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NIHILISM AND THE EPISTEMIC PROFILE OF MORAL JUDGMENT

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1. Moral Nihilism and Moral Error Theory

Moral nihilism is the view that there are no moral facts or moral truths. Thus conceived, moral nihilism is the ontological component of moral error theory, a view that also makes claims about the psychology and language of ordinary moral thought and discourse. Moral nihilists need not be moral error theorists, since they need not accept the claims about moral psychology and language that moral error theory makes. I shall, however, focus on moral error theory since it is the best-known and most comprehensive metaethical theory that has moral nihilism as a component. The version of moral error theory I shall consider maintains that moral judgements are beliefs about moral facts, e.g., the fact that torture is wrong, and that utterances of moral sentences, e.g., “Torture is wrong”, are assertions that purport to refer to moral facts. It also maintains that there are no moral facts. As a consequence, moral beliefs are systematically mistaken and moral assertions are uniformly untrue. (For a discussion of other versions of moral error theory, see Olson 2014: Ch. 1.)

I shall not discuss in any great detail the many arguments for moral error theory that have been offered in the literature (for a critical exposition of some of the most influential arguments, see Olson 2014: chapters 5-6). Suffice it to say here that arguments for moral error theory normally maintain that ordinary moral thought and discourse involve certain non-negotiable but untenable ontological commitments. These commitments are *non-negotiable* in that they are essential to or distinctive of moral thought and discourse, and they are *untenable* in that there are no facts of the kind that moral thought and discourse purport to be about. In order to explain why we ordinary speakers tend to think and talk as if there are moral facts although there are none, moral error theorists often advocate projectivist accounts of moral

judgment and belief, according to which we mistake affective attitudes (such as approval and disapproval) for perceptions of mind-independent moral properties and facts (Hume 1998: App 1; Mackie 1977), and to debunking explanations, according to which moral judgment and belief originate and evolve because of their social and evolutionary advantageousness (Joyce 2006). I shall come back to such projectivist and debunking explanations below, and in section 3 I shall say a bit more about the argument for moral error theory that I find most promising.

My main aim in this paper is to discuss some consequences of endorsing moral error theory, or believing to some degree that moral error theory is true. In section 2, I consider the implications for ordinary moral thought and discourse and the epistemological consequences for moral theorizing. We shall see that many moral error theorists have argued that moral thought and discourse are too useful to be jettisoned, although moral beliefs and assertions are never true. I shall describe my account of how they are best preserved, what I call “moral conservationism.” I shall also discuss how moral error theorists can pursue moral theorizing. In section 3, I consider and respond to a recent challenge to moral error theory, due to Matt Bedke (2014). Bedke argues that insofar as moral error theorists are right that moral thought and discourse can be successfully preserved in the ways I and others have suggested, this would in fact count against moral error theory since it would be evidence that ordinary moral thought and discourse do not in fact involve the untenable ontological commitments attributed to them; moral judgements thus do not have the epistemic profile that moral error theory alleges. Moral error theorists would thus end up biting their own tail. I shall argue in sections 3-5 that the challenge can be met and that there is evidence that moral error theory is in fact correct about the epistemic profile of moral judgements.

2. Moral Error Theory, Moral Conservationism, and Moral Theory

If one holds that moral thought involves systematic error and that moral claims cannot be true, it might seem that the obvious reaction is to abandon moral thought and talk. That is what some error theorists have recommended (Hinckfuss 1987; Garner 2007). Others have thought that moral thought and talk is too useful, both inter- and intrapersonally, to abandon. J. L. Mackie maintained that “[w]e need morality to regulate interpersonal relations, to control some of the ways in which people behave towards one another, often in opposition to contrary inclinations” (Mackie 1977: 43), and Richard Joyce argues that “[m]oralized thinking and talking [function] as a bulwark against weakness of will [and] as an interpersonal commitment device” (Joyce 2006: 208). Not only are moral thought and talk helpful in coordinating collective behavior and useful antidotes to recurring temptations to lie, cheat, and steal; giving them up would also likely be costly and difficult, as Daniel Nolan, Greg Restall, and Caroline West point out: “Giving up moral talk would force large-scale changes to the way we talk, think, and feel that would be extremely difficult to make” (Nolan, Restall, and West 2005: 307).

