

THE UNBELIEVABLE TRUTH ABOUT MORALITY

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Have you ever suspected that even though we call some actions right and other actions wrong, nothing is really right or wrong? If so, there is a philosophical theory that agrees with you: the error theory. According to the error theory, moral judgements are beliefs that ascribe moral properties to actions or to people, but these properties do not exist. The error theory therefore entails that all moral judgements are false. Just as atheism says that God does not exist and that all religious beliefs are false, the error theory says that moral properties do not exist and that all moral judgements are false.¹

Suppose, for example, that you think stealing is wrong. According to the error theory, you then have a belief that ascribes the property of being wrong to stealing. But the property of being wrong does not exist, which means that stealing this does not have this property. This entails that your belief is false. Suppose next that I think stealing is permissible. According to the error theory, I then have a belief that ascribes the property of being permissible to stealing. But the property of being permissible also does not exist, which means that stealing does not have this property either. This entails that my belief is just as false as your belief. In other words, if the error theory is true, stealing is neither wrong nor permissible. Similar claims apply to all other moral judgements: judgements about rightness, goodness, badness, virtue, and so on. If the error theory is true, all of these judgements are

¹ See Mackie 1977, Joyce 2001, and Olson 2014. What I here call ‘the error theory’ is only a moral error theory. I myself defend an error theory about all normative judgements in Streumer 2013 and forthcoming.

false.

That is hard to believe. Can it really be the case that stealing is neither wrong nor permissible? Can it really be the case that all moral judgements are false? You may think that this idea is too crazy to take seriously. But I think there are good arguments for the error theory: arguments for the claim that moral judgements are beliefs that ascribe moral properties, which I will discuss in section 1, and arguments for the claim that moral properties do not exist, which I will discuss in section 2. There are also many objections to the error theory, which I will discuss in section 3. Finally, in section 4, I will ask whether we can believe the error theory.

1. Arguments for the claim that moral judgements are beliefs that ascribe moral properties

The error theory consists of two parts. Its first part says that moral judgements are beliefs that ascribe moral properties to actions or to people. This part of the theory is known as cognitivism. Most cognitivists are realists, who think that moral properties exist. But the second part of the error theory denies this: it says that moral properties do not exist. This part of the theory is known as irrealism. In this section, I will discuss some arguments for cognitivism: in other words, arguments for the claim that moral judgements are beliefs that ascribe moral properties.

Suppose that Fred has a moral disagreement with Susan: for example, suppose that Fred thinks euthanasia is permissible but Susan thinks euthanasia is wrong. According to cognitivism, Fred then has a belief that ascribes the property of being permissible to euthanasia, and Susan has a belief that ascribes the property of being wrong to euthanasia. These beliefs can be true or false: they are true if euthanasia has the property the belief ascribes to it and false if euthanasia does not have this property. Opponents of cognitivism, who are known as non-cognitivists, deny that these judgements are beliefs.² They instead take moral judgements to be non-cognitive attitudes, such as feelings of approval or disapproval.

² See, for example, Blackburn 1993 and Gibbard 2003.

If so, Fred's thought that euthanasia is permissible is a feeling of approval of allowing euthanasia, and Susan's thought that euthanasia is wrong is a feeling of disapproval of allowing euthanasia.

There are several reasons to think that non-cognitivism is false. The first, which is known as the Frege-Geach problem, is as follows. Suppose that Susan wants to argue that euthanasia is wrong. She could then give the following argument:

Killing people is wrong.

If killing people is wrong, euthanasia is wrong.

So euthanasia is wrong.

Cognitivists can say that this argument is valid, since it is impossible that its premises are true (in other words, that it is true that killing people is wrong and that it is true that if killing people is wrong, euthanasia is wrong) and that its conclusion is false (in other words, that it is false that euthanasia is wrong). Cognitivists can say this because they think that the premises and the conclusion of this argument express beliefs that can be true or false. But since feelings of approval or disapproval cannot be true or false, it is much harder for non-cognitivists to explain why Susan's argument is valid. Of course, it can be true or false that Susan has certain feelings, but the feelings themselves cannot be true or false. And if non-cognitivists cannot explain why this argument is valid, that is a reason to think that non-cognitivism is false.

