

Errors upon Errors: A Reply to Joyce

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ABSTRACT: In his response to my paper ‘The Error in the Error Theory’ criticizing his and J. L. Mackie’s moral error theory, Richard Joyce finds my treatment of his position inaccurate and my interpretation of morality implausible. In this reply I clarify my objection, showing that it retains its force against their error theory, and I clarify my interpretation of morality, showing that Joyce’s objections miss their mark.

In my judgement, John Mackie’s *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* [1977] and Richard Joyce’s *The Myth of Morality* [2001] are two of the most important and engaging books ever written about morality. It was my great esteem for them that led me to write a paper titled ‘The Error in the Error Theory’ [2008], in which I tried to identify where their arguments went wrong and explain why we did not have to accede to their conclusion that all basic moral statements are untrue. I am therefore pleased to have prompted a response from Joyce [2011a].¹ Unfortunately, he considers my treatment of their positions inaccurate, and my interpretation of morality implausible. However he consistently misunderstands my objection and views. I am surprised to find myself misinterpreted on so many fronts, and here I can address only the most significant errors. I first reply to the charge that I misinterpret the Joyce/Mackie argument for moral error theory, by clarifying my objection. Second, I explain why Joyce’s response fails to blunt the force of this objection. Third, I rebut Joyce’s objections by clarifying my own interpretation of morality.

1. ‘Absolute’ and ‘Relative’

Following Mackie, Joyce argues for error theory by first identifying a ‘nonnegotiable’ conceptual presupposition of moral language and thought (the *conceptual* premise), and then claiming that this presupposition is incompatible with how the world actually is (the *substantive* premise). Joyce’s first major complaint is that I misidentify the ‘poisoned presupposition’ of morality that leads himself, Mackie, and others to error theory,² and he declares ‘I cannot recognize myself in many of

¹ Jonas Olson [2010] has also come to error theory’s defense. His objections are largely different and aren’t addressed here.

² Joyce suggests I might be mistaking the commitments of moral error theory *as such* with the commitments of a particular argument for error theory. (I am found guilty in Joyce [2011b]). A terminological difference may be responsible; whereas he apparently understands ‘error theory’ austerely, as claiming simply that all basic moral statements are untrue, I used it as incorporating views about the underlying fault in moral concepts. (But see Joyce [2001: 5]: ‘an error theory... involves two steps of argumentation’). Hence I distinguished between different *error theories*, as we commonly distinguish between different expressivist theories, nonnaturalist theories, etc.

He calls it a ‘major strategic weakness’ that my paper overlooks or ignores all the other possible arguments for an error theory, since ‘it takes little effort to locate other possible flawed presuppositions’. It is unlikely that *any* feasible strategy for defending morality in a single article wouldn’t be ‘weak’ by this standard. My objective was merely to refute the ‘Mackian error theory’ [2008: 351], and I explicitly acknowledged that other error theories ‘would not be vulnerable to the arguments of this paper’ [2008: 350].

the views Finlay attributes to “Joyce [2001]”. He explains that while my challenge is to morality’s alleged ‘absolute’ character, his and Mackie’s arguments turn instead on its ‘objectivity’.

Misidentifying the poisoned presupposition would certainly have been a fundamental mistake. But my departures from Mackie’s and Joyce’s preferred *terminologies* don’t entail that I misrepresent their views.³ Terms like ‘objective’ and ‘absolute’ are perilously vague, and I believe they should only be used in philosophy with clear stipulations. Yet Joyce straightaway asserts that as a term of art, ‘absolute’ contrasts with ‘relative’, and that metaethical relativism ‘holds that moral claims contain an essential indexical element, such that the truth of any such claim requires relativization to some individual or group that can change from context to context.’ He then states that if Mackie had meant ‘absolute’, then ‘we can be sure that that is what he would have said’, and proceeds to assume that my arguments against a presupposition of ‘absolute authority’ aim at rejecting the supposed *non-indexicality* of moral concepts.⁴

Ironically, Joyce interprets my use of ‘absolute authority’ in this way while simultaneously observing that ‘the vernacular usage of “absolute”...need have nothing to do with relativism’, and admonishing me that ‘it is important that when we see the term “absolute”—even in the works of metaethicists—we do not leap to the assumption that a particular metaethical theory is under discussion!’ This may seem outrageously hypocritical, but Joyce believes I have misinterpreted his argument as a result of committing this very error in reading Mackie. Yes—‘absolute’ is, in fact, one of the many vague terms that *Mackie* uses to characterize morality’s ‘poisoned presupposition’. (Reversing Joyce’s claim, may I then argue that since ‘absolute’ *is* what Mackie said, we can therefore be sure that that is what he meant?) The first occurrence immediately follows the sentence that Joyce treats as pivotal, in which Mackie characterizes his error theory as ‘the denial that any such categorically imperative element is objectively valid’. Mackie goes on to clarify this opaque claim by saying, ‘The objective values which I am denying would be action-directing *absolutely*, not contingently... upon the agent’s desires and inclinations’ [1977: 29, my emphasis]. A few pages later he writes, ‘the ordinary user of moral language means to say something...that involves a call for action...that is *absolute*, not contingent upon any desire or preference or policy or choice, his own or anyone else’s’ [1977: 33, my emphasis].⁵

