Morality: From Error to Fiction
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If you were to hear someone sincerely assert “Lying is never morally wrong,” then you’d most likely be somewhat taken aback. You would probably assume that this person judges that lying is morally good, or at least morally permissible, which would seem to indicate a tolerant attitude toward dishonesty; thus you’d probably feel disapproving and from then on be inclined to take what they say with a grain of salt. But then suppose that this person went on to say “There’s nothing morally good about lying” and then added “Lying is never morally permissible.” Well, now you’d probably be a bit confused. Which is it: do they think that lying is morally acceptable or morally unacceptable?

The answer is that this confusing person thinks neither. What you’ve encountered is a rare beast—a moral error theorist—someone who doesn’t merely think that some moral judgments are mistaken (something that nobody sensible would deny), but who thinks that all moral judgments are mistaken. According to moral error theorists, lying isn’t morally bad, isn’t morally good, isn’t morally permissible, isn’t morally anything. And they think that this is true not just of lying—it’s true of everything. They are called “moral error theorists” because they think that evaluating the world in moral terms is just a great big error—not necessarily a practical error, but an error in the sense that the world simply isn’t like this. You might still judge this to be a weird or outrageous position to hold, but that would be a very different sort of criticism from the kind of disapproval and mistrust that you initially felt toward this person.

By way of analogy, consider someone who sincerely asserts “Stealing is not disapproved of by God.” If you were assuming that everyone believes in God, then you’d probably conclude that this person believes that God approves of or permits stealing, which would seem to indicate a tolerant attitude toward theft; thus, as before, you’d probably feel disapproving and from then on be inclined to keep a watchful eye on the family silver when this person comes to visit. But if that initial background assumption turns out to be false—if you were to discover that the speaker is in fact an atheist—then none of these inferences would hold. As far as the atheist is concerned, stealing isn’t disapproved of by God, but nor is it approved of by God or permitted by God; it’s not anything by God. And nor must atheists be tolerant of stealing; they may have all sorts of non-God-related reasons to be adamantly opposed to theft. Of course, you might still think this person mistaken for endorsing atheism, but that would be a very different sort of criticism from the kind of disapproval and mistrust that you initially felt toward this person.
What considerations might lead someone to endorse the moral error theorist’s view? It is, after all, a very unusual and unsettling view to hold, and one that’s unlikely to be heard espoused outside academic philosophy. Answering this question is one of the principal tasks of this book, but this shouldn’t prevent us from taking an initial rough tilt at the query. Let’s begin by sticking with the analogy of atheism, for there we are in a more familiar landscape. What considerations might lead someone to endorse atheism?

The answer is that it’s complicated; atheists aren’t usually moved by a master argument for their skepticism. One may be impressed by the fact that theistic facts are not required to explain any known phenomena. Naturalistic explanations (i.e., explanations that fit with the scientific worldview) have a great track record of working out in terms of predictive success and practical applications, to such an extent that even when there are explanatory gaps it remains reasonable to suppose that true naturalistic explanations are simply currently unknown. The very fact that people have powerful religious experiences (which sometimes make theistic beliefs seem very compelling to them) is itself amenable to a naturalistic explanation. The sheer diversity of religions, globally and historically, suggests that theistic beliefs more likely come about through a complex process of collective invention than through any process of gaining access to a realm of theistic truths. (This, after all, is how any religious believer must explain the beliefs of the billions of followers of any other religion.) Indeed, even if there weren’t this diversity, the most plausible explanation of how theistic beliefs arise would not be one that sees them as tracking a theistic realm. There are serious puzzles surrounding some of the traits that are generally attributed to gods (e.g., creating everything, having a disembodied mind, being omnipotent) which raise the possibility of flat-out incoherence. And then there’s also that little matter of evil.

