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# Projection, Indeterminacy and Moral Skepticism

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## 1. Moral Constructivism and Moral Error Theory

According to one way of understanding moral skepticism, to be a skeptic about morality is to hold that all moral claims are either false, incoherent, or something else misleadingly expressed. This tripartite disjunctive formulation is due to Bernard Williams, who made this claim about attributions to agents of reasons for action said to obtain regardless of the contents of their desires, and hence about any moral reasons so said to obtain (Williams 1981). Williams's formulation (although not his entire view) broadly captures the central claims of other recent proponents of moral skepticism, such as John Mackie (1977), Richard Joyce (2001), and Jonas Olson (2014)—also commonly known as 'moral error theorists'. In what follows, I use the terms 'moral skepticism' and 'moral error theory' interchangeably.

According to moral error theory, morality is something invented, constructed or made; but mistakenly presents itself to us as if it were an independent object of discovery. According to moral constructivism, morality is something invented, constructed or made.<sup>1</sup> Thus understood, error theory and constructivism are close philosophical relatives (Lillehammer 2011). Both types of view take morality to be a construction. But error theorists go further than constructivists in claiming that moral thought necessarily, or 'constitutively', presents itself as something different, or 'more' than that, namely, a cognitive reflection of a moral reality that

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<sup>1</sup> I intend this characterization of constructivism and error theory to be consistent with the claim that significant aspects of the human moral sensibility are a product of evolutionary and other non-intentional causes (see e.g. Lillehammer 2003). I mainly ignore this complication in what follows.

exists independently of our contingently evolved and historically emergent beliefs, desires, institutions or social practices.

The fact that constructivism stops short of claiming that morality presents itself as something it is not might be thought to give it a significant explanatory advantage over error theory insofar as the constructivist thereby avoids lumbering moral thought as a whole with a set of allegedly dubious commitments (see, e.g., the papers collected in Lenman & Shemmer 2012). As a starting point for discussion, this might indeed be a reasonable assumption. Yet its avoidance of attributing these allegedly dubious commitments to moral thought as a whole is only a genuine explanatory advantage of constructivism if at least two further conditions are met, namely, that *(i)* the constitutive presence in moral thought of these allegedly dubious commitments is not supported by the evidence of how moral thought actually works, and that *(ii)* a constructivist account of moral thought is not affected by other explanatory disadvantages when compared to its error theoretic competitors. In what follows, I have very little to say about *(i)*.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I focus on *(ii)*. In particular, I focus on the hypothesis that the ability of error theories to diagnose a range of genuinely dubious commitments embodied in moral thought is a comparatively neglected argument in their favor, as compared to constructivist accounts that have historically had relatively little to say about this aspect of moral thought. The cause of this explanatory gap in standard constructivist accounts is a topic I do not go into great detail about here, although it is likely to be at least partly a consequence of the fact that historical proponents of constructivism have understandably been more concerned to vindicate allegedly dubious aspects of moral thought than to debunk them. (I return to this point very briefly below.)

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of *(i)* in the context of current controversies, see e.g. Finlay (2014).

In what follows, I argue that, when suitably understood, constructivism is both compatible with, and in certain cases explanatory of, some of the allegedly dubious commitments to which arguments for moral skepticism appeal.<sup>3</sup> What distinguishes plausible constructivist accounts from paradigmatic versions of error theory is a diagnosis of these dubious commitments as contingent or local, and as existing against a background of moral claims to which the error theoretic hypothesis is not taken to apply (or is not taken to apply for the same reasons). In this paper, I focus on two particular allegations that are sometimes associated with moral skepticism.<sup>4</sup> The first is the suspicion that in making moral claims we are merely ‘projecting’ our attitudes onto the world, without there being any moral fact of the matter to which these attitudes correctly respond. I refer to this as the ‘projection challenge’. The second is the suspicion that in arguing for and against moral views we are merely attempting to influence each other to give similar, overlapping or identical answers to questions

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<sup>3</sup> I do not argue, nor would I want to claim, that constructivism is the only form of meta-ethical theory that can offer such explanations. Any minimally plausible meta-ethical theory should have the resources to offer such explanations. I take at least some versions of moral realism to be at least minimally plausible in the relevant sense. For example, some of the explanatory power of constructivist accounts of indeterminacy and permissiveness (discussed below) might be equally shared by realist views that accommodate indeterminacy and permissiveness by appealing to the vagueness inherent in (some) moral predicates.

