Truth and Error in Morality

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Roughly speaking, the moral error theory concludes that all moral utterances are false. The argument for the error theory is simple and compelling. As the standard argument goes, moral error theory requires only two premises: that moral terms refer, in some sense or other, to the world–moral sentences *say something about what is the case*, and that the world is not, after all, the way the moral sentences say it is. If this is correct, moral sentences (beliefs, utterances, propositions, etc.) are false.

My contribution to this discussion will not be to dispute or reinforce either of these premises in the error theorist's arsenal. They have been the subject of voluminous discussion already. Rather, I want to argue here that *even if these premises are true*, morality need not succumb to the error theory. The error theory can be shown false on the assumption of an alternative theory of truth for moral sentences as part of a more general *pluralism* about truth.

1. The Error Theory Stated

The error theory is most generally categorized as a form of moral antirealism. Insofar as the error theory denies what moral realism affirms, this is correct. But the error theory should be worrying not just for moral realists, but rather for anyone who accepts the claim that there are at least some true moral claims. Moral constructivists and subjectivists have as much to fear from the error theory as moral realists.[1] As anti-realisms go, the error

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[1] I will leave aside the vexed question of where moral realism leaves off and moral constructivism begins, and where moral constructivism leaves off and moral subjectivism begins, and where moral realism leaves off and moral subjectivism begins. I bring these views up only to underscore the point that the mere fact that someone is a moral anti-

theory is a scorched-earth strategy. Though we may be able to use "ought" terms and various other moral terms, if the error theory is true, we must do so with a wink and a nod, or, as Lewis suggests, only when speaking loosely.[2]

The error theory is a thesis about discourse that involves morality as a system of norms. Its conclusion is that this form of discourse, referring specifically to morality, fails–all instantiations of such discourse are false. I note here that the error theory refers specifically to morality because it is important to properly circumscribe it. One should not conclude from the moral error theory that all "ought to" statements are false. For instance, there could be other systems of norms that allow ought judgments that do not come under the heading of morality. Prudential oughts, for instance, might survive the moral error theory, especially on accounts of prudence that refer to an agent's *desires*, and hence are uncommitted to properties the error theorist finds objectionable. Similarly, oughts of etiquette, oughts that involve one's social or personal roles, might obligate in the face of a failure of moral discourse (as Mackie notes, these norms offer only hypothetical imperatives).[3]

So what is the argument for the error theory? Richard Joyce puts the matter in the following way:

> An error theory, as we have seen, involves two steps of argumentation. First, it involves ascertaining just what a term *means*. I have tried to explicate this in terms of "non-negotiability," which in turn I understood in terms of a translation test (but there may be other, and better, ways of understanding the notion). So, in artificially simple terms, the first step gives us something roughly of the form "for any x, Fx if and only if Px and Qx and Rx." We can call this step *conceptual*. The second step is to ascertain whether the following is true: "There exists an x, such that Px and Qx and Rx." If not, then there is nothing that satisfies "... is F." Call this step *ontological* or *substantive*.[4]

Stated generically, then, the error theorist's form of argument runs as follows:

realist does not mean that the error theory is not an important challenge.

[2]David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value" in *Papers in Ethics and Social Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 93.

[3]J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1977), 25-30.

[4]Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5.

1. Sentences with moral terms refer to properties with characteristics $\{x, y, \text{ and } z\}$.
2. No existent properties display characteristics $\{x, y, \text{ and } z\}$.
Hence,
3. Assertoric sentences containing moral terms are false.

Often discussion of the error theory centers on the second step, but the first step must not be overlooked. The error theory must *establish* that moral terms cannot help but refer to properties that display characteristics that fail to fit the world. For instance, Mackie argues that moral terms purport to refer to properties that have the characteristics of being "objectively prescriptive". Mackie writes:

> ordinary moral judgments include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values just in the sense in which I am concerned to deny this. And I do not think it is going too far to say that this assumption has been incorporated in the basic, conventional, meanings of moral terms. Any analysis of the meanings of moral terms which omits this claim to objective, intrinsic, prescriptivity is to that extent incomplete; and this is true of any non-cognitive analysis, any naturalist one, and any combination of the two.[5]

