Book Section:

Reasons for pretending and pretend reasons

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1. The Dao

In our house we do not call one another "scrote," "pig-face," "arsemonger," "slag," "wanker," or "prick." We are polite and civil and abhor such coarse and unparliamentary language. We always aim, in general, to be friendly and kind to our housemates as well as to anyone who may come visiting. We have each our private spaces, our rooms, and we can control who can enter or leave those spaces as well as our private things which others cannot consume or use without our consent.

Fighting or any sort of violence is not allowed. Domestic chores we aim to share out fairly, where there is quite a complicated story to be told about our understanding of just what "fairly" entails and how it has evolved over the years. Some of us form friendships with each other and we have particular shared understandings of what friends should expect of each other. Some of us become lovers, and we have more shared norms to govern that aspect of life. In short, we have a rich and complex body of rules and standards, shared normative understandings and normative expectations that shape our lives together. For the sake of calling it something, call it the *Dao*.

We did not make these rules and shared normative understandings up. This house has been here with people living in it long before we came along and they have always had a Dao. It has slowly taken shape over a long time to meet the needs and fit the natures of the creatures who live here. It is deeply embedded in our shared lives, woven into our literature, our poems and our songs, our rituals and manners, the very conceptual water in which we swim. It has changed a little bit down the centuries and it will certainly change some more in centuries to come. Many of us are critical of some aspects of it and would like to change it. We have regular meetings where these things are discussed.

The Dao is deeply expressive of our biological, animal nature. We are mortal creatures who last some 80 years plus or minus twenty when spared premature ill health or accident. We are sexually differentiated and reproduce sexually. In reproductive strategy we are like other mammals and unlike, say, salmon: we are Ks and not rs (where rs have huge numbers of offspring and invest almost nothing in their survival while Ks have very few offspring and invest a lot). We are social animals given to forming familial groups and larger political communities. We live in the circumstances of justice: dependent on scarce resources and altruistic within limits. The Dao is not determined by these deep but contingent facts about us but it is shaped by and expresses them and would, we may be confident, certainly have been very different had any or all of them been different. But while it expresses our animal natures, it also civilizes and domesticates them in the light of ideas of duty to and respect for each other shaped by many millennia of human cultural evolution.

The Dao is very important to us and we take it pretty seriously. Because of it, we live together in a community that is more or less peaceful, orderly and secure, where people cooperate successfully on terms that are acceptable to (almost) all of us, where we treat each other with civility and respect. (At least on a good day. I idealize a little.) Because of this, the

Dao is something we value immensely, cling to, cherish and protect. We appreciate how big a deal it is that we have achieved a stable, harmonious community. We have heard of other houses that have not achieved this so well and life there sounds just awful. So, even though we often want to criticize it, we rejoice in our Dao, embrace it and identify ourselves with it.

We love the Dao because we think it enriches and improves our lives and it would be a catastrophic loss to be deprived of it. Because the Dao encompasses so large a part of our normative lives we should not think of the reasons we love it and would hate to lose it as reasons external to and independent of it. The Dao itself inescapably supplies the reasons that we value the Dao. There is no place outside it where normative thought can happen for us. That is okay. In normative epistemology we engage in piecemeal Neurathian boat repair, scrutinizing and repairing small piece by small piece. The Dao is not some small inessential corner we can expect temporarily to decommission for inspection and reconstruction without sinking the whole ship.

I say we love and respect the Dao, but not everyone does. Some people are disaffected, unreasonable, not really on board with the project of making a flourishing community together. These people are a problem, but it is very clear that the rules of the Dao still apply to them. It applies to everybody. Is that fair and reasonable? Well, that is itself a question internal to the Dao and the Dao has things to say about when and why it is sometimes okay to insist that people conform to rules they may not accept.

2. Error?

So here we all are living lives shaped by the Dao, and one day something weird happens. Some skeptical philosophers show up and tell us,

> *Listen, this Dao thing you make so much fuss about—we've been thinking and we have decided, basically, that it is junk; it's garbage, a tissue of untruths.*

> *Golly* (we think), *really? What can you mean, how can that be right*?

> *Well* (they reply), *like we said, we've been thinking and we have come to the conclusion that the whole edifice rests on a ROPEY METAPHYSICAL PRESUPPOSITION—RMP—and we are sorry to tell you that the RMP is false.*

Not everybody of course thinks the Dao is junk. Others think it is in perfectly good order. Some of these others however *agree* that it makes sense *only* if we buy into the RMP, but one person's *tollens* is another's *ponens*, and this crowd, the *Heavy Duty Realists*, seek to rescue the Dao from oblivion by doing just that.

Then there is my gang, the *Deflationary Realists*, you might call us. We are quite a miscellaneous ragbag of expressivists, constructivists, and others, but we are united against both Skeptics and Heavy Duty Realists. The Dao, we say, makes excellent sense and we don't need any RMPs to make sense of it.

