Moral Error Theory
Moral Error Theory

History, Critique, Defence

Jonas Olson
Acknowledgements

In the process of writing this book I have been helped by many people. In the autumn of 2012, Jens Johansson organized a reading group at Uppsala University on the entire manuscript. I am deeply grateful to Jens and the other participants, Per Algander, Erik Carlson, Karl Ekendahl, Johan Gustafsson, Magnus Jedenheim, Victor Moberger, Henrik Rydéhn, Frans Svensson, and Folke Tersman, for their generous feedback. Having such insightful and constructive critics is the closest a secular philosopher can get to being blessed. Russ Shafer-Landau and his students read drafts of Parts II and III in a graduate seminar on metaethics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. I am very grateful to Russ and his students for extremely helpful comments.

Most of the book was written at the department of philosophy at Stockholm University, which is an excellent workplace. I have benefited from sustained discussions with my Stockholm colleagues Henrik Ahlenius, Gustaf Arrhenius, Björn Eriksson, Sofia Jeppsson, Hasse Mathlein, Niklas Olsson-Yaouzis, and Torbjörn Tännsjö. Parts of the book were written while I was a visiting fellow at CEPPA (Centre for Ethics, Philosophy, and Public Affairs) at the University of St Andrews in the spring of 2012. This was a productive period and I am very grateful to John Haldane and the other members of the department of moral philosophy at St Andrews for making the stay so pleasant and stimulating.

Drafts of the material in this book have been presented at seminars at the universities of Reading, Oxford, Nottingham, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and St Andrews; at the 2012 Ratio Conference on Irrealism in Ethics at the University of Reading, at the 2012 SPAWN Conference on Normative Realism at Syracuse University, and at two workshops at Insel Reichenau, organized by Attila Tanyi in 2011 and 2012. I am grateful to the many people who gave helpful comments on these occasions.

I have benefitted from conversations with, and/or written comments from, the following people: Krister Bykvist, Ruth Chang, Terence Cuneo,
Sven Danielsson, David Enoch, Kent Hurtig, Wouter Floris Kalf, Uri Leibowitz, Susanne Mantel, Thomas Mautner, Brian McElwee, Tristram McPherson, Graham Oddie, Ragnar Francén Olinder, Andrew Reisner, Mike Ridge, Richard Rowland, John Skorupski, Shanna Slank, Michael Smith, Philip Stratton-Lake, Bart Streumer, and Jussi Suikkanen. Two anonymous readers for OUP, one of whom turned out to be Matt Bedke, provided extremely useful and detailed comments on the content as well as the organization of the material. Peter Momtchiloff at OUP has been very helpful in the editorial process. All of these people contributed to making the book much better than it otherwise would have been. Needless to say, they bear no responsibility for the faults that remain.

I wish to acknowledge a special debt of gratitude to the late Jordan Howard Sobel, from whom I learnt a lot about metaethics and about Hume's philosophy. My deepest and most heartfelt thanks go to LMH and LEOH. This book is dedicated to them.

***

Parts of this book are based on the following previously published material:


Olson, J. ‘Mackie’s Motivational Argument from Queerness Reconsidered’. Forthcoming in International Journal for the Study of Skepticism.

I thank the publishers, Palgrave Macmillan, Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, and Brill, for permissions to reuse the material.
Contents

1. Introduction 1
   1.1. Rationale and Brief Overview of the Book 1
   1.2. Moral Error Theory and Moral Projectivism 4
   1.3. The Many Moral Error Theories 8

Part I: History

2. Hume: Projectivist, Realist, and Error Theorist 21
   2.1. Hume’s Metaethics: Descriptive and Revisionary 24
   2.2. Two Objections: Hume’s Friendly Attitude to Virtue and the Motivating Power of Moral Judgement 35
   2.3. Moral Error Theories: Hume’s and Mackie’s 39

3. Hägerström: Projectivist, Non-Cognitivist, and Error Theorist 43
   3.1. Some Background 44
   3.2. Hägerström’s Early and Later Metaethical Views 46
   3.3. Tegen’s Critique 56

4. Other Precursors of Moral Error Theory 61
   4.1. Russell 62
   4.2. Wittgenstein 64
   4.3. Robinson 68
   4.4. Mackie in 1946: the Argument from Relativity 72

