



Error Theory After J.L Mackie: Contemporary Error Theorists'
Arguments

Georgina Fuszard

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Abstract

This dissertation will be exploring the arguments in favour of moral error theory, which is the metaethical theory that refers to moral statements as erroneous. Error theory relies on the idea that moral statements aim towards the truth, but as there are no moral properties that exist, so moral statements are systematically false. After defining moral error theory, I will then outline J.L Mackie's account of error theory, including his two arguments against moral realism: the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness. In consideration of the arguments against Mackie's error theory, I will explore three contemporary error theorists' ideas that have elaborated from Mackie's arguments or have provided more compelling arguments in defence of error theory. The three error theorists that I will examine are Richard Joyce, Jonas Olson, and Bart Streumer. According to Joyce, Mackie's queerness argument feels incomplete and provides a queerness argument, the argument from non-institutionality. Furthermore, Joyce answers the consequences of first-order ethics if error theory is true with his theory of moral fictionalism. Olson also formulates a queerness theory that is known as the argument from normative irreducibility. Olson also provides an answer for the consequences if error theory is true with his theory on conservationism. Finally, Bart Streumer defends a global error theory, which is vastly different to Joyce and Olson, with an objection to the belief problem to assert we can still support error theory without the ability to believe in it. In the third chapter, I will evaluate the three contemporary error theorists concerning their queerness arguments raised by Joyce and Olson and the unbelievability argument raised by Streumer. Also, there will be a discussion on the most plausible theory to retain normative judgements if error theory is true. I will do this by evaluating moral fictionalism and conservationism.

Key words: moral error theory, Mackie, Joyce, Olson, Streumer, normative error theory, epistemic error theory, non-institutionality, irreducible normativity, unbelievability, abolitionism, fictionalism, conservationism, substitutionism.

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Chapter 1: J.L Mackie's Error Theory

1.1 Background, introduction, and Aims

Background

An ongoing debate in metaethics is the realism versus anti-realism debate. This refers to the question of whether there are objective, mind-independent moral facts or if morality is a mind-dependent, subjective expression. The debate concerns our morality, the understanding of our moral judgments, and the value of the terms right and wrong. In our everyday lives, we may come across moral questions where we would have to decide what is the 'right' answer. Questions such as: should household chores be split evenly between men and women? Is your neighbour treating his dog the 'right' way to handle animals? If you don't give to charity, is that the wrong thing to do?

When we think about moral problems, we consider what moral features exist, such as if this moral choice has objective moral authority or if it is a subjective moral claim. The two positions of the debate of whether we are attracted to the idea moral statements are objectively right or wrong beyond our subjective bias, or if we are attracted to morality being 'an area of personal decision; a realm in which each of us has the right to make up his or her mind about what to do' (McNaughton, p. 3, 1988). Moral realism argues morality is mind-independent and objective, meaning there are moral statements that are objectively right and wrong that exist beyond human bias. Moral realism is considered the default position in metaethics because moral discourse presupposes moral facts, such as using the terms right and wrong. As stated by Brink, 'we begin as cognitivists and realists about ethics. [...] Moral Realism should be our metaethical starting point, and we should give it up only if it does involve unacceptable metaphysical and epistemological commitments' (Brink, p. 23, 1989). Therefore, moral discourse using assertive, declarative syntax to suggest when conversing it aims at the truth, moral realism is the default position, so the burden of proof is on the anti-realists. On the other hand, the anti-realism argument suggests there are no moral facts and therefore rejects objective, mind-independent moral facts. This is essential to highlight why moral realism is the default position to understand that anti-realism will have to sufficiently argue their position to dethrone moral realism.

Apart from considering what ordinary thoughts on moral features are, the practice of engaging with moral issues plays an instrumental role in one's life and is an integral part of being a human. This is because it affects our character, such as who we are and want to become, our families and people around us, and influences how society is governed. Thus, our moral beliefs and ideas are relevant to our other functions and influence our behaviour and societal roles. For example, our moral beliefs may dictate who we would vote for as prime minister in elections, how people treat others, such as

how you may act around a criminal, and affect the career profession you would like to pursue. This conveys the importance of our beliefs and the necessity of the beliefs in our society, or it could lead to chaos.

The moral error theory is the argument morality inevitably involves a fundamental error. This is because we use moral statements that use lexical choices of right and wrong, obligatory and forbidden, good or bad. These moral utterances aim for the truth (moral objectivity), but do not achieve this as there are no moral properties. This argument goes against our normative beliefs and values that have shaped us as human beings by stating that morality is a mistake regarding all our moral statements being false. This paints the error theorist as a moral septic, meaning there is a denial of moral facts and therefore against any thoughts or ideas argued by moral realism. If the error theorist is correct, then the central aspects of how we understand ourselves and society are mistaken because of error, changing how morality is perceived. Thus, the error theory is a revisionary concept in ethics. The error theorist denies any intuitive evaluations one has made to what we consider true, which is the common sense view that morality exists. This questions why we would want to believe in error theory if it denies core principles to what people consider morality to be, and it is an intuitively undesirable position to take. This is because error theory is mainly motivated by the metaphysical and ontological problems involved with the existence of moral properties. With the features of moral properties being very different from what we know about the universe, it is an attractive argument to view these features as queer and deny there are moral facts. Another motivation of error theory is the lack of access to moral facts, which differs from the natural objects that we can access in the natural world. Therefore, as moral facts are considered part of an external world that is not accessible, it is easy to question whether objective moral facts can exist. Furthermore, error theory might seem attractive if other metaethical theories seem to fail, making error theory a desirable outcome if moral realism does not work, nor do non-cognitive anti-realist theories suffice. Contemporary philosophers ultimately show the attraction of error theory as it presents what is taken for granted in moral thinking and discourse, thus making assumptions of what moral features are provided, such as the assumption it gives reason for action. It is worth exploring why there is an attraction to error theory and any plausible arguments in defence of this theory.

Introduction

With the background of error theory and consideration of its position in metaethics, I will now outline what error theory is. Firstly, Error theory will need to be defined to understand what I mean when I refer to error theory. The error theory is the claim that first-order morality inevitably involves a serious mistake (an error) as moral judgments aim towards the 'truth' but fails to be true as there are no moral

properties. The error theory is characterised by cognitivism, anti-realism, and a type of failure theory where conditions of morality are not met, leading to moral scepticism.

The error theorist agrees with the moral realist on moral discourse aiming for the truth and, therefore, agrees with cognitivism. Cognitivism is the view moral discourse expresses truth-apt beliefs, meaning moral judgements can be assessed for truth or false values. For example, when someone states 'doing X is bad', the person expressing this moral judgment aims towards the truth, which is evaluated as either true or false. Cognitivism engages with the psychological state of the agent when expressing moral judgements, suggesting when one expresses a moral utterance, they believe what they are stating is objectively true. Furthermore, cognitivism is concerned with the type of speech act moral utterances are, mainly focused on assertive language such as 'you ought to do X' and 'it is wrong to do X'. The assertive lexis suggests that moral discourse is truth-apt as we can evaluate syntax for truth values. The error theorist views the non-cognitive approach most anti-realist positions take as unattractive because 'it has a troubling accounting for morality: if S's Utterance of stealing is morally forbidden amounts to no more than an expression of S's feelings then why should anyone who is not antecedently inclined to care about S's feelings pay any attention?' (Fisher, p. 40, 2011). This implies moral discourse should be cognitivist as the discourse is aiming towards the truth. The error is caused by the epistemological, metaphysical, and ontological problems with the implications of moral realism. Thus, our moral judgements fall into error as objective moral facts do not exist, even though moral discourse presupposes there are.

With cognitivism outlined, the next component to error theory is the 'failure' aspect, which is how moral discourse fails to meet the criteria of what is evident in the natural world. This is the argument that no positive moral proposition is true, and therefore all positive moral statements are false. This is because discourse fails to secure the truth, given the arguments error theorists provide that moral properties cannot exist. The failure of moral discourse only occurs if a moral proposition is positive, which means when the moral judgment entails something that one ought or ought not to do. As argued by Sinnott Armstrong, a moral utterance is 'positive when and only when its description entails any claim about what it is morally wrong to do or not to do, what anyone morally ought or ought not to do, what is morally good or bad, and so on (Sinnott-Armstrong, p. 35, 2006).

Although I refer to moral error theory for the most part throughout my dissertation regarding the coined expression by Mackie, there are other types of error theories that one should take note of when reading. The moral error theory is about moral statements being truth-apt but never being able to secure the truth. Wide error theory uses the same premises that moral error theory uses, suggesting that thinking systematically relies on false assumptions. However, there is also epistemic error theory

and normative error theory, which will not be explored in this thesis. It is crucial to outline that they will support a moral error theory when referring to Mackie, Joyce, and Olson. Bart Streumer, on the other hand, defends a global error theory, which means it includes normative judgments and expands the error to first-order and second-order ethics.

Aims

The dissertation aims to investigate error theory with Mackie's and the chosen contemporary error theorists' arguments. First, I will consider Mackie's moral error theory and its implausible approach by putting forward objections to Mackie's arguments in defence of error theory. This is enforced by the objections to the impact of Mackie's error theory, the argument from relativity, and the argument from queerness. Second, I will argue how more contemporary error theorists have attempted to revive J.L. Mackie's theory with more complete ideas that have been improved after Mackie. This will be shown through the error theorists Richard Joyce, Jonas Olson, and Bart Streumer. Richard Joyce improves upon Mackie's queerness argument, which is coined the argument from non-institutionality. Jonas Olson has developed his queerness theory, also which is referred to as the argument from irreducibility. Finally, Bart Streumer defends error theory differently from Joyce and Olson with developing an unbelievability argument. Once I have outlined all three error theorists' arguments in defence of error theory, I will explore some objections to their ideas, what may limit their argument's plausibility and whether they have avoided objections raised to Mackie's version of error theory. I will not be attempting to refute any of the error theorists' arguments. Still, I will be presenting how the arguments can be seen to be implausible and therefore, the attempt to revise and keep error theory relevant may be seen to fail. As some of the arguments raised are considering how to retain moral practice if error theory is true, I will highlight how they may be seen as implausible to keep first-order ethics. Still, there will be a discussion on what approach may be best applicable if error theory is true. This would be in consideration of Mackie's argument in retaining moral practise, Joyce's theory of moral fictionalism, and Olson's theory of conservationism. I will also discuss alternative theories in answer to the 'Now what?' problem to see if they are more plausible than the other error theorists' theories.

1.2 J.L. Mackie's Error Theory

In this chapter, I will be discussing J.L. Mackie's moral error theory and his arguments in defence of error theory. J.L. Mackie's error theory is formulated in his book, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977). Mackie is an Australian philosopher best known for his works in metaethics and his

contributions to metaphysics, philosophy of religion, and philosophy of language. His work in metaethics is presented centrally in his book, *Ethics*, where most of his work on metaethics in this book is in the article, 'The Subjectivity of Values'. The term 'error theory' was coined by J.L Mackie, who is regarded as the most significant contribution to the theory with defining clearly what is error theory and how one can defend error theory with two arguments against moral realism.

Mackie's first statement reveals his ontological view, 'there are no objective values' (Mackie, p. 15, 1977). Here are the premises of Mackie's error theory to suggest where the error lies in moral discourse.

P1) Moral sentences have truth conditions that require the statements to be objectively truth or false. This means there is an existence of objectively prescriptive facts (conceptual/ semantic claim).

P2) There are no objective moral facts (ontological claim).

P3) Moral sentences are in error and therefore are systematically and uniformly false.

Here, Mackie accepts cognitivism in moral discourse, arguing moral sentences are attempting to reach the truth, thus accepting moral facts are objectively prescriptive. Mackie accepts the cognitivist view because 'the argument is that non-cognitivist accounts do not fit well with how ordinary speakers use or intend to use moral terms. The idea is when using moral vocabulary, ordinary speakers typically intend to make moral assertions, i.e., to attribute moral properties to objects and individuals. If this is right, it is also plausible that this is what they believe they are doing' (Olson, p. 80, 2014). The semantic claim, therefore, assumes that moral discourse implies objectivity, as posited in *Ethics*, 'ordinary moral judgements include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values in just the sense in which I am concerned to deny this. And I do not think it is going too far to say that this assumption has been incorporated in the basic, conventional, meanings of moral terms' (Mackie, p. 35, 1977).

The error lies in the notion that there are no objective moral facts, which is argued through his argument from relativity and the argument from queerness. Mackie uses Locke's example of the colour red to explain the representative theory of perception. However, he uses it to assert his error theory by stating that redness is a categorical property as moral values are cognitive. Still, there are no categorical properties of redness, meaning there are no moral values in the same form of argument. A categorical property, according to Locke, is 'utterly inseparable from the body, in what state soever it be... and such as sense constantly finds in every particle of matter which has bulk enough to be perceived' (Locke, p. 223, 2007).

In conclusion of Mackie's version of error theory, we have defined error theory from Mackie's book, *Ethics*, by outlining his conceptual, semantic, and ontological claim to show all moral statements are false. There is an understanding of what Mackie considers to be erroneous in moral discourse and our assumptions on the metaphysical world leads to Mackie's two central arguments that object to moral realism. The two arguments are the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness, which asserts the only option is to believe in error theory.

1.3 Mackie's Argument from Relativity

The argument from relativity, also known as the argument from disagreement, is argued in 1.8 of *Ethics* by Mackie and is the argument with less force out his two arguments against moral realism. This is the argument that moral facts cannot exist as they argue objectivity, but the objectivity of moral values are not displayed in societies and cultures. Mackie has made an empirical observation on the diversity of different countries, communities, and cultures regarding moral values, conveying that if moral realism is right and there are objective values, then it should be evident with moral agreement globally. There is evidence of moral disagreements globally, meaning there is a strong moral disagreement between various societies. It suggests that due to the relativity of moral values, there cannot be moral objectivity. Anti-realists use the similarity of moral divergence to the use of scientific discoveries needing to be objective as it relies on scientific facts. However, in scientific research, there are still many disputes on scientific discoveries, such as the debate on the existence of anti-matter. The example here is not entirely relevant to a moral realist as their argument would be the divergence in scientific facts is because if they had access to all the facts, there would be an agreement on the conclusion. Therefore, moral facts should not be compared to scientific facts, as there could be access to all the scientific facts to lead to an agreement.