In the light of such considerations, some philosophers have suggested that we take a fictionalist stance to moral thought and talk, i.e., roughly the kind of stance we take to stories about hobbits and Olympian gods, and in playing games with children (Joyce 2001: Ch. 8; Nolan, Restall, and West 2005). That is, we are to act, think, and speak *as if* we believe that there are moral truths, but we are only to *pretend* to have moral beliefs and *pretend* to make moral assertions. The hope and promise of moral fictionalism is that pretense moral belief and assertion will have the same, or roughly the same, beneficial pay-offs as genuine moral belief and assertion have.

However, the fictionalist practice seems to require considerable cognitive self-surveillance: in order to avoid alleged costs of believing and asserting what is not true, one is only to entertain moral propositions without believing them, and to utter moral sentences without

assertoric force. This arguably requires occasionally reminding oneself that morality is (mere) fiction. Such cognitive self-surveillance is likely to reduce the potency of moral thought and talk to function as a bulwark against weakness of will and as an interpersonal commitment device, for it seems that in order for moral thought and talk to function well in these regards one needs to take morality seriously and be genuinely committed to it, which arguably requires that one suppress the thought of morality as fiction. Fictionalism thus faces a stability problem: on the one hand, one is to engage and immerse in moral thought and discourse so as to reap the benefits, by entertaining moral thoughts and uttering moral sentences; on the other hand, one is at the same time to exercise cognitive self-surveillance so as not to slip into believing and asserting moral propositions.

In previous work, I have criticized fictionalism along the lines above, and defended a conservationist policy, according to which we continue to believe and assert moral propositions as far as we can (Olson 2011; 2014: Ch. 9). Conservationism allows us to reap the benefits of moral thought and talk and requires no cognitive self-surveillance of the kind fictionalism requires. (In a joint forthcoming paper, Björn Eriksson and I supplement moral conservationism with some recommendations for when and how to moralize, yielding a position we call “moral negotiationism.”)

An obvious question is whether it is at all possible for a moral error theorist to hold moral beliefs. It has recently been argued that it is not (Suikkanen 2013). However, it seems to me exaggerated to deny that we can sometimes have an occurrent belief that p and a disposition to believe that not- p in different contexts. It seems not implausible that peer pressure, emotional engagement, and the like, may give rise to beliefs that one rejects “in the cool hour,” e.g., in the seminar room. Beliefs are typically formed on the basis of how things appear, and many things will appear morally wrong, even to moral error theorists. For example, setting a cat on fire certainly appears wrong, and an error theorist who witnesses

such an event may well form the belief that the action is wrong, at least if she temporarily suppresses her belief that there are no moral truths, possibly as an effect of emotional engagement. Such considerations may suffice as a possibility proof that conservationism is a position that is psychologically available to nihilists. It is also notable that some self-avowed moral error theorists have reported that they occasionally do have moral beliefs and make moral claims, as a result of not getting out of the deeply ingrained habit of moralizing (Pigden 2007: 445). Since my main aim here is not to defend moral conservationism, I shall not consider objections or further elaborate its merits (2011; 2014: Ch. 9; Eriksson and Olson, *forthcoming*). In the next section, we shall consider an argument that conservationist reactions and recommendations of moral error theorists tell us something important about the nature of moral judgements, which spells trouble for moral error theory.

Before we get there, however, I want to consider the use, if any, that moral error theorists may make of moral theorizing. We have seen that moral thought and talk are useful, according to moral error theorists; too useful in fact to be abandoned. But how are moral error theorists to assess and compare different moral beliefs and claims epistemically? After all, we know that no moral belief or claim is true, according to moral error theory. To systematically justify and assess the plausibility of moral beliefs is normally thought to be the job of first-order moral theorizing, or normative ethics. But how can moral error theorists engage in that kind of enterprise since there is, according to them, no truth to be found in it? According to one prominent critic of moral error theory, “[i]f there are no truths within morality, [...] then the enterprise of normative ethics is philosophically bankrupt [and] loses its point” (Shafer-Landau 2005: 107).

But note first that if lack of moral truth renders normative ethics philosophically bankrupt, then it is not only error theorists who should deem normative ethics pointless, but also those non-cognitivists who maintain that moral judgments are incapable of being true or false. More

importantly, for our purposes, having the potential to deliver truths need not be the only way for a philosophical enterprise to have a point. Recall Mackie's point that "[w]e need morality to regulate interpersonal relations, to control some of the ways in which people behave towards one another, often in opposition to contrary inclinations." In order to fulfill that function, morality needs to comprise a set of mutually supportive, interpersonally recognizable and acceptable, as well as practically applicable, principles. In other words, while there are no truths in normative ethics to be discovered, a system of normative ethics needs to be invented for practical purposes.

