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28
ERROR THEORY AND FICTIONALISM

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Perhaps the easiest way to come to understand what contemporary philosophers mean when they call a theory about ethics an error theory, or a form of fictionalism, is to begin with nihilism. Nihilism about morality is the view that in fact nothing really is right or wrong. Many of us do have moral beliefs; many of us believe, for example, that torture is wrong. According to nihilism all such moral beliefs are false.

One main motivation for such a radical position is the worry that in the world as described by modern science there seems to be no place for rightness or wrongness. The universe, to simplify somewhat, is made up of elementary particles in a void with properties like charge or charm. Despite these evocative names, such properties are evaluatively neutral. In other words, saying that an electron has positive charge is not *ipso facto* a positive assessment; it is not saying that there is something good about being this way. Neither is it a normative assessment; it is not saying that the electron should be this way. All the properties that physics and, supposedly, the rest of the sciences ever mention are similarly neither evaluative nor normative. If reality is as the sciences claim, then it is evaluatively and normatively neutral. Our moral beliefs, however, are essentially evaluative and normative; they assess states of affairs as good or bad and actions as right or wrong. Since nothing in reality lives up to these beliefs, these beliefs must be false. Or so the nihilist argues.

Not surprisingly, when nihilism is motivated in this manner, it is natural for it to spread. Many claims that we may not think of as moral are, nonetheless, evaluative or normative. Consider claims of prudential goodness: eating more vegetables is good for me. Or aesthetic claims: the painting is beautiful. Once on this path, the grand conclusion that everything is without value and that there is nothing that one should do in life can seem inevitable. Such global nihilism about the evaluative and the normative is often what is being expressed in nihilistic declarations that life is meaningless.

Nihilists, famously, have disagreed about how one should respond to either nihilism about morality or to such general nihilism about the evaluative and the

normative (Nietzsche 1974/1887: 239, 241–2, 1982/1889: 501; Sartre 1995/1946: 270–4). Should one somehow continue believing in morality or should one adopt a radically different way of going on? Or, as Camus famously asked, should one commit suicide? (Camus 1991/1942)

Contemporary philosophers in the "Anglo-American" or "analytic" tradition do not in general use the label "nihilism." In this tradition, meta-ethics has emerged as the subfield that attempts to provide an account of what is going on when we make moral or ethical claims. Within contemporary meta-ethics there is a family of theories that does claim, in some sense or the other, that nothing is really right or wrong and that therefore our moral beliefs are false. These are the theories that are usually classified as forms of error theory or fictionalism. Contemporary philosophers have, however, tried to provide more precise specifications of the different ways in which one could accept some form of the view that nothing is really right or wrong. They have also proposed a range of different ways of going on in the light of such a realization. The resulting taxonomy of positions is quite complicated and sometimes surprising. One surprise will be that some positions plausibly classified as error theories or forms of fictionalism do not quite seem to be forms of nihilism.

Error theory

To understand the taxonomy of error theories and fictionalisms we need to understand their place in the larger taxonomy of meta-ethical theories in general. The sincere utterance of an indicative sentence, say, "The Eiffel Tower is in Paris," is normally taken to be an expression of the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris. Philosophers call such commitments "beliefs." (This is somewhat of a term of art since in ordinary language we sometimes reserve talk of beliefs to cases in which we – speakers or observers – are in fact not fully committed to the truth of the proposition.) The belief is either true or false depending on whether it is indeed a fact that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris. Not all utterances express beliefs so understood. Commands are an obvious case. The command that the Eiffel Tower be in Paris does not express the commitment that it is already true that this is the case.

Meta-ethical theories can differ on whether they take utterances of sentences involving moral terms to be expressions of belief. Despite the use of an indicative sentence, perhaps the utterance of "Torture is wrong" actually expresses a command and not a belief at all. Such views have often been called non-cognitivist views. The error theorist begins by claiming that the utterances of such sentences do express corresponding beliefs. When someone says sincerely that "Torture is wrong," he or she is expressing her belief that torture is wrong. Like beliefs about towers in Paris, these beliefs too are true or false depending

upon the facts – now the moral facts. If it is a fact that torture is wrong, then the belief that torture is wrong is true.

One form of error theory then proceeds to argue that in fact nothing is right or wrong. Since nothing is right or wrong, or good or bad, or just or unjust, and so on, all moral beliefs are false. A belief that is false is a belief that is in error. Since such a theory posits widespread error it deserves to be called an error theory.

