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Kalf, W.F.

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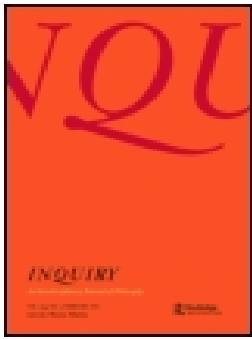
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The belief problem for moral error theory

Wouter Floris Kalf

Institute for Philosophy, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT


Moral error theorists think that moral judgments such as ‘stealing is morally wrong’ express truth-apt beliefs that ascribe moral properties to objects and actions. They also think that moral properties are not instantiated. Since moral error theorists think that moral judgments can only be true if they correctly describe moral properties, they think that no moral judgment is true. The belief problem for moral error theory is that this theory is inconsistent with every plausible theory of belief. I argue that moral error theorists can solve the belief problem. My argument is twofold. First, the belief problem rests on a false presupposition about how moral error theorists reason over time. Once we get clear on how would-be error theorists in fact reason towards the error theory and how, once they are error theorists, they subsequently reason about what they should do with their erroneous moral thought and talk, the belief problem evaporates. Second, even if my first argument fails and error theorists do face the belief problem, then we can still identify a plausible theory of belief that is consistent with moral error theory.

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1. Introduction

Moral error theorists are cognitivists.¹ They believe that atomic moral judgments such as *stealing is morally wrong* express truth-apt, basic moral beliefs (Mackie 1977; Joyce 2001; Olson 2014; Kalf 2018).² They also

CONTACT Wouter Floris Kalf  w.f.kalf@phil.leidenuniv.nl  Institute for Philosophy, Leiden University, Nonnensteeg 1-3, 2311 VJ, Leiden, The Netherlands

¹Henceforth, I sometimes abbreviate moral error theory to error theory because I always discuss moral error theory and never a different kind of error theory, such as an error theory of our entire normative discourse (Streumer 2017).

²Does error theory also apply to other types of moral judgments? Charles Pigden thinks that ‘(in many cases at least) the negation of a moral judgment ... is itself a moral judgment’ and that error theory applies to both basic moral judgments and their negations (2007, 450). I have argued elsewhere that error theory applies to basic moral judgments, their negations, and imperatives such as *do not steal!* (Kalf 2017). In this paper, for simplicity and because this is a moot point in what follows, I work with

accept that basic moral beliefs ascribe moral properties to objects and actions. Error theorists think that we can derive from our current moral discourse a conceptually ‘non-negotiable commitment’ about what a property would have to look like to count as a moral property (Joyce 2001, 5). Thus, J.L. Mackie writes that ‘conceptual analysis’ of concepts like MORALLY WRONG reveals that moral properties must be ‘objectively prescriptive’ (1977, 34, 39). On the most charitable interpretation of this claim, moral facts ‘are or entail irreducibly normative reasons’ (Olson 2014, 124). Error theorists further think that there are no irreducibly normative reasons, often claiming that such reasons ‘are too queer to exist’ (Olson 2014, 12n17). Since moral error theorists think that moral judgments can only be true if they correctly describe irreducibly normative reasons, and because they think that such reasons don’t exist, they conclude that no moral judgment is true.

Because error theorists think that all basic moral beliefs and all atomic moral judgments are truth-apt but never true, they should answer the now what question (Lutz 2014). Moral error theory, and now what? What should error theorists do with their erroneous moral thought and talk? Answers to this question are given by prescriptive metaethical theories, which tell us what we should do with moral discourse after error theory. These theories are therefore importantly different from descriptive metaethical theories, which describe how moral discourse actually works. For instance, Richard Garner argues that error theorists should cease to utter moral judgments altogether (2007). Contrastingly, Jonas Olson argues that we should continue to utter moral judgments even though they are truth-apt but never true (2014).

Prima facie, this debate about which prescriptive metaethical view should be accepted by moral error theorists is coherent and interesting. But Jussi Suikkanen aims to undermine it altogether, for he argues that error theorists suffer from the ‘belief problem’ (2013, 168):

Belief Problem

Every answer to the now what question is inconsistent with our most appealing theories of belief

A theory of belief is a theory about what beliefs *are*; viz., a theory about what makes a propositional attitude a belief rather than a hope, a fear, or a desire. Suikkanen claims that the Belief Problem is a reason to

the claim that error theory only concerns basic moral judgments like *stealing is morally wrong*. I also assume that if basic moral judgments are never true, then uttering the other types of moral judgments (e.g., negations and imperatives) becomes pointless and that we should therefore stop uttering them (for a defence of this claim, see Kalf 2018, 108–113).

abandon error theory, as it is worse to reject our most appealing theories of belief than to reject error theory.

In this paper, I argue that the Belief Problem for moral error theory fails. To this end, I first explain Suikkanen's non-standard formulation of error theory, and I argue that it is consistent and deserves the name 'error theory' (section 2). After this, I explain the Belief Problem in more detail (section 3). I then formulate my first solution to this problem, which is that it rests on a false presupposition about how moral error theorists reason; once we get clear on how error theorist actually reason, the Belief Problem evaporates (section 4). After this, I draw some general lessons from the preceding discussion in an attempt to advance the dialectic about error theory and the now what question (section 5). In the penultimate section, I offer a second solution to the Belief Problem, which is that even if my first response fails and error theorists do reason in a way that invites the Belief Problem, we can nevertheless identify a plausible theory of belief that is consistent with error theory (section 6). In the conclusion, I summarise my argument (section 7).