<sup>4</sup> Comprehensively executing the strategy employed in this paper would require addressing every allegedly dubious commitment that either has been, or plausibly could be, targeted by moral error theorists; including such familiar suspects as the idea of a categorically binding reason for action, an intrinsically ‘magnetic’ normative fact, and so on. Addressing every allegedly dubious claim that has been targeted by moral error theorists is an unrealistic ambition for a single paper, so I do not attempt it here.

which in themselves have no determinate moral answer. I refer to this as the ‘indeterminacy challenge’. While taking it for granted that some projection and indeterminacy errors actually do occur in moral thought, I describe two ways in which the existence of a restricted error theoretical hypothesis can be incorporated by a constructivist account. On such a view, projection or indeterminacy can (and often do) obtain in a manner affecting the soundness of moral thought, but do so as contingent and local features of moral thought—not universal or necessary ones. Moreover, insofar as either projection or indeterminacy obtain in a manner affecting the soundness of moral thought, the challenges they present will often be substantially moral ones, and will therefore be possible to address from within moral thought itself. Taken together, these conclusions imply a reduction in the number of questions in meta-ethics that threaten to falsify or otherwise debunk the commitments embodied in moral thought as a whole, yet stop short of supporting the more radical view of those who claim that all questions in meta-ethics are reducible to questions of ‘first-order morality’ without remainder (cf. Kramer 2010; Dworkin 2011).

To avoid a basic misunderstanding at the outset, I should stress that being able to show how a constructivist account can accommodate the projection and indeterminacy challenges (and how the resulting account offers a diagnosis of what on constructivist terms are the excessively general implications drawn from these challenges by the moral skeptic) does not constitute a refutation of moral skepticism on its own terms. On the other hand, it might conceivably reduce the temptation (if such a temptation were felt) to think in those terms in the first place. If refuting the moral skeptic on his or her own terms were possible (and I am not sure that it is), that would be the topic of a different paper. I shall, however, return to the issue briefly in Section 3 below.

## **2. Projection and Indeterminacy**

## 2.a Projection

Sometimes we seem to attribute to aspects of our social world features of our own responses to that world, thereby mistaking the effect for the cause. This is a widely recognized epistemic defect, and one that sometimes goes under the name of ‘projection’ (see e.g. Kail 2007). Projection so understood can also be a moral defect, as exemplified by a vindictive person thirsty for revenge who falsely attributes to the object of their vindictiveness a hostile, aggressive or otherwise unsavory attitude to others. To the extent that we project our own attitudes onto the social world in this distinctive way we are apt to act less than well, for example by supporting retributive action against people who are completely blameless in the circumstances and who might actually be the object of the same hostile, aggressive or otherwise unsavory attitudes themselves. Projective error thus understood does not require its subject to be suffering from ill-intention or bad character. To take a slightly different example, it is possible for me to get so absorbed in my enthusiasm for a certain charitable plan or policy that I mistakenly come to think my favoring of it is in line with the general enthusiasm that plan or policy elicits in others, when in fact it elicits none. Thus, many people are familiar with the shock of the person who is told by her interlocutors that what seems so obviously agreeable to her is, as a matter of fact, completely unacceptable to everyone else, and where the difference in question comes down to the different affective construal by different people of the case in hand (e.g., where one person sees an opportunity, another person senses danger, and so on).

At least some constructivist accounts of moral thought agree that all moral judgements involve some element of ‘projection’, if in somewhat different ways.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it has been argued

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<sup>5</sup> The aim of the discussion that follows in the main text is to sketch how some constructivist accounts can allow for certain errors of projection, not to establish the independent plausibility of any form of constructivism. I therefore allow myself to skirt over a number of details of the different ways in which a constructivist account of moral thought could plausibly be developed, except where doing so is clearly

