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Projectivism and Error in Hume's Ethics

JONAS OLSON

Abstract: This essay argues that while Hume believes both that morality is grounded in our ordinary moral practices, sentiments, and beliefs, and that moral properties are real, he also holds that ordinary moral thinking involves systematically erroneous beliefs about moral properties. These claims, on their face, seem difficult to square with one another but this paper argues that on Hume's view, they are reconcilable. The reconciliation is effected by making a distinction between Hume's descriptive metaethics, that is, his account of vulgar moral thought and discourse, and his revisionary metaethics, that is, his account of how vulgar moral thought and discourse could be reformed so as to no longer involve error. This essay concludes that Hume is a projectivist and an error theorist in descriptive metaethics, while he is a projectivist and a subjectivist in revisionary metaethics.

1. Introduction

Commentators have attributed to Hume a wide variety of metaethical views. The main questions to be considered in this essay are whether Hume is a moral projectivist and whether he is a moral error theorist. Not surprisingly, these questions cannot be answered with an unqualified 'yes' or 'no.' We first need to get clear about what is meant by 'moral projectivism' and 'moral error theory.' I shall argue that Hume is a moral projectivist, and I shall identify two senses in which Hume might be labelled a moral error theorist. This involves distinguishing between Hume's *descriptive* metaethics and his *revisionary* metaethics. The former is his account of

actual or vulgar moral thought and talk, that is to say, the moral thought and talk of ordinary people; the latter is his account of how actual or vulgar moral thought and talk could be reformed so as to no longer involve error. We can then say that in descriptive metaethics, Hume is indeed a projectivist and an error theorist, and in revisionary metaethics, Hume is a projectivist and a subjectivist but not an error theorist.¹ Getting clearer about the notions of moral projectivism and moral error theory—which are, of course, not Hume’s terms—is the task of section 2. Following Richard Joyce, I distinguish four theses commonly associated with moral projectivism. Section 3 considers which of these theses Hume endorses and argues that Hume is a moral projectivist and an error theorist in descriptive metaethics and a projectivist but not an error theorist in revisionary metaethics. Although error theorist readings of Hume have found some supporters over the years, they are currently rather unpopular. Sections 3.2 and 4 consider why this is and respond to objections to error theorist readings. The moral error theories of Hume and Mackie are compared in section 5.

Before moving further, a caveat is in place. Since my project in this essay is to bring Hume’s work into conversation with modern metaethical debate, there is a clear risk of anachronistic interpretations. I shall comment further on this danger as it appears in the course of argumentation. At this point, I would note only that modern metaethical debate focuses much more on semantic analyses of moral judgment than did eighteenth-century debate. Hume and his contemporaries tended to discuss moral semantics only in passing and took greater interests in moral epistemology, psychology, and ontology. Importantly, however, many of these issues are still at the forefront of the metaethical debate. We can, therefore, hope to advance our understanding of Hume’s views by discussing them in the terminology of modern metaethics and by applying to them modern metaethical categories. Doing so enables us to understand how Hume might both embrace the reality of moral distinctions and moral properties and maintain that the moral judgments of ordinary people involve systematic error.

2. Moral Projectivism and Moral Error Theory

To say that we project moral properties onto the world is, of course, to speak metaphorically. Moreover, there seems to be no perfect agreement as to what such talk amounts to. This is reflected in the fact that ‘projectivism’ has been used as a label for both expressivism and error theory, which can be puzzling since these are very different metaethical theories. Expressivism holds that moral judgments are primarily expressions of non-cognitive attitudes, whereas standard versions of error theory hold that moral judgments are assertions that attribute mind-independent (but non-instantiated) moral properties to objects and, as a consequence, moral judgments are systematically mistaken. So ‘projection’ and ‘projectivism’ can

evidently be used as a label for a variety of different theories. Richard Joyce has recently formulated and distinguished the following four theses often associated with projectivist views in metaethics, which I quote:

1. We experience moral wrongness (e.g.) as an objective feature of the world.
2. This experience has its origin in some non-perceptual faculty; in particular, upon observing certain actions and characters (etc.) we have an affective attitude (e.g., the emotion of disapproval) that brings about the experience described in (1).
3. In fact, moral wrongness does not exist in the world.
4. When we utter sentences of the form 'X is morally wrong' we are mis-describing the world; we are in error.²

These four theses are useful tools in understanding moral projectivism and its relation to moral error theory, but in the context of interpreting Hume, they call for some further comments. Joyce's theses are formulated in terms of wrongness, and an initial worry is that this makes them problematic as tools in interpreting Hume's ethics, since Hume focuses mainly on virtue and vice rather than on rightness and wrongness. One might also question whether the metaethical questions that arise with respect to rightness and wrongness arise also with respect to virtue and vice.³

I will respond to these two worries in turn. First, to allay the worry about anachronism, it is worth noting that although Hume is chiefly concerned with virtue and vice, he occasionally speaks in terms of rightness and wrongness. For example, in the opening of the second *Enquiry*, Hume says, "Let a man's insensibility be ever so great, he must often be touched with the images of right and wrong" (EPM 1.2; SBN 170), and he goes on to speak about "sentiments of right and wrong" (EPM 9.10; SBN 276, see also T 3.2.2.23; SBN 498).⁴ Similarly, when Hume criticizes moral rationalism in the *Treatise*, he follows some of his rationalist opponents and speaks in terms of rightness and wrongness (for example, T 3.1.1.4, 3.1.1.14, 3.1.1.18; SBN 456, 460, 463).

Second, it is noteworthy that some of Hume's rationalist contemporaries also theorized about virtue and vice. John Balguy and Richard Price, for example, defended theories according to which virtue and vice are mind-independent properties, and truths about them are accessible via the understanding, or abstract reasoning, alone.⁵ This suggests that the kinds of metaethical questions that are of interest in this paper arise regardless of whether we focus on rightness and wrongness or on virtue and vice. Regardless of whether we take rightness and wrongness or virtue and vice to be the central moral properties, we can ask whether moral

properties are mind-independent, in a sense to be explained presently, and whether the vulgar take moral properties to be mind-independent.

Let us now comment further on theses (1)–(4). The first thesis concerns moral *phenomenology*. To say that we experience moral properties as objective features of the world, I shall assume, is to say that we experience them as mind-independent. To say that a feature, *F*, is mind-dependent is to say that whether an object, *x*, has *F* depends constitutively on psychological responses that actual or idealized observers have or would have towards *x*. For example, a view on which the property of moral viciousness just is the property of giving rise to sentiments of disapprobation in impartial spectators takes moral viciousness to be mind-dependent. To say that a feature, *F*, is mind-independent is to say that whether an object, *x*, has *F* does not depend constitutively on psychological responses that actual or idealized observers have or would have towards *x*. I shall take views on which moral properties are mind-dependent to be versions of subjectivism, and views on which moral properties are mind-independent to be versions of objectivism.⁶

The second thesis is *psychological*, offering a causal explanation of this moral phenomenology. The third thesis concerns moral *ontology*, and the fourth concerns moral *semantics*, in that it tells us that in making moral judgments we perform the speech act of assertion, since in order to misdescribe the world, one has to assert something about it. A natural reading of thesis (4) is that *in* uttering sentences of the form ‘*X* is morally wrong’ we are saying something that is false; this is the sense in which we are in error.⁷ But there is another sense in which we might be in error *when* we utter such sentences even though we are not in error *in* uttering them. That is, it might be the case that sentences of the form ‘*X* is morally wrong’ are sometimes true, although what we implicitly or explicitly believe about *X* when we make (sincere) utterances of that kind is false. Hence (sincere) moral judgments might involve the doxastic error of false belief in a way that does not render moral judgments uniformly false. I maintain that both views deserve the label ‘error theory.’ The difference between these views will be further explored in section 3.2, in which it will be shown to be relevant to our interpretation of Hume.

