

# **A Unified Argument for the Moral Error Theory**

## **Abstract**

After locating the moral error theory in relation to other metaethical positions and asking what we can learn from moral experience, I will revisit the two arguments John Mackie produced to support his claim that ‘there are no objective values’, the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness. By emphasizing the primacy of the argument from relativity, by giving the argument from queerness a more defensible interpretation and role than is usually done, and by blending in some reflections about projection, I will be able to show that some popular objections to Mackie’s argument for the error theory miss their marks. My discussion of these arguments will also address a question that moralists and moral philosophers are fond of asking: ‘How could so many people be wrong about something as important and familiar as morality?’ Following the lead of David Hume, John Mackie and Richard Joyce, I will claim that the answer to this question involves projection or objectification, and that, despite the popularity of the idea that we *see* morality as objective, objectification is more verbal than visual. Even if facts about our moral experience place the burden of proof on the error theorist (and they may not), that burden can be met by a unified version of the argument from relativity. Finally, I will deal briefly with the question of what we might *want* to do, and what we might *be able* to do, if we come to share the moral error theorist’s skepticism about the objectivity of morality.

## **Keywords**

**The Moral Error Theory**

**Projection and Objectification**

**Moral Abolition and Moral Fictionalism**

**David Hume, John Mackie, Richard Joyce**

## A Unified Argument for the Moral Error Theory

### 1. The Moral Error Theory

Almost everyone appears to believe that we face a world of objective facts—both facts about what there is and facts about what there ought to be. These beliefs are embraced without a second thought by ordinary users of moral language, and they are no less popular among moral philosophers, who are often more interested in discussing some theory about what is morally right or objectively valuable than in asking whether anything is. John Mackie [1977], Ian Hinckfuss [1987], Richard Joyce [2001] and other proponents of the moral error theory *do* ask whether anything is morally right or objectively valuable, and by answering ‘No’ they reject the idea that there are moral obligations, values, prohibitions, requirements and rights that are objective, or real, or independent of what happens in human brains.

It is customary to characterize moral realism as a combination of cognitivism (moral judgments are true or false) and a success theory (some of those judgments are true). A moral error theory is one form of moral *anti*-realism; it combines cognitivism with a failure theory, the belief that moral claims, despite their being truth-valued, are none of them true. The other form of moral anti-realism is non-cognitivism, often referred to as expressivism, the view that since ‘in using moral language we don’t ascribe moral properties to people, actions, or institutions’, the question of truth and falsity doesn’t even arise [Sayre-McCord 1986: 3-5]. This taxonomy is simple but helpful. Theories about what is going on when we make moral judgments have multiplied like rabbits and so have their designations, but it may do for now to say that the three positions mentioned above claim that moral judgments are sometimes true, always false, or never either.

According to Mackie's error theory, moral claims are widely understood to be both objective and prescriptive [Mackie 1977]. An *objective* claim is a claim about the way the world is, one that is made true or false by the world, not by what people think about the world. An objective fact is a fact waiting to be discovered. If it is an objective fact that killing for amusement is wrong, then killing for amusement would remain wrong even in societies that tolerated or encouraged it.

To say that a claim is *prescriptive* is to say that it is a claim *on* us, not a claim *about* us, or about anything. A prescription prescribes—it tells us what to do, not what is true. If I say: 'Get rid of capital punishment', this is what *I* am prescribing; it is *my* personal demand. But if I say 'Capital punishment is morally wrong', I am saying that there is some independent demand for its end, an objective prescription (or proscription) issued not by me, or by any person or set of persons, but by Reason, or Nature, or some other objective source. The moral error theorist says that since demands and prescriptions only arise when people demand and prescribe, no prescriptions or demands could ever be objective.

Mackie called his view *moral skepticism*, but he was unskeptical enough to open his book with the words: 'There are no objective values' [1977: 15]. Hinckfuss wrote that 'there are no moral obligations to be known, and, even if there were, we are not possessed of the intuitive apparatus needed to apprehend them' [1987: 1]. He called this view *moral nihilism* and defined a moral nihilist as 'one who believes that all moral statements . . . are false' [1987: 4]. After distinguishing between objective values and subjective values, he added that 'by "moral nihilism" I shall therefore mean the belief that there are no objective moral values' [1987: 8].

Richard Joyce [2001] offered the first thorough discussion of the moral error theory since the books by Mackie and Hinckfuss. Like Mackie, Joyce is an error theorist who believes that

moral judgments are untrue but too useful to abandon. This position is called *moral fictionalism*, and those few error theorists who believe that morality is overrated, and who encourage us to abandon moralizing, are called *moral abolitionists* or *moral eliminativists*.<sup>1</sup> This most extreme move for the error theorist is often ignored and sometimes mentioned as a distasteful pill error theorists might have to swallow. Recently the discussion of these matters has intensified, but the objections to the moral error theory and to moral abolitionism continue to leave their proponents unconvinced and unconverted. Here I will deal with some of these objections and say what I can to encourage unreflective moralists (as well as reflective moral realists) to take seriously the possibility that they are suffering from, and helping to perpetrate, a dangerous error.

