



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Journal of Moral Philosophy*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Olson, J. (2016)

Précis of Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence.

Journal of Moral Philosophy, 13(4): 397-402

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/17455243-01304001>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-132314>

Précis of *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence*

Jonas Olson

Stockholm University

Abstract: Moral error theorists and moral realists agree about several disputed metaethical issues. They typically agree that ordinary moral judgements are beliefs and that ordinary moral utterances purport to refer to moral facts. But they disagree on the crucial ontological question of whether there are any moral facts. Moral error theorists hold that there are not and that, as a consequence, ordinary beliefs are systematically mistaken and ordinary moral judgements uniformly untrue. Perhaps because of its kinship with moral realism, moral error theory is often considered the most notorious of moral scepticisms. While the view has been widely discussed, it has had relatively few defenders. *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* (henceforth *MET*) examines the view from a historical as well as a contemporary perspective, and purports to respond to some of its most prominent challenges. This précis is a brief summary of the book's content.

Keywords: Hume, irreducible normativity, Mackie, moral error theory, queerness

Moral error theorists and moral realists agree about several disputed metaethical issues. They typically agree that ordinary moral judgements are beliefs and that ordinary moral utterances purport to refer to moral facts. But they disagree on the crucial ontological question of whether there are any moral facts. Moral error theorists hold that there are not and that, as a consequence, ordinary beliefs are systematically mistaken and ordinary moral judgements uniformly untrue. Perhaps because of its kinship with moral realism, moral error theory is often considered the most notorious of moral scepticisms. While the view has been widely discussed, it has had relatively few defenders. *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* (henceforth *MET*) examines the view from a historical as well as a contemporary perspective, and purports to respond to some of its most prominent challenges.

In the book's introductory chapter, I offer a detailed discussion of the main components of moral error theory, and I distinguish the view from moral projectivism. While the latter is congenial to moral error theory, the two views are logically independent.

A fundamental problem for moral error theory concerns its formulation. According to the standard formulation, moral judgements are uniformly false. But if it is false that, e.g., torture is wrong, it follows, by the law of excluded middle, that torture is not wrong. That torture is not wrong seems to imply that torture is morally permissible, which is clearly a moral judgement. This is of course just one example among many others that can be used to illustrate that moral error theory seems to imply that anything is permissible. This suggests that the standard formulation of moral error theory renders the theory incoherent.

The solution to the problem that I offer denies that the implication from "not wrong" to "permissible" is conceptual, and maintains instead that it is a generalized conversational implicature (Grice 1989). The idea is that "not wrong" conversationally implicates "permissible" because normally when we claim that something is not wrong we speak from within a system of moral norms, or moral standard for short. According to most moral standards, any action that is not wrong according to that standard is permissible according to that standard. General compliance with Gricean maxims that bid us to make our statements relevant and not overly informative ensures that we do not normally state explicitly that we speak from within some moral standard when we claim that something is not wrong (Grice 1989: 26ff.). The error theorist can declare that torture is not wrong and go on to signal that she is not speaking from within a moral standard. She might say something like the following: "Torture is not wrong. But neither is it permissible. There are no moral facts and consequently no action has moral status." This cancels the implicature from "not wrong" to "permissible." On this view, error theory does not imply that anything is permissible.

But incoherence still looms. The law of excluded middle entails that if “Torture is wrong” is false, then “Torture is not wrong” is true. If the latter sentence expresses a moral judgement, then moral error theory after all has implications that by its own lights are false. The response I offer comprises two claims. The first is that moral judgements are judgements that entail that some agent morally ought to do or not to do some action; that some action is morally permissible or impermissible; that some institution, character trait, or what have you, is morally good or bad; and so on. The second claim is the one explained above, i.e., that a negated judgement like the one expressed by the sentence “Torture is not wrong” does not *entail* that torture is permissible; it merely conversationally implicates that it is, since the implicature from “not wrong” to “permissible” is cancellable. Thus negated atomic judgements involving moral terms are not strictly speaking moral judgements, but some such judgements conversationally implicate moral judgements. The standard formulation of moral error theory, according to which moral judgements are uniformly false can thus be sustained and does not render the theory incoherent. (As I will mention briefly below, however, there are also non-standard versions of moral error theory, with which the standard formulation does not fit; see *MET*, chapters 1-4).

Moral error theory is most closely associated with J. L. Mackie and the opening chapter of his seminal *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977). In Part I of *MET*, I discuss some notable progenitors of the view. One chapter each is devoted to the moral error theories of David Hume and the Swedish philosopher Axel Hägerström (1868-1939). Like Mackie, Hume and Hägerström held that ordinary moral thought involves systematic errors. Unlike Mackie, however, they did not hold that ordinary moral judgements are uniformly false; in Hume’s case because he held that there are moral properties and facts to which our moral judgements sometimes refer—it is just that moral properties and facts are not what we ordinarily take them to be—and in Hägerström’s case because moral utterances are not the

kind of utterances that can be true or false—they are exclamations or prescriptions rather than assertions. I thus attribute to Hume and Hägerström non-standard versions of moral error theory. Apart from their historical relevance, these discussions have the important implication that some versions of moral error theory are compatible with a variety of metaethical views, such as realism and non-cognitivism. A point of particular scholarly interest concerns the first published statement of moral error theory in its standard version, which I claim was not Mackie's but Einar Tegen's, in a critique of Hägerström's metaethical theory (Tegen 1944).