2. Moral error theory, falsity and evidence

Suikkanen thinks that error theorists are committed to the following four claims (2013, 169–70):

Cognitivism

Utterances of basic indicative moral sentences conventionally express basic moral beliefs³

Semantic

Basic moral beliefs ascribe moral properties to objects and actions

Metaphysical

Moral properties are not instantiated

Falsity

All basic moral beliefs are false

Indeed, many error theorists are committed to these claims. Cognitivism is accepted by all existing error theorists, although it has been suggested

³*Conventionally* express because other types of expression relations, such as those that are pragmatic rather than semantic, may be too weak for the error theorist's purpose. As the issue of which type of expression relation should be accepted by error theorists is a moot point in the discussion that follows, I accept Suikkanen's formulation of this claim (but for a formulation of moral error theory that uses a pragmatic expression relation, see Kalf (2018: Ch. 3).

that there is (currently unoccupied) conceptual room for a non-cognitivist moral error theory (Hussain 2010, 342–44). Semantic and Metaphysical are standardly believed to be at the heart of the error theory, both by error theorists such as Richard Joyce and their critics such as Michael Smith (Joyce 2001, 5; Smith 1994, 64). Finally, Falsity is accepted by the majority of error theorists as well. J.L. Mackie writes that moral judgments ‘are all false’ (1977, 35). Richard Joyce thinks that moral judgments express ‘false beliefs’ (2001, 179). Jonas Olson writes that ‘according to the standard formulation of moral error theory ... first-order moral claims are uniformly false’ (2014, 15). And in an important critical article, Stephen Finlay writes that the ‘moral error theorist’s primary claim is that first-order moral judgments are systematically false’ (2008, 359).

Suikkanen thinks that this formulation of error theory is problematic because it is not consistent, and in order to be able to work with a view that is ‘at least consistent,’ he proposes a different, non-standard formulation of error theory (2013, 172). In this section, I argue that his version of error theory is indeed consistent. Moreover, I argue that this version of error theory is worthy of that name so that Suikkanen, rejecting Falsity, does not attack a strawman.

Before error theorists became error theorists, they had moral beliefs, just like everyone else still has moral beliefs. But once they accept error theory and Falsity, error theorists have to abandon their moral beliefs. After all, generally speaking, we have to abandon our false beliefs, including entire sets of beliefs—the set of moral beliefs for instance—if the beliefs in these sets are all false. Suikkanen thinks that this is problematic for error theorists, for he thinks that most error theorists are not willing to give up, and in fact have not given up, their moral beliefs (2013, 171). He cites Charles Pigden and Jonas Olson as examples of error theorists who retain their moral beliefs after having accepted the error theory (Pigden 2007, 445; Olson 2011, 193).

Indeed, it looks as though there is a good reason to retain moral beliefs after error theory. For it appears that ‘without morality, all hell would break loose in human society’ (Joyce 2005, 300). We already have thieves and killers and without morality, we’ll only have more of these. So better to keep morality. I qualify some of what I say here later (section 3–section 5), but *prima facie*, this argument is plausible. Plato, for one, was worried about what will become of people if morality goes down the drain (1995, 360b–c). He tells the tale of Gyges, a shepherd who does not have to respect morality as he has a ring with which he can make himself invisible to avoid punishment after killing and stealing. Of

course, Gyges can also choose to continue to respect morality, remain visible, and accept the inevitable praise for his good deeds. But unfortunately, Gyges chooses to use the ring and he kills and steals at will. Similarly, Thomas Hobbes fears that in a state of nature in which there is no morality, life will be 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short' (Hobbes 1651, 89). Worse, most of us think that even if there *is* morality, we need political institutions that are designed specifically to deal with knaves, who behave morally if people are watching but will cheat on you if they think that they can get away with this. As David Hume writes in the opening sentence of his essay *Of the Independence of Parliament*: 'fixing the several checks and controls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a knave, and to have no other end in all his actions than private interest' (1741). Hume conveys essentially the same message: without appropriate checks and balances, either in the form of morality or in the form of an appropriately designed government (inclusive or), society as we know it will be hellish; full of egoists, liars, cheaters and rogues. By all means; keep morality, as it necessary though probably not sufficient for social cohesion.

Yet if error theorists want to keep morality and if they continue to accept their moral beliefs after error theory, then they are being inconsistent. On the one hand, error theorists want to retain their moral beliefs as they are unwilling to give them up. This means that they must think that these beliefs are *true* since error theorists are, like everyone else, epistemically obligated to abandon their false beliefs. But that is inconsistent with Falsity, which they also accept, and according to which all our moral beliefs are *false*.

As Suikkanen thinks that a version of error theory that accepts Cognitivism, Semantic, Metaphysical and Falsity is incoherent, he offers an alternative version of this theory, which accepts Cognitivism, Semantic, Metaphysical and

Evidence

The truth of Cognitivism, Semantic, and Metaphysical means that there seems to be sufficient evidence for the falsehood of our basic moral beliefs

Note that this is a version of the error theory worthy of that name because it states that there seems to be sufficient evidence for the falsehood of our basic moral beliefs. That's the gist of the error theory. We often accept that someone is guilty of murder if there seems to be sufficient evidence that they have murdered the victim, and we also often accept that someone is a theist if they sincerely and correctly report that it seems to them that

they have sufficient evidence for His existence. Similarly, it seems to me, we should accept that those who seem to have sufficient evidence for the falsehood of their basic moral beliefs are error theorists. Perhaps some of us accept Evidence but not Falsity due to adherence to some principle of epistemic modesty; nevertheless, these people are error theorists as they accept that moral beliefs are probably false. Suikkanen's *evidence-based error theory* is essentially the standard formulation of error theory to which we add a principle of epistemic modesty.

