

## **Wholesale moral error for naturalists**

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I show how realist moral naturalists can provide an intra-theoretic explanation of the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error. This is a requirement on metaethical theories that has been recently defended by Akhlaghi (2021). After clarifying Akhlaghi’s argument and responding to Evers’s (2021) recent rebuttal, I argue that even under the assumption that moral facts are grounded in an appropriate subset of natural facts (N-facts), there is still a non-zero probability of wholesale moral error. This is demonstrated by considering three types of epistemically possible scenarios: specifically, it could either be that N-facts do not actually exist, or that N-facts exist in a way that entails wholesale moral error, or that N-facts exist in a non-error theoretic way, but their existence is temporally restricted.

**Keywords:** moral naturalism, moral realism, wholesale moral error, moral principles, grounding

### **1. Introduction**

Akhlaghi<sup>1</sup> has recently presented a novel challenge against realist moral naturalism and moral non-cognitivism. The challenge builds upon the putative difficulty of both realist moral naturalism and non-cognitivism to accommodate the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error. The argument is the following:<sup>2</sup>

(P1) It is an epistemic possibility that morality is subject to some wholesale error that would make the moral error theory true.

(P2) If (P1), then it is an adequacy condition on meta-ethical theories that they allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of such error.

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<sup>1</sup> Farbod Akhlaghi, “On the Possibility of Wholesale Moral Error,” *Ratio* 34 (3) (2021): 236-247.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

(P3) Non-cognitivism and moral naturalism cannot allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of such error.

(C) So, non-cognitivism and moral naturalism are false.

In this paper I provide a realist moral naturalist defence against Akhlaghi's argument. Specifically, I argue that even if we grant that our set of evidence involves the supposition that naturalism is true, naturalists should still reject (P3).<sup>3</sup> In sections 2 and 3 I present and clarify Akhlaghi's argument. Specifically, I consider Evers's recent rebuttal and I argue that it is based on a misunderstanding of how a theory should use its own resources to make sense of the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error (EP(E) henceforth).<sup>4</sup> Then, I suggest that there are various scenarios that make wholesale moral an epistemic possibility even under the supposition that naturalism is true.

My paper involves a direct response to Akhlaghi's challenge, but it can also be understood in a broader sense. Specifically, by looking into the various epistemically possible scenarios that entail wholesale moral error (while also being compatible with the supposition that naturalism is true) I hope to provide greater insight into the different forms that moral naturalism and error theory can take. For this reason, part of this paper's audience are also people who potential *reject* Akhlaghi's requirement on metaethical theories.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, Akhlaghi's argument, regardless of its success, is (at the very least) a useful way of bringing out the complexity of both the moral naturalist thesis and moral error theory.

What about Akhlaghi's other target, non-cognitivism? For reasons of space, I will not consider whether the strategies I develop in this paper can also be modified to defend non-cognitivism. On the face of it, however, I am not optimistic. The types of scenarios I will sketch are metaphysically substantive and, for this reason, seem inadequate for sophisticated versions of non-cognitivism (such as the quasi-realist program) that involve a commitment to minimalism.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I will use "naturalism" as a shorthand for "moral naturalism".

<sup>4</sup> Daan Evers, "How to explain the possibility of wholesale moral error: a reply to Akhlaghi," *Ratio* 35 (2) (2022): 146-150.

<sup>5</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> Which is reflected in what Akhlaghi calls (Internal). See *Ibid.*, p. 242.

## 2. Intra-theoretical explanations of EP(E)

According to Akhlaghi, it is a constraint on meta-ethical theories that they should allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error. He takes “wholesale moral error” to mean “some error that permeates a discourse such that all of the claims within that discourse are false or that they are all subject to a false presupposition.”<sup>7</sup> He also adopts a neutral account of epistemic possibility. I will follow Evers and present the discussion that follows in terms of a probabilistic conception:  $p$  is epistemically possible iff  $p$  has a non-zero probability of being the case given one’s set evidence.<sup>8</sup>

An important component of Akhlaghi’s argument concerns the *way* one should accommodate EP(E). Akhlaghi correctly notes that if a metaethical theory is to accommodate EP(E), then this should be done in terms of the resources of that theory. Roughly, the idea is the following. A theory  $T$ , if it is to be legitimate, should set its own success (and failure) conditions (either explicitly or implicitly). For example, the existence of non-natural moral facts satisfies the success-conditions of non-naturalism. On the flipside, the non-existence of non-natural facts would entail wholesale moral error. And given the epistemic possibility of there not being any such non-natural entities, non-naturalism accommodates EP(E).

