A Universal Morality: An account of Moral Objectivity against Moral Error Theory

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Abstract

Moral error theory is a meta-ethical view that discusses how one makes an error when making a moral judgment or claim. The error resides in the fact that the moral values about which the judgments are made, do not exist in the natural fabric of the world. In the first section of this article, I shall discuss about the moral error theory itself and the claims that it makes. Since the moral error theory in a structured form first came from the philosopher J.L. Mackie, I shall discuss his standard account in the second section and show how this standard account has been misconceived over the time. The third section sets up a base of the view that I seek to endorse in this article, showing what is actually meant by an action being 'objectively good or bad'. The fourth section seeks a critical examination of the contemporary moral error theories and discusses the issues that arise while these theories answer the 'now what' question. Section five enlists various contemporary objections to the moral error theory which ultimately undermine the arguments made by error theorists. Since the error theory only considers true what is out there in the world, it poses a 'correspondence threat' to the error theory which is discussed in the sixth section. The seventh section comprises a defense of the formal objections made against the error theory and shows how the formal objection stands by undermining the error theorists' view. The main aim of this article is to provide a critical examination of the moral error theory and show how it provides an implausible account of how morality is to be viewed.

1. **Introduction**

Moral error theory is the meta-ethical view that proposes that the moral judgments or claims are always false. Error theorists are cognitivists, i.e. they accept the fact that moral judgments or claims depict beliefs, but they differ from others on the stand of whether these moral judgments or claims are truth-apt or not, suggesting that such judgments or claims are always false. So, moral error theory could be seen as assuming a critical position against moral values being objectively true.

The term 'Error' comes first, from the philosopher J.L. Mackie[1] who argued in favor of the moral error theory. According to Mackie, when we make a moral judgment or claim, and deem it to be objective in nature, we are making an 'error'. And this 'error' is the result of us making that moral judgment because something such as 'good' or 'bad' does not constitute the fabric of the world.

In his 1977 book, 'Ethics: Inventing right and wrong', Mackie first proposed a moral error theory, which he also named as moral skepticism[2]. Mackie's moral error theory stood on his two main arguments, namely: The argument from relativity and the argument from queerness. The former argument suggests that moral judgments could not be objective because of the widespread disagreement about moral values across various cultures and traditions. Simply put, since what is morally good and bad differs from person to person and since from the known time, there has always been a debate about what is right and wrong, there can't exist values, which objectively apply to each human there is. The latter argument (the most discussed ever since) suggests that there exists a good and a bad action, but the values associated to those actions do not have any metaphysical existence at all. In other words, when we make a moral claim, suppose: 'Charity is good', there exists no such thing as 'good' or 'goodness' out there in the world. Mackie also goes on to claim that if moral values were to actually exist, they must exist as entities which are metaphysically queer. Since a lot of philosophers have pointed out inconsistencies and mistakes in Mackie's theory, the later error

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[1] Though the term 'Error' comes from Mackie, various forms of moral skepticism had already been proposed and defended by the likes of Hume & Nietzsche. R.M. Hare too, in a rather different manner, argued for his 'prescriptive' stance on morality by suggesting that the moral language the we use is not descriptive of the world and that moral statements are essentially "universalizable prescriptions" (Hare, 1952)

[2] Mackie also clarifies in this work about how his moral skepticism is to be understood differently. According to him, not all, but only objective values commit the 'Error' that he argues for. This could be one reason for him naming his work 'The subjectivity of values' and suggesting that moral values exist, but only as subjective ones. More on this in the later section.

theorists have proposed different versions of the theory, which I shall address in the later sections.

2. The standard account

Mackie's moral error theory has two parts- The semantic and the ontological. According to the semantic part, ordinary morality assumes a claim to objectivity, that there are objective values.

> "But this objectivism about values is not only a feature of the philosophical tradition. It has also a firm basis in ordinary thought, and even in the meanings of moral terms."

What Mackie means by *objective* here is that moral claims presuppose a kind of action-guiding authority. According to him, moral claims carry with them an assumed *objective prescriptivism*, in the way that these *prescriptions* are independent of our desires, beliefs, social-conventions etc. He writes that when we use concepts that involve objective moral values, we always presuppose that such things do exist, without the necessary intervention of any person or even God. (Mackie, 1977)

It is in the sense that they assume a position of it being a categorical imperative. Mackie explains this in detail in his original work[3]. According to the ontological part, the world does not fit in with this claim to objectivity. Why? Because moral values are metaphysically queer and do not form the fabric of the world. Hence, such moral claims would not side with a scientific or naturalistic worldview. Victor Moberger mentions in 'Not Just Errors: A New Interpretation of Mackie's Error Theory', that, from the point of view of Mackie, if we are to make any objective prescriptions, then we would be postulating some metaphysically

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[3] Mackie discusses how morality in general had become an exchange of these 'categorical imperatives'. He uses them in the same sense as Kant did. The general idea of morality, Mackie claims, had become an exchange of 'oughts' and 'ought-nots'. Western philosophy in general, according to Mackie, presupposed such objectively true prescriptions being ascribed to moral judgments.

extravagant non-natural facts and properties. And because this does not support the scientific or naturalistic worldview, we should not just avoid postulating such facts or properties, rather, we should altogether deny that such properties exist at all. (Moberger, 2017)

Moberger also suggests that the moral error theory, understood in the standard sense (he calls it the *Standard Interpretation*[4]) takes the following form:

(1) *All* moral judgments involve the claim to objectivity.

(2) The commitment to objective values is an essential feature of moral judgments (in the sense that no judgment counts as a moral one without it).