The four-fold division between theses (1)–(4) is helpful because it enables us to see that the projection metaphor can be used to describe a variety of metaethical views. For instance, it enables us to see how both expressivism and error theory can be understood as projectivist views. Expressivists can, and typically do, accept some version of theses (1)–(3),⁸ but they replace (4) with a thesis to the effect that when we utter sentences like ‘Murder is wrong’ we are not (primarily) describing anything. Because on the expressivist’s view moral sentences conventionally express non-cognitive attitudes, uttering them does not involve error. Error theorists, by contrast, typically accept all of (1) through (4). Subjectivists need not. Some subjectivists think that wrongness just is projected attitudes, that the meaning of

moral judgments is reducible to judgments about attitudes, and that moral judgments involve no error. They thereby reject the ontological and semantic theses, but they can still accept the phenomenological and the psychological theses, that is, (1) and (2). Further combinations are, of course, logically possible; we shall look at one in particular in the next section.

In light of these comments, we can now reformulate Joyce's theses (1)–(4) to make them more applicable to Hume's moral theory.

Phenomenological	We experience moral properties, for example, the rightness and wrongness of acts or the virtues and vices of persons, as mind-independent.
Psychological	This experience has its origin in some non-perceptual faculty; in particular, upon observing certain actions and characters, and so on, we have an affective attitude (for example, the sentiment of approbation or disapprobation) that brings about the experience described above.
Ontological	In fact, moral properties do not exist in the world.
Semantic	When we utter sentences of the form 'X is morally right/wrong' and 'X has a moral virtue/vice,' we purport to ascribe properties to X, but our beliefs about these properties are systematically in error in ways that may render moral judgments uniformly false.

Following Joyce, we can call the conjunction of the phenomenological and the psychological theses 'minimal projectivism.'⁹ On minimal projectivism, the act of projection is a matter of experiencing moral properties as mind-independent features of the world. On a richer understanding of projectivism, which includes the semantic thesis, the act of projection is also a matter of believing and claiming that moral properties are mind-independent features of the world. Minimal projectivism is common ground between many versions of error theory, expressivism, and subjectivism. In the next section, we shall discuss whether Hume endorses any version of projectivism, error theory, and subjectivism.

3. Projectivism, Error Theory, and Hume's Metaethics

3.1. Hume and the Phenomenological and Psychological Theses

An important basis of my interpretation is Hume's famous comparison of sensory qualities to moral and aesthetic properties. Hume makes this comparison in the *Treatise* (T 3.1.1.27; SBN 469) and repeats it in the essays "The Sceptic" (EMPL

163–65) and “Of the Standards of Taste” (EMPL 230, 233–34).¹⁰ Paying close attention to the comparison can help to throw light on which of the four projectivist theses Hume accepts. The first, recall, was the phenomenological thesis that we experience moral properties, for example, wrongness or viciousness, as mind-independent features of the world. There is evidence that Hume accepts this as an accurate description of moral phenomenology. In the *Treatise*, Hume states that “[v]ice and virtue . . . may be compar’d to sounds, colours, heat, and cold, which, according to modern philosophy are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind” and he immediately adds that “this discovery in morals, like that other in physics, is to be regarded as a considerable advancement in the speculative sciences” (T 3.1.1.27; SBN 469).

The fact that this discovery in morals is a significant advancement suggests that it is not what most people already think: it is advancement precisely because most people believe pre-reflectively that moral properties are in external objects and not that they are perceptions in the mind.¹¹ That is, ordinary moral phenomenology is such that moral properties are experienced as mind-independent features of the world in the sense explained in the preceding section, just as the phenomenological thesis says. Further evidence that this is Hume’s view can be mounted. In “The Sceptic” Hume writes,

even when the mind operates alone, and feeling the sentiment of blame or approbation, pronounces one object deformed and odious, another beautiful and amiable; I say that, even in this case, those qualities are not really in the objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment of that mind which blames or praises. I grant that it will be . . . difficult to make this proposition evident, and, as it were, palpable to negligent thinkers. (EMPL 163)

Why would it be difficult to make this proposition evident and palpable to negligent thinkers? Presumably, because negligent thinkers are prone to rely on their experiences of moral properties as mind-independent features. Note that on my reading, Hume does not deny that the vulgar think that moral properties depend on minds in the sense that whether an agent or action is virtuous or vicious depends on the agent’s mental qualities, or character. Hume holds that the vulgar think of moral virtue and vice as mind-independent in the sense defined in section 2 above, that is, as properties that do not depend on the psychological responses of evaluating observers. A few pages later, there is more of the same: “with regard to beauty, either natural or moral, the . . . agreeable quality is thought to lie in the object [evaluated]; not in the sentiment [of the evaluating observer]” (EMPL 165). Although Hume does not discuss ordinary moral phenomenology directly, these passages support attributing to him the phenomenological thesis.¹²

Attributing to Hume the psychological thesis that our experiences of moral properties as mind-independent are brought about, and hence explained, by affective attitudes should find little resistance. The passages already considered indicate that he accepts it. In the opening paragraphs of the second *Enquiry*, Hume contrasts rationalist and sentimentalist accounts of morality and goes on eventually to offer support for the latter and to argue against the former (EPM 1.1; SBN 169). This is, of course, also among his main concerns in Book 3 of the *Treatise*. Here Hume famously asks the reader to consider wilful murder and to see if he (the reader) “can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which [he] call[s] *vice*” (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 468, Hume’s emphasis). Hume predicts that the vice will entirely escape the reader until he turns his reflection inwards and finds “a sentiment of disapprobation which arises in [him], towards this action” (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 469). Indeed, Hume thinks that “[t]o have the sense of virtue is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character” (T 3.1.2.3; SBN 471). This feeling of satisfaction gets mistaken for a perception of an objective moral feature “because [the feeling of satisfaction] is not so turbulent and violent as to distinguish itself, in an evident manner, from the perception of the object” (EMPL 165) and because of “our common custom of taking all things for the same, which have any near resemblance to each other” (T 3.1.2.1; SBN 470). In cases where we approve of people on account of their virtues, say, benevolence or wit, our sentiments of approbation are often not turbulent and violent and, therefore, they have a near phenomenological resemblance to our perceptions of those character traits. Hence, we apprehend as a perception of a mind-independent moral feature what is really a moral sentiment. This is Hume’s account of how affective attitudes explain moral phenomenology.

