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The Tempering of a Defense: Further Critiques Against Error Theory in Light of Russ Shafer-Landau's Ethical Nonnaturalism

Christopher Fidalgo
Georgia State University

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J.L. Mackie's paper "The Subjectivity of values" makes a convincing case for why objective values do not exist. In response, Russ Shafer-Landau's "A Defense for Ethical Nonnaturalism" provides a counterpoint to Mackie's claims. However, there is more an error theorist can say. In my paper, I argue that, while there is more an error theorist can say, those responses are not sufficient to trump Shafer-Landau's claims to an objective, nonnatural ethical system. As he puts it and I affirm, ethics is not solely bound to natural terms, like science, but is nevertheless objective, mainly because of the reasons that support ethics. It is reason itself that provides grounding for ethics, and a natural "ethical" substance or essence is not needed. Moreover, if we take the error theorist's reasoning to its eventual end, we find that error theorist's are either confused about the scope of the debate or their conclusions lead to unintended or incoherent consequences for the error theorist. I conclude that ethics most likely relies upon both natural and nonnatural facts, as opposed to one or the other.

In "The Subjectivity of Values," J.L. Mackie (2007) states objective values do not exist (25). Therefore, he argues that any claim about objective morality is also false, and he calls this his moral error theory. In this paper, I will argue that error theorists are misguided. I believe they are misguided because of Shafer-Landau's arguments within "A Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism" and my own arguments. While I think he and I have reasonable arguments, I will answer the hypothetical error theorist's relevant rejoinders with my own. If error theorists seek an archaic, natural essence with some mystical connection to reality for the basis of morality, then they ought to seek such an essence for other concepts. However, error theorists do not. Instead, they accept reason and argumentation when it comes to deliberating over the nature of other concepts. The *good* is no different in kind than these other concepts. Therefore, error theorists are approaching the *good* and morality in a misguided and unjust way: the *good* is just another debatable concept within philosophy.

Mackie begins his paper with a simple and controversial statement: "There are no objective values" (25). By this, Mackie means that there is no natural entity we could point to which would correlate to values. By natural entity, he means an empirically detectable property, e.g. a chemical property, which could be scientifically investigated. For example, we have a certain

word and concept, *water*, which correlates to a chemical compound, H_2O . For values to be objective by Mackie's account, values would need an equivalent to H_2O . That isn't to say that Mackie rejects the notion of value: he believes that subjective values do exist. An agent can value something. Moreover, an agent can have good prudential reasons to not perform certain acts. An agent might desire to murder an infant because one gains pleasure in doing so, but one shouldn't, prudentially speaking, murder infants because doing so would cause the agent to go to jail and lose their freedom. As long as the agent's desire to stay free within society is more valuable to the agent than the desire to murder infants, then the agent shouldn't murder infants.

Mackie provides two arguments for why there are no objective values. First is Mackie's (2007) "Argument from Relativity" (30). Mackie argues that the wide variety of values is evidence that there are no objective values. Two sides of a moral debate can have all the relevant, natural facts about the matter, and yet, both sides might have vastly different ethical judgments concerning the same incident. Mackie takes it to be the case that if values were objective, and we had all the natural facts, then the answer would be evident, but because there is still disagreement, it is not because we do not have all the natural facts but because values are just simply not objective. Mackie also takes it to be the case that morality and our intuitions about it are based on the way we live rather than morality informing our way of living. What we call "objective morality" is not action guiding but merely a description of how we live. We impart the quality of objective moral goodness after we decide how we would prefer to live, and there is nothing further about morality.

The second argument is Mackie's (2007) "Argument from Queerness" (31). Objective values, if they existed, would be qualities or relations unlike anything else we've discovered. Moreover, to access such moral properties would require a special faculty, one of "moral perception or intuition," which would be unique to morality alone (Mackie, 2007, 31). In short, they

would be extremely queer things. Mackie sees objective morality as currently having this mystical quality about it, one which cannot be explained clearly through a lens of naturalism. Mackie takes it that our ontology rarely, if ever, includes concepts that lack empirical evidence. Because morality lacks empirical evidence for its existence, we should exclude it from our ontology.