But as Moberger points out, this is not the case with Mackie and that the standard interpretation is heavily mistaken. He makes this bold claim based on Mackie's own work. When looked at carefully, some passages from Mackie's own work do suggest that Moberger is right in making his claim. Mackie writes:

[I]t can plausibly be maintained at least that *many* moral judgments contain a categorically imperative element. (29)

[M]ost people in making moral judgments implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive . . . . (35)

[In] everyday moral judgments . . . the claim for moral authority . . . is *ordinarily* there . . . . (41–42)

[E]thical uses [of "good"] are particularly *likely* to [involve] the concept of objective moral value . . . . (59)

[T]he main ethical use [of "good"] does refer to supposed intrinsic requirements . . . . (63) The belief in objective moral requirements [is] implicit in *much* ordinary moral thinking . . . . (Mackie, 1980)

It is clear from the passages that Mackie implies, in some way or the other that *many* moral judgments contain a categorical imperative element in them, but *not all*.

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[4] The 'Standard Interpretation mentioned here refers to the 'standard' way in which Mackie has been interpreted widely. Moberger (2017) talks about how this standard interpretation of Mackie's error theory is not the way that Mackie might have interpreted it.

More evidence is given by Selim Berker in '*Mackie Was Not an Error Theorist'* where he argues that Mackie was very careful to deny only the *objective claims* built into our moral talks and not the truth of *every single* moral judgment that we make. Another piece of evidence Berker provides is that Mackie never mentions that there are *no moral values.* Rather, Mackie has claimed about forty-six times (Berker's count) that the main thesis of his work is that there are *no objective values.* (Berker, 2019)

If these claims are true, then our work is half done already. We need not prove now, that there are at least *some* moral judgments or claims, which are even accepted by the standard interpretation of the moral error theory. What is left to be argued about now, is only the fact whether *some* moral judgments or claims are objectively true or not.

3. An account of moral objectivity

As it seems to me and a lot of other philosophers, there can be no doubt that there is something such as 'moral good and bad'. Sam Harris, in his book *'The Moral Landscape: How can Science determine human values?'* suggests John Searle's two different senses of the words 'objective' and 'subjective'. The first being the epistemological sense and the other being in the metaphysical sense. He mentions that when we speak of something *objectively,* it is a statement that is free of obvious bias, in reference to the relevant facts and so on. In this sense, we do not mean to study or talk about subjective or first-person facts about somebody in an objective way.

He explains the same with the example of one feeling tinnitus (a ringing sensation in the ears). It would be true if the person says they are experiencing a tinnitus in their ears at that moment. Although this is a subjective fact about that particular person, they are being completely objective in stating the fact; they are not lying. (Harris, 2010)

Harris tries to elaborate his point with the concepts of the 'worst possible misery' and the 'greatest possible well-being'. A lot of people confuse morality to be related to one's experience and hence declare all morality to be subjective[5]. But Harris doesn't deny the necessarily subjective (experiential) part of the moral fact under question. He suggests that the answers to moral questions could be given in the terms of the worst possible misery and the greatest possible happiness.

Harris explains that one reason why people mistake objective moral values to not be there is because they think that moral values do not fit into our world like scientific or naturalistic judgments would. But, in doing that, they are merely employing a double standard towards moral values. This double standard is quite evident when one talks of consensus. Most people take scientific consensus to mean that scientific truths exist, while maintaining that consensus in the field of morality just shows how we all carry the same biases. Another aspect, that of controversy highlights this double standard and shows us more evidently that, when one talks of a controversy concerning a scientific truth, it is a sign that further work needs to be done in order to pass the final judgment about it. However, on the other hand, they claim that a controversy concerning morality just proves that there can be no such thing as a moral truth. (Harris, 2010)

The actual problem then, in this case, as Harris points out, is the very talk about consensus. The truth has nothing to do with consensus and vice-versa. It may very well be possible that one person is correct and everyone else is wrong. In simpler words, consensus cannot ever make a false statement true, just because it is accepted by a large number of people.

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[5] It can be seen that Harris' position is not inconsistent with Mackie. Neither Mackie agrees with the fact that all moral claims are objective, not does Harris propose that all moral claims are objective in nature. Some moral claims (or actions) could be considered objective in the way if they contribute to the 'greatest possible happiness'.

According to Harris, whenever we talk of morality, whether it is in terms of justice, fairness, duty or any other principle as such, ultimately, as conscious beings, what we are referring to is the general conception of well-being. And although some critics might argue that the exact definition of 'well-being' is hard to pin down, as the meaning of well-being differs from person to person across cultures, and therefore, there is no scope for a talk of morality as such. Against this, Harris argues that the definition of terms such as 'health' is, in a similar way, loose. It can be defined with reference to specific goals for different people- not suffering from chronic pain or for some, not always vomiting, etc. Though these specific goals might be continually changing, the end towards which all these specific goals are pointed, is the same. (Harris, 2010)

The claim that 'moral values are relative to this time and place that they appear', is one of the few supporting evidences that the moral error theorist might give in support of their position. Harris mentions that a critic of moral values would say that nobody would be able to convince Taliban that they are doing the wrong things. In claiming this, the critic misses out on the point that the truths of science are also "relative to the time and place in which they appear," (Harris 2010). It has been 150 years of working on it, but still, a majority of Americans are not convinced by the thing that evolution is fact. But this doesn't mean that biology isn't a proper science. To not be able to convince somebody doesn't take away anything from the fact that evolution took place. In the same way, to not be able to convince somebody that their act is 'not good', does not take away from the actual fact that the act is 'not good'.

But the question is what would count as 'good' or 'bad'? Harris tries to answer this by *'reference to the negative end of the spectrum of conscious experience'* which he calls as 'The worst possible misery for everyone'. This is the case where everyone in this world suffers as much as they possibly can. Perhaps some asteroid falls on earth and everyone loses a little or

a lot without any positive outcomes. This, according to Harris, seems to be the most plausible meaning of the word 'bad' if the word has to have any meaning at all.