Taking moral utterances to express moral beliefs allows us to recognize a distinctive, epistemic form of error theory. Beliefs, after all, can be unjustified even if they are true. Thus the belief that extraterrestrial creatures regularly abduct humans is unjustified, given the evidence, even if it turns out to be true. In the moral case, a certain kind of error theorist could think that the best explanation for why we believe certain moral propositions is, for example, that such beliefs help our group or class perpetuate itself. They are part of an ideology. She could then argue that this explanation undermines the claim that these moral beliefs are the result of careful consideration of the relevant evidence for the truth of the moral beliefs. She would thus be positing a widespread epistemic error: our moral beliefs are unjustified; they are not grounded on good evidence. This would be a form of error theory that would be consistent with its still being the case that, in fact, actions are really right or wrong. We should distinguish therefore between such *epistemic error theories* and the *metaphysical error theories* we began with.

Metaphysical error theories, recall, were theories according to which nothing is really right or wrong, good or bad, and so our moral beliefs are all false. This simple way of putting the matter avoids some important complications.

First, there are different ways in which it could be the case that nothing is right or wrong. To see these different ways, consider two expressions: "is a dodo," "is a twenty-meter-tall human" and "is a square circle." Dodos being non-existent, there is not anything that is a dodo, and so if someone believes of some particular bird that it is a dodo or believes that there are dodos, then those beliefs are false. Thus, if there were a community that regularly went around believing that there are dodos, we would accept a metaphysical error theory about that community's talk of dodos. However, it is not as though it is impossible for dodos to exist; indeed, they did exist. One way of putting this point is to say that there is nothing wrong with the property of being a dodo. It is just that this property is not instantiated now. Contrast all of this with the case of "is a square circle." Here we might well think that the very idea of a square circle is incoherent and so there is no property of being a square circle. Arguably the property of being a twenty-meter-tall human falls between these two cases. It is not logically impossible for there to be such a person, but given the fundamental biological and physical facts of our world, it is no accident of history that nothing instantiates this property.

Second, the belief that it is not true that rape is wrong is a moral belief, but this is a belief that – putting aside the worry that the properties in question are so strange that talk of them may, in some sense, be incoherent – error theorists will have to grant is true. Thus the error theorist will want to restrict his claim

about the general falsehood of moral beliefs to some more restricted domain of "positive" moral beliefs – those beliefs that "positively" claim that some action, say, is right or wrong.

Metaphysical error theories can thus come in different flavors. An error theory could claim that the very idea of wrongness is incoherent; that given the way the actual world is there are, in some sense, deep reasons why nothing can be right or wrong; or, less plausibly, that as a matter of contingent fact nothing happens to be right or wrong. Depending on the kind of claim made, different kinds of arguments will have to be given for the error theory in question.

Arguments for error theories

We have already seen some suggestions for arguments for metaphysical or epistemic error theories. One can read Marxist theories of ideology as arguments for an epistemic error theory (Marx 1978b/1845–6: 154–5, 172–4, 1978a/1848: 482). Similarly Nietzsche can be interpreted as providing a genealogy of our moral practices that undermines the purported justifications of moral belief: our moral beliefs are best explained as being the descendants of various revolts against the values of traditional dominant, ruling classes. These revolts inverted traditional, and perhaps more natural, aristocratic values (Nietzsche 1989/1887). Finally, some have appealed to theories of evolution to argue for error theory. Our moral beliefs are best explained by their usefulness in helping our ancestors reproduce rather than by any abilities we might have to track moral truths (Joyce 2001: 135–74; Joyce 2006; Street 2006).

As this last example makes clear, the details of these explanations are important. After all our perceptual beliefs are the result of perceptual capacities which presumably can be explained by evolution; it would be odd to give an evolutionary explanation of morality but not of these capacities. However, in the case of perception, evolutionary explanations are not generally undermining. The fact that the capacities that produce a set of beliefs are to be explained by evolutionary usefulness does not immediately show us that they are epistemically unjustified. Similar points hold for other kinds of genealogies.

What such arguments have to show is that the purported explanations of our moral beliefs, or our capacities for moral beliefs, are not compatible with seeing these beliefs, or capacities, as tracking, more or less, the moral facts. Evolutionary explanations have to be supplemented, in general, by an account of what the moral facts are like or what moral truths would have to be like in order to exist. One then argues that given that moral truths are this way, the explanations given of our moral beliefs are not compatible with the claim that we are tracking the moral truths with our moral beliefs.