Before giving my own responses, I would like to present Russ Shafer-Landau's argumentation against Mackie's error theory in "Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism," a piece which heavily influences my own reasoning (2007). After examining Shafer-Landau's arguments, I'll provide my own arguments, along with what a hypothetical error theorist might retort.

In response to the argument from relativity, Shafer-Landau turns Mackie's critique upon itself. His original claims about relativity said that the variety of first-order moral beliefs was evidence that these judgments were subjective opinions rather than objective fact. However, there is as much variety about second-order moral beliefs—that is, beliefs about the metaphysical nature of morality, such as whether it is objective or subjective. Error theorists, if consistent in reasoning, would need to be error theorists about their own beliefs. They would have to believe that all this talk about whether morality is objective or subjective has no metaphysical basis to it, and instead, all claims about the metaphysics of morality (objective, subjective, or otherwise) are all false.

Error theorists, like Mackie, don't believe this, though. They think they have good reason to believe that morality is a subjective enterprise. Shafer-Landau highlights his main, positive thesis against the error theorist's claims: not everything within our ontology is backed by naturalism or scientific evidence, especially in philosophy, including the error theorist's own beliefs. Instead, when examining concepts, we do more than just look for scientific evidence. We introspect, check our intuitions against hypothetical cases, and I would even say we aim for a reflective equilibrium¹

about our moral beliefs.

The process of reflective equilibrium occurs when an agent takes a set of instances (moral quandaries, in this case) and formulates underlying rules (moral precepts) from these instances. If an agent finds each instance where a rational agent is killed by another rational agent as morally repugnant, then the agent establishes a rule against killing other rational agents. After, the agent retests the rules against possible cases. If a rule doesn't cohere well with the agent's beliefs about novel instances, the agent reformulates the rules, and then retests the new set of rules.

Return to my earlier example: an agent may introspect about hypothetical moral instances and find that cases of self-defense, where an attacking rational agent is killed in self defense by another rational agent, as not morally repugnant. The deliberating agent would then refine their moral precept to say that only murder, the intentional killing of another rational agent, is morally impermissible, instead of self-defense or bare killing alone.

I think this is a common way we in fact do think about moral precepts. In this instance, intention and how the killing came about played a role with our forming moral precepts. This process of testing and rule crafting is repeated until all our instances cohere well with our rules.² While reflective equilibrium is not part of Shafer-Landau's positive thesis, I think this process nicely compliments his theory, and even if this process is problematic, Shafer-Landau's argumentation still stands: we do not have scientific evidence for believing the error theorist. By the error theorist's own lights, her views are not coherent or persuasive.

Moreover, in response to Mackie's concerns, I would suggest that there are many other concepts—intangibles such as kindness and cruelty, intention, consciousness, or free will (Shafer-Landau, 2007, 63)—that lack a naturalistic basis. Even concepts, such *vehicle*, are difficult to define. Yet, we are not error theorists about the concept *vehicle* or its referents because, despite the vagueness of the concept, we still believe we have referents that produce

true statements. If Mackie wishes to be consistent, then I believe he should be a sweeping error theorist about a whole host of topics, including those outside of philosophy. An intelligent error theorist, I believe, would respond by saying this: “I would suggest taking a more conservative approach and say that for concepts outside of morality, we appeal to something not as mystical as whatever is the basis for objective morality. Vehicles have an actual basis, i.e. things in the world that we can test the concept against. There is, at least, the possibility of attaining successful reference for the concept *vehicle* but there is no such hope for the phantom that is objective morality.”

In response, I would ask what the error theorist means by *successful reference*. Usually, by that we mean that when we employ a certain concept, propositions that correctly apply the concept say something true. Obviously, *ex hypothesi* for the error theorist, morality cannot do this, since all claims about objective morality are false. The *good* can never successfully refer in this way because for the error theorist all claims about the *good* and therefore morality are false. They are supposedly false because they purport to refer to something that does not exist, namely, objective values. I, of course, disagree with that assumption, though.