Note too that with Evidence, error theorists are rationally permitted to retain their moral beliefs. To see this, consider the stick in the water case. It seems to you that the stick is bended even though in reality it is not, and you know that in reality the stick is not bended because you put a straight stick in the water. Therefore, although you have some evidence for the claim that the stick is bended (it seems to be bended), and although this evidence remains in place, it can still be rational for you to believe that the stick is not bended. And all of this holds even if we say that there seems to be *sufficient* evidence to believe that the stick is bended, for there may always be stronger reasons to reject what you seem to have sufficient evidence to believe.

The same reasoning applies in the moral case. Your moral beliefs *seem* to be false, and you may continue to believe that this is so even if you have a weightier reason to conclude that your moral beliefs are not false. Suikkanen writes that the 'standards of epistemic rationality'—which are concerned with putting you in a position to believe what you ought to believe—allow you to keep your moral beliefs if you accept Evidence (2013, 171). As a result, he takes 'Cognitivism, Semantic, Metaphysical and Evidence to be the constitutive elements in the moral error theoretic position' (2013, 171–172). I will focus on this formulation of error theory in what follows. I do this because it is consistent, worthy of the name error theory, and because this allows me to point out exactly where I think Suikkanen goes wrong in attempting to commit error theorists to the Belief Problem. I argue that an error theory based on Falsity is consistent in section 4 and 5.

At this point, you might object, first, that Cognitivism, Semantic and Metaphysical *entail* Falsity and thus, second, that Suikkanen attacks a strawman.⁴ You might think that Cognitivism, Semantic and Metaphysical entail Falsity on account of the idea that if moral judgments express beliefs that are truth-apt, if there are no moral facts, and if moral beliefs are true

⁴I thank an anonymous referee for this journal for pressing me to engage with these two points.

just in case they correspond to the moral facts, then moral beliefs *must be* false. But in fact, we do not have an entailment relation here. Suikkanen is correct to think that we can use a *principle of epistemic modesty* to argue that although Cognitivism, Semantic and Metaphysical *seem* to give us sufficient evidence for the falsehood of our basic moral beliefs, we must leave it at that; viz., a claim about what seems to be the case. Similarly, it looks as though we can continue to *accept* our moral beliefs simply in virtue of the *principle of epistemic conservatism*, according to which a person is to some degree justified in retaining a given belief just because that person has that belief, at least so long as the evidence against this belief is flimsy (Daly and Liggins 2010, 223). Since the principles of epistemic modesty and epistemic conservatism are at least minimally plausible, we should not accept a formulation of moral error theory according to which Cognitivism, Semantic and Metaphysical automatically *entail* Falsity. For if we did that, then there would be no room for these principles. This doesn't mean that we cannot accept the standard formulation of moral error theory that concludes in Falsity, for there might be good arguments to prefer this view rather than the evidence-based formulation of the error theory. Still, we shouldn't rule out a version of error theory that concludes in Evidence from the get go.

You might have wanted to object that by following Suikkanen in accepting the evidence-based formulation of the error theory, I am not in fact discussing moral error theory. For you might think that this theory is committed to Cognitivism, Semantic, Metaphysical *and* Falsity. But as I just argued, it is not true that moral error theory must be formulated as such. A formulation of error theory that concludes in Evidence rather than Falsity is consistent and deserves the label *error theory*. Suikkanen agrees with this much, but he wields the Belief Problem in an attempt to reject error theory.

3. The belief problem

The Belief Problem arises in the context of the 'now what question' for moral error theory (Lutz 2014, 351). What should we do with our erroneous moral thought and talk after error theory? Note that this *should* is not a moral *should*. It is the overall, all-things-considered *should* that is determined by the relative strengths of the various non-moral *pro tanto* reasons that remain in existence after moral error theory. Thus, J.L. Mackie says that if an agent has a prudential reason, then this reason is not irreducibly normative. Instead, an agent's 'desires along with ...

causal relations constitute the reason' (1977, 66). Such reducible reasons are not too queer to exist because desires and causal relations are not queer and, indeed, exist. After moral error theory, a number of reasons bear upon our overall reason to act, or contribute to the overall practical ought, including prudential and aesthetic reasons. To keep things simple, and because they are probably the most importance reasons, I will just consider prudential reasons. An example of a relevant prudential reason in thinking about the now what question is that continuing to engage in moral discourse after error theory enhances our personal well-being.

This is aptly explained by Richard Joyce, who argues that part of the job description of moral judgments is to function as 'conversation stoppers' (2006, 111). We are all, including moral error theorists and moral success theorists, and to various degrees of intensity, tempted to perform actions such as stealing and lying when it serves our private interests. Fortunately, for all of us, including for moral error theorists, moral judgments do not merely *tell us that* stealing and lying are wrong. They also, phenomenologically, appear to be *rationaly authoritative* and *supremely important*. This means that if we make a moral judgement, then it seems to us that we have a reason to act on this judgment whether or not we desire to do this (rational authority) and that it also seems to us that no non-moral consideration, such as that it would be fun to perform the immoral action, carries more normative weight in our practical deliberation (supreme importance).⁵ The result of this is that if we consider the possibility of stealing and if we judge that stealing is morally wrong, then our internal conversation about what we should do will be over almost instantaneously. We may be contemplating the potential gains of stealing in particular circumstances, but once we judge that stealing is morally wrong, we will think along the following lines: 'right, that's it, stealing is morally wrong, *basta*—I won't steal.'