However, Joyce rightly discerns a dismissive attitude towards alternative arguments in my use of the definite article: ‘*the* error theory’. Mackie/Joyce error theory, turning on the *categorically imperative* nature of morality, offers the most plausible as well as the most familiar argument, and is error theorists’ best hope. A major contribution of Joyce [2001] was to identify and develop this as Mackie’s best argument. Pointing out the availability of other arguments has little force if they are not compelling—and I think Joyce’s proposed candidates are not, which is why they have not found popularity. So I consider morality provisionally vindicated if Mackie’s and Joyce’s arguments are refuted.

³ The terminologies they employ to characterize the poisoned presupposition are diverse and vague: ‘objective’, ‘objectively valid’, ‘categorical’, ‘unconditional’, ‘non-institutional’, ‘part of the fabric of the world’, ‘practical oomph’, and ‘practical clout’. (I am not supposing that they use all these terms interchangeably.)

⁴ There is an important difference between *indexical* views proper, and *relational* views. Strictly, my view is relational, but for simplicity I follow Joyce in ignoring this difference here.

⁵ Joyce suggests that by ‘absolute’ authority, Mackie means demands that are ‘inescapable, incontestable, non-negotiable’ [2011a]. I’m unsure whether this is a reference to (a) ‘strong’ categorical imperatives specifically (see below), or (b) merely to categorical imperatives *per se*. If (a), I agree, but this is what I also meant by ‘absolute authority’. If (b), then Joyce is surely misinterpreting Mackie, who is here clarifying what it is about morality that arouses his suspicion.

It is Joyce's interpretation of me that is mistaken, not mine of Mackie or Joyce. I did not use 'absolute authority' with the meaning he attributes to me, but rather with the same meaning as Mackie. I explicitly stipulated such a use, closely following Mackie and Joyce's own characterizations of morality's poisoned presupposition: 'the absoluteness of moral value thus involves the character of moral requirements as *categorical imperatives*... Moral discourse assumes that moral value and requirements provide or entail *reasons* for acting that apply categorically (absolutely), independently of one's desires and ends' [2008: 349].⁶

Some pages later, Joyce does raise the question whether my use of 'absolute' could be read more charitably in this way, but dismisses the possibility for the reason that it 'doesn't fit with a great deal of what [Finlay] goes on to argue'—which, he says, is concerned with *relativism*. Joyce interprets me this way because much of my use of 'absolutism' occurs in the course of my objections to Joyce's own arguments that morality is conceptually committed to 'absolutism'. Yes—Joyce *himself* identifies 'moral absolutism' (non-indexicality) as a conceptual commitment of morality: 'Moral values are exactly those values which are *not* relative... Our ordinary use of the concept of *moral rightness*... is completely undermined without absolutism' [2001: 97]. He thinks I have inferred from the facts (1) that he argues for conceptual 'moral absolutism' (non-indexicality), and (2) that Mackie sometimes uses the same *word* 'absolute' in discussing morality's poisoned presupposition, to the conclusion (3) that moral absolutism (non-indexicality) is the alleged poisoned presupposition. But, he objects, this conclusion is wrong; the poisoned presupposition is something different.

Joyce's reading is incorrect. On pp. 350-1, I drew a distinction between (i) absolutism about the 'authority' of moral value, and (ii) absolutism about the 'nature' of moral value. By (i) I naturally meant that moral value has *authority* for agents that isn't relative to or contingent upon their desires, etc. This is what I correctly identified as the alleged poisoned presupposition. (Compare Joyce: 'that all-important moral *authority* that putatively binds us regardless of our desires' [2001: 101]). By (ii), I meant roughly what Joyce understands by 'absolutism': that moral concepts are non-indexical, not involving any relation to something else like desires, standards, institutions—or as I prefer, *ends*. When I subsequently wrote about 'absolutism' I didn't disambiguate, but not because I was equivocating. Rather, I was treating these two absolutist theses and the two corresponding relativist theses as package deals. As I put it, 'In this paper... I assume [their] double marriage' [2008: 350]. Hence, my strategy was to challenge conceptual absolutism about moral authority *by means of* challenging the alleged non-indexicality of moral concepts. My objection aims at the right target.

