resolvable, and since many seem irresolvable, he concludes that moral realism is false." This is not the most charitable interpretation of Mackie's argument. See Brink's "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 62 (1984), 111-125.

[35] By turning our attention from moral experience to moral belief, I am exploiting Joyce's observation that Mackie neglected to distinguish carefully between (1) "the thesis that moral experience is the result of our having objectified affective attitudes (feelings,

The full story of how our moral beliefs take hold is far from simple, so the explanation of any act of objectification will involve more, and reach further back, than our immediate feelings about things. Since objectification does not happen in a vacuum, we can briefly identify some features and factors that help explain our tendency to transform psychological states into moral beliefs. Here then is an **expanded strong belief version** of the thesis of objectification:

> Given our biological makeup and our socialization (which includes our training in language), we develop desires and feelings of disapproval and aversion that cause and support the belief that the world contains moral qualities that it does not really contain.

If we fill this in with some of what we have learned and are learning about the ways our brains and our institutions evolve, we can easily provide an explanation of what we say and believe about morality that puts to shame any alternative account that relies on sensitivity to objectively prescriptive moral obligations or intrinsic values. Here the error theorist can call representatives of all of the human sciences to the witness stand—anthropology, archeology, biology, genetics, history, linguistics, psychology—all of them.[36]

The conclusion of the argument from relativity, then, is that our moral claims and beliefs are **relative** to (are a function of) what we have become, what we have been taught, and what we have come to want and feel. Moral properties and facts drop out of the picture because, like witches, curses, and lucky charms, they play no role in the unfolding of events because they do not exist. What does play a role in the unfolding of events is the *belief* in witches, curses, lucky charms, and moral properties and facts. What the moral error theorist can offer us, then, is a satisfying and continually improving explanation of the causes and the effects of the mistaken *belief* in morality, and an account of the ways in which we have exploited that belief, transmitted it, and shaped it to suit our desires and interests.

4. The Argument from Queerness. Mackie tells us that if objective values existed, they would be "entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe," and they would only be detectable by "some special faculty of moral perception or intuition utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else."[37] By calling moral properties "non-natural," and positing a faculty of moral intuition, G. E. Moore bought into both the metaphysics and the epistemology being attacked here.[38]

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demands, and wants . . .)" and (2) "the thesis that we simply have false beliefs about the objective status of moral properties." ("Patterns of Objectification", p. 11). I claim that the error theorist is better off avoiding (1) and treating the product of objectification or projection to be an occasion-specific moral belief. The *strong* version is warranted here because Mackie's challenge is to explain how belief in morality and moral beliefs, *if they are false*, have become so established and so resistant to criticism.

[36] See Joyce's *The Evolution of Morality*; Daniel Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea,* Simon and Schuster, 1995 (Chapter 16, "On the Origin of Morality"); and Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin, 2006 (Chapter 6, "The Roots of Morality: Why are we Good?").

The moral intuitionist says that even though moral properties are neither definable nor explainable, they apply to us and to our deeds. But if we don't know what they are, how they relate to other properties, or how we come to know of them, then why do we even think that they "apply to us?" They may be "non-natural" properties, but we are natural beings. The proper conclusion of the argument from queerness is that moral properties, because of their hopeless attempt to combine objectivity and prescriptivity and their inaccessibility to normal types of investigation, are too "queer" to be explained, or to be used to explain anything else. Thus the argument from queerness can be seen as an important element in the completed argument from relativity because the queerness of moral facts and properties undermines any explanation that appeals to them.

Mackie's critics sometimes try to answer his charge that moral objectivists are committed to "queer" properties by replying that since reality contains many strange things we cannot explain, moral properties are not disqualified by their peculiarities. This reply would be apt if moral properties were just rare and unusual properties—but to think this is to ignore their special "powers." Unlike plain old facts (*The cat is on the mat*), moral facts prescribe (*You ought to keep the cat off the mat*).