The structure of the issue here is a bit like what we find with responsibility and free will, with some people insisting that our moral practice makes sense only if we see it as propped

up with what Strawson (1974: 25) famously denigrated as "obscure and panicky metaphysics" which they proceed to embrace, others accepting the dependency claim but jumping the other way into skepticism about responsibility and free will, while others fight a war on two fronts against both of the first two groups who are united (we think), despite their disagreement, by the very same deep and fundamental mistake.

What is the RMP? Some contend that the Dao presupposes the existence of categorical imperatives, demands that apply not just to actual people but to any conceivable rational creature, without needing to speak to their contingent desires and purposes and that they are condemned for failing to obey. Others offer a narrative of a strange *sui generis* domain of non-natural facts.

Of course, no English speaking philosophers talk about "the Dao"[1]—rather, people talk about "morality." Richard Joyce, whose 2001 book *The Myth of Morality* set the agenda for contemporary error theory, argues that we should condemn morality of error on just such grounds of ropey presupposition. When he says this, he is not, he makes clear, following Bernard Williams (1985: chapter 10) in seeing "morality" quite narrowly as a "peculiar institution" cooked up by people like Kant in relatively recent times. Rather, Joyce claims:

> I do not think that this kind of desire/interest-ignoring condemnation is a particularly modern or Western phenomenon. Despite the fact that it required an eighteenth-century Prussian to label categorical imperatives, I am confident that they have been with us for a long time. Did, say, ancient Chinese people retract condemnation of their own moral monsters upon discovering their unusual desires? I doubt it. (Joyce 2001: 43)[2]

So, yes, we really are talking about the Dao! Not only is categorical morality old, it is pervasive:

> Let us suppose that … moral discourse consists largely of untrue assertions. Those arguments have primarily targeted deontological notions like obligation and prohibition. One might object that even if these arguments were faultless, all they show is that a certain proper subset of our moral discourse is flawed, but there is a rich and robust moral language that remains untouched. However, it is my contention that moral concepts are to a large degree holistically connected, such that a persuasive attack on categorical imperatives will, one way or another, count as a persuasive attack on a great deal more besides.
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> If there are no inescapable moral obligations, for instance, then there will be no inviolable claim rights (and claim rights are the central currency of ordinary rights-based moral discourse). Similarly, talk of virtues and vices generally implies the

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[1] The only exception I know of is C. S. Lewis (1943).

[2] This insistence by Joyce that his skepticism reaches to such remote cultural places is, incidentally, part of my motivation for talking about "the Dao." Nothing much should hang here on the terminological specificity of the word "morality."

existence of obligations. Virtues are often thought of as character traits that one is obligated to cultivate. Or even if not that, a virtuous agent is taken to be one who is, inter alia, sensitive to, and acts in accordance with, her moral obligations. (2001: 175)

Everything must go. Only it turns out that not really. Indeed, it turns out—and this is the rum thing here—that nothing much need change. Here there is a difference between Heavy Duty Realists and many Skeptics. Heavy Duty Realists tend to talk up the extent to which, as they see it, without the Dao and the RMPs that they think prop it up, utter catastrophe beckons and all is lost. Some contemporary error theorists, by contrast, mostly talk this down. They are, after all—at least the ones I know—remarkably nice individuals, not at all given to people-trafficking or selling contaminated medicine to children's hospitals. They espouse error theory but are not out to frighten us for, on the contrary, they think that their skepticism can be tamed and domesticated. J. L. Mackie, as we will see, having, as he supposes, refuted morality, proceeds to moralize at some length. And here is how Joyce presents his own skepticism:

> There is a vague but deep-rooted concern that moral skepticism might corrupt the youth, or, more generally, leave people believing that "everything is permissible," with potentially destructive effect. A moral error theory is… seen not merely as counter-intuitive, but as genuinely threatening. If this concern is shown to be unjustified—as the possibility of moral fictionalism suggests it may be—then perhaps the motivation for resisting a moral error theory is in need of re-examination. (2001: 231)

I am, as will become apparent, unconvinced by this.

3. Practical reason

Interestingly there is a normative category that Joyce thinks escapes this corrosive holism. There has to be if his argument for moral fictionalism is to get off the ground. That is the category of our talk of reasons. This is pretty important. If normative reason gets sucked into the holistic whirlpool we can surely forget about a domesticated skepticism.[3]

Joyce espouses a roughly Humean, subjectivist view inspired by Williams' reasons-internalism. I have reasons to do things that will advance my purposes and desires—or, rather, the purposes and desires of a version of me that has been somewhat idealized (where of course we need to understand "idealized" in some way that builds in nothing moral).