So far I have argued that Hume endorses minimal projectivism. It is important to note that this does not yet commit him to error theory, subjectivism, expressivism, or some other competing metaethical view. The more controversial questions are whether Hume accepts the ontological and semantic theses.

3.2. Hume and the Ontological and Semantic Theses

Much of what was said in support of the claim that Hume accepts the phenomenological thesis supports attributing to Hume the semantic thesis as well. We noted that Hume repeatedly compares moral properties to sensory qualities, which according to the modern philosophy are perceptions in the mind. We also saw that Hume thinks of these doctrines as considerable advancements in morals and in physics, and that these would hardly be advancements if ordinary people accepted them all along. Commenting on Thomas Reid’s work, Hume remarks that to deny that ordinary people believe that sensory qualities are in objects rather than in the minds of perceivers is to imagine “the Vulgar to be Philosophers &

Corpuscularians from their Infancy.”¹³ Hume emphasizes “[the] pains it cost Malebranche & Locke to establish [the] Principle [that sensory qualities are not] really in the Bodies,” and he notes that “Philosophy scarce ever advances a greater paradox in the Eyes of the People, than when it affirms that Snow is neither cold nor white; Fire hot nor red” (Wood, “David Hume on Thomas Reid,” 416).

Hume’s comparison of moral properties to sensory qualities and his claims about what the vulgar believe about the latter provide evidence that he would say that ordinary people believe that moral properties are in the evaluated objects rather than in the minds of perceivers. I concede, however, that the claim that Hume attributes mistaken beliefs about moral properties to the vulgar is open to a challenge. Another interpretive possibility is that Hume thinks that the vulgar have no metaethical beliefs, including beliefs about whether moral properties are mind-independent. While Hume’s texts do not conclusively rule out this possibility, the textual evidence I have mounted make my interpretation more than plausible.¹⁴

One might argue that if Hume holds that ordinary people believe that moral properties are mind-independent, he also holds that these common beliefs affect the meaning of moral terms, with the result that, in verbalizing moral beliefs, ordinary speakers make assertions that attribute mind-independent moral properties to objects, such as people’s characters. But since there are no such properties, in making moral judgments ordinary speakers are, indeed, systematically misdescribing the world; they are in error in the sense that they make false judgments.

There is another possibility, however, that brings us back to the nature of the error highlighted in the semantic thesis (see section 2 above). When an ordinary speaker comes to believe that Cicero is virtuous, she has a pleasing sentiment of approbation, which she mistakes for an impression of a mind-independent property. A copy of this sentiment gives rise to the idea that Cicero is virtuous, so when she has the lively idea (that is, the belief) that Cicero is virtuous, she believes that Cicero has the mind-independent property of being virtuous.¹⁵ The popular belief that moral properties are mind-independent and non-relational is false, but on this view, it does not affect the meaning of moral terms, such as ‘virtuous’ and ‘vicious.’ Therefore, when an ordinary speaker claims that Cicero is virtuous, the *meaning* of her utterance might not involve anything to the effect that Cicero has a mind-independent property of being virtuous. On this view, the false popular belief that moral properties are mind-independent does not render moral judgments false.

This view resembles Mark Sainsbury’s reading of Hume.¹⁶ Sainsbury has argued that in making first-order moral claims—for example, in claiming that Cicero is virtuous or that wilful murder is vicious—we *use* the concepts of virtue and vice, and this is not to engage in reflection on the concepts of virtue and vice. Therefore, says Sainsbury, there are, according to Hume, no “first-order” errors in ordinary moral discourse (Sainsbury, “Projections and Relations,” 141–42). The error that

occurs is second-order and incidental to the meaning of ordinary moral terms. James Baillie has argued, in a similar vein, that Hume holds that one is not committed to ontological falsehoods merely in employing moral concepts.¹⁷ But, he adds, “when we don our philosophers’ caps to *theorize* about morality itself, we run the (avoidable) risk of falling into deep error, such as positing these mind-independent moral properties” (Baillie, *Hume on Morality*, 15).

The view sketched above differs in two ways from Sainsbury’s and Baillie’s. First, Sainsbury and Baillie both seem to suggest that on Hume’s view, the mistaken belief that moral properties are mind-independent emerges from philosophical theorizing. While this is a possible interpretation, I have defended the interpretation on which Hume thinks it is the vulgar, that is, ordinary people, who pre-reflectively take moral properties to be mind-independent and non-relational. This belief is implicit in ordinary moral thinking, just as the belief that colours are properties in objects rather than in the minds of perceivers is implicit in ordinary thinking about colours. On this interpretation, the conception of moral properties as mind-independent is not a philosophers’ fancy. It is ingrained in ordinary moral thinking, or “implanted by nature,” as Hume might say. Rather than lead into error, philosophical theorizing about the ontological status of moral properties can help debunk this error.

Second, although on this view ordinary people’s false beliefs about moral properties do not render moral judgments false, the account still deserves to be called a moral error theory. It maintains, after all, that when ordinary speakers judge that a character is virtuous or vicious, or an action right or wrong, they believe that the character or action possesses mind-independent properties of being virtuous or vicious, right or wrong. Hence, ordinary speakers are systematically in error when they predicate moral properties of an object, since they then have false beliefs about the object. Ordinary moral thought thus involves systematic errors, but these errors may not render the moral assertions of ordinary speakers systematically false.

Here is an analogy meant to shed light on this idea: prior to Einstein, many people believed that motion is absolute rather than relative. In other words, they had false beliefs about movement. It would be implausible, however, to maintain that prior to Einstein people’s assertions about motion, for example, the assertion that the Earth moves, were all false. We might say, instead, that people were systematically in error in the sense that they had false beliefs about motion, but that these false beliefs did not determine the meaning of the term ‘motion.’ This allows us to say that some of their assertions about motion, for example, that the Earth moves, were indeed true, albeit accompanied by false belief.

So, depending on whether and how background beliefs about moral properties are taken to affect the meaning of moral terms, we have two versions of moral error theory: one on which the popular belief that moral properties are

mind-independent affects the meaning of moral terms with the result that moral judgments are uniformly false, and one on which this popular belief does not affect the meaning of moral terms and, hence, does not render moral judgments uniformly false. Which of the two versions is the more defensible reading of Hume is a thorny question to which I shall not venture an answer. Choosing between the two requires determining whether and to what extent background beliefs about the ontology of moral properties affect the meaning of moral terms.¹⁸ This task is difficult enough in its own right, and I offer no speculations on what Hume's view on the matter might have been. As previously mentioned, Hume and his contemporaries did not offer detailed theories of moral semantics.

