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The 'Now What' Problem for error theory

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Abstract Error theorists hold that, although our first-order moral thought and discourse commits us to the existence of moral truths, there are no such truths. Holding this position in metaethics puts the error theorist in an uncomfortable position regarding first-order morality. When it comes to our pre-theoretic moral commitments, what should the error theorist think? What should she say? What should she do? I call this the 'Now What' Problem for error theory. This paper suggests a framework for evaluating different approaches to the 'Now What' Problem, and goes on to evaluate the three most common responses to this problem. All three are found to have noteworthy problems. Finally, I present my own solution, and argue that it presents the most appealing solution to the 'Now What' Problem.

Keywords Error theory · Fictionalism · Abolitionism · Conservationism

Errol the Error Theorist has just completed his dissertation on moral error theory. He has argued, as persuasively as he knows how, that there are no objective moral truths. Errol's arguments are as good as arguments for error theory could possibly be, and he finishes his dissertation feeling supremely confident that he has set upon the truth. Leaving his office, Errol sees his friend Rachel, who is in the living room watching the news. The top story of the day is about a serial rapist and murderer, with a penchant for corpse mutilation—a truly sickening story. Rachel, watching the

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TV aghast, exclaims "God, this is awful! Isn't that right, Errol?" Errol is immediately inclined to agree, but before he opens his mouth, he remembers his commitment to the view that *nothing* is *really* awful in the absolute, moral sense that Rachel intends.[1] So how should he respond to Rachel?

Of course, the puzzle that Errol faces is more general than how he should answer one question posed by a friend. Moral thought, discourse, and action play a large role in all of our lives. Error theorists, it is widely supposed, put themselves in a position where they must abandon all of these commitments, thereby leaving a gaping hole in their normative lives. How should error theorists proceed in light of this development; how should they allow their first-order normative lives to be impacted by their second-order normative commitments? I call this the 'Now What' Problem for error theory. This paper will explore how error theorists can—and *should* (we'll see in a second why this isn't in tension with the error theory itself)—respond to the 'Now What' Problem.

A good solution to the 'Now What' Problem will serve two important functions. First, it will serve as a bit of practical advice for error theorists who still have to navigate the world, thinking about what to do, acting, and interacting with others (i.e., all error theorists). While this is surely a useful thing to have, the (sad) fact of the matter is that there aren't all that many error theorists, and so this benefit is going to be rather limited in scope. But second, a good solution to the 'Now What' Problem serves an important role in rebutting an objection to the error theory. Many people consider the error theory to be an entirely unacceptable metaethical theory because they feel as though they must be giving up something essential in accepting it.[2] A good solution to the 'Now What' Problem will provide a framework wherein error theorists are not forced to give up much (or anything) of importance. And thus one important source of resistance to adopting an error theory about morality can be undermined.

Section 1 will address some preliminary issues. Sections 2 through 4 will ask a series of yes/no questions designed to divide up the logical space of potential solutions to the 'Now What' Problem, and will show the rather severe costs that are incurred by giving certain answers to these questions. This discussion will drive us toward a particular solution to the 'Now What' Problem, that I call Substitutionism, which has been largely ignored in the current literature. Section 5 will examine the commitments of Substitutionism, and look at what makes this kind of solution powerful and desirable.

1 Preliminaries

The question with which this paper is concerned is the question of how error theorists *should* solve the 'Now What' Problem. This question is, obviously, a normative question, but asking it is not in tension with the kind of error theory that

[1] In the absolute, moral sense that he believes Rachel intends.

[2] See Enoch (2011, Chap. 3) for an articulation of this form of resistance.

this paper is concerned with. This paper is focused on an error theory about *morality*, not about any other kind of normativity. While there are some *global error theorists*, who adopt an error theory about all normativity,[3] many error theorists, including myself, are not. The common line of thought underlying the moral error theory is that objective normativity is unacceptably problematic. Yet *instrumental* normativity—normativity grounded in our own attitudes, plans, goals, or desires—is not. So as long as we interpret the normative question of how we *should* solve the 'Now What' Problem as an appeal to instrumental normativity, there are no problems. Some have questioned the intelligibility of a view that accepts one kind of normativity while denying others,[4] and there may be genuine cause for concern here, but it is not my task in this paper either to argue for any particular version of error theory or to defend the error theory against objections. My task is, instead, to see how the 'Now What' Problem can be answered by an error theorist about morality, assuming that an error theory about morality (and only morality) is coherent.[5]

