

**Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin**, eds.

*A World without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory.*

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In 1977, John Leslie Mackie published *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, defending a form of moral skepticism known as 'moral error theory'. This book has since exerted significant influence on moral philosophers either sympathetic to moral skepticism or unwilling simply to take for granted the falsehood or implausibility of that position. They will welcome the present collection's careful discussion of both Mackie's moral error theory and other moral anti-realist views. Several of the papers only tangentially deal with his error theory, so the book's subtitle is not entirely accurate. Some essays adopt a favorable approach to this position, others are instead very critical, and still others are rather neutral. As will become clear in what follows, the order of the essays is not in all cases the most natural one because some of them are not arranged according to their stand on the moral error theory or their thematic connection.

The introductory chapter provides a good explanation of Mackie's moral error theory. The editors clear up some common misunderstandings, maintaining, for instance, that the theory's correct formulation is not ontological but linguistic, i.e., it is not the view that moral values, properties, or facts do not exist, but rather the view that moral claims are all false (or, perhaps more prudently, 'untrue'). This way of expressing the moral error theory permits us to distinguish it from moral noncognitivism: the moral noncognitivist too denies that the items in question exist, but also holds that moral utterances are not assertions because they do not express beliefs, and hence are not truth-apt. The editors also correctly point out that the moral error theory does not by itself entail moral eliminativism, i.e., the view that we should abolish all moral language and thinking. For it is also logically consistent with moral fictionalism, whose most common version maintains that, because morality is useful in certain respects, we should continue to make moral utterances and have moral thoughts, while at the same time refraining from asserting such utterances and believing such thoughts. That is, even though moral realism is false, we should maintain the fiction that it is true. As the editors recognize, although in *Ethics* Mackie seems to advocate some kind of moral fictionalism, he treats this issue only briefly. (A question may arise with this kind of fictionalism: given that it is a noncognitivist view, can it be properly considered a moral error theory? The difficulty is, I think, merely apparent, for the fictionalist affirms that moral claims are truth-evaluable when made by moral realists because they *assert* these claims, whereas the fictionalist uses moral discourse not intending to aim at truth.)

The first essay of the collection, John Burgess' 'Against Ethics', is something of a curiosity. Originally written around the same time Mackie was finishing *Ethics* but not published until 2007, it defends 'anethicism', a view equivalent to the moral error theory. Burgess maintains that 'moral thinking involves a fundamental mistake and illusion' (1)

because there are no objective moral values. He compellingly argues that the ‘linguistic’ (i.e., noncognitivist) theories of emotivism and prescriptivism should be rejected because moral judgments are meant by ordinary people as assertions about supposed matters of objective fact. Finally, after making it clear that anethicism should not be confused with either nihilism or immoralism, he adopts an eliminativist view, recommending that moral language be abandoned.

Next, Charles Pigden’s ‘Nihilism, Nietzsche, and the Doppelganger Problem’, has two aims: to show that Nietzsche was a moral error theorist, and to defend the moral error theory from certain kinds of criticisms. The main criticism concerns the ‘Doppelganger Problem’: the error theorist affirms that all moral judgments are false, but the negation of a moral judgment X is a moral judgment, and if X is false, then not-X (its ‘doppelganger’) must be true; therefore, the moral error theory is self-refuting. The solution to this problem consists in amending the error theory by claiming instead that ‘non-negative atomic moral judgments are all false’. Given that the main purpose of this contribution is to vindicate the moral error theory and given that Nietzsche’s metaethical stance plays no necessary part in this defense, the discussion of whether Nietzsche was an error theorist seems beside the point and somehow distracts the attention from the main focus.

In ‘Patterns of Objectification’, Richard Joyce examines Mackie’s thesis of moral objectification/projectivism and its connection with the moral error theory. He claims that the minimal version of the thesis should not be interpreted as a premise in an argument to establish moral skepticism. Rather, it works as a tie-breaker between moral realism and moral skepticism insofar as its function ‘is to *explain away* the contents of [the] promorality intuitions by providing an account of their origin that does not imply or presuppose their truth’ (45). That is, given that moral skepticism is counter-intuitive, to defend its preferability the error theorist needs to give a more convincing explanation of the origin of the intuitions that support moral realism. Although Joyce sympathizes with the idea underlying Mackie’s strategy, he deems it poorly executed because the arguments in favor of the objectification thesis beg the question or are not based on empirical data.

