

The Error in the Error Theory*

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ABSTRACT: Moral error theory of the kind defended by J.L. Mackie and Richard Joyce is premised on two claims: (1) that moral judgements essentially presuppose that moral value has absolute authority, and (2) that this presupposition is false, because nothing has absolute authority. This paper accepts (2) but rejects (1). It is argued first that (1) is not the best explanation of the evidence from moral practice, and second that even if it were, the error theory would still be mistaken, because the assumption does not contaminate the meaning or truth-conditions of moral claims. These are determined by the essential application conditions for moral concepts, which are relational rather than absolute. An analogy is drawn between moral judgements and motion judgements.

As a New Zealander, my earliest forays into metaethics drew me inexorably towards error theory, that characteristically antipodean view.¹ (One might idly speculate that this tendency explains why another New Zealander, Arthur Prior, introduced into philosophical lore the proposition that *all New Zealanders ought to be shot!*) It seemed to me that John Mackie, a philosopher from ‘across the ditch’, had got matters right in the notorious first chapter of his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* [1977]; when people make moral assertions, they are ordinarily uttering falsehoods, because these assertions mistakenly suppose the instantiation of fantastical moral properties. But I am not any longer an error theorist, and I no longer believe that everyday moral discourse embodies a fundamental error. In this paper I explain why this is so, and where Mackie and those who follow him, like Richard Joyce [2001; 2006], go wrong.

Error theory concurs with moral realism that moral claims aim to describe moral facts and properties, but it sides with antirealism in denying that there are any moral facts or properties there to be described. It is premised on two claims:²

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¹ Many moral error theorists are not antipodeans (i.e. Australasians), of course. But we are overrepresented as well as prominent among the ranks: Mackie was Australian, and Richard Joyce, presently the most prominent representative, is New Zealand-raised. Besides my earlier self, there are also at least Charles Pigden (by adoption), Daniel Nolan, Greg Restall, Caroline West, and Ian Hinckfuss. Contemporary nonantipodean error theorists include Richard Garner, Don Loeb, Mark Eli Kalderon (although he rejects the *label*), and Joseph Biehl. Many contemporary error theorists are also *fictionalists*, who suggest that even though our moral claims are false they may be worth retaining because useful.

² Joyce helpfully emphasizes this in his writings on the error theory (e.g. his 2007).

- (1) *Presupposition*: moral judgments involve a particular kind of presupposition which is essential to their status as moral;
- (2) *Error*: this presupposition is irreconcilable with the way things are.

In the first section, I examine these claims in more detail, focusing on the writings of Mackie and Joyce, who construe the essential presupposition of moral discourse as an *absolutism* about the normative authority of moral value. So interpreted, *Presupposition* is widely accepted, while *Error* is widely rejected. Joyce maintains that attacking *Error* is ‘the only hope for the opponent of a moral error theory’ [2001: 51]. I accept *Error*, however, and shall concede it to the error theorist. Instead, I argue against *Presupposition*. My attack has two prongs. First, I argue defensively that an assumption of the absolute authority of moral value may not be characteristic of moral discourse at all, and that the evidence available to the error theorists does not support their contention. Second, I argue that even if such an assumption is ubiquitous, we still have good reasons to conclude that it does not contaminate the meaning or truth-conditions of moral discourse, and hence that its falsity does not make moral judgement systematically false as error theory contends.³ In closing I speculate that my observation of the antipodean connection is not merely a hubristic indulgence in parochialism, but may also cast some interesting light on the error in the error theory.

Mackie’s Queer Moral Qualms

Although Mackie opens his book with the assertion, ‘There are no objective values’ [1977: 15], his skeptical scruples are reserved for *moral* values and their near kin. The Mackian error theorist accepts that there genuinely is objective, metaphysically real value in the world, and that we often speak plain correspondence-style truth when we ascribe goodness, wrongness, etc. He holds that genuine value is *relational*. Mackie writes:

³ ‘Systematic failure’ does not mean that every assertion with moral content is false – some propositions involving negation, for example (*Theft is not morally wrong*) can still be true. As Joyce helpfully puts it, error theory claims merely that all ‘atomic’ moral sentences, those that simply ascribe a moral predicate to some object, and all sentences that imply them, are false.

There are certain kinds of value statements which undoubtedly can be true or false... Evaluations of many sorts are commonly made in relation to agreed and assumed standards... Given any sufficiently determinate standards, it will be an objective matter, a matter of truth and falsehood, how well any particular specimen measures up to those standards... [1977: 25-6]

In the next chapter he explains in more detail what it is for something to be good. 'Good' means 'such as to satisfy requirements (etc.) of the kind in question' [1977: 55-6]. He further explains that by 'standards' and 'requirements' we are to understand 'something like interests or wants' [1977: 58]. Relational views claim variously that value consists in a relation to standards, norms, desires, or (as I prefer) *ends*⁴ – in this paper I shall speak ecumenically.

Mackie has no doubts that many things are 'good' in the various ways for which this allows. This view of 'good' has obvious applicability to the question of how to understand judgements of peculiarly *moral* goodness: they are judgements that something satisfies (or promotes) peculiarly *moral* standards (or ends). Indeed, Mackie does not hesitate to extend the account in this way:

The subjectivist about values, then, is not denying that there can be objective evaluations relative to standards, and these are as possible in the aesthetic and moral fields as in any of those just mentioned. [1977: 26]

He also does not deny that there are moral standards – they are provided, he maintains, by the *institution* of morality – nor does he deny that there are actions and character traits that satisfy those standards. At this point we may be puzzled: shouldn't this be sufficient to secure the possibility that some moral assertions succeed in being true?

Mackie thinks otherwise, because he believes that judgements must possess one further feature in order to be genuinely *moral*. He writes,

⁴ This move, which takes us to the *end-relational* theory of value that I have proposed and explored elsewhere [Finlay 2004; 2005; 2006], addresses the complications that Mackie is concerned with on p. 55. Mackie himself often slides from standards to ends or purposes [e.g. 1977: 44]. This difference may seem to have a bearing on the objectivity of moral value; if it is supposed to be relational to interest-*tokens*, then it will not exist if those interests do not. However, Mackie himself is explicit that he means only *abstract* interests [1977: 56]. Relational views are also offered by Ziff [1960], Copp [1995], Harman [1996], Dreier [2005].

The ordinary user of moral language means to say something about whatever it is that he characterizes morally... [which] involves a call for action...that is absolute, not contingent upon any desire or preference or policy or choice... [1977: 33]

The absoluteness of moral value thus involves the character of moral requirements as *categorical imperatives*. Mackie elaborates,

A categorical imperative, then, would express a reason for acting which was unconditional in the sense of not being contingent upon any present desire of the agent to whose satisfaction the recommended action would contribute as a means. [1977: 29]

Moral discourse assumes that moral value and requirements provide or entail *reasons* for acting that apply categorically (absolutely), independently of one's desires and ends. This claim is hardly unique to the error theorist; ever since Kant it has been an *idée fixe* in metaethics that an essential feature of morality is the 'categorical' as opposed to 'hypothetical' character of its requirements. The philosopher who most notoriously challenged this idea, Philippa Foot [1972], later officially retracted her heresy. Certainly moral judgements are characterized by categoricity in *some* sense; we do not explicitly condition our moral assertions on agents' desires or concerns, for example. But Mackie, like (the heretical) Foot, does not consider *this* sense of categoricity particularly exceptional or problematic. Many kinds of institutions make such categorical demands on us—Mackie discusses the rules of chess, Foot looks to the norms of etiquette, Joyce appeals to the rules for gladiatorial combat—but these error theorists do not extend their skepticism to the prescriptions made in these discourses. Joyce distinguishes the 'strong' categorical imperatives of morality from these other, 'weak' categorical imperatives, and Mackie rather opaquely writes,