The preceding paragraph is not intended to be particularly persuasive or complete; it’s just a series of headings. The point of the sketch is, first, to draw attention to the familiarity of the idea that a body of considerations could show how an enormously widespread belief system, regarded as of the deepest significance to most people, is horribly mistaken. The second point is to draw attention to the fact that it’s a body of considerations: it’s a series of sometimes independent and sometimes interlocking arguments that collectively (the atheist concludes) render disbelief more reasonable than either theistic belief or uncommitted fence-sitting. There may be some stand-alone arguments in there (such as the notorious Argument from Evil), but it seems as a matter of fact unlikely that atheists usually base their disbelief on any single factor.

Now let’s run the analogous body of considerations for morality.

One may be impressed by the fact that moral facts are not required to explain any known phenomena. Non-moral explanations (i.e., explanations that do not invoke any moral factors) have a great track record of working out in terms of predictive success and practical applications, to such an extent that even when
there are explanatory gaps it remains reasonable to suppose that true non-moral explanations are simply currently unknown. The very fact that people have powerful moral intuitions (which sometimes make moral beliefs seem very compelling to them) is itself amenable to a non-moral explanation. The sheer diversity of moral systems, globally and historically, suggests that moral beliefs more likely come about through a complex process of collective invention than through any process of gaining access to a realm of moral truths. (This, after all, is how any moral believer must explain the beliefs of the billions of adherents to any other moral system.) Indeed, even if there weren’t this diversity, the most plausible explanation of how moral beliefs arise would not be one that sees them as tracking a realm of moral facts. There are serious puzzles surrounding some of the features that are generally attributed to morality (e.g., requiring free will, involving laws without a lawgiver and rights without a conferrer) which raise the possibility of flat-out incoherence.

As before, these are headings rather than anything intended to persuade, and I don’t pretend that all possible considerations have even been mentioned. The purpose of my sketching these considerations is not, at this stage, to evaluate the overall case for error theory, but rather to draw attention to a broader point: it’s a collection of mutually supportive arguments—some of which may be autonomous, some of which may be inter-dependent. It would be unreasonable to expect the moral error theorist to produce a master argument, and it would be misguided for opponents to think that exposing the weaknesses of one argument in favor of error theory would suffice to show that the whole position is mistaken. As with atheism, it is possible that none of the arguments is conclusive if taken in isolation, but considered together they combine to make disbelief warranted. As with atheism, one error theorist may be persuaded by considerations that other error theorists find unconvincing.

It is worth mentioning a couple of other structural similarities between atheism and moral error theory. First, atheism doesn’t require one to think that gods are impossible beings (though an atheist certainly might hold this strong view); it is enough if one believes that gods don’t actually exist. The same thing goes for the error theorist’s attitude toward moral properties. Second, neither the atheist nor the moral error theorist need claim to know that theism/morality is false; all that is required is belief—or, more precisely, disbelief. As a corollary of this latter

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1 The viability of this distinction between belief and knowledge depends on one’s epistemological views. The views I have in mind are those that would seek to accommodate commonplace claims of the form “I believe that p, but I don’t know that p.” A natural way of accomplishing this is to maintain that in order to believe that p one’s conviction in p must meet a certain threshold, and in order to know that p one’s conviction in p must meet a higher threshold (Anderson 2012). As for the distinction between belief and disbelief: S disbelieves that p if and only if S believes that not-p. Hence all acts of disbelief are also acts of belief—but the former term is nevertheless sometimes useful in order to emphasize the negation in the content. “S disbelieves that p” is not to be confused with “S does not believe that p,” since the latter is consistent with S’s neither believing nor disbelieving that p.
point: one might have perfectly good grounds for disbelieving something even if one cannot provide anything that would constitute proof. “None of us,” wrote Bertrand Russell, “would seriously consider the possibility that all the gods of Homer really exist, and yet if you were to set to work to give a logical demonstration that Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, and the rest of them did not exist you would find it an awful job. You could not get such proof” (Russell 1949). Whatever arguments the atheist or the moral error theorist might put forward, they should not be rejected simply on the grounds that they fall short of demonstrating their case beyond any glimmer of doubt.

