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Terence Cuneo
Destabilizing the Error Theory

Philosophers sometimes defend unusual combinations of positions. Bertrand Russell, for example, appears to have defended both phenomenalism regarding perception and Platonism regarding abstract objects, holding that we have knowledge of only sense-data and universals.[1] More recently, Peter van Inwagen has defended the view that there are no material objects such as toasters and planets but that sentences such as "Saturn has several moons" are literally true (and not in some deflationary sense).[2] Combinations such as these can be not only unusual but also problematic when commitment to one member of a combination destabilizes one's commitment to the other. By saying that commitment to one member of a combination "destabilizes" commitment to the other, I mean that accepting one member provides reasons not to accept the other or renders that member of the combination theoretically irrelevant. I would say, for example, that van Inwagen's commitment to there being no planets destabilizes his commitment to the claim that sentences such as that mentioned above are literally true.

Jonas Olson's recent book *Error Theory: History, Critique, Defense* is a defense of the moral error theory.[3] In the course of responding to an objection to his view, Olson also accepts an unusual combination of views, namely, the moral error theory, which implies that there are no moral facts, and a version of epistemic reductionism, which implies the existence of something very close to epistemic facts – so close that many other philosophers hold that they just *are* epistemic facts.

My project in this essay is to contend that a commitment to epistemic reductionism of this sort destabilizes a commitment to the moral error theory, providing reasons not to accept it or rendering the position philosophically irrelevant. To formulate this argument, however, I need to first offer and defend an interpretation of Olson's view. Having done that, I turn to the task of explaining why a commitment to epistemic reductionism destabilizes a commitment to the moral error theory.

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1 Russell (1912) and (1914).

2 van Inwagen (1990) and (2014), Introduction.

3 Olson (2014). I will insert page references to this book parenthetically in the body of this essay.

1. Error Theories: Moral and Epistemic

Call sentences that incorporate moral terms such as "wrong," "required," and "just" in the predicate position *moral sentences*. Call the use of these sentences in our day-to-day lives *ordinary moral discourse* and the mental states that these sentences express *moral thoughts*. Moral realists and moral error theorists agree that ordinary moral thought and discourse represent moral facts, such as the fact *that it is wrong to physically abuse others*.[4] While realists believe that some of these thoughts accurately represent the moral facts, error theorists deny this, holding that:

Ordinary moral thought and discourse, by and large, represent moral facts. But they fail to do so accurately, since there are no such facts. In this respect, ordinary moral thought and discourse are deeply and systemically mistaken.

In *The Normative Web*, I suggested that we could model a view in metaepistemology on the moral error theory by engaging in a series of moves parallel to those made above. Start by calling sentences that incorporate terms such as "justified," "rational," and "warranted" in the predicate position *epistemic sentences*. Call the use of these sentences in our day-to-day lives *ordinary epistemic discourse* and the mental states that these sentences express *epistemic thoughts*. Epistemic realists and epistemic error theorists agree that ordinary epistemic thoughts represent epistemic facts, such as the fact *that beliefs formed on the basis of mere wishful thinking are unjustified*. While epistemic realists believe that some of these epistemic thoughts accurately represent the epistemic facts, epistemic error theorists do not, claiming that:

Ordinary epistemic thought and discourse, by and large, represent epistemic facts. But they fail to do so accurately, since there are no such facts. In this respect, ordinary epistemic thought and discourse are deeply and systemically mistaken

There are some metanormative views – such as versions of moral naturalism and constructivism – that affirm the existence of moral and epistemic facts but understand their nature differently from realists. Error theorists are unwilling to set-

tle for such views, maintaining that if there were moral or epistemic facts, then they would be exactly as realists describe them. Moreover, there are other metanormative views – such as versions of expressivism and fictionalism – that accept the error theorists' ontology but are unwilling to conclude that ordinary moral and epistemic thought and discourse are massively in error.[5] Proponents of these views defend them by denying that moral and epistemic thought and discourse represent moral and epistemic reality. Error theorists also reject these views; they do not flinch at drawing the conclusion that moral and epistemic thought and discourse are deeply mistaken. In both these respects, the error theory is resolutely uncompromising.

What, though, is the understanding of moral and epistemic facts that realists and error theorists both accept? In *The Normative Web*, I suggested that this understanding is captured by our *commonsensical conceptions* of these facts. Our commonsensical conceptions of moral and epistemic facts, in turn, are constituted by platitudes of two sorts – what I called the *substance* and *authority* platitudes.[6]

Roughly put, the substance platitudes with regard to the moral domain tell us that any standard (i.e., non-deviant) moral system would have to incorporate substantive propositions such as:

It is wrong to recreationally slaughter fellow persons.
And:
It is wrong to physically abuse another merely for pleasure.

The account adds that actions such as these are wrong (at least in part) because they are aimed at undercutting or destroying the victim's ability to enjoy goods that constitute human wellbeing, such as enjoying adequate health and bonds of trust.

The epistemic domain is similar. According to the substance platitudes with regard to the epistemic domain, a standard epistemic system would have to incorporate propositions such as:

It is irrational to believe a proposition simply on the basis of wish-fulfillment.

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4 In this essay, I'll mean by moral realism so-called robust realism of the sort defended by Fitz-Patrick (2008) and Enoch (2011). When I use the term "represent," I will not use it as a success term; to say that x represents y does not imply that x accurately represents y.

5 Blackburn (1993) and (1998) develop expressivist views and Kalderon (2008) defends fictionalist ones.
6 Cuneo (2007), chs. 1 and 2. The account I offer here expands a bit on what I say in that discussion, drawing on Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014).

And:

It is justified to believe a proposition on the basis of one's best evidence.