Take a similar debate: which human creations successfully refer to the word *art*. When we debate about the concept *art*, we are trying to accurately pick out the human creations that are art as opposed to the non-art creations. I doubt most people would say every creation is art.³ Entertainment, for instance, is not usually accepted as or intended as art. Often, entertainers say something like, “Well, I’m just trying to entertain,” by which they mean they don’t care about the higher attributes associated with art but only wish to excite the audience’s emotions in some way. To return to the point, I don’t see the debate itself over the metaphysics of art as one which leads to us believing that art doesn’t exist or that all claims about art are false. My error theorist counterpart again would stop me here and say, “Well, the point is that there is no mystical art

essence for the creations that are art as opposed to the non-art creations.” And in response, I would agree. I don’t think there is some mystical metaphysical “essence” that validates something as art or some mystical metaphysical “essence” that validates something as good. However, while I doubt these essences, I don’t doubt that good reasons exist to classify certain things as art. Certain aesthetic qualities, the intention of the work, the depth of the piece, both cognitively and stylistically, whether it excites our emotions in a particular way, how art often lacks function beyond our appreciation and contemplation, etc., all inform us as to whether a work is art, or better put, should be classified as art.⁴ Error theorists are stuck on empirical justification and how our concepts refer to those things. Instead, it is more advantageous to think about concepts and then the reasons why we classify things in a particular way.⁵

I still think error theorists would be unsatisfied by this response, saying that when discussing objective morality, they believe we mean more than merely reasons for why something is good. They believe there is an objective essence of the *good* and that some empirically verifiable property connects our actions with that property. If error theorists want a natural essence of the *good* to point to, then I’m not sure I could provide such a thing, granted I don’t believe in one.⁶ Instead, all I can suggest is that the concept of the *good* operates like other concepts, not by appealing to *purely* empirically verifiable properties, but rather reasons for or against some classification as a concept.

One last point: I find it strange that Mackie is not an eliminativist about values rather than a subjectivist. Someone who is an eliminativist about value would totally eliminate values from their ontology rather than taking it for granted that some values exist, and in Mackie’s case, those values are subjective in nature. He clearly believes in values and at least his own. I don’t know what scientific evidence exists to point to Mackie’s values besides what he consciously states are his values. If I take Mackie’s argumentation seriously, then he must believe in “furniture” for his

subjective beliefs. I assume Mackie would cite his reports of his preferences, but I have doubts that such reports will always be accurate. Sometimes we are wrong about what we desire. Moreover, it's unclear that Mackie's statements about his preferences actually correlate to an empirically verifiable property like Mackie demands of morality. This argumentation is in the same vain as Shafer-Landau's, but it accepts Mackie's position and takes his own beliefs in account. I assume Mackie would bet on science to prove the existence of his values, but such a bet is rather unpersuasive in light of what Mackie argues.

I would now like to return to Mackie's argument from queerness. Recall Mackie's claims: he says that if moral properties did exist, they would be extremely queer things, unlike anything else we understand, and our ability to or faculty used to access such properties would also be as queer as the properties themselves. Shafer-Landau responds to this claim by looking at our ontology as a whole. Shafer-Landau wants to highlight that there are many concepts in our standing ontology that are not backed by naturalism, including much of what we have good reasons for believing. There are a whole host of concepts we discuss which, through an error theorist's lens, merely are atoms in a void, but the way we mentally process, discuss, categorize, and name these arrangements of atoms as particular arrangements is salient and valuable.

One set of facts that is not backed by naturalism alone and we have good reason to believe in are epistemic facts. Epistemic facts guide what we ought to believe, provided that our beliefs are aimed at the truth. Mackie and other error theorists alike would probably find such facts less pernicious than normative facts, despite both sets of facts as being action guiding, meaning they tell us how we should live our lives as opposed to being a bare set of acts about the world. While some philosophers—notably, Hume—say the distinction between “is” and “ought” statements, facts and action guiding principles, is an insurmountable gap, Shafer-Landau takes it for granted that there is a fact of the matter about how we should act, both rationally and morally.