Mackie cited with approval John Rawls's method in normative ethics (Mackie 1977: 105). Rawls described his theory of justice as "a theory of the moral sentiments (to recall an eighteenth century title) setting out the principles governing our moral powers, or, more specifically, our sense of justice" (Rawls 1999: 44.) The important point here is that the method is not one of discovering mind-independent moral facts, but of systematizing our moral sentiments by bringing them into reflective equilibrium. Since the emphasis is on moral *sentiments*, the point and purpose of such an enterprise does not stand or fall by the attainability of moral truth. The ultimate goal would be to formulate a set of principles, or system of normative ethics that is practically applicable. To that end, the system would need to have a high degree of intuitive plausibility and general acceptability (i.e., accordance with shared sentiments), rendering it generally applicable. In order to be practically applicable and useful in cases of conflict or of inter-and intrapersonal clashes of interests and inclinations, the system would also need to be theoretically satisfactory, and to that end it would need to score highly on the criteria of simplicity, comprehensiveness, and coherence. Applicability, intuitive plausibility, general acceptability, simplicity, comprehensiveness, and coherence are standard criteria of adequacy for normative theories, and they seem perfectly available for moral error theorists pursuing normative ethics. The one standard criterion of adequacy that is

not available to moral error theorists is of course that of truth. There are thus significant parts of standard moral epistemology that moral error theorists can take over, although there is according to moral error theory no such thing as moral knowledge.

Mackie took Rawlsian normative ethics to be “a legitimate form of inquiry” (1977: 105). He contrasted it with Henry Sidgwick’s method, in which moral intuitions are not ultimately sentiments, but purported insights of reason into mind-independent and necessary moral facts that have authority over all agents, regardless of their desires and of social conventions (Sidgwick 1981). It is easy to see why Mackie thought that Sidgwick was mistaken to view morality as something to be discovered rather than invented. But in the light of what we have said about moral conservatism about moral thought and discourse, and about the use of normative ethics, it is not easy to see why error theorists like Mackie need be dismissive of Sidgwick’s method. Since our moral sentiments are at least partly results of complex historical contingencies and various evolutionary and cultural pressures, there seems to be no guarantee that they can be systematized into an orderly reflective equilibrium. As I have already suggested, moral error theorists who pursue normative ethics will strive to meet criteria of comprehensiveness and coherence and eventually to arrive at a satisfactory reflective equilibrium. This might seem a more feasible goal if we view some of our moral intuitions as insights into necessary moral truths, and if we view and present normative theories as theories about such truths and what follows from and coheres with them. Just as moral belief and assertion are useful in coordinating collective behavior and in deliberating about what to do, belief in moral realism may be a useful template in normative theorizing. If so, the Sidgwickian method may facilitate normative theorizing.

3. Bedke’s Challenge: The Epistemic Profile of Moral Judgment

It may be, however, that the sketched possibilities for moral error theorists to preserve moral thought and talk as well as normative theorizing, and their alleged success in these endeavors are a burden rather than an asset. Recall that many moral error theorists report that they continue, at least occasionally, to have moral beliefs and that some defend conservatism, i.e., the view that recommends that one continue to hold moral beliefs and make moral claims, although they are believed to be false. Matt Bedke (2014) argues that these reactions and recommendations on the part of error theorists can be used to mount a challenge to moral error theory itself. Bedke's challenge relies on a principle he calls "weak dispositionalism" (WD) about belief. It says the following:

(WD) If a type of mental state "systematically fails have the thetic direction, this is very good evidence that the mental state is not belief" (Bedke 2014: 190).

(Bedke speaks about judgments, but I find it more apt to speak about mental states in this context.) For a mental state to have the thetic direction of fit is for it to have the mind-to-world direction of fit, i.e., for it to have the function of representing the world. Mental states with the thetic direction of fit tend to be sensitive to perceived evidence. If a person who is in a mental state with content p perceives what she takes to be strong evidence that not- p , that token mental state—if it is of a type that has the thetic direction of fit—tends to go out of existence. Suppose, for example, that a person who believes that there is no humanly induced global warming is presented with considerations that she herself takes to be strong evidence that humanly induced global warming is in fact going on. If that does not make her belief that there is no humanly induced global warming go out of existence, or does not even decrease her degree of belief, this is good evidence that her mental state with that content is in fact not belief. It would rather seem to be of a type that lacks the thetic direction of fit and hence is not

sensitive to perceived evidence in the way belief typically is, such as desire, hope, or wishful thinking.