The fact that moral judgments are conversations stoppers in this sense is useful for moral error theorists insofar as they believe that what is prudentially good for them is largely coextensive with what morality prescribes. It is prudentially good for individuals to live in a society in which people can be trusted not to steal or tell lies, for that enables us to enjoy the benefits of cooperation and live in a society that isn't solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short. In the long run, and often also in in the short run, this gives us a prudentially better life than the life of the

⁵ For a detailed discussion of this argument, see (Kalf 2018, 56–59).

common thief, or even the life of a financially successful but dishonest businessman, as these people sacrifice ‘inward peace of mind’ and will sooner or later be ostracised by their community (Mackie 1977, 35). As refraining from stealing and telling lies are precisely the kinds of actions that we call morally right, a substantial part of the debate about which of the various prescriptive metaethical theories we should accept is occupied by an attempt to answer the following question. Which way of making use of moral judgments is prudentially wise for error theorists, keeping in mind both the causal role that moral judgments play as conversation stoppers in our mental lives and the assumption that the moral and the prudential are largely coextensive? At present, we have recommendations to *keep* (conservationism), *abandon* (abolitionism) or *change* (fictionalism, revolutionary expressivism, substitutionism) moral discourse after error theory. As of yet, none of these positions can claim to be the dominant position in the debate.

In the *keep moral judgments camp*, we find conservationists such as Jonas Olson, who believe that we should continue to make moral judgments whilst attempting to ‘compartmentalise’ our error-theoretic metaethical view (2014, 192). Our metaethical beliefs form their own little isolated island in our mental lives; they mind their own business and they do not affect our non-moral beliefs. The benefit of this is that the error theorist cannot remember her commitment to the error theory when she is tempted to steal. As such, moral judgments continue to appear rationally authoritative and supremely important. Consequently, they prompt the agent to perform the action that she prudentially ought to perform. Diego Machuca helpfully calls this ‘psychological insulation’ of first-order and second-order moral beliefs, which ‘occurs if ... someone ... decides to shield his first-order beliefs from his skepticism for pragmatic reasons’ (2017, 216–217).⁶ At the same time, the error theorist can still remember her error-theoretic stance when she is ‘cool, calm and collected’ and in the midst of doing philosophy with colleagues (Smith 1991, 406). The benefit of this is that in contexts in which truth matters more than action (perhaps the error theorist and her colleagues know that the error theorist is unlikely to harm them, given her past behaviour), the error theorist does not accept the false belief that there

⁶Machuca also identifies two other forms of insulation; viz., logical and epistemic: ‘logical insulation occurs if, from the truth or falsity of moral scepticism, one cannot logically infer the truth or falsity of first-order moral beliefs [and] epistemic insulation occurs if knowing or justifiably believing that there are no moral facts ... does not imply that one should stop holding beliefs about the objective rightness or wrongness of certain action’ (2017, 216). Yet it is clear that Olson, because he talks about efforts to compartmentalise our first- and second-order moral thoughts, has psychological insulation in mind.

are moral facts. In that context, she accepts the true belief that all moral judgments are false. Thus, metaethical beliefs cannot be accessed during practical deliberation in everyday contexts, but they can be accessed in detached, academic contexts.

In the *abandon moral judgments camp*, we find abolitionists such as Richard Garner, who argue that morality and prudence aren't coextensive and that precisely because moral judgments move us to act in ways that preserve the current morality or the *status quo*, we should get rid of moral judgments (Garner 2007). According to abolitionists, morality serves the interests of the haves and harms the interests of the have nots. As a consequence, abolitionists are keen to abolish moral judgments and recommend that we do our practical reasoning directly in terms of what is prudentially wise. This may mean that if it is prudentially wise for us to invest in genetically modified crops or to remove some of the current strictures on euthanasia—two proposals that our current morality has difficulties to permit—then we should do these things. Moral judgments, with their inbuilt preference for the *status quo*, only hinder humanity's prospects for progress where it prudentially matters.

In the *change moral judgments camp*, we find three distinct views, each of which accepts that the content of morality and prudence are largely coextensive. First, we have fictionalists such as Richard Joyce, who argue that we should not fully believe but instead *make-believe* that there are moral facts (2005). This means that fictionalists don't accept the false belief there are moral facts because they aren't in cognitive states to begin with; the attitude of make-believing a proposition is a conative mental state. In this way, the new, fictionalised moral judgments escape the charge of systematic falsity. At the same time, fictionalised moral judgments keep (most of their) perceived authority and importance. For make-believing that stealing is wrong in the heat of the moment *will feel like* believing that this is wrong, thus prompting error theorists to refrain from stealing.⁷ Second, there are substitutionists like Matt Lutz, who think that moral judgments will continue to appear rationally authoritative and supremely important even if we accept that these judgments are made true by prudential facts that exist (2014). And like the fictionalists, substitutionists avoid making moral judgments that express false beliefs

⁷Or, on an alternative formulation of fictionalism, moral judgments express full-fledged beliefs, albeit not about moral facts but about moral facts *as they exist in a moral fiction*. For in that case too, moral judgments continue to appear supremely authoritative without expressing false beliefs. I will not consider this version of fictionalism in this paper as it shares many properties with the substitutionist proposal I discuss below, and which I find superior (see Kalf 2018, 159–226).

about non-existent moral facts because for them, the new substitute moral judgments express *true* beliefs about prudential facts. Third, we have revolutionary expressivists like Toby Svoboda, who think that we can reap the benefits of continuing to accept moral judgments, most notably their motivational power, if we alter our moral judgments in such a way that they express emotions (2017). Thus, revolutionary expressivists avoid the charge of accepting systematically false beliefs because they don't think that after moral error theory, moral judgments should express beliefs.