Even though one of the roles of a solution to the 'Now What' Problem is to convince the realist that the error theory is a palatable view, it is important that this is a problem that the error theorist is able to resolve on his own terms. While the realist with whom the error theorist is engaging will have in mind a large number of normative commitments that would resolve Errol's problems (perhaps topped by the command "Don't be an error theorist"), a genuine solution to the 'Now What' Problem must avoid even tacit endorsement of these non-instrumental norms, lest his argument for the error theory be self-undermining. For this reason, the normative questions that constitute the 'Now What' Problem must be understood as instrumental normative questions.

While a moral error theorist will regard any claim to the effect that something *should* be done, *full stop*, with suspicion, there is no problem at all with claims of the form "S should X, provided that she has the following goals/desires/plans…" Hence, this is the form that my investigation into the 'Now What' Problem will take. Rather than making broad claims about what the error theorist should do, we will see what goals and desires will (plausibly) be fulfilled by certain courses of action, and which will be frustrated. In order that the conclusions offered here will hold in substantial generality, I will be looking at a handful of goals and desires that are shared by (almost) all human agents—e.g. the goal to hold only true beliefs, or the goal to get along with one's friends. Solutions to the 'Now What' Problem will

[3] See, e.g., Streumer (2011) and Biehl (2005).

[4] See, e.g., Cuneo (2007).

[5] For a defense of such a view, see Joyce (2001) or Mackie (1977). For both Joyce and Mackie, the problem for morality that forces us to an error theory is not a problem for reasons *as such*, but for reasons with a certain kind of property. For Mackie, these are "objective" reasons. For Joyce, these are reasons that hold for an agent independently of that agent's desires; "a reason for Φing regardless of whether Φing serves his desires or furthers his interests" (p. 42). (Since Mackie isn't very explicit about what he means by "objective," Mackie's and Joyce's worries may well amount to the same thing.) Consequently, the version of error theory that these authors endorse is limited in the way described.

be better to the extent that these goals will be fulfilled, and worse to the extent that they are not.

The different solutions to the 'Now What' Problem are not "views" in any traditional sense, as they do not purport to *describe* the nature of the actual normative lives of any individuals—not the life of the person on the street nor the life of the committed error theorist.[6] The different solutions to the 'Now What' Problem amount to different *recommendations* for how an error theorist might proceed in everyday life, and so the following discussion will focus on the instrumental costs of occupying different areas of the logical space of solutions to the 'Now What' Problem.

2 Conservationism

The first question an error theorist should ask is whether or not he can maintain his first-order moral beliefs while still being an error theorist. Some error theorists do hold that we should indeed do this; this is the Conservationist solution to the 'Now What' Problem.

Joyce (2001) reads Mackie as a Conservationist. Mackie famously said that his error theory amounts to a second-order moral skepticism only, and not a first-order moral skepticism. And while it is possible to be both a first-order and a second-order skeptic (as some of the other views that we will examine recommend), it is open to us to keep all of our first order moral beliefs while at the same time "believing that they were simply attitudes and policies with regard to conduct that he and other people held" (Mackie 1977, p. 16). But a different reading of Mackie's view would hold that Mackie is advocating for abandonment of our moral beliefs while seeing our normative lives as governed by our "attitudes and policies." On this reading, Mackie would not be a Conservationist, but instead what I will be calling a Substitutionist—more on this later.

For a more clear-cut take on the Conservationist view, we can look to the recent defense of Conservationism by Jonas Olson. Olson urges "compartmentalization," saying that we ought to believe that nothing is right or wrong while simultaneously believing that a great number of particular things are right or wrong. Olson "recommends moral belief in morally engaged and everyday contexts and reserves attendance to the belief that moral error theory is true to detached or critical contexts such as the seminar room" (2011, p. 199).

