

Meinongian Error

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The distinction between standard and nonstandard error theory opens the door for noncognitivist error theory. Such approach was proposed by Hagerstrom under influence of Meinong. Can Meinongian-style moral theory be interpreted as an error theory? If yes, this brings something new into the field of moral theory. If no, this is instructive for other views that can fall prey to error theory. Cognitivist expressivism claims that moral beliefs are neither true nor false, which helps to avoid error theory. The possibility of noncognitivist error theory does not rely upon this point, and so cognitivist expressivism needs to provide a new argument. This may help some other views, such as quasi-realism.

1. Error theory: what? An informal start.

Error theory claims that moral judgments have a streak toward objectification. If I encounter someone kicking dogs, I form a judgment that his behavior is wrong, and so that he ought not to act in this manner. If I observe somebody helping an old lady cross the street, I form a judgment that their behavior is morally right, and so that it something which ought to be done. I do not experience any of these judgments to be an outcome of my subjective wishes or desires, but as something which is independent of my personal attitudes. It is rather that my attitudes follow what objectively ought or again ought not to be done. This experience of an objective moral realm though encounters obstacles of ontological and semantic kind. Motivational internalism shifts towards motivational externalism. If I namely ask whether there is some ontological reality corresponding to these experiences of mine, such as the existence of moral entities of goodness and badness, or perhaps of so named properties, a viable naturalist approach will find none in the mind and language independent world. So metaphysics does not support the objectivist leanings of my experiences. Given thus that I experience moral *objectivity* of oughts and the like in my everyday practice, and that there is nothing ontologically corresponding to them, my beliefs related to these have all to be false or in error. They are in error because they lead me to suppose the existence of something that isn't there. Similarly, if I judge that the cat is on the mat, but it turns out that the creature isn't there, my related belief will be *false*, in error. This is the semantic consequence that one has to derive. In my judgment I am under illusion, in error in respect to the objective realm. In counter distinction to cats to which I have an easily verifiable perceptual epistemic access, the supposedly existing objective oughts are subject to difficulties in this respect. I may intuit them, which as opposed to visual perception is a strange kind of epistemic access. In any way, ontologically and epistemically, the supposition of objective realm with provenance from my moral experiences, turns out to be in error. Semantic conclusion about falsity of beliefs involved into moral judgment os what follows. That's the error theory as related to moral judgment. Notice now that error theory, in the just described manner, does away with subjective stuff such as wishes and desires being involved into moral judgment. The experience of moral judgment is taken to be objectivist in the descriptive manner, thus avoiding noncognitive ingredients. Moral judgments pointing to the objective realm are beliefs, not desires. They are aimed to describe an objective moral reality. But these judgments as beliefs turn out to be false, once as the ontological and epistemic check-ups get performed.

Semantic evaluation is objectivist as well, aiming at description of the moral realm. So there does not seem to be any place in moral error theory for a noncognitivist approach, which takes moral judgments to be an upcome on the basis of subjective experiential ingredients, such as the ones involving one's wishes, desires and other attitudes or judgmental acts.

2. Start with the standard and nonstandard versions of error theory distinction.

a. Olson's overall approach.

An important distinction in understanding of error theory is proposed by Olson, namely the difference between classical or standard and between moderate and non-standard versions of error theory. This distinction extends the logical space with the help of which one can characterize error theory. In respect to moral abolitionism and fictionalism Olson defends a conservative approach to error theory. This is in counter distinction to rejecting moral discourse as producing more harm than profit, as abolitionism (Hinckfuss) does. And it is in distinction to fictionalism which takes moral judgments to be descriptive make-beliefs. According to moral error theory, namely, common sense moral beliefs are well objectivity directed matters, although because of the lack of their ontological and epistemic rootedness they all end up in error.

b. Classical or standard (Mackie).