Furthermore, we do not have access to what is objective in moral facts, so in the natural world, we have two plausible arguments, and they can seem just as right as each other to different societies. An example of a moral problem that has diverse opinions would be the views on abortion. This is whether it should be considered right or wrong to have an abortion, as people would believe it is right or wrong for different plausible reasons in other circumstances. Also, there are issues of how many weeks into your pregnancy would it be wrong to abort the child, highlighting the problem of when 'life' really starts. As I have been brought up in a western country as a woman in the 21st century, my moral values have been shaped to believe the correct answer is abortion is not wrong for X reasons. However, someone who may have been brought up with a religious background and has the reason to believe

abortion is wrong because it is objectively wrong to murder an innocent life would think that their moral standpoint is just as plausible as mine.

Mackie argues they derive their moral judgements from the influence of their culture, rather than the access of objective moral facts, meaning we believe in moral values because of society's values, not because they are right or wrong. An excellent example of the divergence of moral judgements between societies argued by Mackie in *Ethics* is the different views on monogamy. This is where people 'approve of monogamy because they participate in a monogamous way of life rather than they participate in a monogamous way of life because they approve of monogamy' (Mackie, p. 36, 1977). Thus, we are drawn to monogamy from the influence of monogamy presented in our society to illustrate why we agree with monogamy.

An objection moral realists have argued against the relativity of moral values is the idea that cultures may lack access to moral facts for cultural or anthropological reasons, suggesting some more developed cultures have more access to moral facts, which leads to a right way of living morally. This indicates that one is not fully informed with the moral facts, which is not the case for different cultures, as they can have plausible reasoning and understand all the facts required and still reach different moral conclusions. For example, in a culture where polygamy is accepted, such as in Islamic laws (drawn from chapter four of the Quran) where the man can have multiple wives, this is seen as the 'norm', and everyone involved is happy with the polygamous way of living. This shows that 'disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect adherence to and participation in different ways of life' (Mackie, p. 36, 1977). Mackie, therefore, conveys our moral judgements are shaped from societal moral codes rather than the agreement to objective moral facts, which explains the relativity of moral judgements. As moral values are relative and formed from societal norms, it indicates moral facts are not objectively prescriptive, and therefore moral discourse is erroneous to presuppose objective moral facts.

1.4 Mackie's Argument from Queerness

The argument from queerness that Mackie formulates is the most substantial argument error theory has to deny moral realism. The relativity argument enforces the natural world's lack of objectivity to suggest there are no objective moral facts. The argument from queerness notes the metaphysical and ontological problems with the features of moral facts. Mackie identifies how Aristotle argues in *Nicomachean Ethics* that the good is identified at which all things aim (Crisp, 2000). It also observed by Plato, who states 'an objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not

because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it' (Mackie, p.40, 1977). The two views by the Ancient Greek philosophers give Mackie a framework of what is considered to be prescribed to objective moral values to define them as moral facts.

The problem with moral facts is that moral properties are unique and unusual to obtain compared to what we can conceive in the natural world, suggesting moral facts are queer. Mackie outlines what features moral properties obtain, such as independence, accessibility, and giving us reason to act that is desire transcendent. These defining characteristics are considered unusual to moral agents as it is characteristics that are not part of the fabric world. Mackie argues morality has 'qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe' (Mackie, p. 38, 1977). This suggests the features that define moral facts do not adhere to what is conceived in the natural world. Therefore, the metaphysical argument is that if objective moral facts exist, the characteristics that we attach to these moral properties are queer because we cannot explain why moral properties have these properties through what is conceived by humans. Mackie outlines the features in question as non-negotiable qualities of moral facts: the necessity of morality to be independent, accessible, and capable of giving us reason to act. As Mackie utters, morality 'involves a call for action or from the refraining from action, and one that is absolute, not contingent upon any desire or preference or police or choice, his own or anyone else's' (Mackie, p. 33, 1977). This is presupposed in moral discourse and human thought, but the qualities are dubbed as queer as there is no evidence of how this occurs in philosophical naturalism. Moral facts 'that would somehow motivate us or provide us with reasons for action independent of our desires and aversions"—but such properties and facts do not comport with philosophical naturalism' (Timmons, p. 50, 1999).

The epistemological argument that Mackie puts forward is that if moral properties exist, then what faculty does one use to come to know about these queer qualities that morality has. Mackie posits in *Ethics* that morality must have 'some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else' (Mackie, p. 38, 1977). It would mean there must be a way to conceive what these moral facts are. A non-naturalist answer to this would be the use of intuitionism. As put forward by the likes of G.E Moore and W.D Ross, we can explain this through a form of intuitionism where we can access moral values with our minds. Mackie takes a critical view of intuitionism, suggesting 'a special sort of intuition is a lame answer, but it is one which the clear-headed objectivist is compelled to resort' (Mackie, p. 39, 1977) and 'has long been out of favour' (Mackie, p. 40. 1977). Mackie argues it seems as if it is an excuse that we intuitively know what is right and wrong, and that is the access to the moral knowledge we have. As there is no explanation for accessing moral facts, it is considered queer to suggest they are accessible.

In conclusion, Mackie has argued the queerness of moral facts through the features they obtain, such as the necessity of moral facts being independent of the natural world, must be accessible to humans, and must have reason to act that is not influenced the agent's desire. The features give Mackie reason to believe they are queer as they do not occur in the natural world. Now that I have outlined Mackie's moral error theory and his two arguments against realism, the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness, I will discuss the responses to Mackie.

1.5 Responses to the Argument from Relativity

The argument from relativity is an argument presenting the evidence of moral disagreement as a reason to believe that there are no objective moral facts. This is supposed to cause a problem for moral realists because objective moral facts should be evident in the world through moral agreement. However, Brink's relativity argument comes under threat, which asserts there is more moral agreement than what Mackie has argued.

In his book, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (1989), Brink asserts that many moral disagreements are 'apparent', presenting there is not as much disagreement when moral issues are reduced down to genuine disagreements. Brink distinguishes between apparent and genuine moral disagreements, suggesting Mackie has given evidence for apparent moral disagreements. Apparent moral disagreements are disagreements that, on the face of it, may look like a disagreement as the moral agents may have made their moral views more complex than what their moral beliefs are. However, once moral disagreements are reduced to their main components, which are their genuine moral beliefs, many disagreements are then resolvable. For example, we can agree on the moral belief that 'stealing is wrong'. When it is applied to the circumstance that a father has stolen food to feed his starving family, there is a change in the intuition of what is right or wrong as it is now considering whether it is right or wrong to steal if you need to survive. People can still view the act of stealing as wrong in this circumstance as that is a general principle but make an exception for the survival circumstances that the father makes as it clashes with their view of sympathy for the father. This can suggest that there are genuine moral principles in this statement that stealing is wrong but necessary to allow their children to survive. This leads to how there is also a distinction between moral disagreement and non-moral disagreement, meaning the disagreement in moral discussions could be from the disagreement of non-moral problems. As Brink argues, 'some depend on antecedent disagreement over moral principles, while others depend on disagreement over the non-moral facts' (Brink, p. 86, 1989). This suggests there is more moral agreement than argued by Mackie through genuine moral agreement, and the disagreement may rely on the non-moral facts of the argument.

An example would be the disagreement over abortion because of religious beliefs, which can be considered a non-moral disagreement because it is more of an evaluation of religious texts and their meaning. Therefore, not all disagreements can be resolved if it is relying on the differences of non-moral facts.

Mackie's responds to the argument with the claim circumstantial judgements still need to apply to general moral principles. This is the idea that the general moral principles need to have objective validity over the circumstantial judgements in order for objective moral facts to exist. General moral principles are suggested to be the objective moral facts that are unchangeable. Still, the moral judgements that change with circumstances can only be intuited in that circumstance to decide what is right and wrong. Moral disagreements with circumstances suggest different approaches to similar circumstances, which means moral disagreement with no application to general moral principles to keep them objective. Mackie argues situational moral judgements are 'objectively valid or true, but only derivatively or contingently' (Mackie, p. 40, 1977). Therefore, it is emphasised there can only be a moral agreement if situational moral judgements apply to general moral principles. Still, as they do not, then there seems to be moral disagreement. The realist response that *most* genuine disagreements over moral facts are resolvable is not plausible as general moral principles should solve all genuine moral disputes.

Brink argues that situational moral judgements are right or wrong 'in principle' of general moral principles. Furthermore, Mackie fails to consider in his response the distinction between apparent and genuine moral disagreements, suggesting the apparent moral disagreements are very complex with considering non-moral facts and not reducing it down to its main components. Although Mackie emphasises some genuine moral disputes should be solved by general moral principles, Brink suggests 'moral ties are possible and some objective moral values may be incommensurable' (Brink, p. 86, 1989). This argues there is evidence of moral agreement with some general moral principles, which is evident enough there are some objective moral facts. For this reason, moral realists do not need to argue much further if there is evidence of some moral agreement, and disagreements over general principles can be in principle solvable. Many disagreements are solvable if there are apparent ones that can be reduced to general moral principles and disagreements on non-moral facts.

This concludes that Mackie does not defend error theory with the argument from relativity as moral disagreement does not show to be a problem for moral realists. This is because there are only apparent moral disagreements that are solvable with reducing the moral beliefs down and ignoring the non-moral facts involved. Some moral agreement shows that some objective moral values are enough for moral realists to show there is no problem with moral disagreement.

1.6 Responses to the Argument from Queerness

Mackie's argument from queerness asserts the qualities that moral facts behold are queer because they are not part of our universe. Some of the features are mind-independence, objective, accessibility, and give reason to act. I will raise objections to Mackie's conceptual claim, suggesting his explanation of what qualities moral facts entail and why they are queer are not complete.

A concern with Mackie's argument from queerness is where the queerness really lies in his argument. Mackie argues moral facts are queer because they have properties that are not part of the natural world, and if they are not explainable, then they are queer. However, there is evidence of many other non-natural properties that are not clearly explainable that we accept as true. For example, humans accept the understanding of mathematics, which is a non-natural property, so there is reason to reject all non-natural properties if they are queer. Dreier supports this claim, pointing out 'mathematical facts enter into scientific explanations all the time, so our reasons for believing in mathematical facts are reasonably secure' (Dreier, p. 249, 2006). Mathematics are understood as a non-natural property, and we have reasons to believe it to be true in the natural world, so it can be accepted. This also goes for moral properties, meaning if there is reason to believe it then it is not so queer in the natural world. This suggests there is a problem with Mackie arguing non-natural properties are queer without explaining how moral properties are separate to other non-natural properties. Mackie accepts this enters a companions in guilt argument, and implies mathematics may be just as hard to explain as moral facts. Thus, mathematics would have to be shown how it can be explained on an empiricist foundation, which Mackie thinks is perfectly capable. However, surely there is also evidence how moral objectivity can be explained on empirical foundations, such as evidence of moral agreement and our moral discourse. Mackie would have to argue how moral properties are different to other non-natural properties to project them as queer. As Mackie has not successfully explored moral features and how they are different to other non-natural properties, there is a lack of explanation why they are queer and should reject them.

An argument that is put forward by Brink, in his article 'Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness' (1984), points out that the argument from queerness has a reliance on motivational internalism. This is because Mackie argues moral facts must be objectively prescriptive, which requires internalism. This is because humans have prescribed objectivity, but this is counter-intuitive to what moral realists define for moral facts as the reason to act should not be contingent on agents. As argued by Brink:

'Whether the recognition of moral facts motivates certainly depends upon what the moral facts are, and, at least on most plausible moral theories, whether recognition of these facts motivates is a matter

of contingent (even if deep) psychological fact about the agent. Whether the recognition of moral facts provides reasons for action depends upon whether the agent has reason to do what morality requires. But this, of course, depends upon what morality requires, i.e. upon what the moral facts are, and, at least on standard theories of reasons for action, whether recognition of these facts provides reason for action will depend upon contingent (even if deep) facts about the agent's desires or interests. So, internalism is false; it is not something which we can know a priori, i.e. whatever the moral facts turn out to be, that the recognition of moral facts alone either necessarily motivates or necessarily provides reasons for action' (Brink, p. 83, 1984).

Brink, therefore, identifies moral realists argue it is not objectively prescriptive, but mind-independent reasons enforce the reason to act. As Mackie has set out the qualities for moral facts, it is contradictory to suggest that it is objectively prescriptive because the reason to act is not contingent upon agents defines moral attributes. Mackie would therefore have to explain how moral facts are objectively prescriptive, which commits to internal motivation, and externally motivated.

McDowell's criticism is another argument that explores the problems in Mackie's reasoning from the argument from queerness. Mackie's argument explores the characteristics moral values must have to be 'real'. This is that moral values must be mind-independent, accessible, and have reason to act. This argument will focus on mind-independence, as Mackie presents that if moral values exist, they have to be mind-independent to be real. As he states, this is too queer. Therefore moral facts do not exist. In 'Values and Secondary Qualities' (1985), McDowell argues against Mackie's line of reasoning to refute moral facts on mind-independence as moral facts could be real and mind-dependent. Thus, McDowell follows the line of argument that even though moral facts may depend on people, it does not mean they cannot be real. This can be exemplified with Locke's distinction of primary and secondary qualities that Mackie influences in explaining his view of moral facts. According to Mackie, his conceptual claim is that redness is a concept of a categorical property as they present themselves to us in experience as a categorical property. However, his ontological claim is there is no categorical property of redness in the world, so we are in error. However, when we consider the use of colour in terms of qualities, we consider it a secondary quality as it is the phenomenon to perceive the colour red. This is because we make a claim about the colour, which suggests that people's perception of the colour make them mind-dependent. This differs from Mackie's claim of colour being mind-independent which is implausible to McDowell as we do not believe that colours have these qualities in and of itself as we see red under normal conditions to a normal perceiver. This causes conflict in Mackie's reasoning with his analogy of colours regarding his argument from queerness. He claims that colours are real but also claims that they are mind-independent, which he does not use the same line of argument for moral values in his analogy. McDowell thus criticises the internal conflict of the error

theory and provides a solution in order to keep objective moral facts that are real but have them as mind-dependent. It is important to note that McDowell does not claim everything is dependent on the mind and makes a distinction between mind-dependent but real and mind-dependent and not real. For example, things that people may hallucinate would not be real as it is a subjective experience of false imagery, but the actual hallucination is real as it is happening. Here, we can say for hallucinations that the mind is directed inwards as it is not the truth of the world, but moral experiences are directing the mind's eye outwards into the world to make it a reality. Thus, when we make moral claims such as seeing someone stealing from the bank, the action of committing a wrong act is 'there to be experienced' (Honderich, p. 115, 1985). Therefore, the phenomena of moral experience suggest that it directs the mind out into the world, which means Mackie is wrong to state that we experience external abstract ideas.