Many commentators want to resist the view that Hume attributes errors to ordinary moral thought or discourse.¹⁹ Rachel Cohon, for example, remarks that in the second *Enquiry*, when Hume says that it is the "office of taste" to gild and stain "all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment [and raise], in a manner, a new creation" (EPM App. 1.21; SBN 294), Hume makes no explicit attribution of error to ordinary speakers.²⁰ But it is unsurprising that Hume does not attribute error in this passage, since he is here concerned neither with the semantics of moral discourse nor with our pre-reflective beliefs about the ontology of moral properties; he is discussing a psychological mechanism, namely, the functions of taste, which he contrasts with the functions of reason.²¹ Cohon also notes that projectivist (which she seems to take to imply error theorist) interpretations often rely for support on Hume's projection metaphor regarding causation (the mind's "great propensity to spread itself on external objects" at T 1.3.14.25; SBN 167) rather than on Hume's explicit claims about morality (Cohon, *Hume's Morality*, 122). My interpretation, however, relies not on Hume's claims about causation but on his comparisons between sensory qualities and moral properties.

Cohon concedes that in "The Sceptic," Hume makes the attribution of error we have considered, that is, that natural and moral beauty are commonly thought to lie in objects rather than in sentiments. But she remarks that "this is simply the mistake of thinking a relational property is an intrinsic quality" (Cohon, *Hume's Morality*, 123). We may add, however, that if our foregoing discussion is on the right lines, it is also the mistake of thinking that a mind-dependent property is a mind-independent property. Cohon seems to consider these mistakes negligible, but the belief that a character or an action has a mind-independent moral property is true if and only if the character or the action has that property. And on Hume's view, it does not. Hence, it remains a plausible conclusion that Hume attributes systematic error to ordinary moral thought or discourse, either in the form of false moral judgments or merely in the form of false beliefs about the ontology of moral properties that accompany moral judgments, some of which may be true.

There are some well-known passages in which Hume seems to commit himself to a subjectivist naturalist account. This account is also realist in that it holds that moral judgments are truth-apt and that some are true. These passages may seem difficult to square with any error theorist interpretation. In the second *Enquiry*, Hume says, "The hypothesis we embrace is plain. It maintains, that morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary*" (EPM App. 1.10; SBN 289, Hume's emphasis).²² It is far from obvious, however, that Hume is here making a semantic claim. He does use the word 'define,' but since the passage appears in a context in which he is arguing against the rationalist view that there are mind-independent moral relations discoverable by reason, it is natural to take him to be offering real definitions, which tell us what virtue and vice are, rather than merely verbal definitions that tell us what the terms 'virtue' and 'vice' mean.²³ Hume's hypothesis that morality—that is, moral properties like rightness and wrongness, and being virtuous or vicious—is determined by sentiment concerns ontology. To have a moral property is to be the object of a distinctively moral sentiment of approbation or disapprobation of an impartial spectator. Importantly, Hume does not here advance a semantic hypothesis concerning ordinary moral discourse.

What we have just said answers the question whether Hume accepts the ontological thesis that moral properties, for example, wrongness and viciousness, do not exist in the world. On this interpretation, Hume thinks that moral properties do exist in the world, but they are not what they are thought to be by ordinary speakers and thinkers. Moral properties as they are commonly conceived do not exist in the world, but given Hume's hypothesis that morality is determined by sentiment, moral properties do exist in the world. We will return to Hume's moral ontology in section 5 below.

There is another well-known passage in which Hume seems to endorse subjectivism. This is where Hume says that "when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you *mean* nothing but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it" (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 469, emphasis added). Here Hume seems clearly to be making a claim about the meaning of moral judgments. However, the simplistic subjectivism he seems to advocate is an implausible account of the meaning of ordinary moral judgments. Commentators have, therefore, been unwilling to attribute this simplistic view to Hume. In this vein, A. E. Pitson suggests that Hume is here guilty of rhetorical exaggeration.²⁴ It might be thought that Pitson's reading gains support from Hume's famous letter to Hutcheson in which he asks whether his formulations on this score are not "laid a little too strong."²⁵ But in the letter, Hume declares himself uncomfortable with the conclusion he considers himself intellectually compelled to accept. He gives no indication that he has made a rhetorical

exaggeration, deliberate or not. It is, therefore, preferable to interpret Hume in a way that avoids making the accusation of rhetorical exaggeration. On my interpretation, Hume is talking about what we could, or perhaps should, mean by ‘vicious’ in a reformed moral discourse.²⁶

The context of the passage is the one in which Hume asks the reader to consider some vicious action, such as wilful murder, and see whether he can find that matter of fact, which he calls vice. The vice, says Hume, entirely escapes him, as long as he considers the object. He cannot find it “till [he] turn[s] [the] reflection into [his] own breast and find[s] a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in [him] towards this object” (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 468–69). Hume then immediately goes on to make the claim quoted above: “So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing but” The “[s]o that” is important since it suggests that the claim about meaning is grounded in the preceding psychological and ontological claims. This makes it natural to interpret Hume as saying something like, “insofar as you say or believe something that is not false, you mean nothing but” The suggestion, then, is that Hume gives an account of the psychology of moral judgments and, on that basis, suggests a revisionary, error-free account of moral thought and discourse.²⁷ This revision may involve merely debunking the popular, but false, belief that moral properties are mind-independent and non-relational. But if this belief partially determines the meaning of moral terms, it requires revising our moral discourse, too.²⁸

For Hume, the fundamental metaethical insight is that morality is a matter of sentiment. How we verbalize these sentiments is a contingent matter. According to Hume’s descriptive metaethics, either the vulgar do it by attributing to objects mind-independent moral properties, and this is, as we have seen, an error, or they do it by attributing to objects properties that they believe are mind-independent, and this is also an error. Alternatively, we could verbalize the moral sentiments by expressing them or, as I claim Hume suggests, by *reporting* them. Since moral judgments are causally explained by sentiments, Hume might suppose that the transition to a subjectivist discourse in which moral judgments report sentiments would be natural and smooth. In light of what Hume goes on to say later (for example, T 3.1.2.4, 3.3.1.15; SBN 472, 581–82), we could take him to suggest that on a more refined version of reformed moral discourse, moral claims would report sentiments of approbation and disapprobation that are peculiarly moral, partly in that we have them only when we put ourselves in the position of an impartial sympathetic spectator.²⁹

Hume is clear that the discovery that moral properties, like sensory qualities, are mind-dependent has “little or no influence on practice” (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 469); it “takes off no more from the reality of [moral properties] than from that of [sensory qualities]” and gives no “umbrage either to critics or moralists” (EMPL 166n3). This is because “[n]othing can be more real, or concern us more than our own

sentiments" (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 468) and because "[t]here is a sufficient uniformity in the senses and feelings of mankind [for them] to have the greatest influence on life and manners" (EMPL 166n3). Our negative sentiments vis-à-vis vicious actions, such as wilful murder, will not be affected by the discovery that our verbalizations of these sentiments or our beliefs about the ontology of vice are in error. The same types of characters and actions will be condemned and praised in reformed moral thought and discourse, free of these errors, as in ordinary, error-ridden moral thought and discourse. This might well be another reason for supposing that the transition from ordinary, error-ridden moral thought and discourse to reformed, subjectivist moral thought and discourse can be made smoothly. Since the transition does not require that we make substantively different moral judgments, the error can be peacefully debunked.³⁰

4. Two Objections: Hume's Friendly Attitude to Virtue and the Motivating Power of Moral Judgment

The view I attribute to Hume explains why his friendly attitude to virtue is not a strong objection to error theorist readings.³¹ The thought that there is an objection here has, perhaps, been fuelled by the notion that error theorists must somehow be opposed to morality or at least to engaging in erroneous moral thought and to using ordinary erroneous moral discourse. But this is a misunderstanding, and it is no less so in Hume's case. Hume, after all, thinks that there are moral properties;³² it is just that they are not in objects, as the vulgar think, and that the error embodied in ordinary moral thought is contingent and peacefully debunkable.