## ***2. Making Moral Judgments***

The jumping-off place for metaethicists is a question: ‘What is really going on when people make moral judgments?’. To ask this is to ask what practicing moralists say, and what, in saying what they say, they are thinking, intending, and achieving. All the parties to the disputes about these matters insist that we pay close attention to ‘genuine moral interactions’, but when they turn their gaze in that direction they often see different things, and even when they see the same thing they manage to draw different conclusions.

### ***2.1 The Words and Deeds of the Moralists***

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Kalderon [2005] published a book with the title *Moral Fictionalism*, but while Kalderon is a moral fictionalist, he is not an error theorist. Rather, he is a non-cognitivist who believes that while the content of a moral judgment is a belief, in uttering that judgment we are not asserting that belief. See Joyce [2011] for a review of this book.

There may be some things about the phenomenon of moralizing on which we can all agree. Moral claims are framed in declarative sentences and delivered as statements about the way things are. When a moralizing moralist says ‘X is good’ or ‘A is right’, we can usually assume that he or she intends to go on record about the value of X or the propriety of A. Ordinary moralists have not attended to the uses of moral language with the same dedication as moral philosophers, but they do speak and behave as if they think of the demands of morality as independent of the preferences or agreements of any one person or group. They expect and require compliance with the requirements of morality, even from themselves, and they argue about what is right and wrong just as they do when they disagree about straightforward matters of fact.

There are many reasons to think that when we make moral judgments we are trying to say true things—that is what we think we are doing, it is what we say we are doing, it is what we intend to do, and it is what we are usually understood to be doing. An entire community, or even everyone on the planet, can be mistaken about some universally accepted belief, but it makes no sense to say that everyone in a community could be mistaken about the rules of their language or the meanings or conventional uses of their words.<sup>2</sup> When we learned to form descriptive sentences, we did not learn to discriminate the factual from the normative. As David Brink observed, ‘we begin as (tacit) cognitivists and realists about ethics’ [1989: 23].

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<sup>2</sup> Terence Cuneo characterizes the expressivist’s ‘guiding rationale’ as a dedication to ‘avoid an error theoretic account of ordinary moral thought and discourse’ [2006, 38-39]. He says that expressivist critics of the moral error theory neglect or deny much of what we have come to understand about speech-acts and about the role of illocutionary act intentions of speakers. So, I claim, do moral realists.

Non-cognitivists, who live by the distinction between the factual and the normative, make three important observations: (1) when we make a moral judgment we are often under the influence of strong feelings and desires, (2) when we make a moral judgment we often perform one or more non-assertive speech acts, and (3) when we make a moral judgment we are often trying to influence attitudes and behavior. The cognitivist can agree with each of these observations because it is easy to feel, do and intend these things while making a statement attributing objective values to something, or objective moral obligations to someone. What the cognitivist emphasizes is that no matter what other speech acts may be involved, the number, authority and intentions of practicing moralists are sufficient to guarantee that moral judgments are almost always attempts to make true statements about moral facts. The error theorist is a cognitivist who only adds that there *are* no moral facts.

Facts about what moralists actually say when they moralize are relatively easy to gather. Facts about what they believe and intend are less accessible, but still open to investigation. Something else that is open to investigation is the behavior of those who are under the influence of morality. Whatever the content of our moral opinions, belief in our moral rectitude fills us with confidence and makes it easier for us to talk ourselves into coercing others to act as we think they ought, to reward them when they do, and to punish them when they do not. The best evidence that we believe that our moral judgments are objectively true and binding may be our willingness to move heaven and earth to enforce the many prohibitions and requirements we have placed on ourselves and others.

## ***2.2 The Experience of the Moralists***

So far we have focused on what moralists say and do. Linguistic and behavioral evidence appear to support cognitivism, but there may be facts about moral experience that can be brought

in to help cognitivists decide between a success theory and an error theory. Those who think that moral experience itself can be offered as evidence for the truth of moral objectivity can be found claiming that ‘moral obligations are *felt* as something imposed from a source external to and independent of the individuals having the experience’, and this leads them to ‘talk of recognizing moral requirements’ and of ‘observing value in the world’.<sup>3</sup> David McNaughton, who actually deploys a version of this ‘argument from moral experience’, starts from the assumption that ‘a moral demand is experienced as something to which we must conform’ [1988: 48]. Critics of this type of argument point out that the feeling that we *must* do something may be an inclination, a compulsion, or anything in between. Unnamed raw feelings lend no support to moral objectivity, but when our impulses and reservations have been identified, cultivated and their evolution and function explained by those who study them, it begins to appear less likely that they are responses to the demands of a morally biased universe.