Part II: Critique

5. How to Understand Mackie’s Argument from Queerness (I) 79
   5.1. The First Queerness Argument: Supervenience 88
   5.2. The Second Queerness Argument: Knowledge 100
   5.3. The Third Queerness Argument: Motivation 103

6. How to Understand Mackie’s Argument from Queerness (II) 116
   6.1. The Fourth Queerness Argument: Irreducible Normativity 117
   6.2. In Defence of the Conceptual Claim 126
   6.3. Queerness and Companions in Guilt 135

7. Debunking Moral Belief 139
   7.1. A Moorean Argument 139
   7.2. A Debunking Response 141
### CONTENTS

**Part III: Defence**

8. Ramifications of Moral Error Theory  
   8.1. Error Theory and Hypothetical Reasons 152  
   8.2. Error Theory and Reasons for Belief 155  
   8.3. Error Theory and Deliberation 172  

9. Moral Error Theory, and Then What?  
   9.1. Against Moral Abolitionism 179  
   9.2. Against Moral Fictionalism 181  
   9.3. The Case for Moral Conservationism 190  

*References*  
*Index*  

199  
211
1 Introduction

1.1. Rationale and Brief Overview of the Book

Virtually any area of philosophy is haunted by a sceptical spectre. In moral philosophy its foremost incarnation has for some time been the moral error theorist, who insists that that ordinary moral thought and discourse involve untenable ontological commitments and that, as a consequence, ordinary moral beliefs and claims are uniformly untrue. This book investigates the case for moral error theory from historical as well as contemporary perspectives.

The main aims of the book are reflected in the themes of its three parts. One aim is to give a historical background to the debate about moral error theory, which often begins and ends with discussions and rejections of arguments put forward in the first chapter of J. L. Mackie’s seminal Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (1977). In Part I (History) I discuss the moral error theories of David Hume, and of some more or less influential twentieth-century philosophers, including Axel Hägerström, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Richard Robinson.

My aim in Part I is not to give a complete historical inventory of moral error theory and its advocates. In a historical survey like the one I intend to give one is naturally forced to be selective in at least two ways. One first needs to settle on a starting point. My story begins with Hume, but arguments and ideas that have spurred the development of moral error theory can certainly be traced farther back in the history of philosophy. Mackie mentions, among others, Thomas Hobbes as one historical source of inspiration.1 According to Hobbes, moral rules are human inventions. More particularly, they are the outcomes of bargaining between rational

1 Mackie 1977: 108–14. Mackie also mentions Hume, Protagoras, and G. J. Warnock in this context. As noted, Hume’s metaethics is the topic of the next chapter. According to
and self-interested individuals who want to negotiate their way out of a war of all against all. Hobbes was thus interested in metaethics, broadly speaking, but it is difficult to determine whether he or any other philosophers who wrote in eras much earlier than the present were moral error theorists. The focus on the semantics of moral judgements and the ontology of moral properties, which make it possible and meaningful to distinguish moral error theory from subjectivism, relativism, non-cognitivism and other theories on which morality is not primarily to be discovered but somehow invented, is fairly recent in the history of philosophical theorizing about morality. As we shall see in Chapter 2, it is difficult enough to attribute a position to Hume that is both coherent and faithful to Hume’s texts.

The second way in which one needs to be selective concerns which philosophers from the more recent history to focus on. The selection, like the choice of a sensible starting point, will of course depend to a large extent on what one means by ‘moral error theory’. We shall discuss this latter question in Section 1.3.

The philosophers to whom I give particular attention have been chosen thematically, because their arguments and theories connect in interesting ways to the contemporary debate about moral error theory, and in particular to the idea that moral thought and discourse are about moral properties and facts that are in some sense queer. I hope that these discussions bring the double benefit of contributing to the understanding and interpretation of these philosophers’ works and of enabling us to understand better the forms and contents moral error theories may take, and how they might combine with other metaethical theories. In these ways I hope that Part I, as indeed the book in its entirety, will be read as a contribution to the history of metaethics as well as to contemporary metaethical theorizing.

We shall see that moral projectivism and moral error theory are closely associated views. The former is congenial to the latter, but does not entail it. We shall see in Part I that precursors of moral error theory tended to

---

Protagoras’s allegory, moral rules are god-given and their point is to facilitate human coordination and social harmony (Plato, Protagoras and Meno). It is this latter idea that is congenial to moral error theorists like Mackie. Warnock’s account of the human predicament and the coordinating functions of morality is in Warnock 1971: Ch. 2.

