

Issues in Contemporary Ethics
Epiphany Term 21/22 (Lectures 1-5)
Moral Nihilism and Error Theory
Lecturer: Christopher Cowie

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Office Hours: Wednesday 11-2 (drop in)

Reading List

Nihilism is the view that nothing matters. Contemporary nihilism goes under the guise of ‘moral error theory’. This is, roughly, the view that morality is bunk and anyone who moralises (that’s all of us) is talking nonsense. The aim of this five-week course is to give you a sense of why people think this and what the challenges are.

Each of the first four lectures summarises a type of argument for error theory. For each of them I have included some readings – more may be referenced in the lecture notes. I have put a ** beside any pieces I’d really like you to read *before* the lecture (not all lectures have these). They’re all either really short, or really readable or both, so please do it. Put half an hour in your diary to read these the night before the lecture.

The content of the fifth lecture depends on your interests – some of the options are listed. We’ll work it out together.

Lecture I – Old Error Theories

Read this classic paper. It is (sort of) about why the death of God could support a limited moral error theory; an error theory of obligation:

- ****Elizabeth Anscombe. *Modern Moral Philosophy*. (1958). ****
<https://sites.pitt.edu/~mthomps0/readings/mmp.pdf>

In this piece a secular case is made for the same kind of limited error theory:

- Bernard Williams. ‘Morality the Peculiar Institution’ in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. (1985).
<http://philosophy.rutgers.edu/joomlatools-files/docman-files/Williams,%20ELP10.pdf>

For some more on the related question of whether it would be best if we got rid of moral obligation and blame altogether see either of:

- Richard Garner. *Abolishing Morality. Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2007).
- Christopher Cowie. *Conservatism in Metaethics: A Case Study. Metaphilosophy* (2014).

These should both be easily accessible for you with your permissions through JSTOR.

For some more sophisticated, related material see:

- Tom Pink. *Moral Obligation*. In O’Hare (ed) *Modern Moral Philosophy*. (Available online through Cambridge Core). (2004)
- Richard Rowland. *Moral Error Theory. Phil Quarterly*. 2020. (Through JSTOR).

Lecture II -Mackie, Relativity and Disagreement

The main focus is the arch-error theorist:

- Mackie. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. (1977). Ch. 1, sections 5-8 especially.
<https://spot.colorado.edu/~heathwoo/readings/mackie.pdf>

There’s a lot going on here. We’ll focus on his ‘argument from relativity’. And in particular on the following responses:

- Enoch. *How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism? Journal of Ethics*. (2009).
- ****Michael Huemer. *Liberal Realist answer to Debunking Sceptics. Phil Studies*. (2016). ****

These should both be easily accessible for you with your permissions through JSTOR.

For some more recent attempts to turn disagreement (or something like it) into an error theory see:

- Hallvard Lillehammer. Moral Error Theory. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. (2004). Pts I and II only.
- Christopher Cowie. A New Argument for Moral Error Theory. *Nous*. (2021).

One last thing... Mackie's argument isn't just about relativity/disagreement. There's another – more famous – metaphysical argument. If you're interested, I like this piece, which takes up the same idea:

- Richard Garner. On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Facts and Properties. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. (1990).

Lecture III - Joyce and the Internalism-Based Error Theory

We'll be thinking about the error theory of Richard Joyce. For an outline of what he's doing see :

- ****Richard Joyce. *The Myth of Morality*. (2001). See especially chapters 1.0 and 2.4.**
- **** (Available online through Durham library).**

For a summary/detail of his main argument see:

- Cowie. *Morality and Epistemic Judgment: The Argument from Analogy*. (2019). Ch.1.0-1.3.

The key premise of Joyce's argument is reasons internalism. For a good summary see:

- Russ Shafer-Landau. *Moral Realism: A Defense*. (2003). Chapter. 7. (Available online through Durham library)
- Errol Lord and David Plunkett. Reasons Internalism. *Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*. (2017). <https://www.plunkett.host.dartmouth.edu/reasons-internalism-lord.pdf>

For some critical back-and-forth of Joyce's error theory see any/all of:

- Stephen Finlay. The Error in the Error Theory. *AJP*. (2008).
- Joyce. The Error in 'The Error in the Error Theory'. *AJP*. (2011).

Both easily available online with your permissions.

- Jonas Olson. In Defense of Moral Error Theory. In Brady (ed). *New Waves in Metaethics* (2011). (Available online through the link in 'philpapers').

Lecture IV - Olson and Streumer and the Irreducibility-Based Error Theory

The most popular kind of error theory now is based on the irreducibility of moral properties.

This is defended most clearly in

- Jonas Olson. *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence*. (2014). Chapters 5-7. (Available online through Durham library).

Some further engagement in:

- Olson. *Precis of Moral Error Theory*. (2016)
- Teemu Toppinen. Is Irreducible Normativity Impossibly Queer? *Journal of Moral Philosophy*. (2016).

In addition to Olson, the other big irreducibility-based error theorist is:

- Bart Streumer. *Unbelievable Errors*. (2017). Especially chapters 1-2.
- Bart Streumer. *Precis of Unbelievable Errors*. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*. (2019).

Both Olson and Streumer are summarised in:

- Cowie. *Morality and Epistemic Judgment: The Argument from Analogy*. (2019). Chapter 1.4 to end of chapter 1.

Lecture V - TBC

We could look at whether moral error theory overgeneralises to an error theory that threatens to undermine the possibility of thought itself:

- Richard Rowland. Moral Error Theory and the Argument from Epistemic Reasons. *JESP*. (2013).

Or whether it is even possible to believe an error theory:

- Streumer. Can We Believe the Error Theory? *Journal of Philosophy*, (2013). (also in his book).

Or whether moral error theory might entail a mathematical error theory:

- Justin Clarke-Doane. Moral Epistemology: The Mathematics Analogy. *Nous*. (2014).
- Silvia Jonas. Mathematical and Moral Disagreement. *Philosophical Quarterly*. (2020).

Or whether the fact that moral error theory entails that the Holocaust isn't wrong means we should reject it:

- Tristram MacPherson. Moorean Arguments and Moral Revisionism. *JESP*. (2009).

Including my own view on this:

- A New Defense of Error Theory. Currently on my website:
<https://christophercowie.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/a-new-defence-of-error-theory-1.pdf>

And finally, whether we'd be better off without morality:

- Garner. Abolishing Morality. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*. (2007).

And really finally, whether the enormous size of the universe and our seeming irrelevance to its eventual course supports error theory:

- Guty Kahane. Our Cosmic Insignificance. *Nous*. (2013).