

## Toothlessness Is Not a Problem for Normative Realism: A Reply to Barta

David DiDomenico

Texas State University

In *Inventing Right and Wrong*, J.L. Mackie famously defends what he calls ‘error theory’ about morality. Nowadays, ‘error theory’ is synonymous with ‘nihilism’.<sup>1</sup> An ‘error theory’ about a given domain is a bald denial that the stuff of the domain is real. For example, *moral error theory* is the thesis that there are no such things as moral rightness and wrongness, moral goodness and badness, moral reasons, moral obligation and permission, etc. According to standard moral error theory, all moral statements—e.g., ‘S has a moral reason to  $\varphi$ ’, ‘ $\varphi$ -ing is morally wrong’—are untrue.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to moral error theory, there is *epistemic error theory* and *normative error theory*. Epistemic error theory is the thesis that there are no such things as epistemic reasons, epistemic obligations and entitlements, etc.<sup>3</sup> Normative error theory holds that there are no normative phenomena at all, and so there are no true claims about what we ought (e.g., morally, epistemically, all-things-considered) to do, have reason to do, etc.<sup>4</sup> Normative error theory entails both moral error theory and epistemic error theory.<sup>5</sup>

So much for defining terms. Are any of these error theories true? Terence Cuneo (2007) has argued that one “undesirable result” of epistemic error theory is this: “Either epistemic nihilism is self-defeating and, hence, we have no (sufficient) reason to believe it, or, it implies that there are no epistemic reasons and, a fortiori, that we have no reason to believe it” (p. 118).<sup>6</sup> According to Cuneo, “[epistemic error theory] is polemically toothless in the following sense: No one would make a rational mistake in rejecting it and no one would be epistemically praiseworthy in accepting it” (p. 117). In other words, *if epistemic nihilism is true, no one would make a rational mistake in rejecting epistemic nihilism*. Call this claim ‘toothlessness’.

In “Biting the Bullet on Toothlessness”, Walter Barta (2024) considers whether toothlessness is a problem for one element of normative error theory, namely the claim that there are no objective normative reasons (Barta calls this claim ‘reasons anti-realism’). According to Barta, toothlessness poses no problem for reasons anti-realism. On the contrary, Barta argues, toothlessness is a problem for ‘reasons realism’, or the view that there are objective normative reasons. This is an ambitious claim. One wonders: how could the fact that *if epistemic nihilism is true, no*

---

<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, there is disagreement in the literature about whether Mackie’s ‘error theory’ really is an error theory in the sense specified above. Mackie says that ‘error theory’ is “a theory that although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false” (p. 35). But by “these claims” Mackie is referring to the implicit claim that moral judgments point to something objectively prescriptive. Since Mackie rejects the idea that anything is objectively prescriptive, all such implicit claims turn out to be false. Nevertheless, nothing in the quoted passage implies that moral values can’t still exist as subjective values. Berker (2019), for instance, provides textual evidence that Mackie was actually defending moral subjectivism rather than moral nihilism in *Inventing Right and Wrong*.

<sup>2</sup> So-called “moderate error theorists” endorse nihilism about the “stuff” but deny that this entails that all moral statements are untrue (i.e., either false or neither true nor false). See Olson (2014) for discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Olson (2014) defends epistemic error theory.

<sup>4</sup> In *Inventing Right and Wrong*, Mackie never expresses any sympathy for epistemic nihilism or normative nihilism.

<sup>5</sup> Streumer (2017) defends normative error theory.

<sup>6</sup> This is also an undesirable result of normative error theory, since normative error theory entails epistemic error theory.

*one would make a rational mistake in rejecting epistemic nihilism* be a problem for the view that there are objective normative reasons? As far as I can tell, this is the author's main argument:

- (1) "The realist about reasons is susceptible to reasons; the anti-realist about reasons is unsusceptible to reasons" (Barta 2024, p. 268).<sup>7</sup>
- (2) Toothlessness is consistent with five arguments that Mackie provides to support moral skepticism.<sup>8</sup>
- (3) So, toothlessness is a problem for reasons realists but not for reasons anti-realists.<sup>9</sup>

There are two problems with this argument. The first problem is that the first premise doesn't pick out a truth on any natural interpretation of what it means. The second problem is that the premises do not support the conclusion. I will discuss each of these problems in turn.