* For a discussion of projectivism in Hobbes, see Darwall (2000).
focus more on arguments for moral projectivism, which suggested moral error theory, than on arguments for the ontological and semantic claims that are needed to give unequivocal support to moral error theory. In this respect, Mackie’s defence of moral error theory in his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* is an important advance in the debate since it involves an explicit defence of the relevant semantic claim and even more importantly, it involves an elaboration of the argument from queerness, which is intended to establish the relevant ontological claim.

Prior to Mackie, the argument from queerness had only been hinted at, but it has now become central to the debate about moral error theory and about metaethics at large. It is also the linchpin of this book and is at the centre of focus in Part II (*Critique*). In my view, the argument from queerness is complex, not always adequately understood, and often dismissed too quickly. This is probably due in part to Mackie’s own presentation of the argument, which is highly compressed and sometimes opaque. Part II scrutinizes the argument even-handedly. I have the double aim of interpreting Mackie—which requires some exegesis—and of providing the clearest and strongest presentation of the argument from queerness, which requires going beyond and sometimes deviating from Mackie’s discussions. For example, I shall distinguish between the argument *from* queerness and the queerness arguments. Mackie did not make this distinction explicitly, but in my view it helps clarify his case for moral error theory. I shall argue that there are four distinct queerness arguments and thus four distinct versions of the argument from queerness. Three of them do not stand up to scrutiny, whereas the fourth queerness argument, the one that targets irreducible normativity, has considerable force. As Mackie was well aware, moral error theorists need to explain why the alleged error in moral thought and discourse persists. Part II closes with a discussion of such explanations.

One of two main aims of Part III (*Defence*) is to deal with contemporary challenges to moral error theory. One conclusion reached in Part II is that the argument against irreducible normativity cannot plausibly be restricted to morality. A plausible version of error theory must take the form of an error theory not only about morality, but about irreducible normativity more generally. These ramifications of moral error theory are fatal, according to many philosophers. Chapter 8 argues that they are in fact not. The second main aim of Part III is to discuss implications of moral error theory for actual moral thought and discourse. Here I challenge
The remainder of this chapter explores what moral error theory amounts to, which alternative forms it may take, and how it relates to moral projectivism. We begin with the latter question.

1.2. Moral Error Theory and Moral Projectivism

To say that we project moral properties onto the world is, of course, to speak metaphorically. Moreover, there seems to be no agreement as to what such talk amounts to. This is reflected in the fact that ‘projectivism’ has been used as a label for, or identified as a component of, both non-cognitivism and error theory, which can be puzzling since non-cognitivism and standard versions of error theory are very different metaethical theories. Non-cognitivism holds that moral judgements are primarily expressions of non-cognitive attitudes, whereas standard versions of error theory hold that moral judgements are assertions that attribute mind-independent (but non-instantiated) moral properties to objects and that, as a consequence, moral judgements are systematically mistaken. So ‘projectivism’ can evidently be used as a label for a variety of different theories. Richard Joyce has recently formulated and distinguished the following four theses often associated with projectivist views in metaethics, which I quote:

1. We experience moral wrongness, (e.g.), as an objective feature of the world.
2. This experience has its origin in some non-perceptual faculty; in particular, upon observing certain actions and characters (etc.) we have an affective attitude (e.g., the emotion of disapproval) that brings about the experience described in (1).
3. In fact, moral wrongness does not exist in the world.
4. When we utter sentences of the form ‘X is morally wrong’ we are misdescribing the world; we are in error (Joyce 2009: 56).

Let us comment briefly on theses (1)–(4). The first thesis concerns moral phenomenology. A first thing to notice is that ‘experience’ in (1) should be read as a non-factive verb. We may thus have experiences of moral properties as objective features of the world although there are no moral
properties. To say that we experience moral properties as objective features of the world, I shall assume, is to say that we experience them as mind-independent. To say that a feature, $F$, is mind-dependent is to say that whether an object, $x$, has $F$ depends constitutively on psychological responses that actual or idealized observers have or would have towards $x$. To say that whether $x$ has $F$ depends constitutively on psychological responses actual or idealized observers have or would have towards $x$, is to say that what it is for $x$ to have $F$ is for $x$ to be the object of certain psychological responses of actual or hypothetical observers. For example, a view on which the property of moral wrongness just is the property of giving rise to sentiments of disapproval in impartial spectators takes moral wrongness to be mind-dependent. To say that a feature, $F$, is mind-independent is to say that whether an object, $x$, has $F$ does not depend constitutively on psychological responses that actual or idealized observers have or would have towards $x$. I shall take views on which moral properties are mind-dependent to be versions of subjectivism, and views on which moral properties are mind-independent to be versions of objectivism.\(^3\)