Now, according to (WD), error theorists who claim that there is strong evidence that there are no moral truths should find that their moral beliefs tend to go out of existence, and conservationists who recommend preserving moral belief should acknowledge that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to make good on that recommendation. But as we have seen, that is not what error theorists find and acknowledge; on the contrary, they report that they continue to hold moral beliefs and they predict that it would be difficult to let go of moral beliefs. Applying (WD) in this context suggests that moral judgments are after all not beliefs with the kind of content that error theorists take to involve ontologically untenable commitments. Error theorists' reactions, recommendations, and predictions, thus put pressure on moral error theory's psychological claim. Bedke takes this to indicate that moral error theory is mistaken about the epistemic profile of moral judgments. This leaves two possibilities: either moral judgments are desire-like states, or they are beliefs with content that does not involve ontologically untenable commitments. In any of those cases, moral error theory is wrong about the epistemic profile of moral judgment. (A possible third alternative is that of *hermeneutic fictionalism*, i.e., the view that ordinary moral thought and discourse is fictionalist. However, my hunch, which is also Bedke's (personal communication), is that any form of hermeneutic fictionalism would have to be either non-cognitivist—in which case it would face the problems discussed in section 4—or cognitivist—in which case it would face the kinds of questions concerning content discussed in section 5.)

Error theorists need not deny that (WD) is a plausible thesis concerning the type of mental state we count as belief. They may agree that it is plausible generalization about beliefs that, *ceteris paribus*, a belief that *p* tends to disappear in the light of evidence that not-*p*. But of course *ceteris* is often not *paribus*, and there are there are in fact several things error theorists

can say in response to Bedke's challenge. First, they may make use of the aforementioned point that humans often form beliefs more or less spontaneously on the basis of how things *appear*. Beliefs formed in that manner may conflict with less spontaneously formed beliefs that are based on more careful reflection. Consider optical illusions, such as the checker shadow illusion in which two squares that are in fact of the same color appear to normal viewers to be of different colors (the one darker than the other). Even viewers who are familiar with that kind of illusion may in unreflective moments not immediately identify what they see as an instance of the illusion, and form the belief that one square is darker than the other, since that is how things appear.

Similarly, moral error theorists need not deny that many situations are such that there appear to be moral facts. In such situations, moral error theorists may have at least fairly momentary and unreflective moral beliefs. Consider, for example, the famous example of a bunch of kids setting a cat on fire. That act certainly appears morally wrong. In spite of her metaethical commitments, an error theorist who witnesses such an event may well react by spontaneously forming a belief with the content *that's wrong*. Once she reminds herself about the error theoretic arguments against moral facts, her belief that the kids' action is wrong may go out of existence.

But it need not disappear completely. A second point error theorists can make in response to Bedke is that belief comes in degrees. Believing to a high degree that moral error theory is true is compatible with believing to some degree that there are moral facts, e.g., that setting a cat on fire is morally wrong. As a piece of autobiography, I can report that I take moral error theory to be the most plausible metaethical theory of which I am aware. But I am not fully convinced that the theory is correct. My credence in some form or other of moral realism is not zero. In this way, moral error theorists may well have some degree of belief that certain actions are wrong and others right.

It seems that one can also boost one's degree of belief in some proposition by attending only or mostly to evidence that supports the truth of that proposition. For example, in thinking about whether the proof version of one's book contains spelling errors one might attend to the fact that many careful people such as colleagues and copyeditors have read it without finding any. On this basis one might form the belief that the book contains no spelling errors. On the other hand, one might attend to the fact that it is highly unusual for a book to contain no spelling errors, and this may make one less certain that the book contains no spelling errors and it may even make one believe that the book contains some spelling error. Similarly, a moral error theorist can boost her degree of belief that there are moral facts by attending to scenarios like the one in which some kids set a cat on fire, or by considering some of the real-life atrocities which are all too common in the history of the twentieth century.