And according to this, 'good' is something that avoids us to tend towards the condition of worst possible misery for everyone. He explain this further with an example - If there were only two people on earth namely, 'Adam' and 'Eve', the question of 'How could these two maximize their well-being?' would have some answers. And undoubtedly, there could be a lot of wrong answers to this question, one being that 'both of them smash each other with a large rock on their faces'. But even though, there can be many wrong answers and a lot of ways in which the personal interest of these two individuals could clash, there would also be ways in which, both of them could thrive. In Harris' own words, 'most solutions to the problem of how two people can thrive on earth will *not be zero-sum*'. There is no denying the possibility that both of them could be blind to the deeper possibilities of collaboration. They would indeed be thriving if they looked out for common interests like food, shelter, defending themselves against large predators and so on. In conclusion, there is no doubt that there are paths that lead to either 'the worst possible misery' or 'the greatest fulfillment possible' for these two people. (Harris, 2010)

The point of this example is that although, on one hand, there are ways for people to thrive and avoid the 'worst possible misery', on another hand, there are always ways for people to not thrive and tend towards the worst possible misery. So now, if there is a difference between the right and wrong answers to the question concerning these two people, why does the difference disappear suddenly when we add another 8 billion people to this experiment? No doubt that the number of possible right and wrong answers to this new question would be vast, but that doesn't mean that the question wouldn't have answers nor does it mean that we cannot exclude certain answers that are obviously bad. (Harris, 2010)

4. Contemporary Error Theories and The 'Now What' Question

Since there is a lot of debate and argument about what Mackie's stand concerning morality actually is, a lot of other philosophers have also proposed their own versions of the moral error theory with their arguments. The two most discussed versions of the error theories are Richard Joyce's error theory, which he backs up with his *argument from non-institutionality*, and Jonas Olson's error theory, which is backed up by the *argument from irreducibility*. I shall pursue a critical examination of both.

i) Joyce's *non-institutionality* argument

Richard Joyce's non-institutionality argument challenges the view that moral facts exist *independently of human beliefs and attitudes*. According to Joyce, moral facts cannot be objective because they are not grounded in any institution-independent[6] facts about the world.

The argument goes like this:

1. If moral facts are objective, then they are institution-independent.

2. There are no institution-independent facts that can ground moral facts.

3. Therefore, moral facts are not objective.

Joyce argues that institutions, such as social norms, laws, and religions, play a crucial role in determining what is morally right or wrong. Without institutions, there would be no objective basis for moral judgments. Therefore, moral facts are not objective because they depend on institutions, which are constructed by humans and are subject to change over time and across cultures.

In conclusion, Richard Joyce's non-institutionality argument challenges the objectivity of morality by emphasizing the role of institutions in shaping moral beliefs and judgments.

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[6]Institution independent' according to Joyce is the pre-assumed property of general moral claims that suggests that those moral claims or judgments are true irrespective of them belonging to any social institution like social norms, religion or cultural norms.

Joyce's argument for this stand on morality is based on the idea that moral facts are not objective, but are instead constructed by humans as part of a moral fiction.

The stance that Joyce takes up is generally known as 'moral fictionalism'. Moral fictionalism is also seen as one of the possible solutions for the 'now what?'[7] problem for the error theory. The 'now what' problem argues that if the error theory is correct and all morality is tripe, then what next? What do we do? To answer this, Joyce takes up the stance of 'moral fictionalism'. According to moral fictionalism, one should not believe any moral proposition per se, but only because engaging in a moral discourse and practice brings along with them, some benefits that are worth preserving. Joyce also explained the aforementioned fictional attitude with the help of propositions like "There was an evil demon" or "Sherlock Holmes was a genius" and so on. It is but obvious that one knows that such propositions do not align with reality, but the whole point of all these propositions is to make people 'play along' towards an end that is rather beneficial.

But what Matt Lutz in *'The 'Now What' Problem for error theory'* argues, seems to me as a strong objection against such a fictional account and one that is not so easy to get away with. Even though the error theorist (now fictionalist) might think that on one hand, they could take up a fictional stand on moral propositions and on the other hand, continue with them for their benefits is plausible, but it is 'straightforwardly irrational'. (Lutz 2014) Moreover, Lutz points out Joyce's position that fictionalists are not deceived by their fictions i.e. they do not suffer a 'break from reality' in the way that they give in to the fiction is of dual standard. This is because on one hand, Joyce claims that the fictionalist is not deceived by their fictions, but, on the other hand, Joyce also says that accepting the fiction that 'stealing is wrong' will make us more likely to avoid stealing when given the option (Joyce 2001). The interesting point worth noting here is that if our fictional attitude

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[7] The 'Now What' problem explores the possible ways forward if and when the Moral Error theory is accepted. See Lutz (2014)

towards stealing makes us refrain from stealing, then clearly, we have acted upon the fiction that we merely had a merely fictional attitude towards. So, the fictionalist needs to either drop the benefits that they are getting from this stance, or they must engage in a willful self-deception. The latter is something that the Joyce claims that the fictionalist can't do at all.

Joyce, in one of his works (The myth of morality, 2001), also uses the Gyges[8] example to illustrate this point. In the Gyges story, Gyges discovers a ring that grants him the power of invisibility. With this power, he is able to commit immoral acts without fear of punishment or retribution. Joyce argues that the moral norms that condemn Gyges' behavior are not objective, but are instead constructed by humans as part of a moral fiction.

According to Joyce, the moral norms that we use to judge Gyges' behavior are not based on any objective facts about the world, but are instead a product of our imagination and social conventions. He contends that moral judgments are like judgments about fictional characters, such as whether 'Darth Vader is evil' or whether 'Harry Potter is brave'. These judgments are not based on objective facts, but are instead based on the conventions and expectations of the fictional world.

What can be implied from Joyce's view on the Gyges example is that Gyges should have a genuine reason for not *wanting* to kill people or commit immoral acts independent of any human desire. But as it seems, this implication is contradictory as it suggests Gyges to have a human desire of *wanting* there to be a desire-transcendent reason to act morally whereas the word *wanting* itself carries with it, a feature of human desire.