So far as ethics is concerned, my thesis that there are no objective values is specifically the denial that any such categorically imperative element is objectively valid. [1977: 29]

By 'objectively valid' or 'strong' categorical imperatives, these error theorists mean imperatives that present 'real', rationally authoritative reasons to act.⁵ They therefore attribute to ordinary

⁵ Here I'm ignoring controversies over the proper interpretation of Mackie's claim. There is some support for the common claim (e.g. Brink [1989]; Dreier [2005]) that in Mackie's view the problematic presupposition is the necessary *motivating influence* of moral

moral discourse the presupposition that moral value possesses absolute authority over persons, such that regardless of their desires and concerns, they cannot disregard it without irrationality.⁶

This presupposition, they hold, is false. Joyce declares that there are ‘no defensible grounds for thinking that such reasons exist’ [2001: 134; also 2006: 198]. They concede that it can be appropriate to ascribe to people *institutional* reasons which are not contingent in this way, so long as one is speaking ‘within the institution’. But these are not *real* practical reasons, and they lack necessary rational authority [Mackie 1977: 78-9; Joyce 2001: 39-42; 2006: 194]. Here the relational view of the metaphysics of value is conjoined in a natural way with a relativist or nonabsolutist view of value’s reason-giving authority. Every kind of value is relative to some standard or end, and the authority of such value for any person is contingent upon his attitudinal orientation towards those relata: his *subscribing* to that standard or his *desiring* or being *disposed towards* that end. “Ought,” Mackie writes, ‘...says that the agent has a reason for doing something, but his desires along with these causal relations constitute the reason’ [1977: 66]. Joyce embraces Michael Smith’s ‘non-Humean instrumentalism’ according to which an agent has a reason for some action if and only if a cognitively enhanced version of himself would desire his actual self to perform it – and he argues that such desires must be grounded in the actual self’s contingent attitudes and dispositions. In this paper, therefore, I assume the double marriage of (i) relational views of value’s nature to relativist or nonabsolutist views of its authority, and (ii) nonrelational or absolutist views of value’s nature to nonrelativist or absolutist views of its authority.⁷

value: a far less plausible charge against moral discourse that is spurned by more recent versions of the error theory. Garner [1990] and Joyce [2001; 2006: 173] argue that Mackie should be read as intending principally the normative charge, which he undeniably makes. The clearest statement of a motivational presupposition [1977: 40] occurs in a description of Plato’s metaethical views. We ought to bear in mind too that at the time Mackie was writing, normative authority and motivational force were seldom sharply differentiated (e.g. Davidson [1963]; Nagel [1970]; Williams [1981]).

⁶ So understood, *Presupposition* is also notably rejected by Railton [1986].

⁷ Isn’t it possible to combine a relational view of value’s nature with an absolutist view of its authority? (Mackie’s treatment sometimes suggests such a combination). On a view of this kind, moral value is relative to a moral standard, but this standard enjoys absolute authority that is not contingent on an agent’s subscribing to it. However the absolutist about authority would need more fundamental values, reasons, or oughts, which are not similarly relational. For the absolutist it cannot simply be that one ought-*according-to-M* (or has reasons-according-to-M) to conform to the standard M. To say that M is the standard that one absolutely

The Mackian error theory therefore claims (a) that moral discourse presupposes the *absolute authority of moral value*, while maintaining (b) that all genuine value has only *contingent* authority, which exists only for those with the right psychological orientation towards the relevant standard or end. Many opponents of the error theory quite reasonably protest that normative authority and genuine reasons simply *do not* depend upon agents' commitments or desires – a tactic that, as I noted above, Joyce calls the 'only hope' for his opponents. This is not the route this paper pursues, because I accept a relational theory of value and a relativist view of normative authority. I shall instead turn my attention to the supposed absolutist presupposition.

It is important to acknowledge that it is open to an error theorist to propose a different presupposition as the culprit for the systematic falsity of moral discourse, and that such an error theory would not be vulnerable to the arguments of this paper (although it may still be vulnerable to parallel objections). However, absolute authority is the most familiar and promising candidate for the error theory. Joyce [2007] gives a helpful survey of the different commitments proposed by different error theories. Often, however, these 'alternative' proposals are significantly opaque (for example, Nolan, Restall & West [2005] simply say that moral discourse presupposes an ontology that is 'strange, nonnatural, and Moorean'), and I suspect that skepticism about absolute authority lies behind many even if not all of them.

Why think that any moral value and authority would have to be absolute? The error theorist claims that the assumption of absolute authority is such an essential element of moral thought and discourse that it must be attributed to moral concepts themselves, and hence to the truth conditions of moral claims. Mackie thus writes, 'I do not think it is going too far to say that this assumption has been incorporated in the basic, conventional, meanings of moral terms. [1977: 35, see also 63, and Joyce 2001: 37] This, I shall be arguing, is the real error in the error theory. Mackie's hasty move is of the last consequence. Even if the assumption of absolute

must obey has to entail that one ought-*simpliciter* (or has reasons-*simpliciter*) to conform to it. This is where the error theorist balks.

authority *were* ubiquitous in moral thought (a claim I shall challenge), this would only result in the systematic falsity of moral claims if it were to contaminate their semantic content. But there can be no automatic presumption that assumptions about some subject-matter, even ubiquitous assumptions, infiltrate the content of our concepts concerning that subject-matter [see also Dreier 2005]. For centuries, water was almost universally assumed to be an element rather than the compound it actually is. But we do not take seriously the analogous proposal that until Lavoisier, thought and talk about ‘water’ was systematically false because there was no such stuff – and we would not even if the assumption had been universal. Even if *every* person who engaged in moral discourse falsely assumed the absolute authority of moral value, therefore, it still doesn’t follow that their moral claims never succeed in being true. The error theorist needs to provide an argument that the assumption of absolute authority is so essential that any practice of evaluative judgement that did not incorporate it would not be genuinely moral. For such an argument, neglected by Mackie, we must turn to Richard Joyce. First, however, I shall question whether ordinary moral practice makes this assumption at all.

The Evidence for Absolutism

In this section I examine and rebut the case, on behalf of the error theory, that moral discourse is characterized by an assumption of absolutism. The error theorist’s case here takes the form of an argument to the best explanation; I shall be arguing that a nonabsolutist, relational interpretation of moral discourse can explain the evidence at least as well, and therefore that we should not embrace the absolutist, nonrelational interpretation as the ‘best explanation’. In the subsequent section I go on the offensive, arguing that the error theory is false.

What evidence is there that the practice of moral judgement involves an assumption that moral value is absolutely authoritative? I discern seven distinct features that can be or have been

advanced as evidence: Joyce discusses most of them as if they were faces of the same argument, but we do better by teasing them apart.