Mackie illustrates what he takes to be one unusual aspect of moral facts by relating them to Plato's Forms. Seeing the form of Rightness, he says, "will not merely tell men what to do, but will ensure that they do it, overruling any contrary inclinations."[39] This "industrial strength" normativity seems powerful enough to strip philosopher kings of their very freedom. "Platonic Rightness," so understood, would be a truly queer property, but so would *any* property that could, when apprehended, take over a person's will and force an action. C. L. Stevenson spoke of the "magnetic" power of moral language to dispose us toward an option being praised; but Mackie is not talking about the power of language to move us, he is, it seems, talking about (the moral objectivist's alleged belief in) a *supermagnetic* property capable of "overruling any contrary inclinations." We certainly know of no properties like this, and it is hard to imagine how any fact or property could exert this kind of hypnotic influence on every (or any) person who came within its field.

Critics of the argument from queerness often admit that any such property would be too bizarre to take seriously, but then they insist that few if any moralists or moral philosophers have ever subscribed to such an oddity. Since this is probably true, Mackie's

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[37] Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 38.

[38] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica,* Cambridge University Press, 1903. Some may think it unfair to drag Moore in at this point, but if we set aside both naturalism and non-cognitivism, intuitionism is what is left; and, if Mackie is right, it does represent more or less the way people think about value and obligation—namely as involving properties we are capable of discerning. He says that "the central thesis of intuitionism is one to which any objectivist view of values is in the end committed: intuitionism merely makes unpalatably plain what other forms of objectivism wrap up." (*Ethics*, p. 38)

[39] Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 24. The ideas (and some of the words) in this and the next three paragraphs first showed up in "On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts" (AJP, 1990), where I discussed Brink's 1984 criticism of motivational internalism and his attack on Mackie's argument from queerness.

choice of this as his example of what is queer about moral properties has offered his critics an easy target.[40]

While the much-debated power of morality to motivate would indeed be peculiar, or perhaps incomprehensible, an even stranger feature than this is sometimes attributed to moral facts. If something is a moral obligation, then it is thought that, in some sense of 'must' compatible with our not doing it, we *must* do it. In general terms, a duty is something we owe, and in non-moral cases the nature of our obligation is usually conventional and easy to explain. Teachers have a contractual duty to meet their classes, letter-carriers a postal duty to deliver the mail, and police officers a sworn duty to protect and serve, but a *moral* duty, should there be such a thing, does not arise from any contract, agreement, or legislation. A moral duty would still be a duty if our institutions were to disappear or to change in radical ways. If protecting the weak and caring for widows and orphans are moral duties, then these are things we are all just required to do.

Philippa Foot, commenting on Kant's idea that reason "commands what ought to happen," explored several ways of expressing the "fugitive thought" that morality binds us, that there are things we *must* do, or *have to* do. But she found nothing standing behind the words, and concluded that there may not be such a form of bondage, and that our belief and our feeling that there is results from education and training. "Perhaps," she suggested, "it makes no sense to say that we 'have to' submit to the moral law, or that morality is 'inescapable' in some special way."[41] It may make no sense to say this, but people continue to say it, and to believe it, and it is this idea that we are all bound by rules that are not of our own making that makes us sitting ducks for arguments from queerness.[42]

The argument from queerness is targeted in a different way by Michael Smith in *The Moral Problem*. Smith's strategy is to counter both the argument from queerness and the argument from relativity by providing an explanation of what it is to say that an act is right that opens the question of rightness to empirical investigation. He says that "to say that an

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[40] I will ignore the vast literature that deals with the extent to which moral beliefs have some motivational power that is independent of what we bring to the table in the way of desires and impulses. One who accepts the institution of morality and believes that morality requires X, will, to some extent, be inclined to do X. But that belief will often be a minor factor in a sea of influences, and occasionally it will count for nothing. If there are no moral facts, then the question of whether the "recognition" of a moral fact motivates is idle.

[41] Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives." In Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 163. See, Richard Joyce, "The Fugitive Thought," *Journal of Value Inquiry* **34**, 2000, 463 – 78.