Propositional attitudes have epistemic merits such as *being justified*, the account adds, in virtue of their being such as to represent reality aright, being likely to represent reality aright, or being such that an agent has done what she ought to in attempting to represent reality aright.[7]

The *authority platitudes* with regard to the moral and epistemic domains concern the normative force or authority of the facts (if there are any) that correspond to propositions such as those stated above. According to these platitudes, moral and epistemic facts are or imply excellent reasons for us to behave in certain ways, regardless of our desires, goals, or the social roles we may occupy. In terminology that has become popular, these facts are or imply "robust reasons." (I shall have more to say about the character of these reasons in a moment.)

Some philosophers reject our commonsensical conception of moral and epistemic facts. For example, in epistemology, those I term reductionists often reject the authority platitudes, holding that there are epistemic facts but denying that they are or imply robust reasons. Some reductionists, for example, claim that epistemic facts generate only hypothetical reasons, which are determined by the (contingent) desires or goals an agent has.[8] Under one version of this view, one has a reason to believe a proposition only if one cares about believing the truth (with respect to propositions of its kind). Other reductionists, in contrast, deny that epistemic facts are or generate any reasons whatsoever – at least when reasons are understood to consist in irreducible favoring relations that facts bear to agents such as us (or facts that stand in such relations). According to these philosophers, while it is possible to legitimately say that we have reasons to believe propositions, doing so would be only to claim that there are norms that direct one to believe propositions because these propositions are true or appear to be true.

Thus understood, advocates of reductionism take an approach toward the moral and epistemic domains that is both more liberal and conservative than error theory. The reductionist approach is more liberal because it does not insist that moral and epistemic facts must satisfy the two dimensions of our common-

sensical conception of moral and epistemic facts. Instead, reductionism maintains that moral and epistemic facts (as it understands them) are "imperfect but good enough" satisfiers of our commonsensical conception of the moral and epistemic domains.[9] The reductionist approach is more conservative because, unlike error theory, reductionism holds (with realism) that moral and epistemic thought and discourse are not radically and systemically mistaken, since our thoughts sometimes accurately represent moral and epistemic facts (as reductionists understand them). In this respect, reductionism preserves the appearance that in the moral and epistemic domains we sometimes get it right. (By saying that a theory "preserves the appearances," I mean simply that it is likely that things are as they appear if the theory were true.)

Later in our discussion, I will be returning to this last point because it proves important. Before I do, I need to emphasize that the authority platitudes play a pivotal role in the way that error theorists think of moral and epistemic facts. For error theorists hold not simply that the authority platitudes are deeply embedded in (non-defective) ordinary thinking about moral and epistemic reality. As Olson points out, error theorists also accept the stronger:

Conceptual Claim: It is conceptually necessary that, if there are moral or epistemic facts, then there are robust (or categorical) reasons.[10]

It is because they deny that there could be robust (or categorical) reasons that error theorists deny that there are moral facts. In fact, when Richard Joyce and Olson defend the error theory, they do so only on the basis of this rejection.[11]

So far I have claimed that it is possible to model the epistemic error theory on the moral error theory, pointing out that advocates of these views reject the existence of moral and epistemic facts because they hold that nothing satisfies the authority platitudes. It is now widely accepted, however, that if one ought to accept the moral error theory, then one ought also to accept the epistemic error theory.[12] Let me call this widely accepted claim the *parity principle*. In

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7 In my (2007), 79, I explore explanatory relations that might hold between both sets of platitudes.

8 Or would have under more idealized conditions. In what follows, I'll understand the qualification to be understood.

9 I borrow the phrase in quotes from Lewis (1995).

10 See Olson (2014), 124–25.

11 See Joyce (2001). Joyce offers an additional line of argument in his (2006).

12 See the references in Olson (2014), ch. 8. The more nuanced way to state the point made above would be as follows: it is widely accepted that, if one ought to accept the moral error theory for the reasons adduced by its primary defenders in the Anglo-American tradition (as opposed to, say, the Nietzschean tradition), then one ought also to accept the epistemic error theory. The version of the error theory I have in mind is of the variety one finds in the Anglo-American tradition.

his discussion, Olson accepts the parity principle, agreeing that if one ought to accept the moral error theory, then one should also accept the epistemic error theory (156). Yet Olson also contends that accepting the epistemic error theory is compatible with accepting a version of epistemic reductionism. In the next section, I want to explore why Olson says this and how we should understand his view.

2. Epistemic Reductionism

There is a perfectly respectable sense in which the game of hockey is normative. For like most games, hockey is governed by rules or norms for how to play it. The rules or standards that govern the game of hockey tell us, for example, that a standard game is divided into three periods, at most only six players on each team can play at once, a player is not allowed to enter the opponents' zone before the puck does, the puck is considered "dead" during play if it leaves the perimeter of the rink, and so on. Along with these standards are rights, responsibilities, and obligations that attach to participants in the game, namely, players, coaches, and officials. Players, for example, have a right to take a shot on goal but they do not have the right to determine whether a shot counts as a goal (officials do); officials have the right to determine whether a player is off-side but coaches do not; officials have the responsibility of tracking how many penalties a player might have but players do not, and so on. These rights, responsibilities, and obligations are enforced in various ways. If a player, for example, fails to comply with them, he or she may be penalized, assessed a fee, or suspended. If this is right, the standards that govern the game of hockey play at least two roles: they determine not only whether someone is playing the game correctly or incorrectly but also whether an activity counts as hockey at all. For were some activity that had the trappings of hockey – a game played on a rink with sticks, a puck, and so forth – not to sufficiently conform to the standards of the game, this activity would not count as a game of hockey.