Some critics argue that the Gyges story is too extreme and unrealistic to be used as a basis for moral judgments. They contend that in real-life situations, moral judgments are based on more nuanced and complex considerations, such as the intentions of the agent, the

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[8] Joyce (2001) gives the example of a fictional character named Gyges who finds a magical ring with supernatural powers. See Joyce (2001) for detailed description.

context of the action, and the harm caused to others. In contrast, the Gyges story presents a situation where moral judgments are based solely on the fact that Gyges has the power to act with impunity.

ii) Jonas Olson's argument from irreducibility

Jonas Olson's argument from irreducibility suggests that moral judgments or claims are defined by our reasons to act on them, considering that they are not reducible to any of the society's norm or rule. And hence, Olson argues, moral judgments or claims become queer because ultimately, any reason to act on them is reduced to the norms and rules of the society that we live in (Fuszard, 2022). The argument runs as follows:

(P1) Moral facts entail that there are facts that favour certain courses of behaviour, where the favouring relation is irreducibly normative.
(P2) Irreducibly normative favouring relations are queer.
(C1) Hence, moral facts entail queer relations.
(P3) If moral facts entail queer relations, moral facts are queer.
(C2) Hence, moral facts are queer.

Jonas Olson argues that if moral reasons are irreducibly normative, meaning that they are grounded in moral norms and values rather than natural facts, then these moral reasons would be "queer" because they do not exist in the natural world. Instead, moral norms and values are created by societal behavior and conventions. Therefore, while it seems that moral reasons are not reducible to non-moral reasons, they are still dependent on social norms and conventions rather than being grounded in objective natural facts.

But some critics argue that Olson's view fails to capture the normative force of morality. They contend that if moral reasons are just reducible to non-moral reasons, then it is difficult to explain why we should be motivated to act on them. Critics contend that moral reductionism cannot account for the motivational force of moral reasons. Moreover, Olson's view overlooks the distinctiveness of moral reasoning. Moral reasoning involves

considering reasons beyond just self-interest or preference satisfaction. Critics argue that moral reasoning is distinct from other types of practical reasoning, and cannot be reduced to them.

Olson persists to the fact that even if the error theory shows us that there are no irreducibly normative reasons, it is phenomenologically difficult for humans to accept that morality is tripe and this is the reason why 'we can still carry on moralising outside the branch of metaethics without pretence.'[9] (Fuszard, 2022)

So ultimately, Olson suggests that even if the error theory is true, we must carry on our moral reasoning and judgments. This view is called 'conservationism' and is another possible answer to the 'now what' problem regarding the moral error theory.

According to Olson, 'conservationism recommends moral belief in morally engaged and everyday contexts and reserves attendance to the belief that moral error theory is true to detach and critical contexts, such as the philosophy seminar room' (Olson, 2014).

But as it seems, it is quite a questionable stance. This is because Olson suggests a 'compartmentalization' view for the 'now what' problem concerning the error theory. Compartmentalization [10] is similar to conservationism in the way that it suggests that although we ought to believe that nothing is morally right or wrong, we need to simultaneously believe that a lot of particular things are right or wrong. And this is what makes it irrational. And the reason for it being irrational is that conservationism (or even compartmentalization) suggests that for any *moral* belief *p,* we both believe *p* and disbelieve *p* at the same time (Lutz, 2014). What compartmentalization suggests in

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[9] This is one reason why Olson does not favor 'abolitionism' as the solution to the 'now what' problem as it is near to impossible to suddenly abolish all moral discourse. Thus, he limits the abolishment to the realm of 'academic philosophy' while in day-to-day situations, we can retain moral talk without pretence.

[10] Compartmentalization (Suggested by Olson) is the view that we simultaneously hold a belief to be true, (for the benefits that we reap from it) and false (to maintain the stance of being an error theorist). See Olson 2014.

particular is that we compartmentalize our beliefs in a way that- in a moral context, the conservationist believes that the moral proposition is true, and also dispositonally believes that the proposition is false. But according to Lutz, such compartmentalization is mere the use of a different terminology and doesn't really solve the problem. This is because dispositional beliefs are still beliefs even though we do not have them in mind at the moment. Not being currently present in mind does not take away anything from dispositional beliefs in them being beliefs. So ultimately, as previously mentioned, the conservationist makes the mistake of simultaneously believing and disbelieving a proposition *p*.

But Olson has a solution to the above problem. Olson suggests that simultaneously believing and disbelieving *p* is something that we do 'all the time'. Olson gives the example of a politician who is a notorious liar and a brilliant public speaker. On attending the politician's speech, since I know that the politician is a liar, I disbelieve everything that they say, but since the politician is also a brilliant speaker, they are able to convince me into whatever they are telling by the force of rhetoric. So in this case, I have an occurent belief that what the politician is saying is true, and simultaneously, I have a dispositional belief in the back of my head that the politician is lying. But Lutz points out the fact that once the politician, by the force of their rhetoric, have convinced me into believing that whatever they are saying is true, then I simply believe the fact that what they are saying is true. It is because *I have been convinced.* In such a case, I am not holding two opposing beliefs at the same time. Rather, I am changing my mind because the politician was able to convince me into their talks. It might be the case that once the politician's speech is over, I may revert back to my original belief that the politician is a notorious liar and all what they told me was a lie. But it does not take anything away from the fact that while I was

listening to the politician's speech, I was convinced and even if it was for *some time,* I changed my belief. (Lutz 2014)

It is not in any case that I hold two opposing beliefs in my mind simultaneously. Although, according to Lutz, the best reply that the error theorist might have for this is that we can change our beliefs in the same way whenever we sense that there might be a pragmatic benefit in changing our beliefs, but this position is very fickle and inconsistent (Lutz, 2014). Moreover, when the error theorist turns their beliefs the other way round, to enjoy the pragmatic benefits, it shows that the error theorist gives more 'value' to the new belief rather than the old one. In a sense, the moral error theorist pursues the belief which is 'better' or 'more good' for them. This idea contradicts the basic principles of the moral error theory and hence, conservationism (of any sort) does not seem to provide a plausible answer to the 'now what' question concerning the error theory.