We could question this, of course. Williams talks of the case of a man who is not very nice to his wife and has no purposes or desires to which being nicer to his wife would speak, and nor would sound deliberation on his part produce any such. Nonetheless, the

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[3] Bart Streumer (2017) defends a global normative skepticism. Happily for us all, however, Streumer professes not to believe his own view. I discuss Streumer's position in *The Possibility of Moral Community*.

friend of "external reasons"—reasons that lack any such anchorage in the agent's desiderative profile—will insist that the man has a reason to be nicer to his wife. Williams writes:

> There are of course many things that a speaker may say to one who is not disposed to do something when the speaker thinks that he should be, such as that he is inconsiderate, or cruel, or selfish, or imprudent; or that things, and he, would be a lot nicer if he were so motivated. Any of these can be sensible things to say. But one who makes a great deal out of putting the criticism in the form of an external reason statement seems concerned to say that what is particularly wrong with the agent is that he is irrational. It is this theorist who particularly needs to make this charge precise: in particular, because he wants any rational agent, as such, to acknowledge the requirement to do the thing in question. (1981: 110)

T. M. Scanlon considers this passage and the criticisms that Williams is happy to let us level at this man (that he is inconsiderate, etc.):

> These criticisms do involve accusing him of a kind of deficiency, namely a failure to be moved by certain considerations that we regard as reasons. (What else is it to be inconsiderate, cruel, insensitive, and so on?) If it is a deficiency for the man to fail to see these considerations as reasons, it would seem that they must be reasons for him (If they are not, how can it be a deficiency for him to fail to recognize them?) Why not conclude, then, that the man has reason to treat his wife better? (1998: 367)

Scanlon's thought seems to be that it appears odd to say that we think it a deficiency on someone's part to fail to see the force of some considerations as reasons but that we do not think they are indeed reasons, and reasons for him. So what will count as a reason cannot readily be insulated from the rest of the normative landscape, including the moral part. The sphere of practical reasons is not a proper part of the normative domain. It is the sphere of everything we might credibly say after a "Because" in answer to a "Why?".

Williams' famous example is of an unkind husband. A pivotal and central example for Joyce is the unrepentant gangster.

> Suppose we have caught a criminal who stands before us in the dock. There is no question about his guilt—he admits it freely. What is curious about this criminal is that he is utterly unrepentant: he tells us that he desired to kill the person, and that the killing did not frustrate any of his desires (we imagine that he even wanted to be caught and punished). Such criminals with such desires may be statistically rare, but they are surely possible. Imagine that the criminal is quite convincing in relating all this to us. Are we in any way moved to retract our judgment that the criminal did something that he morally ought not to have done? Of course not. (2001: 32)

This—what Joyce calls the *inescapability* of moral judgment—does not attach, he thinks, to judgments about normative reasons. The latter, unlike the former, do depend on the

desires and purposes of the agent who is the object of the judgment. It is just this inescapability that Joyce thinks it ropey, so motivating his embrace of error theory.

So Felon—let us call him—is a cold-hearted killer. We will suppose that none of the circumstances that may be argued sometimes to make killing permissible obtain: he has done murder. Well, I do indeed think that Felon's killing is morally wrong and I think that is wrong even if Felon is unrepentant in the way Joyce describes. But in thinking Felon has done something morally wrong I do not fall into error.

What am I doing when I say that what Felon did was morally wrong? I may be doing a number of things. One is to *avow* a certain normative stance. I am signaling my acceptance of a moral code that prohibits extreme violence as a response to (we'll suppose) a trivial perceived slight. In doing this, I let you know that you should rely on me not to conduct myself that way, and, if I do, you can hold me to account for having violated a norm that I myself avow and embrace. I am also ordinarily doing something else: making a *demand*. I'm signaling a *normative expectation* toward you, my conversational partner and audience. You must not conduct yourself in such a way, and I will hold you accountable if you do. It makes abundant sense for me to do both these things, however unrepentant Felon may or may not be.

That sounds familiar: "I approve of this! Do so as well!"[4]—but not quite. In fact, this well-known Stevensonian formula is way too individualistic. For I speak (ordinarily) as a member of a normative community, a space of shared understandings and agreed rules, and as such I invoke the Dao. After all, a world of reciprocal normative expectations, of accountability, had better be a world of shared and agreed norms or it won't work. So I take my avowal not just as an expression of the passions in my soul but as an expression of the values and requirements that we all (and, a fortiori, we both) accept. You can expect this of me and I will expect it of you because it is part of this big important thing that we agree about. We approve of this! Do so as well![5]

I may say his even when it may not be obvious to you that we agree about any such thing. Someone might have stood up in the House of Commons 200 years ago and said that women should be accorded the same political rights to vote and stand for public office as enjoyed by men (or, more precisely, back then, *some* men). Likely no one else present would have recognized *that* as part of the Dao that they agreed about, but the speaker may well have supposed it was. "Listen," we may think of him as suggesting, "if you think carefully and hard about what certain core moral values and principles we all share really commit us to, you will end up agreeing with me on this." (To them, this may have seemed quite mad. To many of us, I guess, it now seems entirely credible.)