Still, my hypothetical error theorist might respond by saying, "Why should I care about aiming my beliefs toward the truth? Why should I value the truth? There might be prudential reasons to do so, but there's no objective, fundamental reason why I should value the *truth*. Exactly in the same way, there is no objective, fundamental reason why I should value the *good*." In response, I find myself wanting to appeal to some intrinsic value about the truth and the good, but in a less spooky way than what Mackie would suggest. There is something about true things which we tend to value over false things. If someone watched a *mockumentary*, a movie which appears as though it is a documentary but is in fact fictional for usually comical or satirical reasons, and that someone believed the mockumentary was in fact a documentary, then he would probably be disappointed or feel wronged in some way.⁷ I think Mackie and other error theorists, while trying to maintain their position, would press on these feelings and reactions by saying there is still no objective reason why we should value the truth. However, their asking why they want the truth confuses me in light of the beginning of this discussion. Error theorists wanted the *good* to successfully refer to something, not falsely, but truthfully. If you really wish to believe in false things, then there is no argument I can supply which would be persuasive. To such a person, what is persuasive to them is what they choose is persuasive; they define the criteria for what's persuasive where usually the truth would suffice. But by and large, people are not relativists or subjectivists when it comes to the nature of truth, and those that are typically confuse the truth of their beliefs with the truth of the content of their beliefs. For instance, *I believe there is a tree in my room* is true if I in fact believe that there is a tree in my room. But, the content of that belief (*there is a tree in my room*) is objectively false, certainly by Mackie's standards, since there are no trees in my room, and we could scientifically prove this.⁸ The *good* might be intrinsically valuable in the same way. Someone might value what is objectively bad, but they would appear confused if they were to ask why they should value the *good*. To return to the earlier argumentation regarding

epistemic facts, however, error theorists do not hold these kinds of subjectivist or relativist beliefs regarding *truth*: Mackie's version, at least, endorses a belief in objective truth. He believes some things are objectively true, scientific judgments, on the basis that there is nothing else to the universe besides naturalism.⁹

For those error theorists that are still not persuaded to accept concepts without scientific evidence but find something compelling about Shafer-Landau's claims about ontology, one could turn to Richard Joyce's fictionalism laid out in "Morality, Schmorality" (2007). One could take all the subtracted ontology Shafer-Landau discusses and believe in that subtracted ontology as a fiction. We might have very good reasons for treating the subtracted ontology *as if it were* true, but we know, and respond when pressed, that the subtracted ontology is not *in fact* true. Believing in morality might benefit each individual, but this benefit cannot make morality in fact true. This doesn't answer Shafer-Landau's logical arguments against error theory¹⁰, but this answer does respond to the practical concerns Shafer-Landau has about eliminating wide ranges of our ontology.

I think this might be a neat way of responding to Shafer-Landau's pragmatic concerns regarding ontology. Like morality, it probably does benefit—meaning facilitates communication, keeps society orderly, produces more happiness for each person, etc.—each individual to treat certain propositions about particular concepts as truth-apt. However, I still feel this position is lacking. One example of a concept which would most likely fall on the chopping block when it comes to removing parts of an ontology that are not scientifically supportable are *a priori* propositions.¹¹ Bachelors, for instance, have no natural essence which we could scientifically point to. There is no *bachelor furniture*, as in, something furniture-y that's a bachelor. What counts as furniture to Mackie are just empirically verifiable forces and atoms in the void. A bachelor is not empirically verifiable. Still, there is a truth about bachelors, one which doesn't appear deniable.¹²

Bachelors just are unmarried males. The truth about that statement appears to be more than a fiction, and most would say there is successful reference between the subject and the predicate. The astute error theorists and fictionalist would argue that in the case of bachelors, we've taken a particular thing and placed a certain value upon it by sorting it. In this case, unmarried men are called bachelors, but there is no bachelor-ness out in the world. Bachelor is just a placeholder for the idea of an unmarried male. Even then there is a question about whether this sorting is a good sorting, and an error theorist would stumble here once more. Like epistemic facts, it's not exactly clear how error theorists would account for 'good' sorting and 'bad' sorting.¹³