2. Joyce's Commitments

A second major issue is whether my strategy succeeds. You might worry it was hasty or question-begging to assume the double marriage. This emerges to be the critical question, because Joyce now claims that in targeting moral non-indexicality I have mistaken a merely subsidiary and

⁶ Compare Joyce: 'The conceptual commitment of moral discourse, upon which the error theory turns, is one concerning actions that we "have to" perform, regardless of what our desires and interests are' [2001: 67]. By 'reasons', I here meant what Joyce qualifies as 'real' (i.e. normatively authoritative) reasons [2001: 51]. Like him, I acknowledge the existence of 'institutional' reasons, which I describe elsewhere as reasons that *don't matter*.

‘dispensable’ argument for his actual master argument, and hence that my objection to his error theory fails. In this section I explain why this is mistaken.

Let me first lay out the dialectic as Joyce sees it. He explains that his master argument goes like this:

- J1: Conceptually, morality requires non-institutional categorical imperatives (NICIs);
- J2: In fact, NICIs are indefensible;
- J3. Therefore, error theory.

Then, he explains, he addresses an objection to J2:

H: In fact, moral NICIs are defensible as rational requirements.

He responds to H with the following ‘subsidiary’ argument:

- (i) In fact, rational requirements are relativistic;
- (ii) Conceptually, moral requirements are non-relativistic (‘moral absolutism’);
- (iii) Therefore, in fact, no moral requirements could be rational requirements.

Having thus rejected objection H, and judging that there are no other promising ways of defending NICIs (i.e. no other good objections to J2), Joyce [2001] concludes that his master argument for error theory succeeds.

Joyce supposes that my objection misses its target in the following way. I aim to challenge J1, but—mistakenly taking the subsidiary argument to be part of the master argument and confusing (ii) for J1—I only attack (ii).⁷ But, Joyce objects, the truth of (ii) and commitment to moral absolutism (non-indexicality) are dispensable for his master argument, since even if moral requirements *were* relativistic or indexical in a way compatible with their being rational requirements, there still might be *other* reasons why they can’t be rational requirements (i.e. reasons for rejecting H)—as he thinks there are⁸—and other reasons for accepting J2. Hence, Joyce now suggests that his defense of conceptual moral absolutism or non-indexicality is dispensable for his claim (J1) that morality essentially involves NICIs (in my terms, presupposes absolute authority)—i.e. he suggests

⁷ Notice that I do so not with the goal of refuting either (iii) or J2, Joyce’s claims which *actually* rest on (ii), since I accept both (iii) and J2, and reject H!

⁸ He clarifies that he does *not* equate NICIs with rational requirements, and rejects the hypothesis that morality conceptually presupposes the authority of practical reason. My arguments are unaffected, since I appeal to practical rationality only because I thought it helpful for clarifying the elusive notion of absolute authority (see Smith’s [1994: 65] reading of Mackie, and Joyce [2001: 104]). But I find Joyce’s rejection of conceptual moral rationalism (CMR) puzzling and ill-advised. (1) It seems irreconcilable with his observations that (i) morality purports to provide *real* reasons, and (ii) that ‘whatever else it consists of, practical rationality is the framework that tells us what our reasons for acting are’ [2001: 49, also 48]. (2) I see no rationale short of denying absolute authority for rejecting either observation. (3) In rejecting CMR in favour of ‘inchoate practical oomph’, Joyce quite defangs his error theory, since attempts to defend moral rationalism have a long, distinguished tradition, while (i) few writers have ever claimed that morality has ‘practical oomph’ where this is not understood as rational requirement, motivating power, or rhetorical force, etc., and (ii) it is questionable whether Joyce can even *communicate* what else is missing. (4) His only arguments against CMR seem fallacious: he suggests that a *conceptual* connection between morality and rationality would be ruled out if *in fact*, either rationality only provides reasons that are contingent on agents’ desires, or it provides desire-independent reasons with the wrong content [2001: 68, 120, referenced in 2011a]. But this seems to confuse arguments against *substantive* moral rationalism (i.e. potential arguments *for error theory*) for arguments against *conceptual* moral rationalism!

that the double marriage my argument assumes doesn't hold. 'Since Finlay misconstrues my arguments', he writes, 'he thinks that if a kind of moral relativism can be shown to be viable, then the entire master argument for the moral error theory collapses.'

