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Morality and Epistemic Judgment

The Argument From Analogy

This is a draft of the introduction. The manuscript is forthcoming with *Oxford University Press* (expected date October 2019, available [here](#)).

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0. Introduction

Moral judgments attempt to describe a reality that does not exist. As a consequence those judgments – and those of us who make them – are systematically mistaken. This is the *moral error theory*. It is an unsettling thesis. Our moral views provide meaning and purpose in our lives, structure societies, legitimise punishment and on occasion demand great personal sacrifices. But according to moral error theorists they are nonetheless mistaken. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche wrote: “Life is no argument at all; the conditions of life might include error.”¹ He was not defending the moral error theory but he expressed the sentiment behind it nonetheless. If the moral error theory is true, then one of the most pervasive features of human life – and arguably a key feature in the development and success of our species - is in error. Might morality be systematically mistaken in this way? This book is about an important argument for thinking it could not be. It is called *the argument from analogy*. I ask whether it succeeds. I argue it does not. This is good news for moral error theorists. It may be bad news for us.² Or so I shall argue.

The basic structure of the argument from analogy is very simple. There are two key moves. The first move is to draw a comparison between moral judgments and epistemic judgments: judgments about what one ought to believe given one’s evidence. Like moral judgments, epistemic judgments concern how one ought to behave in a sense that transcends personal interest and social convention. The second move is to use this comparison to reject the moral error theory. Because moral

¹ Nietzsche 1974, 121.

² Moral abolitionists disagree. See e.g. Garner 2007.

judgment and epistemic judgment are so similar, any case for a moral error theory would entail an error theory about epistemic judgment too. But we know that an error theory about epistemic judgment is false. We could not reason or think in a systematic fashion without epistemic judgments. The conclusion is that the argument for the moral error theory must have gone wrong somewhere along the way.

This is the argument from analogy. It is a simple, powerful argument. In this book I systematise and assess its extensive recent use. I claim that it fails. I will get into the details in due course. But it is worth saying something more about the *motivation* for the project. The argument from analogy stands at the intersection of three different trends within contemporary philosophy, each of which is presently enjoying ‘a moment’. The first of these concerns the moral error theory itself. There are few views in philosophy so closely associated with a single figure as the moral error theory is with J.L. Mackie.³ But in recent years the view has found new supporters. Richard Joyce’s *The Myth of Morality* has been followed by further volumes by Jonas Olson, Bart Streumer, Joel Marks and Wouter Kalf.⁴ Each defends the moral error theory. The result is that the moral error theory is no longer eccentric or fringe. It is now one of the canonical ‘positions’ in metaethics, deserving of serious engagement.

The second trend concerns the general strategy of arguing *by analogy* in moral philosophy. This too is having something of a moment. Arguments by analogy work by drawing a comparison between morality and some non-moral analogue. This comparison is then used to establish a conclusion about morality. A traditionally

³ Mackie 1977.

⁴ Joyce 2001, Olson 2014, Streumer 2017, Marks 2012, Kalf 2018.

popular analogy has been with secondary qualities, such as colour.⁵ The analogy between morality and mathematics has an even more distinguished history. It has been – and continues to be - a fruitful source of arguments against moral scepticism and of models for how moral epistemology should work.⁶ More recently the use of arguments by analogy as a strategy within moral philosophy – so-called ‘companions in guilt arguments’ - has been the subject of philosophical study and interest in its own right.⁷ Indeed this is in part a consequence of Mackie’s suggestion that opponents of the error theory argue in this way:

[T]he best move for the moral objectivist is not to evade this issue, but to look for companions in guilt.⁸

These two convergent trends explain why - at this point in philosophical time – there should be an interest in using analogies to tackle the moral error theory. But why with *epistemology* as the analogue? Enter the third trend. It is increasingly common to think of epistemology and morality as in relevant respects *the same kind of thing*. This is for the most part a consequence of a shift in the mind-set of many epistemologists. They have increasingly come to think of epistemology as an *evaluative* or *normative* discipline. Its task is not merely to make descriptive claims about our beliefs and belief-forming mechanisms but to *evaluate* or *recommend*; to tell us which beliefs we *should* or *shouldn't* form. This is clearly expressed by Mark Schroeder:

⁵ See especially McDowell 1998.

⁶ Gill 2008. See e.g. Scanlon 2014: 70 and for discussion Clarke-Doane 2014.

⁷ See Lillehammer 2007, Sinclair and Leibowitz 2015, Rowland and Cowie forthcoming.

⁸ Mackie 1977, 39.

Epistemology is in part a normative discipline. Epistemologists are not concerned simply with what people believe... They are concerned with what people *should* believe.⁹

This normative or evaluative ‘turn’ in epistemology brings it into the same orbit as morality. Both are normative or evaluative.

Given these three trends the argument from analogy is something of a Hegelian inevitability: a natural synthesis of the existing philosophical dialectics. Unlike Hegel however I can’t claim to have got there first. Versions of the argument from analogy have been around for some time now. The first systematic treatment was provided by Terence Cuneo in his 2007 book *The Normative Web*. Here, Cuneo made use of a variant on the argument from analogy to undermine the moral error theory (amongst other things). Addressing Mackie, he writes:

J.L. Mackie was a moral nihilist... But he expressed no sympathy for epistemic nihilism... I doubt that he would’ve had much sympathy with it. For Mackie believed in the power of argument and reason.¹⁰

The point is a powerful one. A substantial literature has since developed in response to it; some supportive, some not. The most modest ambition of this book is to fairly and informatively systematise that literature while it is still possible to do so. The more ambitious aim is to show that the argument that it is about is misguided.

⁹ Schroeder 2015, 379.

¹⁰ Cuneo 2007, 122.

The roadmap is as follows. In chapters 1 to 2 I present the basics that we will be concerned with: the moral error theory and the argument from analogy. In chapters 3 to 5 I present my basic cases(s) for rejecting the argument from analogy. In chapters 6 to 8 I elaborate on and defend my arguments. In chapters 9 to 10 I defend some ‘fall-back’ positions should my earlier arguments fail and draw together some loose-ends. In chapter 11 I conclude by re-capping on the overall structure of my argument and the key moves in each chapter: disorientated readers may refer to this chapter as they go. My conclusion is that the argument from analogy fails. I do not infer from this that the moral error theory is true. My arguments do not entitle me to this conclusion. But I do claim that – for now at least – I do not know that it is false.