When we belong to the same moral community under the Dao, some such supposition is ordinarily in play. I have called it the *optimistic implicature*, based on the maxim of conversation that *what one is saying is not pointless*.[6] If we have so little shared normative

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[4] Stevenson 1944: chapter 2.

[5] In *The Possibility of Moral Community*, I defend this picture at length.

[6] Lenman 2013: 402. This is of course a much weaker claim that the moral rationalist's claim that morality presupposes the ideal convergence of all rational agents. For critical discussion of the latter see Lenman 1999. The optimistic implicature makes no reference to the vast

understanding, so little common ground that I am certain nothing I ever say will get any motivational purchase (and in real life this is surely almost never the case), then moral condemnation addressed to you does start to look, in many contexts, like browbeating—or, as Williams has it, "bluff" (1981: 111). Maybe not all. Telling the morally unreachable what we think of them sometimes has a point, if we wish to explain to them why we are locking them away or why we do not want to be their friends. Or of course there are cases where one's addressee is not the whole of one's audience. Debating on TV with Fred the Fascist I may well hold out little hope of changing Fred's mind; it's the audience I am really hoping to influence and persuade. And of course when the judge, in passing sentence, says to Felon, "Felon, you are a very wicked," he is addressing not only Felon himself but the whole community whose laws it is her job to uphold.

I say then that what Felon does is morally wrong. In doing this I avow my embrace of an interpretation of the Dao, my community's shared moral code, as prohibiting murder, and I encourage you, as members of my community, to do likewise. I may even encourage Felon himself to do likewise, but I may accept that I would be wasting my breath and not bother. I see no error here.

And there are many other things I can say about him. That we act rightly in punishing him, that his actions bring shame on his family, that he is not a moral exemplar, that he is not a good person to choose as a friend, a spouse, a teacher, a government official, or many of the other roles we choose people to fill. I can say that if a king habitually acted like this we might quite properly depose him—as the founder of the Zhou Dynasty is said to have deposed the depraved last king of the Shang, back in the day. (It was often just such things as these that ancient Chinese people were given to saying about moral monsters.)

Does Felon himself have a reason to repent his crime and change his ways even when, as we might suppose, Felon+, his ideally coherent counterpart recognizes no such thing? We Deflationary Realists don't all say the same thing here. Non-expressivist constructivists like Bernard Williams and Sharon Street will say no. Of an "ideally coherent Caligula" Street writes:

> it is important to remember all the things an attitude-dependent theorist can say about them and regard herself as speaking truly. For instance, we can say that we loathe the ideally coherent Caligula; that it's awful, from our point of view, that he and his normative reasons are like this; and that the rest of us who do care about morality have every normative reason to lock him up, defend ourselves against him, and to try to change him if we can. (2009: 293)

She nevertheless maintains that on her view the ideally coherent Caligula has no normative reason to change his ways. This acknowledgement she argues is important for

space of possible rational beings. It is a matter of claiming what Gibbard call contextual authority (1990: 174ff.) grounded in contingent commonalities of shared moral understanding that, it is hoped, furnish us as fellow members of a community of judgment with enough common ground fruitfully to continue talking.

her metaphysical take on what the morality is. But it is hardly a reason to think morality is garbage.

The expressivist wing of Deflationary Realism doesn't concede even this. Thus Allan Gibbard in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (1990) proposes that to call something—say, the needless distress caused to Felon's victim and their family—"a reason" to do or refrain from something is to express acceptance of a system of norms that treat it as weighing in favor of so doing or refraining. Like Blackburn, Gibbard thinks that there is space here for mind-independence: for the embrace of norms that tell me, as a substantive normative matter, that I should abstain from pointless and gratuitous violence *even in world where I see nothing wrong with it*.[7] Expressivists make sense of attitude-independent, external reason talk with no ropey presupposition required.

There are further questions about Felon. Is he morally responsible for his wrongdoing? Can we blame him for it? Does he deserve his punishment or should we think of ourselves as just caging him as we might a dangerous animal, fearful of the danger he poses but without resentment" But these are questions—important and interesting questions—that we ask *within* morality. Nothing conceptually non-negotiable for morality is plausibly at stake here.