It is worth wondering what Mackie means when he refers to objective, intrinsic, prescriptivity. Importantly, this might be the property of being "objectively motivational"–that the recognition of moral facts is sufficient to provide a motivation for an agent to act in accordance with the moral fact. (Call the thesis that moral facts are objectively motivational, "motivational internalism".) Alternatively, Mackie might have been referring to the property of being "objectively normative"–that moral facts are composed of properties that necessarily provide reason for action.[6] (Call the thesis that moral properties are objectively normative "moral rationalism.") Whichever Mackie meant, he seems to believe that these moral claims must refer to a feature of the world itself, one that is either objectively motivational or objectively normative. Thus, if we are to avoid an error theory, these features of the world must actually exist. According to Mackie, however, these features of the world don't exist; famously, his evidence involves two appeals: the appeal to relativity, and the appeal to metaphysical and epistemological

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[5]Mackie, 35.

[6]Cf. David Brink, "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness" in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1984), 113-4.

queerness. Of the former he writes: "radical differences between first order moral judgments make it difficult to treat those judgments as apprehensions of objective truths."[7] Of the latter, he writes: "If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else."[8] That such entities don't correspond to our general understanding of the structure of the universe, or the general principles of knowledge-gathering we recognize seems to entail that such entities do not exist.

Realists, such as Brink, will quarrel with Mackie's semantic claim that moral terms refer to properties that are objectively, intrinsically, prescriptive. Brink argues that moral sentences do not refer to properties that are intrinsically motivating. Indeed, Brink argues, motivational internalism is false. One reason for thinking that motivational internalism is false is the conceptual possibility of amoralists: agents that grasp or accept moral facts but that nevertheless remain unmoved by them.[9] With motivational internalism out of the way, it seems less implausible to believe that there could be objective moral facts. According to Brink, moral terms simply refer to properties that supervene on natural facts and properties. And though the natural facts and properties upon which moral properties supervene are not objectively motivational, they clearly exist. Hence if natural facts are not metaphysically weird, moral facts need not be either. Hence there should be little barrier to believing that moral sentences can be true.[10]

The debate between naturalists and motivational internalists is long, and rehearsing it will not serve the purposes of this paper. But one caveat is worth mentioning. Recall that Mackie could have been referring to two separate claims when suggesting that moral properties are "objectively prescriptive." Though there is good reason to believe that motivational internalism is false, it is not so clear that morality can fail to provide reasons for action. Considered judgment suggests strongly that if some act or state of affairs bears the moral property "required" or "good", this provides an agent, indeed any agent, reason to perform the act or promote this state of affairs. The plausibility of this claim is strengthened by noticing that moral

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[7]Mackie, 36.

[8]Mackie, 38.

[9]Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. 3.

[10]Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, 172-180.

rationalism–viz., the theory that moral facts provide reasons for action–need not be committed to the view that the reason one has to act on a moral requirement is decisive. These moral reasons might be tied in strength with, or even outweighed by, competitor reasons. But nevertheless, *that* the fact that some particular action is morally required provides at least *pro tanto* reason for action appears to be an important presupposition of ordinary moral language. Indeed, Joyce argues that this is a crucial semantic feature of moral terms: moral terms are are intrinsically *reason-giving*, and intrinsically *inescapable*. To put it in terms that Brink himself uses (albeit in a different context), moral terms are authoritative and inescapable: moral obligations are reason-giving, and they are reason-giving independently of your contingent desires, aims or interests.[11]

Once the semantic question is settled, the metaphysical step seems comparatively simple. How could it be that properties that are both objectively normative and inescapable exist? If philosophical naturalism[12] is true, such properties surely do not exist. But even leaving naturalism aside, it seems–just as a matter of bare intuition–that these properties are no less queer than properties that are objectively motivational. And it also seems–just as a matter of intuition–that natural facts and properties–properties that are not metaphysically queer–lack the characteristics required for them to be genuinely moral facts and properties.