Even with the striking structural similarities between these two bodies of considerations (at least as I have sketched them), it would be surprising if the various analogous arguments across the two cases turned out to have matching plausibility. Well, perhaps this claim needs some qualification: the majority of people probably do assign pretty much the same plausibility to both sets of arguments: namely, adamant implausibility. Most people are not atheists (an evenhanded study from 2013 estimates the worldwide figure at about 7 percent\(^2\)), and it can be claimed with confidence that considerably fewer are moral error theorists. (Since gods are generally taken to provide the basis for morality, it is reasonable to assume that the number of theists who are moral error theorists is close to zero.) If we restrict our attention just to professional philosophers, we’ll find a much higher proportion of atheists (67 percent) than in the general population, but even here the number of moral error theorists is still very much the minority.\(^3\) So, in short, the considerations in favor of moral error theory are not widely embraced—certainly not by theists, but not much even by those who find the analogous arguments in favor of atheism convincing.

It is hardly surprising that moral error theory should be such an unpopular view, for it is exceedingly difficult to persuade people that their beliefs are mistaken, especially when the beliefs in question are psychologically entrenched, receive the unquestioning backing of the surrounding culture, and are considered of such fundamental importance that even the act of expressing skepticism is deemed to be in bad taste. (“It is difficult to get a man to understand something,” observes Upton Sinclair, “when his salary depends on his not understanding it.”) Anyone voicing the error-theoretic view outside of academic circles is likely to meet with a response of spluttering horror; but even in the calmer world found within those circles the view can be expected to meet with staunch resistance. People will always be motivated to defend such deeply rooted beliefs and will find

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\(^2\) Keysar and Navarro-Rivera 2013. These kinds of surveys are fraught with problems, of course, and other surveys give somewhat different results, but the number is always small.

\(^3\) See Bourget and Chalmers 2023. 26 percent of professional philosophers surveyed counted themselves as moral anti-realists, but since the label “moral anti-realism” covers several metaethical positions in addition to error theory (see Joyce 2021), it may be assumed that the percentage of error theorists is considerably lower.
ways of doing so. One thing at which we humans are spectacularly bad is holding our own precious beliefs to the same standards of critical scrutiny that we breeze-
ily apply when concluding that others’ precious beliefs are obviously false. Whenever we judge some other culture’s belief system to be erroneous (e.g., the ancient Greeks believing in Zeus), then although we will accept that there must be some explanatory account of the origins of their beliefs, both on an individual and on a cultural level, that explains how so many people came to embrace such falsehood—we nevertheless remain oblivious to the possibility that our own analogous belief systems have a similar explanation (e.g., contemporary Americans believing in the Christian god). Instead, we are prone to endorse a vague exceptionalism according to which the processes that gave rise to our own beliefs are somehow special—such that our beliefs must be true and reliable—while we simultaneously suppress the obvious knowledge that this is exactly how it seems to others whose beliefs we reject as obviously false.

The parenthetical examples that I just used pertain to comparing religions, and many readers of an atheistic leaning (which, I suspect, will be approximately 67 percent of my readers) shall think themselves savvy on this point. “Yes,” they’ll nod, “believing in the Christian god is just as crazy as believing in the Greek pantheon.” And they will take a similar attitude—though perhaps one sometimes clothed in cultural tolerance—toward beliefs such as that wearing an amulet can be an effective method of birth control, or that certain actions will anger ancestral spirits, or that a particular mountain is sacred, or that distant astronomical events can affect our personalities, and so on. Yet these people are considerably less likely to be willing to turn this critical eye upon their own moral views, such as the belief that certain sorts of actions deserve certain kinds of punishment or reward, or that uttering a certain sequence of words (“I promise to . . .”) can obligate a speaker to act in a certain way, or that people might have certain rights even if nobody has conferred or recognizes those rights. So familiar are such moralistic ideas to us—so obvious and normal do they feel—that the prospect that they might ultimately rely on mysterious and illusory relations seems preposterous.