Classical or standard error theory, such as the one defended by Mackie, takes common sense attuned moral judgments to be beliefs or belief-like, and as such they point to some objective reality, in their *descriptive* role. Given that whatever they describe does not exist though, they are all false. Notice that one aim here is to assign definite semantic value to such belief-like judgments, namely falsity.

c. Moderate or non-standard.

Moderate or non-standard error theory takes moral judgments to be *neither true nor false*, building this view upon the fact that the presupposition of the existence of the presumed moral entities or properties is not fulfilled. This view can be well accommodated to fit error theory, as a milder case of the lack of ontological presupposition that is now understood as indeterminacy of semantic value. We will return to this point in 7.b.i. Another version of non-standard error theory claims that we may be mistaken about the nature and existence of moral facts, and yet there may nevertheless be moral facts. Third version of moderate error theory claims that moral judgments lack truth, but this is not because these judgments as a species of beliefs would be false, and rather because these judgments are not beliefs at all; they are a species of non-cognitive states, such as desires. (Olson: 16)

3. The distinction between standard and nonstandard error theory (Olson's view) opens the door for non-cognitivist error theory.

Standard error theory leans on cognitivist interpretation of moral judgment. Moral judgment is belief-like and therefore it aims at objective moral realm, according to the phenomenological and psychological take on things. Non-standard forms of error theory on the other hand allow for moral judgments being neither true nor false beliefs, or again for these judgments not being beliefs at all but some kind of non-cognitive attitudes. It is because of these characteristics now that they end up in error.

a. Cognitivism and noncognitivism.

Cognitivism takes moral judgments to be beliefs, whereas noncognitivism takes them to be some kind of attitudes, say the ones grounded in one's desires. Cognitivism goes along with the presuppositions that the main function of beliefs is descriptive, which is a generic analytic philosophy stuff. The other analytic presupposition that reference succeeds without phenomenology however is questioned by objectivism leaning first stage of error theory, complying with common sense.

b. Error theory and cognitivism.

Error theory thus starts with common sense cognitivist presupposition about moral judgments being beliefs that describe some reality. Error is then diagnosed following the ontological thesis that this reality isn't there.

c. Error theory and noncognitivism.

Noncognitivism is the view according to which moral judgments are kind of attitudinal or emotional responses to the encountered situation. They turn out to be in error not because they would not describe anything contrary to their explicit claims. They are in error simply because their function is not to describe a certain reality at all, being emotional reactions say and not belief-like.

4. An example of a non-cognitivist error theory: Hagerstrom.

Hagerstrom provides a case of non-cognitivist projectivist error theory. Moral judgment is not belief but a conative act, its reference being neither true nor false. Phenomenological thesis involves the experience of objectification, which is ontologically debunked.

5. Meinong and his influence on Hagerstrom invites the question: Can we interpret Meinongian-style moral theory as an error theory?

Hagerstrom was inspired by Meinong in his non-cognitivist proposal of error theory. This is why he puts the stress upon attitudes and judgmental acts, in opposition to cognitivist description project. But can Meinongian moral theory be interpreted as an error theory? There are two answers, a positive and a negative one.

6. If yes: then this is indeed something new in the field of moral theory.

If Meinongian moral theory can be interpreted as error theory, this offers a new possibility at the moral theory landscape. What would be the basis of such a view?

a. Psychology access and the realm of objects.

The basis of Meinongian theory of objects consists of psychological and phenomenological experiences, which lead to the ideal objectual realm. There are various kinds of psychological experiences, such as aesthetic and ethical. There is attitudinal approach to the objectual presumably independently existing realm. This goes along with Meinongian humeanism, with its noncognitivist stress upon emotional and as just said attitudinal experiences.

b. Theory of objects in error.

The objectivist phenomenologically and psychologically supported experiences though (driven by the "emotional presentations") need not be about the ultimately existing ontological realm. The interpretation of this point depends upon the ontological or metaphysical space that is accorded to Meinongian objects. Meinongian objects may be seen as inhabiting ideal space and to possess ontological persistence fitting to that one. But the reality of these objects may also be measured in respect to the physical world with which one is acquainted. Under this last view the experience of these objects would then be in error. One would experience goodness, say, as an

ought and therefore as an independently existing object. But in fact, one could still realize that there is nothing such as the object goodness in an ultimately ontologically existing world. So the attitudinal experience of goodness as a Meinongian object would end up in error.