[42] It has been suggested that moral facts and properties are essentially mysterious, and that it is not fair to ask the error theorist, who doesn't even believe in them, to explain what they are. See Nadeem Hussain, "The Return of Moral Fictionalism," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18, Ethics, 2004, 155 – 156; and Richard Joyce, "The Error in 'The Error in the Error Theory'," forthcoming in *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. Imagine a theist demanding that the atheist explain the nature of God before claiming that God doesn't exist. The first burden of one who makes a claim may be that of explanation.

act of a certain sort in certain circumstances is right is, . . . , to say *inter alia* that there is a normative reason to perform it. And this, in turn, is simply to say that fully rational creatures would desire that such an act be performed in such circumstances. . . ."[43]

After giving his definition of "rightness," Smith asks if Mackie can "really lay a charge of strangeness against rightness, at least as that feature of acts has been analysed here?"[44] Well, Mackie's argument from queerness is indeed nullified if rightness is defined as something that is not queer. But it should be totally clear that this is *not* what we are saying when we say that an act is right. If there were such a thing as the rightness of an act, and if there were any "fully rational creatures," then maybe those creatures could tell when an act was right, and maybe they would desire that those acts be performed—we have no way to know. However, to say *now* that some act is right is not to say that creatures of *any* type do, or would, want it to be performed. In fact, if Smith had managed to talk us into meaning *that*, then rightness would have inherited a new queerness from the definitely queer notion of a fully rational being.

Definitions are frequently presented as accounts of what people actually mean, but it is also possible to offer them for adoption. If enough of us adopt Smith's definition, we will have a new meaning for the claim that some act is "morally right," but then we will not be saying what anyone who used those words today would be saying. More to the point, we are not likely to adopt that definition because most users of moral language would resist *any* definition that turned moral judgments into verdicts about what some imaginary being might desire to happen.

This is not the place to discuss definitions generally, or ones that rely on some notion of an ideal observer. Someone who offers us a definition of one of the major value words ('good', 'right', or 'ought', for example) just might be concerned with clarity and communication, but it is more likely that he or she is trying to secure some dialectical advantage by slipping something past us. Nobody pulls a rabbit out of an empty hat. We can "prove" that God exists by "defining" God as *love*, but all we end up with when we do that is a philosopher's joke. Jeremy Bentham (and G. E. Moore of all people) tried to make utilitarianism true by definition; but, as Moore so wisely quoted in the motto to his *Principia Ethica*: "Everything is what it is, and not another thing." Most definitions offered by moral philosophers are tools for changing the subject from something the definer doesn't want to talk about to something the definer does want to talk about.[45] Redefinitions of 'rightness' (or any other evaluative word) in terms of empirically respectable and evaluatively neutral concepts have no relevance to either of Mackie's arguments, to which we can now return.

5. Projection/Objectification. According to the argument from relativity, supplemented by the argument from queerness, the best explanation of our moral beliefs and habits will not mention anything as queer as objective moral facts and properties. But it

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[43] Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*, Blackwell, 1994, p. 200.

[44] Smith, p. 200.

[45] Philosophers have a habit of using the word 'naturalism' to refer to metaethical theories that offer definitions of crucial moral terms. 'Definism' is a better term. For example, it allows us to distinguish between "naturalistic definism" and "supernaturalistic definism." There are already far too many uses for the word 'naturalism'.

will certainly mention "objectification" or "projection," if that is what we call the process by which we turn attitudes and feelings into moral beliefs.

Sometimes we experience a suite of positive or negative feelings about some event we have observed. Because of what and who we are, and what we have been taught to think and say, those feelings can become part of a complex of causes and conditions that lead us to think and speak as we would if we had somehow apprehended objective moral properties. Moral objectivists think that an experience of a moral property (the evil of the intention or the wrongness of the deed) is what elicits their moral sentiment, but it is more likely (or, as Mackie would say, less paradoxical to think) that it is their sentiment that gives rise to the belief that they have experienced a moral property.

Hume said that reason "discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution," while "taste . . . has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation."[46] That new creation is the "vice," the "wickedness," the "wrongness." But if I am right, when we "stain" an object, person, or act with colors borrowed from our sentiment, the item doesn't present us with a different appearance, we just think about it differently or, as we say, we see it in a different light.