4. What next? Mackie

I was, I now confess, being unfair when I said the error theorists say that morality is garbage. To say something is garbage is ordinarily to recommend that we bin it as it is of no value. But in fact many error theorists do not think that morality is of no value and that we should bin it accordingly. Some, it is true, *do* recommend the bin. For abolitionists like Ian Hinckfuss, Richard Garner, and Joel Marks the bin is where it belongs. They argue that morality is a social evil that does terrible harm so we should get rid of it.[8] Others disagree. Thus, for Joyce, morality is "precious and consequential" (2001: x). Joyce and others think that there are important benefits to keeping morality in play, despite its being a massive tissue of falsehoods. Some, reformers, think we should tinker with it to free it from error.[9] Others think we should contrive to make-believe that it is true. There are two versions of this latter claim. The first, usually called "fictionalism," has it that we should merely make-believe this and not actually believe it for real.[10] Then there is the stronger version, conservationism, which invites us to a more thoroughgoing pretence where we will seek to actively embrace a state of illusion and contrive to believe the falsehoods.[11] I am using "pretence" here as a term of art to cover the various things which fictionalists and conservationists propose we do that are not abolition—the various ways they favor our

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[7] Blackburn 1984: 217-220. Cf. Gibbard 1990: 160-166.

[8] Hinckfuss 1987; Garner 1994; Marks 2013. I discuss abolitionism in Lenman 2013 and *The Possibility of Moral Community*.

[9] For an interesting proposal along these lines see Lutz 2014.

[10] Defended by Joyce 2001. Joyce nowadays prefers to speak of "nondoxastic acceptance" rather than make-belief. See his contribution to this volume.

[11] Defended by Olson 2014 and Isserow 2017.

retaining moral discourse in spite of its falsehood, whether that retention is understood as continued full-blooded belief or make-believe or nondoxastic acceptance or whatever. And I shall use "fictionalism" for views that favor such retentions in the face of suppose falsehood, including conservationists.

It's natural for an error theorist to be interested in the "What next?" question, the question what we should do next when we decide to believe the error theory. But I think this question is also of interest in deciding whether to believe the error theory in the first place, because I think reflection on it helps to make it clear why we should not.

It all starts with Mackie who, as is now notorious, wrote a book in two parts, the first of which is devoted to telling us that morality is bunk and the second of which is devoted to, um, moralizing. He explains in chapter 1, section eleven:

> The argument of the preceding sections is meant to apply quite generally to moral thought, but the terms in which it has been stated are largely those of the Kantian and post-Kantian tradition of English moral philosophy. To those who are more familiar with another tradition, which runs through Aristotle and Aquinas, it may well seem wide of the mark. For them, the fundamental notion is that of the good for man, or the general end or goal of human life, or perhaps of a set of basic goods or primary human purposes. Moral reasoning consists partly in achieving a more adequate understanding of this basic goal (or set of goals), partly in working out the best way of pursuing and realizing it. (1977: 46)

Mackie distinguishes between a descriptive and a prescriptive reading of this approach and goes on:

> I have no quarrel with this notion interpreted in the first way… Nor indeed have I any quarrel with the second, prescriptive interpretation, provided that it is recognized as subjectively prescriptive, that the speaker is putting forward his own demands or proposals, or those of some movement that he represents, though no doubt linking these demands or proposals with what he takes to be already in the first, descriptive, sense, fundamental human goals. In fact, I shall myself make use of the notion of the good for man, interpreted in both these ways, when I try in chapter 8 to sketch a positive moral system. (1977: 47)

In fact, the moralizing part of the book opens with chapter 5, section 1 of which is called "Consequences of moral scepticism." Morality, Mackie tells us here,

> is not to be discovered but to be made: we have to decide what moral views to adopt, what moral stands to take. (1977: 106)

But this is all rather queer. Having spent the first half of his book cheerfully refuting this morality thingummy that he thinks is full of errors, he proposes to rebuild the house the just demolished. The question that presses itself on us is "Then why demolish it on the first place?" And, indeed, very soon after Mackie's book, along comes Blackburn with the

lovely challenge he raises in his classic essay "Errors and the phenomenology of value" (in Blackburn 1993). Blackburn, like me, finds the whole proceeding odd for reasons that I'll now recapitulate.

We all believe in this morality thing and everyone is happy. But then we decide, *No that morality thing was all wrong*. So we bin it. But now we think: *Hang on, what shall I do now? I want to go on living in society with other human beings and I want there to be some rules that say people are not allowed to kill me or beat me up or steal my lunch and we should keep our promises and not tell lies and so on.* And then, hey, it turns out that the other people are thinking this too. So we have a meeting and we discuss what rules to have and agree on some rules to begin with and we keep on meeting on the first Thursday of every month to try to refine and sometimes perhaps revise what we agreed so far. And of course what is more natural than that our language should come to have certain predicates in it to denote properties like that of *being required by the rules*, or even that of *what the rules would require were they subject to what we might all agree was a process of improvement*? And we make our rules and they bed in and become accepted, and they come to be central to our lives and the ways in which we came to understand and value what we are. Perhaps after some hundreds of years these new rules are deeply embedded in our shared lives, woven into our literature, our poems and our songs, our rituals and manners, the very conceptual water in which we swim. Almost as if…