Compare with naturalism. If naturalism is true, then there are moral facts and such facts are naturalistically acceptable (i.e. they are the same kind of facts that typically figure in the natural/social sciences).<sup>9</sup> For example, let moral goodness be grounded upon facts that maximize our happiness (happiness-facts henceforth).<sup>10</sup> But there is *zero* probability given our evidence that there are no happiness-facts: we *know at least some* facts concerning happiness maximization. So our background body of evidence *already* involves happiness-related knowledge. This suggests that naturalism cannot accommodate EP(E).

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<sup>7</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>8</sup> Evers, *op. cit.*, sec. 2.

<sup>9</sup> What should be understood as a moral natural property is a vexed issue (for a recent account see Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier, “Nomic moral naturalness,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* (2022): 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2022.2035814>).

<sup>10</sup> I take “grounding” in this context to merely be a placeholder for whichever more specific metaphysical relation one chooses to posit (for a pluralist, but still unified account of grounding, see Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier, “Grounding Functionalism and Explanatory Unificationism” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* Volume 9, Issue 4, (2023): 799 - 819. <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2022.29>).

### 3. Specifying Akhlaghi's requirement

One specification is needed at this point. It could be argued that even if our evidence involves happiness-facts there is still a non-zero probability that such facts are not appropriately related to moral facts. In other words, as Evers has recently suggested, our current evidence concerning metaethical theories “does not conclusively point in the direction of a success theory and at least partially supports an error theory”.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, following Evers again, it could be argued that “none of Akhlaghi's arguments establishes that our epistemic situation would have to be different than it actually is if [...] naturalism were true.”<sup>12</sup>

I think Evers misses one crucial component of Akhlaghi's requirement. Evers reads Akhlaghi as conflating the two following ideas:

(\*) “the idea that if a success theory is actually true, then that should make no difference to our current epistemic situation regarding wholesale moral error and

(\*\*) the idea that if a success theory is actually true, then the possibility of wholesale moral error should be explicable in terms of theoretical commitments of the success theory itself. Whereas the first is plausible, the second is not.”<sup>13</sup>

But, I argue, Akhlaghi's point is significantly different. Rather, he makes the following point:

(\*\*\*) If one has the supposition that a success theory (e.g. moral naturalism) is true, then one's evidence entails that wholesale moral error is epistemically impossible.

(\*\*\*) has a different antecedent from (\*) and (\*\*). What is at stake in Akhlaghi's argument is not what follows from the *fact* that naturalism is true, but what follows from one's *supposition* that naturalism is true.<sup>14</sup>

Specifically, assuming the truth of a theory T directly *shifts* our body of evidence. This is a well-established datum in the philosophy of science concerning theory-choice: the same initial

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<sup>11</sup> Evers, op. cit., p. 149.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>14</sup> See, in particular, Akhlaghi, op. cit., p. 244.

body of evidence can take different form depending on the scientific paradigm under which one operates. To illustrate, here's Hanson:

[...] the layman simply cannot see what the physicist sees [...] when the physicist looks at an X-ray tube, he sees the instrument in terms of electrical circuit theory, thermodynamic theory, the theories of metal and glass structure, thermionic emission, optical transmission, refraction, diffraction, atomic theory, quantum theory and special relativity.<sup>15</sup>

The layman and the physicist adopt different sets of evidence given their radically different background theoretical assumptions.<sup>16</sup> The same applies to evidence concerning metaethical theories. Akhlaghi's requirement entails that if one assumes the truth of naturalism then this will result in significant changes in one's body of evidence. If moral facts are, say, happiness-facts, then if one has evidence for the existence of happiness-facts, it follows that one has evidence for the existence of moral facts. But, following Akhlaghi, *it is obvious* that we *already* have conclusive evidence for happiness-facts.

*That* is why naturalist intra-theoretical explanations of EP(E) are impossible. On the supposition that naturalism is true (i.e. that moral facts are appropriately related to happiness-facts), and on the assumption that we *already* have conclusive happiness-related evidence, it is epistemically impossible that there are no moral facts (since it is epistemically impossible that there are no *happiness*-facts).