Don Loeb [2010] maintains that our moral experience is not as uniform as those who think that we ‘experience morality as a realm of fact’ appear to believe. He does not try to show that we do not experience morality in that way, but he argues that moral experience offers less support for moral objectivism than moral realists (and anti-realists like Mackie) suppose. He says that ‘even if moral experience *were* to display morality as a realm of fact (or presuppose that it is), that would not in itself support objectivism’ [2010: 104]. There might, after all, be a very good anti-objectivist explanation for that phenomenon.

Michael B. Gill [2008] argues that the great variety of what is included under the heading of ‘moral experience’ makes it unlikely that phenomenological considerations will support any

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<sup>3</sup> For these characterizations of the beliefs and the language of those who argue from moral experience see Timmons [1999: 75].

one moral theory over the others. This is because ‘how people experience morality is often infected by their theoretical beliefs or prior commitments concerning the nature or origin of morality’ [2008: 100]. A dedicated moral error theorist would be most unlikely to count any experience as a perception of goodness, or to think of some urge as a ‘felt’ objective moral obligation.

Moral objectivists who rely on the argument from moral experience claim that their moral experience results from encounters with objective moral facts and properties. The assignment for error theorists, who believe there are no such facts or properties, is either to find a more plausible explanation for the moral objectivists’ moral experiences, or to come up with a way to throw doubt on those very experiences.

Error theorists who want to *explain moral experience* say that those who claim to be perceiving, observing, noticing, apprehending, detecting, or just seeing moral properties are actually experiencing natural (non-moral) properties, and are *projecting* positive or negative feelings onto whatever they are observing, giving it a distinctive moral aura.

Error theorists who want to *explain moral experience away* will also say that those who believe themselves to have detected moral properties are actually experiencing natural (non-moral) properties, but they will add that when people see behavior they have been taught to deplore, they manage to believe (mistakenly) that they have actually experienced the wrongness of the act or the evil of the one who did the deed. These error theorists can allow that projection may play a role in our moral thinking, but they are likely to suggest that Hume, Mackie and Joyce may have been too tolerant of the visual metaphors used by moral objectivists who lean on the argument from moral experience.

But can we really make light of the claim that people seem to have moral perceptions? We can if we believe that *seeming* to have a moral perception is no different from having a non-moral perception that is embedded in a matrix of beliefs, feelings, and impulses. After being alerted to Bernie Madoff's theft of billions of dollars, we are more likely to notice some of his tell-tale body language and micro-expressions, but this new information does not shine a light on some hard-to-detect and impossible-to-define moral quality of wickedness that his victims failed to notice as they were handing him their money.

Moral objectivists who depend on the argument from moral experience often resort to the phenomenon of *seeing as* to characterize their experience. For example, sincere moralists claim to have *seen* someone *as* wicked, or some behavior *as* morally right or wrong. Wittgenstein made famous a figure that the least artistic among us could draw, and that anyone could easily see as a duck or as a rabbit. But I fear that this and the many other familiar examples of *visual* aspect-shifts are too optical and too well-understood to throw much light on moral vision. More to the point is a kind of Gestalt shift discussed by Bernard Rollin [1981], who writes of a hunter giving up hunting after suddenly *seeing* a deer *as* a living thing, and realizing that he was 'killing a living thing for amusement, rather than merely innocently participating in a sport' [1981: 44-45]. Because it is more conceptual and motivational than visual, this type of Gestalt shift will be of interest to anyone who is suspicious of moral perception. It reminds us that seeing someone, or some thing, in a new light has little to do with our eyes. Coming to *see* someone as evil is coming to *think* that he or she is evil, which involves making that judgment in words to oneself (and perhaps to others), and accompanying that act with a stream of negative feelings and aversive impulses. What we call *seeing someone as evil* is nothing like seeing the duck/rabbit as

a duck. It is not a special way of seeing, but a special way of thinking and talking. Moral vision is more *saying as* than *seeing as*.

### **2.3 The Beliefs of the Moralists**

If moral experience is personal, variable, interest-guided, theory-laden and possibly imaginary, then it will be of little use to moral objectivists who hope to place the burden of proof on the error theorist. That is why some moral objectivists base their defense, not on the claim that they experience morality as a realm of fact, which is easy to question and doubt, but on the widely accepted belief that morality *is* a realm of fact. Unlike feelings, beliefs can be put into words, so perhaps the more public and determinate status of moral beliefs, and widespread agreement about moral obligations and values, can be called upon to return the burden of proof to the error theorist, who (by definition) contradicts commonly held moral beliefs and beliefs about morality.