Although the game of hockey is normative, it is common for philosophers to characterize the game's normativity as being thin. Stating why the normativity in question is thin is not easy but the explanation typically goes something like this. Let's say that a system of putative rights, responsibilities, and obligations is *normative in the lean sense* just in case it does not necessarily imply reasons such that an agent ought, on the whole, to conform to the rights, responsibilities, and obligations that constitute that system. The rights, responsibilities, and obligations that constitute the game of hockey seem to satisfy this description. We do not hold that the responsibilities that attach to participants in the National

Hockey League (qua participants) necessarily provide reasons on the whole for them to act in certain ways. In fact, we can think of cases – such as when a hockey player no longer cares about playing the game because he has better things to do – in which these responsibilities provide no reason to act at all. By contrast, a system of putative rights, responsibilities, and obligations is *normative in the robust sense* just in case it necessarily implies (possibly defeasible) reasons such that an agent ought, on the whole, to conform to the rights, responsibilities, and obligations that constitute that system. These reasons are, to use Olson's terminology, *irreducibly normative* (116–17). Although there are no uncontroversial examples of systems that are robustly normative, many philosophers hold that the moral domain is the most vivid example we have of a system that is normative in the robust sense.

Lean normativity attaches to activities that are goal-directed or involve agents occupying roles of various kinds.[13] Everything from hockey and Gregorian chant to etiquette are systems that are normative in the lean sense. It is worth stressing that while all the examples I've offered of systems that are normative in the lean sense are conventional, there might be systems that are normative in the lean sense but are not conventional. Some have suggested that the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of rationality, for example, constitute such a system. According to these philosophers, there are rights, responsibilities, and obligations that attach to those who can regulate their beliefs and actions in various ways. Still, these philosophers suggest, we may not have reason to be rational.[14] However that may be, we can now connect the distinction between lean and robust normativity with our discussion in the last section regarding the authority platitudes. What the authority platitude tells us, in effect, is that the moral and epistemic systems are normative in the robust sense; at least some of the reasons that these systems generate are robust. Those who reject the authority platitudes with regard to the moral domain – holding that moral facts exist but are not characterized by this platitude – believe that morality is normative but only in the lean sense.

I am emphasizing the distinction between lean and robust normativity because it is central to not only Olson's understanding of the moral and epistemic domains, but also his response to an objection I have elsewhere posed to the epistemic error theory.[15] According to what I'll call the *central dilemma*, epistemic error theory is either (i) self-defeating insofar as it presupposes the very

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13 See Olson (2014), 159.

14 See Kolodny (2005) and Broome (2007) and, for a response, Way (2009).

15 Cuneo (2007), ch. 4 presents the dilemma in a slightly different form.

sorts of entities it says do not exist or (ii) implies wholesale epistemological skepticism, according to which we have no epistemic reason to believe anything, including the error theory itself. An implication of this second horn is that epistemic error theory would be polemically toothless if true, as no one could make a rational mistake in rejecting the position. Since neither of these options is palatable – or so the challenge runs – we have powerful reason to reject the epistemic error theory. Given the parity principle that, if one ought to accept the moral error theory, then one also ought to reject the epistemic error theory, it follows that one ought not to accept the moral error theory.

Olson contends that the error theory can escape the central dilemma. In response to the dilemma's first horn, Olson points out that epistemic error theorists needn't presuppose the very entities that they reject, namely, epistemic facts that are or imply robust reasons. In response to the dilemma's second horn, Olson maintains that rejecting the existence of epistemic facts needn't imply wholesale epistemic skepticism according to which we could not have reason to believe anything.

The key to avoiding the second horn of the dilemma, Olson suggests, is to make two moves. The first is to point out that the term "reason" as it is used in the epistemic domain is multiply ambiguous. Understood in one way, the term is supposed to designate an irreducibly favoring relation (or a fact that stands in such a relation). Understood in another way, it purports only to designate the evidence relation (or a fact that stands in such a relation). Olson does not say much about how he understands the evidence relation, simply pointing out that for something to be evidence for a proposition is for that thing to indicate that that proposition is true or likely to be true (162). The details regarding what the evidence relation consists in, however, are secondary to Olson's project. What matters is that the central dilemma has bite only if we understand "reason" in the robust sense. Epistemic error theorists, however, can plausibly maintain that while reasons do not exist in the first sense, they exist in the second sense. Epistemic error theorists can claim this, Olson says, because there is nothing "queer" about reasons so understood.

The second move Olson makes is to note that the practice of forming and assessing beliefs is a goal-oriented and role-involving activity. Because it is, this practice is governed by norms that are normative in the lean sense. Speaking of responsible believing, Olson writes:

> The error theorist can maintain that she uses 'responsible' (and 'irresponsible') in a purely descriptive fashion that indicates that the agent meets (or fails to meet) the standard for being a responsible believer, where the standard for being a responsible believer can be cashed out in purely descriptive terms.... According to this purely descriptive use of the term 'responsibility', the norms associated with epistemic responsibility are comparable to those of etiquette and chess.[16]

Olson continues:

> Error theory, then does not rule out the possibility of standards of epistemic merit and demerit. It says that in order for claims about epistemic merit and demerit to be true, they must be understood as purely descriptive claims. (165)

To advert to the terminology that I've introduced, error theorists can say that there are normative facts such as the fact *that a belief is justified* just so long as we understand justification as being normative in only the lean sense.

At this point, however, Olson exegesis becomes a little tricky. On the one hand, Olson explicitly says that he will assume that epistemic facts would imply the existence of robust reasons and, hence, would be robustly normative (see p. 156). Since the error theory implies that there are no such reasons, it implies that there are no epistemic facts, including facts that consist in some belief's having an epistemic merit such as *being justified* or *being entitled* (i.e., responsibly formed). On the other hand, in the passage just quoted, Olson states that, according to the error theory, claims regarding epistemic merits and demerits can be true, provided they concern these merits and demerits understood in a lean sense. On the face of things, then, Olson seems to grant both that:

Epistemic facts must be robustly normative and there are no such facts.
And also:
There are epistemic facts but they are not robustly normative.

Olson seems to want to embrace both the epistemic error theory and a version of epistemic reductionism, which would render his view incoherent.