Of course, someone could reject Akhlaghi's requirement altogether. But this would involve not engaging with Akhlaghi's argument in its own terms. In my paper I grant Akhlaghi's requirement for dialectical reasons, and I show that there are ways to secure the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error. I am also inclined to agree with Akhlaghi that rejecting

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<sup>15</sup> Norwood Russell Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery: An Inquiry Into the Conceptual Foundations of Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> For the various intricacies of the role of evidence concerning theory-choice see Thomas Kelly, "Evidence," in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/evidence/>>. Hanson's example arguably assumes a theory-ladenness account of observation. But a similar point could be delivered by adopting some version of standpoint epistemology, or other post-positivist accounts.

his requirement would deliver the implausible result that the moral error theorist is committed to a ‘simple epistemic failure’.<sup>17</sup>

Still, there is a potential worry here concerning the *scope* of this requirement.<sup>18</sup> Would it also be a problem for, say, the *mind-identity* theory that it cannot accommodate the epistemic possibility of there not being any mental states? If so, then Akhlaghi’s requirement seems to overgenerate in an implausible manner.

I have two responses. First, it could be said that Akhlaghi’s requirement only concerns metaethical theories. A version of non-naturalism which takes for granted the epistemic impossibility of wholesale moral error is problematic for that reason.<sup>19</sup> So, perhaps it’s not a problem from the mind-identity theory that it cannot accommodate the epistemic possibility of what could be called ‘mental nihilism’ (i.e. the view that there are no mental facts). Mental nihilism seems less philosophically motivated than moral error theory.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, even if someone were to insist that mental nihilism is equally plausible to moral error theory (thus entailing that the epistemic possibility of mental nihilism should be a requirement on metaphysical theories about the mind), the arguments that I am putting forward in this paper can be appropriately repurposed. For example, even under the supposition that mental facts are identical to neural facts, it is epistemically possible that there are no neural facts *of the appropriate sort* (e.g. neural facts that exhibit the necessary level of complexity in order to realize genuine mentality) (see section 4.1. below).

#### **4. Meeting Akhlaghi’s requirement**

I have argued that Akhlaghi’s requirement should be understood as involving a shift in our background body of evidence. If naturalism is taken to be true, then our body of evidence

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<sup>17</sup> Akhlaghi, op. cit., p. 238.

<sup>18</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this.

<sup>19</sup> In this sense, I disagree with Evers that this begs the question against non-naturalist theories that also incorporate a moral epistemology that easily secures moral knowledge (Evers, op. cit., p. 147). Non-naturalism is a metaphysical theory. If such a moral epistemology is added on top of that, then the epistemic impossibility of wholesale moral error is secured in virtue of *that epistemology*; not in virtue of non-naturalism.

<sup>20</sup> Mental nihilism should be distinguished from eliminative materialism. Eliminative materialism is *not* the claim that there are no mental facts, but that certain generalizations captured by our folk psychology are radically false (given the lack of relevant one-to-one reductions à la Nagel.)

should be taken to involve evidence for the existence of moral facts since it is uncontroversial that there are happiness-facts. So, the naturalist's initial set of evidence is roughly comprised of the following elements:

- (1) Moral facts are appropriately related to a specific subset of natural facts (N-facts).
- (2) N-facts exist.

(1) is the background assumption of naturalism, and (2) is a plausible empirical/metaphysical claim. On the face of it, it seems unlikely that there is anything the naturalist can do to accommodate EP(E). How could wholesale moral error be epistemically possible given the plausible assumption that we have evidence of happiness-facts? (i.e. moral-facts) In what follows I provide three types of cases that are epistemically possible given naturalism, and that involve wholesale moral error. Specifically, I show that even if one grants the supposition of (1), there are epistemic possibilities concerning the metaphysics of N-facts which accommodate EP(E). Roughly, it is an epistemic possibility that either N-facts don't *really* exist, or N-facts exist in a way that entails wholesale moral error, or finally, N-facts exist in a temporally restricted way in one way or another.