The big cost of Conservationism is that it is *irrational*. The Conservationist specifically recommends that, for any moral belief p, we both believe p and disbelieve p, which is straightforwardly irrational. Olson tries to lessen the sting of

[6] This point is sometimes not appreciated. Nolan et al. (2005), in their defense of Joycean Fictionalism, argue that it is a better view than expressivism. But this is a strange apples-and-oranges comparison, since Joycean Fictionalism, as a solution to the 'Now What' Problem, is a recommendation for error theorists, while expressivism is a descriptive view about the actual nature of normative thought and language. The fact that this kind of mistake even could be made to begin with shows how under-developed the current literature on the 'Now What' Problem is.

holding these inconsistent attitudes by reminding us that we are "compartmentalizing" our beliefs. But it's hard to see how this mitigates the problem, rather than simply naming it; compartmentalized inconsistent beliefs are still irrational. Olson tries to provide more depth to this idea of compartmentalization by saying that, in morally engaged contexts, Conservationists will have an occurrent belief that the moral proposition is true, but a dispositional belief that it is false. This use of terminology does not mitigate the concerns at all, since dispositional beliefs are still full beliefs—they just are beliefs that one does not currently have in mind. (Or, at least, this is the standard way of understanding the occurrent/dispositional distinction regarding beliefs.) *To the extent that we value rationality in our belief-like attitudes* (and this is something we all value), Conservationism will come with costs.

Second, and obviously related to this cost, is that the Conservationist holds onto false beliefs (on the assumption that the error theory is true). According to the Conservationist, we should hold onto beliefs that are not warranted, that are not true, and that do not amount to knowledge. This violates a plethora of epistemic norms. And if we interpret epistemic norms as instrumental norms directed at maximizing true belief (and/or knowledge) while eliminating false beliefs,[7] Conservationism will fare poorly *to the extent that we value true belief while disvaluing false belief* (and we do value this). In essence, the Conservationist is advocating for a form of Orwellian doublethink regarding moral beliefs. *To the extent that we hold doublethink to be undesirable* (and we do hold this), we should be wary of adopting Conservationism.

Finally, Conservationism might actually be an incoherent view. Apart from the irrationality of both believing and disbelieving p, it might be *impossible* to both simultaneously believe and disbelieve p.[8] Olson considers this objection, but ultimately holds that it is possible to do this. According to Olson, we do it all the time. For instance, there might be a politician who is both a notorious liar and a brilliant public speaker. Knowing that this politician is a liar, I disbelieve everything that she says. And yet, when I hear her give a speech, I find myself believing what she says. In this case, says Olson, I have an occurrent belief in what is being said at the same time that I have a dispositional belief that what is being said is false. This seems to me to misdescribe the case. If I truly do have an occurrent belief in what the politician says, then I no longer have a dispositional belief that what the politician says is false. If the politician gets me to believe what she is telling me through force of rhetoric, then *I have been convinced*; I no longer disbelieve the politician. Once the speech is over and I am able to escape the rhetorical thrall of the speech, I might then revert back to my old belief. But this is not a case of my holding two beliefs at once—I'm changing my mind! Consider: if I have a belief that p, I will have any dispositions related to p that are constitutive of belief—for example, I will treat it as a premise in my practical reasoning, I will assent to it if I

[7] It is a matter of controversy whether epistemic norms are to be interpreted instrumentally or categorically. My sympathies are with the interpretation of epistemic norms as instrumental. But even if the best interpretation of our epistemic norms is as categorical norms, we can articulate a related set of truth-directed instrumental norms that a Conservationist will end up violating.

[8] Note that here I say *might be*. But even if the following arguments fail, the other problems for Conservationism look damning enough that not much is lost by way of my overall argument.

am being open and honest, I will give whatever reasons I have for that belief if the belief is questioned, and so on. Given this, it seems impossible for me to both believe *p* and disbelieve *p*. (I take no stance on which (if any) of these dispositions actually are constitutive norms on belief. But *if* there are any constitutive norms on belief, there is a problem for Conservationism.) Even when I am in the middle of the politician's persuasive speech, I will be inclined to take *p* as a premise in my practical reasoning, or I will not, and so on. It might instead be that I am "torn" in such a case, and end up manifesting none of the relevant dispositions for believing either *p* or not-*p*, but that is not a case of both believing *p* and disbelieving *p*, either. That is a case of suspension of belief.

The Conservationist might respond by saying that as error theorists we ought to believe that all moral propositions are false and yet, whenever we are in a position where having moral beliefs will have a pragmatic benefit, we ought to change our beliefs; we should allow ourselves to be convinced of the truth of our moral claims, but only for the duration of the circumstances in which it is beneficial to hold onto the moral belief in question.

