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

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Since the publication of Richard Joyce's *The Myth of Morality* in 2001, there has been an explosion of interest in moral error theory. Judging by the bibliography of Olson's book, more scholarly attention may have been paid to this view in the new century than in the whole previous history of philosophy. True, the "History" section of Olson's book is deliberately selective. For example, there is no discussion here of the error theoretical current associated with sociobiology, as found in the work of R. D. Alexander, Michael Ruse, and others. Even so, Olson's book is probably accurate in giving the impression that apart from some comparatively obscure appearances in the work of figures such as R. Robertson and A. Hagerstrom, moral error theory played quite a marginal role in Twentieth Century ethics, even after its infamous restatement by J. L. Mackie in 1977. (Mackie had first proposed the view in 1946.) Olson's *Moral Error Theory* offers a historically informed and theoretically subtle discussion of moral error theory in response to the much greater attention this view has received in the last decade.

Olson's book has three parts. The first part consists in a selective historical overview of previous discussions of moral error theory. Apart from Hume, the focus is primarily on the Twentieth Century. The second part of the book consists in a detailed evaluation of different forms of so-called 'queerness' arguments against moral realism. Olson argues that the real 'queerness' of moral facts and properties resides in their irreducible normativity. The third part of the book consists in a defence of moral error

theory against a selection of recent objections. Among the most salient targets here are contemporary realists such as Terence Cuneo, David Enoch and Russ Shafer-Landau.

J. L. Mackie called his version of moral error theory “moral skepticism.” At issue for Mackie is not whether we can know what morality requires, assuming there is something it does require. The issue is whether there is anything that morality, strictly speaking, does require—to which Mackie’s answer is: ‘No’. Moral error theory, thus understood, is a metaphysical view (with semantic and psychological presuppositions), and only secondarily an epistemological view (although some arguments for moral error theory do have epistemological premises). Much recent work on moral error theory, including Olson’s own, follows Mackie in this respect. As Olson points out, this represents a significant departure from some of Mackie’s predecessors, for whom the main focus was on questions in moral psychology (e.g., whether what seems to us as genuine belief states are really emotional or affective states). What Olson could also have mentioned, but does not, is the centrality to some of these earlier discussions of a different set of epistemological questions about the origins of moral beliefs and knowledge. For example, such epistemological questions can be found at the centre of philosophical responses to early Darwinism and the secularist challenges to religious moral epistemology that evolutionary thinking is often thought to entail.

The real hero of Olson’s book is David Hume, who in Chapter 2 is co-opted as an early moral error theorist. This act of co-optation is both textually interesting and delightfully tendentious. For Olson, the Humean question is whether our error theory should be “standard” or “moderate”; the former implying the literal falsehood of moral claims, the latter implying the falsehood of our beliefs about their nature and content.

(Some readers will immediately object that “moderate” error theory is no error theory at all, but we can let that pass.) According to Olson, what we should take from Hume is twofold. First, there are some apparent properties of things that seem to reside in the world as it exists independently of our minds, but which do not either because (1) they exist ‘in’ our minds (subjectivism), (2) their existence ‘depends’ on our minds (dispositionalism), or (3) they don’t exist at all (error theory). Second, the best fit for moral properties is option (3). The idea of an irreducible normative property is metaphysically mysterious. Moreover, science provides us with a complete naturalistic explanation of how human minds find it irresistible to ‘project’ their normative commitments onto the world, even if no such properties really exist.

The real villain of Olson’s book is “robust” non-normative realism, as recently defended by Russ Schafer-Landau and David Enoch, among others. Option (2) above, on the other hand, receives less focused attention here. According to the latter kind of view, although it may seem to us that we can speak truly of mind-independent moral properties, the only thing we strictly speaking can speak truly of are normative properties that are mind-dependent. The obvious analogy of moral properties on this view is colour, understood as a secondary quality. Such views had wide currency in the 1980’s and 1990’s, partly in response to Mackie’s arguments (for example, in the work of John McDowell and David Wiggins). It is a noteworthy fact that Mackie, who was an accomplished scholar of early modern philosophy (he wrote a book on Hume’s moral theory, and his *Problems from Locke* is a standard work on the primary/secondary quality distinction), did not go down this route. Olson follows Mackie in this respect. This

expository choice (and others) substantially restricts the scope of his error theoretic arguments.

The best Humean analogy for moral thought on Olson's view is arguably not colour understood as a secondary quality, but causal relations understood as necessary connections in extension (cf. p. 34 n. 46). Hume is famous for arguing that we have no "impression" of necessary connection, as opposed to of constant conjunctions (and counterfactual relations) between objects of experience. Yet, it still seems to us that causation involves necessary connection. One Humean explanation is that this alleged necessity is a projection resulting from the mind being irresistibly led from the thought of one thing to that of another. Olson tells a similar story about morality. According to Olson, we have no "impression" of normative necessity, as opposed to more or less invariable correlations between contingently given means and ends. Yet, it still seems to us that morality involves normative necessity. One error-theoretical explanation is that this alleged necessity is a projection resulting from the human mind being irresistibly led from having positive or negative feelings about things to thinking that those things make normatively necessary claims on us.