But no! Please let us call this not "moralizing" but rather "schmoralizing," because we are now being ever so careful not to build in any of those pesky Ropey Metaphysical Presuppositions. So the result will look a bit different. Only, well, look, but it doesn't. When we sit down and try to imagine what schmoralizing might look like it's hard to resist the thought that it will end up looking *awfully* like moralizing. And indeed when we observe Mackie himself schmoralizing (as he must take it to be), it *does* look awfully like moralizing, at least as practiced by very clever and bookish academics of the late-twentieth century. We repudiate the Dao and make morality anew, but what we end up doing is remaking what we had before.[12] That's what I believe thinking about the "What next?" question teaches us: that the natural and right place to go next after coming to believe the error theory is backwards—back to the state you were in when you didn't believe it. What would it be like, the thing we might imagine ourselves constructing to replace a discredited morality free of the ropey errors that effected the discrediting? If, as is all too credible, we think it would look exactly like morality, the original diagnosis of error begins to look decidedly premature.

Jonas Olson addresses this concern and comes to Mackie's defense.[13]

> To some readers it may seem a puzzling fact that Mackie engaged seriously in these kinds of first-order normative debate. If moral error theory is true, then any conclusions reached in normative and applied ethics are false. It may seem obvious,

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[12] Cf. Walzer 1993: 20.

[13] Olson's own case for error theory in his 2014 book is based on a different supposed RMP, what he calls *irreducibly normative favoring re*lations. I don't discuss that here. A telling critical discussion with which I am in much agreement is Toppinen 2016.

then, that moral error theory discredits these disciplines completely. But there is no deep puzzle here. We have seen that philosophers from Protagoras through Hobbes and Hume to Warnock have taught us that human beings need morality to coexist peacefully, to prevent conflicts, to regulate and coordinate behaviour, and to counteract limited sympathies. Since most social life presupposes something like a system of morality and since something like a moral system will or is likely to occur, intentionally or not, wherever there is social interaction, we need, according to Mackie, "to find some set of principles which [are] themselves fairly acceptable to us and with which, along with their practical consequences and applications, our "intuitive" (but really subjective) detailed moral judgements are in "reflective equilibrium." To this end, we need to engage in normative theorizing. Typical adequacy constraints on normative theories are intuitive plausibility and acceptability, comprehensiveness, systematicity, simplicity, and applicability. Moral error theorists can without tongues-in-cheeks engage in the pursuit of theories that meet these criteria. The one criterion that cannot be met is of course that of truth. (Olson 2014: 197)

This defense of Mackie is pretty odd. We need moral rules to live by, Olson seems to be saying, so it makes sense to look for and agree on rules that we can live by well. This is something we can do without falling into any errors. This business of looking for rules can be done well or badly. It has adequacy criteria, as Olson says, that candidate codes of rules will meet to a greater or lesser degree. So theorizing about what these rules should be is subject to a regulative ideal constituted by those criteria. And if we can have rules and a regulative idea for choosing rules without falling into any errors, then we can certainly introduce a *property*: we can say some rules, or systems of rules, have the property of being robust under critical theoretical scrutiny in the light of that regulative ideal. And if there is such a property for rules to have, we can also have (at this point, semantic ascent comes pretty cheap) *truths* about what does and does not have that property and to what degree. Mackie, like other error theorists, thinks morality is suspect because it has the Ropey Metaphysical Presupposition of "objective prescriptivity" that is supposed to underwrite the authority of morality. He most certainly does not think that it is *truth*.

There are Heavy Duty Realists who argue that without the RMP, whatever they take it to be, we really are in deep trouble and nothing makes sense. Notably, David Enoch argues that if Heavy Duty Realism were false, deliberation would not be possible at all—never mind co-deliberation. Intelligent practical thought would simply cease to be possible. We could only ever pick, quite arbitrarily, and never choose. Enoch makes an *indispensability argument* to this effect.[14] In this context, Mackie's project of quietly schmoralizing morality back into business so it can shape our lives in the ways we think so important acquires a great significance. If it succeeds it amounts to a *dispensability argument*. Sure we can make sense of this stuff without Ropey Presuppositions—look, we just did! But then it becomes puzzling why we should think there *ever was* a RMP and why, having successfully constructed an understanding of morality that doesn't make the presupposition, anyone would want to insist

[14] Enoch 2011. I discuss Enoch's argument in my 2014.

that we continue to make-believe that any such presupposition is true, never mind actually believe it, as Olson, a conservationist, advocates.

