WHY QUEERNESS IS NOT ENOUGH: AGAINST MORAL ELIMINATIVISM

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Abstract: Moral error theorists often claim to be strongly anti-metaphysical in their moral scepticism and atheistic naturalists. This paper argues that precisely this becomes a problem for them, when their metaethical and ontological commitments clash. I first outline how the known arguments against error theory face a problematic, yet rarely considered trade-off: either they are very strong, then they are also very demanding in their assumptions or they are less demanding in their assumptions but rather weak in their conclusions. In response to this challenge I then develop a new argument against error theory that exploits an overlooked inconsistency in the error theorists' standard line of argumentation. I conclude that the implications of this inconsistency are less of a problem for fictionalist error theorists, but will render any eliminativism based on error theory circular.

Keywords: metaethics, error theory, moral fictionalism, moral eliminativism, Argument from Queerness, J. L. Mackie.

I. INTRODUCTION

More than 30 years after J. L. Mackie introduced moral error theory as a metaethical view, his theory still sparks discussion[1]. Moral error theorists often claim to be strongly anti-metaphysical in their moral scepticism and atheistic naturalists. This paper argues that precisely this becomes a problem for them, when their metaethical and ontological commitments clash. I first outline how the known arguments against error theory face a problematic, yet rarely considered trade-off: either they are very strong, then they are also very demanding in their assumptions or they are less demanding in their

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[1] See, for example, Finlay (2008, 2010); Joyce (2011, 2012); Olson (2010); Daly & Liggins (2010) and different contributions in *A World Without Values*, ed. R. Joyce and S. Kirchin.

assumptions but rather weak in their conclusions. In response to this challenge I then develop a new argument against error theory that strikes a balance between strength and frugality by exploiting an overlooked inconsistency in the error theorists' standard line of argumentation. I conclude that the implications of this inconsistency are less of a problem for fictionalist error theorists, but will render any eliminativism based on error theory circular.

II. MACKIE'S ERROR THEORY AND ITS CRITICS

Moral error theory claims that moral judgments ('It is good to do X') are uniformly and systematically false (Mackie, 35). It rests on two claims. Firstly, the conceptual claim that moral judgments entail a reference to what Mackie calls objective values. Objective values according to Mackie are categorically prescriptive entities that determine the truth and falsehood of moral judgments.

What does it mean for something to be categorically prescriptive and objective? For Mackie, saying that something is prescriptive is to say that it is action-guiding (Mackie, 23/4)[2]. Objective values „tell us how we *ought* to act, (…) they give us *reasons* for acting" (Miller 2003, 115). To be categorically prescriptive means that this prescriptivity does not depend on an agent's particular desires (see also Kant 1997, 25-7 & Finlay 2008, 4). It is a bit harder to determine what exactly Mackie means by objective. Miller gives an impressive list of Mackie's usages of the term. Among other things, the term objective in Mackie seems to denote entities that are part of the fabric of the world, extra-mental, independent of our attitudes, that can be an object of knowledge, and that can be perceived, to name just a few (Miller 2003, 116).

The second claim, which is often called the ontological claim, is simply that such objective values do not exist. Mackie then combines these claims and argues that all moral judgments are wrong, since a) objective values do not exist but b) all moral claims or judgments erroneously entail a reference to them. The conceptual claim makes error theory a form of cognitivism, because it entails that moral judgements are truth-apt, their truth depending on precisely those objective values whose existence is denied by the ontological claim. Due to the ontological claim moral error theory is usually also seen as a form of moral anti-realism (Miller 1977, 112; Joyce 2009, 1).[3] As Richard Joyce puts it, error theory „combines a rich view of moral concepts with a meager ontological view of the world" (Joyce 2013, 6).

As Mackie himself remarks, moral error theory is strongly anti-common-sensical (Mackie 1977, 35) and thus needs to be backed up by very good arguments. One such argument that Mackie offers is the argument from

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[2] See also Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2010, 56-60).
[3] Pace Jamie Dreier (2010).

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queerness, which is typically considered to involve a metaphysical and an epistemological strand.[4]

The metaphysical part of the argument is that objective values „would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe" (Mackie 1977, 38). He compares them to Platonic forms, paragons of a metaphysical entity (40). The epistemological argument follows this line of thought and states that „if we were aware of [objective values], it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing anything else" (38). Both arguments work to the conclusion that there are no objective values.