7. If no: Meinongian style moral theory can avoid error theory.

Another possibility is that Meinongian moral theory cannot be interpreted as an error theory.

a. This will be instructive for other views that can (if we take Olson's characterization of error theory) fall prey to error theory.

In what way could one block the inference of Meinongian object theory towards error theory?

b. One view that is under error theory predicament is cognitivist expressivism. Cognitivist expressivism, as its name indicates, is the view that moral judgments are beliefs or belief-like. Yet they do not describe some reality, as they are expressivist. They are thus a kind of attitudes, desire or emotional experiences like. This of course invites interpretation of cognitivist expressivism view as a species of error theory. Moral judgments are beliefs that do not describe anything, as they express some attitude.

i. Horgan and Timmons at several points emphasise that their theory is not error theory.

The proponents of cognitivist expressivism Horgan and Timmons deny though that their view would be a species of error theory. In this direction they distinguish between is-beliefs with descriptive aim and function, and between ought-beliefs which according to them are nondescriptive. Moral judgments are ought-beliefs and they are not is-beliefs. If I encounter a scene of a guy kicking dogs, I experience a judgment that this kind of action ought not be done. Doing this, I do not describe anything, but rather commit myself to act in a manner that would avoid such outcomes or states of affairs.

ii. The main argument they put forward is that they do not claim that all moral beliefs are false, but merely that they are neither true nor false.

The main argument of cognitivist expressivism against being sucked into error theory is that moral beliefs aren't false, but that they are rather neither true nor false. This is as it seems a maneuver that avoids such beliefs to be classified as false. This accords well with the denial to embrace standard error theory requiring falsity of common sense objectified beliefs.

iii. Olson's characterization however does not rely upon this point (thus the possibility of non-cognitivist error theory).

But we have seen that there is as well a possible non-cognitivist error theory, in the sense of nonstandard error theory such as proposed by Olson. One version of non-standard error theory, as we noticed, goes along with the lack of satisfying the presupposition according to which one posits the existence of moral entities or properties. If moral beliefs are neither true nor false, the presupposition of their existence and so of their denial is not forthcoming. And so the presupposition of an objective realm that is needed for error theory falsity claim is lacking. But we have seen that nonstandard error theory of noncognitivist brand is well possible.

- iv. So cognitivist expressivism must offer a new argument that it avoids error theory.

In this sense, cognitivist expressivism needs to provide a new argument if it desires not to be presented as a species of error theory. Cognitivist expressivists will otherwise get prey to error theory. One way in which they may get some help is perhaps through Olson's claim that just deep normative queerness argument is the fitting one, as opposed to such views as supervenience queerness. But we leave this point at that stage. Notice though that cognitivist expressivism is committed to something like attitudinal or even emotional underpinning of moral judgments, which comes into conflict with the illuminating reasons project, whose main enemy is emotion-based account of social intuitionism, adopting humean (and thus Meinongian) basis.

- v. The prospective new argument by cognitivist expressivism to avoid error theory might help some other views e.g. Blackburn's quasi-realism.

Whatever the argument of cognitivist expressivism denying its extension into error theory may be, it should be welcomed by some views that are close to it and that may as well not wish to become prey to error theory. Such is the view of quasi-realism promoted by Simon Blackburn. Notice that quasi-realism has realistic pretension, as it seems, at the common sense phenomenology and psychology supported stage. But as the "quasi" part of its name indicates, the realism in question is actually disputed by this view, which presents it as a form of error theory. Certainly, if quasi-realists would like to avoid that predicament, they will be interested in the mentioned additional prospective argument from the part of cognitivist expressivism.

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