The second thesis is *psychological*, offering a causal explanation of this moral phenomenology. The third thesis concerns moral *ontology*, and the fourth concerns moral *semantics*, in that it tells us that in making moral judgements we perform the speech act of assertion, since in order to misdescribe the world, one has to assert something about it. A natural reading of thesis (4) is that in uttering sentences of the form ‘$x$ is morally wrong’ we are saying something that is false; this is the sense in which we are in error.

But there is another sense in which we might be in error when we utter such sentences even though we are not in error in uttering them. That is, it might be the case that sentences of the form ‘$x$ is morally wrong’ are sometimes true, although what we implicitly or explicitly believe about $x$ when we make (sincere) utterances of that kind is false. Hence (sincere) moral judgements might involve the doxastic error of false belief in a way that does not render moral judgements uniformly false. I maintain that both views deserve the label ‘error theory’. We shall return to this distinction between kinds of moral error theory in the next subsection and in

---

\(^3\) Here I follow Michael Huemer’s account of what it is for features to be subjective and objective (Huemer 2005: 2–3). For example, views according to which moral properties are response-dependent count as subjectivist.
the next chapter, in which it will prove to be relevant to our interpretation of Hume.

Joyce calls the conjunction of the phenomenological and the psychological theses ‘minimal projectivism’ and he goes on to distinguish various versions of projectivism that involve different ontological and semantic claims. I shall not follow this taxonomy precisely. I shall take projectivism simply to be the conjunction of theses (1) and (2). I thus take projectivism to be a view about the phenomenology and psychology of moral judgment, according to which something ‘inner’, such as an emotion, or more generally an affective attitude, is experienced as a perception of something ‘outer’, such as a mind-independent property. Projectivism is common ground between many versions of error theory, non-cognitivism, and subjectivism.

This understanding of projectivism and the four-fold division between theses (1)–(4) is helpful because it enables us to see how and why the projection metaphor can be used to describe a variety of metaethical views. For instance, it enables us to see how all of non-cognitivism, subjectivism, and error theory can be understood as projectivist views. Non-cognitivists can, and typically do, accept some version of theses (1)–(3), but they replace (4) with a thesis to the effect that when we utter sentences like ‘Murder is wrong’ we are not (primarily) describing anything. Because on the non-cognitivist’s view moral sentences conventionally express non-cognitive attitudes, we are not misdescribing the world in uttering them. In particular, contemporary non-cognitivists known as expressivists have emphasized that on their view, ordinary moral thinking and ordinary moral judgements do not involve systematic errors.

However, the claim that non-cognitivists can, and typically do, accept (1) may seem to commit expressivists to the view that moral phenomenology is misleading. This in turn may suggest that moral thinking after all does embody error in the form of false belief. We will see in Chapter 3 that some non-cognitivists have held that ordinary moral thinking does involve systematically false beliefs about what we are up to when we make

4 Joyce 2009: 57. See also P. J. E. Kail’s recent distinction between feature projection and explanatory projection (Kail 2007: 3–4). Kail is not concerned exclusively with projectivism in metaethics, but in this context, explanatory projection corresponds roughly to theses (1) and (2) and feature projection roughly to theses (1) through (4).

5 For an accommodation of (1) in an expressivist theory, see Horgan and Timmons 2007.
moral judgements. As we have just mentioned, however, many expressivists do not want to maintain that it does. Does this mean that expressivists are committed to rejecting (1)?

No. First of all, that we experience something as being in a certain way does not mean that we believe it to be that way. For example, most people believe that the two lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion differ in length. But once the illusion has been pointed out to us, we no longer believe, on reflection, that they differ in length although our perceptual experiences continue to suggest that they do. Similarly, we might experience wrongness to be an objective feature of the world, but expressivists might maintain that we do not believe that it is.\(^6\)

Second, what we said above about objectivity and mind-independence is compatible with an expressivist-friendly account of these notions, on which our experiences of wrongness as an objective feature of the world are not misleading. On this account, to experience the wrongness of kicking dogs as mind-independent is simply to experience the wrongness as independent of our attitudes, in the sense that no matter what our attitudes to kicking dogs are or would be, kicking dogs is wrong; one is against kicking dogs even in the counterfactual event that one's attitudes to kicking dogs should change and one would no longer be against it.\(^7\) Expressivists can grant that many people have such attitudes, and that they need not involve error.