that all sound monadic predications of moral qualities to actions or states of affairs (such as goodness or badness) are best interpreted so as to include a hidden, or implicit, relational element connecting specific features of the social world with a set of attitudinal responses to that world in standard or otherwise suitable circumstances, such as a tendency to like or dislike the thought of their coming to exist (see, e.g., McDowell 1998; Wiggins 1998; Gert 2012). Yet even if all moral judgements involve a comparatively innocuous ‘projection’ of attitude in this perfectly general way, there will remain a subset of moral judgements (such as those described in the previous paragraph) that involve the ‘projection’ of attitudes in a distinctively more problematic way. Yet in favorable circumstances, moral judgements that do involve a ‘projection’ of attitudes in this distinctively more problematic way can in principle be reflectively updated or checked against the facts, such as facts about the causal history and function of those judgements (e.g., when I realize that the person actually exhibiting the hostile, aggressive or otherwise unsavory attitude is not my victim, but myself). Moral judgements that either survive or emerge from such a reflective process unscathed are ones a constructivist may classify as ‘reflectively robust’, as opposed to ones that would not (where neither set is thought to be empty).<sup>6</sup> The fact that all moral judgements involve the comparatively innocuous ‘projection’ of attitudes in the perfectly general way does not entail that all moral judgements involve a form of ‘projection’ in the distinctively more problematic way. This is not to say that

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in danger of making my conclusions look more general than they are intended to be. For further discussion of different kinds of constructivism, see e.g. Lillehammer (2011) and the essays in Lenman & Shemmer (2012).

<sup>6</sup> There are interesting complications here because some forms of ‘projection’ in the distinctively more problematic way can play a crucial role in the promotion of ends we are unwilling to renounce, even after suitably informed reflection. I briefly return to this issue in my discussion of self-reinforcing ‘fictions’ in Section 2.d below.

a sufficiently informed explanation of the ‘projective’ aspects of moral thought could not in principle support a general form of moral skepticism. Clearly it could, if all moral judgements could be shown to be ‘projective’ in the distinctively more problematic way described in the previous paragraph. Yet as it happens, at least some moral judgements do seem to be reflectively robust in the sense that they either do *not* involve the distinctively more problematic form of ‘projection’ described in the previous paragraph, or that a commitment to those judgements *would* survive our discovery of their original dependence on this distinctively more problematic form of ‘projection’. (Having discovered that your initial judgement was a product of unjustified prejudice, for example, you might in principle uncover alternative reasons for sticking to that judgement.) It follows that it is more than merely wishful thinking to believe that even though some ‘projective’ errors genuinely do obtain in moral thought, they do not (and so do not necessarily) affect all moral judgements equally; even if all moral judgements do involve some element of ‘projection’ in the comparatively innocuous and perfectly general way admitted to obtain by at least some moral constructivists.<sup>7</sup>

## **2.b. Indeterminacy**

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<sup>7</sup> The line of thought I have sketched in the main text would not go through for meta-ethical accounts that postulate correctness conditions for moral judgements that are said to exist in complete independence of moral thought—or at least it would not go through for such accounts without the addition of further (controversial) premises. It is partly the fact that the form of constructivism in question construes the correctness of moral judgements as some function of moral thought itself that makes it plausible to insist on the crucial distinction between the two senses of ‘projection’ in the way I have done in the main text. For further discussion of the implications of this point, see e.g. Lillehammer (2003) and Street (2006).

The above description of the reflective robustness of moral claims runs straight into an obvious challenge. What seems reflectively robust for me in some situation may not be what seems reflectively robust for me in another situation; or what seems reflectively robust for you, in this or in any other situation. As we all know, people holding what seems to them to be reflectively robust moral beliefs will sometimes disagree, even in the knowledge that the people they disagree with claim to be in exactly the same epistemically strong position as they do. What if each set of conflicting moral beliefs is reflectively robust to the same (maximal) degree? What if there is nothing to decide between them? What if the question is too vague, the values involved not possible to compare, or the answers to the moral questions at issue indeterminate? In that case, we are no further, assuming (as the moral skeptic might surmise) that in making moral judgements we necessarily take for granted that moral questions do have determinately correct answers that are the same for everyone in all circumstances.

Sometimes people do insist that their answer to a moral question is the uniquely correct one even if there are, in fact, other ways of answering the question that are equally sensible, or just as good. In each case, they are likely to be exhibiting an epistemic defect, even if they are lucky enough to have hit upon one of the acceptable answers. The epistemic defect in question is one of dogmatism, which can result from confusing the reasonable desire to find an acceptable answer to a pressing question with the unreasonable insistence that there can be only one. This kind of dogmatism can also be a moral defect, as when someone adopts an intolerant attitude towards other people whose approach to an issue is perfectly reasonable, but significantly different from their own (as may happen when someone falls for the temptation to place victory in argument above the virtues of fairness or truthfulness). To take one actual example among many, some of us are familiar with institutional norms and regulations that differ subtly from one institution to another (e.g., between different clubs, societies, departments or corporations of the same kind), where each set of norms and regulations actually