I think Joyce has become confused about his own commitments, and that despite what he now maintains, his argument for error theory does depend intimately—in its commitment to J1—upon morality's being conceptually non-indexical.

First, I assumed the marriage of absolute authority to non-indexicality with so little argument partly because Joyce and Mackie seemed to assume it too. I'm unsure how Joyce's present disavowal of any conceptual commitment to non-indexicality ('...the same options [of being true relative to one culture but false relative to another] must be allowed for moral imperatives...') can be reconciled with many central claims of his [2001]. His own claims that morality is conceptually absolutist were based in his discussion in Chapter 2 which identified 'strong categorical imperatives' as the poisoned presupposition: '...moral reasons are conceptually non-relative. All the arguments of Chapter 2, to the conclusion that morality consists of categorical imperatives, point to morality's being non-relative.' [2001: 95]⁹ He goes on to link absolutism with the poisoned presupposition explicitly:

To think that the shift from moral absolutism (for which we face an error theory) to Harman's relativistic 'moral' replacement...is a small change in view is to misunderstand the central role that absolutism has played, and does play, in our moral concepts. Moral values are exactly those values which are *not* relative: they are the ones that apply to an agent regardless of that agent's desires or cultural placement. Our ordinary use of the concept of *action* is not much affected when we let go of absolutism; our ordinary use of the concept of *moral rightness*, by contrast, is completely undermined without absolutism.

[2001: 97]

Harman claims that... 'it makes no sense to ask whether an action is wrong, period...' Quite so; it makes no sense. Where I disagree is that I am certain that we most emphatically *do* speak of actions as wrong, period. Indeed, I have gone so far as to claim that it is 'the whole point' of moral discourse that it allows us to speak of actions in such a manner.

[2001: 99]

In these two passages, Joyce identifies absolutism as having a 'central role' in and being 'the whole point' of moral discourse, so that moral discourse is 'completely undermined' without it. Because absolutism 'makes no sense', it is something 'for which we face an error theory'.

Perhaps I am overlooking a way of reconciling these positions. Or you might suppose that Joyce could now disown his earlier claims. But my second, more important point is that even if he is no longer psychologically committed to the non-indexicality of moral concepts, he is nonetheless still *conceptually* committed to it by his own characterization of the poisoned presupposition. (Indeed,

⁹ '...the conclusion that moral reasons are relative to agents (which is close to the conclusion that moral imperatives are hypothetical)...' [2001: 80]; '...moral imperatives are firmly *non*-relativistic (as I have already argued [i.e. in chapter 2], and will do so further below)...' [2001: 86]

I assumed the double marriage with so little fuss partly because it seemed to me obvious.) I'll now explain.

In his response, Joyce formulates his conceptual premise J1 in Mackie's terms of 'non-institutional categorical imperatives' (NICIs). What exactly are NICIs? Joyce's and Mackie's picture is apparently as follows. They recognize two kinds of legitimate *ought*-sentences: *hypothetical imperatives* (HIs), which Joyce identifies as the *oughts* of practical reason, and *institutional categorical imperatives* (ICIs), or 'weak categorical imperatives':¹⁰

HI: S ought-relative-to-D to φ

ICI: S ought-relative-to-I to φ

Here D is a desiderative set; I is an institution (code of rules). An *ought* is a 'categorical imperative', in their usage, just in case it applies or is ascribed to an agent independently of her desiderative set. (My own view as presented elsewhere is that we can give a unifying account of both HIs and ICIs as *ought-in-order-that-E*, where E is an 'end' or outcome.) According to our shared instrumentalist view of normative authority ('real' reasons), an *ought* has normative authority for an agent S only if S's desiderative set connects in the right way with this parameter. Hence, 'S ought-relative-to- x to φ ' has normative authority for S, or entails that S has 'real' reasons to φ , only if x is S's desiderative set, or an institution to which S 'subscribes', or an end of concern to S, etc.

An NICI would then be an *ought* that is not relativized or indexed, either to an agent's desiderative set, or to any particular institution. (I take this to be what Mackie and Joyce mean in characterizing these supposed categorical imperatives as 'objectively valid'; i.e. they don't consist in any relation to an institution or code of rules, but are simply *there* 'in the fabric of the world'):¹¹

NICI: S ought (period!) to φ

Because NICIs apply or are ascribed to agents independently of their desires, they are categorical imperatives, like ICIs. But since they would describe unrelativized normative facts, their *authority* wouldn't be relative to or contingent upon an agent's desires, institutional subscriptions, or ends. Hence, they would have *absolute* authority (be 'strong categorical imperatives'). But because all genuine normative authority is relative to agents' desires—as agreed between Joyce, Mackie, and myself—NICIs are all spurious.