Many arguments have been made against error theory and they broadly fall into three different categories. Yet each of these categories faces problems. The first one includes direct or external attacks that are directed either against the conceptual claim or the ontological claim. The conceptual claim is what makes Mackie's theory a cognitivist theory. Attacks against this claim are thus most readily accessible to non-cognitivists, but there have been others too.[5] Many arguments have been made against the ontological claim, and especially the metaphysical aspect of the argument from queerness is still controversial.[6] The main advantage of such attacks is that they are usually very strong. Since error theory cannot do without either the conceptual or the ontological claim[7], a successful direct attack has a considerable chance to be a decisive argument against error theory. The weakness of such arguments, however, is that they do not beat the error theorist on her own ground, but always remain an external critique. As such, they are often very complex and are based on other metaethical and philosophical views which are usually also debated. For example, the success or failure of a particular version of the metaphysical argument from queerness depends on the correctness of the Humean theory of motivation (Mackie 1977, pp. 40/1; Lillehammer forthcoming, 3). Direct attacks are strong if successful, but are usually very demanding in their assumptions.

The second category contains arguments that do not argue against either claim but rather aim at Mackie's conclusions, arguing that his theory is, if not false, at least unattractive, counterintuitive, too demanding, or else lacks some

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[4] Even more fine-grained distinctions can be made. Hallvard Lillehammer, for example, points out that there are at least three different kinds of metaphysical queerness that are in question (Lillehammer forthcoming, 3; see also Garner 1990).

[5] See, for example, the debate between Finlay (2008, 2010), Joyce (2011, 2012), and Olson (2010).

[6] Lillehammer (forthcoming) gives a great overview of the debate around the argument from queerness.

[7] Joyce disagrees and points to the possibility that one could become an error theorist simply by disagreeing with all other metaethical theories but he concedes that the „the two-step argument is the error theorist's standard strategy" (2013, 5). Also, it is hard to see how a rebuttal of at least one of the two claims would not make another metaethical theory attractive, but let that go for now.

of the essential theoretical virtues. Accordingly, the proponents of these kinds of attacks argue that their respective theories are superior to error theory because they are simpler, more elegant, honest, charitable, conservative, naturalistic, or economical, to name just a few examples[8]. These arguments can be seen as a response to the problems of direct attacks. Instead of arguing that error theory is wrong, they only aim to establish that error theory is unattractive because it lacks some essential theoretical virtue. As such, they are less demanding than direct attacks but they are also weaker. Even if error theory is an unattractive, ugly truth, it could still be a truth. At the same time they are not entirely frugal in their assumptions and thus still force their proponents to endorse other metaethical positions which are also usually debated.

Attacks against moral error theory of the third and last category try to solve this problem by being aimed neither at the premises nor at the conclusions but at the way the latter is derived from the former, i.e. it questions the argument's validity. Aiming to exploit an irreconcilable, inner tension or contradiction of the error theory, they are potentially devastating, while also being very frugal in their demands and do not force their proponents to committing to any controversial metaethical view of their own. Yet it is of course very hard to find such irreconcilable tensions or contradictions in the error theory and a compelling argument of this kind has not been made yet. [9] Following Miller, I will refer to this category of attack as an internal or indirect attack against error theory (Miller 2003, 118).

In the next section of this paper I will develop an argument that is designed to combine the advantages of all three categories and simultaneously addresses their various problems, i.e. a strong argument against error theory that is also very frugal in its assumptions. It will be aimed at the error theorists arguments for the ontological claim (first category), and largely remain neutral about the conceptual claim. Secondly, rather than claiming that error theory is false, it will suggest that error theory is unattractive to ontological naturalists (second category). Thirdly, it will offer an indirect line of attack (third category) against the argument from queerness that is accessible to proponents of a wide range of metaethical and philosophical positions.

III. A NEW OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT

Recall that the argument from queerness has two aspects: a metaphysical and an epistemological. The metaphysical argument from queerness runs as follows (Mackie 1977, 38-42; Lillehammer forthcoming, 2/3):

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[8] Daly and Liggins in their 2010 defence of error theory deal largely, though not exclusively, with these attacks. They concluded that all of the charges considered are either ill-motivated, false, or otherwise fail to provide compelling arguments against error theory (ibid. 21).

[9] A prominent objection that falls into this category is the familiar charge that error theory contradicts the Law of the Excluded Middle. The issue has been discussed among other by Olson (2010) and Pigden (2010, 27-32). I agree with both that error theorists can meet this charge.

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P_{M1} Objective values would be metaphysically queer, utterly different from anything else in the universe.

P_{M2} According to our naturalist worldviews we do not find such queer entities in the world.

C_M Therefore objective values do not exist.

The first premise, which is just stating the queerness of objective values, can take on different forms, depending on how exactly this queerness is to be thought. The second premise is a commitment to a naturalist worldview.

