

ON CONTINGENTLY ERROR-THEORETIC CONCEPTS

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I. ERROR THEORETIC DISCOURSES

An error theorist about a particular discourse combines the cognitivist thesis that the discourse is truth-apt with the thesis that core statements asserted by the discourse are false. For instance, one is an error theorist about witch discourse if one thinks that witch discourse is truth-apt and that some of the entities and properties quantified over by core statements in the discourse, namely witches and magical powers, do not exist and hence that certain core statements of the discourse are false.

Discourses can be contingently or necessarily error theoretic. Mackie's moral error theory is an instance of the latter.¹ Mackie argues that moral discourse is truth-apt, but that it could be true only if there were objectively prescriptive facts such that acquaintance with these facts would be inherently motivating. He argues that there could be no such facts. Thus, not only is moral discourse false, it is necessarily false. Error theorists about witch discourse, however, probably take it to be contingently error theoretic. In the actual world, witch discourse is false because there are no witches and no magic properties. But, arguably, there are possible worlds with witches and magic properties, and in such a world witch discourse is true. This is the position that

Harty Field believes each of us is in with respect to mathematical discourse.² He holds that mathematical statements are truth-apt and are true only if there exist abstract mathematical objects that are quantified over by mathematical statements. But he thinks it is a contingent matter that these objects fail to exist, and hence he thinks that mathematical discourse is contingently error theoretic.

In general, a discourse will be error theoretic iff (a) the discourse is truth-apt, and (b) core statements of the discourse are false. Then, roughly, a discourse is *contingently* error theoretic iff the discourse is error theoretic and the false core statements of the discourse are contingently false. In the light of certain views about reference, some finessing of this account may be desirable. Causal reference theorists and descriptivists who think that certain causal relations or baptismal events form part of the reference-fixing descriptions of some terms might hold that it is an a posteriori necessity that the core statements of some discourse are false. For instance, they might hold that the statement "unicorns exist" is necessarily false, because it is part of the semantics of "unicorn" that it refers actually to entities that are causally connected in certain ways to unicorn discourse. Since there are no unicorns in the actual world, the term fails to refer and hence also lacks a counterfactual

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1 extension. Hence the existential statement is
2 necessarily false.

3 Even so, it is plausible that unicorn
4 discourse is contingently error theoretic.
5 Thus, a discourse *D* is contingently error
6 theoretic iff (a) *D* is truth-apt and (b) core
7 statements of *D* are false and (c) there is
8 a possible world *w*, such that if *w* is the
9 actual world, then the core statements of
10 *D* are true. The last clause, (c), requires
11 the evaluation of the core statements of *D*
12 under the epistemically possible assumption
13 that a different world is actual from the one
14 supposed. That is, it requires considering *w*
15 as though it is actual. Then unicorn discourse
16 is contingently error theoretic even if,
17 necessarily, there are no unicorns, because
18 there *is* a world with winged, horselike
19 creatures, and considered as actual, that world
20 is one in which statements that quantify over
21 unicorns are true. By parity then, a discourse
22 *D* is *necessarily* error theoretic iff (a) *D* is
23 truth-apt and (b) there are core statements of
24 *D* that are false and (c) there is no possible
25 world *w*, such that if *w* is the actual world,
26 then the statements of *D* are true.

27 There seems nothing in principle prob-
28 lematic about either contingently or neces-
29 sarily error theoretic discourses.³ More
30 recently, however, usage has stretched from
31 talk of an error theoretic account of some
32 discourse to talk of an error theoretic account
33 of entities or properties, such as witches
34 or phlogiston. Still more recently usage
35 has stretched to include talk of concepts
36 themselves. Thus, for instance, both Priest
37 and Primoratz argue for an error theoretic
38 view of the concept of sexual perversion.⁴

39 One can interpret a claim about being error
40 theoretic regarding a particular property or
41 entity in terms of a claim about a particular
42 discourse. Namely, one can interpret it as the
43 claim that there is an error theoretic discourse
44 that includes false statements that quantify
45 over the entity or property in question, and
46 that these statements are false because the

entity or property quantified over fails to
exist.⁵ Then talk of being *contingently* error
theoretic about some entity or property can
be understood as the claim that one is error
theoretic about that entity or property, and
there is a possible world *w*, such that if *w* is
the actual world, then the statements of the
error theoretic discourse that quantify over
the entity or property in question are true.
Correspondingly, one is necessarily error
theoretic about some entity or property if
one is error theoretic about the entity or
property, and there is no possible world *w*,
such that if *w* is the actual world, then the
statements of the error theoretic discourse
that quantify over the entity or property in
question are true.