(1) *Reflective* evidence consists in the theories that ordinary practitioners of moral judgement offer or accept about their own practices. Joyce claims that ordinary users of moral concepts explicitly avow absolutist interpretations of their own practices and disclaim nonabsolutist ones.⁸ However, many ordinary users of *motion* concepts would once have avowed absolutist views of motion and motion-talk, and disclaimed nonabsolutist views, yet Joyce doesn't think that their motion concepts were absolutist. The difference, he suggests, is that whereas 'in so far as we endorsed absolute motion, it was because we had never thought very closely about relative motion... we have always been familiar with the notion of value-relativity, and there has been an overwhelming tendency to deny the thesis for the realm of moral value' [2001: 97].

This reflective evidence, I believe, carries no weight. First, even a universally accepted theory about we're referring to can be false. We can easily imagine that every ordinary user of the concept of *water* was disposed to deny that he or she was referring to a compound. We may, of course, have better epistemic access to what we *intend* to refer to than we do to the actual nature of the reference. But even here, introspection is known to be untrustworthy. Second, Joyce overstates the consensus in favor of absolutism. The reflections of many intelligent people throughout history favor some form of relativism, which is rampant today: it is commonly remarked that large numbers of undergraduate students gravitate towards it. It is far from clear that the overall evidence here supports absolutism over nonabsolutism. Third, there are reasons for distrusting the sincerity of people's avowals on this matter. Part of the point of engaging in moral discourse, as Joyce accepts, is to influence the attitudes and behaviour of others. Joyce further accepts that absolutist ways of speaking facilitate this end. There is a real possibility,

⁸ Care is need here, however: a person's metaethical claims may appear to endorse absolutism without actually doing so. For example, saying 'Abortion is wrong, and what I happen to care about has nothing to do with it!' is quite compatible with holding a relational metaethical view [cf. Joyce 2006: 129]. Whether or not abortion compromises certain ends or violates certain standards is not dependent on my caring about those ends or subscribing to those standards. Observe also that 'absolutism' can be used with different meanings, even within metaethics; e.g. Firth [1952].

therefore, that people's expressed metaethical views are often merely extensions of their moral practice, as quasi-realists like Simon Blackburn maintain;⁹ a person may be motivated to espouse absolutism (or something that looks like it) without believing it, or without even pausing to give the issue serious thought, in order to protect or advance the persuasive force of her moral claims.¹⁰ For all these reasons, reflective evidence lends little or no weight to absolutist interpretations.

Joyce denies that his argument 'turns on what people will actually *say* if asked' [2001: 98]. Instead, it is a question of what theory 'best explains and makes sense of the dominant majority of moral practices' – i.e. the evidence of our first-order moral judgements. The issue then is whether the absolutist interpretation of moral discourse provides a better explanation of this evidence than a relational, nonabsolutist interpretation.

(2) *Linguistic* evidence (which Joyce does not invoke) consists in the nonrelativized form of the sentences that people utter when they make moral claims. I take introspective evidence from the thoughts they entertain when they make moral judgements to be a special case of this. Sentences expressing moral claims do not take the conditional form of 'hypothetical imperatives'. We say merely 'You ought to respect your elders', not 'If you want ..., then you ought to respect your elders'. But the bare fact that any particular moral claim is not explicitly hypothetical or relativized is of no consequence. We often leave much of what we mean to say implicit in our speech acts, relying upon context to contribute it. This is commonly the case with the relativization of our evaluative claims, where the relevant end or standard is shared and readily identifiable. It would be strange, for example, for the captain of a rugby team (the All Blacks, say) in a mid-game huddle to prefix his statements about which play ought to be run with expressions like 'If you want us to score a try,' or 'In order to win this game'. The obvious

⁹ Blackburn holds, for example, that claiming that it is an *objective fact* that an action is wrong is just to claim again that the action is wrong, and functions like the latter to express the speaker's disapproval of the action.

¹⁰ Observe that it is less plausible that *relativistic* metaethical claims can be interpreted in the concomitant way. This strengthens the case from reflective evidence against absolutism.

need not be stated. In the moral case this is even more true: moral ends or standards are typically shared by members of a society, assumed to be shared, and easily identifiable.

(3) *Appraisal* evidence. Joyce summarizes his evidence for his case as ‘observation...of what information we treat as relevant and what we treat as irrelevant when making a moral appraisal’ [2001: 99]. In judging a person or their action as morally bad or wrong we do not take into consideration whether he was compromising any of his desires or ends, or whether he was violating any standards to which he subscribes [2001: 42; 2006: 60, 192]. We might be convinced that the Nazis, the emperor Caligula, Charles Manson, or Fred West lacked any concern for or commitment to moral ends or standards, but this would not deter us from judging their actions wrong and their characters bad. This, Joyce claims, ‘shows pretty clearly that it is not a relativistic judgment with which we condemn them’ [2001: 98]. Furthermore, this practice is essential to morality: ‘a system of values in which there was no place for [it] simply would not count as a *moral system*’ [2001: 43].

Appraisal evidence is meant to show that moral judgements are committed to absolute *authority*. There is certainly a clear contrast between prescriptions given with a ‘categorical’ force and those given with a ‘hypothetical’ force, and I grant to the error theorist that it is essential to moral judgement as such that it has the former. But is this anything that a relational interpretation cannot explain? This categorical character of moral appraisal does show that moral appraisals are not intended to be relative to the ends, desires, or standards of the persons *being judged*. But it is perfectly compatible with those appraisals being intended as relative to the ends, desires, or standards of the persons *judging*. Morally committed persons are deeply concerned about the ends or standards of their morality. Their interest in condemning immoral behaviour is not essentially connected with any concern that the perpetrators of such acts may be compromising their own ends or standards. This explains the contrast between moral judgement and mere practical *advice*, which is premised on the agent’s commitment to particular ends or standards. We can certainly agree among ourselves that Charles Manson’s

criminal actions were profoundly *wrong*, without any commitment to this wrongness having rational authority for Manson himself – just as we can agree that some apple is bad without commitment to this badness having rational authority for the apple. Charles Manson, perhaps, is just a bad apple.

We've already observed that Joyce recognizes the existence of 'weak' categorical imperatives, like those of etiquette (Foot) and chess (Mackie). Moral imperatives are 'stronger' than these, he insists, because 'in the moral case, we are not content to admit that our claim... is merely a permissible way of speaking from a perspective that endorses the dictates of morality' [2001: 41]. There is a difference between the imperatives of morality and those of chess and etiquette, but this is something that a relational interpretation of moral practice can explain. Moral standards or ends are of pressing concern to ordinary, decent people, and their importance to us typically overrides the importance of other standards and ends. This is sufficient to explain why we are much more serious and intransigent about our moral appraisals than we are about our appraisals of manners or chess-strategy [see also Dreier 2005: 256; Finlay 2006]. We will not insist on others' compliance with the rules of etiquette or chess at the expense of their happiness because we typically are disposed to care more about the latter than the former. But we care much more about (e.g.) the welfare of children than we do about the happiness of those who may be abusing them, and for this reason we do not withdraw our moral appraisals of a person or his actions in response to recognizing his personal reasons.¹¹ Appraisal evidence does not press us towards the absolutist interpretation.

Perhaps related phenomena will serve the error theorist's purposes better. Three kinds of moral practice involve addressing moral claims to an audience who do not share our moral ends

¹¹ Joyce responds that "I won't pursue X because I don't like X" makes perfect sense, but "You won't pursue X because I don't like X" makes little sense.' [2006: 117]. If we're talking about chocolate, perhaps so. But if we're stuck together in a lifeboat, there's nothing strange about saying 'Don't rock the boat, because I don't like it.' When it comes to moral issues, we're stuck on the same boat.