The epistemological argument from queerness runs similarly (Mackie 1977, 38-42; Lillehammer forthcoming, 9/10):

P_{E1} Objective values would be epistemologically queer, i.e. they would place strange demands on our epistemic faculties.

P_{E2} We are most likely unable to epistemically meet these strange demands.

C_E We should not believe in the existence of objective values.

There are four logically possible permutations about the soundness of those two arguments. Either (1) both are sound, or (2) the metaphysical argument is sound and the epistemological argument is unsound, or (3) the epistemological argument is sound and the metaphysical argument is unsound, or (4) both are unsound.

In case 4, objective values exist and we are able to acquire knowledge about them. This means that the ontological claim of error theory is defeated and the road is open for moral realism. A direct attack on the ontological claim will most likely proceed by arguing for this case. However, I want to suggest another kind of attack that tries to exploit a tension between the other three cases.

Let us now look at the two cases in which the epistemological argument is sound, case 1 and case 3. If the epistemological argument is sound than P_{E2} is true. However, this makes it undecidable for us whether the metaphysical argument is sound or not. P_{M2} states that we do not find metaphysically queer objective values in this world. Yet there are two possible reasons for why this is so: it could either be that P_{M2} is true because there really are none and furthermore we would be unable to epistemically detect them anyway (i.e. case 1). Our situation would then be similar to the situation of a blind person in an empty, dark room. Or – the second option – it could be that there are indeed objective values in the world and P_{M2} is false but we are just unable to epistemically detect them (case 3). In that case our situation would be like the situation of a blind person in a bright room filled with objects. In neither case do we find objective values but the reasons for that are completely

different. In one case objective values just do not exist, and in the other case they exist but we are epistemically unable to find them.

Let us now look at the two cases (1, 2) in which the metaphysical argument is sound. If this is the case, the epistemological argument becomes undecidable: do we not find objective values because there simply are none, but if there were any we would easily find them (case 2) or are there none, but even if there were any we still could not find them (case 1)? To stick with the analogy: in an empty, dark room, there's no way of knowing whether we're blind or just in an empty, dark room. In neither case do we find objective values, but it becomes impossible for us to tell why.

Thus a problem arises for the error theorist who defends both the metaphysical and the epistemological argument. If she accepts one of the arguments, the other one becomes undecidable for her. One part of the argument can be seen as an argument against the other. This challenge is an indirect attack, but, not against error theory as a whole but specifically against the argument from queerness. Since the argument from queerness is used to defend the ontological claim it also has elements of a direct attack on error theory, combining the strength of the latter with the frugality of the former. What are the error theorist's options? The obvious move to make in defence of error theory, it seems, is to just drop one of the arguments and try to back the ontological claim with a reinforced version of one of the two possible arguments from queerness. But either way is problematic and thus a dilemma for error theory results.

The error theorist cannot just drop the epistemological argument and argue only on the basis of the metaphysical argument. Since the epistemological argument renders the metaphysical one undecidable, it can always be used as an argument against error theory, which has to be met by the error theorist through a stronger version of the metaphysical argument. She would have to argue that objective values are not just metaphysically queer but are in fact impossible. If the error theorist could show that objective values cannot possibly exist, i.e. that they cannot exist in any possible world, then the metaphysical argument would always and necessarily be true and tautological and the epistemological uncertainty about why we do not find objective values in this world would be resolved. But as long as we do not have a convincing metaphysical argument for the *a priori* and necessary impossibility of objective values the epistemological argument stands as a challenge to the error theorist. And the chances of successfully developing such an argument, I shall argue, are slim.

What do I mean if I say that something is *a priori* and necessarily impossible, as opposed to merely queer? An example may clarify the distinction. Saying that objective values are queer is to liken their non-existence to the non-existence of unicorns. They do not exist in this world but we can easily imagine a world where unicorns actually exist. To claim that objective values are *a priori* and necessarily impossible, on the other hand, would mean

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to liken their non-existence to the non-existence of pink, invisible unicorns. The notion of a pink, invisible unicorn is the notion of something *a priori* and necessarily impossible because it entails a contradiction in terms. A part of what it means to be pink is to be visible. Thus, in no possible world can there be entities that are at the same time pink and invisible, and unicorns of this kind are *a priori* and necessarily impossible.