I accept the claim that moral sentences refer to facts that are inescapably normative. I also accept the seemingly sensible claim that such properties do not exist. In other words, I accept that, plausibly, the semantics of moral claims make reference to properties that have both normative authority and normative escapability. The question now becomes: must I accept the error theory?

2. The Constructivist Alternative

It might be thought that the only way out of the error theorist's trap is to adopt a metaethical view that rejects ontological commitment to objectively prescriptive properties. Incidentally, I think this proposal is the correct approach. Though there may be many such views, one possibility is

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[11]See Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 42; R. T. Garner, "On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts" in *Austalasian Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1990); David Brink, "Kantian Rationalism: Authority, Inescapability, Supremacy in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, ed. Cullity and Gaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[12]I here refer to the thesis that metaphysical facts are settled by the ontological commitments of a mature science.

a form of metaethical constructivism. According to constructivism, moral claims are not made true by the presence of genuinely moral properties in the world, but rather by the fact that we accept, believe, judge, or are otherwise committed to the truth of these moral claims. There are several versions of a metaethical constructivism.[13] The most perspicuously non-metaphysical variant, however, is given in a recent article by Sharon Street.

Street's view concerns the nature of normativity or practical reasons, but the same view might be held by proponents of a constructivist account of morality, rather than normativity altogether. Street writes:

> According to *metaethical constructivism*, the fact that X is a reason to Y for agent A is constituted by the fact that the judgment that X is a reason to Y (for A) withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of A's other judgments about reasons.[14]

On this view, the fact that X is a reason to Y is not constituted by the instantiation of particular normative properties that hold of X. Rather, it is constituted by our acceptance of the claim that X is a reason to Y–where acceptance is understood as withstanding scrutiny from the point of view of our other judgments about reasons. One might make a similar claim in the moral domain: the fact that A is morally required to X is constituted by the fact that the judgment that "A is morally required to X" withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of A's other judgments about moral requirements.

Thus the problem for constructivism does not appear to be that it is committed to entities that are metaphysically queer. Rather, the problem appears to be that constructivism cannot give us an adequate replacement semantics that is required to avoid the error theory. First, and most obviously, constructivism in Street's formulation cannot to accommodate the position that morality is inherently normatively binding and inescapable–constructivism's analysis of moral claims appears to deny that which Mackie, Joyce, and other error theorists wish to assert about the *content* of moral claims. In fact, morality is perfectly *escapable*: all that is required for A not to have any moral obligations at all is for no judgments of the form "A

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[13]Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), ch. 3; and "The Reasons We can Share" in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Roderick Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12 (1952); John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory" in *Collected Papers*, ed. Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[14]Sharon Street, "Constructivism about Reasons" in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, v. 3, ed. Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 223.

has a moral obligation to ϕ" to withstand scrutiny from the standpoint of A's other moral judgments. Indeed, moral nihilists or people who believe that they have no obligations at all, *will* have no moral obligations on this view. If that is true, the plausible semantics outlined in §1 is clearly violated. Of course, Street may be correct in thinking that moral judgments are not inescapable in the way insisted upon here. Unfortunately, I do not have space to discuss this possibility. As noted before, I think the first two crucial premises of the error theorist's argument are plausible. But if the semantic structure of normative claims holds that moral claims are binding and inescapable, constructivism of the sort offered by Street appears not to fit the bill.

The second problem is that Street's view appears committed to a circular semantics of "reason" (or, on the moral version, "morally required"). On the moral version of Street's constructivist analysis, moral terms themselves are used in the analysis of moral terms. After all, what it means for a particular action to be morally required, on a constructivist view, is for the belief that this action is morally required to withstand scrutiny from the standpoint of the agent's other beliefs about what is morally required.[15] An obvious response might be that the constructivist analysis given here is not literally circular. The analysis of F (where F is a moral predicate) is not given in terms of *F*, but rather *beliefs about F*, or *judgments about F*. But this response simply pushes the question back a level. What does it mean for a belief to be a belief *about F*? Plausibly, for a belief to be a belief about F is for that belief to have a certain semantic structure. In particular, it must be a belief *about* F. Hence, any analysis of what it means for a belief to be a belief about F must be put in terms of F.[16]