#### **4.1. N-facts might not exist**

Akhlaghi assumes that we *know* that N-facts exist. This seems plausible if this claim is construed in terms of a simplistic natural basis for morality like that of happiness. But it is worth noting that naturalist theses are typically more sophisticated. Richard Boyd, for example, has famously argued that moral facts are grounded in a homeostatic property cluster of a complex set of human needs, the exact nature of which is an open empirical question.<sup>21</sup> Other examples involve a notion of societal stability, an Aristotelian conception of well-being, etc.<sup>22</sup>

Akhlaghi is aware of this and applies his argument to Railton's metaethical theory according to which moral goodness is defined in terms of what is good for an ideal agent.<sup>23</sup> The ideal-

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Boyd, "How to be a Moral Realist," in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism* (Cornell University Press, 1988), 181-228.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Parisa Moosavi, "Neo-Aristotelian naturalism as ethical naturalism," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* (forthcoming); David Copp, *Morality, Normativity, and Society* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Peter Railton, "Moral realism," *Philosophical Review* 95 (2) (1986): 163-207.

agent heuristic is supposed to identify what is the objectified subjective interest of an agent. In turn, such objectified subjective interests are supposed to reduce to a set of descriptive/non-normative facts about the relevant agent's desires, the satisfaction-conditions of these desires, etc. But, again, it is not obvious that such collections of descriptive/non-normative facts actually exist. So, even though it *is* plausible that happiness-facts exist, it isn't *equally* plausible (or obvious) that this is also the case for more sophisticated natural phenomena like Boydian human needs and Railton's objectified subjective interests (N\*-facts, henceforth). But then it is not obvious that we *know* that the relevant natural facts exist as per (2).

Note that my point here does not concern our epistemic difficulty of having a complete account of N\*-facts. After all, as Akhlaghi notes, all that's necessary for the epistemic impossibility of wholesale moral error, is to know *at least some* propositions involving our preferred natural basis for morality.<sup>24</sup> Rather, I claim that it is a non-trivial issue whether there are *any* instances of N\*-facts.

It could be objected that there are clear and uncontroversial instances of N\*-facts. Take Boydian needs. It seems uncontroversial that at least *some* human needs are satisfied. These needs are arguably in the set of what Boyd calls *fundamental* human needs (e.g. certain biological needs, the need for intellectual and artistic expression, etc.).<sup>25</sup> Identifying more substantive important human needs requires, as mentioned, significant empirical work.

But this is precisely why it is epistemically possible for there to be no instances of N\*-facts. There is no guarantee that we will be able to furnish such more substantive human needs. In this sense, it could be that fundamental human needs are *all there is* in terms of needs. But the error theorist should have no problem with accepting the existence of mere fundamental human needs since it is uncontroversial that they cannot act as a basis for anything remotely resembling what we call moral facts. In other words, it is not necessary for fundamental human needs to exist *qua instances of N\*-facts*.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Akhlaghi, op. cit., p. 244.

<sup>25</sup> Boyd, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> This extrapolates to other kinds of N\*-facts. For example, it is epistemically possible that there is no coherent set of policies that, if implemented, would deliver societal stability as per Copp, op. cit. Again, note that what is concerned here is a *fine-grained* conception of stability (call it stability\*) rather than a general notion of societal stability simpliciter. Even though it is trivial that every society can exhibit different degrees of stability, it isn't obvious that this is also the case concerning stability\* (since it is epistemically possible that stability\* does not

Another objection.<sup>27</sup> Akhlaghi accepts that, at least *in principle*, naturalists can suggest that N\*-facts might not exist. But doing so would undermine their *realist* aspirations.<sup>28</sup> The worry goes like this:

- (i) If it is epistemically possible that N\*-facts do not exist, then this entails the epistemic possibility that all of our moral judgments are false.
- (ii) But *realist* moral naturalists have a commitment to moral realism in the sense that at least *some* moral judgments *are* true.
- (iii) So, given (i), realist moral naturalists have to give up on their realist commitments.

The idea behind (ii) is that realist moral naturalists have a commitment to moral realism (i.e. the claim that at least some moral judgments are true) in the same sense they have a commitment to naturalism. In this sense, the moral realist thesis should be understood as a background condition that appropriately shapes our set of evidence (as the naturalist thesis does; see (1) above).

