

# The Philosophical Quarterly

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*A World without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory.* EDITED BY RICHARD JOYCE AND SIMON KIRCHIN. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010. Pp. xxiv + 238. Price £90.00.)

This volume comprises thirteen essays and expands upon a special issue of *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* which Joyce and Kirchin edited in 2007 to commemorate the 30th anniversary of John Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977). The six essays from that special issue are reprinted, along with seven newly commissioned essays and a volume introduction. (The introduction does not appear in the table of contents, but is very well written and provides appropriate context for the volume; it is highly recommended.)

The volume editors contend that moral scepticism, of which Mackie's view is a specific strain, has historically 'been wheeled on to the stage for the sole purpose of the audience witnessing its crushing defeat' (p. ix), and they suggest a 'dearth of real-life moral sceptics' as one of the principal reasons why moral scepticism has failed to achieve a respectable intellectual currency. This volume is intended to provide a

range of essays which provide an (admittedly loose) engagement with Mackie's moral error theory, and which bring a serious discussion of this moral scepticism to the fore. While this dereliction of moral scepticism in general or Mackie's moral error theory in particular is somewhat exaggerated, the volume nevertheless makes an important contribution to the literature.

In his *Ethics*, Mackie accused moral discourse of aiming to deploy true propositions while at the same time being systematically unable to do so. In Mackie's own words (p. 35), moral judgements 'are all false'. In support of this conclusion, he advanced two arguments, the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness. The argument from relativity suggests that the best explanation for empirically observed and very disparate moral beliefs is that no objective moral reality exists on which to ground these beliefs; rather, moral belief is owed to the contingent experiences of particular communities (p. 36). Critics of Mackie in this regard could either deny the extent of moral disagreement, e.g., by pointing to agreement on underlying moral principles, or else could deny that moral error theory offers the best explanation thereof.

Mackie's second argument, the argument from queerness, has two components, the metaphysical and the epistemological. The metaphysical component alleges that whatever properties would make moral beliefs true are unlike any other properties that are reasonably parts of our ontology. The epistemological component further alleges that whatever epistemic faculty would give us access to these metaphysically queer moral properties is similarly unlike any other epistemic faculty that philosophers would reasonably countenance.

The essays in Joyce and Kirchin's volume engage with Mackie's moral error theory in myriad ways; the balance of the volume is indeed one of its principal virtues. Three are primarily concerned with what Mackie's theory actually amounts to; these are offered by Joyce, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Jamie Dreier. (Dreier provocatively argues that Mackie was not an error theorist at all!) These essays are, to my mind, oddly sandwiched between four essays whose authors defend Mackie – John Burgess, Charles Pigden, David Phillips and Don Loeb – so I found it useful to rearrange the reading order. The Burgess essay is a particular find, since according to the editors' introduction it was written around the same time as Mackie's *Ethics*, yet was 'scoped', and remained unpublished until the 2007 special issue.

To balance out the four supporting essays, there are also four critical essays, offered by Michael Smith, David Copp, Simon Kirchin and Caroline West. The editors propose a neat distinction between 'concessive' and 'head-on' criticisms of Mackie, the idea being that the former allows that Mackie gets something right, but that his conclusion nevertheless does not follow. The latter, on the other hand, denies Mackie the approaches that pave the way for his sceptical conclusions. On this distinction, Smith and Copp are head-on critics and Kirchin and West are concessive. In reading, I found it more useful to reverse the order in which these couplets are presented in the book, since to some extent Kirchin and West are willing to grant what Smith and Copp ultimately deny.

The final two essays are about what stance we should take towards moral discourse if Mackie's scepticism is warranted. The most obvious answer would be to

eliminate moral discourse altogether in so far as we recognize it to be systematically incapable of making good on its objectivist trappings. More recently, though, fictionalism has emerged as an alternative to eliminativism: the moral fictionalist stance allows ‘a commitment to continue to make moral *utterances* and have moral *thoughts*, while withholding assertoric force from the utterances and withholding doxastic assent from [associated] thoughts’ (p. xxiii). Whether we should be eliminativists or fictionalists depends on what we stand to gain or lose by eliminating or (fictively) retaining the associated discourse. As Joyce and Kirchin point out (p. xxiii), Mackie acknowledged that moral discourse might be a ‘useful fiction’ on the last page of his book (p. 239), but otherwise did not seem to appreciate these distinct possibilities. In the final two essays, Graham Oddie and Dan Demetriou (in a joint essay) criticize fictionalism, and Richard Garner argues for eliminativism.

Overall, this is a fine set of essays, and Joyce and Kirchin do us a service by bringing them together. As any book review should find at least something critical to say, I offer two comments. First, six of the thirteen essays are already widely available, at least at any university with the appropriate journal subscription. This volume then adds the introduction plus seven essays, not great value for the oft lamented prices of Springer hardbacks. Secondly, none of these essays is empirical, or, more specifically, substantially engages the evolutionary/biological arguments in favour of error theory. These arguments, starting, e.g., with Michael Ruse, are an important legacy of Mackie’s work, and one of the volume editors (Joyce) has made outstanding contributions in this regard. There is certainly nothing wrong with the essays which the editors have chosen to feature, but there is another line of thought, emanating directly from Mackie, which is not represented.

Those comments notwithstanding, this really is a strong collection of essays, and one that engages an important theory in a fair and balanced way. The volume should catalyse new discussion of Mackie’s moral error theory, as well as associated discussions about moral scepticism more generally.

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