One version of Mackie’s argument from queerness involves, in its first premise, the idea that moral judgments are queer, and hence different from other judgments, because they have some kind of special force built into them—an internal prescriptivity. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, in ‘Mackie’s Internalisms’, focuses exclusively on this premise and distinguishes several different types of internalism, in order to determine which if any could make Mackie’s argument work. The type of internalism he claims could support the moral error theory is a form of motivational internalism which limits its claim to first-person present-tense moral thoughts which seem true.

In ‘Mackie’s Realism: Queer Pigs and the Web of Belief’, Jamie Dreier defends the provocative thesis that Mackie was a moral realist. This claim is based on a quite unusual way of conceiving of the distinction between moral realism and anti-realism, having to do with the different ways of explaining puzzling features of moral thinking

and language. Whereas the moral realist looks for such an explanation in the properties or facts referred to in moral judgments, the moral anti-realist—in particular the moral expressivist—looks for it in moral concepts and language. Mackie is a moral realist because he thinks that ‘the moral properties themselves would have to account for the internal, necessary connection between moral judgment and motivation’ (82). Although I am uncomfortable with his distinction between moral realism and anti-realism—which may in the end be just a terminological matter—Dreier’s analysis is penetrating, particularly when arguing that Mackie’s mistake consists in locating morality’s queerness in moral properties rather than in beliefs.

In ‘Mackie on Practical Reason’, David Phillips defends Mackie’s account of practical reason, particularly as a more plausible alternative than the instrumentalist approach of Bernard Williams. According to this approach, all genuine reasons are internal, so all reasons are desire-based. Williams thinks internal reasons are objectively authoritative, which is highly problematic insofar as it makes desires (which are arbitrary, contingent, and idiosyncratic) a source of authority. Mackie, by contrast, thinks internal reasons claims are authoritative in the same way as any other normative claim, namely, only relative to a given presupposed background. Hence, for Mackie, internal reasons are not the only or the main source of such a framework-relative authority, and no normative reasons claim is true in a framework-independent way.

Don Loeb, in ‘The Argument from Moral Experience’, explores whether our moral experience, understood as our various ways of talking and thinking about morality, supports moral objectivism or realism. He first maintains that it is not entirely clear that we experience morality as a realm of fact. For instance, not only do people often talk about moral feelings and attitudes instead of moral beliefs, they also sometimes say that what we deem to be morally right or wrong is relative. Loeb then argues that, even if we do experience morality as a realm of fact, this by itself does not support moral objectivism. It would also be necessary to show that moral realism is the best explanation of our moral experience, which is a matter of dispute with the moral anti-realists, who claim that their theories can explain or accommodate many of the features of our moral experience.

In ‘Beyond the Error Theory’, Michael Smith contends that the argument from queerness fails. Mackie’s claim that the concept of a moral value is the concept of a feature of things that is both objective and prescriptive amounts to the claim that what is of moral value has the feature of being absolutely required by reason. Smith maintains that, even if we grant that Mackie’s analysis is correct, there is nothing metaphysically or epistemologically queer about moral value. He tentatively favors the ‘Constitutivist Approach’, according to which those who hold moral beliefs are committed to holding that there are certain desires that are constitutive of being fully rational. It is possible to determine which desires these are by a process of reflective equilibrium, i.e., ‘by getting our considered judgments about what reason requires us to desire in specific cases...into equilibrium with our reflective judgments about what the most general intrinsic desires constitutive of being rational are that stand behind these more specific desires’ (136–7).

David Copp's 'Normativity, Deliberation, and Queerness' also opposes the moral error theory. He grants, but only for the sake of argument, the truth of the 'authoritative reasons proposal', and defends it against both Mackie and Joyce. According to that proposal, moral obligations are a source of reasons which are authoritative, i.e., genuinely normative or irrational to ignore. This implies that someone cannot be regarded as rational 'unless she is motivated in such a way that if she believes she has a moral obligation or reason to do something, she takes this obligation or this reason appropriately into account when deciding what to do' (143). Copp argues that Mackie fails to show any metaphysical queerness about normative facts, and that Joyce rejects the authoritative reasons proposal by mistakenly thinking that only instrumental reasons are authoritative.

