Mistaken Morality?
An Essay on Moral Error Theory

Emma Beckman

Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för
avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt
förvar i Hörsal G, Humanisthuset,
fredagen den 18 maj, kl. 13:15.
Avhandlingen kommer att förvaras på engelska.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Bart Streumer,
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Groningen, Groningen, The
Netherlands.
This dissertation explores arguments and questions related to moral error theory – the idea that morality inevitably involves a fundamental and serious error such that moral judgments and statements never come out true. It is suggested that the truth of error theory remains a non-negligible possibility, and that we for this reason should take a version of moral fictionalism seriously.

I begin by defining error theory as the claim that moral judgments are beliefs with moral propositions as content, moral utterances are assertions of moral propositions, and no positive moral proposition is true. Second, after giving an account of J.L. Mackie’s error theory, I argue that neither Richard Joyce’s nor Jonas Olson’s argument for error theory gives us strong reasons to believe it. According to Joyce, moral discourse presupposes non-institutional desire-transcendent reasons and non-institutional categorical requirements. I challenge this claim by arguing that morality can be understood as an institution, and that the assumption that there are non-institutional moral reasons and requirements can be understood as entering pragmatically into moral conversations. According to Olson, moral discourse involves a commitment to irreducibly normative favoring relations between facts and actions. I challenge this claim by challenging Olson’s response to Stephen Finlay’s argument against absolutist accounts of moral discourse.

Third, I discuss two objections to error theory, and argue that neither gives us strong reasons to reject it. According to the first objection, which is suggested by Terence Cuneo, error theory entails epistemic error theory, which has problematic consequences. After indicating some possible responses on part of the epistemic error theorist, I challenge the entailment claim by defending Hilary Kornblith’s account of epistemic reasons as hypothetical reasons. According to the second objection, error theory entails normative error theory, which cannot be believed. Although he does not defend this objection, Bart Streumer has given an argument for the unbelievability claim. I challenge Streumer’s argument by suggesting that we might have hypothetical reasons to believe normative error theory and that, properly understood, Streumer’s conclusion is not as radical as it may first appear.

Fourth, I discuss what practical implications the discovery that error theory is true would have for first-order moral thinking and discourse. I argue that if this practice is overall non-morally valuable to us, we ought to revise engagement in it on the model of role-playing in live action role-playing games if we find out that error theory is true. Some have claimed that Richard Joyce’s fictionalism encounters (prima facie) problems. I argue that by incorporating the suggestion that engagement in revised moral practice is modeled on role-playing, fictionalism can escape these problems and preserve the benefits of first-order moral practice.

Keywords
moral error theory, Mackie, Joyce, Olson, normative institution, fictionalism, normative error theory, epistemic error theory, irreducible normativity, abolitionism, conservationism, propagandism.