Mackie endorsed Hume's idea that we "create" rather than discover virtue and vice, and he agreed that we manage to do this by the "projection or objectification of moral attitudes."[47] Hume's view, he says, is that

> we tend to project these sentiments onto the actions or characters that arouse them, or read some sort of image of these sentiments into them, so that we think of those actions and characters as possessing, objectively and intrinsically, certain distinctively moral features; but these features are fictitious.[48]

We don't really project sentiments *onto* the items that we judge, and the claim that we "read some sort of image" of our sentiments "into" them remains as opaque as it did on the day it was written.[49] But what follows those words is clear enough: we "think of" the actions and characters as having, "objectively and intrinsically," certain moral features. This can only mean that we *believe* this, and that we say it to ourselves and to others, using words we have heard all our lives, words whose very role in language is to attribute those "distinctively moral features" to people and to what they do and desire. What we project (anger, desire, disgust) is a complex psychological state, what enables our projection is our biological and social inheritance, including our language, and the result of our projection is a moral belief.

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[46] David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendix I, in *Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1902).

[47] Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 42.

[48] Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 71.

[49] The words may be a valiant attempt to accommodate the visual metaphors.

Our indoctrination into the beliefs and language of morality is so thorough that many of us won't be able to imagine a world devoid of objective value. In what Ian Hinckfuss called a "moral society" there is pressure on everyone to acknowledge, teach, and use moral language, and that means that there is pressure to project, because projection, as we are understanding it here, is the process of starting with both natural and acquired psychological states (feelings, desires, likes, aversions) and ending up with moral beliefs.

If we understand objectification or projection in this way we can add the final strokes to the argument from relativity. We can't call on the thesis of objectification to take on the whole job of justifying the error theory, nor can we use it, all by itself, to explain our moral beliefs and behavior. But when we treat objectification as one component of a more complex naturalistic account of the way we form our (erroneous) moral beliefs, and then fold this into the argument from relativity, we have everything we need to satisfy Mackie's proviso.

Mackie notes that "the apparent objectivity of moral value is a widespread phenomenon which has more than one source."[50] Tracing some of these sources of our moral beliefs has been made easier by the fact that we are developing a much better understanding of what sort of beings we are and what makes us tick (and sometimes explode). A natural history of moral error has yet to be written, but we can already identify some factors that have contributed to our habit of embracing groundless moral beliefs and defending them beyond all reason.

Hume says that we all have a **natural sympathy**, a disposition to feel what we imagine others are feeling and a tendency to be made uneasy at the sight of suffering. This generous feeling is encouraged and shaped by our parents and mentors, and if they do their jobs we will not only be uneasy when we become aware of suffering, we will have been primed with beliefs and dispositions that activate the process that leads from a feeling of sympathy to the belief that there is something that we have a moral obligation to do.

Those charged with our upbringing are able to educate and socialize us because we come into the world with **a tendency to imitate** and **an automatic and unquestioning credulity**. The cave-babies who survived and prospered were the ones who believed what was said and did what they were told. Our credulity, like our language-acquisition skills, may abate as we age and as credulity becomes dangerous, but long before we learned how to think for ourselves, or to spot liars, we were shaped by lessons that presuppose the objectivity of morality and model the use of moral language.

Something else that encourages our belief in objective values and obligations is our innate **tendency to defer to some authority or leader**. This too has a function in our development, but a healthy respect for authority can devolve into mindless adulation, and that can be exploited by systems that require unquestioning devotion and obedience to "royalty," or to a guru, ayatollah, or "President for Life." Such great beings are believed (or at least said) to be the source of moral truth, if not of morality. Their disciples and dupes are anxious to feel, believe, assert, and do whatever their leaders demand.

When discussing what he calls "patterns of objectification," Mackie mentions Elizabeth Anscombe's claim that our moral concepts of duty, right and wrong, and obligation

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[50] Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 46.

are "survivals outside the framework of thought that made them really intelligible, namely **the belief in divine law**."[51] It is easy enough to let our desires or our positive or negative emotions flower into moral beliefs, and it is even easier when we are able to support those beliefs by citing both the words of our society's religious authorities and the "common sense" beliefs of the majority of our peers.