Before I attempt to relieve this apparent tension in Olson's view, let me canvass two attempts to relieve it that seem to me unhelpful. The first would be to embrace the second option stated above, advocating epistemic reductionism. This option would require Olson to surrender the epistemic error theory. It would also have unattractive ramifications. For consider the parity principle, which states:

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16 At various points, Olson says that entities that are normative in the lean sense are "descriptive." I find this terminology infelicitous since "descriptive" is often used interchangeably with "natural." Entities that are normative in the lean sense, however, needn't be natural or reducible to the natural.

if one ought to accept the moral error theory, then one ought also to accept the epistemic error theory.

Now suppose one ought to reject the epistemic error theory because epistemic reductionism is true. It would follow that:

it is false that one ought to accept the moral error theory,

which is an implication that Olson would not accept (at least when the ought in play is of the non-robust variety).

A second unsatisfactory option would be for Olson to propose that, when he uses epistemic terms such as "justified" and "rational," they designate facts but not epistemic facts as either realists or reductionists think of them (or anything close to how realists or reductionists think of them). According to this view, epistemic terms would characterize facts that do not satisfy even the substance platitudes with regard to the epistemic domain (or anything like them).

The problem with this proposal is that it would not address the central dilemma posed to the error theory. The dilemma's second horn, recall, charges epistemic error theorists with being committed to radical epistemological skepticism according to which there is no reason to believe anything and that no beliefs could be justified or rational. Responding to this dilemma by pointing out that we can use *terms* such as "reason," "justified" or "rational" to designate facts that have little to do with the epistemic domain as we ordinarily understand it would fail to address the objection. (Berkeley silenced none of his critics by proposing that we could use terms such as "chair" and "lake" to designate objects that are radically different from chairs and lakes as we ordinarily think of them.) If so, a satisfactory response to the dilemma's second horn requires that under what Olson calls their "purely descriptive use," these epistemic terms designate entities that at least come close enough to satisfying our commonsensical conceptions of the moral and epistemic domains. This guarantees that in responding to the central dilemma error theorists would not switch the subject.

Having considered two options that I believe Olson should reject, let me present an option that I think he should accept.[17] This option requires us to distinguish two types of reductionist views regarding the epistemic domain. The first reductionist view I shall call:

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17 Olson has indicated to me in correspondence that this is the position that he intends to defend.

Weakly revisionist: epistemic facts exist but do not satisfy the authority platitudes. These facts are good enough but imperfect satisfiers of our commonsensical conception of epistemic facts.

This position is a variant of what (to this point) I've simply called *reductionism*. The second reductionist view, I'll term:

Strongly revisionist: nothing answers to our concept of an epistemic fact (since some such facts would have to satisfy the authority platitudes regarding the epistemic domain). But there are concepts that are closely related to ordinary epistemic concepts. Although the facts that these "successor" concepts characterize are not epistemic facts, these facts satisfy more or less exact analogues to the substance platitudes with respect to epistemic facts.

Let us, for ease of expression, refer to epistemic successor concepts and the properties and facts for which they stand by the use of expressions in small caps, such as RATIONAL, JUSTIFIED, and REASON. The proposal I wish to advance is that Olson accept strongly revisionist reductionism with regard to the epistemic domain.

The benefits of doing so are multiple. One benefit is that it would allow Olson to be an epistemic error theorist, since this position is compatible with all of our epistemic beliefs being untrue. Another benefit is that accepting this view would provide the materials for responding to the central dilemma. The response would be to concede that, strictly speaking, epistemic error theory implies wholesale epistemic skepticism; there is no epistemic reason to believe anything. But there are concepts – the epistemic successor concepts – that error theorists and others could employ to guide the formation, revision, and evaluation of our propositional attitudes. These concepts could play nearly all the same practical roles as epistemic concepts for all practical purposes: they are practically employable. In principle, we could substitute them for ordinary epistemic concepts.

The reason we could substitute them for ordinary epistemic concepts is that the application conditions for these successor concepts mirror those of epistemic concepts. As I am thinking of them, the application conditions for epistemic concepts are given by claims such as these:

Necessarily, if a belief falls under the concept being based on one's best evidence, then it falls under the concept justified.
Necessarily, if a belief falls under the concept being formed on the basis of

wish-fulfilment, then it falls under the concept unjustified.
And so on.

If the application conditions of a concept tell us what it is to be that concept, then these conditionals (which correspond to the substance platitudes for the epistemic domain) give us insight into the essence of epistemic concepts.

We can formulate application conditions for EPISTEMIC concepts that mirror those given above, such as:

> Necessarily, if a belief falls under the concept being based on one's best evidence, then it falls under the concept JUSTIFIED.
> Necessarily, if a belief falls under the concept being formed on the basis of wish-fulfilment, then it also falls under the concept UNJUSTIFIED.
> And so on.

Once again, if the application conditions of a concept tell us what it is to be that concept, then these conditionals (which more or less exactly mirror the substance platitudes with regard to the epistemic domain) give us insight into the essence of these EPISTEMIC concepts.

My suggestion, then, is that the best way to reconcile Olson's commitment to the epistemic error theory with his claim that epistemic terms admit of a purely descriptive use is to interpret him as embracing Strongly revisionist epistemic reductionism. Doing so would enable Olson to reply to the central dilemma in the following way. Olson could concede that while nothing satisfies the concepts rational or justified, our beliefs often satisfy concepts such as RATIONAL and JUSTIFIED. When they do, they have properties such as BEING RATIONAL and BEING JUSTIFIED. Because they do, the epistemic error theory is not polemically toothless, for there are REASONS to believe the view that error theorists can offer to others and that others can accept. Others could accept and employ these reasons because they satisfy exact analogues to the substance platitudes for epistemic concepts. Moreover, when offering these reasons, epistemic error theorists would not be vulnerable to the charge that in responding to the central dilemma they had switched the subject, giving us EPISTEMIC stones for epistemic bread.