A second reason to think this is as follows. If cognitivism is true, Fred and Susan have a real disagreement. For Fred then has a belief that ascribes the property of being permissible to euthanasia, and Susan has a belief that ascribes the property of being wrong to euthanasia. Since euthanasia cannot have both of these properties, these beliefs cannot both be true. But if non-cognitivism is true, Fred and Susan do not have a disagreement in this sense. Non-cognitivists can say that they do have a disagreement in a different sense: they have clashing non-cognitive attitudes, which may make them do incompatible things. For example, Fred's feeling of approval may make him campaign to allow euthanasia and Susan's feeling of disapproval may make her campaign to disallow it. But that seems unconvincing. Fred and Susan may similarly have clashing non-cognitive attitudes towards food: Fred may like peanut butter and Susan may dislike peanut butter. These clashing attitudes may also make

them do incompatible things: Fred's attitude may make him buy peanut butter and Susan's attitude may make her throw it in the bin. But the clash between these attitudes is clearly a subjective matter. Fred and Susan's disagreement about euthanasia seems different: they may try to resolve it by discussing the pros and cons of allowing euthanasia, and they are unlikely to regard this disagreement as a subjective matter. Non-cognitivism is therefore hard to square with the objectivity we attribute to morality. If we have a moral disagreement with a Nazi who says that Hitler was a morally admirable person, we do not think that this disagreement is a subjective matter, like Fred and Susan's clashing attitudes towards peanut butter. We think that our judgement is really right and that the Nazi's judgement is really wrong. This suggests that we do not take moral judgements to be non-cognitive attitudes, but instead take them to be beliefs that ascribe moral properties to actions or to people.

Non-cognitivists have sophisticated responses to these reasons to reject their view, which are too complicated to discuss here.³ But I myself think that these responses are ultimately unconvincing. If I am right about this, we should believe the first part of the error theory: cognitivism.

2. Arguments for the claim that moral properties do not exist

Suppose that cognitivism is true: in other words, suppose that moral judgements are beliefs that ascribe moral properties to actions or to people. As I have said, realists think that moral properties exist. Irrealists deny this. In this section I will discuss some arguments for irrealism: in other words, arguments for the claim that moral properties do not exist.

There are two kinds of realism: naturalist realism and non-naturalist realism. According to naturalist realists, moral properties are natural properties, by which they mean properties that can be discovered via empirical investigation.⁴ Naturalist realists often argue that our use of moral terms is regulated by certain natural properties: they argue that certain natural properties tend to make us apply certain moral terms to things that have these

³ See, for example, Blackburn 1993, Gibbard 2003, and Schroeder 2008.

⁴ See, for example, Boyd 1988 and Brink 1989.

properties. For example, suppose that Fred is a utilitarian. His use of the term ‘permissible’ may then be regulated by the natural property of maximising the total amount of happiness. In that case, naturalist realists could say that the term ‘permissible’, as Fred uses it, ascribes the natural property of maximising the total amount of happiness. They could take this to show that the property of being permissible is a natural property.

The main argument against naturalist realism is that this view seems to have relativistic implications.⁵ Suppose that Fred’s use of the term ‘permissible’ is regulated by the natural property of maximising the total amount of happiness, whereas Susan’s use of the term ‘permissible’ is regulated by the natural property of maximising the total amount of happiness without killing anyone. If naturalist realism is correct, the term ‘permissible’ as Fred uses it and the term ‘permissible’ as Susan uses it then ascribe different properties. This seems to mean that when Fred says that killing people is sometimes permissible and Susan says that killing people is never permissible, their claims are both true. But that seems wrong: it seems that these claims cannot both be true.

Many realists are therefore non-naturalist realists. According to non-naturalist realists, moral properties exist, but they are not natural properties: they are not properties that can be discovered via empirical investigation.⁶ In this respect, non-naturalist realists often say, moral properties resemble mathematical properties, which also cannot be discovered via empirical investigation. But non-naturalist realism has serious problems as well. The first philosopher to defend the error theory, J. L. Mackie, gave two arguments that highlight these problems.⁷

The first argument is known as the argument from queerness. If non-natural moral properties exist, Mackie says, they are ‘normative’: they tell us what to do. For example, if the property of being wrong exists, it tells us not to perform actions that have this property, and if the property of being good exists, it tells us to respect or admire people who have this property. But no other property does anything like this: properties that can be discovered empirically do not tell us what to do, and mathematical properties do not tell us what to do either. According to Mackie, this makes non-natural moral properties ‘queer’: it makes them

⁵ See, for example, Horgan and Timmons 1991.

⁶ See, for example, Enoch 2011.

⁷ See Mackie 1977, and also Olson 2014.

different in an important respect from all other properties that we think exist. He takes this to be a reason to deny that non-natural moral properties exist.