Another source of our belief in moral objectivity is our **tendency to be upset by injuries and inequities** that leave us and those we care about at a disadvantage. We share this feeling with other primates, and we manifest it, and project it, when we praise justice, or cry in despair that something is "just *wrong*!" We are often troubled not only by the injury we have sustained, but also, and sometimes mainly, by the belief that the one responsible chose to act in spite of (or perhaps because of) the negative effect on us.

When we have been harmed we sometimes find it hard to resist wanting to exact some kind of **revenge** on the guilty party. We effortlessly transform our hurt and anger into some version of the belief that the one who hurt us is evil and deserves to suffer. We want revenge, but since revenge is frowned upon, we pretend (even to ourselves) that by retaliating strongly we are doing the right thing. We say that we are teaching someone a needed lesson, or giving them what they deserve, but the problem with this, as with all moral thinking, is that however painful or damaging our retaliation may have been, it is always possible to come up with an argument to show that it was the right thing to do.

As we reflect on the many sources of our moral beliefs, we should note, as Mackie does, how "ought" statements that are intended hypothetically or conditionally can lose their antecedents in conversations. Sometimes this is well understood, and innocent of moralizing, but other uses are not so innocent, as when we suppress an "if" clause in order to give our "ought" statement the appearance of a genuine, unconditional, objective demand, hoping perhaps that in this form it might be heeded more readily.

We can end these reflections by recalling Mackie's claim that when we call something good there is "somewhere in the picture, some set of requirements or wants or interests, and the thing that is called good is being said to be such as to satisfy these requirements or wants or interests."[52] We can usually presume that our audience will understand what requirements, wants, and interests we have in mind when we speak of good cars, apples, dogs, or anything else. But, as Mackie observed, we sometimes use the word 'good' when we are talking about "objective value."[53] On those occasions we aren't dealing with something that satisfies *our* requirements, wants, or interests, rather we are talking about something we suppose to be intrinsically good, good in itself, or good as an end. This is one of the main beliefs Mackie was rejecting when he opened his book with the words "There are no objective values."

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[51] Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 45. If, as Mackie believed, religion is as deluded as morality, then religious morality is a double delusion. Non-religious morality will be secular, but there is no adequate secular substitute for a divine command.

[52] Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 55.

[53] Mackie, *Ethics*, pp. 59 – 60.

6. Restraining Projections. Committed though he was to the moral error theory, Mackie did not recommend that we abolish morality, or become, in Simon Blackburn's words, "revisionist projectivists" who give up on moral language. But Blackburn observed that a consistent error theorist might *want* to abandon that error-infested language, and he even chided Mackie for not having done so. "So far," he said, "I have tried to show that there is something fishy about holding an error theory yet continuing to moralize."[54]

The **moral fictionalist** and the **moral abolitionist** are error theorists who differ over whether to continue using the language of morality—what Mackie called "the moral overlay." The moral abolitionist admits that morality has at times promoted traits and behavior almost everyone would encourage, but then reminds us that there is another side to the story. Moral considerations have been offered in support of every atrocity and indignity we have imposed on one another. If, as the moral error theorist believes, there is no fact of the matter about what is morally right and wrong, it follows that no moral judgment can ever be shown to be either dictated by or contrary to the facts; no moral defense or criticism of what someone has done can ever be conclusive; and no demagogue can ever be decisively refuted. Speaking in moralistic terms gets us nowhere with those who think differently and who know how to argue, and just *thinking* in those term can amplify our emotions, impair our perception, and make it harder for us to understand and empathize with others.

Ian Hinckfuss developed an impressive case for abolishing morality. He allowed that false moral beliefs may have benefits, but was more impressed by the thought that a "moral society" will have many disagreeable features that are essential to its propagation and preservation, features like "elitism, authoritarianism, guilt complexes, ego competition, economic inequality and war." Moral societies, he added, are intellectually dishonest, "inefficient in maximizing human happiness, satisfaction, or self-esteem," and "because of the threat of war with other societies, physically dangerous." The moral overlay actually hinders the resolution of conflicts and fosters the exploitation of the "poor and the weak by the rich and powerful."[55] This is just a part of his critique, but if Hinckfuss is to any extent right about "the moral society," then morality may be a far more dangerous institution than its fictionalist supporters have allowed.[56]

If we agree with Hinckfuss that morality is not only overrated but also dangerous, then we might hope not only to stop using moral language on others, but also to quit thinking in terms of objective value and obligation. If we can manage to do this we may be surprised to find ourselves attending with increased clarity and responding more appropriately to the events, acts, and people we were previously judging. Moralizing clouds our minds, distracts us from the details of our situation, and leads us into arguments that are certifiably endless. If emotions spawn false moral beliefs, false moral beliefs underwrite and encourage further (and more extreme) emotions, and these lead to more projections and more unwarranted emotions, until we find ourselves in fight, a feud, a dual, or a war.