Despite anticipating that my opponents will be zealous and many, it is my purpose in this book to argue that the overall case for moral error theory is quite persuasive. (I’ll aim for an American “quite,” but settle for a British one.) I will argue for the weird and outrageous view that all moral judgments are mistaken. But if this skeptical view is correct—if all our moral judgments are mistaken—then wouldn’t we be free to lie and steal if the whim took us? Wouldn’t the already-fragile social bonds that hold our society together crumble? In short, isn’t moral error theory—or, at least, the widespread belief in it—something to fear? My second purpose in this book is to argue that these kinds of anxieties, whether mild or apocalyptic, are not well grounded. Moral judgments might be mistaken in the sense that the world simply isn’t the way that we take it to be, but it doesn’t
follow that they are a *practical* error. I will argue that the moral error theorist need not advocate the banishment of morality from our minds and language, but may, rather, recommend that we retain it, on grounds of its usefulness, but with an altered attitude toward it such that the errors are avoided. This fictionalist recommendation aims to show that embracing error theory need not be, in practice, such a terrible thing—it may even be (as I will ultimately argue) pragmatically *better* than believing in morality. To the extent that much opposition to moral error theory derives from concern about the potential negative practical effects of its adoption, a plausible case for moral fictionalism should cause that opposition to lose some of its determination.

This monograph is a sequel to my 2001 book, *The Myth of Morality*. That book attempted two tasks: first, to argue for moral error theory; second, to advocate a certain answer to the question “What should we do if moral error theory is true?”: namely, that we should nevertheless retain our moral discourse with the status of a useful fiction. This current book is a sequel in that it attempts exactly the same two tasks. But of course the passage of over twenty years has seen a lot of movement in the details.

Part I, “Morality in Error,” puts forward a case in favor of moral error theory. Chapter 1 is a critical review of John Mackie’s well-known arguments from his 1977 book. While I am more sympathetic than most to these arguments, my intention is not to advocate them, but is, rather, more in the vicinity of scene-setting.

Chapter 2 argues by elimination, knocking a few metaethical rivals to error theory out of the race. I don’t profess to always present the strongest arguments available. For example, regarding one of my targets, noncognitivism, the philosophical literature is rife with criticisms, and I am content to take the approach of presenting some (hopefully) interesting thoughts against the theory, confident that there are much heftier arguments waiting in the wings (e.g., the Frege-Geach problem) which could, if necessary, be brought on stage to do the job.

Chapter 3, more than any other chapter, is where central arguments from my 2001 book are revisited (or “rehashed,” as I’m sure some disparaging readers will think!); but, thankfully, what took about five chapters to say in 2001 I here distil down into one. And the arguments aren’t *quite* the same. I am much more explicit now that the arguments occur against a backdrop of a commitment to a naturalistic worldview.

Chapter 4 endeavors to establish moral error theory via first supporting skepticism about moral responsibility. Against moral responsibility I have nothing terribly original to say—I simply present the strong case that already exists. My main goal is to counter those who argue that morality could carry on merrily even if we stripped it of the concept *moral responsibility*. An error theory about moral responsibility, I argue, entails a more general moral error theory.

Chapter 5 goes on the defensive for moral error theory, offering responses to half a dozen different objections that have been raised. These objections are (i)
that moral error theory is incoherent; (ii) that the moral error theorist is committed to love being a mistake; (iii) the companions in guilt argument; (iv) that the moral error theorist is on a slippery slope to all-out normative error theory; (v) the challenge of Moorean epistemology; and (vi) the moral indispensability argument. All of these objections fail.

Part II of the book, “Morality as Fiction,” puts forward a case in favor of moral fictionalism. Chapter 6 is a careful examination of the so-called “what next?” question: if error theory is true, then what next? Back in 2001 I was rather more cavalier about this important question than I’m now inclined to be. I’ve come to appreciate that there are various legitimate ways that the question can be taken, but this pluralism does not move me to worry that the question doesn’t make sense. We simply need to specify which question is being asked, by whom, and under what (possibly hypothetical) circumstances.

If Chapter 6 clarifies and poses the “what next?” question, then Chapter 7 aims to answer it. Chapter 7 is the central plank of the second part of the book, where I outline and advocate a version of moral fictionalism. One important way that this answer differs from the version developed in The Myth of Morality is that I now downplay the role of make-believe and pretense which was previously paramount in my understanding of fictionalism. Now I model my fictionalism on J. S. Mill’s solution to the paradox of happiness. I also push for the bold conclusion that taking a fictionalist attitude toward morality is actually better, in practical terms, than seriously believing it.