Mackie did admit that the error theory ‘goes against assumptions ingrained in our thought and built into some of the ways in which language is used’, and he granted that ‘since it conflicts with what is sometimes called common sense, it needs very solid support’ [1977: 35]. What the error theory conflicts with is an assortment of common sense moral *beliefs*, and the main assumption that Mackie was alluding to is the assumption that some (perhaps many) of those beliefs are objectively true. It was to combat that assumption that Mackie produced his two arguments. Loeb [2010: 116] may be right to say that he yielded too quickly to the demand to accept the burden of proof, but this will not matter if the arguments succeed at the job for which they were designed.

Joyce also suggests that Mackie was under the spell of a conservative principle according to which ‘the counter-intuitiveness of moral skepticism in itself represents a burden of proof that

the error theorist must strive to overcome' [2010: 45]. He thinks that even if Mackie's arguments from relativity and queerness are effective against the moral objectivist, they do not erase the counter-intuitive nature of the conclusion, and it is in an attempt to deal with that left-over worry that he turns to Mackie's *thesis of objectification*. Before we turn to that thesis, let us reflect on the fact that counter-intuitiveness is a relative notion; a counter-intuitive claim is counter-intuitive *to someone*. The claim that no moral belief is ever true will be counter-intuitive to anyone raised in our society who has never seriously considered its opposite. It will *not* be counter-intuitive to anyone who has discovered the virtues of the moral error theory and been made aware of some of the liabilities of moral objectivism. Joshua Greene notes that the 'widespread error embedded in moral realism is an error that makes sense—a mistake, one might say, that we were born to make' [2002: 188]; but one might also say that it is not a mistake that we are condemned to carry to our graves.

According to Joyce's reconstruction of Mackie's strategy, the moral skeptic needs two lines of reasoning. The first combines the arguments from relativity and queerness and aims to show that 'there is something fishy about moral facts'. But if moral facts are certifiably fishy, why do people still continue to believe in them, and why did they believe in them in the first place? Joyce's second line of reasoning brings in the psychological habit of objectification to explain how, in the words of Mackie, 'even if there were no such objective values people not only might have come to suppose that there are but also persist firmly in that belief' [Joyce 2010: 46].

Joyce begins by distinguishing a weak (minimal) version of the thesis of objectification from a strong one, and by showing that neither version alone is capable of establishing the truth of the error theory. The strong version says:

Our feelings of disapproval and aversion lead us to see the world as containing moral qualities *that it does not really contain* [Joyce 2010: 43].

Since this version is explicitly committed to a denial of moral objectivity, it would be question-begging to use it as a premise in an argument for the error theory. The corresponding weak version can be stated in this way:

Our feelings of disapproval and aversion lead us to see the world as containing moral qualities *that it may or may not contain*.

This version would also be ineffective at ‘providing a skeptical conclusion’, since it is metaethically neutral.

If the thesis of objectification alone will not provide a skeptical conclusion, what is its role? Joyce reminds us [2010: 44] that immediately after offering his arguments from relativity and queerness, Mackie remarked that

considerations of these kinds suggest that it is in the end less paradoxical to reject than to retain the common sense belief in the objectivity of moral values, provided that we can explain how this belief, if it is false, has become established and is so resistant to criticisms [1977: 42].

Joyce considers the possibility of satisfying this proviso by explaining how our ‘standing intuitions in favor of morality’ are ‘the result of an unreliable process of formation’ [2010: 46]. This would somehow empower or complete Mackie’s original two arguments, to which we now turn.

### 3. *The Argument from Relativity*

Mackie introduced his argument from relativity by noting ‘the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community’. But he immediately added that ‘it is not the mere presence of disagreements that tells against the objectivity of morality’ [1977; 36]. We can find as much disagreement and agreement as we want, both within and among cultures, but the argument traces our moral disagreement *and* agreement to our different versions of reality and to our varying feelings, needs, interests, and traditions. We agree about morality and have moral intuitions because we have learned our lessons; and we disagree because we haven’t all learned the same lessons, and because our interests often conflict.

Many critics of this argument get off on the wrong foot by treating it as an inference from actual (or irreconcilable) *disagreement* to the absence of moral objectivity. David Brink, for example, says this: ‘Mackie argues that if moral realism were true, all moral disputes should be resolvable, and since many seem irresolvable, he concludes that moral realism is false’ [1984: 117]. Sarah McGrath claims that ‘according to Mackie, “radical differences between first order moral judgments” provide a compelling reason to doubt “the objectivity of values” ’ [2008: 88]. Russ Shafer-Landau devotes a chapter of [2004] to the destruction of an argument he calls ‘the argument from disagreement’, and characterizes as saying that wide and deep moral disagreement among informed and intelligent parties provides ‘excellent evidence for skepticism’ [2004: 68]. Louis Pojman rightly characterizes the argument from relativity as holding ‘that the best explanation for actual moral diversity is the absence of universal moral truths, rather than the distorted perceptions of objective principles’, but when he turns to criticize

Mackie he focuses on a version of an argument from *disagreement* by remarking that ‘the fact of cultural diversity doesn’t constitute a very strong argument against an objective core morality’ [2001: 243].