Joyce objects further that 'We generally will not be comfortable saying that [some murderer's] actions were...morally unacceptable and in the next breath asserting that he had no reason to refrain and that in fact committing the murder was what he ought, all things considered, to have done.' [2006: 204] I quite agree, but that is because we are not comfortable saying the second thing at all. Joyce fails to disclose that he *is* committed to saying that this murderer did what he ought, all things considered, to have done, by virtue of his instrumentalist view of normative judgement. What the example really suggests is that contra Joyce 'real' reasons are not always identical with instrumental reasons [Finlay 2006].

or standards. Most simply, therefore, there is (4) *address* evidence, from the practice of addressing linguistically categorical moral judgements to nonsubscribers. This may seem problematic for a relational interpretation: when the audience does not share the speaker's concerns, those concerns might not be in the context. The nonrelativized character of moral utterances in such cases may therefore be taken as evidence that the moral judgements being expressed are not intended as relational.

Further, we can ask about the point of engaging in this practice. Moral claims are addressed to others primarily in order to influence their attitudes and conduct. The practice of addressing a moral claim to somebody who doesn't share one's moral ends or standards may therefore seem pointless, if moral value is relational and only has authority to those with the relevant ends or commitments. We may therefore consider it to be an additional form of evidence for the assumption of absolute authority, (5) *expectation* evidence, that speakers address their moral claims to nonsubscribers, apparently in the expectation that in doing so they might possibly succeed in influencing the other by the provision of absolutely authoritative reasons, the authority of which the other can recognize and respond to.

Third, there is the practice of fundamental moral dispute—i.e. that which occurs between people who subscribe to fundamentally different moralities—constituting (6) *disputation* evidence. This is a form of reciprocal moral address, characterized by an apparent assumption of univocity and a common subject matter. If people with incommensurable moral ends or standards engage in a dispute over what is 'morally right', this is evidence that they assume that moral rightness is an absolute, not a relational matter. If our moral claims were always relativized to particular ends or standards, then 'fundamental' moral disputes would be equivocal. Were people to recognize that they subscribe to fundamentally different moral standards, then they should recognize that there is no genuine dispute between them. This, Joyce writes, 'hardly describes moral disputation' [2001: 99].

Are these three features essential to moral practice as we know it, and are they genuinely incompatible with a relational interpretation of morality? The first thing I want to say here is that they are nowhere near as common or characteristic of moral practice as one might think. They all involve discourse between people who are morally alien to each other. Consider first moral practice in a small, homogeneous society (e.g. tribal societies). As Mackie writes, moral institutions ‘reflect people’s adherence to and participation in different ways of life’ [1977: 36]. In homogeneous societies, moral institutions arise as universal authorities, dictated by tradition and subscribed to by every member of society. This is not to deny that there will be conflicts of interest, but none of these private interests will be incorporated into the moral code. There will be disputes over what is moral, reflecting disagreement about what conduct actually satisfies those standards. There will be conscious transgressions, because individuals will at times choose to pursue private interests at the expense of common interests. But no occasion for address, expectation, or disputation evidence will arise in such a society: every member is assumed to subscribe to the moral code, and outsiders are considered either enemies or aliens, and not people with whom to engage in moral discussion. In this case we may observe on behalf of moral discourse, as Joyce observes on behalf of motion discourse, that the question of whether moral authority is relative or absolute would not be something that people would have worried much about, and that it would be uncharitable to consider them nonnegotiablely committed to absolutism. At the least, the point of moral discourse would not be noticeably affected by the presence or absence of an assumption of absolute authority.

We do not live in a homogeneous society, of course, and it may be thought that address, expectation, and disputation evidence will be plentiful in our own society, which is probably the most morally fragmented and diverse in history. If we don’t find sufficient reason to attribute absolutism to homogeneous societies, perhaps we should deny that they have a fully-fledged *moral* practice at all – merely a proto-morality. I will argue, however, that moral practice in our own society is largely continuous with the moral practice in the homogeneous society. First,

even in our society, most moral discourse takes place between people who share their fundamental moral values, and assume that they share these values. (Just survey the moral judgements made on television or radio talk shows and news broadcasts, and try to recall the last time you engaged in moral discourse with someone like Charles Manson or a neo-Nazi).¹²

Second, it is not enough merely to locate moral discourse between people with fundamentally divergent moral allegiances. To qualify as evidence, it has to be the case that the speakers *accept* that they are involved in discourse with such an interlocutor. Given the rarity of encountering someone who is morally alien, people will tend to assume the presence of shared moral concerns. A person's fundamental concerns can seldom be ascertained just by watching or listening to him. Even if someone's behaviour seems to evince the absence of a concern or the presence of a foreign one, the possibility remains that the person is betraying, ignoring, or concealing their own values. Speakers may continue to address their moral judgements to others in the hope or faith that at some level their values are shared, and may be rekindled by their appeals. Many people in our own society profess the conviction that there is some small remnant of 'humanity' in even the most depraved monster. We must be careful, therefore, before diagnosing any moral discourse as fundamental.

Third, supposing that fundamental moral discourse involving moral address to an acknowledged nonsubscriber really does occur, we can question whether this is genuinely evidence of an assumption of absolutely authoritative value properties, or whether it is something that a relational interpretation of moral judgement can accommodate. Granting, that is, that sometimes the point for which we engage in moral discourse is 'a desire to say something more – to imbue the moral imperative with a greater authoritative force' [Joyce 2001: 41], we can challenge the error theorist's assumption that this is part of its semantic point. It may instead simply be its *pragmatic* point, or what we aim to accomplish by our speech acts. Joyce

¹² Note also that I'm not questioning the existence of *inter-cultural* moral discourse and dispute. It is often assumed that such discourse must be fundamental, but this only follows if moral concepts are relativized in part to *cultures* (e.g. wrong-according-to-Greek-standards, or wrong-according-to-our-ends). But relational views need not claim this (e.g. wrong-relative-to-the-end-of-social-harmony), and if they don't, they can accommodate *nonfundamental* moral discourse between members of different cultures.

suggests that the ‘sturdier language’ he invokes to convey absolute authority is ‘so far, only rhetoric’. I have argued elsewhere [2004; 2006, see also Williams 1981] that that is *all* such talk is: that the absolutely demanding nature of some moral discourse is a feature of the rhetorical use of relational moral language. Here I provide a quick sketch.

We observed that the relativization of an evaluative assertion can be left implicit in case there is a social presumption of subscription to the relevant standards or ends in the context. This makes possible a rhetorical use of evaluative speech acts. To make an evaluative assertion without explicit relativization is to speak as if the relevant standards or ends are uncontroversially shared (or subscribed to) by one’s audience. In fundamental moral discourse, however, this condition is not met. Speaking as if something were contextually implicit when it is not is a violation of conversational etiquette, and a tool we can utilize to pragmatically communicate certain things;¹³ in this case, it is a rhetorical way of expressing the *expectation* (demand) that the audience subscribes to the speaker’s ends or standards. This story explains address, expectation, and disagreement evidence in a way that is not only compatible with, but also presupposes a relational interpretation of moral concepts. We *address* our moral claims to others without relativization, because by doing so we can express a demand that the other subscribes to the implicit ends or standards. The potential psychological efficacy of such rhetorical demands accounts for any *expectation* that we may have an influence on the other. And when the address is reciprocal, leading to fundamental moral dispute, we have the ‘disagreement in attitude’ that is the centerpiece of expressivist explanations of moral discourse. By asserting evaluative judgements that are relational and noncontradictory as if they were nonrelational and contradictory, we use moral language as (in Anscombe’s phrase) a ‘mere word of mesmeric force’.¹⁴ This belies Joyce’s claim that nonabsolutist moral concepts ‘could not so

¹³ Deliberate, public violation of rules is generally a powerful way of making a statement. Consider Rosa Parks’ simple act of protest against segregation. In the case I’ve suggested, of course, the protest is not against the *conversational* rule.