This response saves Conservationism from incoherence worries, but only by incurring other costs. For a disposition to change one's moral attitudes rapidly back and forth between belief and disbelief is a very fickle kind of disposition indeed. *To the extent that we are uncomfortable with inconstant attitudes* (and we are uncomfortable with them), we should be wary of this approach.

As I've been emphasizing throughout this section, all of the costs for Conservationism are purely instrumental—they accrue only to the extent that we have certain goals, where the goals I've been focusing on are widely shared. So as not to become repetitious, in future sections of this paper I will drop the constant references to the purely instrumental nature of these norms—but keep in mind that that is the game we are playing (Fig. 1).

3 Abolitionism

The discussion of the previous section suggests that it would be best for error theorists to reject all first-order moral beliefs. If we do this, the next question to ask is: is it possible for us to go on living and talking as though we had not done so? As we will see, this is possible; but the Abolitionist recommends that we reject our moral language and action as well. This section will examine the costs that come from adopting such a recommendation.

The Abolitionist solution to the 'Now What' Problem has been defended by Hinckfuss (1987) and Garner (2007). It is, in many ways, the default solution to the 'Now What' Problem.[9] According to the Abolitionist, the fact that moral discourse

[9] This can be seen in the tendency of many authors to use the term "error theory" interchangeably with "moral nihilism." To equate these two terms is a mistake if we understand the first as a metaethical view, and the second as a first-order normative view. Conservationists don't seem to count as nihilists, and the label doesn't really seem apt for Fictionalists or Substitutionists. It is, however, precisely the right label to apply to the Abolitionist. But not all error theorists are Abolitionists.

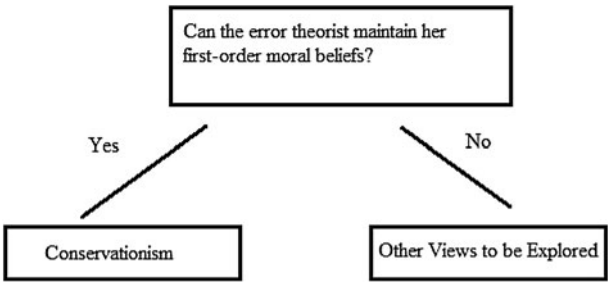

Fig. 1 A taxonomy of solutions to the 'Now What' Problem

is used to refer to properties that are nowhere instantiated means that we should ditch our moral discourse entirely. The Abolitionist treats moral discourse the same way that scientists treat phlogiston discourse. Discourse about phlogiston was useful and widely accepted within the scientific community up until a certain point. Then scientists obtained good evidence that there is no such thing as phlogiston. And at this point, they stopped talking about phlogiston, believing things about phlogiston,[10] and acting as though phlogiston existed. Similarly, says the Abolitionist error theorist, since we have good reason to believe that there are no moral properties that are anywhere instantiated, we ought not believe things about morality (if we don't want to believe false things), talk about morality (if we don't want to say things we believe to be false), or act as though there were moral truths.

We turn now to the problems with Abolitionism. For one thing, we should be concerned that abolitionism is psychologically impossible. A moral outlook on the world is not the product of some scientific theory that we might discard when a better one comes along (as we did with phlogiston). Moral patterns of thought have been instilled in us since a very young age (and may, in fact, be innate), and form very central parts of our character. This being the case, the Abolitionist's advice that we abandon all moral patterns of thought and action might be something that we simply cannot do.[11]

But even if we can set these impossibility concerns aside, Abolitionism comes with some rather severe costs. Abolitionists will find themselves unable to engage with others in moral discourse, which is frequently a useful activity to engage in. Consider Errol, who is asked by his friend Rachel for his opinion on the morality of the mass-murderer on the news. Errol, if he is an Abolitionist, can refuse to answer (thus leading to a rather uncomfortable silence in the conversation), or he may tell Rachel that, actually, the mass-murderer has done nothing wrong (since nothing is actually wrong). Sticking resolutely to this position will lead to a much more uncomfortable conversation with Rachel. It might even lead to the end of his friendship—"I could never be friends with someone so immoral!" To the extent that

[10] It is permissible to believe that there is no such thing as phlogiston and to say things like 'there is no such thing as phlogiston.' The kinds of beliefs and discourse that the Abolitionist says we should eliminate are what we might call *positive* phlogiston belief/discourse.

[11] This point is due to a helpful anonymous referee.

