The “Rightness” Error:
An Evaluation of Normative Ethics in the Absence of Moral Realism

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J.L. Mackie’s Error Theory postulates that all normative claims are false. It does this based upon his denial of moral realism. Without objective moral facts “out there”, Error theory asserts that any purportedly moral claims are false because such statements make the assertion that some subject (a moral claim) belongs in the predicate of either “Rightness” or “Wrongness”, neither of which exist. As a result the statement “murder is wrong” is false, since the predicate “wrong” has no extension, and therefore the subject “murder” could not possibly be in it. In arguing for Error Theory, Mackie spends a great deal of time attempting to refute moral realism; however, this paper’s primary concern is with the relationship between moral realism and normative ethics, so to facilitate this process I will hereafter labour under the assumption that there is no moral realism. I will follow this line of argumentation through to its conclusion, in order to assess what impact this would have on the possibility of making justified normative claims. For the sake of clarity I will use throughout this paper the definition of moral realism put forward by David Brink in his book *Moral Realism and Moral Inquiry*, that is that “Moral realism is roughly the view that there are moral facts and true moral claims whose existence and nature are independent of our beliefs about what is right and wrong”. Normative claims will also be defined as they are by Brink, as claims about things which are morally important (e.g., what is right and wrong). Throughout this paper the primary focus will be on finding an answer to the question “can justified normative claims be made without moral realism?” To this end I will examine several contemporary papers addressing this question, as well as assess the stronger candidate metaethical positions for how they contribute to an answer.

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1 Mackie, J.L. “From Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong.”
3 Ibid., p. 1.
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Furthermore I will postulate the hypothesis that justified normative claims can be made without moral realism, in hopes of either finding support for this hypothesis, or reason to reject it.

First it is important to note the implications of abandoning moral realism. This implies that we need to do away with all theoretical foundations for the inherence of objective mind-independent moral facts. As a result, the notion of a metaphysical ground from morality will be cast aside; as will, to some smaller extent, the rational grounds for a deontology such as Kant’s. These can both be done without affecting the world as we experience it. First let it be that there are no metaphysical postulates known as morals, second, allow that human rationality cannot provide an objective ground for moral realism, since hypothetically this is too queer and would require psychological corroboration which is not presently available. So the world without moral realism look very much the same as it does now and the phenomenology of making moral judgements stays exactly as it would in a world where there were real moral facts. This brings us to our first consideration, that is that presumably people would continue to make moral judgements.

This superficially would lead us to a premature conclusion, which is that without moral realism it is plausible that people would continue to make claims about what is morally important, i.e. right and wrong, and therefore they can in fact make normative claims. This, however, hardly answers the larger question with which this paper is concerned, that is “can people make justified normative claims in the absence of moral realism?” The answer to this bigger question is ultimately more involved, as questions of justification often are. As a guideline to answering this I will outline several fundamental prerequisites I feel must accompany an affirmative assessment of a metaethical position. It is critical that the normative claims being made are justified in such a way that they are non-arbitrary, and provide a ground for establishing the claims as addressing the subject matter of morality. In other words the metaethical position taken must allow for claims to be more than opinions or feelings, they must posses a character which identifies them as moral; in this sense they cannot
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contradict some very basic moral intuitions such as “killing is wrong”. Furthermore whatever candidate position is adopted, it must be consistent within itself, and just as importantly it must offer a satisfactory explanation for why people make what appear to be normative claims without moral realism to ground them.

Within the field of metaethics, there is a dichotomy between cognitivist and non-cognitivist approaches, the former being the position that moral claims have truth values, and the latter that they do not. Because they deny that there can be any truth in moral statements, non-cognitivists are traditionally opposed to moral realism, and therefore are not affected by the assumption that there is no such thing. The non-cognitivists, therefore, are committed to the position that normative propositions cannot be made in a way that would satisfy the perquisites outlined earlier. A brief sketch of the two prominent non-cognitivist positions will outline the challenges which must be faced by the candidate metaethical position which aspires to give a positive answer to our question about normative claims. These negative accounts will set the bar for the quality of answer which must be expected if an opposing thesis is to provide a positive account of normative ethics.