serves the ends of the institutions that adopt them as well as could reasonably be hoped for, in spite of being extensionally different from each other (e.g., in terms of how votes are accumulated when electing officers in one of the many selection practices that go under the label 'democratic'). In each of the institutions in question, there may have been long (and sometimes tedious) internal discussions between members about which set of norms and regulations are the correct ones to adopt, discussions that may have taken place in more or less complete isolation from exactly parallel discussions in the institution next door. In each case, the debates may have been intense, and the disagreements deep and trenchant. At the same time, it might be the case that for each set of mutually incompatible norms and regulations considered in these discussions, at least one of the relevant institutions has actually gone on to adopt it, and have done so successfully. Hence, by all accounts, and in spite of how things may have looked to the local disputants at the time, there could be more than one set of norms and regulations that is perfectly acceptable for the kind of institution in question; norms and regulations that would reflectively stand the test of time, and that are capable of justly and effectively serving the institutions that endorse them. This in spite of the fact that each set of norms and regulations will conflict with all the others on at least one issue. Once the virtues of epistemic modesty (e.g., always bearing in mind the possibility that further discussion or new evidence may decide the issue) and moral integrity (e.g., bearing in mind that some forms of pluralism are a symptom of intellectual laziness or complicity by omission) have been taken into account, to insist that only one of these sets of norms or regulations could in fact (or 'really') be correct for institutions of this kind can be a symptom of an insufficient grasp of the scope of acceptable difference in morally legitimate and worthwhile social practices, where the question of whether to accept as adequate more than one solution to a problem is sometimes itself a substantially moral one.

According to moral error theory, all substantial moral judgements are either false, incoherent, or something else misleadingly expressed. Hence, there are no correct answers to moral questions, never mind a unique and determinate answer in every (or, indeed, any) case. If there is no right answer, then all moral questions are objectively indeterminate at best; any solution to a moral problem being as good as any other, at least as far as its distinctively moral merits are concerned. When it comes to getting moral things right (as opposed to getting other things right, such as being able to survive, making a living, or silencing one's opponents, etc.), there is literally no issue of correctness to discuss.

There is a good case to be made for the claim that the answer to at least some moral questions is indeterminate (cf. Putnam 2004; Albrecht 2014: ch. 4; Constantinescu 2014). On that issue, the moral skeptic is probably right. These questions include ones that admit of more than one perfectly reasonable solution, possibly like the institutional examples I sketched in the previous paragraph. There is also some evidence that at least in some cases people do make the false assumption either that some specific answer to a moral question is uniquely and determinately correct, or that there must be such an answer, even if there is none. Yet as we attain some degree of moral maturity, we normally become able (perhaps after a bit of agonistic soul-searching or criticism from others) to grasp that sometimes a question that previously seemed to us to allow for one, and only one, acceptable answer does, in fact, have a plurality of acceptable answers. One way for there to be a plurality of acceptable answers to a moral question is for two or more answers to be most reasonable together, or disjunctively. Thus, to the question whether we should choose A or B the answer could be: choose either (e.g., "Take a bath in the sea or a cold shower"). More importantly for present purposes, many plausible cases of apparent moral indeterminacy are located against a background of generally accepted determinacy. Thus, to the question whether we should choose A or B, the answer may be: choose either, but definitely not C or D (e.g., "Either give her an aspirin or a paracetamol, but

don't give her all the pills in either bottle all at once"). Thinking back to the institutional case described in the previous paragraph, there is normally a limited range of possible norms and regulations within which serious participants could reasonably favor one set over another. Beyond that range, there is a set of conceivable norms and regulations the lack of coherence of which, the self-defeating nature of which, or the sheer perversity of which will make morally serious participants either rule them out from the start, or (so one might wish) never think of them in the first place. To accept that some moral questions have no unique, determinate and non-disjunctive answer does not therefore imply that we should worry about losing our moral bearings altogether, even if some claims to unique and determinate correctness are either silly or dogmatic, or both.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the fact that people do sometimes falsely insist on there being a unique, determinate and non-disjunctively correct answer to some moral questions does not support the error theoretic hypothesis that moral thought as such is defective in virtue of its false insistence on there being unique, determinate and non-disjunctively correct answers to all moral questions. So long as only a single moral question has a unique, determinate and non-disjunctively correct answer, the unrestricted error theoretic hypothesis is false. Moral thought can survive the case by case discovery of local indeterminacy with respect to particular sets of moral claims against the background of moral claims the (in-)correctness of which is perfectly determinate. In this sense, the discovery of moral indeterminacy is potentially 'conservative' with respect to the status of the moral judgements against the background of which the indeterminacy in question is located.