Take an example. Imagine that while sitting on a train, I ask the stranger sitting next to me what she is thinking about, while staring out the window. A rather serious person, she replies that she is thinking about the immorality of the Nazi war machine. But what does she mean when she says she is thinking about the *immorality* of the Nazi war machine, rather than, say, the *humorlessness* of the Nazi war machine, or the *all-encompassing nature* of the Nazi war machine? The answer to this question will be an account of the semantics of moral terms, to what moral terms refer. But if constructivism is true, moral terms must refer not to independent properties, but rather to, what, exactly? Were they to refer to things *independently of* our beliefs

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[15]For a helpful rundown of the semantic circularity problem, see Ralph Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18-23.

[16]See, for instance, David Brink, "The Significance of Desire" in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, v. 3, op. cit., 20-21.

about morality, or our "judgments" about moral obligation, etc., they would be referring to independent entities of the sort that constructivism denies existing. If this is true, the error theory wins, given the rejection of these metaphysically queer properties. But if they are to refer–in some way or other–to judgments about morality (or, e.g., to facts that themselves refer to our beliefs or judgments about morality, such as that a particular belief will "withstand scrutiny" from the standpoint of our other beliefs or judgments about morality), it appears that this account of moral semantics is simply circular.

Street responds to this worry. She wants to avoid a circular semantics, and is aware that her constructivist schema is unable to provide any substantive semantics itself. Hence, Street opts for the claim that the semantics of "reason" is primitive. For Street, the semantics of reason is characterized in terms of a normative *experience*–the experience of having a certain consideration count in favor of doing something.[17] But, importantly, this experience cannot be adequately understood in non-normative terms, and hence must be treated as simply primitive: "Just as the experience of color cannot be adequately described except by invoking color concepts, so the type of experience in question–what might be called 'normative experience–cannot be adequately described except by invoking normative concepts."[18] I will not comment on the strength of Street's response, except merely to say that a primitive semantics of normative claims seems to be a second-best option. Nevertheless, even if a primitive semantics was plausible for normative claims, it appears to be substantially *im*plausible for *moral* claims. Though there may be a distinctively normative experience, it is difficult to see how there could be a distinctively moral experience absent an informative analysis of what it means to have such a moral experience.

My argument here is by no means a knock-down refutation of any satisfactory semantics for constructivism.[19] But it seems to me that this form of constructivism will have a substantially difficult time articulating precisely *what* the semantics of moral claims are to be if they do not refer to belief-independent entities. Any constructive procedure–if it is to genuinely reject commitment to the existence of metaphysically queer entities–must claim that a crucial part of that constructive procedure simply is a cognitive at-

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[17]Street, 240.

[18]Street, 240.

[19]Importantly, not all constructivist theories will be cast in terms of that which moral agents are committed to valuing, believing, or judging. See, for instance, Roderick Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12 (1952).

titude taken by moral agents, or some subset of moral agents. But in so doing, the constructivist analysis must provide a semantics that refers to the constructive procedure itself. In which case, the view will be circular. Hence the constructivist alternative provides no genuine solution to the error theory in the absence of the existence of intrinsically inescapably normative properties. One might design a constructivism that takes *desire* rather than *judgment* as the mental state crucial for the constructive procedure. This might avoid circularity, but at the cost of highlighting the difficulty any constructivist theory will have in accommodating the common-sense semantics of moral claims plausibly, including their normativity *regardless* of one's desires.

A constructivist might object that I have given short shrift to the primitivist semantics suggestion by Street for normative claims. Though I hold that such a position is distinctly implausible, it may well be an open door. Nevertheless, I argue, we can accept the main claims of a constructivist metaethic *and* accept a non-circular, non-primative semantics for moral claims. And, in so doing, we can avoid the error theory.

3. The Error Theory and the Semantic Theory of Truth

As I suggested at the end of §1, I agree with error theorists, but not the constructivists, that moral claims refer to extravagant metaphysical entities. I also agree with the constructivists (and the error theorists) that these entities do not exist. But I do not agree that this commits me to an error theory.