The two non-cognitivist accounts this paper will discuss will be Emotivism and Prescriptivism. Emotivists take the position that when someone makes an assertion which aspires to normative content, they are actually expressing their own emotive states and opinions. The purpose, then, of making such claims for the Emotivist is to sway the subjective states of others. Prescriptivism, on the other hand is not meant to be factual in content, but rather as Brink explains it, “express universal prescriptions or recommendations.” These both provide a viable explanation for what is actually happening when people make normative claims; in this way they serve as opposition to the remaining normative positions, by way of providing and alternative hypothesis for the reason behind them. It is imperative, therefore, that an acceptable

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cognitivist thesis must succeed in providing an account of normative claims which is equally as plausible as its non-cognitivist counterparts.

It should be stated as well that cognitivist moral philosophy does not unanimously support the thesis that justified moral claims can be made. As Geoffrey Sayre-McCord points out in his paper *The Many Moral Realisms*, cognitivist theories can be divided between error and success theories. The most prominent cognitivist error theory is, for obvious reasons, Error Theory, as was discussed in the introduction of this essay. This is a position that holds that moral claims do in fact have truth values; however, they are all false. Accordingly, this position will not be helpful in providing a positive answer to our question about normative justifiability.

If we are to find a positive answer regarding the possibility of making normative claims, it will surely be within the success theory positions within the cognitivist camp. Once again this paper will analyse only the most prominent of these positions, in this case I will look at Subjectivism, Intersubjectivism, and Objectivism, respectively.

Subjectivism, insofar as it is a cognitivist perspective, asserts that moral claims have truth values, however these are not dependent on external metaphysical facts, but on the subjective states of individuals. Of the specific version of moral subjectivism this paper will discuss, Sayre-McCord says that for it, “…judgements of value make sense only relative to the desires, preferences, and goals of the judger, so that the claim that ‘x is good’ should be treated as elliptical for ‘x is good-for-me’6. In this case moral subjectivism would be relative, however this is not always the case; several variations of subjectivism provide an objective account of value. One variation makes the claim that any source of subjective value is objectively good; this however, does not sufficiently account for moral debate, since all goods are viewed as objectively good. The third and most sophisticated version of subjectivism that

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will be considered here encompasses the Ideal Observer theories. These, as their name suggests, involves a speculative ‘Ideal Observer’ who is privy to all relevant information concerning any given decision or value judgement. It is this Ideal Observer’s subjective states which establish the objective good. In this way the objective good is informed by what in fact ‘ought’ to be the objective good based on the state of the world. Despite providing an objective ground for value, this thesis, which I believe to be the strongest offered by subjectivism, fails to sufficiently justify normative claims. What the Ideal Agent provides are useful suggestions for action based on the given circumstances, despite this it (he/she [if it is gendered]) does not actually articulate moral value. The only way in which the Ideal Observer could give grounds for moral claims, is if there were moral facts which it was informed of, however, this violates the original hypothesis of this paper. Without inserting its own value, the Ideal Observer could not make the claim that “killing is wrong” without the existence of wrongness; as a result, this perspective just defers the justifiability of our normative claims to an unjustified Ideal Observer.

Intersubjectivism, like subjectivism, relies on the subjective states of people; however, instead of it addressing one person’s subjective state at a time, it incorporates an entire society’s collective values together. Simple intersubjectivism or conventionalism, argues that morals are just whatever values are established by any society. This, unlike subjectivism, provides an account of what could be going on within moral discourse, which is that people are deliberating over what morals should be incorporated into the society’s value structure. Despite this advantage over subjectivism, conventionalism still is not acceptable, since if it claims that morality is determined by a social group, meaning that morality is socially relative. If it is not making this claim, but is saying that when people engage in moral discourse they are just discussing conventions, then conventionalism would be non-cognitivist, since what appear to be normative claims are just claims about norms. Furthermore, as Sayre-McCord argues in his paper, moral discovery in conventionalism reduces to sociological observation, which does not coincide with our intuitions about how
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the process of understanding morality ought to look. To improve upon this view he offers a strengthened variation wherein we “…abstract from actual practices and people and treat the truth of moral claims as being determined in someway by the hypothetical conventions or practices of hypothetical people”, he then claims that the benefit of such a process would be in “…holding that the truth of moral claims turns on what appropriately idealised agents would agree to under specified conditions”7. Though this removes conventionalism from the concerns of relativism, it runs into much the same problems faced by subjectivism, which is that it does not appear to be discussing what is meant when the term morality is used. Once again an idealised agent, this time a society, cannot discover morality unless it existed “out there”, which in this scenario it doesn’t; when it made what appeared to be a normative claim, what it would really be doing is prescribing some value. Even if the society in question is infinitely well informed, a prescription based on non-moral facts does not constitute a justified normative claim.