5. New Developments against the Error Theory

With the emergence of new interpretations of the error theory, there has been a corresponding rise in new criticisms of the theory by contemporary philosophers. These criticisms have been aimed at exposing the weaknesses of the error theory and making a stronger case against it, which aligns with my views about the error theory.

One of these criticisms comes from Terence Cuneo. Cuneo's objection to the error theory raises an important dilemma for those who hold this position. According to the error theory, moral claims are false because there are no moral properties in the world. This means that any claim about what one ought to do is fundamentally mistaken.

However, this view is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, if error theorists claim that there are reasons to believe in the error theory, then their view is self-defeating. The property of being a reason is a normative property, which means that it is only meaningful if there are

moral properties in the world. If moral properties do not exist, then the property of being a reason cannot exist either. Therefore, if error theorists claim that there are reasons to believe in the error theory, they undermine their own position.

On the other hand, if error theorists claim that there are no reasons to believe in the error theory, then their view is toothless. If there are no reasons to believe in the error theory, then it is not a rational mistake to reject it. This means that error theorists cannot criticize those who reject their view, since doing so would require them to appeal to reasons, which they claim do not exist.[11]

Therefore, the self-defeat or toothlessness objection poses a significant challenge to the error theory. While some defenders of the error theory have attempted to respond to this objection, it remains a significant challenge to the plausibility of the theory. Ultimately, the dilemma faced by error theorists undermines their claim that moral claims are fundamentally mistaken, and suggests that there may be more to morality than mere linguistic error.

Another objection is posed by Nishi Shah. Shah's objection to the error theory can be called the objection from the normativity of belief[12]. Beliefs are normative mental states, meaning that a mental state can be classified as a belief only if it satisfies the following condition: there is a reason for us to have that mental state if and only if there is evidence that the content of that mental state is true. However, if the error theory is true, then there are no normative reasons, which mean that there can be no mental states that satisfy the aforementioned condition. This would imply that there are no beliefs if the error theory is true. Hence, the error theory contradicts itself by denying the existence of normative mental states while claiming that normative judgments are beliefs.

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[11] See. Terence Cuneo, The Normative Web (New York: Oxford, 2007).

[12] See, Nishi Shah, The Limits of Normative Detachment (2010)

Another objection, the one from bad faith (Streumer 2013), as formulated by Crispin Wright[13] and Simon Blackburn[14], raises serious concerns about the error theory. According to this objection, if the error theory were true and normative judgments were indeed false, then any agent who accepts this theory and continues to make normative judgments would be guilty of a form of bad faith. This is because accepting the error theory would require the agent to give up all of their normative judgments, since those judgments would be false according to the theory. However, error theorists typically do not give up their normative judgments and continue to make them in their daily lives. This inconsistency, according to Wright and Blackburn, is a form of self-deception or bad faith.

To understand this objection more fully, it is important to consider the nature of belief and the role it plays in our mental lives. Beliefs are central to our cognitive lives, as they allow us to form expectations about the world and to act accordingly. Moreover, beliefs are normative in nature, as they are based on evidence and reasons. For example, we believe that the sun will rise tomorrow because of our past experiences and scientific knowledge.

If the error theory were true, then all normative judgments would be false, including those that we make about what we believe. This means that the error theory is committed to the claim that all of our normative beliefs are false. However, this creates a paradoxical situation for error theorists: if all of our normative beliefs are false, then why do error theorists continue to make normative judgments and act as if they are true?

Wright and Blackburn argue that the only way to avoid this paradox is to give up all normative judgments, including those about what we believe. In other words, error theorists should refrain from making any normative judgments, since they do not believe that any such

[13] Crispin Wright, "Truth in Ethics" (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003)

[14] Blackburn, Essays in Quasi-Realism (1993)

judgments are true. However, error theorists typically do not follow this advice and continue to make normative judgments in their daily lives. This inconsistency, according to Wright and Blackburn, amounts to a form of self-deception or bad faith.

The most plausible account against the error theory, according to me, has been proposed by Richard Rowland. Richard Rowland gives the *Argument from Epistemic Reasons*[15] to support his claims against the error theory. The argument runs as follows:

(1) According to the moral error theory, there are no categorical normative reasons.

(2) If there are no categorical normative reasons, then there are no epistemic reasons for belief.

(3) But there are epistemic reasons for belief.

(4) So there are categorical normative reasons (2, 3).

(5) So the error theory is false (1, 4).

It is no doubt that any error theorists, from Mackie to Joyce or Olson would deny (1). The part of the argument prone to be attacked by the error theorist is likely to be either (2) or (3). Rowland provides his support for (2) with an example:

> "It seems that the fact that there are dinosaur bones around is a reason for everyone to believe that dinosaurs once roamed the earth, regardless of whether they want to believe this or not. In general, two agents in the same epistemic situation – that is, with the same evidence and background beliefs – seem to have the "same reasons for believing any given proposition, regardless of possible differences in their personal goals." So, it seems that the moral error theory's *ontological* component, the claim that there are no categorical reasons, *entails* that there are no epistemic reasons for belief as well as no moral reasons for action."

It is the entailment of there being no epistemic reasons if there are no categorical reasons that forms a firm base for (3) to stand.

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[15] See, Rowland, "Moral Error Theory and the Argument from Epistemic Reasons", 2013

And now, the error theorist might say that though moral reasons and epistemic reasons are similar in being categorically normative, they are quite different in the way that moral reasons are attributed to *acts* and epistemic reasons are attributed to *beliefs*. (Rowland, 2013)

But one has to note that the error theorist does not claim the error to be in the moral propositions being said, or not even in the acts for which we take these propositions to be the reasons, the error they hold, hence, is in the relation between these propositions and acts. So, the error theorist can't shift the burden of the argument by claiming that the properties to which epistemic reasons and moral reasons are attributed are different.