Expressivists can reject (3) if they take the claim that moral wrongness exists in the world to be true in a minimal sense. They might say, for instance, that ‘Murder is wrong’ is true (in a minimal sense) and from this, they can say, it follows that moral wrongness does exist in the world. For what it is for moral wrongness to exist in the world just is for some sentence like ‘Murder is wrong’ to be true.

Subjectivists may hold that wrongness just is projected attitudes, that the meaning of moral judgements is reducible to judgements about attitudes—either attitudes of the speaker, or of the speaker’s community, or yet again of some idealized subject. They can thus accept projectivism and reject the ontological thesis.\(^8\) They can then either reject outright the

---

\(^6\) Joyce (2009: 58–9) makes a similar point.


\(^8\) Since it comprises only a phenomenological and a psychological thesis, projectivism is not logically incompatible with objectivist realism. However, the marriage between projectivism and objectivist realism may not be a very happy or appealing one.
semantic thesis and maintain that moral thought and discourse involve no systematic errors, or they can maintain that we ordinary speakers are systematically mistaken about the nature of moral properties and facts but that this does not render moral judgements uniformly false. We shall see in the next chapter that Hume may have endorsed a version of this view. Another case in point is the philosopher and sociologist Edward Westermarck, who endorsed a relativistic analysis of moral judgements but maintained that ordinary speakers are typically under the illusion that moral judgements may be and sometimes are objectively true. The illusion has its source in the fact that moral judgements are based on objectification of emotions.9

Error theorists, by contrast, typically accept all of (1) through (4). There are complications to be added, however, and we shall discuss some of them in the next subsection. In discussing Hume’s view in Chapter 2, we shall see that moral error theory may be compatible with subjectivist realism, and in discussing Hägerström’s views in Chapter 3, we shall see that moral error theory may be compatible with non-cognitivism.

1.3. The Many Moral Error Theories

Projectivism and moral error theory are a natural couple, but as we have seen, projectivism may be combined with a variety of metaethical views. What, then, is definitive or error theory? Error theory about some area of thought and discourse, D, is commonly defined as the view that D involves systematically false beliefs and that, as a consequence, all D-judgements, or some significant subset thereof, are false.10 Thus moral error theory is commonly defined as the view that moral thinking involves systematically false beliefs—typically about moral properties and facts—and that, as a consequence, all moral judgements, or some significant subset thereof,11 are false. These seem to me satisfactory definitions of what we might call standard error theory and standard moral error theory, respectively. But we also need to accommodate some non-standard versions of error theory.

10 Cf., e.g., Daly and Liggins (2010).
11 More on this presently.
According to some error theorists about some area of thought and discourse, D, the systematically false beliefs involved in D amount to a presupposition failure and, as a consequence, all D-judgements are uniformly neither true nor false. For example, some moral error theorists hold that moral thought and discourse presuppose that there are moral properties and facts, but since this presupposition is unfulfilled, moral judgements uniformly lack truth-value.\footnote{This version of moral error theory is defended in Sobel (ms, ch. 13). See also Joyce (2001: 6–9).} This complication is easily accommodated. We can make room for this non-standard version of error theory by defining an error theory about D as the view that D involves systematically false beliefs and that, as a consequence, all D-judgements are untrue, either in the sense that they are uniformly false or in the sense that they are uniformly neither true nor false.