The moral error theorist claims that everyday moral thought and language exhibit or imply a crucial commitment X, and argues that this central commitment is false or unfounded, so that the whole of morality is based on an error. In 'A Tension in the Moral Error Theory', Simon Kirchin questions whether there is such a universal commitment, focusing on Mackie's and Joyce's error theoretic stances. He reasons that everyday moral experience 'is messy, disorganized, cluttered, and lacks a unique and specific identifying point' (168). The error theorist must cope with a tension: while needing to specifically identify the claims to which moral thought and language are essentially committed, the more he specifies these claims the less plausible it is that they will be central to all moral thought and language.

I agree with Kirchin (and also with Loeb, above) that everyday moral experience is messy and disorganized. However, in many cases, conceptual confusion and superficial reflection hide actual common commitments. It seems that at least the majority of ordinary people are actually or ultimately committed to moral universalism. For instance, although some students taking an ethics class say with apparent confidence that moral judgments are relative to socio-cultural frameworks, when pressed about an act such as the rape or murder of a child, they are reluctant to allow that such an act is neither good nor bad in itself but only relative to a given framework. They pause when confronted with the implications of their metaethical claims. More generally, ordinary people typically seem committed to moral realism, with differences arising from within the space of morality: what some regard as a moral matter, others regard as a matter of etiquette, but *moral* claims still seem to be intended as descriptions of objective moral facts or properties, which are the source of an objective prescriptivity. It should be noted, however, that Kirchin 'leaves things open': his purpose is not to deny the presence of a central, unfounded commitment in moral thought and language, but only to show that every version of the moral error theory which has so far been propounded must deal with the abovementioned tension.

It is usually thought that moral realists are committed to moral internalism, according to which there is an internal, necessary, or conceptual connection between moral judgments and motivation. However, if moral judgments are beliefs and, *à la* Hume, we claim both that only desires, which are distinct from beliefs, can motivate and that reason cannot change a subject's existing desire set, then internalism is false. In

‘Business as Usual? The Error Theory, Internalism, and the Function of Morality’, Caroline West contends that Mackie and Joyce’s error theoretic stances are based on that line of argument, since ‘[i]f internalism is a conceptual truth about morality, and internalism is actually false, then morality is nowhere instantiated’ (184). West aims to examine the various alternative attitudes we can adopt once we accept the falsity of moral internalism. She argues that moral abolitionism is psychologically unfeasible and that the business-as-usual stance (which she attributes to Mackie) is incoherent. There remain four options, among which, however, she does not choose. The first two (distinguishing between belief in theory and in practice, and non-revisionary moral realism) are variants of the business-as-usual alternatives that try to avoid the incoherence charge. The last two (revolutionary noncognitivist fictionalism and revisionary moral realism) are revisionary but not so much as to be psychologically impossible. An objection to West’s quick overview of the remaining four alternatives is that fictionalism might well be considered a form of the business-as-usual stance and that, as noted above, Mackie is usually viewed as proposing a kind of fictionalism.

In ‘The Fictionalist’s Attitude Problem’, Graham Oddie and Daniel Demetriou critically examine Mark Kalderon’s moral fictionalism, according to which, although moral judgments are truth-apt (factualism), they are not beliefs (noncognitivism). While to accept a non-moral proposition is to believe it, to accept a moral judgment is to express a noncognitive attitude, namely, to ‘endorse’ it. One can thus be a moral fictionalist without being an error theorist. Oddie and Demetriou argue that, just as the nonfactualist faces the Frege-Geach problem—he cannot explain how, in a valid argument, truth transfers from the premises to the conclusion—so too does the noncognitivist factualist face the problem that he cannot explain how rational acceptance and rejection transfers from the premises to the conclusion of an argument. The same acceptance-transfer problem is faced by cognitivist fictionalism insofar as it too requires a double-attitude account of acceptance.

Richard Garner, a well-known champion of moral anti-realism, closes the volume with ‘Abolishing Morality’. He attempts to determine whether the moral error theorist should be a moral abolitionist or a moral fictionalist. He opts for the first alternative because morality seems to cause more suffering than it prevents, and it is therefore desirable and useful to abandon moral language and thinking altogether. There are other means besides morality to promote, encourage, or motivate certain useful social practices, such as early training in empathy, strict surveillance, and legal penalty.

Overall, this volume will be excellent reading for those interested in the strengths and weaknesses of Mackie’s moral error theory in particular, or in the metaethical debate between moral realists and anti-realists more generally.

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