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<sup>8</sup> To say that a unique and determinate answer is 'non-disjunctive' is not to deny the obvious truths that there is always more than one way to carry out an action, and that any proposition can trivially be turned into a disjunction without change in truth value. The implicit assumption is that we can identify a subset of disjunctions as informative or interesting for the purposes at hand. To this extent, the notion of a 'non-disjunctive' answer is correspondingly theory- or interest-relative.

The local, or even widespread, existence of indeterminacy in moral thought is readily explicable on any constructivist account on which moralities (like social institutions, such as clubs or societies) are understood as individual and/or collective works in progress or development, and to this extent potentially undecided, open-ended or disjunctively permissive with respect to at least some moral claims that either have been, or could be, coherently formulated.<sup>9</sup> Such constructivist accounts can readily account for even the widespread existence of mistaken commitments to unique, determinate and non-disjunctively correct answers to moral questions while stopping short of the skeptical claim that all moral thought is thus mistakenly committed with respect to every moral judgement that could possibly be made. The range of constructivist accounts able to accommodate this phenomenon may fail to include certain views according to which the answer to all moral questions is said to be fixed as a matter of necessity by features constitutive of human (or even rational) agency. Yet it is hard to think of any form of constructivism, even of the strictest Kantian variety, that entails this radical conclusion (see e.g. Korsgaard 2009). Either way, the requisite degree of indeterminacy in moral thought is (i) consistent with any form of constructivism according to which the correctness of moral judgement is taken to be function of moral thought and practice, or its historical development, and (ii) explained by any form of constructivism according to which moral thought and practice, or its historical development, is partially constitutive of the correctness of moral judgements.

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<sup>9</sup> The basic sketch of constructivism given in the main text is neutral with respect to whether ‘morality’ is thought of primarily as an ‘individual’ or as a ‘social’ construction. Many recent discussions of constructivism (such as the so-called ‘neo-Kantian’ and ‘neo-Humean’ versions of constructivism discussed in Lenman & Shemmer 2012) seem to have followed the former route. For various reasons I am not able to go into at greater length here, I favor the latter route.

## 2.c Projection and Indeterminacy

The false projection of idiosyncratic responses onto a non-obliging social reality and the mistaken insistence on there being unique, determinate and non-disjunctively correct answers to moral questions are logically independent ways for moral judgements to be in error. Yet there are potentially illuminating ways in which these two errors could be combined to produce a distinctive source of error in moral thought. One way in which some moral judgements could involve a distinctive error so understood is as follows. Suppose my reaction to a morally significant situation (such as a proposed change in my working patterns) is fear (e.g., because I tend to be averse to changes proposed by people other than myself). I judge the proposed change to be a risky and dangerous threat to what is agreed by all to be a collegial and mutually supportive working environment, and strongly object to it on those grounds. However, most of my colleagues fail to share this reaction, not having experienced the same levels of fear or surprise as I. In fact, most of them see the proposed change as a positive step, having as a predictable consequence the saving of person hours and a prospect for all employees to spend more time with their families. A heated dispute ensues, in my own case characterized by the following two key facts. First, I am adamant that the proposed change is bad, in virtue of being a serious threat to the existing collegial and mutually supportive office culture (at least as I imagine it to be). Second, I am adamant that there is no other acceptable solution than the *status quo*. There can be one, and only one, reasonable solution to this conflict, and that is the one I have proposed. (The judgments of my colleagues may or may not exhibit the same dogmatic tendencies.)

This imaginary (but not entirely unrealistic) example shows two sources of moral error working together, with the first error (projection) playing an explanatory role in generating the second (determinacy). In short, my mistaken insistence that there is a unique, determinate and

non-disjunctively correct answer to the question at hand is in this case explained by my mistaken insistence that the only salient alternative to my own view is dangerous, where the latter judgment is explained by my unreasonable fear. In this way, an ‘error of projection’ and an ‘error of determinacy’ can (and sometimes probably do) work together to produce a more complex and distinctive error in moral thought in the same situation. A constructivist account of moral thought can accommodate this kind of complex error. Yet on a plausible constructivist account, errors of this kind will be interpreted as the contingent, local and in principle correctable errors which in at least some cases they hopefully are.