First, it is important to note that the conclusion of the error theoretic argument does not follow from its premises. In particular, the word "false" never appears in the premises. The premises only make claims about, roughly speaking, the meaning of moral terms and, roughly speaking, the organization of the world. Truth and falsity is left out completely. (1)-(3) is, strictly speaking, enthymematic.

Fair enough, it might be responded. But the missing premise is trivial. All that is required in order to make the argument valid is to add an uncontroversial claim about the nature of truth. In other words, what we need is a premise to the effect that, in order for a sentence to be true, that to which it refers must be instantiated by extra-linguistic entities. To put the matter more simply, the *world* must be as the sentence *says* it is. One might simply insist, for instance, on a semantic conception of truth, defended by Tarski, among others. For Tarski, truth is a matter of satisfaction, and satisfaction is (at least in part) a matter of meaning or reference. The ordered pair <my

Sharona, my motor> satisfies the sentence "x makes y run" if and only if that to which "My Sharona" refers makes that to which "my motor" refers run. If "my Sharona" refers to my Sharona, and if "my motor" refers to my motor, then <my Sharona, my motor> satisfies the sentence "x makes y run". As Stephen Leeds writes: "Tarski showed that reference-in-L canonically determines truth-in-L; that is, there is a general method whereby, when we are given a definition of reference-in-L, we may immediately write down a definition of truth-in-L."[20] Call a "semantic conception of truth" any conception of truth that holds that a sentence is true if and only if the sentence bears "the right relation" between its *meaning* and *extra-linguistic reality.* "The right relation" might be, for instance, satisfaction, correspondence, "mirroring", "picturing", representation, etc. But if we assume a semantic conception of truth, the error theory appears to follow from the first two premises of the error theoretic argument. Assuming that moral terms refer to inescapably normative properties, and assuming that *nothing* satisfies the sentence "x is inescapably normative", all moral claims must be false. Moral claims are not satisfiable, they do not correspond to extra-linguistic reality, because that to which they refer simply does not exist.

To deny the error theory, we should deny the semantic conception of truth. However, to deny the semantic conception of truth might seem foolhardy. After all, as Tarski writes, "We should like our definition to do justice to the intuitions which adhere to the *classical Aristotelian conception of truth*–intuitions which find their expression in the well-known words of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: *To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true.*"[21] In order to deny the semantic conception, in its broad outlines, one would seemingly have to deny Aristotle's intuition. One would have to accept the claim that one could say of something that it is, when it is not, and have one's sentence come out true. Aristotle's intuition appears to guarantee that *reference* and *truth* must always go together in the following sense: in order for any sentence to be true, that which is referred to by the subject must display whatever property is referred to by the predicate.

Despite the seeming absurdity of the strategy, I want to deny the semantic conception of truth *for moral claims.* In fact, I argue, doing so is a natural way to articulate the main outlines of the constructivist views I noted in the previous section. The resulting view is committed to a *pluralist*

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[20]Stephen Leeds, "Theories of Reference and Truth" in *Erkenntnis* 13 (1978), 112.
[21]Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth" in *Truth*, ed. Blackburn and Simmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 117-18.

theory of truth; a coherence theory of truth for some domains, a semantic theory for others.

4. The Coherence Theory, Briefly

We start by insisting, with error theorists, that moral claims are committed to the existence of metaphysically extravagant entities. In other words, we simply accept a semantics of moral claims that entail that these claims refer to properties that are normatively authoritative and inescapable. However, that these claims do not exist will have no impact whatever on the truth of these sentences so long as we assume that moral claims are truth-evaluated not by a semantic conception of truth, but rather by a *coherence* theory of truth. The semantics and truth conditions of moral claims are thus divorced. How does this work?

I have articulated a coherence theory of truth in ethics in detail elsewhere,[22] so I won't explore in great detail all the nooks and crannies of this view here. The coherence theory really consists of two crucial definitions: *truth* and *coherence*. In order for the coherence theory to be a coherence theory of truth, "truth" must be defined in terms of coherence. In order for the coherence theory to avoid circularity, however, "*coherence*" must not be defined in terms of truth. And this problem has been a classic sticking point for a coherence theory of truth of any stripe. Presumably, "coherence" is going to be defined in terms of some entailment relation, such as the ability for certain claims to be inferred from others. But making reference to inferences of this kind is problematic for precisely this reason: what does it mean to say that one sentence can be inferred from another except that if one claim is true, one can expect the other to be true as well?