One natural interpretation of the first premise is that reasons realists can be motivated by *normative reasons*, but reasons anti-realists cannot. This interpretation entails that there are normative reasons, which entails that normative error theory is false. Given that Barta is trying to offer a spirited endorsement of Cuneo's undesirable result that is consistent with normative error theory, this interpretation must not be what Barta has in mind.

A second natural interpretation of the first premise is that the reasons realist will tend to be motivated by what they *believe* to be normative reasons, but the reasons anti-realist will not tend to be motivated by what they *believe* to be normative reasons. This isn't a plausible claim and there are arguments in the literature suggesting that it is false. Bart Streumer (2017, p. 137), for instance, argues that normative error theory is literally unbelievable. His argument appeals to two plausible necessary conditions on belief. The first is that "A person believes that p only if this person believes what he or she believes to be entailed by p"; the second is that "A person believes that p only if this person does not believe that there is no reason to believe that p." Given that anyone who understands normative error theory well enough to be in a position to believe it knows that it entails that there is no reason to believe it, normative error theory is literally unbelievable. If normative error theory is unbelievable, then it doesn't make anyone less susceptible to what they believe to be normative reasons.

A third natural interpretation of the first premise is that the reasons realist will tend to be motivated by what they believe to be normative reasons, but *the reasons anti-realist will not tend to be motivated by any considerations at all*. This third interpretation seems to me to be what Barta actually has

---

<sup>7</sup> Barta calls this premise "The Asymmetrical Teeth of Reasons."

<sup>8</sup> Mackie offers the following summary of these arguments: "The considerations that favour moral scepticism are: first, the relativity or variability of some important starting points of moral thinking and their apparent dependence on actual ways of life; secondly, the metaphysical peculiarity of the supposed objective values, in that they would have to be intrinsically action-guiding and motivating; thirdly, the problem of how such values could be consequential or supervenient upon natural features; fourthly, the corresponding epistemological difficulty of accounting for our knowledge of value entities or features and of their links with the features on which they would be consequential; fifthly, the possibility of explaining, in terms of several different patterns of objectification, traces of which remain in moral language and moral concepts, how even if there were no such objective values people not only might have come to suppose that there are but also might persist firmly in that belief. These five points sum up the case for moral scepticism" (1977, p. 49).

<sup>9</sup> It is worth pointing out that the second conjunct in Barta's conclusion, although true, is actually consistent with Cuneo's claim that toothlessness is an "undesirable result" of epistemic error theory.

in mind. He writes, “Basically, if we have refuted all epistemic reasons, then we have no reasons by which to believe, justify, or explain moral error theory itself” (Barta 2024, p. 265). Moreover, Barta’s explanation of the sense in which anti-realists are allegedly unsusceptible to reasons involves claims like “The realist cannot convince anti-realists, because anti-realists disbelieve in reasons” (p. 268). It is clear from the text that by ‘reasons’ Barta means reasons of any kind: normative reasons, motivating reasons, and explanatory reasons.

The problem with the first premise on this third interpretation is that normative error theory does not entail that there are no reasons of any kind. It only entails that there are no normative reasons—that is, considerations that count in favor of and justify some action or belief. In addition to normative reasons, there are also considerations on the basis of which we act or believe (i.e., motivating reasons) and considerations that explain why we act or believe (i.e., explanatory reasons). Normative error theory does not entail that there are no motivating or explanatory reasons. So, normative error theory does not entail that anti-realists cannot be susceptible to considerations that they find convincing. Even though she denies the existence of objective normative reasons, the anti-realist might still have an interest in believing the truth.<sup>10</sup> If she does, she will be (*ceteris paribus*) just as susceptible to arguments and considerations that she finds convincing as a garden-variety reasons realist.<sup>11</sup>

The second problem with Barta’s argument is that the premises do not support the conclusion. Even if it were true that reasons realists are “susceptible” to reasons, but anti-realists are not, as the first premise says, that would not imply that toothlessness poses a problem for reasons realists. The second premise also does not support the conclusion. In general, the fact that a claim is consistent with the premises of an argument in support of a theory T does not imply that the claim itself is evidence for T. For example, the fact that Waco is in Texas is consistent with the premises of Mackie’s arguments, but the fact that Waco is in Texas is no evidence at all for moral skepticism.