My challenge to this portrayal of morality was that moral statements (a) could be, for all Joyce and Mackie have shown, and (b) in fact plausibly are, merely ICIs: *oughts* applying or ascribed to agents independently of their desires, but with normative authority that is relative to and contingent upon those agents' desires. I conclude that my objection does not miss its mark as

¹⁰ Following Mackie, Joyce appropriately distinguishes imperatives-proper from ought-sentences. Nothing here turns on the simplification in my presentation.

¹¹ Perhaps this can be resisted [see my 2008: 351n]. But even if an absolutist view of moral authority could be combined with some indexical views of moral concepts this would not rescue the error theory, since the particular indexical views I propose support only relative authority.

charged. If my defense of moral indexicality is correct, then Joyce's and Mackie's error theories fail. The bottom line is that they and I hold basically the same view about what kinds of things the world contains; what we disagree about is whether this is enough to make some moral claims true. The real issue is whether my arguments succeed in establishing that moral statements could be and/or actually are ICIs. Joyce indeed seems partly to recognize this, since he takes considerable pains in his response, as in his book, to defend his supposedly 'dispensable' claim that relativistic/indexical interpretations of morality as involving only ICIs cannot be correct.

3. The Perils of 'Relativism'

My interpretations of moral practice and concepts are open to reasonable doubts and challenges. Ultimately the reader must judge for herself whose portrait of morality, mine or Joyce's, is more faithful. However, Joyce insinuates that I am guilty of 'undertaking every convolution and distortion possible to squeeze every last drop of ersatz objectivity from [my] favoured theory.' Before that accusation can be justly assessed, one would need to be working from an undistorted picture of my favoured theory, but Joyce's objections involve some significant misrepresentations. To be fair, in my paper I was coy about the particular details of my own views. I need to explain more carefully how I propose a relativistic interpretation of morality should proceed.

Joyce's complaints largely boil down to two issues.¹² (A) Against my *defense* of a relativistic interpretation of morality, he claims it fails to do justice to how people would respond to a speaker who made the suggested index explicit, like a judge at the Nuremberg trials who prefaced his moral condemnations of Nazis with 'According to our standards...' (B) Against my *argument* for a relativistic interpretation of morality, he complains that I provide no support for my 'bizarre' claim that error theorists are obliged to interpret ordinary people uncharitably as taking the instantiated relational property as evidence for the uninstantiated absolute property.

In addressing these complaints it is instructive to note some problems arising from Joyce's own understanding of what he calls 'relativism'. His explicit definitions of 'moral relativism' identify it as the view that moral concepts or words are indexed to particular *agents* (individuals or groups).¹³ If we take this as the precise definition, then Joyce is *completely* wrong to interpret me as defending relativism. For in this sense I also reject relativism about moral concepts, and I agree they are not (in any interesting sense) indexed or relativized to agents, as individuals or as groups. Rather, I defended a 'relational view' I introduced as claiming that 'every kind of value is relative to some *standard or end*' [2008: 350]. True, I maintain that our moral claims are relativized to *our* standards or ends, but this is to be read *de re*, not *de dicto*; i.e. if my relevant moral end is E then my moral claim is to be interpreted as *ought-relative-to-E*, not as *ought-relative-to-my-ends*.

¹² Joyce is also unimpressed by my final sentences offering what I called 'unscientific speculations' about the possible significance of the Australasian proclivity for error theory, characterizing them as a 'silly' *ad hominem* argument. Whatever their value, they were not offered as any kind of argument against error theory, but merely as interesting possible implications of my analyses for the sociology of metaethics.

¹³ '...claims of the form "There is a normative reason to φ (in circumstances C)" are not properly formed... Therefore two people who utter the same sentence... may well be expressing different propositions, one about [agent] S, the other about [agent] S*... This is what I understand by "relativism"' [2001: 84]; '*relativism*... holds that moral claims contain an essential indexical element, such that the truth of any such claim requires relativization to some individual or group that can change from context to context.' [2011a].

The significance of this mismatch would not be that my objections to Joyce's argument for error theory misidentify his commitment to 'absolutism' (since an indexical view of this broader kind is also incompatible with morality's consisting of NICIs/presupposing absolute authority, as explained above and on p. 350 of my paper), but rather that there are ways of resisting Joyce's argument which he failed to notice. However, it might be more charitable to dismiss his explicit definitions as narrower than intended, and to interpret his use of 'relativism' as applying to any view of moral concepts as indexed to *some* kind of parameter.¹⁴ This fits better with his exploration of the analogies with 'relativism' about motion (which isn't *agent*-relativity, after all) and his ascription of moral relativism to my paper. Moreover, his original arguments against relativistic interpretations of morality would apply as well to relativism more broadly construed.