My answer to this problem appeals to truth-pluralism.[23] According to pluralism, sentences in different domains can permit of different truth predicates. Hence, not every domain permits of a coherence theory of truth. Indeed, a coherence theory is steadfastly inappropriate for most domains. Unless we wish to be committed to some strong form of idealism, it seems quite plausible to believe that the truth conditions of sentences like "$e = mc^2$" are not properly given by a coherence theory. Speaking very generally, descriptive or "scientific" sentences seem tailor-made for some form of semantic

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[22]Dorsey, "A Coherence Theory of Truth in Ethics" in *Philosophical Studies* 117 (2006).

[23]Pluralism of this kind has been the subject of some criticism, see for instance Christine Tappolet, "Mixed Inferences: A Problem for Pluralism about Truth Predicates" in *Analysis* 57 (1997). I attempt to respond to Tappolet's worry in "A Coherence Theory of Truth in Ethics".

conception of truth. For sentences like "$e = mc^2$", Aristotle's dictum surely applies. But this is significant for the analysis of coherence. Why? Because when asking about the coherence of any belief set α, we have left the moral domain for a domain of discourse that permits of a non-coherence truth predicate. Hence, coherence can be analyzed in terms of truth, but semantic truth, rather than coherence truth. For instance, suppose that we identify the criterion of coherence as *consistency*: all consistent sentences are coherent. "Consistency" simply refers to a property possessed by a set of sentences: all of these sentences *can* be true together. But *this* question–the question of the consistency of any set of beliefs–is not a question that is properly evaluated within the moral domain. Whether belief set α is consistent is not a moral matter. Hence, when we ask whether the sentences of α can be true together, we are asking if they can be true together according to the theory of truth appropriate to the domain from which we evaluate α's consistency: we ask whether they can be true together according to the *semantic* theory of truth. Of course, on the semantic theory, all moral sentences will come out false. Nevertheless, one can still evaluate false sentences for their consistency.

So the definition of coherence is not circular. Coherence is defined in terms of truth, but semantic-truth rather than coherence-truth. But what is coherence? Coherence, as we know, goes beyond mere consistency. But how far beyond? Here disagreements abound. As Walker writes:

> Opinions have differed too about what is to be meant by 'coherence'. Sometimes it has been taken to be simply consistency with the basic principles that characterize the system of beliefs. Sometimes, at the other extreme, it has been held to require mutual entailment by all the propositions in question: p will cohere with q and r only if p, q and r all entail one another. Sometimes, again, it has been left thoroughly vague what coherence is supposed to amount to.[24]

"Consistency with the basic principles that characterize the system of beliefs" sounds initially attractive: surely a coherent system will hold together *via* some particularly important grounding principles–a coherent system will then be a system consisting of sentences that are consistent with that grounding system. But this criterion is unworkable. First, it is unclear how we are to identify the "guiding principles" of any particular system of beliefs. One might suggest that "basic principles" can be identified by a pragmatic

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[24]Ralph C. S. Walker, *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (London: Routledge, 1989), 4-5.

standard: "guiding principles" are those moral sentences that are held most dear by the proponents of a particular belief system, for instance. But even if we are able to identify the basic or guiding principles of a particular system of sentences or beliefs, such an account of coherence seems strange. "I am morally required to order a black coffee at 4pm" and "Nazism is morally beautiful" are surely *consistent* sentences. But they are hardly coherent. Whichever sentence here is the guiding principle, this sentence is consistent with the basic principles involved, but the system surely fails coherence.

Furthermore, Walker's second suggestion seems too strong. Read naturally, it seems to suggest that a system is coherent if and only if all sentences entail all other sentences. A system of beliefs containing q, r, and s will be coherent if and only if q entails r and s, r entails q and s, and s entails q and r. But this seems rather strong. One can simply examine a three-belief system. Imagine that one believes that "genocide is immoral", "Hitler's final solution was immoral", and "Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge was immoral". The former surely entails the latter two (insofar as Hitler's final solution and Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge constituted involved genocide), but neither of the latter two entail the former. However, it would be a mistake to suggest that this system is incoherent.