Correlatively, one can suppress one's belief that there are no moral facts by advertently not attending to evidence supporting moral error theory. Suppressing one's belief that there are no moral facts need not be a directly intentional act. One can do so more indirectly by engaging in moral argument and political debate with one's peers, most of who are likely not to be moral error theorists. In such arguments and debates, questions concerning the existence of moral facts tend to be in the presuppositional background rather than in the argumentative foreground. There are also unintentional processes that are noteworthy in this regard, such as subconscious compartmentalization of beliefs and sentiments, which helps to avoid cognitive dissonance. An instance of this general phenomenon may be moral error theorists' tendency to suppress evidence for moral error theory when witnessing atrocities or when engaging in moral argument and political debate. In these ways, moral error theorists may come to have more permanent and stable, and not just briefly momentary, moral beliefs.

It deserves to be mentioned that moral error theory is not the only philosophical view whose implications are hard to square with ordinary day-to-day thinking. Consider nihilism

about ordinary physical objects. Philosophers who accept such a view may well in their daily lives believe things like *the keys are in the pocket* or *dinner is in the oven*, although they are not true, according to the philosophical theory they accept. Part of the explanation may once again be that it *appears* to them that there are things like keys, food, and ovens, and that they have some degree of belief that there are such things, although in their reflective and philosophical moments, their highest credence is in nihilism about such things (cf. Bedke 2014: 195-7).

There is a third point that moral error theorists can offer as an explanation of why moral beliefs are especially “epistemically stubborn,” or resistant to counterevidence, such as arguments for moral error theory. This is the point that many moral beliefs are results of projections of affective attitudes of approval and disapproval. Let us say that for a subject to project an attitude of approval or disapproval onto an action, person, or object is for the subject to experience that attitude as a perception of a property of the action, person, or object that is independent of the attitudes of the subject. Such experiences may easily cause us to mistake affective attitudes for perceptions of properties that are independent of our attitudes (recall Hume’s metaphor about gilding and staining the world with colors borrowed from internal sentiment, Hume 1998: 163) and to form the mistaken belief that there are moral properties and facts. This kind of projection of attitudes, or gilding and staining, is likely to take place even if we have been convinced by error theoretic arguments to the effect that there are no moral facts. I mentioned already in the beginning that moral error theorists often appeal to projectivist accounts in order to explain why we tend to speak and think as if there are moral facts even though there are none. Projectivism is also useful in responding to Bedke’s challenge, since it helps explain in a way that is congenial with error theory why it often *appears that there are moral facts*, although there are none. (An explanation of this

appearance that is simple but clearly not congenial with moral error theory is that there are moral facts.)

To recap, I have made three points in response to Bedke's challenge: that beliefs are often based on appearances and that we tend subconsciously to compartmentalize beliefs and sentiments in different contexts; that belief comes in degrees; and that moral beliefs are results of projections of affective attitudes of approval and disapproval. The third point connects to the first. These three points offer explanations of why moral beliefs need not go out of existence in subjects confronted with what they take to be strong or conclusive evidence that there are no moral facts and no true moral beliefs.

However, one may argue that Bedke's challenge can be restored, at least in part. For recall that the challenge stated that moral error theorists' reactions and recommendations concerning moral belief is very good evidence that moral judgments are either beliefs that do not involve the ontologically untenable commitments error theory alleges, or that moral judgments are not beliefs at all. According to our third point above, moral *beliefs* are *results* of projections of attitudes of approval and disapproval, but why not go for the view that moral judgments *are* attitudes of approval and disapproval? That seemingly simpler view would confirm what Bedke's challenge seeks to establish, namely that moral error theory is mistaken about the epistemic profile about moral judgment. To address that worry, we shall in the next section consider features of moral judgments that strongly suggest that they are beliefs.

4. Are Moral Judgments Beliefs?

An undisputable feature of moral judgments is that they vary in degrees of certitude, just as non-moral judgments do. Just as one can be more or less certain that there is humanly induced global warming, one can be more or less certain that male circumcision is morally wrong. If moral judgments are beliefs it is no more problematic to account for degrees of moral

certitude than to account for degrees of non-moral certitude. But if moral judgments are non-cognitive states, like approval and disapproval, how are we to make sense of moral certitude? For example, what is it to be certain that female circumcision is morally wrong and less than certain that male circumcision is wrong? One natural thought is that degrees of moral certitude can be accounted for in terms of intensity of approval and disapproval, so that one who is certain that female circumcision is wrong and less than certain that male circumcision is wrong disapproves more strongly of female than of male circumcision.