We can summarize the difference between Weakly and Strongly revisionist views by identifying the ways in which their proponents would answer two questions.

(A) Do the two views share the same ontological commitments?

> Yes, by all appearances, they share the same ontological commitments, at least with regard to those properties and facts characterized by our epistemic or EPISTEMIC concepts. For both views maintain that there are facts that satisfy the substance platitudes with regard to the epistemic domain, or platitudes that exactly mirror the substance platitudes with respect to the epistemic domain. Moreover, both views agree that there are no facts that satisfy the authority platitudes.

(B) Does each view imply that ordinary epistemic thought and discourse is massively and systemically mistaken?

> They do not.

> Weak revisionists maintain that ordinary epistemic thought and discourse is not massively and systemically mistaken. For in their view there are epistemic facts that answer to our epistemic concepts.

> Strong revisionists hold that ordinary epistemic thought and discourse is massively and systemically mistaken. For in their view there are no epistemic facts that answer to our epistemic concepts. Still, there are EPISTEMIC concepts and EPISTEMIC properties and facts that answer to EPISTEMIC concepts. Error theorists can appeal to these concepts, properties, and facts when replying to objections, such as the central dilemma.[18]

One could think of the primary difference between these views like this: Weak revisionists hold that there are (perhaps imperfect but good enough) *satisfiers* of ordinary epistemic concepts. These are epistemic properties and facts, reductively understood. Strong revisionists maintain that there are (perhaps imperfect but good enough) *substitutes* for our epistemic concepts. These successor concepts characterize the very same facts that weak revisionists claim satisfy ordinary epistemic concepts.

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18 I am assuming that, since concepts are fine-grained entities, epistemic and EPISTEMIC concepts are different, since they have non-equivalent conditions for their competent application. Someone with reasonable mastery of the concept (epistemically) justified, for example, could rightly claim that it fails to apply to facts that are normative in only in the lean sense. In contrast, someone with reasonable mastery of the concept JUSTIFIED could not do the same.

In what follows, I'll interpret Olson as defending the combination of epistemic error theory and Strongly revisionist reductionism with respect to the epistemic domain. We can refer to this pairing of positions as the *epistemic combination*.

3. From the Epistemic to the Moral Domain

J. L. Mackie is well-known as being the first prominent philosopher to articulate and defend the moral error theory in Anglo-American analytic philosophy.[19] In a memorable passage, Gilbert Harman expressed mystification regarding Mackie's approach to ethical theorizing in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, writing: "Mackie (1977) argues in Chapter 1 that ethics rests on a false presupposition, but then he goes on in later chapters to discuss particular moral issues. It is almost as if he had first demonstrated that God does not exist and had then gone on to consider whether He is wise and loving."[20]

I believe that there is something to Harman's worries regarding Mackie, although locating the problematic features of Mackie's view proves to be not entirely straightforward. In the next section, I will attempt to articulate what I find puzzling about Mackie's approach. In the meanwhile, let me note that Olson finds nothing puzzling about Mackie's approach to ethical theorizing, writing:

> there is no deep puzzle here... Since most social life presupposes something like a system of morality... we need, according to Mackie, 'to find some set of principles which [are] themselves fairly acceptable to us and with which ... our "intuitive" (but really subjective) detailed moral judgments are in "reflective equilibrium."

Moral error theorists can without tongues-in-cheek engage in the pursuit of theories that meet these criteria. The one criterion that cannot be met is of course that of truth. (197)

Before I attempt to substantiate Harman's worries, let me try to articulate what I find puzzling about Olson's own attempt to follow Mackie.

Consider two reductionist positions regarding the moral domain that mirror those we formulated regarding the epistemic domain. The first view is:

Weakly revisionist: moral facts exist but do not satisfy the authority platitudes. These facts are good enough but imperfect satisfiers of our commonsensical conception of moral facts.

Weakly revisionist positions are very close to and perhaps identical with some naturalist views in metaethics, such as that defended by David Copp.[21]

The second reductionist view is:

Strongly revisionist: nothing answers to our concept of a moral fact (since some such facts would have to satisfy the authority platitudes regarding the moral domain). But there are "successor" concepts that are closely related to ordinary moral concepts. Although the facts that these concepts characterize are not moral facts, these facts satisfy more or less exact analogues to the substance platitudes with respect to moral facts.

Let us refer to those facts that satisfy the more or less exact analogues to the substance platitudes as the MORAL facts and the concepts that characterize them, MORAL concepts. While it is not possible to coherently combine the moral error theory with Weakly revisionist reductionism, it is possible to combine the moral error theory with Strongly revisionist reductionism. Not only is it possible to combine these views, I take it that Olson has compelling reasons to combine them, given his commitment in the epistemic domain to a similar combination.

The justification for embracing each view, after all, would be the same: we need practical guidance when it comes to our believings. EPISTEMIC principles provide such guidance in the form of principles for the formation, revision, and evaluation of our doxastic attitudes. But we also need practical guidance when it comes to our action-plans and their implementations. MORAL principles provide such guidance in the form of principles for the formation, revision, implementation, and evaluation of action-plans.[22] Moreover, while the concepts that compose MORAL principles are successors to ordinary moral concepts, they could play nearly all the same practical roles as moral concepts for all practical purposes: they are practically employable. In principle, we could substitute them for our ordinary moral concepts.

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19 Mackie (1977). As Olson notes (pp. 56–60), Mackie was not the first in this tradition to defend the error theory;
20 Harman (1984), 30.

21 See Copp (2007). As Olson states in the Introduction to his book, he has very little to say about positions such as these, focusing on nonnaturalist versions of realism.
22 Here I simplify. EPISTEMIC principles would, presumably, apply to a wider array of entities than our doxastic attitudes and MORAL principles would apply to a wider array of entities than our action-plans and their implementations. See Cuneo (2007), ch. 2.