¹⁴ Consider analogously a silly game, sometimes played in my family, where A claims ‘I’m me’, and B replies, ‘No, I’m me’. Here we play ignorant about the relational nature of our language. I’m suggesting that in the moral case, there’s a serious point to playing this game.

effectively play the social roles to which we put morality, and thus we could not *use* it as we use morality' [2006: 208].

Fourth and finally, having observed that moral discourse in its normal range is nonfundamental, we may legitimately wonder whether, as Joyce claims, ordinary users of moral concepts would be disposed to engage in fundamental moral discourse. Were a person to come to accept fully that another does not share her fundamental moral concerns, would she bother to address her moral claims to him? Would she have any expectation that by doing so she may succeed in influencing him? And would she bother to engage in a moral argument with him? I think that it is clear that at least many of us would not, viewing moral discourse with the morally alien as a fruitless waste of time and effort. In the abortion debate, for example, people on the 'pro-life' side who bother to argue with 'pro-choicers' may attempt to establish that fetuses are innocent persons. They assume that pro-choicers accept that it is wrong to kill innocent persons. Arguments against racists try to establish that people of other races are in essential qualities no different from members of one's own race. We only enter into moral disputes with people, generally speaking, if we think that we can find some moral premises that they may accept.

We should have serious doubts about the existence of genuine address, expectation, and disputation evidence for the absolutist interpretation of morality. This leaves us with one form of alleged evidence. Joyce's ultimate appeal is to (7) *reactive attitude* evidence: our reactive attitudes of blame towards those we believe to have acted wrongly, and our judgements of blameworthiness, responsibility, and the deservedness of blame and punishment.¹⁵ The fact that our reactive attitudes towards and judgements about moral transgressors are not contingent upon what they desire or the standards to which they subscribe is taken as evidence of an assumption that moral authority is absolute.

Joyce's argument proceeds as follows:

¹⁵ It may be overly simplistic to treat blameworthiness and the deservedness of punishment as equivalent [Arpaly 2003: 172]. I follow Joyce in treating them together, however, as I believe nothing important hinges on it here.

1. Moral practice is committed to holding transgressors blameworthy regardless of the ends they desire and the standards to which they subscribe;
2. Holding someone blameworthy entails judging that that person failed to respond to reasons that were authoritative for her [also Nagel 1970: 83; Shafer-Landau 2003: 193];
3. Therefore, moral practice is committed to the judgement that moral reasons are authoritative for persons whatever their ends or standards (i.e. absolute).

Hence, reactive attitudes embody an assumption of absolute authority, delivering morality into the clutches of the error theory.

Before we evaluate this evidence, we have to ask about its significance. Even if we allow that second order moral judgements (those imputing blame for wrongdoing) embody an error that makes them systematically false, how would that impact *first order* moral judgements about what actions are good or bad, right or wrong?¹⁶ I confess to harboring some sympathy for an error theory about judgements of blameworthiness, according to which they assume a form of responsibility for action that nobody actually has. I find myself more willing to excuse people for any act the more I know about their circumstances and psychology. But that is a separate question from whether that act is morally right or wrong. The moral error theorist's primary claim is that first order moral judgements are systematically false. Joyce's position is that our first order moral concepts involve a commitment to second order absolutism: that an action could not be morally wrong if a person would not under certain realizable conditions be blameworthy for performing it, despite not subscribing to the relevant moral ends or standards.

I shall challenge both premises in the argument above, although the argument against the first premise must wait for the next section. For now, observe that while it may be true that we ordinarily hold people blameworthy for their moral transgressions irrespective of their ends or standards, Joyce needs something stronger. He needs it to be the case that were we to become persuaded that people could not be blameworthy for their moral transgressions, then we *could*

¹⁶ The distinction between first- and second-order moral judgements is owed to Jonathan Bennett [1995].

not coherently continue to believe that their actions were ever morally wrong – just as we could not coherently continue to believe a polygon to be a triangle after concluding that it had four sides. This, I will later argue, is too strong.

Does the practice of holding people blameworthy involve an assumption that they violated reasons that had authority for them? This is a matter of legitimate philosophical controversy. It isn't possible to refute Joyce's claim here, but I can offer some considerations in favour of an alternate view. Joyce holds that our reactive attitudes evince the judgement that their targets did not respond to considerations that were authoritative for them. But such judgements do not in general prompt attitudes like blame. We don't *blame* or *condemn* people because they fail to respond to authoritative *prudential* or *instrumental* considerations, for example. So nonresponsiveness to authority is not *sufficient* to explain reactive attitudes. What else is needed? It is plausible to suppose that we blame people only when they act against ends or standards that are important to *us*. If this is necessary for reactive attitudes like blame, might it also be sufficient? If so, our reactive attitudes may have nothing essential to do with responsiveness to authority. Against its sufficiency, it can be pointed out that we largely hold agents blameless for harms if those harms result from ignorance or incapacity, for example, and we generally do not hold 'nonrational' animals to blame at all. However, a plausible explanation of this restriction in our reactive attitudes is that they respond to facts about people's *character*: their motivational dispositions. It may be enough, for our reactive attitudes, that a person's character is such that they are not responsive to cognition of morally significant considerations, ones that matter to us – contrasting that person with a nonagent or ignorant agent who is not cognizant of those considerations at all [see also Arpaly 2003]. Blame is deserved just in case a wrong action stems from having a bad character. If this is right, then holding someone blameworthy has no essential connection to the judgement that they failed to act on reasons that were authoritative for *them*.

Let us take stock of the alleged evidence for an assumption of absolutism in moral discourse. I have argued (a) that there is not as much of this evidence as we may have supposed, and (b) that any evidence that does exist may be fully compatible with a relational, nonabsolutist interpretation of this practice. It is arguable, I think, that *hardly anybody* makes the false assumption of absolute authority that error theorists claim is absolutely essential to morality as such. However, this denial may seem too radical, and in any case it is not necessary for the case against the error theory. It may be more reasonable to conclude that some people make this false assumption, and that others do not. Should we conclude that some people's moral practice is absolutist and hence systematically false, while other people's is nonabsolutist, and potentially successful? This would be a significant retreat for the error theorist. However, it remains possible that there is after all just one kind of discourse here, whether absolutist or relational; the dispute over absolutism takes place, after all, *within* rather than between moral communities. Either the absolutist or the nonabsolutist may be confused about the nature of the moral concepts he is using; the absolutist may make potentially true, relational moral claims despite himself. Or the nonabsolutist may make false, absolutist moral claims despite himself. So far I have merely argued that error theorists fail to prove their case. Now I shall argue that the error theory is actually false.

Absolutism and Meaning

So far I have argued that the error theorists fail to make their case, because their argument to the best explanation fails to establish their thesis that moral discourse is characterized by an assumption of absolutism. But suppose we yield to the error theorist here, and concede that most or even all moral judges make the erroneous absolutist assumption. I shall now argue that we nonetheless have good reason to conclude that moral concepts and judgements are not absolutist and hence that moral discourse is potentially successful, because

we should deny that this assumption contaminates the meaning and truth-conditions of moral claims.