The philosophy of causation includes a large number of attempts to interpret causal thought without appealing to hidden necessary connections. Such interpretations often appeal to complex counterfactuals (e.g., where the first event had not happened, the second event would not have happened, and so on). One way of thinking about such interpretations is to think that, although they may not capture everything we might intuitively associate with causation (or causation 'strictly speaking'), they capture *enough* of what most of us associate with causation most of the time to provide a good enough

model for causal thought; a model according to which we can sometimes take ourselves to truly say (*modulo* inevitable indeterminacies) that “A caused B.” (This kind of strategy is sometimes associated with David Lewis.) Why not say the same about morality? Why not interpret moral claims in terms of some complex set of actual or possible means and ends associated with widely shared and deeply held human concerns, or such concerns as moderated by a process of rational and informed reflection? Why not think that although such interpretations may not capture everything we intuitively associate with morality (or morality ‘strictly speaking’), they capture *enough* of what most of us associate with morality most of the time to provide a good enough model for moral thought; a model according to which we can sometimes take ourselves to truly say (*modulo* inevitable indeterminacies) that some things are right or wrong?

Such a view is not a million miles away from Olson’s own when he argues, in the final chapter of his book, that the error theorist should adopt a “conservationist” attitude to morality. According to Olson, it makes most sense (instrumentally speaking) to continue to sincerely making moral claims even though all moral claims are ‘strictly speaking’ false. Any attempt to revise them in the direction of truthfulness would be likely to create more problems than it would solve, as would any attempt to adopt a make-believe (or ‘fictionalist’ attitude to moral thought. (Olson does not discuss fictionalism of the ‘hermeneutic’ variety.) By comparison, a broadly Humean analysis of causation need not be read as a revisionist proposal for how to speak, as opposed to a metaphysically modest proposal for how to *interpret* how we do speak, and according to which we can be said to speak at least approximately truly, at least most of the time. If some suitably modest interpretation along these lines is plausible (and there is no reason

why there should be only one), then the sense in which either causal or moral thought is ‘strictly speaking’ erroneous is arguably of limited significance.

This analogy between moral and causal thought may seem to fail in one crucial respect. Moral necessities are irreducibly normative, whereas causal necessities (at least on most accounts thereof) are not. What stands in the way of revisionist interpretations of moral thought along the lines of Humean interpretations of causation is that they fail to capture the essential element of action-guidingness essentially embodied in moral claims, as famously articulated in ‘Hume’s Law’ or Moore’s ‘Open Question’ argument. The basic problem is not about necessity in general, but about normative necessity in particular. (Olson also goes on to deny the normative necessity of epistemic and logical norms, along with his rejection of moral necessity.)

I agree with Olson that this is a good place to locate the problem of moral objectivity. Yet I also suspect that part of that problem derives from the implicitly reductionist way in which it tends to be framed in the first place. There are at least three reasons to think that this is the case. First, when we evaluate a given theory of causation, for example, we are normally entitled to (indeed we must) make use of substantial causal judgements to decide whether its proposed account of the causal relations is plausible. By parity of reasoning, when we evaluate a given theory of morality, we may regard ourselves as equally entitled to make use of substantial moral judgements to decide whether its proposed account of the relevant kind of normative relation is plausible. Although this may leave us somewhere short of a complete vindication of either causal or moral thought in reductive terms, there is nothing intellectually fraudulent or mysterious about the project.

Second, we can all agree that human beings are naturally evolved creatures who have evolved to form distinctive normative commitments in response to a hostile environment, and that for naturalistically explicable reasons we have come to regard some of these commitments as binding us unconditionally and without exception. We should also agree that it is a perfectly good question whether the commitments in question are robust enough to survive rational reflection on our knowledge of these and other relevant facts. If at least some of them are, then we are rationally justified in our commitment to believe in some normative necessities. Perhaps there are fewer of these than we are tempted to think, or perhaps there are none (all the reflectively robust norms being conditional or subject to exception). We can't be sure about the answer in advance. What we can be sure about is that the answer will not depend on an issue in analytical metaphysics.

Third, and as Olson points out, the term 'reason' is potentially ambiguous between a number of normative and non-normative interpretations (p. 158). This claim plays a crucial role in his response to the objection that his error theory applies equally to reasons for belief, thereby committing him to the claim that there is no reason to believe the error theory. Olson claims (plausibly enough) that an error theorist could consistently come to believe the error theory in response to the evidence, where 'evidence' is interpreted naturalistically as facts indicative of truth. Yet by drawing out the potential ambiguities of the term 'reason', Olson opens up a philosophical can of worms. For much the same could arguably be said about terms like 'object', 'property', 'fact', 'relation', and 'truth'—each of which may require quite specific (and non-deflationary) interpretations in order for any error theoretical mysteries to arise. At least some of these

interpretations have recently been subject to deflationary challenges in ways that go beyond the scope of discussion in Olson's otherwise excellent book.

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