The Belief Problem for error theory is that that none of these solutions to the now what problem is consistent with at least one of the available plausible theories of belief, where a theory of belief is a theory about what beliefs *are*; viz., a theory about what makes a propositional attitude a belief rather than a hope, a fear, or a desire. According to Suikkanen, error theorists believe that even if 'one ceases to believe in moral properties, facts, and truths, this is still not *enough* to get one to give up one's first-order beliefs' (2013, 173; italics in original). After all, says Suikkanen, Richard Garner, who is an error theorist, explicitly says this. Suikkanen cites Garner's 2007 article 'Abolishing Morality' on p. 502, but I think that Garner says it most clearly on p.500; 'to convince someone to abolish or abandon morality, you must first get them to stop believing in moral properties, facts, and truths. You must get them to become moral anti-realists, but, as we shall see, even that is not enough'. Suikkanen argues that we need an explanation of the datum that error theorists give prudential reasons for why one should give up one's moral beliefs after error theory, and the most plausible explanation, he says, is that error theorists think that ceasing to believe in moral facts and moral truth *is not enough* to get people to give up their first-order beliefs. Prudential arguments for why we should abandon our moral beliefs would be superfluous 'if one thought that everyone would automatically give up their moral beliefs when they accepted the moral error theory' (2013, 173). Suikkanen concludes that people don't automatically give up their moral beliefs when they accept the error theory.

According to Suikkanen, this means that for error theorists, moral beliefs are *systematically insensitive attitudes*; viz., attitudes that are not given up when one believes that there seems to be sufficient evidence against their truth. He explains:

I do not mean merely attitudes that admit of local failures of sensitivity in which one mental state (a belief) is on one or few occasions of irrationality insensitive to thoughts about evidence ... Rather, I mean mental states that (i) are

continuously insensitive to stable explicit thoughts about there being sufficient evidence against their truth, and that (ii) they belong to a whole class of attitudes that are insensitive in this same way (2013, 177).

Unfortunately for error theorists, the ‘most popular theories of beliefs’ dictate that if an agent believes that there is sufficient evidence for the falsehood of her mental states and they can still continue to be in that state, ‘then that mental state cannot count as a belief’ (Suikkanen 2013, 177; see also Scanlon 1998, 19). That is, each of the most popular theories of belief embraces:

Doxastic Involuntarism

If an agent becomes aware of sufficient evidence against a certain belief B, then this agent cannot possibly continue to accept belief B

Doxastic Involuntarism is inconsistent with the error-theoretic commitment that you can continue to accept your moral beliefs if you accept Evidence.

Suikkanen considers two solutions on behalf of error theory.⁸ First, the error theorist can admit that our first-order moral judgments do not count as beliefs and, second, she can accept that she violates the most popular theories of beliefs. The first solution has the obvious drawback that it entails that Cognitivism is false, which is a fundamental metaethical commitment of the error theory. I will therefore not pursue this solution. The second solution is also unpalatable, but I will argue that one theory of belief is in fact consistent with the error theory (section 6). However, I will first argue for a solution to the Belief Problem that dismantles it as a pseudo-problem (section 4). In between these sections I draw some general lessons from the discussion up until that point in an attempt to advance the dialectic about error theory and the now what question (section 5).

4. The false presupposition solution

Suikkanen writes that the Belief Problem arises because:

moral error theorists ... think that moral beliefs in general are not sensitive to thoughts about the sufficient evidence for their falsehood. This is why, on their views, we need to consider the prudential reasons for our moral attitudes (2013, 181).

⁸Actually, he presents three solutions. But the third is that error theorists should accept an answer to the now what question that makes an empirical prediction that we currently haven’t yet tested. Like Suikkanen, and because we haven’t done the tests yet, I will not consider this suggestion.

This suggests that Suikkanen thinks that error theorists reason as follows:

First Pattern of Reasoning

T = 1 Like everyone else, would-be error theorists make moral judgments

T = 2 Would-be error theorists become error theorists, accepting Evidence rather than Falsity to remain consistent

T = 3 Error theorists keep their moral beliefs, consistently with Evidence

T = 4 Error theorists confront the now what question, amassing various prudential reasons for abandoning, keeping, or changing their moral thought and talk

T = 5 Error theorists decide which of these answers to accept, and become abolitionists, conservationists, revolutionary expressivists, fictionalists, or substitutionists

Would-be error theorists are metaethicists who consider the various metaethical theories with the aim of deciding which of these theories they should embrace. As such, would-be error theorists may fail to become error theorists as they might become convinced of a moral success theory instead (or they might become expressivists, etc.). Whether every single one of us is a would-be error theorist is debatable. It may be that not all of us can grasp or understand the moral error theory, perhaps because it is too difficult for some of us to keep the various components of the error theory in mind in order to clinch the argument (Cuneo and Christy 2011, 95). This is an empirical conjecture that does not matter for my argument (and that I don't happen to believe either). What matters is that everyone who has the capacity to believe the error theory on the basis of good arguments should not reason according to First Pattern of Reasoning and should instead reason according to a different pattern of reasoning that I outline below.

If moral error theorists reason according to First Pattern of Reasoning, then they face the Belief Problem. Error theorists accept Evidence rather than Falsity to remain consistent at T = 2. Suikkanen thinks that error theorists keep their moral beliefs for three reasons: (i) they are permitted to keep them by Evidence, (ii) they say that they keep their moral beliefs and (iii) they think that keeping their moral beliefs is a good idea because they accept the popular idea that without morality all hell would break loose in human society. But if error theorists *keep* rather than abandon their moral judgments at T = 3, then we have the Belief Problem, for if you keep a belief even though you become aware of sufficient evidence for the falsity of that belief, then you violate the requirement that the doxastic is involuntary.