At this point in the argument, it seems to me that debate is moving further away from ethics and metaethics and more towards metaphysics and philosophy of language, particularly how we name or conceptualize things. For those concerns, I have little experience with arguments outside of metaethical debates. *Prima facie* from someone who knows little, the worry about how we name a collection of atoms, if that is what is meant by sorting certain groupings of atoms into a concept category, is a worry about concepts and naming rather than a worry about the concepts themselves. There is nothing mystical that links bachelors to unmarried males, but bachelors are unmarried males. Unmarried males could be called something else, say schmachelors in Joyce's fashion, but what is important is whether the correct idea is communicated. If there were no bachelors, then all we could successfully refer to would be schmachelors. If a man, Bill, was a schmachelor and someone said, "Bill's a schmachelor because he was married earlier this year," then the person proclaiming such would be wrong because they are proclaiming something false. Bill cannot be a schmachelor if he is indeed married. Still, in the case of morality, error theorists would not be persuaded because they would say treating morality in this way would be, as Joyce put it, trying to discuss the nature of witches when no witches exist (2007, 53-54). Without scientific evidence to verify witches against, we can make no true claims about witches. As I have

argued, however, I don't know why *solely* scientifically proven concepts are all we should pay attention to.¹⁴ Our conceptual analysis¹⁵ of the *good* can inform us as to whether our propositions about the *good* are in fact true. If naturalism were true, then the fictionalist would have a better case. Because non-natural concepts are open to us, as I have argued, there is more we can use for successful reference than just natural properties. *Good* then needs to be investigated like any other concept.

Therefore, I don't think that morality succumbs to error theory. Error theory is too destructive when it comes to ontology, epistemology and language, and it fails to pass its own critiques. While Mackie may not agree, I believe conceptual analysis of the *good* is a worthwhile enterprise to invest, particularly because naturalism alone is unpersuasive. There are, as Shafer-Landau argues, non-natural properties and concepts we care about and take seriously, not solely as a fiction, but as real existing things. Successful reference, with respect to concepts, is not limited to natural properties either. Good reason and a solid justifying process—like reflective equilibrium—can provide a basis for objective morality. Morality doesn't have a spooky basis in a mystical essence, but the *good* is a non-natural property. While scientific investigation might not inform our knowledge about morality, reflecting on and discussing the nature of the *good* in real and hypothetical cases can—and does—inform us about morality as a whole.

ENDNOTES

¹ For more on this, see Nelson Goodman (1955) on the process of reflective equilibrium.

² For those interested, see Stephen Stich (1988) for problems concerning epistemic reflective equilibrium. I think Stich's view is incoherent, since it relies upon a western notion of truth and rationality to be persuasive. However, his paper still provides a counterpoint to the process.

³ There is a common notion that everything is art (or art to someone), but if everything were art, then the employment of the term would be pointless and vacuous. I take it that people don't intuitively take the concept *art* to be pointless or vacuous.

⁴ Error theorists might argue that I'm missing a big distinction between naming and being. I'll discuss this distinction later, but it suffices to say that I don't see this as huge of a distinction as the error theorist might, particularly if our reference is still successful.

⁵ An error theorist might complain and say the justification is the focus. I believe my discussion on reflective equilibrium answers those concerns.

⁶ Some philosophers, such as R.M. Hare (1952), have argued for the *good* as being a supervenient property, meaning that if there is a change in the natural properties of an event, then there is a change in the moral properties

of that event. This theory creates a tight connection between the moral and natural properties of an event.

⁷ For a real life example, see *I'm Still Here*, Joaquin Phoenix's mockumentary which resulted in such reactions (Casey Affleck, 2010).

⁸ If you find this reasoning unpersuasive, I encourage you to read Paul Boghossian (2006) for elegant argumentation against factual relativism and constructivism.

⁹ Revisit Shafer-Landau's argumentation against the relativity argument for why this second-order belief might be questionable in light of Mackie's theory.

¹⁰ Fictionalism takes error theory as an assumption.

¹¹ Here, I'm making an allusion to Kant's theories on analytic, *a priori* propositions. My arguments later on will continue this trend with the *good* in mind.

¹² It should be noted that there is significantly less debate over what counts as a bachelor.

¹³ The implications here could be devastating and lead to an unraveling of language for error theorists. I think an error theorist would respond with some sort of functionalist account about sorting, but the nature of 'good' or 'bad' sorting would still require objectivity because language requires objectivity. There is no reason why such an account couldn't work for morality as well, but that would lead to objective rules, a problem for the error theorist.

¹⁴ The good could be a mixture of non-natural *and* natural properties, but it is at least non-natural.

¹⁵ I think our linguistic use of the *good* matters as well, but I'm not willing to fully argue for that position since doing so would require more space than I have. The *good*, most likely, will be a mixture of things, not solely any one property.

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