But there is also another dimension of moral judgment, what is often called moral *importance*. For example, it is a common thought that it is more morally important to save lives than to keep promises. This feature is not difficult for cognitivism to accommodate; to judge that saving lives is more morally important than to keep promises is simply to *believe* that saving lives is more morally important than keeping promises. But how can non-cognitivism accommodate moral importance? Again, the natural thought is to invoke intensity of approval and disapproval: to judge that saving lives is more morally important than keeping promises is to approve more strongly of saving lives than of keeping promises (or to disapprove more strongly of omitting to save lives than of breaking promises).

But the problem is that certitude and importance are two separate dimensions of moral judgment that can vary independently. (The problem was stated in Smith 2002, and further developed in Bykvist and Olson 2009, 2012, and 2017. The problems for non-cognitivism discussed in this section are all developed in greater detail in Bykvist and Olson 2009.) For example, one can be highly certain that keeping promises is not of great moral importance (that breaking promises is a minor wrong) and one can be moderately certain that abortion is of great moral importance (e.g. that it is seriously wrong). Non-cognitivists may propose that moral certitude be accommodated in terms of second-order approvals. For example, to be certain that male circumcision is wrong could be to approve strongly of disapproving of male

circumcision. A problem with this proposal is that one can approve of disapproving of male circumcision for reasons that are unrelated to one's moral certitude; perhaps one simply wants to share or oppose the majority view in one's community, or perhaps an evil demon has threatened to inflict severe punishment unless one approves of disapproving of male circumcision, etc.

Here are two further belief-like features of moral judgment that are difficult for non-cognitivism to accommodate: First, what is it to be *certain* that some action is wrong? As we have seen, for cognitivism to accommodate moral certitude is no more problematic than to accommodate non-moral certitude; to be certain that, e.g., male circumcision is wrong is to believe fully, or to believe to a degree close to 1, that male circumcision is wrong. But there is no corresponding intuitive notion of approving or disapproving fully, or to a degree close to 1. In other words, there is no intuitive top-level of approval and disapproval, whereas there is one for belief.

Second, it makes sense to compare degrees of non-moral and moral certitude. We may say and think things like *I am more certain that $2+2=4$ than that utilitarianism is true*. For cognitivism, such comparisons are not more problematic than comparisons of degrees of non-moral certitude. But according to non-cognitivism, comparisons of degrees of moral and non-moral certitude are what we might call "cross-attitudinal" comparisons of degrees of belief and degrees of approval or disapproval. It is difficult to make sense of cross-attitudinal comparisons. What does it mean to say that one's degree of belief that $2+2=4$ is higher than one's approval (of approval) of actions that maximize happiness?

These considerations strongly suggest that moral judgments are beliefs and that moral error theory is at least to that extent correct about the epistemic profile of moral judgments. But might moral beliefs not have the kind of content that involves ontologically untenable commitments?

5. Is Moral Error Theory Right about the Content of Moral Beliefs?

According to Bedke, moral error theory takes ordinary moral judgments to be about non-natural facts. Moral error theory also denies that there are any non-natural facts and holds that, as a consequence, ordinary moral beliefs are never true. The version of moral error theory that I favor, however, take ordinary moral judgments to be about *irreducibly normative* facts. Whether such facts would be natural or non-natural is a question error theorists can leave open. The important point is that, according to error theory, moral judgments are beliefs about irreducibly normative facts, but since there are no irreducibly normative facts moral judgments are uniformly untrue. But what is irreducible normativity?

In responding to this question, it is useful to begin by saying what it is *not* and to contrast it with adjacent but different notions. Following Derek Parfit, we can contrast normativity in the “rule-implying” sense with normativity in the “reason-implying” sense (2011: 308-10; 326-7). Examples of normative facts of the former kind are facts about what is legal or illegal, grammatical or ungrammatical; and about what accords with rules of etiquette or chess. There is no metaphysical mystery how there can be such facts, for facts about the law and grammar, and about rules of etiquette or chess, are all facts about human conventions. It might of course be difficult to say exactly how and why certain conventions originate and evolve, but such difficulties invite no metaphysical mysteries (Mackie 1977: 25-27; Joyce 2001: 34-37; Olson 118-26). Moreover, for any fact that is normative in the rule-implying sense, e.g., that it is a rule of etiquette that one do not eat peas with a spoon, we can always sensibly ask whether we have *reason* to—or whether we *ought* to, or are *required* to—*comply* with that rule. Those are instances of what Christine Korsgaard and others have called “the normative question” (Korsgaard 1996; Broome 2007).