However, this is not at all how error theorists think. I am an error theorist, and I certainly don't think like this. Moreover, error theorists should not

think like this because it fuels the Belief Problem. Instead, error theorists think, and should think, as follows (henceforth, I omit the qualification *and should think* for ease of exposition):

Alternative Pattern of Reasoning

T = 1 Like everyone else, would-be error theorists make moral judgments

T = 2* Would-be error theorists become error theorists and they accept Evidence *or Falsity* (whichever they prefer)

T = 3* Error theorists *reject* their moral beliefs, consistently with Evidence *or Falsity* (depending on the choice they made at T = 2)

T = 4 Error theorists confront the now what question, amassing various prudential reasons for abandoning, keeping, or changing their moral thought and talk

T = 5 Error theorists decide which of these answers to accept, and become abolitionists, conservationists, revolutionary expressivists, fictionalists, or substitutionists

This Alternative Pattern of Reasoning is different from the First Pattern of Reasoning at T = 2 and T = 3, hence T = 2* and T = 3*.

The most important difference, for our purposes, between how Suikkanen thinks that error theorists reason and how they actually reason occurs at T = 3*. After accepting the error theory, error theorists reject their moral beliefs, and so they might as well (and usually do) accept Falsity rather than Evidence at T = 2*. This is consistent with Doxastic Involuntarism. Would-be error theorists become convinced of error theory, so they reject their moral beliefs. Then, at T = 4, and without any moral beliefs *at all*, they investigate the prudential reasons that remain. At that point, they may become convinced that they should abolish their moral beliefs, or that they should instead keep or change them. But that's a further question, and one that error theorists ask only once they have abandoned their moral beliefs. If error theorists reason like this, then amassing prudential reasons for accepting a particular prescriptive metaethical theory makes sense. Rather than collecting these reasons in order to get themselves to abandon their moral beliefs, they collect prudential reasons in order to see which of the various prescriptive metaethical theories on offer they should accept.

Recall from a few paragraphs up that Suikkanen thinks that error theorists keep their moral beliefs because (i) they are permitted to keep them by Evidence, (ii) they say that they keep their moral beliefs and (iii) they think that keeping their moral beliefs is a good idea because they accept the popular idea that without morality all hell would break loose in human society. We can now see why all of these reasons fail. With respect to (i), being permitted to keep your moral beliefs does not mean that you are

obligated to keep them, or that it is a good idea to keep them. Indeed, I argued that moral error theorists should not keep their moral beliefs because if they do then they face the Belief Problem. This also means that (ii) is irrelevant. Error theorists *should not*, at $T = 3^*$, keep their moral beliefs, regardless of how many of them in fact do this or report that they do this, for otherwise they face the Belief Problem. Error theorists are entitled, of course, to become conservationists for pragmatic reasons, at $t = 5$. But this will happen after they have abandoned their moral beliefs between $T = 3^*$ and $T = 5$, and accepting conservationism will be the result of a conscious and deliberate mental effort to compartmentalise or insulate their first-order moral beliefs from their second-order and error-theoretic moral beliefs.

Finally, looking at (iii), it is not true that all hell will break loose in society after error theory if we (all) reject our moral beliefs. This is because the *prudential* beliefs that we will still have after error theory enable us to steer clear from stealing laptops and expensive camera's, from turning our children into little liars, racists, and xenophobes, and from killing people we dislike for their religion. It is just that many error theorists (except the abolitionists) think that by keeping moral judgments in some form or other, they put themselves in an *even better* position to do what is prudentially right. After all, acting on your prudential reasons isn't always easy. We overeat, we smoke, and we skip exercising. If our prudential well-being is best furthered by keeping moral beliefs as they are and by insulating them from our sceptical thoughts when it matters (conservationism), then we should, prudentially speaking, continue to make use of our moral practice in this way. Similarly, if our prudential well-being is best furthered if we become fictionalists, substitutionists, or expressivists, then we should do this. True, if error theorists use Alternative Pattern of Reasoning rather than First Pattern of Reasoning, then—but only so long as they are determining which prescriptive metaethical theory they should accept after error theory—they can only use their prudential reasons to justify their decision not to kill and steal. And, true, this is less effective than using your prudential reasons *and* using your moral judgments (or your fictionalised moral judgements, or your substitute moral judgments, etc.). But because usually our prudential practical reasoning works just fine, hell won't break loose in society. Nothing bad will happen, and not because there won't be many error theorists, but because those who become error theorists normally won't act against their prudential judgments, which largely coincide with what morality currently prescribes.

The argument I just gave for the claim that hell will not break loose if we give up our moral beliefs works for abolitionists as well, though it takes a bit of effort to see why. Abolitionists think that morality and prudence coincide insufficiently often to warrant keeping morality in some form or other. But they are not committed to reject the whole of morality as a bogus institution that enforces the—in their eyes—prudentially sub-optimal *status quo*. Indeed, abolitionists will still think that some of our existing moral rules are helpful for their prudential well-being, such as the rule to help their loved-ones or to avoid killing. It just that when they look at the whole of morality, including its commendable aspects (the obligation to help your own children) and its reprehensible aspects (e.g. the prohibition against abortion, see Garner 2007), they think that we are better off without morality. But that doesn't mean that at $T = 4$, the error theorists with a hang for abolitionism and who have rejected their moral beliefs and are considering to accept abolitionism, will in fact kill and steal. Their new social rules, which favours liberal abortion practices and are generally socially progressive, still contain rules against killing and stealing. But then, and even if the abolitionists start to promote more liberal abortion practices in society, which the other moral error theorists (by assumption) have prudential reasons to avoid, this still falls short of all hell breaking loose in society. Perhaps liberal abortion practices are prudentially bad, but they are not bad enough for all hell to break loose in society. Hell breaks loose if we are stealing and killing adults, but even abolitionists don't promote a system of values in which these actions are permissible, let alone obligatory.