This presents that there can be a reality from mind-dependence that Mackie argues against to deny moral facts because there can be moral judgements that are internal and true. This is to mainly highlight that there can be value derived from the mind-dependence of reality that Mackie does not accept from his view of what constitutes a moral fact when there is a possibility of truth being derived from mind-dependence. As McDowell is a sensibility theorist, he believes that moral truths are dependent on human sensibilities, which rejects Mackie's view of the necessity of moral facts being mind-independent to be real. Therefore, McDowell denies his conceptual and ontological claim of redness being a categorical property, and therefore, the categorical property of red does not exist.

McDowell's response to the incoherency of Mackie's Argument from Queerness and the tensions formed in the error theorist's premises does not follow an external realist's premises of what moral facts are. Most moral realists are committed to the moral fact's being mind-independent to give them authority. Thus Mackie uses the arguments of a metaphysical, moral realist to provide that its mind-independence would define moral facts. Furthermore, Mackie rejects moral facts altogether, mind-independent or not, through other objections such as there is no objectivity and that they all must be false as there cannot be moral facts. Therefore this would be rejected by Mackie as realists that commit to a mind-dependent view of moral facts still commit to an objective view of moral facts. However, McDowell does raise an important problem in the error theorist's line of reasoning. He uses Locke's analogy of colour to express colour as a categorical property that is mind-independent. Still, he has to accept that colours are real, so his analogy is not sufficient. Although Mackie is attempting to argue what moral facts should be, an external moral realist denies Mackie's conceptual claims that moral facts. The externalist would argue there does not need to be an intrinsically motivating faculty within the abstract idea to motivate people to act morally right. Moral realists can deny their claims

on what moral facts are as it does not argue against their position. Thus Mackie's argument fails on both accounts of the sensibility theorist's and the external moral realist's argument.

In conclusion, I have provided some arguments as to why Mackie's argument from queerness is incomplete. This is because Mackie is self-contradictory, arguing that moral facts are objectively prescriptive and that there must be a reason for action. McDowell asserts the problems with the moral feature, mind-independence, suggesting Mackie has not argued why moral facts must be mind-independent. Mackie has attempted to show how these features required for moral facts are queer but has not entirely set out how they are queer. Furthermore, Mackie has set out qualities for moral facts without any evidence moral discourse presupposes the qualities. McDowell has shown how it can be justified with mind-dependence. Therefore, error theory would need more justification on why moral discourse presupposes these qualities and how they are queer.

1.7 Responses to the Impact of Mackie's Error Theory

With Mackie's definition of error theory and his two arguments against moral realism outlined, it is essential to examine Mackie's error theory responses. As this is a controversial position to take in metaethics, there have been many responses to refute error theory and their arguments in defence of it. As Mackie's book, *Ethics* (1977), is the first to formulate a moral error theory, there is an attack on the impact of error theory on first-order ethics. I will be looking at the responses to the tensions in error theory, the responses to the argument from relativity, and most importantly, the argument from queerness responses.

A problem that error theory faces is the 'Now what?' problem, which is the argument that there is an impact on our first-order ethics if our second-order ethical views (error theory) asserts all moral statements to be false. This means that if error theory is true, it impacts our normative judgements because we would consider all our moral values as false. People are not inclined to believe error theory because of this objection as 'they feel as though they must be giving up something essential in accepting it' (Lutz, p. 352, 2014). As moral commitments are essential to us, this would not be ideal for people to drop if the error theory is true. Therefore the burden is on the error theorist to come up with an argument on how to retain normative commitments if one believes in error theory. This would lead to questions such as whether there should be a change to the moral language that does not assert its truthfulness, if we should be moralising at all, or how one can carry on with their moral commitments after finding out that error theory is true. If we did get rid of all our pre-conceived moral values and got rid of moral language, this would be considered jeopardy to societal constructs.

Theorists who suggest that we should drop all our moral commitments are seen as abolitionists or eliminativists, who argue that we must drop our first-order beliefs if error theory is true. An example of an abolitionist would be Garner, who argues we should stop believing in moral properties. As an abolitionist, his aim is 'to convince someone to abolish or abandon morality, you must first get them to stop believing in moral properties, facts, and truths. You must get them to become moral anti-realists, but, as we shall see, even that is not enough' (Garner, p. 500, 2007). Wright is a moral realist who supports the argument that error theory would have to take an abolitionist route. If their argument is valid, they should suggest that we abolish our moral commitments. Wright puts forward in *Truth and Objectivity* 'the error-theorist may be able to argue that the superstition that he finds in ordinary moral thought goes too deep to permit any construction of moral truth which avoids it to be acceptable as an account of moral truth. But I do not know of promising argument in that direction' (Wright, p. 10, 1992).

In response to this objection on the effect error theory has on first-order ethics, an easy excuse would be that there is no necessity to care for first-order ethics as metaethics and normative ethics are separate. Mackie argues error theory 'is a second-order view, a view about the status of moral values and the nature of moral valuing, about where and how they fit into the world. [...] First and second order views are not merely distinct but completely independent: one could be a second-order moral sceptic without being a first-order one, or again the other way round (Mackie, p. 16, 1977). In this case, Mackie asserts that one can be sceptical about second-order ethics and have different views in first-order ethics that do not argue scepticism. Although they are distinct, they are not entirely separate if they suggest that we give up all our moral commitments if all statements are false. It would be hard for Mackie to argue that his error theory which states all moral statements are false, has no relation to his first-order commitments.

However, Mackie does answer the 'now what?' question regardless of his separation of first-order and second-order ethics. Mackie does not entirely adopt a theory to retain moral commitments. Still, states in *Ethics*, the way to carry on with first-order ethics is 'believing that they were simply attitudes and policies with regard to conduct that he and other people held' (Mackie, p. 16, 1977). Richard Joyce suggests that this statement that Mackie posits in *Ethics* would make him a conservationist because it would mean that one should carry on holding their commitments just as they did before (Joyce, 2001). Mackie has separated the two fields and has informed us that he is not sceptical of first-order ethics, which means he is likely arguing that we should retain moral commitments by just believing in both. Jonas Olson defends conservationism and believes Mackie to be a conservationist, which will be discussed in section 2.2, where Olson will defend the conservationist position. Another reading of that statement suggests that Mackie would be an abolitionist because of reference to our lives being

guided by 'attitudes and policies' rather than making any moral judgments or commitments. Therefore, there would be no need for guidance from morality if the society is governed by attitudes and policies. However, the statement that attitudes govern our society could be defended as a non-cognitivist position, suggesting our moral discourse is shaped by our attitudes rather than the cognitive response of moral discourse aims for the truth. As we know, Mackie is apparent in his defence of cognitivism. Using the term attitudes concerning first-order ethics is confusing as to whether it relates to moral attitudes. This does not help Mackie in his argument as it does not clarify what one should do next if the error theory is true. The statement on what Mackie suggests we should do if error theory is true is vague. It could be interpreted in two different positions that are very different as one would be retaining moral commitments. In contrast, the other interpretation would be abolishing morality of the first-order completely. In conclusion, if there is any way of salvaging error theory from the objection of its impact on first-order ethics, it would need a clear explanation on how we can retain moral commitments.

Another problem that error theorists may suffer from is the belief problem that has arisen in that 'now what?' question. As shown by Mackie's definition of error theory, error theorists must believe that all atomic moral judgements are truth-apt, but their aim towards the truth is in error. The 'now what?' answers such as what Mackie posits in the statement 'believing that they were simply attitudes and policies with regard to conduct that he and other people held' is most inconsistent with the more appealing theories of belief (Mackie, p. 16, 1977). Moral error theorists had core moral beliefs before they have turned to the belief of error theory just like everyone else has. Still, once they commit to error theory, there is a need to abandon entire sets of beliefs as one cannot accept their false beliefs are considered usable. Suikkanen argues this is a difficult position for error theorists because they are unwilling to give up their moral beliefs, as evident in the last paragraph where there is a lack of error theorists taking the abolitionist position. The belief problem occurs when one should reject the view of error theory as the other theories of belief take priority in retaining our moral commitments. Suikkanen informs us that 'I do not mean merely attitudes that admit of local failures of sensitivity in which one mental state (a belief) is on one or few occasions of irrationality insensitive to thoughts about evidence ... Rather, I mean mental states that (i) are continuously insensitive to stable explicit thoughts about there being sufficient evidence against their truth, and that (ii) they belong to a whole class of attitudes that are insensitive in this same way' (Suikkanen, p.177, 2013). The burden is on the error theorist to argue how one can retain their first-order moral commitments and their attitudes whilst holding the view that error theory is true.

1.8 Conclusion

To summarise the first chapter, we have clearly outlined what Mackie believes error theory to be with his definition. We have then outlined the two central arguments against moral realism: the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness. The argument from relativity provides an objection to moral realism by suggesting the amount of moral disagreement evident in the world would argue there are no objective moral facts. However, Brink provides an objection to the relativity argument by highlighting the apparent disagreements to the genuine disagreements. The argument from queerness discusses the queerness relating to moral properties, suggesting there is no evidence of the features of moral facts in the universe. However, critics have shown there is a problem with the argument from queerness because of Mackie's assumption on the qualities of moral facts being queer without justification why they are queer. There are other general concerns for error theory presented by the consequences of error theory, such as the 'now what?' question. Mackie has attempted to sustain error theory from objections. Still, unfortunately, it has suggested there is an incomplete argument from queerness and a poorly executed answer for the 'now what?' question that would need improving to revive the defence of error theory.

Chapter 2: Contemporary Error Theorists' Arguments

As explored in the first chapter on Mackie's view on Error Theory, there are many issues with his theory and arguments against moral realism. This is shown through the problem error theory faces as a theory itself, Mackie's argument from relativity and his argument from queerness. This is argued through moral realists, such as D. Brink and C. Wright, which refutes the error theory position. Although there is a strong argument against Mackie's Error Theory, conveying error Theory as an unflattering position to take in meta-ethics, contemporary error theorists have elaborated or have adapted from Mackie's view. To hold an error theory about morality, one must accept a kind of moral scepticism. The contemporary error theorists hold the view that moral facts do systematically fall into error. The three philosophers who consider themselves error theorists explored in this dissertation are Richard Joyce, Jonas Olson, and Bart Streumer, who further endorses morality as an illusion. I will be looking at error theorists that have elaborated from Mackie, such as their queerness arguments and other theories that defend error theory. Furthermore, I will be looking at the error theorists' arguments in resolving the problem that Lutz and Wright raise with error theory, which is how an error theorist can carry on with first-order ethics if their second-order ethics involves all moral statements being systematically false. Therefore, Wright argues that people would then have to give up all their

moral commitments, leading to societal chaos. This would be considered an abolitionist or eliminativist route regarding morality. Still, error theorists have expressed the importance of first-order ethics and come up with theories to retain moral talk if error theory is true.

Joyce is an error theorist who evaluates moral discourse in reference to the argument from queerness. He develops his queerness argument that will be called the argument from non-institutionality. Furthermore, Joyce attempts to answer the question of 'error theory, then what?', which refers to how people can still have normative commitments if error theory is true. This is done by justifying the use of moral discourse with revolutionary moral fictionalism. His theory is most prominent in his books *The Myth of Morality* (2001) and his article 'A world without Values' (2010). Jonas Olson is an error theorist who wrote *Moral Error Theory: History, critique, defence* (2014). This book discusses the history of error theory concerning Mackie and how much Mackie's influenced error theory. Olson draws on the metaphysical queerness of moral properties and provides a queerness argument which will be called the argument from irreducible normativity. Like Joyce, Olson develops a theory on how one can carry on using normative commitments if error theory is true, known as conservationism. This theory presents that we need to conserve normative commitments as agents still believe that their moral commitments are still right if error theory is true. Bart Streumer, in his book *Unbelievable Errors* (2017), defends a global error theory by not limiting himself to moral error theory like Mackie, Joyce, and Olson. Streumer has a different approach in arguing for an error theory by objecting to the normative objection that has been argued by ethicists such as Dworkin and Nagel. Streumer argues that there is no reason to believe in error theory, and therefore we cannot believe in error theory. This is through the premises that error theory shows there is no reason for belief, and therefore no reason to believe error theory. However, this is not seen as a problem for Streumer and strengthens his defence for error theory.

2.1: Joyce's Argument from Non-institutionality and Moral fictionalism

Richard Joyce is an error theorist that contributed to the error theory regarding his queerness argument and how we can justify having normative commitments if error theory is true. Joyce agrees with the core principles of error theory which are moral judgements 'involve an implicit claim to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, but these claims are all false' (Joyce, p.3, 2001). In 'A World without Values' (2010), Joyce refers to Mackie's book as the landmark of 20th-century metaethics and supports Mackie's error theory as a form of nihilism due to his denial over doubt on moral discourse. Joyce accepts Mackie's arguments on the Argument from Relativity and the Argument from Queerness but states there are 'philosophical encounters that Mackie did not explore'

(Joyce, p.2, 2010), which involves error theorists having a lot of room to explore and adapt error theory. Joyce argues for an error theory by evaluating moral discourse, asserting that moral sentences provide categorical reasons to engage. Still, the existence of morality in moral discourse does not exist, leading to no moral facts in our moral discourse. Joyce's queerness argument will be referred to as the argument from non-institutionality, which refers to moral discourse asserting there should be non-institutional categorical reasons to act, but such assertions are queer. Also highlighted in his texts, Joyce answers the question of what should error theory do next with normative commitments if error theory is true. Joyce's response to retaining moral talk in society is to adopt his theory of moral fictionalism, referring to how one should pretend that moral facts do exist.

Firstly, Joyce highlights how moral discourse suggests it presupposes absolutism using categorical imperatives and assertoric lexis. Therefore, it displays how moral discourse is cognitive to presuppose that there are mind-independent moral facts. This is because we use lexical choices that suggest what one is saying is right/wrong, such as 'it is wrong to steal from people'. When using assertive discourse such as 'you ought to...' and 'it is right/wrong to...' in a moral context, the assertoric language implies it is truth-evaluable assertions. Joyce uses the example of a theist and an atheist using religious discourse in a conversation to highlight how assertoric moral statements work and how, therefore, cognitive statements are erroneous. The atheist would accept that the religious discourse used by the theist such as 'God is omnipotent' and 'God loves you' would be truth-evaluable assertions about God without evidence of a deity existing in the natural world to identify these assertions as right/wrong. However, the theist uses assertoric language here, which means that the statements like 'God is omnipotent' are treated as true, objective facts. This applies to moral discourse for the error theorist as moral judgements are also truth-evaluable assertions of the practical world which suggests that people using moral discourse aiming towards the truth but fails to achieve being true or false as it is erroneous (Joyce, 2001).