But this issue is pertinent to Joyce's first complaint about my portrayal of morality, (A) above. Before I explain, let me observe that I *agree* with his claim that the Nuremberg judge who explicitly relativizes his moral claims has scandalously 'said too little' and that people would want him to 'eliminate' the relativizing phrase, and—as Joyce eventually acknowledges—I offer an explanation for these things. My proposal in the original paper [2008: 357] and elsewhere was that leaving the relevant end or standard unstated can function as a rhetorical device for expressing the *expectation* (i.e. demand) that others have concern or respect for that end or standard. If this is right, then the explicitly relativistic judge fails to express the demand, and hence the *condemnation*, that people want and expect him to express. Joyce's objection eventually emerges to be this: the relativistic model places 'the locus of our moral condemnation in the wrong place', turning our attention towards *ourselves* and our own contingent feelings and desires, rather than towards the objective qualities of the deeds being judged.

But this characterization would be apt only on the narrow, self-referential sense of moral relativism found in Joyce's explicit definitions, which I reject. Suppose for example that the unstated end is *promoting general human wellbeing*. In demanding respect for general human wellbeing and asserting that the Nazis acted in ways detrimental to that end, the judge would not be directing our attention to his/our own attitudes at all, but simply to the ideal of general human wellbeing, and its relation to the actions of the Nazis. (Our attitudes towards that end would therefore be *activated*, but not necessarily brought to our attention). On this kind of relativist view, it is no essential part of what we as moral speakers communicate that we demand concern or respect for these ends *because they are our ends*. Hence, my kind of relativist can and should *agree* with Joyce (and Olson [2010]) that the judge can appropriately say, 'What you did was wrong, *irrespective of one's moral standards*'. For it is straightforwardly true that no matter what moral standards we, the Nazis, or anyone else were to subscribe to, the actions of the Nazis were wrong in relation to the end of promoting general human

¹⁴ I find Joyce's treatment of 'relativism' about reasons and morality perplexing, and suspect he conflates the theses (a) that 'reason' is semantically indexical/relational, and (b) that agents' reasons are metaphysically relative in depending on their desires (which no more suggests an indexical account than the dependence of a person's headaches on her brain chemistry suggests that 'headache' is an indexical term). The definitions of relativism quoted in note 13 above require (a), but Joyce's professed agnosticism about whether normative reasons are conceptually or merely metaphysically relative [2001: 86-8] requires (b) instead—since indexicality/a difference in propositions a sentence expresses requires conceptual or semantic relativity.

wellbeing.¹⁵ Similarly, against Joyce’s caricature of my view [2011a], we didn’t hang Nazis because (i.e. for the reason that) they did things that ‘*we found* wrong’, but because they did things that were ‘*objectively* wrong’, in relation to (e.g.) the end of general human wellbeing.¹⁶ It is not my account of moral objectivity that involves ‘distortion’, then, but Joyce’s objections to it.

Perhaps this kind of relativism about moral concepts is ultimately mistaken.¹⁷ But Joyce’s criticisms do nothing to support that conclusion, since his depiction of ‘what Finlay would have us believe’ is not an accurate account of my theory. Note too that the case of the Nuremberg judge could only provide very weak support for error theory, at best. I don’t claim that some or most people don’t *ever* want or assume more ‘practical oomph’ for morality than the world actually provides, but merely that this is not an *essential* feature of moral speech and thought as such. The most public condemnation of some of the most heinous acts in history, directly addressed to the perpetrators themselves, is perhaps where such a desire or assumption is *most* likely to be found. In order to defend his error theory in good faith, Joyce needs to focus on cases where the stakes are more modest. Elsewhere [2009] I have suggested that the relativist about moral concepts might favour a restricted form of error theory or fictionalism about *some* moral claims, in which speakers *falsely believe* or *pretend* that there is some unidentified but important end that bears on the conduct in question. But Joyce’s error theory maintains that *all* basic moral claims are untrue; this is what is at issue between us.

Joyce’s other major complaint about my portrayal of morality, (B), targets my claim (this time on offense) that error theory is grossly uncharitable because it has to suppose ordinary speakers to be inferring spurious absolute value properties from the evidence of real, relational value properties—in the same way that an error theory about *motion* has to suppose ordinary speakers to be inferring spurious absolute motion from the evidence of real, relative motion.¹⁸ He expresses perplexity: ‘I cannot see why Finlay supposes that the error theorist might be the least tempted to impute to ordinary moral speakers the tendency to treat the instantiated relational property *as evidence for* an absolutist property.’ Rather, he asks, why not identify the evidence as (e.g.) suffering and selfish intentions, just as believers in witches infer from evidence in the form of accusations, confessions, suspicious behaviour, etc.?