In response, I reject that realist moral naturalists have a *commitment* to moral realism in the above sense. Rather, moral realism, for the naturalist, is an *empirical* thesis just like the thesis that there are N/N\*-facts (as per (2) above). In fact, there is sense in which moral realism runs downstream from the existence of N/N\*-facts.<sup>29</sup>

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even exist). Or consider again Railton's appeal to objectified subjective interests. These interests might not exist in the simple sense that there *cannot* be any positive instances that would meet their satisfaction-conditions. So, for example, let these satisfaction-conditions involve the instantiation of a property type P, and let the instantiation of P be nomologically impossible. Or, perhaps, there is something *conceptually* incoherent with the set of instantiation-conditions themselves (see Richard Joyce, "Moral Anti-Realism," in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/moral-anti-realism/>, sec. 3.2.).

<sup>27</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for encouraging me to consider this objection.

<sup>28</sup> Akhlaghi, op. cit., p. 244.

<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that one's credence to particular moral beliefs is completely dependent on the existence of the relevant N/N\*-facts. Certain prima facie plausible first-order moral claims enter into reflective equilibrium in the same way claims concerning the existence of N/N\*-facts do (Boyd, op. cit.). The idea is, rather, that the former are epistemically defeasible and are *partly* dependent on the latter (in the sense that we should assign more 'weight' on the existence of N/N\*-facts thus making error theory a *fallback* position to realist moral naturalism).

Akhlaghi anticipates this move by noting that the naturalist's commitment to moral realism is what motivates their defense against the error theorist.<sup>30</sup> I disagree. What should motivate the realist moral naturalist view is the plausible (but defeasible) empirical claim that there are N/N\*-facts. Naturalists, in contrast to error theorists, are optimistic that the available evidence vindicates moral realism. But like any empirical claim, it could be (epistemically speaking) false given our evidence. So, the epistemic possibility of N/N\*-facts not existing does not pose a particular threat to the naturalist's moral realist aspirations.

#### **4.2. N-facts might exist in the wrong way**

According to the previous scenario, it is epistemically possible that N/N\*-facts do not exist (N-facts, henceforth). This second scenario takes the existence of N-facts for granted. The idea is that even if we accept that N-facts exist, it is still epistemically possible that N-facts exist *in a way that entails wholesale moral error*. To illustrate this, I will focus on a scenario according to which *every* moral proposition is true, in the sense that *every* moral theory is a *success* theory.

On the face of it, it seems false to claim that error theory is compatible with the scenario that *every* moral proposition is true. Traditionally, error theory is supposed to entail that every moral proposition is false. But we should move beyond truth fetishism. The key claim behind error theory is that our moral discourse is fundamentally a defective practice. But, I claim, this is exactly what is being delivered if every moral theory is a success theory.

This scenario entails wholesale moral error as it suggests that the moral domain is fundamentally unable to guide moral action. If every moral theory is *equally* eligible for use, then it is metaphysically indeterminate what is morally required to do under any set of circumstances.<sup>31</sup> For example, it is epistemically possible that N-facts exist in a way where it

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<sup>30</sup> Akhlaghi, op. cit., pp. 244-5.

<sup>31</sup> There are various ways to make this scenario more metaphysically intricate. For example, this could be a *gavagai-style* indeterminacy according to which it is inscrutable what the referent of a moral concept is. Or, it could be that there are infinite equally *natural* referents (for more moderate examples of such naturalness-ties see David Mokriski, "The Methodological Implications of Reference Magnetism on Moral Twin Earth," *Metaphilosophy* 51 (5) (2020): 702-726.). To illustrate further, what I've presented here is arguably a more extreme metaphysical analogue of Cowie's recent novel argument for moral error theory (see Christopher Cowie, "A new argument for moral error theory," *Noûs* 56 (2) (2022): 276-294.). Roughly, Cowie argues that we can derive error theory from the fact that there's significant inconsistency between different first-order moral theories.

is true that utilitarianism and Kantian deontology furnish equally true moral propositions. On a more traditional conception of error theory, moral propositions are false given that there isn't anything in the world to act as their referents. On the conception I am proposing there are just *too many* things that can act as their referents. But this wouldn't make our moral practice any less defective.