Mackie consistently understood the argument from relativity to be an argument to the best explanation, so if we are error theorists in search of the best explanation for that widespread moral belief and obstinacy, we might start with the ‘well-known variation in moral codes’, but then we will go on to collect facts about the words, experiences, and behavior of moralists. Then we will try to come up with a version of reality that explains all that without appealing to anything that we do not already understand, or at least to anything that we have no hope of ever understanding. Any such explanation will never be certain or final; it will just be the best we can do at the time.

This style of reasoning is familiar to the scientist, the detective and the historian. In a brief discussion of it, Mackie remarks that ‘there is every reason to believe that this kind of thinking has been and is intelligible to reasonable people at all periods of history and in all cultures’ [1982: 5]. Mackie made it clear that what *he* thought needed to be explained was how, if there are no objective values ‘people not only might have come to suppose that there are but also might persist firmly in that belief’ [1977: 49]. The moral objectivist’s explanation of both the supposition and the persistence involves the claim that there are objective, non-natural moral properties that we apprehend (visually, rationally, or intuitively). Error theorists think they can improve on this thin and mysterious account of the source of our moral beliefs. They build their explanations on what we have learned about our nature and our history, and on what we know about the effects that propaganda, human credulity, and positive and negative reinforcement can have on what we believe about morality.

If we modify Joyce's strong version of the thesis of objectification to apply to moral beliefs, we get a *strong belief version* of that thesis:

Our feelings of disapproval and aversion lead us to believe  
that the world contains moral qualities that it does not  
really contain.

By turning our attention from moral experience to moral belief, I am exploiting Joyce's observation that Mackie neglected to distinguish carefully between (1) 'the thesis that moral experience is the result of our having objectified affective attitudes (feelings, demands, and wants . . .)' and (2) 'the thesis that we simply have false beliefs about the objective status of moral properties' (2010: 11). I think that the error theorist is better off avoiding (1) and treating the product of objectification to be an occasion-specific moral belief. The *strong* version is warranted here because Mackie's challenge is to explain how moral beliefs, *if they are false*, have become so established and so resistant to criticism.

The full story of how our moral beliefs take hold is far from simple, so the explanation of any act of objectification will involve more, and reach further back, than our immediate feelings. Since objectification does not happen in a vacuum, here is an *expanded strong belief version* of the thesis of objectification:

Given our biological makeup and our socialization (which  
includes our training in language), we develop desires and  
feelings of disapproval and aversion that cause and support the  
belief that the world contains moral qualities that it does not really  
contain.

If we flesh this out with some of what we have learned and are learning about the ways our brains and our institutions evolve, we can easily provide an explanation of what we say and believe about morality that puts to shame any alternative account that relies on sensitivity to objectively prescriptive moral obligations or intrinsic values. Here the error theorist can call representatives of all of the human sciences to the witness stand—anthropology, archeology, biology, genetics, history, linguistics, psychology—all of them [See Joyce 2006; Dennett 1995, Chapter 16, *On the Origin of Morality*; Dawkins 2006, Chapter 6, *The Roots of Morality: Why are we Good?*].

Further support for the error theory can be found in the research of moral psychologists and neuroscientists. For example, Joshua Greene observes that ‘we are naturally inclined toward a mistaken belief in moral realism’ and that ‘the psychological tendencies that encourage this false belief serve an important biological purpose, and that explains why we should find moral realism so attractive even though it is false’ [2002: 205]. In recent articles Greene and his colleagues have discussed their use of Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging to examine the brains of subjects as they reflected on moral dilemmas. By these and other feats of neuroscience they hope to add to our understanding of the etiology of morality.<sup>4</sup>

According to the conclusion of the argument from relativity, then, our moral claims and beliefs are *relative* to (are a function of) what we are, what we have been taught, and what we have come to want and feel. Moral properties and facts drop out of the picture because, like witches, curses, and lucky charms, they play no role in the unfolding of events because they do

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<sup>4</sup> See Greene [2002] and his homepage, which describes his work and lists his writings at [url = <http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~jgreene>].

not exist. What does play a role in the unfolding of events is the *belief* in witches, curses, lucky charms, and moral properties and facts. What the moral error theorist, with the help of students of the human sciences, can offer us is a satisfying and continually improving explanation of the causes and the effects of our mistaken *belief* in morality, and an account of the ways we have exploited that belief, transmitted it, and shaped it to suit our desires and interests.