Thus, Field is a contingent error theorist
about mathematical objects, and Mackie is
a necessitarian error theorist about moral
properties. But neither is an error theorist
about the *concepts* in question. Field
thinks there is a perfectly good concept of
a mathematical object, and it is because
nothing in this world falls under that concept
that mathematical discourse is contingently
error theoretic.

2. ERROR THEORETIC CONCEPTS

In some cases, however, there are arguments
to the effect that concepts themselves are, or
might be, error theoretic. Priest, for instance,
is clearly concerned about the status of the
concept of sexual perversion, rather than
about any discourse involving phrases like
“sexual perversion.” He is at pains to devise
an account of the content of the concept.
Ultimately, however, he seems to suggest that,
as a contingent matter, the concept makes no
sense. This paper will return to the details of
his claim later. First, however, some sense
must be made of the idea of an error theoretic
concept.

Concepts are entities of some kind. So
it makes sense to be either contingently or
necessarily error theoretic about *concepts*

themselves as an ontological category. If someone believes that it is an essential feature of concepts (as a kind) that they are mental representations of a particular kind, say, language-like representations tokened in particular ways, and if it turns out that actually, there are no such representations, then that person will be a contingent error theorist about concepts as a kind of entity. Or if one thought it were an essential feature of concepts that they are abstract objects with certain features, and it turns out that necessarily, there are no abstract objects, then one should be necessary error theoretic about concepts as a kind of entity. But the error theorist at issue here is an error theorist about *particular* concepts, and this latter only makes sense against a backdrop of being a realist about concepts as a kind of entity.

Clearly, to claim that a particular concept $\langle x \rangle$ is error theoretic is not simply to make a claim about the extension of the term “ x ” that expresses $\langle x \rangle$. Error theorists about witch discourse are error theorists about witches and hence think that “witch” has no extension, but they are not thereby error theorists about the *concept* $\langle \text{witch} \rangle$. There is surely a perfectly good concept, it is just that as it turns out, nothing falls under the extension of that concept.

Here is a possibility that is consistent with what has so far been said about being an error theorist about entities. One is an error theorist about a concept $\langle x \rangle$ iff one is error theoretic about a discourse D , and D has false core statements that quantify over the concept $\langle x \rangle$ such that those statements are false because $\langle x \rangle$ does not exist. Given this, error theorists about particular concepts must at least implicitly be committed to a certain view about the nature of concepts. It makes little sense, for instance, to suppose that error theorists think of concepts as mental representations, or as a certain cluster of abilities with linguistic expressions. In claiming to be an error theorist about the

concept of sexual perversion, Priest does not intend to suggest that each of us lacks a mental representation of sexual perversion or lacks some key facility with the expression “sexual perversion.” In either of *these* senses of concept, he surely wants to say that the concept of sexual perversion is possessed. Rather, the error theorist’s claim makes sense if concepts are abstracta. Being an error theorist about a particular abstract concept C is then consistent with agents “minimally possessing” C , where agents count as minimally possessing a concept just in case they either have an appropriate mental representation or have linguistic facilities with the term expressing the concept (“ C ”). Plausibly then, it is not possible to *fully* possess an error theoretic concept, since plausibly, fully possessing C involves being related in certain ways to a particular abstracta— C —and if C fails to exist then no such relation is possible.

Suppose that, broadly understood, concepts understood to be abstracta have a definitional structure that expresses the necessary and sufficient conditions for falling under that concept. Consider some putative concept $\langle x \rangle$. Part of the definitional structure of $\langle x \rangle$ might include the claim that “ p iff not p .” Then $\langle x \rangle$ is internally inconsistent: a contradiction is part of its definitional structure. Thus (assuming the falsity of dialetheism), nothing could fall under the extension of “ x .” Or suppose it is part of the definitional structure of $\langle x \rangle$ that P is the case. Suppose P is necessarily not the case. Then nothing could fall under the concept $\langle x \rangle$, and if necessary falsehoods are incoherent or internally inconsistent, then $\langle x \rangle$ is incoherent or internally inconsistent. Since nothing can exist which is internally inconsistent or incoherent, no abstracta that has these features can exist, and hence it is right to be an error theorist about putative concepts whose definitional structure has these features.