But where would the *authority* of morality come from if we stopped propping up our moral beliefs with RMPs, even supposing we ever did? Why would we think morality thus unpropped-up *important*? Well, that is not so hard to answer. In rejecting abolitionism, Olson approvingly quotes Nolan, Restall, and West:

> [M]oral discourse is extraordinary useful. Morality plays an important social role in coordinating attitudes and regulating interpersonal relations.[15]

Apart from the abolitionists—Hinckfuss, Garner, Marks, et al.—everyone in this literature agrees. Morality is really important. It is "precious and consequential." We would be in deep, deep trouble without it. (We say this in different ways. The fictionalist tries to confine the point to something about how very *useful* morality is. I am happy to say more: it would be a *moral* disaster if morality were to be lost.) In any event, it is a point that gives us authority in abundance. And now that we have reconstructed the ethical in the way Mackie takes himself to be doing, and it all seems to be going so well, it gets less and less plausible that the supposed RMP is anything like as central—as "conceptually non-negotiable"—as we were first told. It starts to look like at best, a fairly inessential add on, something that can be sloughed off at little cost.

A few pages after the long passage quoted above, Olson's book ends with this peroration:

> To conclude, moral error theory does not discredit normative ethics. The human predicament is such that we need to "find principles of equity and ways of making and keeping agreements without which we cannot hold together." Our means of achieving this is to engage in first-order normative theorizing. This is not to discredit normative ethics, but to award it the highest importance. (Olson 2014: 197)

If we take this seriously, then nothing has been said to discredit normative ethics. But then moral error theory itself is beginning to look decidedly queer. If it is really really important--not important only given a Ropey Metaphysical Presupposition, certainly not let's-pretend-important, but for real important—that we accept and respect some body of moral rules to regulate our lives together and so we do just that for just that reason, it's pretty hard to see where the mistake is supposed to be or why we should think we have fallen into error for having done so.

5. What next?: Joyce

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[15] 2005, 307. Quoted Olson 2014, 180.

The "What next?" question is brought very explicitly into focus by Joyce: "If there's nothing that we ought to do then what ought we to do?" (2001: 175). He quickly recognizes that this had better not be seen as itself a moral question.

> It might be thought that the question "If a moral error theory is the case, what should we do?" is self-undermining. And so it would be, if it were asking what we *morally* ought to do, but that is not what is being asked. It is just a straightforward, common-or-garden, *practical* "ought." In other words, the answer that the question invites will be a hypothetical imperative, and the arguments for a moral error theory have not threatened hypothetical imperatives. I do not want this issue to depend on any particular view of how we make such practical decisions. Let us just say that when morality is removed from the picture, what is practically called for is a matter of a cost-benefit analysis, where the costs and benefits can be understood liberally as preference satisfactions. By asking what *we* ought to do I am asking how a *group* of persons, who share a variety of broad interests, projects, ends—and who have come to the realization that morality is a bankrupt theory—might best carry on. (2001: 177; see also Joyce 2019)

Joyce then wants to think of the selection between the various items on the error theorist's supposed menu—abolitionism, fictionalism, conservationism—as guided by this supposedly morally neutral process of "cost-benefit analysis." We find the same thought in Nolan, Restall, and West:

> The fictionalist's answer, in brief, is that realist moral discourse should be retained, even though it is strictly speaking false, because it is useful. (The "should" here is pragmatic, not moral). (2005: 310)

This idea resurfaces in a different context later. We have to do more than decide which item on the "What next?" menu to choose. If we decide to choose one of the two options, fictionalism and conservationism, that invite us to go in for pretending, however thoroughgoing, we then have to make a *further* decision. We have to decide *which* set of falsehoods, of all the many moral codes we can dream up, we are going to pretend to believe. Again we are told to resort to nonmoral, purely pragmatic selection: "the question of which fiction to be used is best settled by determining which fiction would be most useful to use" (Nolan et al. 2005: 327).

There is a problem with all this and it is a very big problem indeed. It's a problem we effectively already registered in noting Scanlon's response to Williams. It is just a fantasy that there is this thing we can do here—"cost benefit analysis"—that is *morally neutral*. Joyce in *The Myth of Morality* takes this as something that we are imagining a group of people doing.[16] And these people are practicing Humean instrumental reasoning—what

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[16] 2001: 177. The emphasis on the "What next?" question as a question for a group is continued in Joyce 2005 and 2019. I think it a well-judged emphasis. We could ask the question from an individual standpoint but I don't think that will help much. Very briefly, we