In sum, the Belief Problem rests on a misunderstanding of how error theorist reason, diachronically, over time. It is based on the false presupposition that error theorists reason as specified in the First rather than in the Alternative Pattern of Reasoning. Once this is cleared up, the Belief Problem evaporates.

5. Insulation and the shape of morality

Before I give my second reason for rejecting the Belief Problem, I make a few remarks on the dialectic about error theory and the now what question in an attempt to improve our understanding of this dialectic. Suikkanen thinks that error theorists think that the whole of morality is bogus, but Suikkanen also thinks that error theorists think that morality is useful, so—and here comes the bit I have been arguing against—to enable themselves to abandon their moral beliefs, he thinks that error theorists need additional prudential reasons to do so. It is on the back of this claim that

we get the Belief Problem. If we need prudential reasons to abandon our moral beliefs even if we have already accepted the error theory, then moral beliefs must, implausibly, be systematically insensitive attitudes.

Here is a diagnosis of what might have gone wrong. Suikkanen has misperceived the popularity of insulationism as a commitment to conservatism.⁹ Insulationists think that after error theory, we can insulate our first-order moral beliefs from our second-order moral beliefs which, if this insulation wouldn't be possible, would force the error theorist to abandon her first-order moral beliefs. Most prominently, insulationists think that at $T=3$, error theorists have to abandon all of their moral beliefs, and that at $T=5$, they can insulate their moral beliefs, which they will want to do if they are conservationists. Insulationism enables error theorists to reap the benefits of continuing to accept moral judgments as these judgments will still function as conversation stoppers. Insulationism also seems to enable error theorists to remember that moral error theory is true in the philosophy seminar room, for it looks as though psychological insulation depends on effort—such that, if we decrease the effort, then insulation disappears. Suikkanen can accept insulationism because it can give him what he thinks error theorists want; viz., the ability to keep both some form of morality and error theory. As such, error theorists can reason in a way that does not expose them to the Belief Problem. If insulation *is not* on your mind if you think about conservatism, then as you are thinking about the question how error theorists can keep moral beliefs after error theory, you are naturally drawn to the suggestion that error theorists, precisely, *keep* their moral beliefs even once they have already accepted the error theory. But if insulation *is* on your mind, then should be clear by now that the package deal 'error theory, Doxastic Involuntarism, and insulation' is more plausible than the alternative package 'error theory, doxastic voluntarism, and the Belief Problem'.

The interesting question, it seems to me, is not whether Suikkanen should accept insulationism and abandon his claim that error theorists face the Belief Problem. Instead, the interesting questions lie further downstream. For instance, can conservationists who use Alternative Pattern of Reasoning and insulationism have their cake and eat it too? Can you make sure that you properly insulate your moral beliefs in practical contexts so that you reap the prudential benefits of using moral judgments, and yet at the same time ensure that your commitment to moral error theory remains accessible in the philosophy seminar room? Diego Machuca

⁹I thank an anonymous referee for this journal for this suggestion.

helpfully mentions the possibility of ‘mild psychological insulation,’ which describes the possibility that ‘one’s first-order moral beliefs may become unaffected by moral skepticism *so long as* one keeps performing a certain mental action’ (Machuca 2017, 217, italics in original). This might be the mental action of focussing on the properties of the practical situation that one is in—e.g. on the facts that laptop in the computer store is shiny and fantastic and the fact that it seems to be morally wrong to steal that laptop. *Prima facie*, it seems that if you want to properly insulate your moral beliefs, then your metaethical views must be impossible to reach But that flouts the conservationist’s claim that in the philosophy seminar room, error theory can be believed. Equally though, and on the other horn of this dilemma, if the belief that moral error theory is true is to remain accessible for the error theorist in the philosophy seminar room, then it stands to reason to think that in practical situations in which the error theorist is tempted to steal and lie, the belief that error theory is true will also be accessible and will in fact be accessed (Kalf 2018, 188–190).

A different form of psychological insulation is also available to error theorists. According to it, our first-order moral beliefs may become unaffected *once and for all* if we perform a certain mental action (Machuca 2017, 217). But this form of insulation cannot be what the conservationist requires, for she wants to continue to be able to believe error theory in the philosophy seminar room. Which of these views is preferable and psychologically attainable? These types of questions, it seems to me, are worth pursuing once the Belief Problem is unmasked as a pseudo-problem.

6. The plausible theory of belief solution

Suppose, however, that the Belief Problem does not evaporate. Suppose, that is, that for whatever reason, error theorists cannot or should not use Alternative Pattern of Reasoning and that they should use or can only use First Pattern of Reasoning. Suikkanen argues that in this case, there is no plausible theory of belief that is consistent with any prescriptive metaethical theory. The theories of belief that Suikkanen considers are (i) descriptive functionalism, (ii) the truth-norm account, (iii) normative functionalism, (iv) representationalism, (v) interpretationalism, and (iv) dispositionalism.

I think that Suikkanen’s argument fails for (i) descriptive functionalism.¹⁰ Descriptive functionalists believe that the different propositional attitudes

¹⁰ I won’t comment on whether this theory of belief is in fact plausible or popular. I think that it is, and it is accepted by philosophers like Michael Smith, Lloyd Humberstone, and others (Smith 1994; Humberstone

that we have are distinguished by their causal roles. We are caused to have some of these attitudes by perception, by memory, by peer pressure, or by the thought that an argument before us is a compelling argument. And these attitudes themselves cause other attitudes. For instance, my perception of rain will cause me to desire to buy an umbrella. Descriptive functionalists need a plausible description of the causal role of beliefs in order to set beliefs apart from all the other propositional attitudes. Michael Smith, who has defended this view, holds that the defining feature of beliefs is the way in which they react to our thoughts about evidence: 'a belief with the content that p tends to go out of existence in the presence of a perception with the content that not- p ' (1994, 115). It is not clear what a perception with the content that something is not wrong would look like (Suikkanen 2013, 182). But if we replace, in Smith's account, *perceptions* with the content that not- p with *thoughts* or other mental states with the content that not- p , then we can apply this account to moral beliefs. However, if we do this, then it becomes apparent that our moral thoughts understood as systematically insensitive attitudes, which is what we are presently assuming error theorists to be committed to, could not count as beliefs. For in that case, looking for beliefs entails looking for attitudes that are systematically *sensitive* to thoughts about sufficient evidence.