Chapter 8 goes on the defensive for moral fictionalism. First I entertain the idea of fictionalism modeled on metaphorical language. This is not ultimately a kind of fictionalism that I’d recommend, but its discussion helps us to understand how the moral fictionalist has the resources to see off various criticisms. I then compare fictionalism with a couple of its most conspicuous rivals: abolitionism and conservatism. I argue, unsurprisingly, that fictionalism wins.

Finally, in a lengthy epilogue I take a step back and wonder whether there is even a fact of the matter whether moral error theory is true or false. I consider a position I call “metaethical ecumenicism” (inspired by comments by David Lewis), according to which both moral error theory and moral naturalism are permissible positions to hold, and the only grounds for preferring one over the other are practical. Ultimately, I argue that moral fictionalism still represents the pragmatically best option.

The book is, as a whole, fairly ambitious in the amount of ground it covers, which inevitably has drawbacks. When doing philosophy there are obviously times for pursuing an argument with meticulous care, but there are also times for showing how all the pieces of many arguments can fit together into a Big Picture. In the ideal world, one would like to do both, but that would lead to an overly thick book at which both potential readers and prospective publishers would likely balk. Since my interest is definitely in showing how different arguments
combine to build an overall case, I confess up front that sometimes this means that I will omit elements of an argument, or fail to acknowledge potential objections, or be content to refer readers to fuller argumentation elsewhere.

I admit that setting out to write this sequel brought me no small amount of trouble, mostly because it was challenging to strike the right balance between rehearsing the old and exploring the new. I cannot claim with confidence that the end result is optimal. For readers acquainted with *The Myth of Morality* there will definitely be moments of déjà vu (and here I seek absolution in the slogan “I’ve said it once before but it bears repeating”), but I hope that this will not prove too tedious; my intention is that familiar ground will serve as a point of departure for some new discussions. It would be nice to think that the passage of two decades has seen my metaethical views grow more intellectually mature and sophisticated, but this isn’t really something I would assert with any conviction. Yet there is definitely more to say on the subject. In philosophy, there always is.
PART I

MORALITY IN ERROR
1

Mackie’s Arguments for Error Theory

Introduction: Mackie’s Moral Error Theory

The label “error theory” was coined by John Mackie in his 1977 book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Since then, the term has come into widespread use among professional philosophers, and Mackie’s arguments have become a staple on ethics course reading lists the world over. The object of this opening chapter is to take Mackie as our starting point and use his arguments to set the scene; it is not my goal to defend those arguments. For readers familiar with Mackie’s views and keen to get down to business, nothing of great substance will be lost by skipping ahead to Chapter 2.

First let’s gain a clearer understanding of what the basic error-theoretic position is. Moral judgments take many forms, but generally they appear to ascribe a property or relation to the world. “Stealing is wrong” appears to ascribe the property *wrongness* to acts of stealing. “You morally ought to repay that money” appears to ascribe the relation of “moral oughtness” to the pair of things consisting of you and the act of repaying the money. When we sincerely make a moral judgment, then, we seem to commit ourselves to the world being a certain way: that things do have these properties, and that things do stand in these relations. Some moral judgments don’t take this form—sometimes, for example, we put forward our judgments in the imperatival mood, such as simply “Don’t steal.” But if this imperative is intended *morally*, then standing close behind it will be its supposed justification: “Don’t steal because stealing is morally wrong.” Thus even the moral imperative harbors the same commitment to the world being a certain way.

If I assert that my dog is blue, but my dog lacks the property of blueness, then I have made an error—I have committed myself to the world being a way that it is not. In this example, of course, there are other things that are blue, just not my dog. If I assert that my dog is a unicorn, then, again, I’ve made an error, but in this case nothing has the property of being a unicorn: if I point to *anything* in the actual world and assert that it’s a unicorn, then I’ve made an error. The moral error theorist thinks that moral properties are a bit like unicorns. Whatever we point to in the actual world, and assert that it is morally right or morally wrong, or good or evil, or praiseworthy or blameworthy, etc., we will have made an error. The error lies not just in uttering something false, but in asserting it (i.e., in
committing oneself). After all, one can say false things without asserting them (e.g., when joking), in which case there need be no error.