Facts that are normative in the reason-implying sense are irreducibly normative, and they are very different. Such facts do not reduce to—and are not wholly constituted by—facts about human conventions or about agents’ motivational states or desires. In the words of the eighteenth century moral rationalist Richard Price, irreducibly normative facts “have a real obligatory power antecedently to all positive laws, and independently of all will” (Price 1948: 105).

Are moral facts irreducibly normative (are they “reason-implying,” in Parfit’s terms) or do they reduce to facts about social conventions and agents’ motivational states or desires (are they merely “rule-implying,” in Parfit’s terms)? We can begin to answer this question by asking whether moral judgments invite the normative question. It was noted above that for any fact that is normative in the rule-implying sense, we can sensibly ask whether we have reason to—or whether we ought to, or are required to—comply with that particular rule. Similarly, for any fact to the effect that some agent has a certain desire, we can always sensibly ask whether the agent and others have reason to—or whether they ought to, or are required to—act so as to promote the fulfillment of that desire.

Now consider moral facts and moral judgments. Many moral realists and moral error theorists agree that ordinary moral thinking is committed to the following conditional: If one judges, that is believes or knows, that one ought morally to eat less meat, then one cannot sensibly ask whether there is also reason for one to eat less meat. That question will already have been answered by the moral judgment. (One could of course ask different questions, such as whether eating less meat would be *comme-il-faut*, or whether there is anything that motivates one to eat less meat, or whether doing so would be conducive to fulfillment of one’s desires.) This explains why it would be odd, and perhaps conceptually confused, to accept that one ought morally to eat less meat, but go on to deny that one has reason to do so

because social conventions do not recommend or require that one eat less meat, or because one is not motivated to do so, or because one lacks the relevant desire.

In other words, moral judgments do *not* invite the normative question. According to many moral realists and moral error theorists, this is because moral facts are or would have to be irreducibly normative, and because ordinary moral judgments are judgments about irreducibly normative facts. Error theorists of course part company with realists about irreducible normativity in thinking that there are no irreducible normative facts. Their reason for thinking so is that such facts would be ontologically queer and that we can give plausible debunking explanations of why we tend to believe that there are such facts. But such arguments are not our topic here.

Some philosophers have argued that moral facts are not in fact irreducibly normative and that ordinary moral judgments, properly understood, are not in fact judgments about such facts (Foot 1972, Finlay 2008; for responses, see, e.g., Joyce 2011, Olson 2014). Proponents of such views face the difficult task of explaining away the appearance that facts and judgments about conventions and about agents' desires seem to invite the normative question whereas moral facts and judgments do not. The most straightforward explanation of this appearance is that moral facts are or would have to be irreducibly normative and that moral judgments are judgments about such facts. If that is also the correct explanation, error theory is after all at least roughly correct about the epistemic profile of moral judgments.

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Related Topics

See chapters 7 ("Moral Reasoning and Emotion"); 8 ("Moral Intuitions and Heuristics"); 13 ("The Denial of Moral Knowledge"); 18 ("Moral Intuition"); 21 ("Methods, Goals, and Data

in Moral Epistemology”); 21 (“Moral Theory and its Role in Everyday Moral Thought and Action”); 28 (“Decision-Making under Moral Uncertainty”).

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Further reading

Terence Cuneo's *The Normative Web* (Oxford University Press, 2007) argues that arguments for moral nihilism apply equally to epistemology. Chapter 4 criticizes epistemic nihilism and argues that since epistemic nihilism fails, moral nihilism does too. Matthew Evans and Nishi Shah argue in their "Mental Agency and Metaethics" (*Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 7, R. Shafer-Landau (ed.), Oxford University Press: 80-109) that traditional forms of anti-realism in metaethics, including nihilism, cannot accommodate central features of mental agency. According to a related but more general critique, normative nihilism is self-defeating. Stan Husi responds to this charge in his "Why Reasons Skepticism is Not Self-Defeating" (*European Journal of Philosophy* 21 (2013): 424-49). Caroline West's "Business as Usual? The Error Theory, Internalism, and the Function of Morality," in R. Joyce and S. Kirchin (eds.), *A World without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Error Theory*, Springer, 2010) offers a useful discussion of several options for how to think about morality if nihilism is endorsed.