Joyce thinks is left standing when we have divested ourselves of believing in morality, safely insulated from the corrosive holism whereby error infects everything else. But to extend Humean instrumentalism in this way from person to group we need to come up with some kind of social welfare function, something that takes us from the preference profiles of individual people to a preference profile for the group as a whole. And how to do this is a massively and inescapably *moral* question. Whose welfare counts and how much? Everyone's? Equally? Really? Shall we give less weight to the preferences of poor people? Surely that would be really unfair. Shall we count women equally to men? Well yes, of course, unless we are sexist bigots. But using language like "unfair" and "sexist bigot" we are already deep inside the Dao; we have to already be under sail in the sea of moral language to speak this way. And who even is "everyone"? The group making the decision? But who are they? The competent adult members of the community that will have to live with it? All and only they count? What about their children who are not yet competent? Their children who are unborn? Adults who are not competent? What about people in other communities? What about animals? When we figure out who counts, what then? Are we to just aggregate and maximize? That's called *utilitarianism*. It's a *moral theory*. It's not morally neutral and is as controversial as hell.[17] As soon as we try to put this into action we are up to our necks in moral controversy. The "What next?" question is a moral question. Inescapably. That doesn't yet mean that error theory is false. It does mean you can forget about domesticating it. Without the Dao, we have, to echo Edmund Burke, no compass to govern us ([1790] 2004: 172-3) and we are quite lost.[18]

According to a certain kind of moral fictionalist, then, we can appeal to a cost-benefit analysis criterion for deciding whether we should make-believe any fiction or just jettison morality completely, which fiction we should choose to make-believe, and how thoroughly we should make-believe it. This is our criterion, we may say, of *pretenceworthiness*, and we are after the most pretenceworthy fiction to make believe. There is a fatal dilemma here. We had better not be fictionalists or any kind of error theorists about *pretenceworthiness* itself. *It* has to be kosher. Some statements about what

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might hope to get satisfactory answers to it if we again take it to be an already inescapably moral question. But if we insist on the fantasy that there is available to us some pure, pragmatic understanding of practical reason purged of all moral direction that we can bring to bear here, it is a safe bet we are going to bump into some nasty free-rider problems.

[17] According to me it is also false, but that is another argument for another day.

[18] This pragmatic way of understanding the "What next?" question effectively seeks to accord a foundational role to personal preferences with morally substantive value judgments to be determined by and responsible to the former. Susan Hurley's book *Natural Reasons* is a sustained and powerful attack on just this way of understanding the normative world, which she characterizes as "the subjectivist view that all substantive evaluative questions may be reduced to formal problems about the relations among preferences, that solutions to the latter, as a conceptual matter, determine answers to the former" (1989: 106), making a strong case for its philosophical incoherence. Even before we start trying to figure out what our metric of social welfare is to be, preferences, she argues, are value-laden from the outset.

is pretenceworthy had better be true. Really true. Not pretend true. If not, then everything really is garbage all the way down; the Dao, all of it, is for the shredder, and domesticated skepticism is for the birds.

Pretenceworthiness, whatever it is, had better not be queer. Suppose we understand it in utilitarian terms: we should pick the moral code F to be our fiction our make-believing of whose truth will generate most average (let us say) utility for members of the moral community doing the choosing. But hang on, this story is starting to look *really* familiar. It looks awfully like a familiar normative ethical position called *rule utilitarianism*.

> RU: We should adopt and follow the moral code our adopting and following of which will most effectively maximize average utility.

The "should" here is just the should of pretenceworthiness and, as we just noted, there had better be nothing queer or metaphysically ropey. So what started out meaning to be a bold new metaethical view just ends up being a very roundabout way of arriving at the idea that very familiar normative ethical theory is, simply, true.

Well, maybe not quite. The thought may instead be:

> FRU: We should adopt and follow the moral code our adopting and following of which will most effectively maximize average utility. We should *also* pretend we believe the code in question derives its authority from Ropey Metaphysical Presuppositions which we will pretend to believe.

But it would be very queer to claim that FRU is a better plan than RU. Again we might think to prop up the authority of the rules. But that won't work, as we saw. If we think that maximizing average utility is *important* (*really* important), then we have authority aplenty already. If it is not, what are we even doing? If pretenceworthiness is a real thing with real normative clout, all we need is RU, in which case we don't need to pretend anything. We can be an open-eyed moral community whether or not RU is the best code for us to live by. So if our reasons to pretend are themselves more pretend reasons to pretend, we have no reasons to pretend and the fictionalist project fails. But if our reasons to pretend are real reasons there is no need to pretend and the error theory itself is convicted of error.[19]

We cherish and respect the Dao, recognising as we do that it is precious and consequential. To do this we don't need to pretend anything. Does the fictionalist think it in some way important not only that we cherish and respect the Dao but that we think our doing this requires validation for some Ropey Presupposition? That seems a queer thing

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[19] This strategy is followed very explicitly by Jaquet 2021. Jaquet offers a contractualist rationale for adopting a utilitarian criterion for selecting the moral fiction we have most reason to make-believe. But this is baffling, If this rationale works, we have good reasons, reasons for real, to adopt and follow the prescriptions of such a moral code. And if we have such reasons, we don't need to make believe anything.

for anyone to think. Ropey Presuppositions of the kind I here question are neither precious nor consequential. Whoever would want to pretend to believe them?[20]

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