However, as I indicated in Section 1.2, I believe that there is another important version of non-standard error theory. I shall illustrate this by focusing on moral thought and discourse. We might be systematically mistaken about the nature of moral properties and facts, but there might nevertheless be moral properties and facts. Our systematically false beliefs about the nature of moral properties and facts need not affect the meaning of our moral terms and therefore need not render our moral judgements uniformly false or untrue. Although they are not what we think they are, we might sometimes succeed in correctly attributing moral properties and reporting moral facts.\footnote{An anonymous reviewer suggested the following non-normative example to illustrate the point: physicists once believed that electrons are the smallest negatively charged particles. It turned out that they are not. But that did not prevent these physicists from making true claims about electrons.} As I have already mentioned, I shall argue in Chapter 2 that Hume may have endorsed a view like this. According to another version of this general view, moral thinking involves systematically false beliefs about moral properties and facts, and we are mistaken about what we are up to when we make moral judgements. On this view, all moral judgements are uniformly untrue, but this is not a consequence of the systematically false beliefs about moral properties and facts, but because of the purported fact that moral judgements do not express beliefs at all. I shall argue in Chapter 3 that the early non-cognitivist Axel Hägerström at one point endorsed a view like this.
These views are versions of what we may call moderate moral error theory. Like the standard and non-standard versions we encountered previously, moderate moral error theory attributes the doxastic error of systematically false beliefs to ordinary moral thinking, but it is moderate in that it does not take this doxastic error to render false all moral judgments, or some significant subset thereof, and neither to give rise to a presupposition failure.

One might object that what I call moderate moral error theory is too moderate to deserve the label ‘error theory’. If the view that moral thinking involves systematically false beliefs suffices to motivate the label ‘error theory’, the category of (moral) error theory becomes a lot more inclusive than it is commonly taken to be.

In response, I agree that recognizing moderate moral error theory alongside standard moral error theory significantly widens the category of (moral) error theory. But how inclusive a philosophical category like moral error theory is does not seem a philosophically interesting question. The interesting question is whether the categorization marks a philosophically interesting distinction. There is indeed a philosophically interesting distinction to make between metaethical views on which ordinary moral thinking involves systematically false beliefs, and metaethical views on which ordinary moral thinking does not involve systematically false beliefs—either because the folk’s metaethical beliefs about moral properties and facts are largely correct, or because the folk have no or very few such beliefs. My proposal is to mark the distinction by categorizing the first kind of views as versions of moral error theory.

Let me add, however, that in order for a theory to be a version of moderate moral error theory, the doxastic error it attributes to ordinary moral thinking must be sufficiently pervasive as opposed to peripheral. I have no theory to offer about what counts as a sufficiently pervasive error; I can only mention two examples that will be discussed more carefully in the coming chapters. The first is the view that ordinary moral thinking involves the belief that moral properties and facts are objective although they are in fact mind-dependent. The second is the view that ordinary moral thinking takes moral judgements to purport to attribute objective moral properties and report objective moral facts although they in fact express non-cognitive attitudes. Both these views seem to me clear-cut examples of views that attribute errors to ordinary moral thinking that
are sufficiently pervasive to make the label ‘(moderate) moral error theory’ apt.

As we shall see in Section 2.3, Mackie endorsed standard moral error theory. Since Mackie's theory and arguments for and against it are the central topics of Parts II and III of the book, I shall in those parts focus mostly on standard moral error theory. Note, however, that many versions of moderate moral error theories are reliant on something like the argument from queerness, since they maintain that ordinary moral thought and discourse involve systematic errors about the nature of moral properties and facts. The discussion in Part II is therefore equally relevant to moderate moral error theory as to standard moral error theory.

**Standard moral error theory: the problem of formulation**

Let us now consider a problem concerning the formulation of standard moral error theory. According to moral error theory, first-order moral claims are uniformly false. A first-order moral claim is a claim that entails that some agent morally ought to do or not to do some action; that there are moral reasons for some agent to do or not to do some action; that some action is morally permissible; that some institution, character trait, or what have you, is morally good or bad; and the like. So, for example, the claim that torture is wrong is false. This raises the question of what to say about the truth-values of negated first-order moral claims, such as the claim that torture is not wrong. This latter claim appears to be a moral claim and since it is the negation of a claim that standard moral error theory deems false, it appears that the theory should deem the negated claim true. Yet we know that according to standard moral error, moral judgments are uniformly false.

This leads to two worries: First, is standard moral error theory a coherent theory? Second, can it be maintained that moral error theory lacks first-order moral implications? It is immediately obvious that the standard formulation of moral error theory has implications for first-order moral

---

14 For a reading of Mackie that dissents from the majority's reading, see ch. 13 of Sobel (ms). According to Sobel, Mackie propounded an error theory according to which moral judgements are uniformly neither true nor false rather than false.