To make the argument more compelling, I begin by bolstering the error theorist's case. Rather than appealing to the forms of evidence surveyed above, the error theorist can turn to the very absence of fundamental moral disagreement for which I have argued. Since subscription to the dominant moral standards or ends is ubiquitous and implicit, would it not be natural for people in society – particularly in homogeneous societies – to fail to notice the role these standards or ends play in determining the extension of moral right and wrong? Could we not expect them to possess simple, absolute moral concepts, rather than more complex, relational concepts? We find analogous tendencies to absolutism in people's assumptions about motion and names. Motion, we now accept, is a relational matter: there can be motion only relative to a frame of reference. But this is something that needed discovery: for most of history, motion has been taken to be something absolute. But if people in earlier times had no awareness that motion was relational, surely (it may be argued) they could not have been employing a concept of relational motion, but only a flawed concept of absolute motion. Paul Boghossian writes,

It is not...plausible to claim that any competent user of the predicate 'moves' knows that it expresses the concept of a relation rather than the concept of a monadic property.... Some perfectly competent possessors of the concept of motion were unaware that the only truths there are about motion are relational ones and so had no reason to mean only the relational judgment. [2006:15]

Naming presents a similar phenomenon. George Santayana recounts an anecdote about a German woman who maintained that 'Englishmen called a certain object *bread*, and Frenchmen called it *pain*, but that it really was *Brod'* [1970: 133]. Here we have a case of mistaking a triadic relation (*a* is called '*b*' in language *L*) for a dyadic relation (*a* is called '*b*'). What these cases have in common is that the near universal constancy of one parameter (the framework of motion relative to the surface of the earth, the language spoken by everyone around) in a person's experience means that it hides in plain sight; it is ubiquitous and therefore unnoticed. People therefore fail to recognize its indispensability. The analog in the moral case is

then clear: when subscription to a moral code is ubiquitous, people in that society are likely to fail to recognize its role [Harman and Thomson 1996: 13].

The analogy is a good one, I think. Many people will be disposed to overlook the relational character of value due to the ubiquity of the dominant moral code. This would explain why the product of reflection on our moral practice is often an absolutist metaethical theory. But it is a mistake to find in this any vindication of error theory. Error theorists propose that we attribute this error to the very concepts with which ordinary moral judgements are formed, and that accordingly we should agree that ordinary moral judgements are systematically false.¹⁷ The analogies here give us reason to pause. If the error theorist is right, then it would seem that we must also attribute an absolutist error to the very concepts employed in ordinary judgements of motion made prior to (and even today in the absence of) acceptance of the relational character of motion, and agree that these ordinary motion judgements are systematically false. This is just preposterous. Suppose an ancient mariner surveys the ocean, and sees that two ships have changed position relative to each other. The first happens to be anchored, the second is adrift. If the mariner asserts that the first has stayed still while the second has moved, has he said and thought something false or incoherent? Surely not, even if he would espouse an absolutist theory of his judgement when questioned. It is no less preposterous, I think, to suggest that when an ordinary person asserts in the context of an everyday conversation that Fred West's acts of incestuous rape, child abuse, and murder were wrong, what she says is false or incoherent. But as this is what the error theorist contends, we need an argument to establish that morality is here like motion.

¹⁷ Gilbert Harman offers a way out: even though people's concepts are not relational, we should assign their judgements relational *truth-conditions*, so that we don't have to find them guilty of systematic error [Harman and Thomson 1996 – see also Dreier 2005: 261-2] – Joyce follows his lead in the case of motion, though not morality. Boghossian rightly objects that this is too charitable: the content of people's judgements must be determined by the concepts they are using, not by the imperative that we not attribute systematic error to them [2006: 17-8]. In his [2006], Joyce is less sanguine about his conceptual claims, but proposes a different criterion for attributing truth to judgements in a discourse characterized by a false assumption: whether the discourse could continue to play its characteristic role if the assumption were abandoned [2006: 201-2]. He suggests that this is so for motion discourse, but not for moral discourse, as for witch and phlogiston discourse. But in the previous section I argued that moral discourse *can* retain its role without the assumption of absolute authority.

The difficult question we cannot avoid here is: how is the (semantic and conceptual) content of our language and thought determined? The error theorists' arguments we have been investigating have turned on considerations of people's reflective understanding of their moral thought and speech, and of what they may be conscious of when they engage in this thought and speech. This evinces an assumption of the truth of a local form of *content-internalism*: what we mean morally is fixed by something internal to our mental states, particularly our intentions. Mackie writes, 'the ordinary user of moral language means to say something....that involves a call for action...that is absolute' [1977: 33], we saw Joyce stressing our 'desire to...imbue the moral imperative with a greater authoritative force', and Boghossian emphasizes the implausibility of claiming that in asserting nonrelativized sentences, 'ordinary speakers...*intend* their remarks to be elliptical for some relational sentence' [2006: 16].¹⁸ While moral content-internalism doesn't entail that our reflective understanding of our practices is infallible (we can be mistaken about our own intentions and can thereby misunderstand our own concepts and language), it is what supports the view that reflective evidence can be decisive in establishing which theory of moral judgement is correct.

Should we accept this moral content-internalism? It suffices to show that the error theorists have so far failed to prove moral judgement systematically erroneous, that content-externalist views – on which semantic and conceptual content is determined largely independently of individual persons' mental states – enjoy widespread favour today. If moral terms rigidly designate certain properties (perhaps certain natural or moral kinds – a popular metaethical view in recent decades [Boyd 1988; Sayre-McCord 1997]) then the content of someone's thought and speech could radically diverge from what they intend to say or believe themselves to be saying. This is why people can have wildly mistaken views about what water is, but still say true things about it. This could also be the case if moral terms acquire their semantic

¹⁸ Boghossian's position towards the moral error theory is that *were* the only kind of value in the vicinity of morality to turn out to be relational, then the error theory would be correct.

values from the usage of a network of experts, like medical, mechanical, botanical, and technological terms.

As significant an objection as this is to the error theorists' arguments, I shall put no stock in it, since I happen to agree with the error theorist that moral content is determined largely internally rather than externally.¹⁹ Moral value is significantly different to water; it lacks metaphysical depth. Moral goodness doesn't present us with a robust presence that we can point to and say, 'I'm talking about that stuff there, whatever it is', it's absurd to suggest that it might have a complex molecular structure, and we enjoy seemingly a priori epistemic access to facts about what has it and what doesn't. Moral concepts are also nothing like technical concepts fixed by the usage of experts: there is no uncontroversially recognized group of moral authorities, and people generally use their moral terms without deference to the usage of others. I shall rather argue from within a moral content-internalist view that the error theorists are mistaken.

Joyce draws a contrast between witch- and phlogiston-discourse on one hand, and water- and motion-discourse on the other. All four discourses were for significant periods characterized by ubiquitous false assumptions: respectively (i) of the existence of supernatural powers, (ii) of the existence of a substance contained in all flammable materials that is released during combustion, (iii) that the wet stuff covering much of the earth is an element, (iv) of the existence of absolute location. An error theory seems obviously right for witches and phlogiston, but obviously wrong (Joyce believes) for water and motion. Once we understand why, he claims, we can see that moral discourse is like the former and not the latter.