¹⁵ Joyce and Olson might object that this isn’t the proper interpretation of the clause, although it is the most literal. Suppose we rather interpret it as ‘...wrong, in relation to your moral standards whatever they may be’. The relativistic judge couldn’t truthfully assert that, but my theory predicts this too.

¹⁶ Joyce cannot object that ‘objectively’ rules out relativization, since he insists against me that ‘objective’ is not opposed to ‘relative’. If it is responded that we could as well say that the Nazis’ deeds were ‘*absolutely* wrong’, Joyce supplies the rejoinder here too, when he observes that ‘the vernacular use of “absolute”...need have nothing to do with relativism.’ Pressing his point in another way, he suggests that on my account ‘the judge *cannot* say... “...I demand that people subscribe to our point of view *because it’s the correct point of view*.”’ But there are many possible ways of accommodating talk of ‘correctness’ (or ‘real’ morality) here. For example, it could just be a way of expressing endorsement of the point of view, as expressivists would maintain. Also relevant here is the point below, that it is consistent with my defense of morality that *some* kinds of moral claims have flawed presuppositions.

¹⁷ There are many other reasonable objections that have to be met before my account is vindicated; half of my book manuscript in preparation is devoted to this task. My goal here is merely to defend my view from Joyce’s specific objections by correcting his misrepresentations.

¹⁸ By ‘infer’ here and below I mean nothing more intellectual than *judging on the basis of*.

Here I failed to explain my thinking with sufficient care; let me now clarify. Apparently, Joyce finds my claim peculiar partly because he can't imagine what *single* relational property could plausibly function as *the* evidence for (e.g.) moral wrongness. He suggests that I may be committing a quantifier-shift fallacy: inferring from the *plausible* idea that for every moral judgement a person S makes, there exists a (perceived) relational property to which the judgement responds ($\forall x \exists y$), to the *implausible* idea that there exists some (perceived) relational property to which every moral judgement that S makes responds ($\exists x \forall y$). While he himself finds the former idea quite plausible (it is a 'platitude that...there will nearly always be *some* instantiated relational property to which each judgment can be interpreted as a response'), Joyce asserts that 'it is the latter claim...of which Finlay needs to convince us. He wants to maintain that there is some non-absolute standard to which a person's...moral judgments can be uniformly assessed.'

Once again however, Joyce mistakes my intentions. I meant only the first, plausible claim, that every moral judgement is responsive to *some* perceived relational property. Why would Joyce again opt for the uncharitable reading, ascribing to me a logical fallacy and a claim he finds 'bizarre', rather than a claim that he himself finds so plausible that he describes it as a 'platitude'? Now, *mea culpa*, at one point I injudiciously wrote—with individual instances of moral evidence in mind—'the evidence in each case is the relational *property* that the relational theory identifies with morality or motion' [2008: 366, emphasis added]. But otherwise I wrote consistently in the plural, about actions being judged wrong in relation to certain moral *standards* or *ends*, and about relational *properties* of value.

Joyce claims not merely that I want the implausible claim, but that I *need* it. I'm not sure why. My case here is closely and explicitly based on an analogy with motion, for which an error theory premised on absolutism would have to maintain (with an unacceptable lack of charity, as I think Joyce agrees) that ordinary speakers mistakenly take real, relative motion as evidence for the spurious absolute motion they ascribe.¹⁹ But, of course, the relative motion we observe is not all relative to a *single* frame of reference, but to many different frames. So the analogy I employ encourages and requires only the plausible claim. Joyce's misreading may be due again to his narrow conception of 'moral relativism'; he describes this property as the 'relational property pertaining to the action's bearing on the speaker's ends'. But while relativizing our moral claims to 'our ends' *de dicto* would indeed require a single relational property, relativizing them to 'our ends' *de re* rather yields a plural reading.²⁰ So my claim was that the Mackian error theorist would have to suppose uncharitably that ordinary moral judgements use *real* value, relative to various ends of concern, as evidence for spurious absolute value.

¹⁹ I don't deny that ordinary people might mistakenly interpret their *concept* of motion as absolutist, but this is different from mistakenly employing an *absolutist concept* in first-order motion judgements. Olson [2010] objects that my 'error theory' about *metaethical* judgements is unacceptably uncharitable.