The task of spelling out what we commit ourselves to when we make moral judgments is the conceptual component of the error theorist’s argument. The error theorist’s case also involves an ontological component concerning what kinds of properties and relations actually exist in the world. Thus the standard way of arguing for moral error theory, broadly speaking, is to maintain that these components combine to entail that in making moral judgments we commit ourselves to the world being a way that the world is not: moral judgments are erroneous.

Different error theorists might alight upon different ontological commitments as the conceptual premise of the argument. For example, one might claim that something is a moral value only if fully rational agents would converge upon it (Smith 1994). Or one might claim that morality requires the existence of a certain kind of stable character trait (Harman 1999). Or one might claim that the only way of making sense of moral normativity is by appeal to a divine supernatural power (Adams 1987). Any of these examples could be coupled with a matching ontological premise that the commitment in question fails to hold—that rational agents need not converge, that human character traits do not have the requisite kind of stability, that no such divine beings exist—to the skeptical conclusion.

Mackie’s particular argument for error theory is based on the idea that when we engage in moral discourse we commit ourselves to the existence of objective values and objective prescriptions, but the world does not contain these features, thus rendering our moral judgments mistaken. Let us take these two things in turn: first values and then prescriptions.

Mackie has no beef with what might be called “subjective values.” He accepts that many things are good or bad: good coffee, good vacuum cleaners, good friends, etc. To call something “good,” he thinks, is to say that it satisfies the requirements or wants or interests of the kind in question (1977: 55–6). When these requirements are our requirements—when the values stem from what we require of things (to taste good, to remove dust, to be loyal and companionable, etc.)—then no problem arises; the values exist because of our acts of valuing. But when it comes to calling something morally good, Mackie thinks, then the requirements are no longer of our making: they purportedly “simply are there, in the nature of things, without being the requirements of any person or body of persons, even God” (1977: 59). The ontological step of the argument (to be described in further depth later) is to argue that the universe isn’t like this; no such requirements exist and therefore no moral values exist.

1 There is some discussion to be had about whether the error theorist should claim that moral judgments are false or whether “untrue” might be better. But this distinction is finicky with little of substance hanging on it, so I’m ignoring it for now. For discussion see Joyce 2001: 6–9; Kalf 2018.
Nor does Mackie have any beef with what might be called “subjective prescriptions.” He accepts that there are many things that we ought to do or must do. Some of these prescriptions derive from our desires: a hypothetical imperative tells one to φ if one desires X and φing is the most efficient way of attaining X. And some prescriptions derive from human institutions that involve rules, such as golf or etiquette or fashion or the regulations of a country club. These latter prescriptions may take the form of categorical imperatives: demanding actions of people regardless of their desires. In both cases—hypothetical imperatives and institutional categorical imperatives—the prescriptions arise from our desires, our valuing activity, and our collective decisions. (Much more on hypothetical and categorical imperatives later, in Chapter 3.) But when it comes to moral prescriptions, Mackie thinks, we presuppose demands that are neither hypothetical nor institutional. When something is morally demanded, he thinks, it is, in a sense, not we who are making the demand—rather, we are merely voicing a demand that is supposedly already there, in the nature of things. The ontological step of the argument is, again, to declare that the universe simply isn’t like this: Mackie recommends “the denial that any such categorically imperative element is objectively valid” (1977: 29).

Mackie’s Conceptual Premise

Mackie’s strategy for establishing the conceptual step—that morality commits us to objective values and objective prescriptions—consists largely of showing that many prominent philosophers throughout history have labored hard to establish the existence of such things. (Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Sidgwick, Clarke, Hume, and Price all get a mention.) The presupposition of this strategy would appear to be that all these philosophers were striving to defend something that they perceived to be a central component of common moral thinking. “It is not going too far,” claims Mackie, to say that this assumption of objectivity “has been incorporated in the basic, conventional, meanings of moral terms” (1977: 35). Values and prescriptions that are subjective simply don’t have the kind of authoritative force that we require of morality. Someone who wonders whether some action is morally wrong is not trying to work out how they or anyone else do or would feel about it, but rather trying to determine “whether this course of action would be wrong in itself” (1977: 33–4).