The reason is that the application conditions for these successor concepts mirror those of moral concepts. As I think of them, the application conditions for moral concepts are given by claims such as these:

Necessarily, if an action falls under the concept <u>being a case of recreational slaughter of a fellow person</u>, then it falls under the concept <u>wrong</u>.
Necessarily, if an action falls under the concept <u>being a case of physically abusing another for pleasure</u>, then it falls under the concept <u>wrong</u>.
And so on.

We can identify application conditions for MORAL concepts that exactly mirror these, such as:

Necessarily, if an action falls under the concept <u>being a case of recreational slaughter of a fellow person</u>, then it falls under the concept <u>WRONG</u>.
Necessarily, if an action falls under the concept <u>being a case of physically abusing another for pleasure</u>, then it falls under the concept <u>WRONG</u>.

If the application conditions of a concept tell us what it is to be that concept, then these conditionals (which more or less exactly mirror the substance platitudes with regard to the moral domain) give us insight into the essence of these MORAL concepts.

Let's call the combination of the moral error theory and Strongly revisionist reductionism with respect to the moral domain the *moral combination*. My contention is that Olson should accept both the epistemic combination and the moral combination, combining the error theory with Strongly revisionist reductionism with regard to both the epistemic and moral domains. Doing so would allow Olson to claim both that the moral error theory is true but also that moral terms also admit of a purely descriptive use that parallels the use of epistemic terms.

Having offered reasons for Olson to accept the moral combination, let me now explain why I find the characterization that Olson offers of his own position puzzling. When defending Mackie's approach to moral theorizing, Olson explains how error theorists can engage in normative theorizing, positively contributing to this project and reaping its fruits.[23] But, Olson cautions, error theorists cannot say that the results of their efforts are true. I am not sure why Olson

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would say this, however.[24] The reason is this: if normative theorizing were to consist in reporting ordinary moral or epistemic beliefs, then one could see why Olson says what he does. For if his view were correct, such theorizing would consist in reporting false moral and epistemic beliefs. But normative theorizing needn't consist in simply reporting ordinary moral or epistemic beliefs. It could consist in formulating and advocating MORAL and EPISTEMIC principles. Error theorists could, moreover, maintain that the theories that they construct on the basis of these principles are *true*, enjoying properties such as being JUSTIFIED. For the theories they advocate may be constituted by no other normative propositions than those that represent EPISTEMIC and MORAL facts. What is more, error theorists needn't claim, as Mackie does, that we somehow "invent" these facts or that they are "subjective." So long as these facts do not satisfy the authority platitudes, trafficking in "queer" normative relations, they can be as objective as you like. Indeed, if what I argued earlier regarding the epistemic domain is correct, Olson has good reason to hold that MORAL facts would be objective in the sense of satisfying more or less exact analogues to the substance platitudes with regard to this domain.

Call the conjunction of the epistemic and moral combinations *the error theorist's positive view*. My suggestion has been that Olson accept this view. What we've learned when articulating this view's commitments is that there is substantial common ground between the error theorist's positive view and epistemic and moral reductionism: both views agree that there are facts that are normative in the lean sense and that satisfy the substance platitudes with regard to the epistemic and moral domains, or more or less exact analogues to these platitudes. Moreover, both views agree that there are no facts that satisfy the authority platitudes. While there is this shared ground, these views disagree about the character of epistemic and moral concepts. Reductionists hold that epistemic and moral concepts accurately represent epistemic and moral facts. Error theorists deny this.

4. Destabilizing the ET

My project in the previous two sections has been to argue for a pair of claims. First, we should interpret Olson as defending the epistemic combination. And, second, Olson should accept the moral combination given his commitment to

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the epistemic combination. In this section, I want to argue that commitment to the epistemic and moral combinations – what I've called *the error theorist's positive view* – destabilizes commitment to the error theory. The argument for destabilization runs as follows: the error theorist's positive view is not identical with certain versions of moral reductionism such as Weakly revisionist reductionism. But the two positions are *very* close cousins because of their shared positive ontological commitments. (In what remains, when I use the term "reductionism," I shall have in mind Weakly revisionist reductionism.) When we bring to light other methodological claims to which error theorists are committed, however, powerful reasons surface for holding that error theorists should either not accept their own view, or continue to accept their view but concede that it is philosophically irrelevant.

In the previous two sections, I've argued that the core of the disagreement between reductionism and error theory concerns the nature, role, and implications of moral and epistemic concepts. Error theory maintains that any fact that falls under moral concepts must satisfy the authority platitudes, while reductionism denies this. The question to ask is whether this difference is theoretically significant, signifying a difference between these positions that is deep or one that is superficial.

The answer to this question, I believe, depends on what one thinks a metanormative theory should accomplish. On this matter, I see two options. One option is to maintain that a satisfactory metanormative theory should offer us not only an accurate account of what sorts of normative facts there are but also an account that preserves deeply entrenched features of ordinary epistemic and moral thought and discourse. A second option is to say that metanormative theorizing needn't concern itself with preserving deeply entrenched features of ordinary epistemic and moral thought and discourse but should accurately state what the ontology of the normative domains is like. Were normative theorizing to accomplish this, the folk may ultimately have to surrender their deeply entrenched views to bring them into line with our best theories of what there is.

Both options present challenges to the error theory. Begin with the first. Suppose it is true that a satisfactory metanormative theory should preserve the deeply entrenched features of ordinary moral thought and discourse in at least this sense: if theories A and B are otherwise identical (or nearly so) but A preserves the deeply entrenched features of ordinary moral thought and discourse better than B, then (all else being equal) one ought to accept A. And suppose, further, that reductionism and the error theorist's positive view are otherwise on par insofar as they have the same ontological commitments: both maintain that there are normative facts in the lean sense but not in the robust sense and that these facts satisfy the substance platitudes with regard to the epistemic and moral do-mains, or exact analogues to them. Given these two assumptions, I contend that error theorists should not accept their positive view.