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[54] Simon Blackburn, "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value," in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 152.

[55] The quotes are from Hinckfuss, p. v and pp. 20 – 21.

[56] I have discussed the up-side of abolishing morality in "Moral Abolitionism," in Joyce and Kirchen (eds.), *A World Without Values.*

Moral error theorists have abandoned the belief that kicking babies is morally wrong, the belief that it is evil to start illegal wars, and every other moralistic platitude they have ever heard. No matter what grisly events they have seen or heard about from imaginative moral philosophers, they will not believe that these deeds, or their perpetrators, are objectively evil. This opens the way for moral objectivists to feign horror that anyone could reject such pervasive and deeply-held beliefs about the wrongness of things like torture and child abuse. Critics of error theorists outdo themselves thinking up monstrous acts and then daring error theorists to deny that they are morally wrong. How, they ask, can there be nothing wrong with bear-baiting, dog-fighting, predatory lending, genocide, or pounding nails into live infants, chopping them up, and feeding them to their mothers?[57] Of course this proliferation of horrors is wasted effort because no description of a case, however horrendous, is going to convert an alert error theorist to moral objectivism. A person's rejection of moral objectivity is not based on ignorance of the world's cruelty.

Does the fact that error theorists and moral abolitionists "reject morality" mean that they will be more inclined to kick babies and start illegal wars? Of course not. The emotions of horror at cruelty and slaughter that once fueled the projections remain in full force even if we no longer project them into moral judgments. It is a mistake to think that if we are not guided by moral reasons, we will be guided by selfish or sadistic ones. To be sure we are often influenced by self-interest and rage, but thanks to years of training in civility and endless inducements to consider others, we have developed quite a few sympathetic and friendly dispositions. As we move through our day we automatically follow customs and laws, and we rarely think about consequences or about what morality requires unless it is to rationalize doing what we want to do. Our decisions emerge from a jumble of impulses, habits, feelings, beliefs, fears, and internalized imperatives from ourselves and others. Both selfishness and moral beliefs may find a place in this hodgepodge, but they play smaller roles in those decisions than egoists and moral philosophers think. What we end up doing is the product of incalculable and often invisible factors, among which we will find both selfish and generous impulses, as well as the words we say to ourselves and others say to us.

Moral objectivists will understandably be reluctant to abandon moral language, but what about the error theorists? I believe that the only stable and intellectually comfortable position for an error theorist is moral abolitionism. I have discussed moral abolitionism elsewhere, so here I'll just say that philosophers who have worked on problems of ethics all their lives may find it distasteful to refrain from saying what they really think, if what they really think is that moral objectivists are dead wrong, and that the institution of morality has failed, and by its very nature will continue to fail, to guide us to the kind of world its champions promise.

7. Two Spurious Arguments. There are some critics who argue that the error theorist is attacking a straw man. They say that almost no one today really believes in objective values or demands; but I have already argued that almost everyone either believes, or is ready to believe, exactly what the error theorist wants to deny. I have explained what these beliefs amount to, how we are encouraged to buy into them, and how they both enable and are reinforced by projection. They have not been invented by a few out-of-touch professors, but are held, or at least presupposed, by everyone who has projected their

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[57] That final item on the list is from Shafer-Landau who claimed that it is an eternally true moral principle that this is something it would be wrong to do. (*Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?,* p. 88).

feelings, interests, and aversions into objective moral values and then defended, or at least presupposed the truth of, the ensuing beliefs.