## **2.d Comparisons and Implications**

What I have called the ‘error of projection’ essentially involves the mistaken attribution to the social world of a feature that is actually located in the mind of the person making the relevant moral claim, as when my fear causes me to regard some harmless aspect of the world as dangerous.<sup>10</sup> The error of determinacy does not necessarily involve a mistaken attribution of this kind. Yet the error of determinacy could also involve a mistaken attribution to the world of a feature that occurs only in the mind of the person making a moral claim, such as would be the case where my belief that some moral question must have a unique, determinate and non-disjunctively correct answer is explained by the fact that the possibility of things being as I think they are is one I find too painful to contemplate. While the latter case may not be helpfully described as a case of ‘projection’, it certainly belongs to a similar family of epistemic (and

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<sup>10</sup> I am assuming here that some cases of fear are accurate responses to a social world that is, in fact, dangerous. The same goes for other more or less ‘thick’ descriptions that a constructivist account of moral thought will admit as true, or otherwise correct, descriptions of social reality, but which moral skeptics (and potentially some moral realists) are likely to classify as embodying potentially dubious metaphysical claims.

sometimes moral) defects, in the sense that the way I judge the world to be is excessively colored by how I feel. Errors of determinacy essentially consist in overestimating the size of the domain of questions that have a unique, determinate and non-disjunctively correct answer. Thus understood, they are errors of over-generalization. Errors of projection are not characterized by this kind of over-generalization, as opposed to falsely locating one set of features in the wrong place (e.g., ‘the world’ as opposed to ‘the mind’), and potentially mischaracterizing those features in so doing (e.g., as ‘danger’ as opposed to ‘fear’). In these respects, errors of projection and determinacy are importantly different, both with respect to what they consist in, and with respect to the kind of diagnosis and correction they are likely to be susceptible to during the course of moral reflection and development.

Errors of projection and determinacy also differ in the way their emergence or persistence in moral thought can be given a plausible functional explanation or rationale. It is comparatively easy to see why we should not be surprised to find errors of determinacy in various areas of moral (and other) thought, insofar as a commitment to argue as though the truth is “single”(cf. Blackburn 1985) can function to overcome epistemic complacency; to generate such agreement as is possible; to discover non-obvious, but reasonable alternatives; to increase the sophistication and overall coherence of our moral beliefs; and to ensure that we leave no stone unturned in matters of great importance, and so on. To that extent, it might be tempting to describe the error of determinacy as manifesting a ‘virtue’ that involves a false belief at its core. A tendency to mistake our groundless fear for genuine danger, on the other hand, is not so obviously a recipe for sharpening our moral/epistemic tools, nor for getting better at discovering such genuine danger as our social world clearly contains. To this extent, it may be harder to think of the error of projection as manifesting an epistemologically or morally admirable outlook. Yet in some situations, even a tendency to falsely ‘project’ an idiosyncratic attitude onto the social world could arguably play a morally significant social

role, for example if that social world is widely and accurately characterized by my merited distrust, and where the false ‘projection’ of fear, for example, comes to serve a protective function. Furthermore, by projecting my own idiosyncratic responses onto the social world I may succeed in ‘framing’ the way that other people approach it so as to encourage responses that serve my ends.<sup>11</sup> To this extent, errors of projection can also be given a morally significant rationale. It follows that unless they are (jointly or separately) replaceable without great cost by moralized responses that play a similar role without the associated error, both errors of projection and errors of indeterminacy can in principle play the role of self-reinforcing (but contingent and local) ‘fictions’, in something like the way that some error theorists have claimed that all moral claims do (cf. Joyce 2001; Lillehammer 2004).

From a constructivist perspective, the functional explanation or rationale proposed for errors of projection and determinacy will differ significantly from the parallel explanation or rationale proposed by standard forms of error theory. Most significantly, standard forms of error theory will characteristically attempt to give a functional explanation or rationale for the alleged error in question that is articulated reductively, and so entirely in non-moral (and possibly non-normative) terms. From the perspective of constructivism, the situation is different. Because constructivism allows that a wide range of moral claims are actually true, valid or otherwise correct as they stand, it will be natural (and perfectly consistent) for a constructivist account of moral thought to give a functional explanation or rationale for local errors in moral thought that is either explicitly or implicitly moral to some extent. In other