1 Putting a more recent gloss on the view that
 2 concepts are abstracta with something like a
 3 definitional structure, Chalmers and Jackson
 4 take the content of concepts to be given by
 5 a truth function from worlds considered as
 6 actual, to extensions of the term expressing
 7 those concepts at those worlds.⁶ Thus, the
 8 content of the concept <water> is a truth
 9 function from worlds considered as actual
 10 to the extension of “water” at those worlds.
 11 On this way of finessing the classical account
 12 of concepts, some terms expressing putative
 13 concepts, like “x,” will map onto the empty
 14 set. One natural thing to say about such terms
 15 is that they fail to express any concept. This
 16 is plausible insofar as it relieves the burden
 17 of having to say that the content of such
 18 concepts is the empty set, and hence that the
 19 concept of a square circle is the same concept
 20 as the concept of Fermat’s little last theorem
 21 (as opposed to his last theorem) being false.⁷
 22 If something like this is a desirable account,
 23 then it is plausible to embrace an error theory
 24 about these putative concepts that map to the
 25 empty set.

26 If Mackie is right, then some moral
 27 concepts are like <x>. Suppose, as Mackie
 28 contends, it is part of the definitional
 29 structure of the concept of a morally right
 30 action that an action is morally right only if
 31 it instantiates an objective prescriptive property
 32 of rightness such that acquaintance with that
 33 property is intrinsically motivating. Since
 34 according to Mackie there could be no such
 35 property, the concept <morally right action>
 36 is error theoretic.

37 Such considerations provide reasons to be
 38 *necessarily* error theoretic about some putative
 39 concepts, namely those that are internally
 40 inconsistent or that are expressed by a term
 41 whose extension across worlds considered
 42 as actual is the empty set. Often, however,
 43 discussion of error theoretic concepts implies
 44 that some concepts are *contingently* error
 45 theoretic. According to Priest, the concept
 46 of sexual perversion is one of a sexual act

that does not fulfil its natural function and is,
 ipso facto, bad.⁸ It is part of the definitional
 structure of the concept both that biological
 processes have well-defined natural ends
 and that it is in virtue of being unnatural
 that perverted sexual acts are bad. Priest
 argues that the concept of perversion “makes
 sense” given an Aristotelian worldview,
 since on that view biological processes do
 have well-defined ends, and it is in terms
 of the relevant ends that actions are right or
 wrong. But now that society has abandoned
 this Aristotelian view, the concept no longer
 makes sense. Indeed, Priest suggests that
 a number of other concepts cease to make
 sense once various contingent features of
 the world are discovered. He notes that the
 notion of the time (*simpliciter*) between two
 events “makes sense within the context of a
 Newtonian physics, where space and time are
 uniform and absolute; but once this picture is
 rejected and replaced by Special Relativity, it
 loses all meaning.”⁹ He goes on to note that
 “the temporal separation between any two
 events is relative to a frame of reference, and
 to ask what *the* temporal separation between
 two events is [is] a nonsensical question.”¹⁰
 Another example is the concept of sin. Ac-
 cording to Priest, the concept of a sin is the
 concept of a transgression against divine law.
 Thus, he writes, “the notion makes sense,
 therefore, only within a particular set of theis-
 tic beliefs. Someone who rejects such beliefs
 will find no application for the notion of sin
 at all: it will be misleading to call a person
 either sinful or sinless.”¹¹

Priest’s suggestion does not seem to be that
 these are concepts, which, as a contingent
 matter of fact, fail to have anything falling
 under them. First, he frequently claims that
 the concepts themselves make no sense given
 the way the world turned out. This is not the
 claim that given what is now known of the
 world, it would make no sense to apply those
 concepts, but rather, the stronger claim that
 there is something nonsensical in the concepts