Nicholas Sturgeon finds "little to challenge" in the suggestion that when Hume gives a subjectivist definition of the term 'vicious' in the *Treatise*, he is making a reform proposal.³³ Sturgeon, nevertheless, rejects projectivist error theorist readings both because they have as much trouble accommodating "Hume's many suggestions that moral facts are about our sentiments" as non-cognitivist readings and because they have as much trouble as Sturgeon's own favoured reductive realist interpretation accommodating Hume's "insistence that moral judgments themselves motivate."³⁴ The first point presents no problems for our reading, according to which Hume thinks that moral facts are facts about mind-dependent, relational properties, whereas the vulgar think, mistakenly, that they are facts about mind-independent properties. The second point might seem to be a more serious worry, since on our reading, moral judgments express beliefs, and on a popular reading of Hume, beliefs are motivationally inefficacious.

There is a weaker and a stronger version of the claim that beliefs are motivationally inefficacious. Both versions agree that motivation requires a suitable pair of belief and desire; beliefs alone cannot motivate. The difference is that the weaker version allows that beliefs, a species of what Hume calls *ideas*,³⁵ can generate

desires, a species of what Hume calls *impressions*. On this view, beliefs are directly motivationally inefficacious, but beliefs can be indirectly motivationally efficacious by giving rise to desires. The stronger version denies both the direct and the indirect motivational efficacy of beliefs: beliefs cannot motivate directly and cannot give rise to desires. There is evidence that Hume endorses the weaker but rejects the stronger version.³⁶ For example, here is Hume's sketch of how hedonic beliefs, ideas of pleasure or pain, generate desire:

An impression first strikes upon the senses, and makes us perceive heat or cold, thirst or hunger, pleasure or pain, of some kind or other. Of this impression there is a copy taken by the mind, which remains after the impression ceases; and this we call an idea. This idea of pleasure or pain, when it returns upon the soul, *produces the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear*, which may properly be called impressions of reflection, because derived from it (T 1.1.2.1; SBN 7–8, emphasis added).³⁷

Hume might say something similar about the moral case: upon observing, or contemplating, certain actions or characters, we get impressions of virtuousness or viciousness, of praise or blame. To have such impressions is to experience the pleasing sentiment of moral approbation, or the displeasing sentiment of moral disapprobation. Of these impressions there are copies taken, which we call ideas of virtue and vice, praise and blame. And these pleasing and displeasing ideas produce new desires. The belief that some action or character is virtuous or vicious can thus produce a desire to perform or not to perform that action, or to emulate or not to emulate that character.³⁸ Note that were Hume to say that an agent's ideas of virtue and vice, praise and blame, are ideas *of his own* pleasure and pain and that these ideas are what generate new desires, the position would look like a version of psychological egoism. It is more plausible to read Hume as saying that it is the ideas *themselves*, or the having of them, that are pleasing and displeasing. The objects of ideas of virtue and vice, praise and blame, are certain actions and characters, rather than pleasure and pain. What generates desires is the *pleasant thought* of virtue and praise (or the *unpleasant thought* of vice and blame), not the thought *of* pleasure and pain.

But even if it should turn out that the most plausible reading of Hume is one on which he denies that moral belief can generate desires, the point about the motivating force of moral judgments is a weak objection to error theorist readings. Hume seems not to commit himself to the view that there is a necessary connection between making a moral judgment and being motivated to act accordingly.³⁹ What he does say are things like “[m]orals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions” (T 3.1.1.6; SBN 457), not that morals do so *necessarily*, and that “men are *often* govern'd by their duties” (T 3.1.1.5; SBN 457, emphasis added). This is easily

explained on error theorist readings, for recall that the psychological thesis says that our experiences of moral properties as mind-independent are causally explained by affective attitudes, and recall, also, the suggestion above that ideas of virtue and vice are copies of pleasing sentiments of moral approbation and displeasing sentiments of moral disapprobation. In other words, moral judgments are causally explained by motivationally efficacious attitudes. The correlation between making moral judgments and being motivated to act is therefore strong but contingent. The view allows for cases in which the lively idea that some action is virtuous or vicious fails to produce a desire or some other motivating attitude. Since this latter implication is, in itself, plausible, and since the general view that the connection between moral judgment and motivation is strong but contingent fits well with other aspects of Hume's position, it is defensible to attribute it to Hume.

5. Moral Error Theories: Hume's and Mackie's

We saw in 3.2 above that Hume thinks there are moral properties. This gives some vindication to realist readings of Hume.⁴⁰ But crucially, this is not at the expense of error theorist readings. Hume is a realist about moral properties in the sense that he thinks that there really are mind-dependent moral properties; to have a moral property is, as we have seen, to be the object of a distinctively moral sentiment of approbation or disapprobation of an impartial spectator. On this account, moral properties are relational properties, so this interpretation rejects Hume's claim that moral properties are perceptions in the minds of perceivers (T 3.1.1.25; SBN 469). On this account, what is in the mind of perceivers is one *relatum* rather than the moral (relational) property itself.⁴¹ Despite this mismatch, on balance this is still the best interpretation of Hume's view.⁴² Two considerations support it. First, Hume's main concern was the negative one of denying that moral properties are in external objects rather than the positive one of affirming that they are perceptions in the mind. He might therefore have been speaking loosely when he claimed that moral properties are perceptions in the minds of perceivers. Secondly, our interpretation squares well with other claims Hume makes, for example, that "[moral] attributes *arise* from the particular constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection" (EMPL 162, emphasis added) and that "objects *acquire* [moral] qualities from the particular character and constitution of the mind which surveys them" (EMPL 171, emphasis added).

On my interpretation, Hume is, therefore, a subjectivist realist, but he is also an error theorist in that he thinks that ordinary moral thought embodies error. It is a common and natural assumption that projectivist and error theorist readings conflict with subjectivist realist readings, but I have suggested a way in which these readings can be reconciled.⁴³ Error theorist readings are a plausible interpretation of Hume's account of ordinary moral thought and discourse, his

descriptive metaethics, while subjectivist readings are a plausible interpretation of his positive account of moral ontology on which he bases his reform proposals for moral thought and discourse, his *revisionary* metaethics.