For among the deeply held convictions that we have is that, when it comes to moral and epistemic matters, we sometimes get it right. Indeed, it belongs to the broadly Moorean appearances that we not only sometimes get it right, but also that we have knowledge regarding moral and epistemic matters. By all appearances, for example, we appear to know moral propositions such as:

It is wrong to recreationally slaughter fellow persons;
and:
It is wrong to physically abuse others for pleasure.

And epistemic propositions such as:

It is irrational to believe a proposition simply on the basis of wish-fulfillment; and:
It is justified to believe a proposition on the basis of one's best evidence.

While error theorists cannot preserve these commitments – since they would not be true if the error theory were correct – reductionist positions can. Reductionists can even help themselves to the claim that we know what we have reason to do, provided that we understand "reason" in the lean sense. Moreover, reductionists have at their disposal resources to explain why properties such as *being wrong* and *being justified* answer to our moral and epistemic concepts even though these properties do not satisfy the authority platitudes.

This last claim might seem surprising. If reductionists agree that it belongs to our commonsensical conceptions of the moral and epistemic domains that moral and epistemic facts satisfy both the substance and authority platitudes, how could they plausibly maintain that these facts satisfy the substance but not the authority platitudes?

In principle, they could do so in several ways. Let me sketch one strategy that they might use. This strategy operates with a distinction between *concepts*, on the one hand, and *conceptions*, on the other. According to this distinction, concepts are referential devices that are the constituents of propositions, which often give us insight into the nature of the objects for which they stand. Conceptions, in contrast, are not referential devices or constituents of propositions. Rather, they are descriptive thoughts – often widely held and implicit – that a thinker associates with a concept or the object thereof. Of course "from the inside," it may be difficult to distinguish the two; extensive theorizing might be the only way to mark the distinction.

To take a familiar example, suppose the concept being solid characterizes composite material objects in terms of the cohesion of their parts or the relative impenetrability of these objects. Still, those of us who possess this concept might also harbor a variety of conceptions about objects that are solid. Among these conceptions, for example, might be the belief that solid objects have no space between their constituent parts. While widespread, we know that this conception is false. But since it does not belong to the concept being solid – as it does not belong to the application conditions of the concept – it would not prevent this concept as it is used in ordinary thought and discourse from characterizing objects that are solid.

In a similar fashion, ordinary moral and epistemic concepts might incorporate or be given by the substance platitudes with regard to these domains. If they do, then their application conditions would include propositions such as:

Necessarily, if an action falls under the concept being a case of recreational slaughter of a fellow person, then it falls under the concept wrong.

But we might also harbor conceptions that attend possession of the concept wrong. One such conception might be the belief that a divine being will ultimately punish people who perform many wrong actions. Another conception might be that the concept wrong applies only to those objects that satisfy the authority platitudes. Reductionists hold not only that these conceptions do not belong to the concept wrong, but also that some, such as the authority platitudes, are false. However, even if the authority platitudes were false, as reductionists believe, our moral and epistemic concepts could still refer to epistemic and moral features. So, while we might ordinarily suppose that reasons are robustly normative, the falsity of this supposition would not prevent our concept reason from referring to reasons.

I have argued that reductionists can accept:

(C) our commonsensical conception of moral and epistemic facts incorporates a commitment to both the substance and authority platitudes with regard to the moral and epistemic domains,

but reject:

(B) it belongs to the nature of moral and epistemic concepts that moral and epistemic facts must satisfy the authority platitudes.

Because reductionists accept (C), they can offer a characterization of ordinary moral and epistemic thought and discourse that is very close to that accepted by error theorists'. But because they reject (B), they needn't agree with error theorists that the contents of this thought and discourse are systematically untrue. If this is right, however, then reductionists can claim that their position preserves the deeply entrenched commitments of ordinary epistemic and moral thought and discourse *at least* as well as the error theorists' positive view. On the assumption that this is what a satisfactory metanormative theory should accomplish, it follows that error theorists ought not to accept their positive view.

We can summarize the argument as follows:

(1) The error theorists' positive view and reductionism are (or are nearly) identical except with regard to their understanding of the nature, role, and implications of moral and epistemic concepts.

(2) The reductionists' understanding of the nature, role, and implications of moral and epistemic concepts preserves the deeply entrenched commitments of ordinary epistemic and moral thought and discourse *at least* as well as the error theorists' understanding of the nature, role, and implications of moral and epistemic concepts does.

(3) A satisfactory metanormative theory should preserve the deeply entrenched commitments of ordinary epistemic and moral thought and discourse: all else being equal, if two metanormative theories are otherwise identical (or nearly so), one ought to accept whatever theory that better preserves these commitments (if any).

(4) So, all else being equal, there is no reason to accept the error theorists' positive view rather than reductionism.

(5) All else being equal, if there is no reason to accept the error theorists' positive view rather than reductionism, then those who accept the error theorists' positive view ought not to accept their own view.

(6) So, all else being equal, those who accept the error theorists' positive view ought not to accept their own view.

Let's review this argument's premises. (1) is simply an implication of the error theorist's positive view, which implies that the fundamental difference between this view and reductionism is how advocates of each position understand the nature, role, and implications of moral and epistemic concepts. (3) is true by hypothesis, since we are assuming that a satisfactory metanormative theory should preserve the appearances. Although, it may be worth reminding ourselves that (3) does not say that a theory ought to preserve our commonsense commitments full stop. It says only that if two theories are otherwise identical (or nearly so), we

should accept whatever view that better preserves these commitments (if any). I have, moreover, contended that the error theorist's positive view and reductionism are otherwise identical (or nearly so): both accept the same ontology of the normative domains and very similar characterizations of ordinary moral and epistemic thought and discourse. Both theories hold, for example, that a commitment to the substance and authority platitudes is constitutive of ordinary moral and epistemic thought and discourse. As for (5), this premise is an application of the very plausible principle that, for any two mutually incompatible theories, A and B, if one has no more reason to accept A than B, then one ought not to accept A.