Errol values his friendship with Rachel and his ability to communicate with her, it would be better if he could engage her in moral discourse. Perhaps Errol might be evasive in his non-use of moral language, responding to Rachel's query of "Isn't that awful?" with a declaration of "I hate serial killers" (but not "Yes; I hate serial killers"). But evasive non-use of moral language in morally engaged contexts is still awkward and suspicious, and so not costless.

Will an Abolitionist actually be led to act in ways that are considered immoral? Not necessarily, but the possibility isn't entirely unlikely. For the Abolitionist will reject all of her moral beliefs and, with them, reject their reason-giving force. This might leave the Abolitionist in a position where she judges that, on balance, her reasons permit her doing something considered immoral, like committing murder. There are two ends that might be sacrificed here, making this a bad result. First, it will usually be in the Abolitionist's long-run interest to not commit murder. By discarding moral norms and relying only on her capacity for practical reasoning, she has eliminated a psychological check on her actions that would have made it harder for her to make mistakes about what is really in her long-run interest.[12] Second, reasoning of this kind *licenses murder*. It might seem strange to count this as a cost for an avowed error theorist, for error theorists hold that murder is not categorically wrong. But it might be instrumentally wrong. That is, committing murder might violate ends or desires that the error theorist has, in particular the end or desire that murder not be committed (especially not by the error theorist himself!) While there might not be anything objectively wrong about murder, we all are repulsed by murder (I hope). This is something that our solution to the 'Now What' Problem should take seriously, if at all possible. (Indeed, it's something that even Garner wants to take seriously, as his discussion of morality's role in promoting war and other kinds of conflict reveals.)

The Abolitionist might object here that I am being uncharitable. Might not an Abolitionist about moral norms take norms that are widely considered moral and still endorse them and act on them for other reasons? My response is that this is inconsistent with Abolitionism as I am understanding it here. Abolitionists claim that any norm that is generally held on largely moral grounds is essentially defective and therefore needs to be discarded—this is certainly the attitude that Hinckfuss and Garner take. There are views that take moral norms, and reconceptualize and repurpose them in such a way that they might still provide reason-giving force—and we will look at them shortly—but I reserve the term "Abolitionism" for those views that lack this reconciliatory impulse.

There might be room here for a kind of "Tempered Abolitionism." As I have discussed the view here, Abolitionism is defined by a non-use of moral language and a non-use of moral reasoning and action. And as I've argued in this section, both non-use of moral language and non-use of moral reasoning and action come with costs. But it is possible that an error theorist with Abolitionist sympathies might see one of these problems as more intractable than the other, and thus adopt a tempered

[12] See Olson (2011) and Joyce (2001) for an extensive development of this line of reasoning. For brevity's sake, the details will not be recounted here.

form of abolitionism that embraces moral action while eschewing moral language, or vice versa. I mention these views for the sake of completing the logical space, not because I think that the practical benefits surrounding the use of moral language are substantially greater than the practical benefits of moral action, or vice versa. Tempered Abolitionism will obviously be less problematic than Full Abolitionism, and so might be worth some further exploration. But for now we will look to the views that attempt to maintain all of the benefits of moral discourse and action without a problematic commitment to moral beliefs. Our taxonomy continues to grow.

4 Fictionalism

Abolitionism and Conservationism were traditionally the only two answers that had been considered to the 'Now What' Problem. That changed with the introduction of moral Fictionalism.[13] The Fictionalist agrees with the Abolitionist in saying that we should not *believe* any moral propositions. But he also agrees with the Conservationist in saying that engaging in moral discourse and practice brings a large number of benefits that are worth preserving. So the Fictionalist recommends adopting an attitude other than belief toward moral propositions that can capture the benefits of moral discourse—a fictional attitude.[14]

The fictional attitude in question, as explained by Joyce, is the attitude that we take toward propositions like "Once upon a time, there was a dragon" or "Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street." Most of us don't *really* believe these propositions—there was never such a thing as a dragon, and Holmes never existed. But these are propositions that we accept in contexts where we are telling a story (to ourselves or to others) by adopting a "fictional attitude" toward those propositions. Joyce recommends that we take up fictional attitudes toward moral propositions, i.e. to treat these propositions like a story that we are telling, and playing along with.[15] The idea that we are playing along with the story is rather important for Joyce. He describes a Holmes-enthusiast running around London, finding the sites where

[13] My discussion here will involve only Joyce's "revolutionary" Fictionalism, and not Kalderon's (2005) "hermeneutical Fictionalism," since it is only the former which is a response to the 'Now What' Problem.