Sophisticated error theorists like Richard Garner and Richard Joyce reject, of course, at least the first part of this comparison. Objective values are not merely queer the way unicorns are but they are „unusual in an unusual way" as Garner puts it (Garner 1990, 143). The metaphysical argument can take different forms, each focusing on a different kind of queerness, and it is often hard to see whether the error theorists intend their arguments to show the contingent non-existence or the necessary impossibility of objective values. I will, however, not go through all the variations of the metaphysical argument here, because there is a more general point to be made why any given argument for the *a priori* and necessary impossibility of objective values will not be readily available to the error theorist. Due to its conceptual claim error theory is a form of cognitivism, i.e. it views moral judgments as truth-apt. But if objective values cannot possibly exist and moral judgments can be true only if objective values do exist, then moral judgments cannot possibly be truth-apt. An argument that establishes the *a priori* and necessary impossibility of objective values will thus be too strong to be compatible with the conceptual claim of error theory. Instead of merely erroneous, our use of moral language would be truly paradoxical. This turn from an error theory to a 'paradox theory' would be quite a radical departure from the entire metaethical view that error theorists are trying to establish.

With such implications looming, the second and perhaps better way of meeting the new challenge would be to forego the metaphysical argument completely and merely defend the epistemological argument: objective values would be queer entities, and we have problems with epistemically detecting such queer entities. Thus, the error theorist could argue, there might or might not be objective values, but either way we cannot tell and thus should not believe in them. However, as we have seen, if we assume that the epistemological argument holds then the metaphysical argument is rendered undecidable. Thus, the naturalist's *scepticism* about objective values is not well justified but, the question of their existence being undecidable, the error theorist rather has to assume a weaker, merely *agnostic* position on the question about the existence of objective values. The strong ontological claim would have to be given up in favour of a weaker epistemological claim. If we cannot know whether objective values exist, and if knowledge about the existence of objective values is necessary to determine the truth and falsehood of moral judgements, it follows that we cannot make any claims about the truth and falsehood of moral judgments. Error theory thus would be a form

of moral agnosticism that cannot establish the falsehood or truth of any moral judgment and thus fails in its central aim.

Having to endorse agnosticism about objective values rather than a well-founded scepticism would be quite a disappointment for the error theorist, who, as it is sometimes put, takes a position towards morality that is analogous to an atheist's position towards religion (Joyce 2011, 1; Joyce 2010, xii; Garner 2010b). The distinction between atheism and agnosticism is a subtle but nevertheless important one, the latter being a considerably weaker position. In an ontologically naturalist framework, i.e. an ontological framework that denies the existence of supernatural entities (Daly & Liggins 2010, 19; Miller 2003, 178-80; see also Papineau 2009), the question about the existence of objective values should be decidable, thus justifying either scepticism or realism (see also Mackie 1977, 17/8). Yet, if I am right, scepticism about objective values is not an option for the error theorist, who can at best establish agnosticism about objective values. If we cannot know whether objective values exist, and if knowledge about the existence of objective values is necessary to determine the truth and falsehood of moral judgements, it follows that we cannot make any claims about the truth and falsehood of moral judgments. Error theory thus would be a form of moral agnosticism. As such it cannot establish the falsehood or truth of any moral judgment and thus fails in its central aim. In pointing out a conflict between error theory and ontological naturalism we also find an element of the second category of attacks in this new argument.[10]

Not being able to make claims about the truth or falsehood or moral judgments might be more problematic for certain kinds of error theorists than others. A distinction is often drawn between eliminativists, or moral abolitionists, on the one hand, and moral fictionalists on the other. Both eliminativism and fictionalism are forms of error theory and both agree that the positive, atomic propositions of our moral discourse are uniformly false. However, they differ in their opinion on what consequences should be drawn from this with regards to moral discourse. The eliminativist recommends that moral discourses should be abandoned completely „just as we have abandoned phlogiston-talk" (Daly & Liggins 2010, 2). The fictionalist, on the other hand, argues that we should stop believing the erroneous propositions of the moral discourse but rather choose to merely accept them, without committing

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[10] Daly and Liggins in their 2010 defence of error theory consider attacks that claim an incompatibility between error theory and *methodological* naturalism (Daly & Liggins 2010, 19-21). Simply put, *methodological* naturalism holds that science is the best way to find out about the world, whereas *ontological* naturalism is an ontological view that denies the existence of supernatural entities (Daly & Liggins 2010, 19; Miller 2003, 178-80; see also Papineau 2009). My argument is concerned with the latter, because it claims that error theory is not well justified in denying the existence of supernatural, queer objective values, but it does not make claims about the former. Hence, Daly's and Liggins' objections do not affect my argument.

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to their truth.[11] Their debate can be seen as disagreement about the use and harm of moral language that is grounded in error theory. Both eliminativism and fictionalism generally assume that error theory is correct and is a sound metaethical basis for their views. The argument of this paper is especially aimed at the eliminativist strand.