themselves, because the concepts could only make sense given that the world was a certain way: a Newtonian way, an Aristotelian way, or a theistic way. If these were concepts, which, as it turns out, have nothing falling under them, then it would surely still make perfectly good sense to ask whether or not something falls under each concept. It is just that the answer would be “no.” The concept of a witch makes perfectly good sense, and one can meaningfully ask whether there are any witches, and that is so even though society now largely rejects an explanatory framework in which magic and mysticism figure. One can rightly, and meaningfully, assert that there are no witches. But Priest thinks it would be *as* misleading to claim that some person is not sinful, as to claim that she is. So it is not just that “sinful” turns out actually to have no extension. For then “sinful” would be like “witch” and it would be right, and meaningful, to say that no one is sinful, and hence to say, of some particular person, that she is not sinful. Of course, this is not to deny that there might be certain pragmatic rules of assertion according to which once the theistic framework is rejected, claims such as “x is not sinful” will largely disappear or be considered pragmatically peculiar assertions. If the implication of “x is not sinful” is that there is some comparison class, y, whose members are sinful, then the assertion has false implications in a nontheistic world. But Priest’s point seems to be stronger than merely to claim that there might be pragmatic reasons not to make such assertions. Rather, the idea is that because the relevant concepts are meaningless in this world, claims expressed using these concepts are themselves not meaningful and hence have no truth-value.

Priest’s view, then, is best seen as the claim that these concepts are *contingently* error theoretic.¹² On closer inspection, the idea of contingently error theoretic concepts is deeply problematic. Certainly, if concepts are truth

functions from terms to extensions at worlds considered as actual, then it hardly seems plausible that it is a contingent matter whether or not a concept exists. Plausibly, if anything is a candidate to exist at every possible world, then truth functions to extensions *across worlds* are those things. If a function to extensions at worlds considered as actual maps to the empty set, then that function maps to the empty set *at every world*. And if a function maps to a particular nonempty set of extensions, that function will map to those extensions at every world.¹³ This view of concepts straightforwardly explains why talk of contingently error theoretic concepts is puzzling, for one can only be contingently error theoretic about an entity if that entity fails to exist and contingently so. Since on this view concepts exist, or fail to exist, of necessity, there can be no contingently error theoretic concepts.

One might, however, embrace a view of concepts as abstracta that does not explicate their content in terms of truth functions from terms to extensions. Although often it is supposed that abstracta exist of necessity if at all, nothing precludes the view that some abstract objects exist contingently. Witness Harty Field, a contingent error theorist about abstract mathematical objects, and Mark Colyvan, a contingent Platonist about abstract mathematical objects.¹⁴ If concepts were contingently existing abstracta, then, *prima facie*, sense could be made of the claim that some concepts are contingently error theoretic. But now it must be asked, in virtue of what do these abstracta exist in some worlds and not others?

One option is that there is a connection—either causal or constitutive—between the existence of a particular abstracta, *C*, at a world, and the possession of *C* by agents in that world. Set aside general worries about the plausibility of any account that appeals to such connections between abstracta and concreta. Even absent these concerns, any

1 way of spelling out the relationship between
 2 the existence of *C* and the possession of *C* are
 3 problematic for the contingent error theorist.

4 Suppose that by concept possession minimal
 5 concept possession is intended. Then it had
 6 better not be the case that a concept *C* exists
 7 in *w* iff an agent in *w* minimally possesses
 8 *C*. For it is possible minimally to possess
 9 concepts that are internally inconsistent,
 10 and hence that necessarily fail to exist. So if
 11 minimal possession is a sufficient condition
 12 for concept existence, this entails that there is
 13 a concept *C*, and a world *w*, such that in *w*, *C*
 14 exists (in virtue of being minimally possessed
 15 by some agent in *w*) and *C* fails to exist (in
 16 virtue of being internally inconsistent). Since
 17 this account entails a contradiction, it can
 18 immediately be rejected.

19 Suppose instead a concept *C* exists in *w*
 20 only if an agent in *w* minimally possesses *C*:
 21 minimal possession of *C* in *w* is a necessary
 22 but not a sufficient condition for the existence
 23 of *C* in *w*. Then no contradiction is entailed.
 24 What are the other necessary conditions for the
 25 existence of *C* in *w*? Plausibly, one necessary
 26 condition is that *C* is internally coherent. But
 27 are these two conditions (*C*'s being minimally
 28 possessed and internally coherent) jointly
 29 sufficient for the existence of *C*, or are they
 30 merely necessary conditions for the existence
 31 of *C*? If they are jointly sufficient, then the
 32 contingent error theorist is in trouble. For
 33 she is precisely concerned with cases where,
 34 despite the fact that actual agents minimally
 35 possess a concept, she contends that each of
 36 us ought to be contingently error theoretic
 37 about that concept. But a concept could
 38 be *contingently* error theoretic only if it is
 39 internally coherent (otherwise it is necessarily
 40 error theoretic), and the *possibility* of being
 41 error theoretic about some concept *C* can
 42 only sensibly be raised given that *C* is at least
 43 minimally possessed. (Otherwise, how could
 44 anyone even formulate the error theoretic
 45 claims?) But then the conditions under which
 46 it is possible to be contingent error theorists

about *C* are precisely the jointly sufficient
 conditions for *C*'s existence, and hence the
 conditions under which one ought not be an
 error theorist about *C*. So this account cannot
 support a contingent error theoretic view of
 any concept.