If the error theorist, on the other hand, tries to prove that (3) is not plausible, then they are only making it worse for themselves. To claim that there are no epistemic beliefs is to claim that '*nobody knows anything'*. Rowland shows this with the help of an example- We know as a fact that dinosaurs roamed around on the earth millions of years ago because there are dinosaur bones available as a proof for it. And now, anybody in this *epistemic* situation would have the *epistemic* reason to believe that we know this as a fact that this is true. To deny this would be to say that no one knows anything. But how do we prove this? We know that epistemologists believe that *if S knows that P, then S has a justification for believing P*. And this justification is obviously of an epistemic sort. So, *if there is an epistemic justification for believing P,* it means that there is an *epistemic reason for believing that P.* (Rowland, 2013) To conclude this argument, one just needs to show that somebody knows something. Rowland argues that 'he knows his phone number' and it is easily demonstrable too. So either, it is either the case that nobody knows anything at all (not plausible) or that the error theory is not correct.

6. The 'correspondence' problem for the error theory

Taking a critical look at these stands, it seems but obvious that an error theorist is presuming a 'correspondence theory of truth'. The correspondence theory of truth argues that a proposition can be true only if it corresponds to or accurately represents the state of affairs in the world. And since, moral values and its companions in guilt cannot be represented as the part of state of affairs of the world being described, they should be abandoned. But what the error theorist might miss out is that such a position might put them in an incoherent or circular position- to say that a proposition corresponds to reality is to say that it is true. But how is the truth of the proposition described? The only way that an error theorist may answer this is by saying that the proposition corresponds to reality. So, altogether, to say that a proposition corresponds to reality is to say that it is true, and to say that it is true is to say that it corresponds to reality. This circularity[16] makes it difficult for the error theorist to describe in precise words, what they actually mean by the word 'truth'.

Another difficulty for the error theorist might arise when the question of 'describing the state of affairs' comes up. How can one correctly and accurately describe the state of affairs so as to be in *consensus* with everyone else? The difficulty of describing a state of affairs also lies in the description of a state of affairs being context sensitive. To say that 'The sky is blue' does not seem to be problematic until and unless the time at which this statement is uttered happens to be in the middle of the night. It might be interesting to see here that the statement 'The sky is blue' still holds true if the context of the statement is made clear. The truth value of the statement has a lot to do with the context that it is uttered with. I shall discuss more about context and ascribing values in a later section concerning the formal objections against the moral error theory. An important thing to note here is that the error theorist themselves claim that since there is *'no widespread consensus'* about moral values across the world, and

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[16] The correspondence theory of truth ultimately settles down to examine the correspondence between ideas about truth and ideas of the world, which ultimately makes it take a form of the coherence theory of truth. See more, Michael Williams (1977), *Groundless Belief*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

this is one reason why objective moral values cannot hold a firm ground. So it seems, that consensus matters a lot to the error theorist. And if this is the case, the error theorist falls into the same ditch that they themselves dug up because to show *'a widespread consensus'* among the various possible descriptions that a single state of affairs may have, seems to me, and enormous task. This problem would not pose any kind of threat to the position I have taken up, as in the previous sections, I have already showed with Harris' claims that *consensus* need not be an important factor to take into consideration as the truth holds irrespective of the number of people backing it up

7. Formal Objection against the Error Theory

Another strong objection against the moral error theory (or rather any normative error theory) is the formal one. The formal objection argues that the error theory cannot be considered to be valid as it goes against standard deontic logic and semantics. The two important aspects of this sort of an objection against the error theory are- The law of excluded middle, which states that:

(L) For every proposition *p,* either *p* or not *p.*

And the duality of permissibility and impermissibility, which is:

(D) Every action is either permissible or impermissible.

One must note that (D) follows from (L) if '*im-f'* means not *f.*

But according to Bart Streumer and Daniel Wodak, such an objection to the error theory (or any normative theory) fails because, firstly, such an objection targets the content of the error theory rather than its form. And secondly, the standard deontic logic and semantics should be revised (if they prove the error theory wrong). (Streumer & Wodak, 2021)

The original objection, that Streumer and Wodak respond to, goes like:

(1) Lying is impermissible.

And because lying has been ascribed the property of being impermissible, and such a property, which is normative, does not exist, so (1) is false. But now, according to the Law of excluded middle (L), it entails:

(~1) Lying is not impermissible.

And now, assuming (D) from (~1), it entails that:

(2) Lying is permissible.

We can see here that (2) has also been ascribed a property of a normative kind, and such a property again, does not exist. So, the error theory along with (L) and (D) says that (2) is both true and false at the same time. The same could be proved for (1) if we assumed (L) and (D), as the falsity of (2) would ultimately entail (1). (Streumer & Wodak, 2021)

As I pointed out earlier, Streumer and Wodak mention two possible ways in which such an objection could be proved implausible – Either by denying the standard deontic logic and semantics, particularly the duality of permissibility and impermissibility, by saying that lying is neither permissible nor impermissible or, by showing how the formal objections to the error theory tend to attack its content rather than the form.

In the previously mentioned case of lying, Streumer and Wodak suggest that we must deny (D) so as to 'cancel' the implicatures that are conveyed- as when we utter (~1), it is implied that we are also accepting (2). (Streumer & Wodak, 2021)

But according to them, this denying of (D) might come at a cost- as previously mentioned, (D) follows from (L) if 'im-f' means 'not f'. So, by denying (D) , they must also deny that

'im-*f*' means 'not *f*'. They claim that such a denial is plausible, and provide a supporting '*purity error theory*' for the same. The purity error theory springs from the idea that uncleanliness or pollution that may reside in objects, may pass to humans through contact, may be transmitted to others like a contagion. (Joyce, 2001)

The 'purity' error theory is as the following:

(1*) This house is spiritually impure.