#### ***4. The Argument from Queerness***

Since the argument from relativity is an argument to the best explanation, we need to show that the error theorist's explanation of moral beliefs and activity makes more sense than that of the moral realist. This is made easy by the fact that the items moral realists use in their explanations (moral properties and facts, objective values and inherent human rights) are themselves mysterious and unexplainable. Mackie tells us that if objective values existed, they would be 'entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe', and they would only be detectable by 'some special faculty of moral perception or intuition utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else' [1977: 38]. By calling moral properties 'non-natural', and positing a faculty of moral intuition, G. E. Moore [1903] bought into both the metaphysics and the epistemology being attacked here. Some may think it unfair to drag Moore in at this point, but if we set aside both naturalism and non-cognitivism, intuitionism is what is left; and, if Mackie is right, it does represent the way people think of value and obligation—namely as involving properties we are capable of discerning. He says that 'the central thesis of intuitionism is one to which any objectivist view of values is in the end committed: intuitionism merely makes unpalatably plain what other forms of objectivism wrap up' [Mackie1977: 38].

The moral intuitionist says that even though moral properties are neither definable nor explainable, they apply to us and to our deeds. But if we don't know what they are, how they relate to other properties, or how we come to know of them, then why do we even think—how *can* we even think—that they apply to us? The proper conclusion of the argument from queerness is that moral properties, because of their hopeless attempt to combine objectivity and prescriptivity and their inaccessibility to normal types of investigation, are too 'queer' to be explained, or to be used to explain anything else. Thus the argument from queerness can be seen as an important element in the completed argument from relativity because the queerness of moral facts and properties undermines any explanation that appeals to them.

Mackie illustrates what he takes to be one unusual aspect of moral properties by relating them to Plato's Forms. Seeing the form of Rightness, he says, 'will not merely tell men what to do, but will ensure that they do it, overruling any contrary inclinations' [1977: 24]. Many critics of the argument from queerness agree with Mackie that any such property would be too bizarre to take seriously, but then they base their sole objection to Mackie's argument on the claim that few moral realists have ever subscribed to such an oddity. Since this is probably true, Mackie's choice of this as an example of what is queer about moral properties has offered his critics an easy target.

There is, however, another oddity to which both moral philosophers and ordinary moralists do seem to subscribe. This is the idea that whether or not, and to whatever extent, morality motivates us, it also makes demands on us, demands we cannot escape but are free to disobey, demands warranted by no human custom, decision, law, or command. A moral obligation does not *cause* us to do some act, but it is thought to *require* it. No one has ever been

able to make sense of these demands from nowhere, and if the idea that morality is objective depends on such an oddity, then its doom is sealed.<sup>5</sup>

The argument from queerness is targeted in a different way by Michael Smith [1994]. Smith's strategy is to counter both the argument from queerness and the argument from relativity by providing an explanation of what it is to say that an act is right that opens the question of rightness to empirical investigation. He says that

to say that an act of a certain sort in certain circumstances is right is . . . to say *inter alia* that there is a normative reason to perform it. And this, in turn, is simply to say that fully rational creatures would desire that such an act be performed in such circumstances . . . [1994: 200].

After giving his definition of 'rightness', Smith asks if Mackie can 'really lay a charge of strangeness against rightness, at least as that feature of acts has been analysed here' [1994: 200]. Well, Mackie's argument from queerness is indeed nullified if rightness is defined as something that is not queer. But it seems clear that this is *not* what we are saying when we say that an act is right. If there were such a thing as the rightness of an act, and if there were any 'fully rational creatures', then maybe those creatures could tell when an act was right, and maybe they would desire that those acts be performed—we have no way to know. However, to say *now* that some act is right is not to say that creatures of *any* type do, or would, want it to be performed.

Definitions are frequently presented as accounts of what people actually mean, but it is also possible to offer them for adoption. If enough of us were to adopt Smith's definition, we would have a new meaning for the claim that some act is morally right, but then we would not be

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<sup>5</sup> I have dealt at greater length with the argument from queerness in Garner [1990], which is a response to Brink [1984].

saying what anyone who uses those words today is saying. More to the point, we are not likely to adopt that definition because most users of moral language would resist *any* definition that turned moral judgments into verdicts about what some imaginary being might desire to happen. . In fact, if Smith had managed to talk us into accepting his definition, then rightness would have inherited a new queerness from the definitely queer notion of a fully rational being.

Someone who offers us a definition of a word such as ‘good’ or ‘right’ might be concerned with clarity and communication, but in my view it is more likely that he or she is trying to secure some dialectical advantage. Jeremy Bentham (and G. E. Moore of all people) tried to make utilitarianism true by definition; but, as Moore so wisely quoted in the motto to his *Principia Ethica*: ‘Everything is what it is, and not another thing’. [1903] Most definitions offered by moral philosophers are tools for changing the subject from something the definer doesn’t want to talk about to something the definer does want to talk about. Redefinitions of ‘rightness’ (or of any other evaluative word) in terms of empirically respectable and evaluatively neutral concepts have no relevance to Mackie’s argument, to which we can now return.

### ***5. Projection/Objectification***

According to the argument from relativity, supplemented by the argument from queerness, the best explanation of our moral beliefs and habits will not mention anything as peculiar as objective moral facts and properties. But it will certainly mention ‘objectification’ or ‘projection’, if that is what we call the process by which we turn attitudes and feelings into moral beliefs.