On my view, a system is coherent if and only if every sentence of the system is warranted by the *rest* of the system taken as a whole. This entails that each sentence in a coherent set should either be derivable deductively from, or be given a strong inductive base by, the remaining sentences of the system. The attractions of this account of coherence should be clear given the failures of previous accounts. Not all coherent systems entail that all sentences are derivable from each other sentence. Nor is it the case that all sentences in coherent systems will be inferred deductively rather than inductively. In ethics, as in any other realm, inferences involve extrapolation from an inductive base. Such inferences, if warranted, should contribute to the coherence of a system of beliefs. Also, my account of coherence captures the general idea lying behind the intuitive appeal of any account of coherence. At its most basic level, coherence requires beliefs to do more than be consistent–it requires them to "stick together". And this account of coherence captures the sense in beliefs can *cohere* or *stick together* in a system–by a system of logical and evidentiary relations good enough to provide sufficient warrant for each claim by the rest of the system.

So much for coherence. What about truth? It seems best to give an account of the truth of particular sentences in terms of their presence in coherent systems. But one must be careful. It cannot be that a sentence is true if and only if it is a member of some coherent system or other. All such

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sentences are members of an infinite number of coherent systems. Rather, a sentence must be part of a *believed* system. This clause, however, creates its own problems. Virtually no believed systems are coherent; placing presence in a believed system as a constraint on coherence lands us back in an error theory: no moral sentences are true. To get around this problem, we require a modicum of idealization. True sentences are those that would be present in a belief system were that belief system to be *made* coherent, following a roughly Quinean rubric of minimal mutilation.[25]

But believed by whom? In principle the coherence theory of truth could provide any number of answers on this score, so I will simply state my own preference. Rather than insisting that a sentence is true if and only if it is part of the coherent belief system of, say, an *ideally rational agent* or if it is part of the coherent belief system of a whole community, or some subset of competent judges (all of which are compatible with the spirit of the coherence theory), I prefer, again, a more hum-drum coherentism: the truth of moral sentences is determined by their presence in the *speaker's* belief system, made coherent. Of course, this leaves open the possibility that moral truth is relative–indeed, relative to every possible speaker. Whether morality is relative on this view is a matter for empirical and philosophical investigation. Furthermore, the relativity of morality under this view is to this point unknown; we know very little about the beliefs of speakers were they to be made coherent following processes of minimal mutilation and regimentation. I hereby submit that we should reserve judgment on whether morality is relative until we know substantially more about what the beliefs of various speakers *would be* under the proper idealized conditions. In point of fact, there appears to be substantial evidence that whatever actual moral relativity had been supposed to exist is to a substantial degree chimerical.[26] I defend this view elsewhere; here I simply note it for the record.[27] One could in principle, however, supplement the coherence theory with a further Kantian or "ideal observer" idealization. It is worthwhile noting, however, that divorcing the semantics of moral claims and their truth conditions yields a relativism that is, in fact, *compatible* with the *universal and inescapable* semantics of moral claims insisted upon by error theorists. We should accept that moral terms *refer* to properties that are inescapably normative, even

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[25]Cf. W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2nd. ed., 1981).

[26]Cf. Michelle Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[27]Cf. Dale Dorsey, "Humean Constructivism and the Relativity Problem(s)", MS; and "A Coherence Theory of Truth in Ethics".

objectively, universally so. Nevertheless, the metaphysical claim that there are no such properties makes no difference to the *truth* of moral sentences. The truth of these sentences is not given by the existence or non-existence of such properties. The actual relativism of morality, if it exists, does not conflict with the "claim to objectivity" required to adequately capture the *meaning* of moral claims.

