Book Reviews

Jonas Olson


Since the publication of Richard Joyce’s The Myth of Morality in 2001, there has been an explosion of interest in moral error theory. Judging by the bibliography of Olson’s book, more scholarly attention may have been paid to this view in the new century than in the whole previous history of philosophy. True, the “History” section of Olson’s book is deliberately selective. For example, there is no discussion here of the error theoretical current associated with sociobiology, as found in the work of R. D. Alexander, Michael Ruse, and others. Even so, Olson’s book is probably accurate in giving the impression that apart from some comparatively obscure appearances in the work of figures such as R. Robertson and A. Hagerstrom, moral error theory played quite a marginal role in Twentieth Century ethics, even after its infamous restatement by J. L. Mackie in 1977. (Mackie had first proposed the view in 1946.) Olson’s Moral Error Theory offers a historically informed and theoretically subtle discussion of moral error theory in response to the much greater attention this view has received in the last decade.

Olson’s book has three parts. The first part consists in a selective historical overview of previous discussions of moral error theory. Apart from Hume, the focus is primarily on the Twentieth Century. The second part of the book consists in a detailed evaluation of different forms of so-called “queerness” arguments against moral realism. Olson argues that the real “queerness” of moral facts and properties resides in their irreducible normativity. The third part of the book consists in a defence of moral error theory against a selection of recent objections. Among the most salient targets here are contemporary realists such as Terence Cuneo, David Enoch, and Russ Shafer-Landau.

J. L. Mackie called his version of moral error theory “moral skepticism.” At issue for Mackie is not whether we can know what morality requires, assuming there is something it does require. The issue is whether there is anything that morality, strictly speaking, does require—to which Mackie’s answer is: “No.”
Moral error theory, thus understood, is a metaphysical view (with semantic and psychological presuppositions), and only secondarily an epistemological view (although some arguments for moral error theory do have epistemological premises). Much recent work on moral error theory, including Olson’s own, follows Mackie in this respect. As Olson points out, this represents a significant departure from some of Mackie’s predecessors, for whom the main focus was on questions in moral psychology (e.g., whether what seems to us as genuine belief states are really emotional or affective states). What Olson could also have mentioned, but does not, is the centrality to some of these earlier discussions of a set of epistemological questions about the origins of moral beliefs and knowledge. For example, such epistemological questions can be found at the centre of philosophical responses to early Darwinism and the secularist challenges to religious moral epistemology that evolutionary thinking is often thought to entail.

The real hero of Olson’s book is David Hume, who in Chapter 2 is co-opted as an early moral error theorist. This act of co-optation is both textually interesting and delightfully tendentious. For Olson, the Humean question is whether our error theory should be “standard” or “moderate”; the former implying the literal falsehood of moral claims, the latter implying the falsehood of our beliefs about their nature and content. (Some readers will immediately object that “moderate” error theory is no error theory at all, but we can let that pass.) According to Olson, what we should take from Hume is twofold. First, there are some apparent properties of things that seem to reside in the world as it exists independently of our minds, but which do not; either because (1) they exist “in” our minds (subjectivism), (2) their existence “depends” on our minds (dispositionalism), or (3) they don’t exist at all (error theory). Second, the best fit for moral properties is option (3). The idea of an irreducible normative property is metaphysically mysterious. Moreover, science provides us with a complete naturalistic explanation of how human minds find it irresistible to “project” their normative commitments onto the world, even if no such properties really exist.

The real villain of Olson’s book is “robust” non-normative realism, as recently defended by Russ Schafer-Landau and David Enoch, among others. Option (2) above, on the other hand, receives less focused attention here. According to the latter kind of view, although it may seem to us that we can speak truly of mind-independent moral properties, the only thing we strictly speaking can speak truly of are normative properties that are mind-dependent. The obvious analogy of moral properties on this view is colour, understood as a secondary quality. Such views had wide currency in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, partly in response to Mackie’s arguments (for example, in the work of John McDowell...