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<sup>11</sup> There are interesting dangers lurking here, as manifested (for example) by the power of religious demagogues, political propagandists and persuasive advertisers. Exploring these dangers is a topic for another occasion. For the purposes of illustration, the reader might observe the affective content of virtually any minimally sophisticated online interface, or the increasing use (and apparent effectiveness) in the use of social media in mainstream politics.

words, given that some moral claims are actually reflectively robust, it will be natural (and perfectly consistent) for a constructivist to say that some errors of projection or indeterminacy have a substantially moral function or rationale, and to treat that as a genuine explanation to be evaluated on its own (partly moral) terms. Any analogously moralized explanations offered by a moral skeptic, on the other hand, must be seen for what they are, namely, as at best second-rate approximations to explanations, useful explanatory illusions, or some other kind of explanatory ‘Fools’ Gold’.

### **3. Some Preliminary ‘Results’**

There is such a thing as ‘errors of projection’ in moral thought. One error of projection consists in misattributing aspects of one’s own personal attitudes to features of the social world, for example by overestimating the extent to which those attitudes are shared by others. This kind error of projection can be corrected for by investigating the facts in question, including relevant facts about the causes and function of one’s own attitudes. The existence of this kind of error of projection does not support a general form of moral skepticism. In particular, it does not support the skeptical conclusion that all moral claims involve an error of projection that embroils them, of necessity, in falsehood, incoherence or misunderstanding.

There is also such a thing as an ‘error of determinacy’ in moral thought. One kind of error of determinacy consists in overestimating the extent to which moral questions have unique, determinate and non-disjunctively correct answers; sometimes by insisting that ‘moral truth’ is single in the face of stronger evidence for either pluralism or indeterminacy. This kind of error of determinacy can also be corrected for by investigating the facts in question, including the relevant facts about the causes and function of the insistence on perfect determinacy. The existence of this kind of error of determinacy does not on its own support a general form of moral skepticism either. In particular, it does not support the skeptical

conclusion that all moral judgements are falsely committed to the view that all moral questions have unique, determinate and non-disjunctively correct answers.

Both of these preliminary conclusions are consistent with the claim that some moral judgements do embody genuinely dubious commitments. In some cases, these will be dubious ‘non-moral’ commitments (e.g., that the non-human world is literally ‘hostile’ or ‘friendly’ to our personal desires or concerns, as opposed to either ‘dangerous’ or ‘beneficial’). In other cases, they will be dubious ‘moral’ commitments (e.g., that it is always right to insist that there can be only one acceptable solution to a co-ordination problem, when in fact there can be more than one). There are at least three ways to go wrong in giving an account of the place of such dubious commitments in moral thought. The first is to treat local and contingent features of some moral judgements as if they were necessary features of all moral judgements (cf. Williams 1985; Lillehammer 2013). The second is to treat substantially moral questions as if they were ‘non-moral’ questions about the nature of morality (cf. Blackburn 1998; Kramer 2010). The third is to overplay the significance of the fact that some moral judgements commit us to a ‘disorderly’, or otherwise insufficiently sparse, ‘ontology’ (cf. Putnam 2004; Price 2011). Although visible at the margins, the third of these ways of going wrong has been much less prominent in the preceding pages than the first two. This is not to deny that it is of genuine interest (cf. Lillehammer 2013).

It might be objected that the descriptions I have given in the two previous sections of local and contingent errors in moral thought are poorly targeted as far as traditional discussions of moral skepticism are concerned. These discussions, far from making invalid inferences from local and contingent aspects of some moral claims, explicitly address what are claimed to be universal or necessary features of such claims, such as an allegedly false commitment to mind independence, or an incoherent postulation of irreducible normative properties (Mackie 1977;

Joyce 2001; Olson 2014). With respect to these questions, what I have described in the previous two sections as errors of projection and determinacy are beside the point.