The determinative factor, Joyce suggests, is the 'point' of the discourse: the intentions with which we use the term and without which we would have no use for it. The 'whole point' of witch discourse 'was to refer to women with supernatural powers' [2001:96]; the whole point of phlogiston discourse was to refer to the substance contained in all flammable materials and

¹⁹ Much of the recent debate over this is to be found in the literature stimulated by Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons' [1991] Moral Twin Earth argument.

released during combustion. The falsity of the assumptions that there are such entities is therefore sufficient to render the discourse systematically false. On the other hand, the point of water discourse is ‘to refer to a stuff we believed to be united by a common microphysical constitution’, and the point of motion discourse was ‘to refer to the change in position of objects in space over time’. False assumptions about water and motion therefore didn’t prevent success in talking about real water and motion.

Joyce’s error theory is therefore premised on the claim that the whole point of moral discourse is to refer to value with absolute authority: ‘our ordinary use of the concept of *motion* is not much affected when we let go of absolutism; our ordinary use of the concept of *moral rightness*, by contrast, is completely undermined without absolutism’ [2001: 97]. It may come as a surprise, therefore, to find that Joyce, like Mackie, seeks to *preserve* moral discourse, or something remarkably similar to it – Joyce recommends continued employment of moral discourse as a convenient fiction. This is not because he prizes pointless activities, but because he, like Mackie, *does* believe that there is an important point to engaging in moral discourse. Joyce’s consistency here is to be rescued in the following manner: the point of *ordinary use* of moral concepts is to make reference to absolutely authoritative moral properties. Because there are none, this use is undermined. But the fictionalist use has a different point, which isn’t undermined by the falsity of absolutism.

There are two related problems for Joyce here. First, he doesn’t believe that the fictionalist gives moral discourse a *new* point and use; rather, fictionalism advises that we continue using moral discourse because it is worth retaining a use that ordinary, flawed moral discourse always had. It follows that it is incorrect to claim that the falsity of absolutism undermines the *whole point* of moral discourse. But this is threatening to the error theory: if the content and truth conditions of moral discourse are functions of its point, Joyce may have to

concede that moral claims can be true.²⁰ Second, fictionalism itself seems undermined as a coherent option; if the whole point of fictionalist discourse is legitimate, then it would seem to follow from Joyce's criterion that the fictionalist's moral claims can be true. But in that case there would be no point in maintaining an attitude of mere make-believe towards moral claims!

Joyce presumably means to invoke only the *referential* point (i.e. intentions to *refer*) behind a discourse. Any discourse might have several distinct points. The point of witch discourse might include the preservation of villagers' health, the detection and punishment of sinners, and the suppression of female power and autonomy. But only intentions to refer are properly taken as determinative of content – insofar as we are cognitivists about the target discourse, as error theorists are. According to error theory, the whole *referential* point of the use of moral terms is to refer to absolutist moral properties (fictionalist use, on the other hand, doesn't involve any referential intentions). This is part of what I am denying in this paper. Once we distinguish the referential point of a discourse from its point more generally, the possibility emerges that the absolutist features of moral discourse are to be explained in terms of some other, nonreferential point that it has—which, I suggested in the previous section, is in fact the case.

The content of moral thought and speech is determined neither by our reflective understanding of it (we can be mistaken about such things), nor simply by what we intend to communicate by our use of it (this fails to distinguish semantic from pragmatic intentions). It would be too ambitious to advance a full-fledged theory here: what is needed is to locate a difference between (a) cases like judgements of motion and water, where intuitively we ought to resist imputing systematic error to ordinary judgements, and (b) cases like judgements attributing the concepts *witch* and *phlogiston*, where an error theory seems appropriate; a difference which must be plausibly determinative for conceptual and semantic content. We can then determine whether moral discourse belongs with the former or the latter.

²⁰ Crispin Wright (1992: 10) poses a similar challenge to error theories. Unlike Wright, Joyce and I accept that the norm for truth in moral discourse requires reference.

The element to which we should appeal is the *essential application conditions* embodied in competent first order use of the concepts and terms: approximately, the criteria on which a concept or term is applied. The concept *witch* is applied to an individual if and only if it is supposed that (approximately) she is a woman with supernatural powers. The concept *phlogiston* is applied to a substance if and only if it is supposed that (approximately) that kind of substance is contained in all flammable materials and is released during combustion. It is because these suppositions are never true of any actual entities that an error theory of witches and phlogiston is in order. By contrast the essential application conditions employed for *motion* and *moral wrongness* are (I believe) *relational* – even in the use of those who avow absolutist theories of motion and morality. An object is judged to have *moved* if and only if it is supposed that it has changed position relative to some frame of reference. An action is judged to be *morally wrong* if and only if it is supposed that it frustrates certain ends or violates certain standards.²¹

After all, the absolutist about motion makes (what look like) substantially the same first-order motion judgements as the rest of us, and the absolutist about morality makes (what look like) substantially the same first-order moral judgements as the rest of us. Assuming there is no genuine absolute motion, or genuine absolute moral properties, the absolutist's judgements could not be responsive to these fictional properties. Rather, his judgements about motion are responsive to his sensitivity to motion relative to particular frameworks, and his judgements about moral wrongness are responsive to his sensitivity to the relation of actions to certain moral standards or ends.²² It is because of this that we rightly attribute relational moral and

²¹ I do not mean to suggest that every error theory of this general kind – which attributes absolute concepts where only relational properties are to be found – is mistaken. Similar error theories are contenders with regard to mass, simultaneity, and colour. Each case needs to be considered individually on its merits.

²² In his [2006], Joyce argues for an alternative, also endorsed by Mackie: that moral experience is characterized by the 'pathetic fallacy' in which, in Hume's words, the mind 'spread[s] itself on external objects' [1978: 167], mistaking its subjective sensations of disgust or disapproval for perceptions of objective properties [2006: 125f]. I proceed here on the assumption that I have provided a more charitable, and thereby preferable, interpretation accommodating all the evidence. Joyce cites the empirical research of psychologists including Jonathan Haidt and Joshua Greene as supporting his hypothesis, but this evidence is compatible with a variety of metaethical theories.

motion concepts and terms even to the absolutist, and justifiably claim that he misunderstands his own language and thought.

Two objections need responses here. First, this account may be thought to have the unacceptable implication that necessarily coextensive concepts, like *trilaterality* and *triangularity*, are identical: they share the same necessary and sufficient conditions. But we must distinguish between the conditions for a concept's possible realization, and the conditions for meaningful *application* of that concept, which extend to its application to merely imaginary, impossible worlds. We understand what it would mean for a polygon to have three sides but not have three angles, even if we cannot conceive of such a polygon itself. By contrast, we cannot even understand what it would mean for there to be a married bachelor, or a genuine witch without supernatural powers, or phlogiston that is not the kind of stuff stored in and released from flammable materials.

Second, there is the inconvenient fact that people *do* (or did) apply the concepts *witch* and *phlogiston*. My argument against an error theory of motion and morality can therefore be parodied:

Assuming that there are not genuinely any women with supernatural powers, the believer in witches could not be responding to *this* property in making his witch judgements. And assuming there is not genuinely any substance that is stored in all flammable materials and released during combustion, the believer in phlogiston could not be responding to this property in making his phlogiston judgements. Rather, witch judgements are responsive to sensitivity to a complicated disjunctive property including, for example, the property of being a woman whose enemies have suffered illness and misfortune. Phlogiston judgements are responsive to sensitivity to (in part) the property flammable objects have of acquiring additional weight through combustion. It is because of this that we rightly attribute concepts of *witch* and *phlogiston* that have realizations in the actual world even to people whose theory of witches and phlogiston construes these things as such that they have no actual realizations.