Sometimes we experience a suite of positive or negative feelings about some event we have observed. Because of what and who we are, and what we have been taught to think and say, those feelings can become part of a complex of causes and conditions that lead us to think and to

speak as we would if we had somehow apprehended objective moral properties. Moral objectivists think that an experience of a moral property (the evil of the intention or the wrongness of the deed) is what elicits their moral sentiment, but it is more likely (or, as Mackie would say, less paradoxical to think) that it is their sentiment that gives rise to the belief that they have experienced a moral property.

Hume said that reason ‘discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution’, while ‘taste . . . has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation’ [Hume 1777 :294]. That new creation is the vice, the wickedness, the wrongness, or their opposites. But if I am right, when we ‘stain’ an object, person, or act with colours borrowed from our sentiment, the item doesn’t present us with a different appearance, we just think and talk about it differently or, as we say, we see it in a different light.

Mackie endorsed Hume’s idea that we create rather than discover virtue and vice, and he agreed that we manage to do this by the ‘projection or objectification of moral attitudes’ [1977: 42]. Hume’s view, he said, is that

we tend to project these sentiments onto the actions or characters that arouse them, or read some sort of image of these sentiments into them, so that we think of those actions and characters as possessing, objectively and intrinsically, certain distinctively moral features; but these features are fictitious [1980: 71].

We don’t really project sentiments *onto* the items that we judge, and the claim that we ‘read some sort of image’ of our sentiments into them remains as opaque as it did on the day it was

written.<sup>6</sup> But what follows those words is clear enough: we ‘think of the actions and characters as having, ‘objectively and intrinsically’, certain moral features. This can only mean that we *believe* this, and that we say it to ourselves and to others, using words we have heard all our lives, words whose very role in language is to attribute those ‘distinctively moral features’ to people and to what they do and desire. What we project (anger, desire, disgust) is a complex psychological state, what enables our projection is our biological and social inheritance, including our language, and the result of our projection is a moral belief.

Our indoctrination into the beliefs and language of morality is so thorough that many of us won’t be able to imagine a world devoid of objective value. In what Hinckfuss [1987] called a ‘moral society’, there is pressure on everyone to acknowledge, teach, and use moral language, and that means that there is pressure to project, because projection, as we are understanding it here, is the process of starting with both natural and acquired psychological states and ending up with moral beliefs.

If we understand objectification or projection in this way we can add the final touches to the argument from relativity. We can’t call on the thesis of objectification to take on the whole job of justifying the error theory, nor can we use it, all by itself, to explain our moral beliefs and behavior. But when we treat objectification as one component of a more complex naturalistic account of the way we form our (erroneous) moral beliefs, and then fold this into the argument from relativity, we have everything we need to satisfy Mackie’s proviso.

### ***6. Notes Toward a Natural History of Moral Error.***

Mackie notes that ‘the apparent objectivity of moral value is a widespread phenomenon which has more than one source’ [1977: 46]. The task of identifying these sources has been made

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<sup>6</sup> The words may be a valiant attempt to accommodate the visual metaphors.

easier by the fact that we are developing a better understanding of what sort of beings we are and of what makes us tick. A natural history of moral error has yet to be written, but we can already identify a few of the many factors that have contributed to our habit of embracing groundless moral beliefs and defending them beyond all reason.

Hume says that we all have a **natural sympathy**, a disposition to feel what we imagine others are feeling and a tendency to be made uneasy at the sight of suffering. This generous feeling is encouraged and shaped by our parents and mentors, and if they have done their jobs, we will not only be uneasy when we become aware of suffering, we will have been primed with beliefs and dispositions that activate a process that takes us from uneasiness and sympathy to the belief that we have a moral obligation to act.

Those charged with our upbringing are able to educate and socialize us because we come into the world with **a tendency to imitate and an automatic and unquestioning credulity**. The cave-babies who survived and prospered were the ones who believed what was said and who did as they were told. As Richard Dawkins observes, ‘there will be a selective advantage to child brains that possess the rule of thumb: believe, without question, whatever your grown-ups tell you’ [2006: 174]. Our credulity, like our language-acquisition skills, may abate as we age and as credulity becomes dangerous, but long before we learned how to think for ourselves, or to spot liars, we were shaped by lessons that presuppose the objectivity of morality and model the use of moral language.

Another source of our belief in moral objectivity is our **tendency to be upset by injuries and inequities** that leave us and those we care about at a disadvantage. We share this feeling with other primates, and we manifest it, and project it, when we praise justice, or cry in despair that something is ‘just *wrong*’. When we have been harmed, we sometimes find it hard to resist a

**desire to exact revenge** on the guilty party. We effortlessly transform our hurt and anger into some version of the belief that the one who hurt us is evil and deserves to suffer. We want revenge, but since revenge is frowned upon, we pretend (even to ourselves) that by retaliating strongly we are doing the right thing.