The last of the cognitivist positions discussed by Sayre-McCord, objectivism, is only worth mentioning here in passing. In short objectivists assert that morality exists outside of subjective or intersubjective value, which means that it exists “out there”, Sayre-McCord provides a quote from Ross which articulates his intuitions that goodness does not arise from are appreciation of something, but that we appreciate its goodness8. This postulation of external goodness obviously violates the anti-realist nature of this paper, and therefore requires no further discussion here.

The preceding discussion of competing moral theories was not intended to be an exhaustive examination of all or even any metaethical and normative positions. The purpose was to evaluate the quality of answers which were available amongst the prominent divisions in moral thought. With the survey roughly completed, it is now possible to evaluate its results, in order to

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8 Ibid., p. 18.
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support or weaken the hypothesis that it is possible to make justified normative claims without moral realism. The most significant trend throughout all the theories looked at is that none met the prerequisites which were set out for an affirmative response. Accordingly, since a substantial fraction of the moral landscape has been assessed, and not one perspective yielded an acceptable basis for a positive response to our question, it can be said that the hypothesis has been weakened. Of course, since the survey was not exhaustive, there is no reason to abandon our hypothesis yet.

Given these findings, it is now possible to assess the likelihood of a moral theory proving that it is possible make normative claims in the way that has been outlined. It is our assumption that metaphysical and psychological claims to moral realism must be abandoned. Since normative claims would be impossible in a non-cognitivist framework, cognitivism must be where a positive answer would lie. Objectivism failed by default. Subjectivism, when simple was relativistic, when sophisticated postulated a hypothetical entity which could not provide an objective ground for normative claims. Intersubjectivism paralleled subjectivism, just on a larger scale, at first relativistic, then non-moral. The question which remains, then, is what a positive answer would look like, and if it would be possible.

An anti-realist argument for justified normative assertions would first require a ground for justification. Since this cannot be external, or “real”, it must be internal. Since normative claims are universally prescriptive, their foundation must be universally accessible. This, however, would require that there be some faculty which a) everybody has b) provides consistent and universally prescriptive moral insight c) and qualifies that insight as moral in a non-arbitrary sense. Now assuming there is some such faculty (a), given that there are variations between subjective and intersubjective moral value, it is doubtful that it satisfies (b). This, however, is a surmountable challenge, if one is willing to grant that not everyone can access their moral faculty, due to an uncultivated soul or some such explanation. Granting this, it would still have to meet prerequisite (c), which is impossible without reference to some variety of moral
realism. If there is nothing in the universe which is a moral fact outside of us, then this special moral faculty, which we have by assumption, is free to prescribe anything whatsoever. Since no objective ground for justification could ever be provided (without moral realism), the decisions made by the moral faculty must be morally arbitrary. It could be pragmatic in its prescription, or even follow a consistent set of “normativesque” imperatives; however, there can never be an objective non-arbitrary foundation for these. Unless one were willing to grant that non-moral facts are relevant to normative claims, then the latter could never come to be in a non-arbitrary way. Allowing non-moral facts to influence moral deliberation presupposes some understanding of the subject matter of morality. Since we are attempting to isolate what the process of achieving real moral understanding would look like, we cannot assume what is or is not permissible as a foundation for morality. As a result it is impossible to know what would be a sufficiently non-arbitrary basis for justified normative claims. At very best, then, it may be possible to make justified normative statements without moral realism, however, we could never know if they were justified. With this in mind, it is then possible to assert that we cannot be justified in making normative claims in the absence of moral realism, even if we might make justified normative claims despite this.

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