It is illuminating to compare Hume's error theory and overall metaethical view with J. L. Mackie's. A striking difference is that while Mackie thinks that moral judgments are necessarily false because, necessarily, there are no moral properties,⁴⁴ the view we have attributed to Hume has it that there are moral properties, but ordinary speakers are systematically mistaken about them in ways that may render their moral judgments uniformly false. This difference in ontologies reflects different views on how the nature of moral properties is determined. Mackie takes the nature of moral properties to be determined by ordinary speakers' conception of moral properties. He thinks reflection on this common conception tells us that moral properties and facts are objectively (mind-independently) prescriptive and intrinsically motivating, that they supervene on other properties and facts, and that we could come to know of them only by intuition.⁴⁵ In short, Mackie thinks objectivist intuitionists like Samuel Clarke, Richard Price, G. E. Moore, and W. D. Ross were essentially right about the nature of moral properties and the semantics of moral judgment, but he rejects their view that there are any moral properties or moral facts.

Hume, by contrast, takes the nature of moral properties to be determined by the psychological attitudes that causally explain our moral judgments. There are no moral properties as the vulgar ordinarily and pre-reflectively think of them, but once we reflect properly on what goes on when we make moral judgments, we can come to see the true nature of moral properties and also that there are, indeed, moral properties. In contrast to Mackie, Hume did not have much sympathy with his contemporary intuitionists' conceptions of moral properties. Probably with something like Clarke's view of moral fittingness as a brute and unanalyzable relation in mind, Hume remarks that he does not know what to respond, "till some one be so good as to point out to me this new relation" (T 3.1.1.20; SBN 464).⁴⁶ It is likely that Clarke would respond that Hume is asking for the impossible; the relation of fittingness can be "pointed out" only in the sense that it can be intuited. Mackie would probably accept this response, with the crucial caveat that there is nothing to intuit.

A final difference between Hume and Mackie concerns whether ordinary moral thought and discourse are *essentially* error-ridden.⁴⁷ Mackie maintains that they are, since he thinks it is of the essence of moral judgments to be about objectively prescriptive, intrinsically motivating, supervenient properties, knowable by intuition. He might have said, then, of Hume's subjectivist reform proposal for moral thought and discourse that it would be thought and discourse about (a special type of) sentiments but not recognizably moral thought and discourse.⁴⁸ Hume, on the other hand, maintains that what is essential for moral judgments is not

primarily a matter of content. What is essential is that the judgment be caused by peculiarly moral kinds of sentiments of approbation and disapprobation. This is why, as we have already mentioned, Hume thinks the error in ordinary moral thought and discourse is contingent.

We may conclude that Hume, unlike Mackie, is no moral skeptic. According to Hume, there are moral properties, we can make true moral judgments, and we can have moral knowledge.⁴⁹ According to Mackie, by contrast, there are no moral properties, moral judgments are (necessarily) false, and hence, we cannot have moral knowledge.

6. Summary

I have argued that in interpreting Hume's metaethics, we should distinguish between a descriptive and a revisionary project. Hume's descriptive metaethical analysis is plausibly read as error theorist. Two versions of moral error theory attributable to Hume have been identified: one on which ordinary speakers believe falsely that moral properties are mind-independent and non-relational, which renders moral judgments false, and one on which this popular, but false, belief does not determine the meaning of moral terms and hence, does not render moral judgments false. Unlike contemporary moral error theorists, Hume is no ontological anti-realist about moral properties and no skeptic regarding moral knowledge. Based on his subjectivist realism about moral properties, Hume proposes a revisionary account of moral thought and discourse according to which moral judgments report attitudes, and because moral judgement report attitudes and we are able to know what these attitudes are, we are able to have moral knowledge. This interpretation has the important implication that error theorist, subjectivist, realist, and non-skeptical readings of Hume's ethics can all be reconciled.

NOTES

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1 In calling Hume's account of moral properties subjectivist, I mean only that he takes moral properties to be mind-dependent, in the sense defined in section 2. I do not mean to deny that Hume predicts that convergence in moral opinions will occur when we take up the perspective of an impartial spectator.

2 Richard Joyce, “Is Moral Projectivism Empirically Tractable?” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 12 (2009): 53–75, at 56. See also P. J. E. Kail’s recent distinction between *feature projection* and *explanatory projection*. P. J. E. Kail, *Projection and Realism in Hume’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3–4. Kail is not concerned exclusively with projectivism in metaethics, but in this context, explanatory projection corresponds roughly to theses (1) and (2) and feature projection roughly to theses (1) through (4).

3 Two anonymous referees for *Hume Studies* raised these worries.

4 References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), hereafter cited as “T” followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers; and to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter cited as “SBN” followed by page number. ‘Abs.’ stands for Abstract. References to the second *Enquiry* are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. T. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), hereafter cited as “EPM” followed by section and paragraph numbers; and to *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), hereafter “SBN” followed by page number. ‘App.’ stands for Appendix.

5 See John Balguy, “The Foundation of Moral Goodness” [1728–1729], in *British Moralists 1650–1800*, vol. 1, ed. D. D. Raphael (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991), 387–408, esp. 392–96; Richard Price, *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, ed. D. D. Raphael (1758; repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), esp. 15–17, 233–36.

6 Here I follow Michael Huemer’s account of what it is for features to be subjective and objective. Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2–3. For example, views according to which moral properties are response-dependent count as subjectivist. I shall eventually argue that Hume takes moral properties to be mind-dependent, because he takes them to depend on psychological responses of spectators. But note that Hume’s view that mental objects, such as people’s characters, are the primary bearers of moral properties does not commit him to the view that moral properties are mind-dependent. The view that characters are the primary bearers of moral properties is consistent with the view that moral properties do not depend on the psychological responses of *observers* (see also sect. 3.1).

7 On many versions of error theory, for example, Mackie’s, we are saying something that is *necessarily* false in uttering sentences of the form ‘X is morally wrong.’ We will return to this in section 5. Some error theorists hold that moral judgments are systematically *untrue* rather than false because they rest on a false presupposition. This point need not detain us here, however.

8 Some clarifications are called for here. First, the claim that expressivists typically accept (1) might raise eyebrows, because this would seem to commit expressivists to the view that moral phenomenology is misleading. Since according to most expressivists, moral wrongness is not an objective feature of the world, this would suggest that moral thinking embodies error, something expressivists do not want to maintain. But there are expressivist-friendly readings of ‘objectivity’ and ‘mind-independence.’ To experience the wrongness of kicking dogs as mind-independent might simply be to

experience the wrongness as independent of our attitudes, in the sense that no matter what our attitudes to kicking dogs are or would be, kicking dogs is wrong; one is against kicking dogs even in the counterfactual event that one's attitudes to kicking dogs should change and one would no longer be adverse to it (Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984], 217–20). Expressivists can grant that many people have such attitudes, and that they need not involve error. Second, expressivists can reject (3) if they take the claim that moral wrongness exists in the world to be true in a minimal sense. They might say, for instance, that 'Murder is wrong' is true (in a minimal sense) and from this, they can say, it follows that moral wrongness exists in the world. For what it is for moral wrongness to exist in the world just is for some sentence like 'Murder is wrong' to be true.