Joyce has defined how moral discourse works and therefore shows how moral statements are cognitive, which leads to how assertoric language is in error with categorical reasons to act. Categorical reasons to act means that there must be a reason to act morally that is independent of the agent's desires or commitments to make them objective mind-independent moral facts. An example is a moral statement, 'it is wrong to murder an innocent person', one will suggest that there should be a reason outside our own bias and human behaviour as to why someone should act morally correct. This relates to a problem Mackie was faced with that Joyce answers about internal motivation. Argued by Joyce in *Myth and Morality*, Mackie's argument was committing to internal motivation as

it is a 'non-negotiable commitment of moral discourse' (Joyce, p. 17, 2001). David Brink, in *Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness* (1984), argues Mackie is committing to:

p1) IM is False.

p2) morality is committed to IM.

p3) Morality is flawed.

Brink shows this is an unsound argument as Mackie argues that IM is false, but morality is committed to IM. However, Joyce states it is begging the question to show that Mackie's premises would be interpreted as unsound with those premises. Joyce argues that internal motivation is false and therefore agrees with Brink when stating that internal motivation does not exist. He doubts that moral discourse is committed to internal motivation. However, Joyce argues that moral discourse asserts there is an external motivation when moral discourse is part of an institution. Thus, Joyce's arguments for assertoric moral discourse and categorical reasons to act leads to his queerness argument from non-institutionality.

Now we have outlined how Joyce views moral discourse and categorical reasons. His queerness argument, known as the argument from non-institutionality, explores how our reasons to act should be non-institutional. Joyce argues that everyone is under the assumption that moral properties have non-institutional categorical requirements, meaning they are desire-transcendent reasons for action. As quoted from Joyce, 'morality involves an error because moral discourse presupposes non-institutional desire-transcendent reasons and non-institutional categorical imperatives, while all genuine desire-transcendent reasons and categorical imperatives are institutional' (Joyce, p. 523, 2011a). Therefore, Joyce displays that because moral discourse does not provide evidence from categorical reasons to act that there are desire-transcendent reasons to act as moral discourse presupposes, morality is therefore in error. This is explained by these premises put forward by Joyce:

P1) moral discourse presupposes non-institutional desire transcendent reasons and non-institutional categorical imperatives.

P2) all genuine desire-transcendent reasons are institutional, and all genuine categorical imperatives are institutional.

P3) Moral discourse pre-supposing non-institutional desire transcendent reasons and non-institutional categorical imperatives are queer.

To explain what Joyce means by non-institutional desire transcendent reasons for action, it suggests that there should be reason outside the institution to explain why one should act according to this moral code. Mackie refers to the term institution as a social practice 'constituted by many people behaving in fairly regular ways, with relations between them which transmit and encourage and perhaps enforce those ways of behaving' (Mackie, p. 80, 1977). An excellent example that Joyce posits in *Myth of Morality* is the institutions of chess. When an agent is playing chess with their opponent, there is the requirement of not moving the king chess piece no more than one square per turn. One of the people playing chess expresses this requirement that the player cannot move this piece more than one square. In this context, there is one requirement where the player stating the rule is making that requirement mind-dependent as it is from their thoughts and behaviour, which suggests the chess rule is mind-dependent. The other requirement is the chess requirement of not to move the king more than one square per turn, which is not constituted by the player's thoughts and feelings but would still be mind-dependent as formed from the agent's thoughts and feelings to make it institutional. Therefore, a requirement would have to be mind-independent in the sense that it is not an agent's or institutional requirement. This can apply to moral examples such as the institution of promising, as when someone is promising to do X, they are morally obliged to fulfil this promise to the person you are promising to. This asserts that the categorical reasons to act are all institutional, which makes moral facts queer for presupposing they need to be non-institutional.

Joyce developed this idea from Mackie's incomplete argument that suggests the error theorist thinks that moral reasons and requirements are institutional. This is shown from this passage from Mackie's book, *Inventing Right and Wrong*:

'Do the desires and especially the sufferings of other people, if known to me, constitute a reason for me to do something if I can [...]? It would be natural to say that they constitute some reason [...]. But the important thing is that if we recognize this as a further class of reasons, independent of any desire that I now have to help these other people, we are [...] bringing in the requirements of something like an institution [...]' (Mackie, p. 78, 1977).

Mackie, therefore, highlights how moral properties should obtain the feature of mind-independence, which means it should avoid the agent's bias of desire or be reduced to the requirements in an institution in the natural world. This shows Mackie has a promising argument for the queerness argument but seems incomplete in showing where the queerness lies. I have summarised Joyce's

argument from non-institutionality, but the non-institutionality argument only entails error theory if moral discourse does presuppose there are desire-transcendent non-institutional moral facts. Joyce posits how morality must be thought to be beyond the institution as:

‘The rules and reasons of [...] [a] game [...] may quite reasonably be entirely ignored. We do not, I reiterate, think of morality in this way. Morality purports to have more authority than this – it is not something that a person may escape (in David Wiggins’s words) “by simply flying the skull and cross-bones and renouncing altogether the aim of belonging to the moral community.’ (Joyce, p, 63, 2006)

Joyce has set out how morality is not thought to be similar to other institutions, such as rules of a game, because we all participate in moral thinking. As we all participate in thinking there are moral objective facts, we do not compare it to games because we can easily break the rules of a game. Although our reason to act is part of the moral institution, we all think it is not.

Now we have outlined Joyce’s queerness argument against moral realism, the error theorist is faced with the problem that if we are to believe error theory, then there needs to be an answer to how one retains their normative commitments. This is a response to Wright’s objection to error theory, which asserts that ‘the error-theorist may argue that the superstition that he finds in ordinary moral thought goes too deep to permit any construction of moral truth, which avoids it from being accepted as an account of moral truth. But I do not know of promising argument in that direction’ (Wright, p. 10, 1992). Richard Joyce’s argument for moral fictionalism, which is referred to as revolutionary moral fictionalism, is the moral discourse used is not aiming towards a moral truth but is to ‘pretend to assert or make-believe that they obtain’ (Miller, p. 217, 2013). This affirms the moral discourse used to intend that it is a real moral evaluation even though every moral claim is false. This is a revision of the ‘hermeneutic’ moral fictionalism view, which asserts moral discourse does not aim for the ‘literal’ truth but may appear to do so. This can be exemplified in utterances about fictional characters such as ‘George shot Lenny’ in *Of Mice and Men*, which shows it is true in a fictional sense, but the characters or the action ever existed. Revolutionary moral fictionalism differs from hermeneutic moral fictionalism, as when we are making moral utterances, there is an intention to aim for moral truth without believing that it is true. Therefore, people can believe that they aim towards a true account in moral discourse without accepting moral realism due to all truth-apt moral discourse being false. This is because moral statements are used in an assertoric manner, which is the distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism.

Non-cognitivists would suggest moral discourse does not assert any truth-evaluable statements. Joyce refers to Rudolf Carnap's argument to justify non-cognitivism in moral utterances as 'a value statement is nothing else than a command in a misleading grammatical form... it does not assert anything' (Carnap, p.24-25, 1937). This argument is regarded as weak because we are all misled through aiming towards the truth from flawed grammatical and semantic rules. Therefore, his fictionalist position states that moral sentences still have truth conditions but do not assert moral beliefs. This is seen as a revision of current moral practices in discourse that view moral talk as a description, as Joyce views revolutionary fictionalism as prescriptive.

This is a favourable approach from Joyce as it answers some problems that were raised from Mackie's Error Theory. One problem that has been raised from error theory is 'Error Theory, then what?', which involves what error theory means towards acting morally by society and normative ethics. As raised by Wright in the first chapter, error theory would not be useful for first-order ethics, which refers to the normative ethics to dictate what one ought to do. This differs from second-order ethics, which is the metaethical theories that evaluate truth values in moral discourse. This can lead to moral nihilism, which is not an advised route for error theorists. However, Joyce satisfies this question with the idea that we can still pretend to have morals and have the attitude of moral utterances being true or false without knowing all moral statements are in error.

The error theorist can continue to use moral discourse and pretend the moral utterances are true with the error theory still existing. To imply the error theorist is abolishing all atomic moral sentences would suggest they are moral eliminativists. Therefore, the error theorist has a choice to act as if there are assertoric moral sentences are true or adapt their language to be less assertoric, so they are not 'committing an epistemological sin any more than an actor reciting the lines of a play' (Joyce, p. 4, 2001). Furthermore, error theorists and meta-ethicists are not concerned with normative ethics and how the theory affects the morality of societies, conveying metaethics are dealing with the truth-values of moral discourse and therefore do not need to justify how morality works beyond that.

Moral fictionalism also contributes to error theory avoiding the Frege Geach problem as Joyce justifies using assertoric moral discourse to pretend moral facts exist without falling into the problem non-cognitivists face with the Frege-Geach problem. Joyce's argument does succeed in justifying error theory's cognitivist approach and avoids the Frege-Geach problem as it satisfies the truth conditions needed for cognitive argument to fit moral discourse in a non-assertoric manner and does not fall into

a fallacy of equivocation. Furthermore, it avoids giving up moral values if we make-believe in moral discourse.

2.2: Jonas Olson's Argument from Irreducibility and Conservationism

Jonas Olson is also a contemporary error theorist who defends Mackie's argument from queerness by developing his queerness argument. Olson wrote *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* in 2014, therefore having previous debates on error theory existing that he can discuss and evaluate. Olson also covers the history that influenced error theory, such as David Hume, Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who have argued a certain type of failure theory their works to suggest they are sceptics. Although this is not relevant to his arguments, this is interesting to Olson, as there may be weaker forms of error theory in their philosophical ideas, but if they had pushed for a metaphysical queerness in moral properties like Mackie has done with the argument from queerness, it would make their forms of error theory stronger. In the second part of his book, there is a focus on Mackie's argument from queerness, with identifying four queerness arguments. The four concerns are supervenience, knowledge, motivation, and irreducible normativity. However, Olson argued that three of these argument fails, and therefore his argument from irreducibility is the only one that will have success for error theory. The argument from irreducibility is arguing 'moral facts entail that there are facts that favor certain courses of behaviour, where the favoring relation is irreducibly normative', but there is no evidence of such (Olson, p. 123, 2014). In the third part of the book, he answers the next steps for error theory and how one can follow error theory whilst holding moral judgements with his theory of conservationism.

There are four arguments from queerness that Olson discusses which centres around supervenience, knowledge, motivation, and irreducible normativity. Olson explores the first three but denies that they are successful. Thus, argues that the fourth one, irreducible normativity, is the most plausible queerness argument. As Olson views the first three queerness arguments listed as ineffective arguments for the error theory, they will not be discussed. Still, there is Olson's summary as to why they are unsuccessful.

'The argument concerning supervenience overgeneralizes or reduces to an instance of a general worry about sui generis non-natural properties and relations. The argument concerning knowledge is an argument for moral scepticism rather than moral error theory. This argument too overgeneralizes and in the end, it does not stand on its own feet. The third argument, concerning motivation, rests on the

premise that it is a feature of the ordinary conception of moral facts that first-hand knowledge of moral facts guarantees motivation to act' (Olson, p. 116, 2014).

Olson identifies the problems with these three queerness arguments. The argument concerning supervenience is the idea that morality supervenes on the natural world as it is not anything we understand in the natural world. This is a pretty generic worry in the metaphysical realm in philosophy that can be easily answered by comparing morality to other abstract properties. Therefore, it suggests it does not suggest where the queerness entirely lies. The argument from knowledge displays how we cannot access any knowledge on moral facts and therefore should be considered queer. However, there are answers to how we access moral properties such as intuitionism put forward by G.E. Moore and W.D. Ross, and just because they are not accessible does not deny their existence outside the natural world. Finally, the motivation argument indicates there must be independent motivation to have reason to act which is considered queer due to internal motivation, but Olson suggests this is a flawed argument as moral realists would argue that morality has a feature of acting right because it is right independent of desire, which is not internal motivation. Now that I have outlined the justification as to why these three regularly used arguments in error theory are not successful, I will now present Olson's argument from irreducibility. This is conveyed to be the most successful queerness argument that avoids the problems that the other three queerness arguments have struggled with.

The argument from irreducibility is a queerness argument that suggests moral facts are defined by our reason to act, not being reduced to the norms of society. This would be considered queer as any reason to act we know of is reduced to compliance with norms. The premises of the argument are as follows:

- (P1) Moral facts entail that there are facts that favour certain courses of behaviour, where the favouring relation is irreducibly normative.
- (P2) Irreducibly normative favouring relations are queer.
- (C1) Hence, moral facts entail queer relations.
- (P3) If moral facts entail queer relations, moral facts are queer.
- (C2) Hence, moral facts are queer.

When Olson refers to the term irreducible normativity, it means that we have reasons to act following our morality that is not reduced to norms or desires. This differs from reducible reason relations as it means that the favouring relation is reduced to empirical or non-normative facts, such as facts that

promote desired satisfaction or rule-governed activities. This means that some behaviour is correct or incorrect irrespective of any desire, interest or end that I might have, or any code, rule or norm. For example, if it is morally wrong to eat meat, we would all have a reason not to eat meat, but this reason cannot be dependent on any desire that we might have or any norm (Olson, 2014). As the reason may be because eating meat is detrimental to human and non-human well-being, that would be reduced to a norm, so there would have to be a reason to act morally that is outside any norm. Olson insists that moral reasons would be *irreducibly normative*, but that irreducibly normative reasons would be queer as they do not exist in the natural world, as every reason to act morally is reduced to the norms that exist caused by societal behaviour.

The two central premises to Olson's argument from irreducibility relate to his conceptual claim, which is P1) Moral facts entail that there are facts that favour certain courses of behaviour, where the favouring relation is irreducibly normative, and P2) Irreducibly normative favouring relations are queer. To understand these two premises, there needs to be clarification on what is a favouring relation and why that relation is irreducibly normative. Favouring relation would be defined as reasons to act, and therefore the reason to act cannot be reduced to norms or desires.

An example of this would be if someone wanted to find out information on foxes, they would go on Wikipedia to find out facts on foxes. This website would contain facts about foxes which counts in favour of that person reading the website, and therefore a reason for him to do so. Moral reasoning would follow the same form where there should be a reason to act and that reason should count in favour of that action not being irreducibly normative. Therefore, the conceptual claim argues that moral reasoning should be independent of any norms or course of behaviour displayed. As formulated by Olson here, he states that the moral fact is relying on a fact that should be independent of the normativity of behaviour.