This might be thought decidedly unsatisfying. After all, like Street's view, I hold that if the nihilist coherently believes that he has no moral obligations, he has no moral obligations. How does that not make morality inescapable? Of course, my view *is* escapable–just like Street's. But this is not the point. The point is whether we can accept the semantic or, as Joyce calls it, the "conceptual" point made by the error theorist and accept the metaphysical claim that the properties to which these moral claims refer don't exist without accepting that all moral claims are false. The answer is yes. Morality is escapably normative, if normative at all. But that doesn't mean that, whatever their semantic commitments, moral sentences are false.

It might be thought that this view raises more questions than it answers. For instance, my view has a rather complicated relationship with Tarski's T-sentences.[28] However, given the merits of this view, especially its rejection of the error theory, the rather complicated account of truth in morality is a small price to pay. (More on this in the following section.)

A final objection is worth noting here. It might be claimed that, on standard assumptions about the concept of ontological commitment (viz., one is ontologically committed to just those entities that one's best theory is committed to), the view insisted upon here actually commits us to extravagant metaphysical entities after all. Response: the truth of moral claims has no ontological import whatver. This point is easily missed. It is easy to assume that a coherence theory must embrace some or other form of ontological thesis, such as the claim that all reality is simply ideas, etc.

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[28]It might be thought that I must deny the T-sentences. After all, "'*A* is morally required to *F*' is true if and only if *A* is morally required to *F*" appears false, given that the right-hand side of the biconditional refers to properties that do not exist. But this is not quite right. The T-sentences can be held so long as the truth predicate for the metalanguage *when speaking of moral terms* is coherence, not correspondence. Hence, the truth predicate of the metalanguage, which gets expressed in the metametalanguage (when the object language is the moral system) is coherence, not correspondence. And so on for all orders of a metalanguage for the moral object language. However, I must here leave it unexplained how to distinguish between *moral* claims of the form "*A* is morally required to *F*" and *metaphysical* claims of the form "*A* is required to *F*". I flag that this is a serious worry; I am inclined to rely on the context of utterance to distinguish between these uses–but this response is at best incomplete and sketchy.

Walker writes: "Since the coherence theory holds that truth consists in a relationship of coherence amongst beliefs, and not in correspondence with a reality independent of beliefs, it is not surprising that many coherence theorists have held that reality is ideal, in the sense that it is our minds' creation."[29] But we should resist the move from a coherence theory of truth in ethics to any form of moral ontology. We should admit into our ontology only those entities to which we are ontologically committed. But Quine insists–and is right in insisting–that the criterion of ontological commitment is restricted to the regimented sentences of our best scientific theories.[30] It seems plausible to say that the criterion of ontological commitment holds good for domains the sentences of which subscribe to a roughly Aristotelian account of truth. It seems plausible to read our ontology off a regimented system the truth of which is assessed by whether what it says is, is. But the truth of moral claims is different. So different, in fact, that it seems proper to say that the truth of moral claims has little to do with the structure of the world. That morality commits us to certain facts or properties should not be taken to entail that those properties actually exist, whether independently of beliefs or as some form of mind-dependent idealist reality. For moral claims, ontological commitment says little about reality, because moral claims are not judged with reference to reality.

5. To Sum Up: A Prima Facie *Case for the Coherence Theory*

The power of the coherentist alternative to the error theory is not simply that it can avoid the error theory. Many views can do that. Rather, its distinctive attraction is that it can avoid the error theory without having to substantially alter the error theorist's plausible commitments. Though realists of various stripes can reject the error theory, they must either be committed to the existence of inescapably normative properties[31], or the rejection of the claim that moral terms refer to properties that are inescapably normative.[32] Constructivists can accept the claim that inescapably normative properties do not exist, and can avoid an error theory, but only at the price of straying some distance from the ordinary semantic commitments of

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[29]Walker, 19.

[30]Quine, "On What There Is" in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2nd. ed., 1981).

[31]See, for instance, Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[32]See, especially, Brink's "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness".

moral discourse (indeed, in the case of Street, only at the price of rejecting any non-circular, non-primative semantics of normative claims). But if we accept a coherence theory of truth in ethics, we can accept any semantics of moral claims we want, including the common-sense semantics noted by the error theorists, along with the metaphysically parsimonious assumption that these terms do not refer to existent properties, and *still* reject the error theory. This result is enough to warrant the coherence theory serious consideration.