9 Joyce, "Is Moral Projectivism Empirically Tractable?" 57.

10 References to Hume's essays are to David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. D. F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), hereafter cited as "EMPL" followed by page number.

11 Mackie makes the same point in a footnote; see J. L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge, 1980), 158n5.

12 There is some evidence that Hume's contemporary and philosophical ally Adam Smith accepted a similar picture of moral phenomenology. References to Adam Smith are to his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), cited as "TMS" followed by part, section (where appropriate), chapter, and paragraph numbers. Smith says at one point that when we sympathize entirely with another agent, "[h]is actions seem . . . to demand, and . . . to call aloud for proportionable recompense" (TMS 2.1.4.2, emphases added). It is plausible that Smith intends the terms 'demand' and 'call aloud' to capture experiences of objective mind-independent moral relational properties.

13 Paul B. Wood, "David Hume on Thomas Reid's *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, On the Principles of Common Sense: A New Letter to Hugh Blair from July 1762*," *Mind* 95 (1986): 411–16, 416. See T 1.4.2.12–13 (SBN 192) for a similar point.

14 A general project in the *Treatise* is to trace the origins of ideas central to human thinking, such as ideas about causation, personal identity, the persistence of material objects, morality, and so on. On Hume's view, many of these ideas do not have the origins the vulgar tend to think that they have. My reading of Hume's metaethics is in line with this general project and Hume's pursuit of it. However, in this paper I remain non-committal on whether it is defensible to attribute to Hume error theories in areas other than morality.

15 See the discussion in section 4.

16 R. M. Sainsbury, "Projections and Relations," *The Monist* 81 (1998): 130–60.

17 James Baillie, *Hume on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2000).

18 See the concluding discussion in Richard Joyce, "Expressivism, Motivation Internalism, and Hume," in *Hume on Motivation and Virtue*, ed. Charles R. Pigden (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 30–56, 53.

19 Kail, who defends a variant of the projectivist error theorist reading, notes that it is currently not a popular one. *Projection and Realism*, 148. Notable defenses of other versions of this reading are found in Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge, 1977) and Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory*. I discuss two objections to error theorist readings in section 4 below.

20 Rachel Cohon, *Hume's Morality: Feeling and Fabrication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 123.

21 It is true, though, that there are fewer explicit attributions of error to moral thought and discourse in the second *Enquiry* than in Hume's earlier writings. Howard Sobel made the intriguing proposal that Hume was here motivated by pragmatic concerns, to avoid propagating "[t]ruths which are *pernicious* to society" and combating "errors which are salutary and *advantageous*" (EPM 9.14; SBN 279, Hume's emphases). See Jordan Howard Sobel, *Walls and Vaults: A Natural Science of Morals (Virtue Ethics According to David Hume)* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009), 98–101. So, while it is *philosophically* important to highlight and correct the errors in vulgar moral thought and discourse, it might not be *pragmatically* well advised to do so.

22 Two clarifications: by "a spectator" Hume means an impartial spectator, and by "the pleasing sentiment of approbation" he means approbation of a peculiar kind (T 3.1.2.4; SBN 472; EPM 5.1n17; SBN 213n1).

23 In support of this reading, it is worth noting here Hume's disparaging attitude to analytic definitions. Hume says that giving "a synonymous term *instead* of a definition" (T 1.3.2.10; SBN 77, emphasis added) is philosophically unilluminating. See also T 1.3.14.4 (SBN 157).

24 A. E. Pitson, "Projectionism, Realism, and Hume's Moral Sense Theory," *Hume Studies* 15 (1989): 61–92, 66.

25 J. Y. T. Greig, *The Letters of David Hume*, vol. 1 (1727–1765) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 39–40.

26 Mackie also suggests that we read Hume "as intending to say that this is what you ought to mean because that is all that, on reflection, you could maintain." *Hume's Moral Theory*, 58. But this raises the question of what, on Mackie's view, Hume meant by 'ought' here. I take it that Mackie means that, on Hume's view, this is all you could maintain without saying or believing something that is false.

27 It is noteworthy that claims similar to Hume's seeming commitment to subjectivist naturalism are found in Adam Smith. For example, Smith says that "[t]o be the *proper* and approved object either of gratitude or of resentment can *mean* nothing but to be the object of that gratitude, and of that resentment, which naturally *seems* proper and is approved of" (TMS 2.1.2.1, emphases added). As with Hume's claim in the second *Enquiry* considered above, it is plausible to take Smith to be offering a real definition, that is, an account of *what it is* to be the proper object of gratitude or resentment. Smith also says that "[t]he very words, right, wrong, fit, improper, graceful, unbecoming, mean only what pleases or displeases those [i.e., the moral] faculties" (TMS 3.5.5). Like Hume, Smith is here concerned to reveal the psychological reality of moral judgments, so it might be plausible to take him to offer a revisionary account of ordinary moral discourse. But it is more difficult to find evidence in Smith that he took ordinary

moral thought and discourse to involve systematic error, so in the case of Smith, this interpretation lacks strong textual support.

28 However, I find no recommendation in Hume that we actually make the transition from ordinary, error-ridden moral thought and discourse to reformed moral thought and discourse free of error. On my reading, Hume's project is merely to sketch what an error-free moral discourse might look like. There is even some indication in Hume that he thinks it advisable on pragmatic ground to stick to ordinary, error-ridden moral thought and discourse. For a discussion of this, see Jonas Olson, "Getting Real about Moral Fictionalism," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, ed. R. Shafer-Landau, vol. 6 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), sect. 5. See also note 21 above.

29 In order further to support the interpretation that at T 3.1.1.26 (SBN 469), Hume is not talking about what 'vicious' means in *actual* moral discourse, it is worth considering his claim about force and energy in the abstract of *Treatise*: "either we have no idea at all of force and energy, and these words are altogether insignificant, or they can *mean* nothing but that determination of the thought, acquir'd by habit, to pass from the cause to its usual effect" (T Abs. 26; SBN 657, emphasis added). Here Hume can be taken to make a point parallel to the one I claim he makes at T 3.1.1.26 (SBN 469), namely, that in a reformed discourse about force and energy, the terms 'force' and 'energy' would be used to signify "that determination of the thought, acquir'd by habit, to pass from the cause to its usual effect." This is because we realize, on reflection, that this is all these words could signify. But it would be implausible to suggest this as an analysis of how 'force' and 'energy' are used in actual discourse. See, also, Edward Craig, "Hume on Causality: Projectivist and Realist?" In *The New Hume Debate* (revised edition), ed. Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman (London: Routledge, 2007): 113–21.

30 The case is analogous to ordinary thought and discourse about sensory qualities, for example, color. According to Hume, the vulgar think that colors are mind-independent qualities of objects. But there are no such properties, so either vulgar color judgments are false, or what the vulgar believe when they accept such judgments is false. However, the vulgar use of color terms is extensionally equivalent with the use of the enlightened "Philosophers & Corpuscularians" (Wood, "David Hume on Thomas Reid," 416) who have seen through the error and think of colors as secondary properties (that is, as powers or as properties in the mind); both the vulgar and the philosophically enlightened hold that the sky is blue, that grass is green, ripe tomatoes red, and so on. So ordinary thought and discourse about colors need not be greatly upset. This error, too, can be peacefully debunked.