On the other hand, if these conditions are
 not jointly sufficient, then some account
 is required of what other conditions are
 necessary. But it is hard to see what other
 plausible conditions there could be. The
 error theorist needs to say that a concept *C*
 exists iff (a) *C* is minimally possessed and
 (b) *C* is internally coherent and (c) *X* fails to
 obtain (where *X* is some additional necessary
 condition or conditions). Since (a) will obtain
 in the case of any concept that is a candidate
 to be error theoretic, and (b) will obtain in the
 case of any concept that is a candidate to be
contingently error theoretic, the plausibility
 of the error theory being true of *C* rests on
 (c). There need to be features of the relevant
 world in virtue of which *X* fails to obtain,
 where these features have nothing to do with
 the structure of *C* or with the linguistic and
 conceptually relevant behaviors or abilities
 of agents with respect to *C*, and where the
 absence of these features explains why it
 is right to be an error theorist about *C*. It is
 difficult to see how there could be such an
X. So whatever the relationship between the
 existence of *C* at some world and the minimal
 possession of *C* by agents at that world, it will
 be at best implausible and at worst impossible
 to be contingently error theoretic about *C*.

Suppose then, that concept possession
 is understood to be full possession, where,
 roughly, to possess fully a concept is to
 completely grasp its content: to understand
 its definitional structure or to understand the
 truth function from worlds considered as
 actual to extensions. On this view of concept
 possession, one cannot possess a concept
 that is internally incoherent. Now suppose
 that concept possession is a necessary and
 sufficient condition for the existence of a

concept at a world. A concept *C* exists in *w* iff some agent in *w* fully possesses *C*. This can hardly ground the claims of the contingent error theorist. For whether or not it is right to be contingently error theoretic about, say, the concept of sexual perversion, is not a debate about whether any actual agent fully possesses the concept. Priest is not claiming that in fact each of us is conceptually impoverished with respect to the concept, *though that might not have been the case*. Moreover, since full concept possession entails that the concept possessed is internally coherent, it is, as before, hard to see what other necessary condition could be required if full concept possession is relegated to a necessary but insufficient condition for the existence of a concept. So appeal to full concept possession rather than minimal concept possession does not help the contingent error theorist.

A last option is to say that concepts exist contingently, but there is no connection between their existence and their possession. One suggestion is that *C* exists in some world *w* and fails to exist in some world *w**, iff *C* is internally consistent. The idea is that some concepts necessarily fail to exist—those that are internally incoherent—and all other concepts exist contingently. Then there are some worlds in which it is correct to be contingently error theoretic about *C*. The problem now is that there is a lack of any warrant for claiming, of some particular world, that that world is an error theoretic world with respect to *C*. Concepts are abstracta, and hence agents bear no causal relations to them. Unless either those abstracta exist of necessity, or there is some necessary connection between those abstracta and the empirical properties of a world, agents can have no evidence of their existence or lack thereof. So even if it was true that the concept of sexual perversion was a contingently existent one, there could be no reason to suspect that actually that concept fails to exist, and hence no reason

for anyone to be an error theorist about it. More generally, if concepts are contingently existing abstracta that bear no necessary connections to empirical facts about a world, then they are rendered utterly metaphysically and explanatorily epiphenomenal.

There is one final possibility. The contingent error theorist might hold that an internally coherent abstract concept *C* is contingently error theoretic in *w* just in case in *w*, *C* is inconsistent with, or presupposes the falsity of, other core concepts in *w* (where the discourses expressing those core concepts are taken to be more likely to be true than the discourse in which *C* is located, or where those discourses are more central than the one in which *C* is found, such that it is most likely that any tension will be resolved in favor of the discourses that are in tension with *C*).¹⁵ While the concept *C* itself is coherent, if the attention is turned to the web of concepts involved in core discourses in *w*, it will be discovered that *C* is inconsistent with the other concepts in the web: *C* is externally inconsistent. Something like this view makes sense of some of what Priest says. He notes that the concept of perversion makes no sense once the Aristotelian worldview is dispensed with, and the concept of absolute temporal distance makes no sense once the Newtonian worldview is dispensed with. Thus, perhaps these two concepts are contingently error theoretic because in this world they are inconsistent with other key concepts that form part of core discourses as a result of an abandoning of the discourse of teleology in favor of the discourse of natural selection, on the one hand, and an abandoning of the discourse of Newtonian physics and an embracing of the discourse of special relativity, on the other.