²⁰ Identifying (e.g.) moral wrongness with a set of different relational properties raises natural worries about moral agreement and disagreement, which I address elsewhere. Here it is my turn to claim the legacy of Mackie: 'By suppressing any explicit reference to demands and making the imperatives categorical we facilitate conceptual moves from one such demand relation to another. The moral uses of such words as "must" and "ought" and "should", all of which are used also to express hypothetical imperatives, are traces of this pattern of objectification.' [1977: 44]

Joyce enquires further why I claim that the error theorist has to take the relational property as ‘the evidence’, rather than (what I will label) *concrete* evidence like suffering and selfish intentions—which, he writes, ‘seems to pass unnoticed’ in my discussion. Here more explanation is needed. First, I certainly agree that things like suffering and selfishness, as well as people’s associations, shifty eyes, and (among the primitive) hunchbacks, function as people’s evidence for their moral judgements. After all, relational value properties themselves can’t be perceived directly, but must also be inferred from this kind of concrete evidence. Similarly, we do not (always, at least) perceive relational motion directly, but infer it from assorted concrete evidence like (e.g.) the turning wheels of vehicles, the wakes and the wind-filled sails of ships, fading sound, change of size in visual field, etc.

The thrust of my argument was not that error theorists are unable to identify anything other than relational value as functioning as evidence for moral judgements. Rather, it was that they cannot plausibly deny that relational value commonly also plays a significant evidential role. (As we’ve just seen Joyce all but concede!) The reason why we shouldn’t take people generally to be inferring directly from concrete evidence to absolute properties is that the concrete evidence forms an extremely loose and diverse kind. For motion, what unifies the concrete evidence in reality is only *that it is evidence for motion relative to various salient frameworks*. It is unclear why (e.g.) a ship’s wake and fading sound would each be evidence of *absolute* motion, and I think it is implausible that people’s motion judgements in such cases are not guided by their awareness of the wake’s being evidence of the motion of the ship relative to the ocean, and fading sound’s being evidence of motion relative to the hearer. Analogously, I suggest that what unites the concrete moral evidence in reality is only *that it is evidence for value relative to various salient ends of concern*.²¹ It is unclear why (e.g.) signing an executive order authorizing torture would by itself be evidence of *absolute* wrongness, and I suggest it is implausible that people’s moral judgements in such a case are not guided by their awareness of such an act’s being evidence of (dis)value relative to ends they care about, like the prevention of suffering. Moral judgements therefore differ from witch judgements (for which an error theory is appropriate), and are akin to motion judgements, in that while the actually instantiated properties of relative value and motion form unified kinds with significance for people, the actually instantiated property in the case of witches is gruesomely disjunctive. It isn’t plausible that ordinary people’s witch judgements aim at tracking such an uninteresting, jerrymandered property, and we can safely presume that they rather infer from the concrete evidence the interesting but uninstantiated property of being a witch.

I find it implausible that ordinary users of moral language generally infer directly from (e.g.) performance of particular action-types to nonexistent absolute moral properties, without their awareness of how those action-types have real value in relation to the various ends or outcomes of concern to them playing any role in those inferences.²² When I judge Fred West’s heinous actions

²¹ In some cases the concrete evidence may seem sufficient; e.g. infliction of suffering. Note, though, that infliction of suffering also constitutes—intrinsically—an act of (dis)value relative to the end of preventing suffering. This disvalue is what infliction of suffering has in common with the signing of the executive order authorizing it.

²² Two points: (1) This doesn’t beg questions against a deontological moral theory like Kant’s. We can represent Kantianism as identifying the moral end of every action as being *that the action in question be in conformity with practical reason/duty*. (2) Since to refute error theory I need only show that there are *some* true moral judgements, I can allow that some other moral judgements might not be

morally bad, is it plausible that I infer directly from the act-type *child-rape* to the evaluation *morally bad*, without my judgement about relative value, that raping a child is *bad for the child's wellbeing*, playing a significant role? I think not. Further, I find it quite sufficient for child-rape's being genuinely *morally* bad that it is bad for the child's wellbeing, that it has no other, redeeming value, and perhaps, that it is performed with awareness of these facts. Addition of absolute authority (or 'practical oomph', whatever that might be) seems to me quite unnecessary.

I certainly haven't proven here that it is my view of the conceptual commitments of morality and not Joyce's that is correct. But I do believe I have proven that contrary to Joyce's charges I have not misunderstood or misrepresented his error theory, and that my objections do not miss their mark. Quite the reverse!²³

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responses to relational properties. (Perhaps people do sometimes base moral judgements—like condemnations of homosexuality or incest—purely on feelings of disgust, in which case those judgements won't reliably be true).

²³ I thank Mark Schroeder, Jake Ross, and the editor and referees for the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* for their help in improving this paper.