Suikkanen presents a possible response on behalf of the error theorist (2013, 182). He also rejects this response, but I think that in a slightly modified form, this response is plausible. This response enables error theorists to combine a plausible theory of belief with the claim that moral beliefs are systematically insensitive attitudes. The response I have in mind is to adopt a weaker version of Smith's view. This is the claim that the distinguishing feature of beliefs is merely a *disposition* to be given up when subjects believe that there is sufficient evidence against the truth of the relevant attitudes. So, moral attitudes count as beliefs if, and only if, they have this disposition. At the same time, it is not a problem if these attitudes are retained in the face of Evidence, for it could be that the disposition to reject beliefs in light of Evidence remains a disposition.

Suikkanen rejects this response, claiming that it faces the following dilemma. Either the disposition is strong, by which Suikkanen means that agents will continue to hold the relevant moral beliefs even in the

1992). But the force of my objection to Suikkanen does not depend on the truth of this claim as it is Suikkanen who claims that this theory of beliefs is plausible.

face of continuously mounting evidence against their truth. Call this *strong descriptive functionalism*. Or else the disposition is weak, in which case agents are relatively quickly made to abandon their moral beliefs. Call this *weak descriptive functionalism*. Error theorists cannot accept either of these horns, he claims. For if the disposition is weak, then we won't be able to distinguish beliefs from hopes. After all, you can continue to hope that there will be three books on your desk in a minute from now even though you can see that there are only two books. For it might be that your colleague who, who has promised to return your book, is rumoured to be off sick; nevertheless, you can hope that this is just that—a rumour. On the other hand of the spectrum, if the disposition is strong, then, writes Suikkanen, 'this would hardly be compatible with the idea that we will be able to decide whether to keep them on the basis of the prudential reasons' (2013, 183).

I think that error theorists should say that moral beliefs are *strong dispositions* in Suikkanen's sense. Hardly compatible can either mean *only just compatible* or *certainly not compatible*, but if strong descriptive functionalism is true, it must mean only just compatible. This is because strong descriptive functionalism is defined as the view that although we are very much disposed to keep our moral beliefs in light of countervailing evidence, there will a point at which resistance breaks. If that point never comes, then there is no disposition, and no strong descriptive functionalism. Fortunately for the error theorist, the claim that moral beliefs only rarely disappear is exactly what she needs on the assumption that the Belief Problem is a genuine problem. Suikkanen thinks not, because he thinks that this means that for every 100 error theorists who accept Evidence, only one or two of them will end up abandoning their moral beliefs. Nevertheless, though this is certainly *unfortunate* for the 98 hard-working error theorists who don't end up abandoning their beliefs despite all their hard work, we do have a consistent error theory. After all, we have a plausible theory of belief (*viz.*, strong descriptive functionalism) *and* we have the notion of moral beliefs as systematically insensitive attitudes understood as attitudes that remain in place in light of countervailing evidence. And we have all of this despite the fact that at one point the resistance will be broken and the attitudes will be abandoned.

You might object that this means that the relevant attitudes no longer count as systematically insensitive attitudes. For *systematically insensitive*, you might think, means *never sensitive*. But I think that systematically insensitive means: (strongly) disposed to be insensitive but sometimes sensitive. I have two arguments for this claim. First, Suikkanen himself

agrees with this, for he defines systematically insensitive states as states that are (i) continuously insensitive to stable explicit thoughts about there being sufficient evidence against their truth, and that (ii) belong to a whole class of attitudes that are insensitive in this same way (see section 3 above). On this view, beliefs are *continuously* insensitive to these kinds of thoughts, though there is a moment that they flip, as a whole class of attitudes, and become sensitive to the evidence under its sheer weight. In other words, *continuously* does not imply *endlessly*. Second, consistently with this view of moral beliefs, we can explain why and when it can happen that some people don't manage to abandon their moral beliefs, which one might take to be reason to deny that we have a disposition on our hands. The explanation for why some error theorists don't abandon their moral beliefs is that they have not put sufficient and sufficiently prolonged pressure on the beliefs in the form of exposure to the relevant evidence. This allows us to conclude that the disposition remains a disposition and that people will abandon their beliefs given sufficient pressure. We should not conclude that, because it takes *a lot* of effort to do give up our moral beliefs, we don't have a disposition. In sum, even if my first objection to the Belief Problem fails so that we must agree that it is a genuine problem for the error theory, error theorists can solve this problem.

7. Conclusion

Jussi Suikkanen thinks that error theorists suffer from the Belief Problem. In this paper, I have argued that this problem does not arise once we get clear on how error theorists actually reason. Error theorists do, and, in any case, should, abandon their moral beliefs after error theory, and they should solve the now what problem after having abandoned their moral beliefs, which they can safely do as they will still have prudential reasons not to kill and steal. I also argued that even if this solution fails, we still have the *plausible theory of belief-solution* to the Belief Problem, according to which error theorists can keep their commitment to moral beliefs as systematically insensitive attitudes *and* accept strong descriptive functionalism. Thus, error theorists have nothing to fear from the Belief Problem.

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