It seems absolutely right to point out that some concepts will be such that after certain empirical or perhaps conceptual revision, they will be in significant tension, or perhaps even inconsistent with, other concepts, in the sense that given the new discourses, it would never be correct to claim that there was something

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1 that fell under those concepts. Moreover,
 2 in many of these cases it would clearly be
 3 a contingent matter that nothing fell under
 4 the concepts in question. Furthermore, there
 5 is a clear difference between such cases and
 6 other sorts of cases in which it is discovered
 7 that nothing falls under a particular concept.
 8 Suppose it were discovered that the concept of
 9 a pink goose has nothing falling under it. This
 10 discovery would result from an examination
 11 of the empirical world and the discovery that
 12 every goose is a color other than pink. But
 13 in the cases under consideration, it is not
 14 required that the world is examined once there
 15 is access to the other concepts in the web:
 16 only those concepts need to be examined.
 17 From the armchair it can be discovered that
 18 nothing falls under the concept of perversion,
 19 just by conceptual analysis of the concept
 20 of perversion coupled with consideration of
 21 the relevant broader discourse it is supposed
 22 describes this world, namely natural selection
 23 (and perhaps also some ethical discourses). Of
 24 course, empirical investigation was required
 25 to come to the view that natural selection is
 26 the right account of certain phenomena in
 27 this world, but once this concept is embraced
 28 as correctly applying to this world, then
 29 examination of this concept and the related
 30 discourse is all that is needed to rule out that
 31 there are any perversions.

32 Nevertheless, these are not sufficient
 33 grounds to claim that concepts such as these
 34 are contingently error theoretic. The sense in
 35 which these concepts are erroneous is that
 36 given the truth of the statements of the other
 37 relevant discourses, those concepts cannot have
 38 anything falling under them in the actual world.
 39 But this does not make true Priest's assertions
 40 that these concepts makes no sense, and that
 41 in some sense assertions made using the term
 42 expressing the concept are meaningless or have
 43 no truth value. Indeed, it is precisely because
 44 the concept of perversion has the content it
 45 does, and this world is the way it is taken to
 46 be with respect to natural selection, that it can

be can be meaningfully explained why it is
 that there are no perversions. The concept is
 perfectly meaningful, and discourse using the
 term expressing the concept is meaningful. It
 can meaningfully be claimed that there are no
 perversions, and explained why there are no
 perversions, and further explained how the
 world would need to differ if there were to be
 perversions. The concept itself is not rendered
 erroneous, nor, indeed, is discourse involving
 the concept. The only error can be in applying
 "sexual perversion" to any act. But that is to
 say no more than that "sexual perversion" has
 no extension, not that it is a genuinely error
 theoretic concept. Indeed, it might be quite
 important that some concepts remain part of
 discourse even though nothing falls under
 those concepts. Perhaps perversion is not like
 this, but arguably absolute temporal distance
 might be if there is interest in certain modal
 properties of the world that are grounded in
 other physically possible models of space-
 time.

There is, therefore, a dilemma. Either
 concepts exist necessarily or contingently.
 If necessarily, then talk of contingently error
 theoretic concepts is mistaken. If contingently,
 then either there is some connection between
 the possession of a concept and its existence,
 in which case a contingent error theoretic
 account of that concept is impossible or
 deeply implausible, or else there is no such
 connection, in which case concepts are purely
 epiphenomenal and there are no grounds for
 being an error theorist about any particular
 concept. Either way, there is no room for a
 contingently error theoretic concept.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a return to Priest's examples
 will be instructive if it can be determined
 whether there is an explanation of the
 phenomena to which he appeals, as it were,
 without appealing to the idea of contingently
 error theoretic concepts. Suppose Priest is
 right, and that it is part of the definitional