Richard Garner, who champions this position, in his paper „Abolishing Morality" gives us *a posteriori* reasons why we should abandon morality, including three charges against morality that Mackie considered and rejected, namely that „morality inflames dispute and makes compromise difficult, it preserves unfair arrangements and facilitates the misuse of power, and it makes global war possible" (Garner 2010, 219/220). Besides the question whether these claims are true or not, *a posteriori* reasons are unlikely to successfully justify abolishing morality, if the error theorist can at best be an agnostic about moral judgments. The reason is as follows. Abandoning our moral discourse threatens to put an end not only to moral discourse, but also to metaethical discourse. In fact, one of the hopes that motivate Garner to argue for eliminativism is that we will finally be able to put an end to (at least some) metaethical disputes (Garner 2010, 220 & 222-4). However, arguing for metaethical eliminativism on the basis of moral agnosticism, when in fact it remains yet an open question whether objective values do exist and whether moral judgments are sometimes true, begs the question. As was shown before, the eliminativists are not justified in their scepticism but can only embrace an agnostic position. If it is yet undecided, and maybe even undecidable, whether the ontological claim is true it would be negligent to abandon the discourse that is aimed precisely at answering this question. Differently put, abandoning the metaethical discourse assumes that this discourse cannot help us to find out about the truth and truth-aptness of moral judgments. But, as was shown, it remains an open question for the error theorist whether moral judgments are ever true. Thus eliminativists are begging the question when they abandon moral and metaethical discourse on *a posteriori* grounds, and *a priori* grounds do not seem to be available to them.

There may be one way out for the eliminativist. Metaethics is widely regarded as a non-empirical discipline by moral anti-realists and realists alike. Even very naturalist, reductionist forms of realism might not necessarily entail a commitment to viewing the analysis of the moral qualities of an act or property as an empirical question (Miller 2003, 180-2). The only possible way for the eliminativist is to break with this position and embrace a conception of metaethics as an empirical discipline.[12] In doing so they would change the standards of justification that a metaethical theory needs to com-

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[11] Miller makes the same distinction but calls the two forms radical and moderate error theory, respectively (Miller 2003, 122).

[12] Joyce points to some reasons why the debate between fictionalists and eliminativists might be decided with reference to empirical research (Joyce 2010, xv; 2013, 2).

ply with. Empirical, *a posteriori* evidence would then be the right kind of evidence to support eliminativism in just the same way that experimental evidence in physics is the right kind of evidence to justify an error theory about phlogiston.

The implications of such a move are significant. Firstly, this would not only make *a posteriori* evidence the right kind of evidence but also completely change the problem in question. Error theory is a theory about the truth and truth-aptness of moral judgments. Yet, no matter whether the eliminativists see themselves as moral sceptics or agnostics, they cannot, *by their own standards*, hope to learn much about the truth of moral judgments from empirical research. The only question they can hope to solve empirically is whether or not the use of moral language does more harm than good (in a non-moral sense). This question is relevant for the debate between fictionalism and eliminativism; it is not relevant for the debate about error theory. Embracing a conception of metaethics as an empirical disciprand thus makes eliminativism lose its error theoretic underpinnings: it might save eliminativism, but it is not a reasonable option for an error theorist. This also means that – although eliminativists would not have to defend error theory anymore, which has always been tedious – their theory would not have any answer to the question whether moral judgments are sometimes true, which significantly reduces the explanatory powers and philosophical richness of their views. The potential incompatibility between error theory and eliminativism is an important, overlooked, and uncomfortable implication for the eliminativists, yet it is unavoidable if they should choose to embrace a conception of metaethics as an empirical discipline.

Moral fictionalism might be less affected by the argument of this paper because the consequences that it draws from error theory are less radical. Agnosticism might serve it well for its purposes. Most importantly, moreover, it does not beg the question the way eliminativism does through arguing for the abolition of metaethical discourse on *a posteriori* grounds. Nevertheless it might, of course, face other problems and be philosophically unattractive for other reasons.[13]

Thus, there is a tension between the metaphysical and the epistemological strands of the argument from queerness that threatens the ontological claim. The error theorist cannot reinforce the metaphysical argument because such a reinforced argument is incompatible with her commitments to cognitivism. The only other option for the error theorist is to rely exclusively on the epistemological argument and embrace an agnosticism about moral judgments. This means that moral error theory cannot establish a claim about the truth and falsehood of moral judgments. While this might be less

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[13] See, for example, Joyce 2013, 2; Oddie & Demetriou 2010; Garner 2010.

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of a problem for the fictionalist, it will render any eliminativism based on moral error theory circular.[14]

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