31 Kail notes that this is a consideration sometimes mounted against projectivist and error theorist readings of Hume. *Projection and Realism*, 148. But, as already noted, Kail himself favours a variant of the projectivist reading.

32 When Hume ranks among "disingenuous disputants" those who deny "the reality of moral distinctions" (EPM 1.1; SBN 169), he has in mind philosophers like Hobbes and Mandeville who denied that humans have, and are motivated by, genuinely moral or other-regarding concerns and affections, as opposed to egoistic or self-regarding considerations. There is a similar critique of "licentious systems" in moral philosophy in Smith, TMS 7.2.4.

33 Nicholas Sturgeon, "Moral Skepticism and Moral Naturalism in Hume's *Treatise*," *Hume Studies* 27 (2001): 3–83, 7–8.

34 Sturgeon also says that projectivist and error theorist readings are often taken to gain support from Hume's is-ought passage, and Sturgeon takes this support to be undermined by his readings of the is-ought passage and others, which, he claims, fit better with his reductive realist interpretation. "Moral Skepticism and Moral Naturalism," 69n33.

35 According to Hume's phenomenological conception of belief, "belief is nothing but an idea, that is different from a fiction, not in the nature, or the order of its parts, but in the *manner* of its being conceiv'd" (T 1.3.7.7; SBN 628, Hume's emphasis). See, also, T 1.3.7.2–8 (SBN 94–98).

36 For similar points, see Cohon, *Hume's Morality*, 18–19, 42–43; Kail, *Projection and Realism*, 181–82, 190–92; and Sturgeon, "Moral Skepticism and Moral Naturalism," 21–22.

37 Later on in the *Treatise*, Hume says, "we find by experience, that the ideas of those objects, which we believe either are or will be existent, produce in a lesser degree *the same effect* with those impressions, which are immediately present to the senses and perception. The effect, then, of a belief is to raise up a simple idea to an equality with our impressions, and bestow on it a like influence on the passions" (T 1.3.10.3; SBN 119, emphasis added).

38 See Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 202.

39 One might, perhaps, think that Hume does commit himself to a necessary connection between making a moral judgment and being motivated to act accordingly when he argues that moral rationalists who maintain that moral facts are "eternal and immutable" relations must show that "the[se] [relations] have no less, or rather a greater, influence in directing the will of the deity, than in governing the rational and virtuous of our own species" (T 3.1.1.22; SBN 465). But he is not here claiming a necessary connection between making a moral judgment and being motivated to act accordingly. Note that he only speaks about morally righteous individuals, such as the deity and rational and virtuous human beings. He is arguing against the existence of mind-independent (relational) moral facts discoverable by reason, as postulated by moral rationalists. The premise is that such (relational) moral facts would necessarily influence the wills of morally righteous individuals and Hume's point is that "it has been shewn, in treating of the understanding, that there is no connexion of cause and effect, such as this is suppos'd to be, which is discoverable otherwise than by experience, and of which we can pretend to have any security by the simple consideration of objects" (T 3.1.1.22; SBN 466). Furthermore, as Hume says, "[t]is one thing to know virtue, and another to conform the will to it" (T 3.1.1.22; SBN 465).

40 Such realist readings must, of course, not make mind-independence a necessary condition of realism, since, as we have seen, Hume thinks that moral properties are mind-dependent. For an influential realist reading of Hume, see David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1982).

41 In one sense, Hume thinks that both *relata* are in minds, for he thinks that mental qualities are the primary bearers of moral properties: "If any *action* be either virtuous or vicious, 'tis only as a sign of some [mental] quality or character" (T 3.3.1.4; SBN 575, Hume's emphasis). But this does not mean, of course, that both *relata* are in the mind of a perceiver (though it might be, for instance, when one takes pride in one's own mental qualities).

42 Hume is not altogether consistent in his treatment of the ontology of moral properties. For instance, he claims that "these two particulars are to be consider'd as equivalent, with regard to our mental qualities, *virtue* and the *power* of producing love or pride, *vice* and the *power* of producing humility or hatred" (T 3.3.1.3; SBN 575, second and fourth emphases added), but as we have already seen, he also "defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*; and vice the contrary" (EPM App. 1.10; SBN 289). In the *Treatise*, he also states that "[t]he *pain or pleasure*, which arises from the general survey or view of any action or quality of the mind, *constitutes* its vice or virtue" (T 3.3.5.1; SBN 614, emphases added, Hume's emphasis omitted). I try, in the main text, to provide what seems, on balance, the most consistent and faithful interpretation of Hume's apparently conflicting claims about the ontology of moral properties.

43 A reconciling interpretation of Hume's metaethics is also offered in Garrett, chap. 9. My interpretation of Hume's metaethics has some affinities with Garrett's, but our reconciliation projects are different. Garrett's main aim is to offer an interpretation that reconciles cognitivist and non-cognitivist (or "propositional" and "non-propositional") readings of Hume (Garrett, 199–204), while my main aim is to reconcile error theorist and subjectivist realist readings.

44 As I read Mackie, his view is that there are no instantiated moral properties, and that this is not just a contingent truth about the actual world: it is metaphysically impossible for there to be instantiated moral properties. This follows from a version of strong moral supervenience, which I believe Mackie endorses, and which is independently plausible. The issue is too complex to be further developed here, however. For the purposes of this essay, the important point is that in attributing to Mackie the view that there are no moral properties, I attribute to him the view that it is metaphysically impossible for moral properties to be instantiated. It should be clear that in attributing to Hume the view that there are moral properties, I attribute to him not only the view that moral properties are possibly instantiated but also the view that moral properties are instantiated in the actual world.

45 J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), chap. 1.

46 For Samuel Clarke's view, see "A Discourse of Natural Religion," [1728] in Raphael, *British Moralists*, 1: 197–99.

47 Cf. Joyce, "Expressivism," 53 and Sobel, *Walls and Vaults*, 51–52.

48 Howard Sobel has noted that if Mackie's view is that moral discourse is essentially error-ridden, he cannot say what he evidently did say, namely that "[a] man [can] hold strong *moral* views . . . while believing that they [are] simply attitudes and policies with regard to conduct." Sobel, *Walls and Vaults*, 52, quoted from Mackie, *Ethics*, 16, Sobel's emphasis. To give Mackie a defensible view here, we could take him to be saying that a

man can subscribe to both views, but that he cannot attend to both views simultaneously. He must compartmentalize his thoughts and avoid entertaining both thoughts at one and the same time. See the discussion in Olson, “Getting Real,” sect. 5.

49 Hence, my reading of Hume accommodates Norton’s point that on Hume’s view, we have moral knowledge, and consequently, we need not “succumb to the moral skeptics.” Norton, *Common-Sense Moralist*, 150.