structure of the concept of sexual perversion that an act is perverted that does not fulfil its natural function and in virtue of this is bad. Moreover, suppose that an Aristotelian world is one in which there is an account of natural function such that perverted acts fail to be natural, and such that it follows from that account that those acts are bad. Then if an Aristotelian world is possible, the concept of sexual perversion is internally coherent and contentful, and indeed, in such a world certain acts fall under the concept of perversion. If that Aristotelian world is not the actual world, then only counterfactual acts fall under the concept, and applying the expression to any act in the actual world would be a mistake. But that is *not* to say that the concept makes no sense, or that claims made using the expression “sexual perversion” are meaningless or have no truth-value. And that seems like the correct thing to say. If the Aristotelian world is merely possible, then it seems meaningful, correct, and indeed desirable for us to say that actually, there are no perversions, though there might have been had things been different. On the other hand, if the Aristotelian world is merely epistemically possible but logically impossible, then it turns out that the expression “sexual perversion” fails to express any concept. In that case it is right to be necessarily error theoretic about the concept.

Or consider the case of the concept of the time (*simpliciter*) between two events. Priest claims that once it is discovered that this is

a world where special relativity holds, talk of the temporal distance *simpliciter* between events is meaningless. But this is surely not the right thing to say at all. Talk of the temporal distance *simpliciter* between events is perfectly *meaningful*. Absolute temporal distance can be defined across a range of different models, the most obvious and well-known being the Newtonian model. It is only because the concept of temporal distance is meaningful that it can correctly be reported that there are no absolute temporal distances in this world, though there might have been had things been different. Indeed, this seems like the sort of thing that scientists might often want to say. It is true that if one is asked, of this world, what the absolute temporal distance is between a and b, there is no answer to that question. Or, more correctly, the answer is that there is no absolute temporal distance between a and b and that temporal distance varies depending on one’s frame of reference. The question is meaningful, it is just that there are no absolute distances in our world. Moreover, if one were to answer that the absolute temporal distance between a and b is three minutes, then one will have asserted a false proposition, not a proposition that lacks a truth-value. So again, here is a case of a meaningful concept that, contingently, turns out not to have anything falling under its extension. In neither of these cases does it make sense to embrace an error theoretic account of these concepts.

NOTES

1. J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin Books, 1977).
2. H. Field, “The Conceptual Contingency of Mathematical Objects,” *Mind*, vol. 102 (1993), pp. 285–299.
3. Though we might have reason to be suspicious of some particular accounts on grounds specific to the domain in question. For instance, we might be suspicious of a contingent error theoretic account of mathematical statements.
4. G. Priest, “Sexual Perversion,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 75 (1997), pp. 360–372; I. Primoratz, “Sexual Perversion,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 34 (1997), pp. 245–258.

5. One could eschew talk of discourses completely and simply say that one is an ontological error theorist about entities of kind E iff (a) an entity is a particular of kind E only if it has properties $P_1 \dots P_n$ and (b) nothing has properties $P_1 \dots P_n$. One is an ontological error theorist about properties of kind P iff (a) a property is an instance of property kind P iff it have features $F_1 \dots F_n$ and (b) no property has features $F_1 \dots F_n$. Nothing hangs on understanding ontologically error theoretic accounts one way or the other.

6. D. Chalmers, "Epistemic Two Dimensional Semantics," *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 118 (2004), pp. 153–226; F. Jackson, (2004). "Why We Need A-intensions," *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 118 (2004), pp. 257–277.

7. Fermat's little theorem is the theorem that if p is a prime number, then for any integer a ($a^p - a$) will be evenly divisible by p .

8. Priest, "Sexual Perversion," p 371.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., p. 370.

11. Ibid.

12. Priest might just be claiming that when we thought that Aristotelianism was true, we were warranted in thinking that "sexual perversion" referred, though as it turns out we were mistaken, and it lacks any reference. That claim seems perfectly sensible, regardless of whether or not it is true. But talk of concepts "making sense" suggests he has something else in mind.

13. Of course, it is true is that from the perspective of agents in a different possible world who have a different concept of, say, sexual perversion from our concept, the truth function from their term "sexual perversion" to extensions at possible worlds considered as actual will yield a different set of extensions than the function centered on our world. That is just to say that the very same linguistic item could have expressed a different concept (though perhaps in this case a related one). But the point is that the truth function from *our* term "sexual perversion" to extensions at worlds considered as actual will be the same at every world.

14. Field, "The Conceptual Contingency of Mathematical Objects"; M. Colyvan, "Conceptual Contingency and Abstract Existence," *Philosophical Quarterly* 50 (2000), pp. 87–91.

15. I thank a referee for this suggestion.

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