The second argument is known as the argument from relativity. Mackie begins this argument with the observation that members of different societies often make different moral judgements. For example, members of a secular society may think that euthanasia is permissible, whereas members of a deeply religious society may think that euthanasia is wrong. What explains this difference? Is the best explanation that members of the secular society are in touch with the non-natural moral properties of euthanasia, but members of the religious society are not? Or is the best explanation that members of these different societies are part of different social environments, with different customs, different media, and so on? Mackie thinks that the second explanation is much more plausible than the first. Since non-natural moral properties do not play a role in this explanation, he takes this to be another reason to deny that these properties exist.

These arguments can be challenged. Non-naturalist realists can say that the argument from queerness is really just a statement of their view rather than an argument against it, since it merely points out that moral properties are different from all other properties that we think exist. And they can say that the argument from relativity ignores the fact that many moral disagreements arise because of ignorance about non-moral matters, such as ignorance about whether God exists. If members of the religious society came to the conclusion that God does not exist, they would perhaps revise their moral judgements and come to think that euthanasia is permissible. But Mackie's arguments do highlight serious problems for non-naturalist realism, and there are also other arguments against non-naturalism that are too technical to discuss here.⁸ So it may well be true that moral properties do not exist. If so, we should also believe the second part of the error theory: irrealism.

3. Objections to the error theory

Suppose that the error theory is true. In that case, all moral judgements are false. How should

⁸ See Jackson 1998 and Streumer 2008.

we respond to this? Normally, if we discover that one of our beliefs is false, we stop having this belief. If I believe that there is milk in the fridge but I subsequently discover that the fridge is empty, I stop believing that there is milk in the fridge. Should we respond to the truth of the error theory in the same way? Should we give up all of our moral judgements? That seems both difficult and undesirable. This has given rise to many objections to the error theory.

One objection starts as follows:

If the error theory is true, all moral judgements are false.

So then the judgement that murder is wrong is false.

So then murder is not wrong.

If an action is not wrong, this action is permissible.

So if the error theory is true, murder is permissible.

This already seems quite bad, but it gets even worse. For the objection continues:

If the error theory is true, all moral judgements are false.

So then the judgement that murder is permissible is false.

So then it is not the case that murder is permissible.

If it is not the case that an action is permissible, this action is wrong.

So if the error theory is true, murder is wrong.

Since this line of reasoning can be repeated for any other action, the error theory seems to entail that every action is both permissible and wrong. That is even harder to believe than the claim that all moral judgements are false.

I think error theorists can answer this objection by rejecting the following premises of these arguments:

If an action is not wrong, this action is permissible.

If it is not the case that an action is permissible, this action is wrong.

Of course, when we say that an action is not wrong, we thereby suggest that we think it is

permissible, and when we say that it is not the case that an action is permissible, we thereby suggest that we think it is wrong. But defenders of the error theory can deny that this is the literal meaning of what we say: the literal meaning of what we say is only that the action lacks a certain moral property, not that it has a different moral property instead.⁹ If so, the error theory does not entail that every action is both permissible and wrong.

A second objection to the error theory is as follows. Suppose that we come to believe the error theory and therefore come to believe that all moral judgements are false. In that case, we probably will not conclude that all moral judgements are equally acceptable. For example, consider the following moral judgements:

Murder is wrong.

Murder is permissible.

General acceptance of the first judgement will promote peaceful coexistence and cooperation, whereas general acceptance of the second judgement will not. Even if we think that the error theory is true, therefore, we will probably continue to think that the first judgement is acceptable and the second is not. But if that is so, why should we construe the truth or falsity of moral judgements in terms of the presence or absence of moral properties? Would it then not be much more plausible to construe the truth or falsity of these judgements in terms of whether their general acceptance promotes peaceful coexistence and cooperation?¹⁰

I think error theorists can answer this objection by saying that the arguments for cognitivism show that we do currently construe the truth or falsity of moral judgements in terms of the presence or absence of moral properties. Of course, if we came to believe the error theory, we would perhaps start to construe the truth or falsity of moral judgements in a different way. But that does not show that the error theory is false. It merely shows that if we came to believe the error theory, this would perhaps lead to changes in our moral thought and discourse.

⁹ See Pigden 2007 and Olson 2014.

¹⁰ See Wright 1992.