To see this, consider that two paradigmatic error theoretic strategies are still viable on this scenario: fictionalism and abolitionism.<sup>32</sup> If there are too many referents for a given concept, then this constitutes a reason to abolish that concept. Consider a non-moral case. Eliminative materialists argue that folk psychological concepts like <memory> need to be abolished from our vocabulary. Their view shouldn't be understood as saying that there isn't *anything* that these concepts refer to. Rather, their claim is that <memory> refers to *too many* things in a way that suggests that the relevant concept is epistemically misleading. Similarly, if <moral goodness> refers to a disjunction of entities posited by *every* first-order moral theory then abolitionism seems like the proper response.

The same applies to fictionalist error theory. Even if <memory> has a wildly disjunctive referent it might still be pragmatically appropriate to include the relevant concept in our folk vocabulary (for reasons of social coordination, etc.). Ditto for <moral goodness>. If moral concepts are wildly disjunctive, it might still be the case they should be retained for pragmatic reasons. What the above illustrates is that fictionalism and abolitionism are warranted responses not *only* when the relevant concept has no referent, but also when it has *too many* referents. This is because, in both cases, the practice that adopts such a referent would become epistemically defective *in virtue of adopting* that concept.

A worry. Call the type of error theory sketched above “error theory\*” (ET\*). It could be objected that ET\* does not entail what Akhlaghi calls *veritistic* wholesale moral error (Veritistic). This type of error entails that “all claims within a domain are false or subject to some false presupposition”.<sup>33</sup> This is to be contrasted with non-veritistic wholesale moral error (Non-Veritistic) which concerns the failure “to achieve some practical goal(s) or aim(s)”.<sup>34</sup> The worry is that ET\* seems to deliver (Non-Veritistic) instead of (Veritistic). But Akhlaghi argument explicitly concerns (Veritistic).

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<sup>32</sup> Joyce, op. cit., sec. 3.2.

<sup>33</sup> Akhlaghi, op. cit., p. 243.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

In response, I note that ET\* delivers neither (Veritistic) nor (Non-Veritistic). ET\* entails wholesale moral error since it cannot accommodate moral action (since every moral theory turns out to be a success-theory). The error here doesn't concern the achievement of some practical goal nor does it concern the falsity of moral beliefs. Rather, ET\* fails to accommodate what Kalf usefully calls the “moral reality thesis” (MRT).<sup>35</sup> Roughly, as Kalf notes, the content of MRT is supposed to capture the “core commitment of moral discourse”.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, *failing to fully accommodate MRT* is what delivers wholesale moral error.

An error theory in terms of (Veritistic) arguably delivers wholesale moral error since (Veritistic) plausibly fails to accommodate MRT (e.g. by entailing that there are no intrinsically motivating moral reasons). But ET\* *also* fails to meet MRT. If every moral theory is a success-theory then the moral realm becomes radically unrecognizable. But it is plausible that MRT vindicates at least *some* aspects of our folk conception of moral discourse. Relatedly, another plausible component of MRT concerns the idea that there is an *elite* proper subset of successful (i.e. “true”) first-order moral theories. ET\* goes radically against that insight: if *every* moral theory is a success-theory then there is no sense in which a proper subset of such theories can be singled out. For these reasons, I take ET\* to deliver a legitimate version of wholesale moral error.

### **4.3. N-facts might cease to exist in one way or another**

So far, I've considered a scenario where N-facts do not actually exist, and a scenario where N-facts exist but their existence entails wholesale moral error. In this third scenario, I will consider the epistemic possibility of N-facts existing without entailing wholesale moral error but whose existence is *temporally restricted*. The idea is this: even if N-facts exist in a non-error theoretic way, it could still be the case that they *cease* to exist as a natural basis of moral goodness after a point in time. More concretely, if N-facts are identified with existing Boydian needs, then it is epistemically possible that, after a point in time, moral goodness ceases being grounded in Boydian needs.

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<sup>35</sup> Wouter Floris Kalf, “Moral Error Theory, Entailment and Presupposition,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16 (5) (2013): 923-937.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 924.

This scenario might seem incoherent at first. But it shouldn't once we identify two independently plausible and epistemically possible theses: (1) Moral principles are natural laws, and (2) Natural laws can be temporally restricted. (1) is a plausible assumption given the naturalist framework under which we are operating. (2), as I will argue, is epistemically possible.