This leaves only premise (2), which looks true. Indeed, this premise probably understates how the error theory and reductionism compare. Both views, after all, agree that we commonly assume that we can know propositions such as *it is wrong to recreationally slaughter fellow persons* or *it is irrational to believe a proposition merely on the basis of wish-fulfillment*. If the error theorists' positive view were correct, however, then we could not know any such propositions. In contrast, if reductionism is correct, we know these propositions and many more like them. On the face of things, reductionism seems not only to save the appearances as well as but much better than the error theory.

The argument just offered hinges on the assumption that a satisfactory metanormative theory should preserve the deeply entrenched features of ordinary epistemic and moral thought in the sense specified by premise (3). In principle, error theorists could reject this premise. But doing so would, I believe, be costly.

Error theorists maintain that ordinary moral and epistemic thought and discourse are in deep and systematic error; none of it is true. But there would be no error if competent participants in ordinary moral and epistemic discourse did not suppose that moral and epistemic reality must satisfy the authority platitudes (or our moral and epistemic concepts did not imply the truth of these platitudes). Why think, then, that participants in ordinary moral and epistemic thought and discourse hold that the authority platitudes are true of moral and epistemic reality (or that our moral and epistemic concepts imply the truth of these platitudes)?

According to error theorists such as Joyce, it is because it is difficult to make sense of our practices of blaming and praising if they did not.[25] If Joyce's views are representative – and I believe they are – it follows that error theorists are committed to preserving at least this deeply entrenched feature of ordinary epistemic and moral thought and discourse:

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25 Joyce (2001), ch. 2.

Competent participants in ordinary moral and epistemic discourse suppose that moral and epistemic reality must satisfy the authority platitudes.

But error theorists could not in one breath deny that a satisfactory metanormative theory should preserve the deeply entrenched features of ordinary epistemic and moral thought and discourse and recommend their view on the basis of this claim. If so, it is not really an option for error theorists to surrender this claim, since doing so would undercut what looks like an indispensable premise in the case that they offer for their view.

Suppose, however, error theorists could plausibly reject the claim that a satisfactory metanormative theory should preserve the deeply entrenched commitments of ordinary epistemic and moral thought and discourse in the sense specified by (3). The implication of doing so would be that the sole remaining difference between reductionism and the error theorists' positive view becomes theoretically irrelevant. After all, if a metanormative theory needn't preserve the deeply entrenched commitments of ordinary epistemic and moral thought and discourse, it wouldn't matter (at least as normative theorizing goes) whether ordinary agents employ moral and epistemic concepts or whether these concepts characterize moral and epistemic reality. In fact, it wouldn't matter if reductionists were to *agree* that moral and epistemic concepts fail to characterize moral and epistemic facts, joining error theorists by employing MORAL and EPISTEMIC concepts when theorizing. What would matter is what error theorists and reductionists say about normative reality. And on this matter, we've seen, they say the same thing. Of course none of this would establish that the error theory is false or that error theorists should surrender their view. It would only establish that what renders the error theory a distinctive view is theoretically irrelevant (so far as metanormative theorizing goes). As far as normative theorizing goes, the fact that the moral and epistemic beliefs of ordinary people are massively mistaken is neither here nor there.

Here is the conclusion I reach. It is possible for error theorists to escape the central dilemma by grasping the dilemma's second horn. Doing so commits them to the error theorists' positive view, which is a blend of the epistemic and moral combinations. However, when error theorists advocate their positive view, they thereby destabilize commitment to their own position. If this is right, the strategy that Olson advocates for avoiding the central dilemma is one that error theorists should not embrace. This conclusion is compatible with there being other strategies.

egies for resisting the central dilemma. One such strategy, for example, might be to reject the parity principle on which the central dilemma is predicated.[26]

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Andrew Reisner
Peer Disagreement, Rational Requirements, and Evidence of Evidence as Evidence Against

1. Introduction

Worries about the significance of disagreement amongst actual, or perceived (perhaps with a good reason), peers has in recent years prompted a substantial body of work by epistemologists.[1] It is common in this literature to discuss a variety of normative issues that may arise from peer disagreement in terms of 'rationality'. This is regrettable. For roughly the last fifteen years, philosophers working on normativity have been growing ever more sensitive to the important differences between normative reasons, rational requirements, and requirements of reasoning. The term 'rationality', as used by epistemologists in this debate, can be used to make claims about any or any combination of normative reasons, rational requirements, and requirements of reasoning.[2] 'Rationality', in the broader literature on theoretical reason, typically denotes requirements or permissions that appertain to relations amongst mental states, as opposed to considerations generally that count in favour of having particular beliefs or other mental states. Those fall under the rubric of 'normative reasons'.

Despite the terminological difficulties, it seems clear that the main focus of the peer disagreement literature in epistemology is best understood as being on normative reasons for belief.[3] Consequently, in this chapter I shall consider the possible import of peer disagreement with respect to rationality in its more regimented use and as distinct from the importance of peer disagreement with respect to the normative reasons it may provide or its import for the requirements of reasoning. My suggestion is that there is little upshot rationally to peer disagreement. A possible exception are cases in which peer disagreement is believed to be antecedently unlikely or in which it is assigned a low credence. At present,

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1 See De Ridder (2014) as an example of work on disagreement between idealised peers. For disagreement between agents who regard each other with reason as peers, see Enoch (2010).
2 Cases of ambiguous usage include Ballantyne and Coffman (2011), Kelly (2010) and White (2005). This is often the result of an uneasy slide from traditional talk of justification in epistemology to the use of reasons talk in concert with justification. For a brief discussion of the incorporation of reasons into epistemology, see Reisner and Steglich-Petersen (2011).
3 I thank Michele Palmira for suggesting this reading of the literature to me.