Direct arguments for metaphysical error theories attempt to show that there is something incoherent in the very ideas or concepts of purported normative and

evaluative properties. Or perhaps that such concepts are inconsistent with what we confidently take to be basic truths about fundamental reality. One interpretation of John Mackie's well-known defense of error theory falls into this category (Mackie 1977). Mackie argued that normative concepts like "right" and "wrong" involved the idea of "objective, intrinsic, prescriptivity," the idea that objective features of the world could somehow issue authoritative commands to us (35). He then argued that we know that the fundamental constituents of the world just are not the kinds of things that can issue authoritative commands.

Epistemic arguments can seem like metaphysical arguments. After all, if one concludes that, say, all moral beliefs of the form so and so is obligated to do such and such are false, then we may well conclude that it is rational to believe that there are no obligations. Consider an analogy. Imagine that we have an argument to show that all beliefs about unicorns can be explained by bad reasoning from observations of narwhal tusks and certain notions of virginal purity. With such an argument in hand, one might well conclude not just that current beliefs of the form such and such is a unicorn are unjustified, but also that one should positively believe that there are no unicorns. This is compatible with granting that unicorns could have existed or that we could be wrong – as future evidence might show. But such a position is not agnosticism: it is not the position that involves having no belief about the matter of the general existence of unicorns at all. Precisely stating the conditions under which such inferences are rational is not straightforward; nonetheless, it is plausible to think that sometimes one can draw the metaphysical-sounding conclusion that there are, say, no obligations from epistemic arguments about beliefs about obligations.

Revolutionary fictionalism

Were a fifteenth-century inquisitor to conclude that there are no witches because there is no such thing as sorcery, then we would expect him to stop engaging in the practice of figuring out who is a witch. He would stop looking for witches, because such practices require believing that there actually are witches. On the other hand, consider Santa Claus. Most of us stop believing in Santa Claus at some point, but many of us replace our belief in Santa Claus with an elaborate pretense involving imagining him coming down chimneys and living at the North Pole. This seems quite unobjectionable, presumably in part because nothing too serious is at stake – unlike the torture of supposed witches.

It would seem that accepting an error theory about our moral beliefs would, given the seriousness of the issues at stake, be more like the case of witches than of Santa Claus. Our moral beliefs are the basis of decisions, individual and collective, that have significant impact. If it is not true that anything is right or wrong, then it would seem we should simply stop our current attempts to figure out what is right or wrong. After all, we know that our resulting moral beliefs

will be false or unjustified. And making decisions, often life-or-death decisions, on the basis of such beliefs seems quite irrational. Of course, if the error theory includes the normative claims of rationality, then we cannot truly say this. We can still say, though, that if moral beliefs are simply false, then there seems to be nothing irrational or wrong with simply doing whatever we want.

Such amoral conclusions might seem the obvious ones to draw from an error theory. However, many of those attracted to error theory have not in fact drawn these conclusions. For them accepting an error theory about morality is more like accepting an error theory about Santa Claus than about witches. There may well be good reasons to continue with calling things right or wrong, though we may have to do it in something like the spirit of pretense. It may be true that when we realize, for example, that the belief that rape is wrong is false or unjustified, either we may not psychologically be able to continue to have that belief or it may be irrational for us to continue to have that belief. Nonetheless, we could continue to pretend that rape is wrong. Just as we accept the fiction of Santa Claus, we could accept the fiction that certain actions are wrong. Our reasons for doing this would presumably be different. To simplify, it is the pleasure of the pretense in the case of Santa Claus that is our reason to take this pretense up once we have given up the belief. In the case of morality, the reason often given is that without the practice of calling things right or wrong, social order would collapse (Joyce 2001: 175–231).

Such theories that accept an error theory about our current moral beliefs, but recommend going on in something like a pretense, are often classified as forms of *revolutionary fictionalism*. "Fictionalist" because they recommend treating morality as a fiction and "revolutionary" because they recommend a dramatic revolution: a revolution that gives up the error-ridden business of actually believing that things are right or wrong and replaces it with a pretense that things are right or wrong.

Such a view faces some problems. The appeal to, for example, social order as a reason to start pretending that rape is wrong seems to require that this normative claim – the claim that this consideration is a reason – is not one of the normative claims that the error theoretic part of revolutionary fictionalism has been shown to be false or unjustified. As we saw at the beginning, certain motivations for an error theory about moral claims in particular, such as the concern that the world the sciences show us is evaluatively and normatively neutral, also motivate an error theory about evaluative and normative claims in general. However, if all claims about reasons are false, then the claim that maintaining social order is a reason to pretend that murder is wrong is also false and so in fact there is no reason to pretend that murder is wrong. The global revolutionary fictionalist then cannot give us a reason to adopt the proposed revolution.