We might try to understand Mackie’s assertion that moral status is objective, conceptually speaking, by comparing it with something for which we’re happier to endorse subjectivity: legal status. Consider something that is both illegal and widely considered to be immoral: say, slavery. The legal status of slavery clearly depends on us: it’s illegal only because those with appropriate authority have decreed it to be illegal. But is that how we think of the moral status of slavery?
It’s easy to see why Mackie would think not. Were someone to publicly declare that the moral status of slavery depends on us—that it’s immoral only because someone with appropriate authority has decreed it to be immoral—they would likely meet with outrage. If one considers a past society where the accepted procedures of legislation incontrovertibly deemed slavery to be legal (say, Alabama in 1850), there is little conceptual room for insisting that members of that society were all mistaken in thinking it legal when it was in fact illegal. Though we might think that it was wrong of them to make slavery legal, we accept that they did, definitely, succeed in making it legal. By contrast, if one considers a society where slavery was widely judged to be morally permissible (say, Alabama in 1850), there certainly remains conceptual space for insisting that they were all mistaken in thinking it permissible when it was in fact morally wrong all along. Again, we’ll think that it was wrong of them to consider slavery permissible, but, unlike with legal status, we don’t for a second think that they succeeded in rendering slavery morally permissible.

Despite the availability of such intuition pumps in favor of the objectivity of morality (conceptually speaking), Mackie’s conceptual premise is far from secure. An underlying problem is that there is no philosophical agreement on a fine-grained method for deciding when a discourse is committed to a thesis—such that the denial of the thesis would amount to changing the topic—versus when it is merely contingently associated with the thesis. Even if we fully understood what “objective values” and “objective prescriptions” are, and we could show that most or all moral speakers believe in such things, this still wouldn’t show that one couldn’t excise this belief, if it proves problematic, and carry on with a moral discourse that did not involve a commitment to objectivity.

Consider, for example, the fact that there was a time when pretty much everyone believed that the Earth lies at the center of the universe. Still, being at the center of the universe wasn’t an essential feature of the concept Earth. If it had been, then it would have been a priori impossible for us to make the discovery that the Earth is not at the center of the universe. Or to put it another way, if it had been an essential feature, then the discovery that there is nothing at the center of the universe would be the discovery that the Earth doesn’t exist at all. However, through all the upheavals of the Copernican revolution, nobody, so far as I know, countenanced the conclusion that the Earth simply doesn’t exist. Rather, people realized that we were wrong about the Earth being at the center of the universe, and carried on (entirely reasonably) believing in the Earth. Perhaps, in the same way, even if we discover that we have held important mistaken beliefs about the nature of morality, the appropriate course is to correct those beliefs and carry on (entirely reasonably) believing in morality.

But there are plenty of contrasting comparison cases, too. There was also a time when pretty much everyone believed in the existence of unicorns (i.e., horse-like animals with a single horn). It eventually became clear that nothing
exists that satisfied this description. Still, the world does contain creatures that satisfy some of the description. There are, for example, plenty of horse-like animals without horns—we call them “horses.” Might we have simply weakened the commitment to horns in order to accommodate the existence of unicorns? Nobody, so far as I know, countenanced the conclusion that we’d been riding around on unicorns for centuries but had just been mistaken about the bit about the horn. And the reason for this is that having a horn is an essential feature of the concept unicorn; it is (if you’ll excuse the pun) the whole point of the concept. Perhaps, in the same way, the need to appeal to objective values and prescriptions is the whole point of morality, such that when we discover that there is nothing in the world meeting this description, the appropriate course is to conclude that morality should go the way of the unicorn.

