

Jonas Olson. *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence*. Oxford University Press 2014. 224 pp. \$55.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198701934).

It is not easy to imagine there might be a better book for understanding the case for moral error theory than Jonas Olson's *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* exhibits strong argumentation throughout. And it is enjoyable to read. Where many contemporary ethicists endeavor to hide the shortcomings of their theories, Olson is refreshingly and remarkably forthright about the weaknesses of the arguments for his view. Three out of four of Mackie's original moral queerness arguments, he states, 'do not stand up to scrutiny' (3). The historical predecessors of contemporary moral error theory are suitably covered and the theory's relations to other metaethical theories are helpfully illuminated.

A number of things recommend *Moral Error Theory*. All those with an interest in metaethics will find it successfully increases the clarity of one's understanding of several central metaethical issues. Philosophers, generally, will find many points of interest, and not merely because it is thrilling to think there might be no moral properties. Perhaps its great asset is to show that the attacks you think will overturn the theory under examination probably will not—or at least will not without significant additional efforts.

One key establishing point Olson makes is that nonnatural realism, of the kind offered by Price, Moore and Ross, is the sole target of moral error theory, other theories being thought to be lacking. Nonnaturalism, he claims, is correct in holding that talk 'of non-natural properties is the philosopher's reconstruction of ordinary moral discourse' (80). Fascinatingly, Olson claims that the moral facts posited by such views entail 'irreducibly normative favouring relations' (122). It is such relations, he argues, that qualify moral facts as 'queer'. As a contemporary intuitionist who argues that nonnatural moral relations ground our duties, I was struck by Olson's claim.

Olson's exposition of moral error enables the reader to understand the theory immediately, bypassing many of the usual tangles of metaethical categorization. He also gets to the point without unnecessary preliminaries. Moral error theory centrally holds that 'ordinary moral thought and discourse involve untenable ontological commitments and that, as a consequence, ordinary moral beliefs and claims are uniformly untrue' (1). Along the way, Olson shares some surprising claims about the view. He states that 'there is no necessary connection between the argument from queerness and naturalistic ontologies' (86). This is surprising because, at least on my thinking, by starting with a thoroughgoing commitment to naturalism, one would have ruled out of question any nonnatural properties, whatever extensive moral reflection might suggest of their existence. If natural, non-natural, and spiritual entities remain viable options, it seems that any properties considered 'queer' by naturalists might be accounted for in some manner.

One basic sticking point for moral error theory must be unstuck before Olson makes his case for it. Moral error theory tells us that all moral judgments are false. For example, 'Abortion is permissible' is false. But so is 'Abortion is impermissible'. The problem is that the falsity of the former implies the truth of the latter. If p is false, then $\sim p$ is true. So, as a result of understanding the basics of moral error theory and logic, we arrive at the conclusion that 'Abortion is impermissible' is both true and false. Olson shares different ways of dealing with this fundamental threat. His escape plan is to assert that the just mentioned implication, and all others in substantive moral discourse, are really instead 'instances of generalized conversational implicature' (14). No reason is

given for this expedient, except that it gets moral error theory up and running. Some proponents will consider this maneuver acceptable. But opponents will have the nagging suspicion that moral error theory stumbles at step one. Since moral error theory's semantics are essentially those of the intuitionists (80), and since intuitionists' descriptivist semantics retain the logical relations of all other descriptive discourse, then if p is false, $\sim p$ is true, regardless how that impacts any theory.

Olson is quite thorough in his discussion of the apparent predecessors of moral error theory. Hume has been considered an expressivist, a utilitarian, and a virtue ethicist, and now an error theorist. Olson's evidence indicates the way in which Hume's moral theory preceded moral error theory. But overall, especially given other equally plausible claims about Hume's moral theoretical identity, the conclusion that is supported is that Hume resists neat contemporary theoretical classification. Olson introduces the distinctive views of two Swedish theorists whose works haven't had wide coverage in the English speaking world: Hägerström and Tegen. Their views are worthy of further study.

Now we turn to the queerness argument Olson thinks successful. Its crucial premise is: 'Moral facts entail that there are facts that favour certain courses of behaviour, where the favouring relation is irreducibly normative' (123). Olson does not argue for this claim. Nor does he tell us how he arrived at it. Different ways of expressing what kind of queerness moral facts possess have been offered: moral facts are 'objectively prescriptive', are 'intrinsically action-guiding', have 'in-escapable authority', and so on (117). In his own way of getting to the core of the matter, Olson announces, 'I now believe that the best articulation is that moral facts are queer in that they are or entail facts that count in favour of or require certain courses of behaviour, where the favouring relation is irreducibly normative' (117). Does Olson introduce the moral relations hypothesis because the traditional intuitionists, such as Clarke and Price, with whose works he seems conversant, held there are such entities? Is his formulation perhaps the result of a discussion currently underway in metaethics? Or is it simply an insight he's had? We're not informed. Since I have argued for the reality of moral relations, I'm aware arguments for them can be provided. But curiously, Olson is more confident that moral realism results in moral relations than I am. He thinks, once more, moral facts *entail* that there are irreducibly normative favoring relations. I think they can be established through a series of inferences to best explanation. And we're only at the beginning of this series.

The attribution of 'queerness' to entities raises other questions. In the just mentioned central queerness argument, Olson argues that since irreducibly normative favoring relations are queer, moral facts are queer. What is missing from his argument is a statement informing us what definitive assessment is proper for entities found to be queer. When one says that entities are queer, what might be meant? Olson provides some ideas: what is mysterious, ontologically suspicious, what cannot be explained in terms of arrangements of matter, what is an ontologically fundamental addition to a scientifically based naturalistic worldview, and what is not ultimately explicable on scientific grounds (84-87). What is missing from *Moral Error Theory* is an argument for the claim that positing an entity meeting such descriptions implies, makes probable, or suggests it doesn't exist.

Olson correctly remarks the limited effectiveness of different partners-in-crime responses to queerness arguments. But there is one such response that he thinks worthy of lengthy rebuttal. Olson addresses a conundrum that ought to be of wide philosophical concern. It has been most forcefully pressed by Terence Cuneo (*The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism*, Oxford University Press, 2007), and forms a partners-in-crime challenge using epistemic reasons. If real moral reasons are deemed queer, then genuine epistemic reasons are likewise queer. The result would be that

reasons-attributions would be uniformly false, except where such reasons may be reduced to an agent's desires or to some objective standard of behavior. So an epistemic error theory would hold that, for example, if Jones reviews all the evidence for some proposition p , and all the evidence argues that p is true, it would nonetheless be the case that 'Jones *ought* to believe that p ' is false. Olson, as they say, bites the bullet. Error theory is not without resources here. It can remain the case that Jones has a reason, a *hypothetical reason*, for believing that p , on the condition Jones wants the truth about it. Why this matter is of wide significance is that it seems that most philosophers hold that there are reasons to have certain beliefs, regardless of our desires.

Moral error theory shares a property with its foil, intuitionism: it moves people to take issue with it. Olson's clarity in formulating his view is such that one is best able to understand what moral error theory is. His effectiveness in making his case for his view is such that one sees the challenge for its overturning. Since these qualities moved me to challenge his moral theory, I've not been able to relate all the points, big and small, on which his insights and analyses add value to the metaethics discussion. I know I'll be referring to and thinking about *Moral Error Theory* for some time. I'm confident many others will do likewise. I hesitate to say that they should.

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