A revolutionary fictionalist may insist that the error theoretic part of his theory only applies to some limited domain of normative and evaluative claims: the normative truths about what reasons we have to adopt the proposed fiction are not threatened by the arguments for the error theory. This requires that the

errors in question cannot be the result just of the fact that moral claims are evaluative and normative.

Another option for such a global revolutionary fictionalist is to claim that when he says that social order is a reason to adopt the proposed fiction, this claim itself is put forth already as part of a pretense. The global revolutionary fictionalist is already engaged in a pretense that there are reasons, and then, as part of this pretense, he is pretending that there is a reason to adopt the proposed pretense of morality. Though such a position may be consistent, it does involve an admission by the revolutionary fictionalist that in fact there is no reason to accept the proposed fiction.

This highlights a further problem. We often think of morality as imposing constraints on us: a strong desire to cheat is kept in check by a belief that doing so would be morally wrong. Indeed, in the error theoretic part of their theories revolutionary fictionalists often refer to this functional role of moral beliefs to explain why we have them in the first place despite the fact that they are false. However, once we replace the belief that doing something is morally wrong with the pretense that it is wrong, it is not obvious that a pretense can play the same role. One can worry that such pretenses would easily be overridden by our desires. Our commitment to morality seems no longer to be serious enough.

Assuming revolutionary fictionalism can adequately deal with these concerns, there is one sense in which it is not committed to nihilism. It is not committed to simply doing without morality – or without whatever normative or evaluative practice is its focus. It is recommending a related replacement practice, namely, a fictionalist one.

Hermeneutic fictionalism

If asked where Sherlock Holmes lived, most of us would say Baker Street, London. It would be a mistake though to think that we believed that there was an actual human being named Sherlock Holmes. According to a more plausible account, we are all engaged in a collective pretense that there was such a person as Sherlock Holmes. Consider as evidence the fact that attempts to track down his living relatives would leave us quite perplexed. The hermeneutic fictionalist thinks that there is analogous evidence for the conclusion that our practice of morality is also a collective pretense. The claim is not that our current moral practices involve beliefs that are mistaken, but rather that we never believed that murder was wrong but were all along pretending that murder is wrong. Fictionalism is proposed as a correct interpretation of our current moral utterances rather than as a revolutionary proposal for replacing moral belief with moral make-belief (Kalderon 2005).

The purported evidence for this interpretation is controversial. Recall one of the motivations for error theory: the suggestion was that it was hard to see how

rightness or wrongness would fit into the world as described by modern science. The fictionalist suggests that in fact most of us go along in our moral practices quite unconcerned by such matters, and, indeed, the fictionalist insists, it takes some effort to get us worried about these metaphysical issues. Our natural, initial response is to find these worries themselves perplexing – perplexing just in the manner we would find the search for Holmes's relatives perplexing. We should conclude, claims the fictionalist, that we were never really committed to such properties actually being instantiated anyway. We were just, in some sense, pretending they were.

However, it does not feel to most people that they are pretending. The hermeneutic fictionalist attempts to undermine this counter-evidence by pointing to other cases in which we do not believe what we apparently literally say but still do not consciously think of ourselves as pretending: Juliet can be the sun without incinerating Verona. The first-person reports of participants are only one source of evidence that needs to be weighed against other sources of evidence such as our purported puzzled reactions to philosophers' inquiries about whether there really are moral facts.

The hermeneutic fictionalist may claim that he does not face the worry about seriousness that faced the revolutionary fictionalist. After all pretense is what we have been engaged in all along and so it can be serious – or at least as serious as morality actually is for us. This reply will not do by itself. If indeed we are not fully conscious of the pretense we are engaged in, then bringing it to full consciousness might well have an effect. Explicitly being aware that it is a pretense might undermine our commitment. The hermeneutic fictionalist will have to show that it does not, if he wants to fully vindicate our existing practices. To the degree that he succeeds, there is, once again, one important sense in which hermeneutic fictionalism is then not a form of nihilism.

On the other hand, the hermeneutic fictionalist can always insist that, though becoming aware of the fictional nature of the practice would undermine it, this does not show that the account is false. Even on this version, he might insist that he is not a nihilist in any interesting sense. Someone who points out that Sherlock Holmes does not really exist is not giving us news. It is odd to think of all of us as nihilists about Sherlock Holmes. We never did believe in his existence and so there is not some pre-existing commitment about which we could come to be nihilists.

Non-cognitivism and error theory

We come finally to a set of more sophisticated distinctions and a corresponding range of theoretical possibilities. Recall that error theory was introduced as a theory according to which sincere utterances of "Torture is wrong" express the belief that torture is wrong. This belief is an attitude, a commitment to the truth, of the proposition, that torture is wrong, towards which it is directed.