A few words concerning (1). I take the idea that moral principles are natural *laws* to be a plausible component of moral naturalism. In this context, a moral principle is a fact of the form [N-facts ground moral goodness]. In turn, this fact is a law of nature akin to special science laws like the laws of Mendel, or laws governing mentality. I cannot fully defend (1) here but I take it to be a plausible thesis given the nature of the naturalist program: if moral principles are natural then they should be similar in nature to other (non-moral) general facts (i.e. scientific laws).<sup>37</sup>

In defense of (2) it should be noted that it is plausible that (2) is compatible with every theory of natural lawhood.<sup>38</sup> To illustrate I will focus on neo-Humeanism (a major player in the literature). Neo-Humeanism takes natural laws to supervene on the level of physical, non-modal, freely recombinable spacetime points (call this the *Humean mosaic*). The distinctive feature of neo-Humeanism concerns the idea that a given distribution of the Humean mosaic is metaphysically contingent: roughly, for every permutation of that distribution there is a corresponding possible world.

As per Lewis, “lucky” distributions involve laws that concern the entirety of the mosaic, whereas unlucky worlds are chaotic and contain no laws or regularities.<sup>39</sup> But note that there are also intermediate possible worlds where laws are homogenous (so to speak) but break down after a point in time. In such worlds, there are time-restricted laws (i.e. laws that exist up to a point in time).<sup>40</sup> Finally, and this is the crucial point, from the point of view of someone at a given possible world *w* it is not epistemically accessible whether *w* is a lucky or a not-so-lucky

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<sup>37</sup> Relatedly, see Stamatiadis-Bréhier, *op. cit.*, sec. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Olivier Sartenaer, Alexandre Guay and Paul Humphreys, “What Price Changing Laws of Nature?” *European Journal for Philosophy of Science* 11 (1) (2021): 1-19.

<sup>39</sup> David Lewis, “Humean Supervenience Debugged,” *Mind* 103 (412) (1994): 473-490.

<sup>40</sup> These laws should not be conflated with laws that involve a temporal component (i.e. laws that only apply to certain temporal parts).

world. For this reason, it is always epistemically possible that laws involving N-facts could cease to exist after a point in time, thus resulting into wholesale moral error.<sup>41</sup>

Three objections. First, it could be objected that it is unclear how the above scenario entails wholesale moral error. After all, the scenario accepts the *current* existence of N-facts. And this goes against wholesale moral error. But, in response, it is still epistemically possible that wholesale moral error might occur *in the future*. This should still count as a legitimate *type* of EP(E) by anyone's lights.<sup>42</sup>

Secondly, one might argue that the above scenario is ruled out by the very nature of moral principles. As the worry goes, if a general moral fact has an *expiration date*, then it cannot be a moral *principle* since moral principles are essentially atemporal.<sup>43</sup> But, ex hypothesis, a genuine moral principle *holds* at the actual world. So, it cannot be atemporal and, for this reason, the naturalist cannot accommodate EP(E) in this way.

In response, one should distinguish between the application-conditions and the existence-conditions of a moral principle. The former concern the conditions under which a moral principle can be applied (e.g. let P be universalizable, if P applies to some particular case C then P should also apply to any other case that is qualitatively the same as C). The latter concern the conditions under which P *exists*. For example, according to neo-Humeanism, moral principles hold at a particular world insofar as the Humean mosaic is appropriately organized.

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<sup>41</sup> This result can be delivered in various ways. For example, it could be that N-facts *themselves* cease to exist, or that the *fact* that N-facts ground moral facts ceases to hold. Or, perhaps, the modal operator that binds these facts has an “expiration date” as per Stathis Psillos, “Induction and Natural Necessities,” *Journal for General Philosophy of Science / Zeitschrift für Allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 48 (3) (2017): 327-340.

<sup>42</sup> To be clear, Akhlaghi's argument concerns both “future” and “present”-based wholesale moral error. As noted, however, the scenario just sketched is limited to the former type of error and, for this reason, doesn't seem to fully meet Akhlaghi's requirement. But this shouldn't cause much concern. The scenarios I present in this paper are supposed to work in a mutually complimentary fashion. Also, both types of wholesale moral error seem importantly similar in spirit.