When discussing what he calls ‘patterns of objectification’, Mackie mentions Elizabeth Anscombe’s claim that our moral concepts of duty, right and wrong, and obligation are ‘survivals outside the framework of thought that made them really intelligible, namely **the belief in divine law**’ [Mackie 1977: 45]. It is easy enough to let our desires or our positive or negative emotions flower into moral beliefs, and it is even easier when we are able to support those beliefs by citing our religious authorities and the ‘common sense beliefs’ of the majority of our peers.

### ***7. Restraining Projections***

Committed though he was to the moral error theory, Mackie did not recommend that we abolish morality, or become, in Simon Blackburn’s words, ‘revisionist projectivists’ who give up on moral language. But Blackburn observed that a consistent error theorist might *want* to abandon that error-infested language, and he even chided Mackie for not having done so. ‘So far’, he said, ‘I have tried to show that there is something fishy about holding an error theory yet continuing to moralize’ [1993: 152]. The moral fictionalist and the moral abolitionist differ over whether to continue to moralize. The moral abolitionist admits that morality has at times promoted traits and behavior almost everyone would encourage, but then reminds us that there is another side to the story. Moral considerations have been offered in support of every atrocity and indignity we have imposed on one another. If, as the moral error theorist believes, there is no fact of the matter about what is morally right and wrong, it follows that no moral judgment can ever be shown to be either dictated by or contrary to the facts; no moral defense or criticism of what

someone has done can ever be conclusive; and no demagogue can ever be decisively refuted. Speaking in moralistic terms gets us nowhere with those who think differently and who know how to argue, and just *thinking* in those terms can amplify our emotions, impair our perception and make it harder for us to understand and empathize with others.

Hinckfuss developed an impressive case for abolishing morality. He allowed, as everyone must, that false moral beliefs can be quite beneficial, but he was more inclined to dwell on the thought that a ‘moral society’ will have many disagreeable features that are essential to its propagation and preservation, features like ‘elitism, authoritarianism, guilt complexes, ego competition, economic inequality and war’ [1987: v]. Moral societies, he added, are ‘inefficient in maximizing human happiness, satisfaction or self-esteem, and, because of the threat of war with other societies, physically dangerous’ [1987: 20]. A commitment to morality actually hinders the resolution of conflicts and fosters the exploitation of the ‘poor and the weak by the rich and powerful’ [1987: 21]. This is just a part of his critique, but if Hinckfuss is to any extent right about the moral society, then morality may be more problematic than its fictionalist supporters have allowed themselves to suppose.

If we find ourselves in agreement with Hinckfuss that morality is not only overrated but also dangerous, then we might consider minimizing our own moralizing. We can try to stop using moral language on others, and we can work toward restraining our spontaneous moral pronouncements to ourselves. If we can manage to do this, we may be surprised to find ourselves attending with increased clarity, and responding more appropriately, to the events, acts, and people we were previously judging. Moralizing clouds our minds, distracts us from the details of our situation, and leads us into endless and fruitless arguments. If our emotions spawn false moral beliefs, and if those false moral beliefs underwrite and encourage further (and more

extreme) emotions, we should not be surprised when our disagreements turn into fights, feuds, or wars.<sup>7</sup>

Moral error theorists have abandoned the belief that insensitive bigotry, dog-fighting, predatory lending, kicking babies and genocide are morally wrong, along with every other moralistic platitude they have ever encountered. But does this mean that they will be more inclined to do these things? Of course not. The emotions of horror at cruelty and slaughter that once fueled the projections remain in full force even if we no longer project them into moral judgments. It is a mistake to think that if we are not guided by moral reasons, we will be guided by selfish or sadistic ones. To be sure, we are often influenced by self-interest and rage, but thanks to years of training in civility and endless inducements to consider others, we have developed quite a few sympathetic and friendly dispositions. As we move through our day we automatically follow customs and laws, and we rarely think about consequences or about what morality requires unless it is to rationalize doing what we want to do. Our decisions emerge from a jumble of impulses, desires, habits, feelings, and beliefs. Both selfishness and moral beliefs may find a place in this hodgepodge, but they play smaller roles in our decisions than egoists and moral philosophers think. What we end up doing is the product of incalculable and often invisible factors, among which we will find both selfish and generous impulses, as well as the words we say to ourselves and others say to us.

The moral error theory is not widely believed, and moral abolitionism is not widely practiced, but the error theory is closer to informed and thoughtful common sense than we might

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<sup>7</sup> 7. For the upside of moral abolitionism and some criticisms of some moral fictionalists see Garner [2010] and [2011].

think, and moral abolitionism is a sane and healthy policy because it does not require us to subscribe to false and implausible claims, or to waste time arguing about our own projections.

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