15 This problem has been discussed by, e.g., Pigden (2007); Sinnott-Armstrong (2006); Sobel (ms); Tännsjö (2010). Pigden calls the problem of formulating moral error theory the *Doppelganger Problem* and his solution is in some respects similar to the one I am going to offer.
theory since it implies that first-order moral judgements are uniformly false. But the worry we shall now address is whether the standard formulation of moral error theory has implications that are themselves moral.

Mackie insisted that his error theory is purely a second-order view and as such logically independent of any first-order moral view. But this can be doubted. According to the standard interpretation of Mackie’s error theory, a first-order moral claim like ‘Torture is morally wrong’ is false. According to the law of excluded middle it follows that its negation, ‘Torture is not morally wrong’, is true. That torture is not morally wrong would seem to imply that torture is morally permissible. More generally, then, the apparent upshot is that contrary to Mackie’s contention moral error theory does have first-order moral implications. And rather vulgar ones at that; if moral error theory is true, any action turns out to be morally permissible!

But it seems that we can also derive an opposite conclusion. According to moral error theory, ‘Torture is morally permissible’ is false. According to the law of excluded middle it follows that torture is not morally permissible, which seems to entail that torture is morally impermissible. More generally, then, the apparent upshot is that any action is morally impermissible! This may not be a vulgar first-order moral implication, but it is surely absurd. It also transpires that the standard formulation of moral error theory leads to a straightforward logical contradiction since we have derived that it is true that, e.g., torture is morally permissible (since any action is morally permissible) and that it is false that torture is morally permissible (since any action is morally impermissible).

One way out of the predicament is to adopt the non-standard version of moral error theory according to which all first-order moral claims are neither true nor false, due to a failure of presupposition. But this non-standard version of error theory can be questioned. In general, I take claims that predicate non-instantiated properties of some individual or individuals to be false. For instance, a claim to the effect that some person

---

17 I assume a liberal account of properties according to which there is a property $F$ if there is in some natural language a meaningful predicate that purports to pick out $F$ (see Schiffer 1990). The predicate ‘morally wrong’ fits this description, so there is a property of moral wrongness but error theorists maintain that this property is not instantiated. I take it that most moral error theorists maintain that moral properties are necessarily uninstantiated they are simply too queer to be instantiated in any possible world. A more theoretically motivated reason for this view is that fundamental moral facts, e.g., that inflicting pain is pro tanto
is a witch (where being a witch involves being a woman with magical powers) is false. The same goes for a claim to the effect that acts of torture are morally wrong.

Moreover, the claim that it is not the case that torture is wrong seems, from the perspective of moral error theorists to be true, since, on their view, nothing has the property of being wrong. In contrast, the negation of the claim that the present king of France is bald seems to be neither true nor false, since there is no present king of France. This suggests that while claims about the present king of France presuppose that there is a present king of France, first-order moral claims, like the claim that torture is wrong, entail that there are moral properties.\textsuperscript{18}

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has suggested another way out of the predicament according to which the scope of moral error theory is to be restricted, to the effect that only positive first-order moral claims are deemed uniformly false.\textsuperscript{19} A positive first-order moral claim is defined as a claim that entails something about what some agent morally ought to do or not to do, what there is moral reasons for some agent to do or not to do, and so on and so forth; or what would be morally good or bad, or morally desirable or undesirable, and so on. Importantly, it says nothing about mere permissibility.

Restricting moral error theory to positive first-order moral claims only, rids moral error theory from incoherence and from the absurd implication that anything is morally impermissible. But one may object that it morally wrong, would be necessary facts. But since there are no such facts in the actual world, there is no possible world in which there are moral facts. Correlatively, there is no possible world in which moral properties are instantiated. By way of comparison, atheists might hold that there is a property of being God and that this property involves being a necessary being that is omnipresent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and that created the universe. However, since there is, according to the atheist, nothing in the actual world that instantiates this property, there is no possible world in which this property is instantiated. The point that there is no possible world in which moral properties are instantiated refutes Christian Coons’s recent attempt to establish that there are at least some moral facts (Coons, 2011). Coons’s argument involves as a crucial premise the claim that there is a possible world in which there are moral facts. But since moral error theorists hold that there are no instantiations of moral properties in the actual world, and since moral facts are necessary facts, they also hold that there is no possible world in which there are moral facts, i.e., that there is no possible world in which moral properties are instantiated. This point on behalf of moral error theorists is spelled out in more detail in Wielenberg (ms).

\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Lycan 2000: 196.

\textsuperscript{19} Sinnott-Armstrong 2006: 34–6.