There is inevitably some truth in this complaint. But then my aim in this paper has not been to produce an argument against moral skepticism on its own terms (which we may or may not accept as a sensible starting point), but instead to show that one feature of moral thought that might seem to be better accounted for by moral skepticism can in fact be accounted for also on a moral constructivist account, *up to a point*. (The qualification ‘up to a point’ is crucial because from a constructivist perspective there is no phenomenon to be explained beyond the relevant point, and so no rationale for making the attempt.) Thus, I have tried to be very clear throughout that my main focus would not be every allegedly universal and necessary feature of moral claims that has historically been targeted in existing arguments for moral skepticism, but rather a more restricted domain of contingent, local and generally correctable errors that can be agreed to exist by moral skeptics and their critics alike. The reason for choosing this focus is precisely that in discussing these contingent, local and generally correctable errors it is possible to show not only that constructivist accounts of moral thought are able to capture some of the genuine insights about projection and indeterminacy alluded to in standard arguments for moral skepticism, but also to raise the possibility that in some cases at least, those insights are more plausibly interpretable as capturing contingent, local and correctable errors, as opposed to the necessary, universal and non-eliminable errors that moral skeptics have claimed to find in moral thought as a whole. Finally, the errors of projection and determinacy I have described in the previous two sections are recognizably real and empirically observable errors in moral thought, as opposed to at least some of the errors claimed to exist by recent moral theorists; errors which have tended to be visible only on the analytical metaphysician’s balance sheet, and the alleged implications of which have therefore tended to be restricted to the ordering of the columns therein (cf. Blackburn 1998). The errors of

projection and indeterminacy I have described in the previous two sections should therefore be of interest also to those who are concerned about the threat of so-called ‘debunking arguments’ in ethics more widely, regardless of the comparative merits of constructivism and error theory as comprehensive theories in metaethics.

#### **4. In Search of the Moral Skeptic**

According to one form of ancient skepticism, there is no more reason to believe any proposition than there is to believe its contradiction. We should therefore be agnostic with respect to the truth value of all propositions, moral or non-moral, at the cost of irrationality. Regardless of the well-known issue about whether it is internally coherent (i.e. should we be agnostic with also with respect to the skeptical proposition?), this form of skepticism, widely known as ‘Pyrrhonian’, has one particularly interesting feature. The Pyrrhonian skeptic does not attempt to stand outside of ordinary discourse in order to judge it as epistemically defective with respect to some externally validated standard. Instead, the skeptical conclusion is derived from inside ordinary discourse by considering each claim and counterclaim on a case by case basis, and finding that neither can be more or less securely established than the other. In this sense, Pyrrhonian skepticism is a paradigmatic form of ‘internal’ skepticism. It is therefore not refutable by the philosophical strategy of pointing to the alleged incoherence, absurdity or impracticality of taking up a philosophical perspective (or an ‘Archimedean point’) outside of human thought and practice altogether (cf. Williams 1985).

Pyrrhonian skepticism has a metaphysical analogue with which it should not be confused (but with which it is arguably interchangeable in practice). On this view, there is no proposition that is more true, valid, or otherwise correct than its contradiction. We should therefore stop short of actually believing any proposition, moral or non-moral, at the cost of illusion. Unlike its epistemic analogue, this form of skepticism unquestionably deserves the

title of an ‘error theory’ about said propositions, the implication being that to believe a proposition is to believe either a falsehood, a contradiction, or something else that falls short of the ‘aim’ of truth. Like its epistemic analogue, this form of skepticism does not attempt to stand outside of ordinary human discourse in order to judge it metaphysically defective with respect to some externally validated ontological standard. Instead, the skeptical conclusion is said to be derivable from the inside of ordinary human discourse by considering each claim and counterclaim on a case by case basis, and finding that neither can be true (e.g., because they both entail a contradiction). In this sense, the metaphysical analogue of Pyrrhonian skepticism is also a paradigmatic form of ‘internal’ skepticism. It is therefore not refutable by pointing to either the incoherence, absurdity or impracticality of taking up a philosophical perspective (or an ‘Archimedean point’) outside of human thought and practice altogether.

A constructivist account of moral thought is compatible with ‘internal’ forms of moral skepticism, of both the epistemic and the metaphysical variety. Yet if the arguments I have given in this paper are plausible, we can make sense of this kind of ‘internal’ moral skepticism as contingent and local. A constructivist account of moral thought is also compatible with the claim that it is possible to ask ‘external’ questions about moral thought, such as how moral claims can be ‘located’ with respect to other claims to which we attribute justification, truth or facticity. Yet if the claims I have made in this paper are at all plausible, any such ‘external’ location exercise is likely to be of limited significance for what we should say about our entitlement to claims about moral justification, truth or facticity, as opposed to what we should say about how such claims are most plausibly interpreted (cf. Blackburn 1998). As far as I can see, this is all as it should be. The Pyrrhonian hypothesis is one that ought to be rejected—on epistemological, on metaphysical, and on substantially moral grounds.<sup>12</sup>

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