'Moral facts are facts about what other facts (for example, the fact that performing some action would be conducive to the general happiness) favour certain courses of behaviour (for example, performing the action that would be conducive to the general happiness), where the favouring relation is irreducibly normative.' (Olson, p. 135)

The second premise is that such argument of moral facts being irreducibly normative is queer. Olson considers the idea that a reason to act cannot be reduced to norms or desires is built into the features of moral facts. This would be queer as when we think of our moral values, it does seem to be a part of

the norms of society or the reason to act is part of our desires. As argued by Olson, 'It seems difficult to deny that if the irreducibly normative favouring relation, or instances of it, is queer, then the fact that it obtains is also queer' (Olson, p. 135, 2014). Here, we will present how a favouring relation is considered irreducibly normative and why that is queer. The act of stealing should be morally wrong, independent of norms and desires of the agents, but when we consider someone's reason to act morally by not stealing, it does not fit the criteria. That reason to act could be because the law has consequences on stealing, and therefore people desire not to go to prison. Furthermore, the agent may consider the feelings of the agents involved if they stole from someone. There is no suggestion there is a reason to act because it is simply right/wrong that is in accordance with our norms and therefore would consider moral facts queer.

With Olson's queerness argument outlined, I shall explain his theory of conservationism. The argument highlighted in section 1.5, which Joyce also attempts to answer, is the question 'if error theory is correct, then how does one act now?'. This is raised by philosophers such as Wright and Lutz to argue what would happen to first-order ethics if error theory is true. Although error theory is a second-order ethical theory, meaning it can be argued it does not have to justify how error theory would be used for normative ethics, realistically, the second-order theory does affect how one approaches first-order ethics if one also believes there are no such existence of moral facts.

Olson still attempts to answer how to have moral judgements with his theory of conservationism. Conservationism is different to Joyce's theory of moral fictionalism, and Olson argues there are multiple problems with pretending to carry on with conversing about morality. This is because the act of pretence to carry on with engaging with moral discussion knowing error theory is true leads to false beliefs, which negatively impacts having true beliefs that the conservationism theory recommends. Thus, Olson argues that even if error theory is true, we still as humans phenomenologically feel like there are moral facts and therefore can still carry on moralising outside the branch of metaethics without pretence. When Olson states it feels like we can still use moral discourse, it is regarding the beliefs that we have formed outside of academic philosophy. It therefore should have a theory to carry on beliefs if error theory is true. This suggests Olson is against abolitionism as he iterates the importance of our beliefs in first-order ethics, so to retain moral talk without the pretence, he argues a theory called conservationism.

Moral conservationism is the theory that first-order ethics and second-order ethics can be treated separately. It can carry on our normative beliefs with ignorance to our beliefs on the second-order theory. Conservationism is the idea that one must conserve their moral beliefs as this is instrumental

to society and identity. Therefore we should carry on without moral beliefs as 'normal' because of the importance of its place in society. This suggests that both first-order and second-order ethics can exist but should be separated and engaged within different contexts. Therefore, we are still preserving the benefits of engaging with moral practice, and if error theory is true, then that should be engaged within uncritical contexts. Olson illustrates how our beliefs change in uncritical contexts with an example of politicians and cheating partners.

'Someone might say truly the following about a cunning politician: 'I knew she was lying, but hearing her speech and the audience's reactions, I really believed what she said'. Or a deceived lover might say about his mistress, 'I knew she was lying, but when she told me that she cared about me I really believed her'. Hence we are sometimes taken in by what people say (be it cunning politicians, manipulative partners, etc.) in the sense that we believe what is said, even though we are disposed to believe, upon detached and critical reflection, that it is false' (Olson p192-3, 2014).

Olson suggests that we can still believe in moral facts even though there is an underlying understanding that moral facts are false, similarly to when we may know someone is lying. Still, there is a feeling of really believing the person telling lies. This could be argued as the use of rhetoric language, which would persuade us into believing in different moral values, which draws us away from the belief of error theory in uncritical contexts.

Furthermore, in order for conservationism to be plausible, it would need to avoid arguments that have previously been a problem for Mackie's argument for retaining moral engagement. A problem that has been identified previously is that we simply cannot just believe in error theory and hold our normative beliefs at the same time as this is illogical. Olson, therefore, puts forward that for the theory to retain moral beliefs, we can only engage with error theory in an academic setting such as a lecture or when we are in philosophical contexts. We can engage with our moral beliefs in more ordinary contexts. Olson posits in his book, 'conservationism recommends moral belief in morally engaged and everyday contexts and reserves attendance to the belief that moral error theory is true to detach and critical contexts, such as the philosophy seminar room' (Olson, p. 199, 2014). This allows us as moral agents to connect with our moral beliefs that have formed without the worry of error theory arguing that it is false. This is not to say that we should consider ourselves non-naturalist moral realists when we assert moral utterances in everyday moral conversations. We are to argue that we simultaneously believe in moral statements whilst believing that there are no moral properties to support that statement.

For example, we can engage with a moral discussion that it is morally wrong to torture and eat animals, and we can believe what we are arguing in this discussion. However, at that moment, there is no consideration for metaethics when thinking about whether it is right or wrong to torture and eat animals. According to error theory, if the same is brought up in a metaethics lecture, we can say the statement is false. This means we would be simultaneously believing P and not P but would be holding two inconsistent beliefs as they would be believed in different contexts. As Olson does not think Joyce's moral fictionalism is an implausible theory because of the phenomenological problem caused. This is not believed to be a problem for Olson as we temporarily really do believe in these two different beliefs dependent on the contexts instead of pretending to believe.

2.3: Bart Streumer's Unbelievability Argument

Bart Streumer is an error theorist who wrote the book *Unbelievable Errors about all Normative Judgements* (2017) and the article 'Can we Believe in Error Theory?' (2013). He illustrates his arguments towards a type of error theory. In the first chapters of his book, he explores the four central views of normative judgements and properties: non-reductive, realism, reductive realism, and non-cognitivism. Therefore, Streumer will explore what normative judgements apply to error theory and how error theory is justified. However, Streumer's main argument in contribution to error theory is how agents must reject their belief in error theory as we cannot believe in it, nor have any reason to believe in error theory. According to Streumer, this approach makes error theory more likely to be true. Furthermore, his theory suggests that it undermines many objections made for error theory which makes it harder to reject the argument.

A central challenge to error theory is the normative objection, which has been argued with force by Thomas Nagel and Ronald Dworkin in *The View from Nowhere* (1986) and *Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It* (1996). This objection is that if the philosophical theory (which is the error theory here) in question is less convincing than the plausibility of our normative judgements, then one must reject the philosophical theory. For example, if one has to choose whether to believe in error theory or commit to the normative judgement not to torture children for fun, then one should firmly follow the beliefs of the latter. This is because the plausibility of keeping our normative judgements over believing a theory of dropping all our normative commitments is higher. The normative objection goes as follows:

- P1) If claim A and philosophical theory B cannot both be true, and if A is more plausible than B, we should reject B.
- P2) The claim we ought not to torture children for fun and the error theory cannot both be true.
- P3) The claim we ought not to torture children for fun is much more plausible than the error theory.
- C1) Therefore, we should reject the error theory.

However, Bart Streumer has recently offered a defence of error theory that discredits Nagel and Dworkin's objection. This is to agree that one would certainly want to keep their deeply held normative judgements and therefore would choose to not believe in error theory in favour of it. However, this is not because error theory is false, but simply because agents cannot believe in it. Streumer agrees with premises 2 and 3 but denies premise 1 as there is a better explanation which is referred to as the unbelievability argument, stating it is unbelievable rather than refutable. This weakens the force of the normative objection as it means they cannot reject it if the conclusion Streumer puts forward is we cannot believe in it rather than reject it.

Streumer refers to his error theory as a 'global error theory' as it applies to normative judgments and suggests this applies to epistemic error theory. However, I will not discuss the relations and differences between epistemic, moral, and normative error theory. The central claim he is attempting to argue is 'normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, even though properties do not exist' (Streumer, p. 194, 2017). Normativity does have a broad conception in philosophy, but streumer's concise definition of normativity is 'the only properties that I take to be normative are rightness, wrongness, permissibility, goodness, badness, rationality, being a reason, and properties that are equivalent to or incorporate one of these properties' (Streumer, p. 105, 2017). Thus, it differs from Mackie's argument as Streumer's theory is not limited to moral property and relations, meaning his error theory applies to all normative properties and relations. When Streumer argues beliefs ascribe normative properties, the examples given are 'murder is wrong' and 'euthanasia is permissible' because they are using normative discourse, which differs from descriptive due to the beliefs conceptually entailing the property exists. As Streumer commits to a different error theory, as he states his error theory can be seen as a global error theory that affects normative properties too. Mackie, Joyce, and Olson do not have this problem as they are committed to a moral error theory that is more limited to moral error theory. However, as raised by Daniele Bruno, 'these type of theories, like the classical Moral Error Theory defended by Mackie and by Joyce, are thus unable to avoid the Normative Objection in Streumer's way' (Bruno, p.219, 2020). This is because even Streumer admits that one can only believe narrower versions of error theories that do not involve judgements about

reasons for belief. So, arguments such as Mackie and Joyce cannot avoid the normative objection according to Streumer and can only follow his argument to defend error theory.

After outlining what is considered normative judgements in moral discourse, it must be considered what is defined as a reason for belief and if there is reason to believe error theory. The term reason for belief refers to what counts in favour of this belief, meaning what gives us the motivational pull to believe this belief. To have a full belief in P, one should have evidence or a sufficient reason in order to believe P. To partially believe, or fully believe, without any reason to believe in P suggests one does not really have a full belief. Therefore, a reason for belief would be considered a normative property, and if error theory is true, the reason for belief does not exist. This is entailed by Streumer's argument 'normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, even though such properties do not exist' (Streumer, p. 1, 2013). This suggests that there is no reason to believe error theory as a reason for belief does not exist. This is because we cannot have a belief while holding the belief there is no reason to the belief.

Streumer commits to the statement that it is not possible for us to believe the error theory (meaning we cannot commit to normative properties not existing). Streumer's argument entails that if error theory is true, there are no reasons, leading to no reason to believe the error theory. When Streumer refers to a belief, it should be regarded as full belief in order to be confident in that belief. 'We fully believe that p, if we are wholly confident that p, and we partially believe that p if we are fairly but not wholly confident that p' (Streumer, p. 195, 2013). One can only be wholly confident in a belief if all the relevant descriptive information has been taken into account for the belief. Thus, if people have two contrasting beliefs after considering the relevant information, they cannot be wholly confident that their beliefs are correct. Therefore, the two conditions in holding a full belief are one has to be confident about P and adequately understand P. To be confident that we cannot believe error theory would have one assuming that this would hinder the error theory if one cannot believe in it. However, Streumer does argue this does not discredit error theory as it 'undermines many objections that have been made to this theory' (Streumer, p. 195, 2013). Streumer also expresses the difference between implicit and explicit belief to contribute to his definition of belief. When one explicitly believes that P, one suggests that we believe P if we currently think P. To believe P implicitly means that our thought commits us to P, which Streumer disregards in a full belief. In conclusion of Streumer's definition of belief, it is to mean explicit and occurrent belief.

Firstly, I will explore Streumer's reasons as to why we cannot believe the error theory. Streumer expresses from his own experience that we cannot believe the error theory as we find ourselves forming a belief that there are such conceptions as normative properties existing. Here, Streumer argues how error theory commits to the lack of belief in error theory:

'The property of being a reason for belief, in the sense of a consideration that counts in favor of a belief, is a normative property. If the error theory is true, this property does not exist. The error theory, therefore, entails that there is no reason to believe the error theory.' (Streumer, p.197, 2017)

Streumer argues this is not a problem for the error theory as the theory will still be true even if we do not or cannot believe in it. This is because belief does not deny whether a theory is true or false, as highlighted by his objection to the normative objection. Streumer highlights that choosing not to believe in a theory does not deny the truth values of a theory, nor does being able to believe in a theory. The error theorist understands his argument is revisionary and highly controversial as it will cause many adverse reactions, but to Streumer, this only reinforces his argument. This is exemplified by people's reactions to error theory, which can be strong opinions on their disbelief of error theory does show it cannot be true. However, this encourages Streumer's theory as these are the kind of reactions that one would have to make his argument sound as we cannot believe the error theory. However, people's reactions do not mean the argument is sound and therefore is not considered a defence to his theory. Still, it presents the idea that there is no need for belief in the error theory and does not suggest it cannot be true.

Furthermore, Streumer finds the possibility of believing the error theory, which does not cause a problem for defending error theory. This is through believing parts of error theory at different times, suggesting that we can come close to believing in error theory without having a full belief. Streumer argues in 'We can Believe in Error Theory' the different ways one can believe different parts of error theory at different times by arguing:

'We can believe that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, while at the same time believing that such properties exist. And we can at a different time believe that normative properties do not exist, while believing at this time that normative judgements are non-cognitive attitudes rather than beliefs, or that normative judgements are beliefs that do not ascribe properties in the sense in which the error theory uses the term 'property' (Streumer, p. 11, 2013).

This suggests that, at times, Streumer can believe in the statement that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, and therefore believe that normative properties exist. This would suggest when he thinks about this temporarily, he does not think about arguments against the existence of normative properties. However, when he thinks about the existence of normative properties, it is more complicated and, therefore, temporarily believes that they do not exist. Therefore, when thinking about the two different arguments at different times, Streumer argues that we can temporarily hold these beliefs and temporarily giving up the other belief. Another way Streumer argues we can come close to believing error theory is arguing that there is a collection of 'sound' arguments in defence of error theory that connected together could make error theory 'seem' like it is true. Although this is because Streumer has shown we cannot have a full belief that the arguments show that error theory is true, he argues that they can be shown to 'seem' as sound arguments but can only seem instead of they 'are' sound arguments. Therefore, we can come close to believing error theory if we agree the arguments in defence of error theory seem to be true.

As outlined, Streumer believes that no belief in error theory does not face problems for error theory. This is because if we do not believe error theory, it undermines many objections that have been put forward for error theory that Streumer highlights. Here I will be going through all the objections that Streumer has argued his view of error theory avoids. There are five objections that Streumer believes the unbelievability argument undermines, which are the objection from self-defeat, the objection from the normativity of belief, the objection from bad faith, the objection from compliance with a different norm, and the objection from revision. It also undermines the normative objection that Dworkin and Nagel have argued, but as I have already presented how Streumer's argument undermines it, I will set out five more objections in response to error theory it has undermined.