Other critics concede that people do after all believe in those "queer" objective moral properties and facts, but they say that this is also true of error theorists, who won't be able to break habits learned over a lifetime of moral indoctrination; and they add that even moral abolitionists will be unable to stifle an occasional moralistic outburst.[58] According to the first set of critics, there are few if any moral objectivists, but according to the second, there are few if any error theorists.

Why do the critics from this second group believe that it is barely possible to be an error theorist? The sight of moral fictionalists actively practicing their fictionalism could have misled some of them, but they might also have misinterpreted morally neutral uses of evaluative words by error theorists and moral abolitionists. It is also possible that these critics of the error theory have become so dependent on moral thinking that they can't imagine that anyone could function without it. This may be why they accuse error theorists who tell the truth and help others of acting from moral principles of truthfulness and beneficence. But no honest and helpful error theorist needs to confess to anything more than a general policy of honesty and a habit of helping.

Moral objectivists face similar problems when they look for ways to criticize the moral abolitionist. Many of them have become so used to pleading their cases on moral grounds that they aren't able to believe that anyone could abandon the use of such a powerful device. But moral abolitionists understand how easily we can oppose torture or promote charity without ever mentioning moral obligations or duties. A skillfully framed plea or the mere expression of a preference can have at least as much effect as the overused but still impressive: "It's the right thing to do."[59] Expressions of pleas and preferences are not evidence of a belief in objective value, even if critics of the moral error theory sometimes seem to suppose that they are.[60]

With these two criticisms of the error theory answered we are able to say that both moral objectivists and their opponents, the error theorists, really do exist. Both sides can't be right, but I believe it is easy to choose between them. No matter what moral objectivists say, the queerness of moral properties and facts makes their existence unlikely, and the fullness and beauty of an expansive empirical account of the causes and effects of our mistaken moral beliefs can only be dismissed by someone who is unwilling or unable to understand it.

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[58] This is not about the mere use of words such as 'good' and 'ought', which have many non-problematic uses. It is about using those words, or any others, to imply the kind of objectivity moral error theorists deny.

[59] Dick Cheney said it about the invasion of Iraq, Barack Obama said it when talking about passing the health care bill, and everyone between them on the political spectrum rolls it out when they feel strongly about some action.

[60] Simon Blackburn says that "the rejection of ethics is not really an option," but what does he mean by 'ethics'? He says that the decision to live a tolerant 'non-judgmental' life is an ethical decision. It may be, but it is a decision an error theorist could make. *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 19-21.

8. Conclusion. After identifying the moral error theory as a cognitivist form of moral anti-realism and reviewing its reception by moral philosophers, I argued that the words and behavior of moralists suggest that the cognitivists are right—moral claims are intended to be, and are understood to be, objective evaluations and demands. Having gone this far, some cognitivists appeal to moral experience to support the further claim that some of these moral judgments are objectively true. They say that the nature of moral experience and wide consensus on fundamental moral beliefs place an argumentative burden on the error theorist, a burden many error theorists think is met by Mackie's arguments from relativity and queerness.

I suggested that we view the argument from relativity as an argument to the best explanation and see it as the main argument for the error theory. Both the argument from queerness and the reflections about projection/objectification can be seen as elements of that argument, the conclusion of which is that no appeal to objective values is able or required to explain what we say and believe about morality, or what we do while under its influence.

Mackie was right. We do invent morality, but not deliberately. Our moral beliefs have many sources, but they are all quite natural. Each of us discovers the morality of our group, and while it is presented as objective and inescapable, and possibly even divine, these ideas have never been adequately explained or defended. We have seen how critics of the moral error theory either misidentify their target, or become lost in rhetoric and false indignation. Their only shot at taking down the argument from relativity is either (1) to find some way to disallow arguments to the best explanation, or (2) to show up with a better explanation of our moral experience and our moral beliefs than all of science. It is, I hope, clear that moral objectivists aren't going to be able to do either of these things.

The moral error theory is not widely believed, and moral abolitionism is not widely practiced, but the error theory is closer to informed and thoughtful common sense than we might think, and it is potentially more useful to humanity than any other set of beliefs about morality because it does not require us to subscribe to false and implausible claims, or to waste time arguing about our own projections.

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