A third objection to the error theory is that the arguments for the error theory apply not only to moral judgements, but also to other normative judgements, such as judgements about reasons for belief.¹¹ For example, suppose Fred thinks that geological evidence is a reason to believe that the Earth was not created six thousand years ago. And suppose Susan thinks that this evidence is no reason to believe this. Fred and Susan will not regard this as a subjective matter. They will take themselves to disagree even if their use of the term ‘reason to believe’ is regulated by different natural properties. Moreover, reasons for belief are normative in the sense of telling us what to believe, and members of different societies regularly make different judgements about what there is reason to believe. Mackie’s arguments from queerness and relativity therefore also seem to apply to judgements about reasons for belief. That seems to undermine the error theory: it seems to mean that the arguments for the error theory show that there is no reason to believe this theory.

Error theorists can try to answer this objection by denying that the arguments for the error theory also apply to judgements about reasons for belief.¹² They can say that these judgements are merely beliefs about probability: when we judge that X is a reason to believe Y, they can say, we merely believe that X raises the probability that Y is true. They can also say that disagreements about reasons for belief are less widespread than moral disagreements. But this is not wholly convincing. It seems that X can be a reason to believe Y even if X does not raise the probability that Y is true: for example, when someone’s testimony is a reason for me to believe a necessary truth. And there are widespread disagreements about reasons for belief, such as about whether there is reason to believe that God exists. This objection is therefore hard to answer for error theorists.

A fourth objection to the error theory is known as the Moorean objection, since it is similar to an influential argument against scepticism about the external world that was first given by G. E. Moore. Moore argued as follows:

If the external world does not exist, I do not have hands.

¹¹ See Cuneo 2007.

¹² See Olson 2014.

But I do have hands.

So the external world exists.

To reinforce this argument, Moore held up his hands while uttering the second premise. The objection to the error theory that is similar to this argument is as follows:

If the error theory is true, all moral judgements are false.

It is wrong to torture babies for fun.

So the judgement that it is wrong to torture babies for fun is true.

So at least one moral judgement is true.

So the error theory is false.¹³

Like the previous objection, this objection is hard to answer for error theorists. It is overwhelmingly plausible that it is wrong to torture babies for fun. Error theorists could deny that this entails that the judgement that it is wrong to torture babies for fun is true. But they can only deny this if they endorse non-cognitivism about this judgement, and non-cognitivism conflicts with the error theory. It therefore seems that error theorists must answer this objection by denying that it is wrong to torture babies for fun. But then we should ask what is more plausible: that the error theory is true, or that it is wrong to torture babies for fun. We surely all agree that it is far more plausible that it is wrong to torture babies for fun. This objection therefore seems to show that we should reject the error theory.

4. Can we believe the error theory?

But I think there is a way for defenders of the error theory to answer this objection. They can start by saying that the arguments for the error theory apply to all normative judgements: not only to moral judgements but also to judgements about reasons for belief, exactly as the third objection says. And they can then argue that we cannot believe a general error theory that

¹³ See Dworkin 1996.

applies not only to moral judgements but also to judgements about reasons for belief.¹⁴ I think they can do this by defending the following two claims:

We cannot believe *X* and believe that *X* entails *Y*, and at the same time fail to believe *Y*.

We cannot believe *X* and at the same time believe that there is no reason whatsoever to believe *X*.

If the first claim is true, someone who understands this general error theory well enough to believe it will believe that there are no reasons for belief and will therefore believe that there is no reason to believe this general error theory. And if the second claim is true, we cannot believe this general error theory and believe at the same time that there is no reason to believe this theory. This entails that we cannot believe this general error theory.

That may seem to be a problem for this theory. But I do not think it is. A theory can be true if we do not believe it. So why could a theory not also be true if we cannot believe it? Moreover, we can believe the two different parts of this general error theory, cognitivism and irrealism, at different times. We can believe that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties as long as we do not at the same time believe that normative properties do not exist. And we can believe that normative properties do not exist as long as we do not at the same time believe that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe such properties. The only thing we cannot do is put the arguments for cognitivism and irrealism together and come to believe this general error theory.

Suppose I am right that we cannot believe this general error theory. This theory then avoids the third objection: this objection now merely plays a role in showing that we cannot believe this general error theory, without showing that this theory is false. And the Moorean objection is not a problem for defenders of this general error theory either. Since no one can believe this theory, its defenders cannot believe it either. They can therefore agree that it is much more plausible that torturing babies for fun is wrong than that this general error theory

¹⁴ See Streumer 2013 and forthcoming.

is true. But they can say that what explains why we think this is not that this general error theory is false, but is instead that we cannot believe this theory.

If this is right, the truth about morality is literally unbelievable. You may think that this is a bad thing. But I think we should welcome it. For a truth that we cannot believe cannot make us change or give up any of our moral judgements. Our inability to believe this general error theory therefore prevents it from undermining morality.

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