The objection from self-defeat, also known as the argument from toothlessness, is argued by Terence Cuneo to suggest we are damned if we do believe in error theory, and we are damned if we do not. As the error theory has no reason to believe error theory, their view is 'polemically toothless', arguing there is no reason for such a theory to exist or worth discussing it any further as a position in metaethics. On the other hand, if an error theorist argues there is reason to believe error theory, then it is a self-defeating argument as a reason to believe is a normative property, and there is no such property to exist to the error theorist. Therefore, whichever they choose to argue, error theory is an implausible position to take and should be rejected. Streumer puts forward that this is not a problem for error theory if error theory is true but we just cannot believe in error theory. He suggests that the lack of belief in error theory does not make it polemically toothless if he has shown that we can believe

parts of error theory at different times and come close to believe error theory. Streumer anticipates Cuneo's response to his argument of coming close to believing error theory by suggesting he would argue there is also no reason to come close to believe error theory if error theory is true similar to there is no reason to believe error theory at all if error theory is true. However, if the arguments seem sound, there are reasons to come close to believing the error theory as we cannot reject what seems to be a sound argument (Streumer, 2013).

The objection from the normativity of belief is argued by Nishi Shah's work in 'The Limits of Normative Detachment' (2010), arguing that there is a reason for us to have X if and only if there is evidence that the content of X is true. This argues beliefs are normative in the sense that mental state X is a belief. Therefore, as we commit to normative beliefs, we should completely ignore error theory. Streumer's theory avoids this objection as he agrees to carry on with the belief in normative beliefs. In contrast, error theory can still be considered true by partially believing in it at different times (Streumer, 2013).

The objection from bad faith is argued by Crispin Wright, who previously outlined an objection against Mackie's answer to the 'Now what?' problem. This is the argument that if error theory is true, then we should give up all our normative commitments. As error theorists do not give up all their normative judgements, this would make them guilty of a form of bad faith because their second-order theory should suggest they give up all of their first order commitments. However, Streumer's argument suggests that error theorists can keep their first-order moral commitments if they do not believe in error theory with his unbelievability argument. Therefore, they can carry on with their beliefs if error theory is true as the belief does not concern the truthfulness of error theory (Streumer, 2013).

Wright and Blackburn have another objection to error theory known as the objection from compliance with a different norm. This suggests when there are two contrasting beliefs, such as 'murder is wrong' and 'murder is right', they both ascribe to a non-existent property to murder. However, we would accept the former statement to be more acceptable than the latter, suggesting a normative judgment's acceptability does not depend on whether the object it describes to has this property. Therefore, it should depend on if the judgement complies with another norm, which would be the norm that normative judgements should promote social stability. If accepting murder is wrong, this would comply with the norms of society and therefore should be followed more than the moral view that goes against societal norms. This applies to the belief that we should commit to our normative beliefs for societal norms over suggesting all moral facts are false. Streumer argues that this is not a plausible argument as we cannot define a normative judgement's truth about its acceptability in

society to promote social stability. Furthermore, Streumer shows the possibility of holding normative beliefs while error theory can also be true, and therefore it does not object to error theory (Streumer, 2013).

Blackburn makes a further objection concerning the consequences for error theory that I have raised in section 1.5, where I raise the tensions in error theory regarding Mackie's error theory. This is the objection from revision, suggesting that if error theory is true, then one will have to revise our first-order moral commitments and our moral discourse to adapt to the error theorist line of thought. This would ensure that our normative vocabulary would be free of error, such as adapting language that does not commit someone to use normative predicates to ascribe normative properties and use moral utterances that express non-cognitive attitudes. Therefore, this would not make any change to the normative practice, and it would not commit us to the truth of error theory (Streumer, 2013).

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented three error theorists and their arguments to defend error theory. Richard Joyce's defence of error theory conveys how moral discourse refers to non-institutional, desire-transcendent moral facts. This led to his queerness argument that although moral discourse presupposes this, morality is institutional, making moral facts queer. Furthermore, I have outlined how Joyce defends moral talk if error theory is true through his theory of moral fictionalism, highlighting how this theory avoids objections to the objections put forward by Wright and Lutz. Second, Jonas Olson defends error theory similarly with a different queerness argument, suggesting morality presupposes normative irreducibility. This is the argument that moral facts presuppose it cannot be reduced to norms, but this is considered queer as we know morality to be reduced to norms and course of behaviour. Olson has also contributed an answer to the question 'error theory, then what?' with his theory of conservationism. This suggests that we can carry on engaging with moral discussions as we do believe they are to be true in uncritical contexts and believe in error theory in critical contexts. Thirdly, I have outlined Streumer's unbelievability argument, which argues why we cannot believe in error theory and how the lack of belief in error theory does not cause a problem for error theory. In chapter 3, I will discuss whether each argument from Joyce, Olson, and Streumer is plausible in defending error theory after J.L Mackie and if they have avoided objections made to Mackie's error theory. There will also be a discussion on the theories put forward by Joyce and Olson to retain first-order ethics and whether there are any alternative theories that may be more plausible in answering the question 'Now What?'.

Chapter 3: Responses to the Contemporary Error Theorists' Arguments

Now there is an outline of the three contemporary error theorists that have raised plausible arguments in defence of their definition of error theory. From the analysis of their different approaches to adapting a view of moral error theory from Mackie, we can draw conclusions that the argument from relativity should be ignored, the argument from queerness is incomplete, and Mackie's answer to the 'Now What?' question is ambiguous. In the second chapter, I have discussed two queerness arguments raised by Joyce and Olson that are called the argument from non-institutionality and the argument from normative irreducibility. This is to respond to the issues raised by Mackie's queerness argument, in which the critics dispute the lack of clarity on where the queerness lies in morality.

I have also presented the theories Joyce and Olson have asserted in contribution to the 'now what?' problem with the theories moral fictionalism and conservationism. I have also explored an argument that answers the belief problem, which is Bart Streumer's unbelievability argument. In this chapter, there will be an evaluation of each contemporary theorist's arguments which will help answer the question of whether any arguments after Mackie can save error theory. Furthermore, I will be evaluating Jonas Olson's conservationism and Joyce's moral fictionalism to see what is considered the most plausible approach to retain moral practice if error theory is true. I also discuss alternative theories to the 'now what?' problem, such as substitutionism, to see if there are better theories other than abolitionism, moral fictionalism, and conservationism.

3.1 Responses to the argument from non-institutionality

The argument from non-institutionality is Joyce's queerness argument that defends the idea moral discourse asserts non-institutional, dire-transcendent moral values are considered queer as there is no evidence of such in the natural world. Joyce faces problems with his queerness argument, such as whether his conceptual claim could not be reliable if moral agents see morality as an institution. Also, there is a problem when someone expresses a moral judgment with moral discourse, they assume there is an absolute authority behind it.

Joyce's queerness argument relies on an assumption that when someone engages in moral practice, must be a desire-transcendent reason when they are uttering a particular moral sentence. For the example of promising someone not to lie, there must be a non-institutional categorical reason why

one should not lie that is not reduced to internal reasons for that agent. However, the conceptual claim that there must be a non-institutional categorical desire for why a moral act is right or wrong could be considered a false assumption. I am going to discuss how moral agents may not have this presumption and therefore think of morality as an institution. Joyce argues that considering morality as an institution goes against the way agents think of morality to be, meaning morality must obtain the moral features moral realists set out, which are that morality must not be reduced to an institution.

However, there is an argument to highlight how morality can be seen as an institution, which does not go against the way we think about it by comparing it to other normative institutions. If we are to consider morality as an institution, this would mean there would be institutional reasons and requirements that have authority over the agents that enforce the moral institution. This can be analogous to other normative institutions, such as the examples we have shown before like chess. This would be an example where the rules and regulations of the game of chess are only authoritative for those who endorse those rules. This is shown when there are agents that do not care for morality and therefore do not care for an action being right. In this case, they will not take the norms in a moral institution for providing a reason for action. Furthermore, it can be shown as an institution as there is a distinction between how we think and speak within the institution to how we observe it from outside the institution as observers. For example, we can observe a moral discussion happening and understand that they are moralising or utter a moral statement to those who endorse the moral institution.

However, Joyce argues that when we form moral utterances, we are not just simply speaking in a way that is permissible to agents that are endorsing the moral institution. Therefore, people who do not endorse the institution can still recognise there are moral values that are right and wrong that are desire transcendent, even if they do not care for morality. Mackie similarly argues this with the feature of morality must be objective and without being the requirements of any person or body of persons, even God (Mackie, p. 59, 1977). Thus, both views can still be compatible with morality being an institution, as what Joyce and Mackie have explained is what usually happens when we are caught up in a moral institution. This means we can still assert X is right or wrong with the consideration it is right or wrong according to a moral institution. Therefore, it seems that we end up having thoughts and reasons for action that imply morality is an institution, meaning the conceptual claim that moral discourse presupposes non-institutional, desire-transcendent moral values is not correct.

An example of this is when Joyce uses the Gyges example, where Gyges should have a genuine reason for not wanting to kill people that is right independently of what he thinks or feels. The statement here is conflicting as it suggests there is a constraint on the human desire of 'wanting' there to be a desire-transcendent reason when there is no such feature attached to moral facts. Nevertheless, the idea of wanting a moral act to be right or wrong could imply a moral institution as the idea of not killing innocent people fits in with the norms of societal behaviour. This shows that even Joyce falls into his error that we may think that our moral discourse presupposes a moral institution.

Another problem that Joyce would raise is that morality as an institution would be very different to other normative institutions, so we should not compare. If it is distinctly different, then it may not be considered an institution. The differences morality as an institution has to other institutions is perhaps the moral reasons because we can accept that most of us as moral agents care about morality and care more for this institution more than others. However, this does not suggest this does not make morality an institution. It would just mean we would consider prioritising acting in accordance with the moral norms than other norms such as etiquette.

I want to put forward another objection to Joyce's argument considering whether morality can be accepted as an institution. This is by criticising the conceptual claim that moral discourse is assertive and assumes there is a shared assumption that there is moral authority behind these moral utterances. An example of this would be when discussing advice on whether someone should tell their significant other they are having an affair with them. Moral agents will utter, 'you ought to tell your significant other of your affair', suggesting there is an assumption from the assertive 'ought' that there is a moral authority that is desire-transcendent that has decided this is the right action. Joyce would argue that this is because there is a 'real' reason as to why one should tell the truth to their significant other. Therefore the semantics of assertive moral discourse implies Joyce's conceptual claim that moral discourse presupposes non-institutional desire-transcendent moral values.

However, I would like to argue that moral authority is not encoded in moral discourse and is an assumption. Therefore, if authority is not encoded in moral discourse, there is no implication that there are no true-positive moral statements because moral discourse could suggest other meanings. This falsifies Joyce's argument in defence of error theory as there is no power in the moral discourse that encodes a moral authority. This would mean there are no positive moral statements to prove that they are 'false' with the queerness argument. With the example that an agent ought to tell his partner that he is having an affair, there is an assumption there is an authority that means the agent will have

to act upon it practically. This suggests that the assumption of moral authority in moral semantics is not relying on evidence in the semantics, and error theory would have to show evidence of moral authority in the moral discourse before developing the queerness argument. However, this objection may concern going against cognitivism as we would still agree that when we are engaged in moral discussion, our sentences are still truth-apt. This can still be the case while arguing Joyce is assuming moral authority. James Dreier provides an example that shows how we assume what is true through assumption than what is true:

‘A policeman on the witness stand testifies that while staking out the apartment, he saw the defendant enter and then leave one hour later. The defence cross-examines: When you say it was one hour later, can you provide an inertial frame? “A duration of one hour must, officer, be relative to one inertial frame or another, you know.” The policeman denies that he meant any such thing. “Just one hour is all I meant, not relative to any of your fancy frames’ (Dreier p.261, 2006).

The policeman believes that time is absolute, although our best theory of physics tells us that time is relative. Therefore, the policeman takes something false for granted when he claims that he saw the suspect leave the apartment one hour later. But as Dreier points out, ‘the incorrect theory that the policeman himself would give if carefully questioned, does not seem to infect the integrity or veracity of his ordinary, first-order judgments. What the policeman said, we believe, is true; only his background absolutist theory of it is mistaken’ (Dreier, p. 262, 2006). This applies to moral discourse as we may assume what is saying is true through the assumption of moral authority, but there is no causal connection to moral discourse and what the truth could be.

In conclusion, Joyce’s argument from non-institutionality faces some objections that may disregard Joyce’s conceptual claim that moral agents think there are non-institutional, desire-transcendent moral reasons. Therefore, the queerness argument should not be considered a sound argument as a defence for error theory if there is a problem for the conceptual claim if moral claims could be understood as part of an institution. Furthermore, there is a problem with Joyce’s assumption on moral authority in moral discourse, and therefore error theory would have to provide evidence on how there is authority encoded in moral discourse to make it queer.

3.2 Responses to the argument from irreducibility

Olson's argument from irreducibility is a queerness argument that asserts 'moral facts are facts about what other facts (for example, the fact that performing some action would be conducive to the general happiness) favour certain courses of behaviour (for example, performing the action that would be conducive to the general happiness), where the favouring relation is irreducibly normative' (Olson, p. 135, 2014). However, there have been objections to Olson's queerness argument, such as Finlay's objection regarding the defence of relativism and the problems raised from Olson's response to Finlay's objection.

Just like Joyce's queerness argument, I would like to challenge the conceptual claim of Olson's argument from irreducibility. Most philosophers against error theory have a method for attacking error theorists' queerness arguments, which would be to argue how the moral feature in question is not queer at all. They also argue that the conceptual claim is not plausible or that the moral discourse does not commit to absolutism, which would ignore the argument. Olson foreshadows the critic's response to his queerness argument, outlining whether there are moral reasons for someone to act upon facts about their desires and interests, which would mean moral facts are normatively reducible. However, Olson would argue this is not a plausible argument to favour as there should be a 'right' reason how to act. Olson uses the example of donating to Oxfam to illustrate how we think moral facts are irreducibly normative, which does not seem the case when we consider the reasons to act.

'one cannot escape a moral reason to donate to Oxfam simply by adverting to one's lack of a relevant desire. Moreover, even if most or all people do have desires whose satisfaction would be promoted by their donating to Oxfam, or more generally by their compliance with moral norms, it is difficult to accept [...] [the] view that whether there are reasons for people to donate to Oxfam, or more generally to comply with moral norms, depends on whether doing so would promote the fulfilment of their desires and interests. This would simply be the wrong explanation of why there are reasons to donate to Oxfam, or more generally to comply with moral norms' (Olson, p. 125, 2014).

As exemplified, the best route for a reason for action with the moral agent donating to Oxfam would be to donate because it is the right thing to do regardless of the desired consequences that fit into the norms as this should not be the reason to act. However, as highlighted with donating to Oxfam, when we consider some of the reasons reduced to norms, this would make the conceptual claim queer.