As we have just seen in the case of fictionalism, there seems to be space for a position that replaces the attitude of a belief with a different attitude, an attitude of pretense or make-belief. The proposition towards which the attitude is directed is, however, the same as in the case of a simple error theory, namely, the proposition that torture is wrong. The proposition can be false without our attitude, and thus without us, being at fault since the attitude is not one of belief and so not a commitment to the truth of the proposition.

There is a wide range of attitudes towards propositions that we seem to posit in our everyday language. We can imagine something, hypothesize it, assume it, consider it, wonder about it, and so on. In the appropriate context, an utterance of a sentence that we might claim normally expresses a belief can express one of these other attitudes. Imagine a detective trying to reconstruct a crime scene: "The house is dark, our suspect can't see the glass partition, so he bumps into it." We would theoretically distinguish these attitudes by giving different accounts of their function within our thinking. For many of these attitudes – and others we could hypothesize – it may well turn out that the truth of the proposition towards which the attitude is directed is not crucial to the functioning. The fictionalist thus potentially has a wide range of attitudes that he can posit. The attitudes we have been considering so far – pretense, imagining, or make-belief – may not be the best for the fictionalist. After all, first, these are attitudes which, as we have seen, we are arguably conscious of being in when we are in them, and, second, these attitudes suggest a certain lack of seriousness in our commitment. Both features of these attitudes can be a problem for the hermeneutic fictionalist in explaining our lack of awareness that we are pretending and our apparent strong commitment to our moral practices. By appealing to a different attitude, the hermeneutic fictionalist may have an easier time explaining our current practices (Kalderon 2005: 130–6).

Similarly, a revolutionary fictionalist may also prefer proposing a shift to an attitude that does not have the same apparent lack of seriousness that pretense and imagining do and that is yet still directed at the same proposition at which our existing beliefs are directed.

Most of these alternatives to belief are attitudes that do not directly have the role of keeping track of the truth. Thus they could all be called non-cognitive attitudes, and theories that propose them as the attitudes expressed by some discourse could be regarded as non-cognitivist accounts of that discourse. However, traditionally, the label non-cognitivism has been applied in a more restricted manner. A non-cognitivist account of moral language is not standardly construed to take such language as playing the role of expressing attitudes other than belief but that nonetheless have a moral proposition as their content (Kalderon 2005: 89–90). Rather, the attitude expressed is a motivational attitude directed towards a non-normative or non-evaluative proposition. A crude account that would count as non-cognitivist by these traditional standards is, for example, an account according to which an utterance of "Killing innocents is

wrong" expresses a desire that innocents not be killed. The attitude expressed may well be a propositional one, but the proposition towards which it is directed is not the apparent moral proposition. Traditionally error theories have been defined as forms of cognitivism, that is as theories that take moral language to express beliefs. Thus, given these traditional understandings of the relevant labels, one could not be both an error theorist and a non-cognitivist. However, it is important to see that there are some senses in which a non-cognitivist could be an error theorist.

First, a non-cognitivist could hold the view that once we come to see that our practices are, in some sense, merely in the business of expressing motivational attitudes we will give them up. They will have turned out not to live up to our expectations, and so, in some sense, such a non-cognitivist theory could be taken as identifying an "error" in our current practices. It should be emphasized that most extant non-cognitivist theories deny that their accounts undermine in any such way.

Second, for a non-cognitivist account to stand any chance of being plausible it must deal with what is called the Frege–Geach puzzle (see the entry on Non-cognitivism [Chapter 27]). Solving this puzzle, arguably, requires that the non-cognitivist leave open the possibility that speakers can sensibly say things of the form "It is true that torture is wrong." That is to say, the non-cognitivist needs to provide a non-cognitive account of what is going on when someone makes such an utterance. The same point holds for utterances of the form "It is false that torture is wrong," "Our belief that torture is wrong is not justified," and so on. Most extant non-cognitivist theories take themselves as succeeding in doing this while still remaining non-cognitivist. Whether they succeed is an important question (see, again, the chapter on Non-cognitivism). In any case, this means that a plausible non-cognitivism apparently has to be such that one could both be a non-cognitivist and say, "Our moral beliefs are systematically false," or "Our moral beliefs are systematically unjustified." It follows, then, that there is a perfectly sensible sense in which a non-cognitivist could also be an error theorist, and an error theorist that says very much what a traditional error theorist would say.

See also Nietzsche (Chapter 18); Existentialism (Chapter 20); Non-cognitivism (Chapter 27); Biology (Chapter 33).

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