Similar to the normative error theory, the purity error theory also shows that (1*) has as its content something that has been ascribed a non-existent property and is therefore false. On assuming (L) and looking at the falsity of (1*), it entails that:

(~1*) This house is not spiritually impure.

And if, similar to the normative error theory, there was a duality for the purity and impurity of something, like (D*), every object would then either be spiritually pure or spiritually impure. Like (D), (D*) follows from (L) if 'im-F' means 'not F'. And then, one who makes a judgment on the purity of houses assuming (D*), would find an entailment of (~1*) to:

(2*) This house is spiritually pure.

And similar to the moral error theory, the purity error theory shows that, along with (L) and (D*), (2*) is both true and false at the same time. The same could be proved for (1*) if we assumed (L) and (D*), as the falsity of (2*) would ultimately entail (1*). (Streumer & Wodak, 2021)

What they intend to show by an analogy to the purity error theory is *not* that any kind of duality is false, but instead- That firstly, any formal objection to the normative error theory fails because it ultimately would be a mere overgeneralization to the purity error theory. They

claim so because even though both the error theories differ in their content, they are ultimately similar in their form. They conclude from this that since, the purity error theory is plausibly true , *it cannot be false in virtue of its form.* And because the normative error theory shares the same form as the purity error theory, it cannot be false in the virtue of its form either.

Secondly, they claim that in the normative error theory, our formal assumption of (D) might look harmless and of no direct relation to permissibility or impermissibility of any particular action. Moreover, the purity error theory also shows that (D*) is yet another formal assumption and is not directly related to spiritual purity or impurity of any particular object. But just as (D*) entails that objects have purity properties and is therefore incompatible with the purity error theory, (D) entails that actions have normative properties and is therefore incompatible with the normative error theory. The incompatibility of (D) with the normative error theory is because "we think that (D) is a substantive normative claim rather than a formal assumption even though an extremely general one." (Streumer and Wodak, 2021)

They also think that it is much easier for us to reject (D*) than rejecting (D) because we are unlikely to reject (D) unless and until we believe the normative error theory.

In making such claims, I believe that they have made certain errors. On the first claim, they show that the normative error theory and the purity error theory are similar in their forms even if their content is different. However as it seems to me, this is not the case.

In the purity error theory, one makes a judgment about the purity or the impurity of a *house,* while in the normative error theory (particularly the moral error theory), one makes a judgment about the permissibility or impermissibility of an *action.* In other words, the purity error theory is dealing with an inanimate object, while on the other hand, the moral error theory is dealing with an action. Streumer and Wodak rightly claim that a non-existent

property (if we take the moral error theory to be true) are being applied to something in both these cases, but to what these properties are being ascribed to is categorically different for both the error theories. Moreover, in the normative error theories, it is obvious that the judgments under investigations are also normative and such normative judgments come from normative reasons. And we have already showed in the previous sections that if there are no normative reasons, then there can be no epistemic reasons for belief, concluding that nobody knows anything. But having previously showed that people know *some* things meaning there are epistemic reasons for belief, it can't be said that the normative error theory is correct.

Secondly, the statement "we are unlikely to reject (D) unless and until we believe the normative error theory" doesn't seem to do fully justify why (D) is problematic in itself. In other words, only someone who claims the error theory to be true finds it problematic enough to reject it. However, this is not the case with (D*). (D*) talks of an object being either pure or impure and such a thing has been considered as a matter of taboo (Joyce, 2001) which has barely been taken seriously in the modern context. It is but obvious that an object such as the foundation of a house might be made of concrete, the walls might be made of bricks or wood, the roof might be made of shingles or tiles, and the windows might be made of glass. These materials are not pure in the sense that they are not unadulterated or undiluted. They are composed of various elements and compounds, and may contain impurities or contaminants. But to assign it an impurity in the sense of how it has been assigned in the original form is problematic in itself. One doesn't need to look at the problem of non-existence of such a property in order to deny it as in the general context, the term "pure" is typically used to describe things that are free from any foreign or impure substances, or that are unadulterated or undiluted. This definition applies to substances, but not to objects such as houses. A house is a man-made structure that is typically constructed using a variety of materials. For example, the foundation might be made of concrete, the walls might be made of bricks or wood, the

roof might be made of shingles or tiles, and the windows might be made of glass. These materials are not pure in the sense that they are not unadulterated or undiluted. They are composed of various elements and compounds, and may contain impurities or contaminants. Furthermore, the purpose of a house is not to be pure, but to provide shelter, protection, and comfort for its inhabitants. The design and architecture of a house are also not meant to be pure, but rather to serve functional purposes. There is a reason not to reject (D) in the same way as I have argued in the previous sections that there are certain actions that can be seen to be morally good (or even permissible) in the way that they are in the direction that avoids the worst-possible misery for humankind.

In summary, the moral error theory is backed by epistemic reasons (which have been previously shown to be existing) while the purity error theory is not. I must acknowledge here that there definitely are some properties or things that do not exist and neither does any reason supporting them, and in such a case, an error theory concerning these properties is not problematic at all. For example, if I say:

(3) My dog is superextensionous.

In the above mentioned proposition, 'My dog' has been ascribed the property of being 'superextensionous'. But as we very well know, such a property does not exist, moreover, the most important part is that while such a property is non-existent, there also exists no reason for us to believe in 'superextensionous-ity'. But as we have shown, categorical normative reasons for moral facts and claims do exist.

To make their point stronger, Streumer & Wodak discuss 3 possible ways in which 'im-f' does not *merely* mean 'not f. Particularly speaking how 'im-permissible' does not *merely* mean 'not permissible'. The first way that they adopt to show this is by saying that the proposition 'x is immortal' is clearly not equivalent to 'x is not mortal' as if we accepted this,

all inanimate things would be immortal! In a more general sense, if we accepted (L) and then accepted the equivalence of '*x* is immortal' and '*x* is not mortal', then *everything* would become either mortal or immortal!