Olson's central argument to defend his queerness argument is in his response to Stephen Finlay's objection to error theory as a relativist's account in metaethics. Stephen Finlay responds to Jonas Olson's argument from irreducibility in 'The Reasons that Matter' (2006) and 'The Error in Error Theory' (2008) to defend his view of relativism/contextualism. Finlay believes that 'every kind of value is relative to some standard or end' (Finlay, p. 350, 2006). Finlay is attacking Joyce and Olson, along with absolutism, suggesting the moral reasons in question are relativised. Finlay argues that ordinary moral claims do not entail claims about irreducibly normative reasons, so the conceptual claim is false. This is through suggesting that the irreducibly normative reason to act right may not be endorsed by agents and does not care to follow that moral end. This can be exemplified with an agent cheating on their partner and someone suggesting they ought to tell them the truth. However, they are taking into account their care and concern on telling them the truth, so they would pick not to tell them to save their relationship. Therefore, Finlay endorses relativism as it shows people will pick the consequences that are preferred to their cares and concerns. Here Finlay states, '[m]oral reasons matter (intrinsically) only for those with moral concerns [...]. A morally unconcerned person can still have moral reasons, but they cannot be reasons that matter for him (Finlay, p. 17, 2006).

For this reason, ordinary moral claims do not entail irreducibly normative reasons because the reasons can be relativised through the agents that endorse their moral end. Furthermore, Finlay's explanation for why moral discourse may suggest it is relativised is because moral discourse is used as a rhetorical device to express people's relative moral ends. This shows there is no moral authority in moral discourse if moral discourse is used as a rhetorical device to express one's desires and projects.

Olson responds to Finlay's objection to Olson's argument from irreducibility and his attack on absolutism, arguing moral discourse can partly be used as rhetorical devices, but this idea fits better with the error theory stated over relativism. As Olson states in *History, Critique, Defence*:

'the idea that moral judgements are partly rhetorical devices used to put pressure on people to behave in certain ways is congenial both to moral error theory and to Finlay's relativist theory, but it fits better with the former (Olson, p. 128, 2014).

Olson asserts Finlay's argument that moral claims are partially rhetorical devices, but this supports the error theorists' claim more. Olson argues this case with two arguments. His first argument conveys the evolution of moral discourse fits better with moral discourse being irreducibly normative than relativism through the evolved functions of moral discourse.

'[Finlay's suggestion] fits well with a hypothesis congenial to moral error theory, namely that part of the reason why moral thought and talk evolved is their coordinating and regulative functions that are highly useful from an evolutionary perspective. [...] It is a plausible conjecture that moral discourse fulfils these functions better if moral claims entail claims about irreducibly normative reasons than if they are reduced to claims about what would conduce to some end (Olson, p. 128, 2014).

Here, Olson seems to argue moral reason and discourse can be partially explained by their 'coordinating and regulative functions', which is more preferable to error theory than relativism. However, Olson setting out how moral discourse has evolved in their uses does not give much evidence as to why Finlay's route to relativism is not better than concluding moral discourse presupposes irreducibly normative reasons to act. Therefore, agreeing with Finlay that moral discourse can be partially explained by rhetoric devices but also can be explained by its evolving function does not suggest why it supports an error theory point of view.

Olson's second argument to favour his queerness argument over Finlay's relativism is simply 'moral claims have rhetorical force because they are or entail claims about irreducibly normative reasons' (Olson p. 129, 2014). The two both agree that moral discourse entailing rhetorical devices have more force than other features of moral discourse to show we care about our moral views. The difference between the two arguments is their observations, which Finlay argues:

'[m]oral standards or ends are of pressing concern to [...] [us], and their importance to us typically overrides the importance of other standards and ends. This explains why we are much more serious and intransigent about our moral appraisals' (Finlay p. 354, 2008).

Finlay asserts moral discourse has a rhetorical force to show our approval or disapproval towards a moral act and to show the seriousness of one's view. However, the agent receiving the moral advice may not take advice which suggests that moral authority does not matter, showing the lack of moral authority encoded in moral discourse. Olson's objection to Finlay's claim is that moral discourse entailing rhetoric devices presupposes moral authority, suggesting the moral advice is right or wrong regardless of norms. Olson states here:

'The conceptual claim makes good on this expectation: the fact that moral standards or ends are of especially pressing concern to us explains why moral claims entail claims about irreducibly normative reasons' (Olson, p. 129, 2014).

Olson's response is begging the question because Olson is attempting to respond with his conceptual claim. Olson does not entirely explain how rhetoric devices presupposes irreducibly normative moral values and suggests the moral standard or end is that way because of his conceptual claim. Although I am not attempting to defend relativism here, as I believe relativism holds many problems, Finlay's objection to Olson highlights some problems of his queerness argument, such as criticising the assumption of moral authority and the use of rhetoric devices in moral discourse.

Overall, the objections raised causes problems for Olson's queerness argument as they have general concerns. Finlay argues that moral discourse lacks moral authority and that rhetoric devices are used to argue a form of relativism. However, Olson does not argue why rhetoric devices are better suited to error theory and, similarly to Joyce, cannot justify the lack of authority encoded into moral discourse. If the objections I have raised to Olson's argument from the response to Finlay's objection are sound, this would suggest Olson's argument from irreducibility does not have much force as a defence of error theory. Therefore, the argument from irreducibility and the argument from non-institutionality do not succeed as a developed queerness argument from Mackie's.

3.3 Responses to Moral Fictionalism

Richard Joyce's theory of moral fictionalism, as explained in section 2.1, is the idea that people can retain their moral beliefs by pretending they are true in uncritical contexts. Therefore, the expectation for Joyce is that people can 'play along' that moral facts are true when in actuality, there cannot be any moral facts. However, Joyce's view on moral fictionalism is faced with a few problems if we commit to a make-believe view of moral values. I will discuss the problems the theory may face and if there are any solutions for moral fictionalism to be considered the most plausible theory if error theory is true.

It is reasonable that moral discourse is assertive and error theorists agree with the cognitivism, but it doesn't seem like an adequate response to allow error theory to accept X while disbelieving in X. As Olson has argued in section 2.2, it seems that it is hard to show that it was not his real beliefs that something is right or wrong and suggest that he did not believe in those moral actions. For example, Miller uses an example of a philosophy lecturer that supports and teaches Mackie's view on error theory, thus believes all our moral judgements are false. However, outside his studies, he finds a wallet full of money and judges it as obligatorily wrong to steal it, so he hands it to security. In a critical context when in his lectures, he would say that this is false, but in a normal moral circumstance, he

believes that these two features of stealing are wrong and being honest to security by handing it in is right is true. This less critical context of moral actions that the lecturer's face suggests his moral judgments aim for the truth, which could evolve into that he believes in these moral rights and wrongs in less-critical circumstances. Thus, even Joyce admits 'at the moment of utterance it doesn't seem to [the lecturer] as if he is participating in the act of pretence' (Joyce, p. 291, 2005). Joyce's moral fictionalism, therefore, feels unsatisfactory for these contexts where there is no feeling of pretence when having moral judgments, so the change of beliefs in this less critical context of not stealing from what he believes in lectures seems inadequate (Miller, p. 229-30, 2011). Thus, using the words 'morally right' will change the meaning to different circumstances for error theorists as morally right could either mean it falls into error or aim towards the truth in others.

This is similar to Daly and Liggin's objection, which puts forward the phenomenological objection to Joyce's moral fictionalism. This is stating that moral fictionalism cannot work as it does not feel we are pretending when we express moral judgements. Daly and Liggins posits in 'In Defence of Error Theory' (2010) that 'one commonly voiced objection is that we do not seem to be pretending when we engage in the discourses of which pretence theories are claimed to be true. Indeed we seem not to be pretending. For instance, if we introspect, it seems to us that we believe, rather than pretend, that $2 + 2 = 4$.' (Daly, p. 768, 2010). This implies that Joyce is assuming the ability of people being able to act with pretence in real moral dilemmas when in retrospect it is hard to argue this when it feels like we do hold these beliefs. Here are the premises Daly and Liggins has laid out to object to moral fictionalism:

- P1) If we make-believe that P, it will seem to us that we are make-believing that P.
- P2) It does not seem to us that we are make-believing that P.
- P3) Therefore, we are not make believing that P.
- P4) if moral fictionalism were true, we would be make-believing in P.
- C) moral fictionalism cannot be true.

Daly and Liggin's argument here asserts there is not clear that we are make-believing our normative commitments if does not seem to us that we are pretending that what we believe is true. Therefore, the act of presence seems to disappear when we are not thinking about error theory.

Furthermore, critics seem to have problems with the fictitious attitude while still using truth-apt sentences. This implies they encounter problems with the Frege-Geach problem and the critics want

to revise the assertive language in moral discourse. As Lutz puts forward, ‘the Fictionalist places a lot of weight on the fact that Fictionalists are supposed to play along with their fictions—this is how the Fictionalist is supposed to gain conduct-regulation benefits—but this involves acting as though the moral proposition in question is true, even though the Fictionalist merely holds a fictional attitude toward that proposition. This is straightforwardly irrational’ (Lutz, p. 360, 2014). Lutz asserts the issue of the irrationality of conveying a moral proposition is true, but this is all an act of pretence.

Furthermore, Joyce may see this as avoiding the Frege-Geach problem as it still holds the logical coherency in moral discourse. However, non-cognitivists believe that the Frege-Geach problem goes beyond the semantics when it comes to moral discourse. It also presents the attitudes expressed that must be concerning the logical relations of semantics or else ‘the underlying genuine arguments – the arguments people make by using sentences fictively – won’t have any force’ (Roojen, p. 196, 2015). This would imply that error theorists would need the attitudes to be implied in the logical meaning of the semantics to successfully avoid the problem. Still, as error theorists would be seen to argue sentences are false, so it is fictitious attitudes, then it does not avoid this problem.

An example of this would be that when someone expressed ‘lying is wrong’, then their attitudes should be coherent with their moral discourse. As Joyce argues that these would be make-believe statements that do not adhere to the attitudes with the moral statement, this would still apply to the Frege-Geach problem. The underlying attitudes in our moral discourse do not seem satisfactory for understanding the meaning. Therefore, moral realists and non-cognitivists take issue with the use of fictitious attitudes following their moral discourse as there would be no force behind the moral statements that they are uttering. This would suggest that the moral discourse should be revised if the attitudes are of fiction so people they are conversing with understand that it is with an act of pretence and avoiding moral syntax that would convey they hold those beliefs.

Overall, Joyce’s moral fictionalism seems to be a contender in preserving the benefits of our moral values without having the illogical argument of believing in first-order ethics and error theory. However, it is questioned whether the act of pretence is practical when considering whether one is dealing with moral dilemmas in uncritical contexts. Furthermore, moral fictionalism may not be completely committing to cognitivism if the act of pretence would subject error theory to the Frege-Geach problem. It therefore could be faced with problems from the Frege-Geach problem and other critics that would want moral discourse to be revised to suit the attitudes.

3.4 Responses to conservationism

Jonas Olson attempts to answer the question on ‘error theory, then what?’ with conservationism. Olson also rejects abolitionism as he states the importance of keeping the engagement in moral practice. However, Olson rejects the idea of moral fictionalism because there is no clear way of intending whether you are in the state of pretence when making moral judgements. Thus, Olson puts forward the theory of conservationism to be able to believe our moral judgements. Olson suggests that one should carry on with their moral commitments in ordinary contexts outside of philosophy and only believe in error theory in academic contexts. Therefore, moral agents should believe in non-natural realism in everyday circumstances when making moral judgements.

The central problem to conservationism is the irrationality of holding two opposing beliefs simultaneously, which are to believe X while disbelieving X. As put forward by Lutz, ‘the Conservationist specifically recommends that, for any moral belief p, we both believe p and disbelieve p, which is straightforwardly irrational’ (Lutz, p. 354, 2014). Olson does not see this as a plausible objection against conservationism. He asserts the idea of having these opposing beliefs in different contexts, meaning one would believe that error theory is true. Therefore, all moral sentences are false in academic settings and will also believe that they believe the moral statement that X is true in an ordinary setting. We can hold these two beliefs through being convinced in different contexts, such as parents telling you that you cannot steal from the shops because it is theft, and you could go to prison. Here, we could suggest we are convinced that stealing is wrong because external factors convince us to hold these moral views. However, when we are in a philosophy seminar, we can easily drop these moral commitments when shown that error theory is true, showing that our moral commitments in uncritical contexts are temporary. Joyce’s claim that if the agent is disposed to believe that not-p in critical contexts, they believe that not-p also in uncritical contexts, regardless of what they say or think in the latter kinds of contexts (Joyce, 2001, 2005). This is supported by Lutz, who argues ‘we ought to believe that nothing is right or wrong while simultaneously believing that a great number of particular things are right or wrong’, implying one of the beliefs should be retained while the other should be discarded to avoid the invalidity of the argument (Lutz, p. 354, 2014). Therefore, it is not an appealing method to have different beliefs in different contexts. If you truly believe in error theory in an academic context, it is hard not to apply your beliefs in everyday life. This differs from moral fictionalism as they can carry on with the belief that every moral statement is in error outside academic context and can carry on fitting in with moral discussion with the act of pretence. I do not think this is a strong argument for denying conservationism because the different contexts in which

we have different beliefs, which have been formed from the persuasion of rhetoric devices, makes forming moral beliefs easy in ordinary contexts. The theoretical side of philosophy debated in the classroom may allow us to believe that error theory is true. Still, one does not always think philosophically outside the classroom and therefore can form normative beliefs without thinking of error theory.

Another objection to conservationism is that it hasn't given us sufficient reason why conservationism is better than believing in moral fictionalism. Olson offers an argument in *Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* (2014) that moral fictionalism does not seem satisfactory in carrying on with our moral beliefs because agents do not seem to pretend when engaging with moral discussion. This means we should adopt the conservationist approach if it seems that moral agents genuinely believe in their moral commitments. The problem with both conservationism and moral fictionalism is that we are making assumptions on what an agent thinks or feels when engaging in moral discussions in uncritical contexts if they believe error theory is true in critical contexts. It will be challenging to conclude how one thinks or feels when in moral discussion, and we will have to use other arguments to argue why their theory would be better in preserving moral commitments. Olson's argument for preferring conservationism over fictionalism is the unclearness of when one engages with fiction when bearing on action and motivation and the blurred line on the act of pretence and believing in the moral statement in hand. This shows moral fictionalism would need to be revised to clarify how the act of pretence in uncritical contexts would be able to work and if there can be clarity whether people truly pretend to act as if their beliefs in moral commitments are under false pretence.