I also survey the moral error theories of more or less prominent philosophers of the early twentieth century, such as Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Richard Robinson. What prompted these philosophers and some others in this period to be attracted to moral error theory was mainly a general dissatisfaction with the ontological and epistemological commitments of the non-naturalistic realism of G. E. Moore and W. D. Ross, along with considerations of ontological parsimony. These early cases for moral error theory are suggestive but they would have been stronger had they included something like Mackie's arguments that moral properties and facts are metaphysically queer. In his earliest statement of moral error theory, Mackie held that the argument from relativity was stronger than the argument from queerness (Mackie 1946). Thirty years later, by the time of his *Ethics*, he had changed his mind about the relative merits of the two arguments.

Part II of *MET* begins with the suggestion that the argument from queerness is profitably seen as having a bipartite structure. The first part of the argument seeks to identify ways in which moral facts would be metaphysically queer, and hence to establish a presumption against the existence of moral facts. Such arguments we can call “the queerness arguments.” The second part of the argument from queerness seeks to explain why we tend to think and speak as if there are moral facts, although there are none. Such explanations typically appeal to projectivist accounts of moral thought and judgement, familiar from Hume and Mackie,

according to which we mistake affective attitudes (such as approval and disapproval) for perceptions of mind-independent moral properties and facts, and to debunking explanations, according to which moral thought and discourse originate and evolve because of their social and evolutionary advantageousness. The point is to explain how ordinary moral thought and discourse are products of processes that do not track moral truth and thereby to counter the “Moorean argument,” according to which it is more plausible that, e.g., torturing children for fun is wrong, than that there are no moral facts (*MTE*, ch. 7). If successful, the argument from queerness shows that moral error theory is in the end more plausible than realism since it establishes a presumption against moral facts and explains our common-sense moral beliefs in ways that do not require or presuppose that they are or can be true.

In my view, four distinct queerness arguments can be discerned in Mackie’s discussion. They concern motivation, epistemology, supervenience, and irreducible normativity. While the first three can be shown to be unsuccessful (*MET*, ch. 5), the fourth is more promising (*MET*, ch. 6). According to this argument, it is highly plausible that ordinary moral thought and discourse involve commitment to irreducibly normative facts, but it is far from clear that there are, or can be, any irreducibly normative facts. One conclusion of Part II is that a plausible error theory takes the form of an error theory about irreducible normativity. In other words, if the domain of the irreducibly normative is wider than that of morality, the most promising argument for moral error theory ramifies beyond the moral.

Critics of moral error theory have recently argued that some of these ramifications are implausible. In particular, it has been argued that if irreducible normativity is queer, then hypothetical reasons and reasons for belief are also queer. It has also been argued that irreducibly normative facts are required in order for practical deliberation to be meaningful. In Part III of *MET*, I respond to these challenges. I argue that meaningful deliberation does not require irreducible normative facts; it does not even require that the deliberator believe that

there are such facts. I also argue that we can accept error theory about those hypothetical reasons claims that are irreducibly normative. But not all hypothetical reasons claims are plausibly interpreted as irreducibly normative. The term “reason” is notoriously ambiguous, and I argue, by way of example, that hypothetical reasons claims are sometimes most plausibly interpreted as empirical claims about means-ends relations.

I am willing to grant to the critics of moral error theory the view that epistemic reasons are irreducibly normative. If they are, the argument for moral error theory that I find plausible also supports epistemic error theory. If epistemic error theory is true, there are no epistemic reasons to believe the error theory. The error theorist can accept this conclusion without thereby undermining her own position, for she can still maintain that there are sound arguments to the effect that error theory is true. Epistemic error theory, I argue, is not as implausible as it may first appear.

In the final chapter of *MET*, I consider the implications of moral error theory, and of belief in moral error theory, for ordinary moral thought and discourse. Some error theorists have recently argued that morality is too useful to abandon—even though moral thinking commits us to falsehoods—and that we would therefore be well-advised to adopt fictionalism in moral thought and discourse. I argue that this kind of revolutionary fictionalism faces serious difficulties of instability that make moral thinking less than useful. I propose an alternative view, moral conservatism, which avoids these difficulties. The book concludes with a discussion of the implications of moral error theory for normative ethics, which, I argue, need not be dire.

References

- Grice, P. 1989. *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Mackie, J. L. 1946. ‘A Refutation of Morals’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 24: 77-90.

Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Olson, J. 2014. *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tegen, E. 1944. 'The Basic Problem in the Theory of Value', *Theoria* 10: 28-52.