Clearly something has gone wrong here. Our application of concepts is often responsive and sensitive to what we take to be *evidence* of – but not constitutive of – their instantiation. My

proposal has the resources to make this distinction, however. If even that which is necessarily coextensive need not be part of the *essential* application conditions, then certainly merely evidentiary factors will not be: competent users of the concept *witch* will have no trouble conceiving of a situation where the standard evidence of witchcraft obtains, but the accused is not a witch, or of a situation where none of the standard evidence obtains (no wart, no black hat, no sick enemies) but in which a woman is a witch nonetheless.

Might it be the case that the moral error theory can be rescued in the same way? Moral judgements cannot be sensitive to nonexistent absolute moral properties, but they could be sensitive to what a person takes to be merely evidence for the realization of such properties. Motion judgements, likewise, could be sensitive to what a person takes to be merely evidence for the occurrence of absolute motion. But these moves are not nearly as plausible as in the case of witches and phlogiston. Consider that the ‘evidence’ in each case is the relational property that the relational theory identifies with morality or motion. This presents the error theorist with several serious problems.

First, error theory now seems gratuitously uncharitable: it claims that ordinary judgements of moral wrongness and of motion track awareness of actual value relative to moral standards and actual relational motion, but are nonetheless systematically false because they take the real thing to be merely evidence of fantastical counterparts. Second, it is quite unclear *why* relational value or motion would be taken as sufficient evidence for absolute value or motion. If people were genuinely employing absolute moral and motion concepts, wouldn’t they rather be skeptical that any relational value or motion was any indication of the real thing? They may, of course, arrive at philosophical skepticism by reasoning from their absolutist theories, but that is a different kind of skepticism. Arguably the inference from relational to absolute would be explained by an assumption that the relational parameter tracks the absolute state of affairs: that the moral standards or ends subscribed to are the absolutely right ones to subscribe to, and that the framework of motion relied upon happens to be absolutely at rest. We might

wonder where this assumption arises from. Another problem is that basic moral truths are generally considered not to be in need of evidence, or possibly even to admit of it: they are *self-evident*. This is even considered platitudinous by many metaethical absolutists. We should be suspicious of any theory that claims that despite this platitude, even our beliefs in the most basic moral truths are reached inferentially.

Finally, this defence of error theory undermines the very argument in its favour that I have been discussing in this section: the claim that ordinary judgement is absolutist by default because we are not ordinarily sensitive to the significance of the relevant parameters. If, as this defence maintains, we actually infer absolute moral value and motion from the evidence of the relational facts, then we are after all sensitive to the relevant parameters in our application of our concepts, even if not in our reflection on that application. It is therefore error theories, rather than relational theories, that impute unnecessary complexity to ordinary practice and judgement. There is therefore no justification for the denial that awareness of relational properties is ‘internal’ enough to play a central role in determining the content of our concepts and terms.

The error theorist will likely resist the claim that the essential application conditions for ordinary moral concepts are relational in the way I have suggested. Mackie and Joyce both take the view that these conditions include the presence of genuine practical reasons that are important (rationally authoritative) for any agent regardless of his commitments or ends. They suggest, in other words, that competent use of moral concepts entails the following: if a monster like Fred West were (perhaps *per impossibile*) to have no genuine reasons that made it irrational for him to perform his crimes of child abuse, rape, and murder, then those acts could not coherently be considered morally wrong for him to perform. I think we should deny that the ordinary concept of moral wrongness entails any such thing. Even if we grant that moral judges usually assume that everyone has (and must necessarily have) genuine conclusive reasons to avoid morally wrong actions, we should not suppose that they would withhold hypothetical

moral appraisals of the actions of an agent who lacked such reasons. Our moral concepts allow us coherently to contemplate the figure of the rational villain, and also to contemplate coherently the question, ‘Ought I rationally to act as I morally ought?’²³ These considerations seem to me decisive against the error theory.

Our moral concepts are relational concepts, I conclude, even if our own reflective understanding of them is as absolute. This is so because even people who take moral value to have absolute authority employ essentially relational application conditions in forming their judgements of what has moral value: if they consider an action to satisfy certain moral standards or promote certain ends, then they judge it to be morally right. Their reflective theories are beside the point, because they do not genuinely capture the basis for their application and use of those concepts. Even philosophers who adhere to absolutist metaethical theories do not form their first-order moral judgements by exercising sensitivity to nonrelational value properties: they are no more able to detect such nonexistent features of the world than those of us who deny their existence.

Even if anybody genuinely does assume absolute authority in their practice of moral judgement, therefore, Mackie and other error theorists still err in maintaining an error theory about such persons’ moral judgements, for the reason that this absolutist error does not infect their concepts or the meanings of their words. They continue to employ relational moral concepts and terms, sometimes succeeding in making true moral judgements, even while holding onto a mistaken understanding of their own practice – just as our ancient mariner employs relational motion concepts and terms, often succeeding in making true motion judgements, even while holding onto a mistaken understanding of his own practice.

To conclude, the point of this paper has been to argue that ordinary moral judgement is innocent of the charge of systematic falsity, brought against it by the error theory. Error theory is based on a characteristic perceived in moral discourse: treatment of moral value as having

²³ Joyce contemplates a question of this kind, and writes that it ‘seems very odd to me’ [2006: 205]. The reader must be the judge.

absolute authority. We have seen that the most compelling evidence for this is found in only one kind of moral discourse: fundamental moral discourse or disagreement between people with transparently different moral standards, ends, or concerns. Whereas any familiarity with the metaethical literature would give the impression that this is the *norm* for moral discourse, I have argued that it is rather the exception. Indeed, it could with fairness be described as the breakdown condition of moral discourse [Anscombe 1958; MacIntyre 1984]. Error theory therefore takes as the paradigm of moral discourse its exceptional, defective form. I have argued that it misunderstands the nature of that defect, but its error is natural and understandable. If I may be indulged some unscientific speculation, I venture the hypothesis that the curious antipodean proclivity for the error theory has some philosophical significance as a clue towards the nature of its error. There will be more occasion for the exceptional, defective form of moral discourse, and less occasion for nonfundamental moral discourse, in the experience of those living in communities with the greatest diversity of cultural heritages and moral viewpoints: in countries like New Zealand and Australia, which are melting pots made up of immigrants from a wide variety of backgrounds. This may lead a reflective person to mistake an exceptional, derivative form as definitive of moral practice, have a more acute appreciation of the contingency of moral standards and more sympathy towards rival moral viewpoints, and naturally gravitate towards error theory as a result—reasonably, but erroneously.^{24, 25}

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²⁴ This ignores other possible explanations and numerous objections, of course. If there is any truth to this suggestion, however, there is another significant factor to the explanation; these countries suffer relatively few serious social problems (compared with the United States, for example), removing a powerful stimulus to taking morality very seriously. Rather than taking the intolerant rhetorical stance described above, antipodean thinkers would therefore have a greater tendency to scrutinize morality 'scientifically,' and like Hume to 'lack some warmth in the cause of virtue'.

²⁵ I am very grateful to Richard Joyce, Mark Schroeder, Jacob Ross, Maurice Goldsmith, Paul Boghossian, and the referees for the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* for their comments and suggestions.

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