Olson's conservationism has shown how one can engage with moral discussion in uncritical contexts, which is through us holding temporary beliefs from being 'convinced'. Although there is a problem with holding two beliefs simultaneously, this is handled by showing these beliefs formed in uncritical contexts is because we are convinced temporarily these moral statements are true. Joyce responds with the irrationality of holding two opposing beliefs temporarily in different contexts, suggesting that one belief is stronger than the other than it should be the case of believing not P in critical and uncritical contexts. Olson also responds to how conservationism would be considered a better approach to moral fictionalism as it is clear on the motivational force of the attitudes.

3.5 Alternative theories to the 'Now what?' problem

Now that we have spoken about abolitionism, moral fictionalism, and conservationism, it should be considered which one is the most plausible outcome in preserving the benefits of moral practice if error theory is true. As agreed previously, it is essential to retain first-order ethics, so abolitionism is not the route error theorists are desired to take. On the other hand, moral fictionalism and conservationism have multiple similarities, such as the necessity to preserve moral commitments if error theory is true, showing the distinction between critical and uncritical contexts, and recommending similar behaviour using moral discourse. The difference is that one argues we should act with pretence in these uncritical contexts and the other suggests we temporarily hold moral beliefs in uncritical contexts. So far, conservationism is the most plausible theory, but let's compare it with one more theory. There are other known theories out there that could defend error theory and its impact on first-order morality. So far, moral fictionalism, conservationism and abolitionism have been mentioned. From speculation, the theories suggest that a solution to the 'now what?' problem must meet three criteria. It must not endorse any positive moral beliefs, allow us to use moral discourse and continue acting morally, and the moral language and action cannot be based on accepting a moral proposition.

A theory that attempts to answer the 'now what?' question that Lutz has developed is referred to as substitutionism. Substitutionism is the concept that we can replace moral beliefs, substituting them with other beliefs. This is done by having a fully-committed attitude to some propositions without committing to moral propositions. Lutz sets out 'according to the Substitutionist, the thing to do in response to the 'Now What' Problem is to adopt a fully-committed attitude to some propositions that are not moral propositions, and use those full commitments to fill the hole in our normative life' (Lutz, p. 362, 2014). Therefore, we will need to replace moral beliefs with other beliefs that allow us to meet the criteria needed to preserve first-order ethics. For example, a subjectivist would approach this by replacing the idea of moral beliefs with their beliefs about their attitude and projects. This can also be applied with a relativist approach as they can substitute moral beliefs with beliefs about the norms of their culture. The flexibility of substitutionism can also reach non-cognitivist ideas, suggesting they can replace their moral beliefs with expressions of approval and disapproval of acts. This shows the concept of moral beliefs can be made redundant if replaced with other beliefs to suit societal function.

However, this may cause problems with the use of moral language or be considered an irrational route for moral action if there are no moral beliefs. This would mean the substitutionist would need to find

an appropriate substitute for moral beliefs for our moral language and action to have force still. This is because substitutionism seems similar to abolitionism by suggesting that we will hold no moral beliefs. The only way to carry on is to hold other beliefs that are non-moral, so substitutionism has the task of having beliefs similar to moral beliefs make it work. Lutz identifies that the error theorist argues 'our normative concepts are not directly referential. The content of our normative concepts and the meanings of our normative words are given by a set of platitudes regarding what it takes to be good or bad, right or wrong' (Lutz, p. 362, 2014). This is exemplified by comparison to God and his attributes by Lutz. This is by making a distinction between the negotiable and the non-negotiable conceptual commitments attributed to God. The non-negotiable conceptions of God would be attributes such as being omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and the creator of the universe. These, if found out not to be true or taken away, will affect the concept of what it is to be God. However, the negotiable commitments could be how God has given the Ten Commandments to Moses, which if we find out that they didn't happen to be true, does not affect the conception of God. This can be used to apply to moral discourse as there are non-negotiable commitments argued by error theorists, such as our moral reasons need to be desire-independent. The negotiable commitments that moral reason has could allow substitutionism to replace moral beliefs with other normative beliefs. An example Lutz provides is how pain can be a reason and shape their beliefs to avoid such pain. Some may disagree that they would shape attitudes around pain but could understand the connection between pain and one's attitude towards it. This would provide action to avoid pain, and this can be suggested as a belief that has enough force as a moral reason.

With substitutionism outlined, we can compare how substitutionism compares to the other theories in question. It is argued that substitutionism avoids endorsing erroneous claims in uncritical contexts if they are not endorsing moral claims by expressing other beliefs. Furthermore, it preserves the motivational force of morality by allowing full commitment to propositions, unlike moral fictionalism. Therefore, it allows us to have beliefs by disconnecting the moral propositions in question. The problem with substitutionism may depend on what form of substitutionism one would adopt as the theory is flexible. However, some of the forms would be incompatible with error theory, such as non-cognitive substitutionism, as it would therefore have problems such as the Frege-Geach problem. An instrumental part of error theory is moral discourse is cognitivism as it suggests the error lies in the moral discourse presupposing moral facts when they do not exist. Furthermore, there is also a problem with using moral discourse if we are substituting the meaning, suggesting we would need to reform moral language if we are substituting our moral beliefs. This could be done using a different

kind of language, but it could end up with the same meaning as moral discourse and therefore presuppose moral values.

In speculation, there are no theories that contribute towards the 'Now what?' problem that avoids all objections, and therefore there is no perfect answer to retain moral discussions. As already discussed, conservationism is a more desirable answer than moral fictionalism with the commitment to the motivational force and retaining moral discourse. I do not believe that substitutionism preserves many benefits in first-order ethics by substituting other beliefs to replace moral beliefs, as shown by lacking motivational force and a problem with moral discourse. If there is a theory that is most plausible for preserving the benefits of moral values, conservationism's attempt to preserve the benefits is most successful. However, if there was a more satisfying solution for preserving normative commitments, error theory may have a more reputable position in metaethics.

3.6 Responses to Streumer's Unbelievability Argument

Bart Streumer's argument in defence of error theory is that our full beliefs do not commit us to believe in error theory. This is because our normative beliefs are committed to normative properties, which do not exist, and therefore the belief in error theory does not exist. However, as highlighted in section 2.3, this is not a problem for Streumer as error theory can still be true without our belief in the theory. Furthermore, the lack of belief in error theory allows Streumer to outline what objections error theory can be undermined if we do not have belief in error theory. Streumer, therefore, argues that although we cannot fully believe in error theory, we can believe in parts of error theory at different times to keep defending error theory. However, this can cause problems for Streumer if we are to not fully believe in error theory, leaving his weaker version of error theory by believing parts at different times.

Hyun and Sampson object to the idea of believing in parts of error theory and the cost of believing parts suggests that it still causes problems for first-order ethics. Hyun and Sampson posit in 'On Believing Error Theory' (2014) that:

'Although we cannot believe the Error Theory, we can come close to believing the Error Theory, and Streumer has argued that we have reason to do so. Streumer recognizes that a way to come close to believing the Error Theory is to believe those theses that are parts of the Error Theory, and surely Moral Error Theory is a part of the Error Theory. So, if there are reasons to come close to believing the

Error Theory, then there are reasons to believe Moral Error Theory, and as a result, our deepest and most important moral convictions are indeed threatened' (Hyun, p. 640, 2014).

This conveys that even though one believes in parts of error theory, this suggests that one is committing to the part of error theory that is moral error theory, even if it is partially. Therefore, we are still committing to moral error theory, which is against most of our other moral beliefs and should be abandoned if it threatens our full beliefs. Streumer is unclear on what parts we can believe, which leaves the idea of still being committed to moral error theory. Although, as presented before by Streumer, the problems of believing in error theory and why we should not believe in error theory, believing in parts still causes this concern that it still puts normative commitments in jeopardy. To avoid this, Streumer would have to adequately explain what parts of error theory at what time we can believe them.

In section 2.3., I have set out arguments Streumer believes undermines many objections by the unbelievability argument, but some objections have can be raised from following the unbelievability argument. I shall talk about three objections that Streumer has responded to and whether his response is sustained from the objections. The first one is known as the objection from partial belief. As raised in section 2.3, we cannot have a full belief in error theory but we can partially believe parts of error theory at different times to have a defence of error theory. We must have partial beliefs in error theory or else there is no reason to have the theory. Streumer admits that the unbelievability argument opens the possibility of partially believing in error theory at different times because we can believe different premises of error theory without committing to a full belief in error theory. The objection from partial belief is partial beliefs in error theory can lower the confidence in our normative judgements, arguing there will be a less motivational force in our moral beliefs. This also works for error theory, suggesting if there is only partial belief in error theory, then there is a lack of confidence in believing in a theory, and therefore, other theories would be more preferable for full belief. Streumer responds to this objection, suggesting that even if it does weaken our normative beliefs, 'it will not make us give up these judgements' (Streumer, p. 22, 2013). Therefore, Streumer prefers to weaken our judgements than to either give up these commitments for error theory. Furthermore, this applies to having partial belief in error theory to lower our confidence in the belief in error theory, suggesting this does not mean we do not have to drop our beliefs. This is better than dropping our partial beliefs altogether. The response to the objection seems to be arguing for a lesser than two evils, suggesting the option we have is to have low confidence in our moral beliefs or have no moral beliefs at all. The former is the route Streumer finds more plausible. This is an irrational approach to

keep beliefs in error theory and normative commitments, but only partially if it shows there are problems in believing both.

Another objection is the Moorean paradox objection, which is the argument that if Streumer defends error theory with the unbelievability argument, we have to follow one of the following:

- 1) The error theory is true, but I do not believe that it is true.
- 2) The error theory is true, but there is no reason for me to believe that it is true.

If we assert that 'p, but I do not believe in p', they are Moore-paradoxical because no one can rationally argue that a theory is true, but I cannot believe in it. Streumer agrees that one cannot sincerely assert that they believe a theory is true but we cannot believe in it. However, we can defend different parts of error theory at different times that does not entail or assert error theory is true. Therefore, Streumer argues he does not argue he believes in error theory or argue error theory is true but can partly believe in parts of error theory that are not considered fully believing in error theory. This means there is no argument Streumer asserts he believes in error theory or an argument to show error theory is true. This seems confusing from Streumer, arguing we can agree with X and Y, but we cannot believe in $X + Y = Z$, suggesting we should ignore the conclusion to the premises we believe in when the conclusion is a rational progression. Partial belief does not seem plausible and therefore does not avoid the Moorean paradox objection.

The last objection is the objection from reflective equilibrium, which is the idea that our philosophies should bring our beliefs into equilibrium. If we cannot believe a theory of belief, or if we differentiate between different parts of a theory at different times, then there isn't entirely an equilibrium with a lack of consistency of our beliefs. Therefore, our normative commitments and metaethical commitments should have an equilibrium. David Lewis has argued in support of this objection, asserting we should endorse 'a simple maxim of honesty: never put forward a philosophical theory that you yourself cannot believe in your least philosophical and most commonsensical moments' (Lewis, p. 135, 1986). Unfortunately, Streumer's response to this objection is very vague and confusing with his response being:

'These claims may seem sensible, but I think they are false. There is no reason why the truth could not be beyond our grasp. If it is, we should not believe falsehoods for the sake of reaching reflective

equilibrium. Instead, we should try to come as close as possible to believing the truth. It would be dishonest to try to do anything else' (Streumer, p. 24, 2013).

Here, Streumer is arguing our beliefs should be closest to the truth as possible instead of reaching equilibrium, but does not explain how not believing in his error theory, which he argues is true, is the best option. Furthermore, if error theory is the truth, then surely his theory is not an adequate response to this, suggesting it is more dishonest to not believe in a theory that is true to partially have normative commitments.

Streumer has shown that he cannot defend his unbelievability argument from the three new objections raised from partially believing in error theory. Moreover, it seems that his unbelievability argument raises more questions than answers on how we can believe error theory and normative commitments, showing it is not adequately explained how this is possible.

3.7 Conclusion

As outlined at the beginning, the aim of this dissertation is to discuss why Mackie's error theory is not successful in defending error theory and whether the three contemporary error theorists I have selected to discuss their arguments revives the theory. Although Mackie started to raise good arguments, as highlighted in the argument from queerness and his attempt to answer the 'now what?' question and suggests a 'start' for the development of error theory. However, I defend the view that Mackie does not completely defend error theory with the refuted argument from relativity, the incomplete argument from queerness, and the ambiguous answer to the 'now what?' question.

Richard Joyce agrees with the statement that the argument from relativity has no force in defending error theory but does take an interest in Mackie's argument from queerness and suggests the queerness lies in moral discourse pre-supposing non-institutional, desire-transcendent reasons to act. Joyce improves upon Mackie's error theory by outlining where the queerness lies in moral discourse, which is in the moral discourse presupposing non-institutional, desire-transcendent moral reasons. However, the objections to his conceptual claim, such as how morality can be an institution and the assumption made on moral discourse having authority, weakens his argument's force. Jonas Olson is also interested in finding where the queerness lies, which is in the presumption of morality being irreducibly normative. However, the argument from irreducibility is faced with problems through

Olson's response to Finlay. This concludes Joyce and Olson are not successful in reviving Mackie's queerness argument.

Joyce also re-iterates that Mackie does not develop much of a theory to have a solution for the 'now what?' problem, as Joyce argues it is ambiguous what Mackie is attempting to argue, whether it be conservationism or abolitionism. I have set out that abolitionism does not preserve the benefits of first-order ethics, Joyce's moral fictionalism faces problems with attitude and motivational force, and conservationism suggests irrationality in believing in two opposing beliefs. However, Olson is the most plausible by arguing how rhetoric devices convince us into opposing beliefs in uncritical contexts. I have also discussed another theory that could be preferred, which is Lutz' substitutionism theory. However, it faces problems replacing moral beliefs with moral discourse being inconsistent with beliefs and lacking the motivational force moral beliefs have. Although conservationism is most plausible, there are imperfections in all theories and should be revised. Lastly, I have outlined and discussed Streumer's unbelievability argument in defence of error theory. This is the theory that we cannot believe in error theory. According to Streumer, this helps defend error theory as it avoids many objections to error theory if we believe in it. Streumer argues we can still partially believe in error theory at different times for error theory not to be a 'full belief', but this causes problems for the unbelievability argument.

Overall, the aims of the contemporary error theorists are not met, which are to revise the queerness argument to defend error theory and develop an answer to preserve first-order ethics. Therefore, I do not believe the error theorists beyond Mackie has revived error theory and is still not considered a reputable position in metaethics.

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