It is worth pointing out that Mackie’s arguments do not support reasons anti-realism, and Mackie did not intend them to. Mackie offered them in support of ‘moral skepticism’, which Mackie says is “the denial of objective moral values” (1977, p. 48). It’s possible that *analogues* of *some* of Mackie’s five arguments support reasons anti-realism. For example, consider Mackie’s Argument from Queerness. If moral reasons must be “objectively prescriptive” but there is nothing in reality that is “objectively prescriptive,” then there just are no such things as moral reasons. An analogous argument could be given for doubting the reality of epistemic reasons. Other philosophers have explored these analogues in the epistemic domain.<sup>12</sup> At any rate, Barta’s point is not that such analogous arguments succeed. The point is rather that toothlessness itself provides further evidence against reasons realism because it is consistent with Mackie’s arguments for moral skepticism.

---

<sup>10</sup> Olson (2014), who defends epistemic error theory, shows how evidence can still give us instrumental, non-normative reasons to believe.

<sup>11</sup> And if she is a mere reasons anti-realist and not a full-blown nihilist (i.e., error theorist) about normative reasons, she might still be a subjectivist about normative reasons. The subjectivist denies the reality of *objective* normative reasons but embraces the reality of subjectively determined normative reasons (i.e., a consideration is a normative reason relative to this or that epistemological framework, but none of which are objectively true).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Cuneo (2007) and Olson (2014).

One claim that I found to be particularly puzzling is this: “the very toothlessness of moral arguments would themselves play a strong corroborative causal role in the persistence of disagreements and emergence of relativistic moral standards” (p. 270). I’m not sure what to make of this suggestion. By “toothlessness of moral arguments” Barta seems to have in mind the idea that *if reasons nihilism is true, no one would make a rational mistake in rejecting moral arguments*. When thinking about what best explains human behavior, we would do well to keep in mind the distinction between is and ought. If we cannot validly derive an ought-claim from an is-claim, then we also cannot validly derive an is-claim like ‘there is persistent disagreement in ethics’ from the negation of an ought-claim like ‘no one would make a rational mistake in rejecting moral arguments’.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the above criticism of Barta’s argument, I agree with Barta’s claim that toothlessness is not a problem for reasons anti-realists. The explanation of why it’s no problem for reasons-realists, though, is not that reasons anti-realists are incapable of being convinced by anything a realist might offer them. It is rather that Cuneo’s undesirable result cannot be recast as an argument that shows reasons anti-realism to be false.<sup>14</sup> To see this, consider the distinction that epistemic error theorists are wont to draw between *normative reasons* and *premises of a sound argument*.<sup>15</sup> Premises of a sound argument are true propositions. Normative reasons are facts or true propositions that also happen to have the property of favoring some action or belief. It is this favoring property that generates the standard error theoretic anxiety about normative reasons. Defenders of various forms of error theory typically argue that there are no such things as favoring properties because such properties would have to be irreducibly normative, intrinsically action-guiding, or objectively prescriptive, which makes them “metaphysically queer”.<sup>16</sup> However, the claim that no fact or true proposition also happens to have the property of favoring an action or belief does not entail that there are no facts or true propositions. Hence, facts or true propositions can play the role of premises in arguments even if there are no normative reasons. In other words, although there can be sound arguments in support of (and sound arguments against!) reasons anti-realism, it’s unclear whether any of these arguments will include toothlessness as a premise.

## References

- Barta, W. 2024. “Biting the Bullet on Toothlessness”. *Southwest Philosophy Review* 40, pp. 265-274.
- Berker, S. 2019. “Mackie Was Not an Error Theorist”. *Philosophical Perspectives* 33 (1), pp. 5-25.
- Cuneo, T. 2007. *The Normative Web*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

<sup>13</sup> I am not suggesting here that Mackie’s Argument from Disagreement (sometimes called the ‘Argument from Relativity’) commits this fallacy.

<sup>14</sup> Cuneo is of course aware of this. He writes, “there is no plausible non-question-begging argument to establish that epistemic nihilism is false” (2007, p. 119).

<sup>15</sup> As long as notions like *truth* and *validity* can be explained without appealing to the notion of a *normative reason*, there is no problem in principle with this distinction.

<sup>16</sup> To feel the anxiety about normative reasons, one must first rule out the arguments that attempt to reduce favoring properties to something that isn’t metaphysically queer like social conventions, causal or functional roles in desire satisfaction, etc.

Mackie, J. L. 1977. "The Subjectivity of Values". *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Penguin Books, pp. 1-49.

Olson, Jonas. 2014. *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Streumer, B. 2017. *Unbelievable Errors: An Error Theory about All Normative Judgements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.