The problem with this approach is similar to what we have discussed previously. It does not seem to be problematic at all to say that '*x* is immortal' does not *merely* mean '*x* is not mortal'. But, just like in the previously mentioned cases of purity and normativity, we must be careful in the selection of '*x*' to which the property of mortality or immortality is being ascribed. We won't commit the error of ascribing mortality properties to inanimate beings if we exclude inanimate beings from acquiring the position of '*x*'. As discussed before, just like some sort of purity cannot be ascribed to a house, in the same way, mortality properties cannot be ascribed to inanimate objects as mortality is the property or state of being subject to death or having a limited lifespan. Non-beings, by definition, do not exist in a living or animated state, and therefore cannot be subject to death or mortality. Therefore, the duality of mortality or immortality is not with respect to *everything,* but only with respect to living organisms. In other words, "*everything* would not become either mortal or immortal", but rather '*every living organism* would either be mortal or immortal', and there seems to be no issue with such a duality.

The second way that they adopt to show that 'im-*f*' does not *merely* mean 'not *f*' is to consider the difference between 'im-*f*' and 'non-*f*'. They argue that while 'non-moral' merely means 'not moral', 'immoral' means something more than it. (Streumer & Wodak, 2021) They say it in the sense that immoral is described as contrary to morality. The point I am trying to make is to focus on the sense and context in which there properties are ascribed. To say that 'my house door' is 'not-moral' completely makes sense as ascribing morality to my house door would end up being a 'category mistake'. On the other hand, to say that 'genocide' is 'not-moral' also completely makes sense as genocide is 'an action' that would bring us closer to

'the worst misery possible'. The difference is that, particularly speaking, 'my house door' is *'non-moral'* and that 'genocide' is *'immoral'*. In other words, if I was asked to make a list of all the things that are considered *'not-moral',* I would only tend to add certain 'actions' to that list- these actions would refer to being *'immoral'*. This is because when I think of morality, the first thing that strikes my mind is a moral and an immoral act. There is no doubt about the fact that 'im-*f*' does not *merely* mean 'not-*f,* but in such a sense, even 'non-*f*' would not *merely* mean 'not-*f'*. To go the other way round, let us consider what is meant by 'not-*f'*. To say that 'my house door' is 'not moral' is in the sense that it *cannot* be ascribed moral properties and hence 'non-f'. To say that 'genocide' is 'not moral' is in the sense that it is contrary to morality and hence 'im-f'. The thing is that in both these cases, we could speak of 'not-f' but in different senses- both being unproblematic.

The third way in which they show 'im-*f*' does not merely mean 'not *f*' is by considering category mistakes. They argue that the proposition:

(5) The number 157 is permissible

Is 'false' as it ascribes a property to the number 157 which the number does not have. (Streumer & Wodak, 2021)

Assuming (L), the falsity of (5) would be:

(~5) The number 157 is not permissible.

But it doesn't entail that:

(6) The number 157 is impermissible.

They then claim that if they are right about (~5) being true and (6) being false, even category mistakes could show that 'im-*f*' does not merely mean 'not *f'*.

But what Streumer & Wodak claim that the number 157 does not have the property of being 'permissible' and hence, the proposition is false. But they miss out on the fact that, it is not just the case that the number 157 'does not' have the property of being permissible, but also that the number 157 'cannot' be ascribed the property of being permissible as it would be a category mistake. Though they later describe the case to be one of category mistakes, they describe the propositions having category mistakes to be 'true' or 'false'. According to a widely discussed stance on category mistakes, known as the *'truthvaluelessness view'* (Shaw 2015), category mistakes are indeed meaningful, but cannot be ascribed truth values. Moreover, the *'Presuppositional view'* suggests that propositions having category mistakes suffer from a '*presuppositional failure*'[17] in the way that saying 'George stopped smoking' presupposes that George used to smoke in the past.[18] Hence, in saying that (~5) is true and (6) is false, they make a serious error. And if the error persists, category mistakes would not prove to be of any help to anyone who is trying to prove the formal objections against the error theory wrong.

In summary, the formal objections against the error theory stand unless and until one makes the mistake of either interpreting 'not-*f*' as just 'non-*f*' or 'im-*f*' or assume the reference of 'not-*f*' as 'non-*f*' where it should have been 'im-*f*' and vice-versa. And if so is the case, rejecting (D) would not be a good idea as (D) would stop being problematic the moment one starts ascribing the correct properties to correct *x* without any missing context.

8. Conclusion

As shown, the moral error theory does not seem to me as a plausible stance concerning morality. We have shown that firstly, there is a lot of incoherence among a lot of error

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[17] Such sentences, if uttered in the situation where the speakers do not already accept the presupposition, it causes the sentence to suffer from a presuppositional failure.

[18] See, for example, Asher (2011) and Magidor (2013).

theorists regarding the standard form of the moral error theory. Moreover, even if we grant the theory a success, it fails to answer the 'now what' question keeping in mind the pragmatic applications of the error theory. Even though some philosophers have tried to form arguments and subsequently given answers to the 'now what question', their arguments have serious shortcomings. In addition to this, the error theorist also falls into a trap as the error theory entails that there can be no epistemic reasons for belief. The correspondence problem is another serious threat to the aforementioned stance. The formal defense of the error theory also falls short on multiple occasions. To make the matter worse for the error theorists, upcoming empirical evidence from cognitive scientists suggests the presence of modules in the brain, one of them being a *cheater-detection* module[19] which is able to identify and catch cheaters in social situations. The presence of the cheater detection module provides *strong* evidence for moral nativism. As I see it coming, more empirical evidence would only make the situation more difficult for the error theorist in the coming years.

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[19] See Cosmides, L., & Tooby, J. (1992). Cognitive adaptations for social exchange. In J. H. Barkow, L. Cosmides, & J. Tooby (Eds.), *The adapted mind: Evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture*

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