While there does seem to be a real distinction here—between mistakes that can be revised versus mistakes that sink a whole concept—there is no consensus on what determines that distinction in a fine-grained way. When, then, we encounter a controversial case—such as Mackie’s conceptual premise—we find ourselves at an impasse. In any case, we will return to the issue of moral objectivity later; for now, let’s move on to the ontological step of Mackie’s argument.

Mackie famously submits two skeptical arguments which he calls the Argument from Relativity and the Argument from Queerness—but which I shall call the Argument from Diversity and the Argument from Strangeness, respectively (for reasons that will be mentioned in due course). Neither of these arguments, nor the combination of them, does Mackie think sufficient to establish moral error theory; this conclusion is reached (he thinks) only if they are supplemented by a third: the Argument from Objectification. As I said earlier, my goal in this chapter is not particularly to defend Mackie’s arguments, but rather just to understand the basics of the skeptical case that he puts forward. I’ll follow the unimaginative format of considering the three arguments in turn.

The Argument from Moral Diversity

That cultures and individuals vary in their moral views seems obvious. Over two thousand years ago, Herodotus observed the cultural variation regarding how the dead should be treated: what seemed obviously proper among the Greeks (cremation) met with horror among the Callatiae of India who favored eating their dead—a practice which in turn, of course, appalled the Greeks. Diversity of moral views continues to be public and pervasive. You can probably think of people you know quite well who hold different views than yours about the moral status of things such as euthanasia, vegetarianism, patriotism, and vaccination mandates.

Some have argued that this moral diversity lends support to moral relativism (Benedict 1934; Harman 1994). Some have argued that the existence of moral
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diversity reduces the level of confidence we should have in our moral judgments (McGrath 2008; Nguyen 2010). Here we are interested in a different kind of view: that this diversity favors moral error theory. Mackie’s presentation of this kind of argument is deceptively simple, but upon reflection proves rather tricky to nail down.\(^2\)

The argument is usually interpreted as depending on an inference to the best explanation (see Gowans 2000: 4; Shafer-Landau 2003: ch. 9; Enoch 2009: 21), centered on which of two hypotheses best explains “the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another” (Mackie 1977: 36). First, there is the error-theoretic hypothesis that morality is something that groups of humans make up, and since there are no moral facts to constrain the formation of moral beliefs, diversity is widespread and the associated disagreements are persistent and intractable. Second, there is what we can call the “realist hypothesis”: that there are objective moral facts, and diversity exists and disagreements occur because humans have limited epistemic access to these facts: human perception of moral facts is “seriously inadequate and badly distorted” (1977: 37). Mackie argues that the phenomenon of moral diversity is “more readily explained” (1977: 37) by the former hypothesis than by the latter.

One might well wonder why Mackie restricts his comparison to just these two hypotheses, for there would seem to be other contenders. There is, for example, the non-objectivist hypothesis according to which moral facts exist but they are not objective in the way the realist proposes. But recall that by this stage Mackie has already to his own satisfaction established the conceptual premise of his case—the claim that objectivity “has been incorporated in the basic, conventional, meanings of moral terms”—in which case the non-objectivist hypothesis is off the table. Another possible hypothesis is the relativist view according to which moral facts exist—perhaps even objectively—but are of a relativistic nature, such that what is morally true for one group of humans may differ from what is true for another group. One possible explanation for Mackie’s not considering the relativist hypothesis at this stage is that he has conflated the objectivity versus subjectivity distinction with the absolutism versus relativism distinction (a very common mistake), in which case any arguments he has used to establish the objectivity of morality as a conceptual commitment will also be taken to have established the conceptual inadequacy of moral relativism. But even putting this possible confusion aside, there are good reasons for doubting whether moral relativism can provide a decent explanation of moral diversity—at least, if we’re thinking of moral diversity as something that could make disagreement among the varied

\(^2\) Mackie calls this argument the “Argument from Relativity,” but this label might suggest that he is arguing for moral relativism, which he definitely isn’t. Others (including my past self) have called it the “Argument from Disagreement.” But “disagreement” might be taken to suggest parties engaged in active dispute, which is not an essential feature of the argument and could possibly be a distraction; hence “diversity.”