<sup>43</sup> I take it that this is not a worry about the *generality* of that moral principle but about whether it is *universal*. To illustrate, a moral principle could have a narrow scope (i.e. by applying to very specific circumstances) while also being universal (in the sense that it is not restricted to specific persons, times, or places) (see Pekka Väyrynen, “Reasons and Moral Principles,” in Daniel Star (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*. (Oxford University Press 2018), 839-61, sec. 2).

When I note that a moral principle could have an expiration date, this has implications for the *existence* conditions of the relevant moral principle. When a moral principle ‘expires’, then that principle ceases to *exist*. But the principle’s application conditions remain unchanged. In this sense, even if we grant that moral principles are essentially atemporal (in terms of their application-conditions), it could still be the case that they cease to exist after a point in time.

Finally, there is a worry concerning the substantivity of this third scenario. The worry is that even if we accept that it is epistemically possible that moral principles are temporally constrained, this is, nevertheless, a *remote* epistemic possibility. So, even if such scenarios can be used to directly meet Akhlaghi’s challenge, there are still argumentatively underwhelming.

But the only way we can make sense of this worry is if we *assume* that we inhabit a lucky world (where moral principles are temporally unrestricted). This assumption is unwarranted, however. As mentioned, a not-so-lucky world where general moral facts are temporally restricted is as probable as a lucky world given our evidence.<sup>44</sup> For all we know, we exist in a not-so-lucky world and, for this reason, I take scenarios involving temporally restricted moral principles to be argumentatively powerful.

It should be stressed that the fact that we cannot assess whether the actual world is lucky or not-so-lucky is *not* a unique feature of neo-Humeanism. I don’t have the space to illustrate this by taking each theory of lawhood in turn, but it suffices to note that there is a general strategy for delivering the epistemic possibility of unlucky worlds *independently* of one’s background theory of laws.<sup>45</sup>

The idea is this: if a moral principle holds at *w*, then that principle has a *ground* at *w*. But the metaphysical details of these grounds are epistemically opaque: it is plausible that our current set of evidence doesn’t conclusively show whether the relevant grounds give rise to temporally restricted or temporally unrestricted moral principles. For example, take Rosen’s recent

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<sup>44</sup> Note that even if we supplement our stock of evidence with metaphysical assumptions that prohibit the metaphysical possibility of temporally restricted general moral facts, it is still epistemically possible that these assumptions are false. Following Tyler Hildebrand, “Natural Properties, Necessary Connections, and the Problem of Induction,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2016): 668-689, one could suggest that we can appeal to a *naturalness* constraint to rule out such temporally restricted moral principles (e.g, by stipulating that moral principles need to range over natural, atemporal, properties).

<sup>45</sup> Also, even if it were the case that neo-Humeanism was the only theory that delivers epistemically opaque moral principles, my argument would still be forceful since neo-Humeanism is an independently plausible metaphysical framework overall.

proposal that moral principles are grounded by a relational fact involving universal-like entities in the spirit of the Dretske-Tooley-Armstrong account of scientific laws.<sup>46</sup> I suggest that it is unclear, given our evidence, whether the universal-like entities involved in Rosen’s theory are temporally unrestricted in their scope: for all we know, the modal status of these facts makes it the case that moral principles at w hold only up until a given point in time. To compare, note that it’s a contentious issue in the literature whether a similar style of strategy can successfully solve the problem of induction.<sup>47</sup>

## **5. Conclusion**

In this paper I did two things. First, I clarified Akhlaghi’s argument in light of Evers’ recent critique. I argued that one of the key components of Akhlaghi’s requirement for the intra-theoretical accommodation of EP(E) involves the assumption that we take the *standpoint* of the relevant theory (in my case, naturalism). Secondly, I provided three types of cases that directly meet Akhlaghi’s requirement. According to the first type, N-facts do not actually exist, whereas according to the second one, N-facts exist in a way that entails wholesale moral error. Finally, I sketched a type of scenario where moral principles occur in a temporally restricted way.

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<sup>46</sup> Gideon Rosen, “What Is a Moral Law?” in Russ Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Vol. 12* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017), 135–159.

<sup>47</sup> See Helen Beebe, “Necessary Connections and the Problem of Induction,” *Noûs* 45 (3) (2011): 504-527; Stathis Psillos, “Induction and Natural Necessities,” *Journal for General Philosophy of Science / Zeitschrift für Allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 48 (3) (2017): 327-340; Hildebrand, op. cit.

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