[14] Joyce defines Fictionalism in several different ways throughout *The Myth of Morality*, making it rather difficult to pin down what Joyce takes to be the central commitment(s) of Fictionalism. What is presented here is one central line of Fictionalist thought. Nolan et al. (2005) defend a similar version of Fictionalism.

[15] A note on terminology: "Fictionalism" is sometimes used to describe any view that recommends using a certain language and acting in certain ways while simultaneously disbelieving all positive propositions concerning the subject matter of that discourse. On this use of the term "Fictionalism," all of the views labeled as "Other Views to be Explored" in Fig. 2 will be instances of Fictionalism. Yet Fictionalism, as I've just defined it, has much more built into it—the view described here does not just recommend using moral language and action, but recommends doing so in virtue of holding a certain fictional attitude towards a moral proposition. I use Fictionalism in this narrower way because this is the way that Joyce uses the term "Fictionalism," and it has become the standard way to use that term in the existing literature on the 'Now What' Problem. I mention this issue only to set it aside—the issue here, to the extent that there is one, is strictly terminological and not substantive.

Holmes's most famous exploits 'occurred'—"That's where Holmes saw Moriarty!" Of course, this enthusiast knows that the Holmes stories are just that—stories. But she is "playing along" with that story. And that is how adopting a fictional attitude toward moral propositions governs her use of moral language and action—by "playing along."

Unfortunately, it is ultimately unlikely that the Fictionalist is able to gain the benefits of moral action in a way that does not incur other costs. The Fictionalist places a lot of weight on the fact that Fictionalists are supposed to play along with their fictions—this is how the Fictionalist is supposed to gain conduct-regulation benefits—but this involves acting as though the moral proposition in question is true, even though the Fictionalist merely holds a fictional attitude toward that proposition. This is straightforwardly irrational. Even the most dedicated Holmes enthusiast will not run to Baker Street to warn Holmes about Moriarty's latest plot (recently read about in a Conan Doyle novel). Anyone who did so would seem to have suffered a break with reality.[16] Joyce himself says that someone who "runs on the stage to save the princess" is "deceived by a fiction" (2005, p. 295), and Joyce avows that Fictionalists are not deceived by their fictions. And yet, at the same time, Joyce tells us that accepting the fiction that stealing is wrong will make us more likely to avoid stealing when given the option (2001, pp. 223–228). But if accepting the fiction that stealing is wrong prevents us from stealing (such that we would steal if we did not accept this fiction), then we are clearly acting on the proposition that we have a merely fictional attitude towards—and "acting on the proposition that we have a merely fictional attitude towards" is exactly what we are doing if we run on stage to save the princess.

So the Fictionalist faces a dilemma. Either Fictionalism must lose out on the benefits of conduct-regulation (a significant loss, since this is the major benefit that Joyce pins his argument for Fictionalism upon), or the Fictionalist must engage in willful self-deception, which is something we are generally keen to avoid. There is no way to thread the needle here. Even if practical acceptance of the fictional proposition comes in degrees, it seems as though we are being self-deceptive in exact proportion to how willing we are to treat the fictional proposition as true in practical contexts. Of course, a certain degree of self-deception might be well worth the cost, given the conduct-regulation benefits to be gained. So this might be a cost that the Fictionalist is happy to bear. Nonetheless, it is a cost for the Fictionalist, and so it is worth seeing if there is another position that does not have these problems.

Finally, Fictionalism suffers from not taking moral convictions seriously enough—our moral convictions are much more *important* than propositions like "once upon a time, there lived a dragon." This might seem like an odd point for an error theorist to make; but even error theorists feel the pull of morality.[17] When Errol tells Rachel that the serial killer on the news has done a terrible thing, it is not (merely) to capture the benefits of having an amicable conversation with Rachel—

[16] This is not just because Sherlock Holmes stories are supposed to have occurred in the past. Someone reading a book called *The Contemporary Sherlock Holmes*, where all of the actions are supposed to be occurring *right now*, would be no less irrational in trying to find Holmes to warn him of Moriarty's plot.

[17] I do, at least, and I don't see why other error theorists wouldn't.

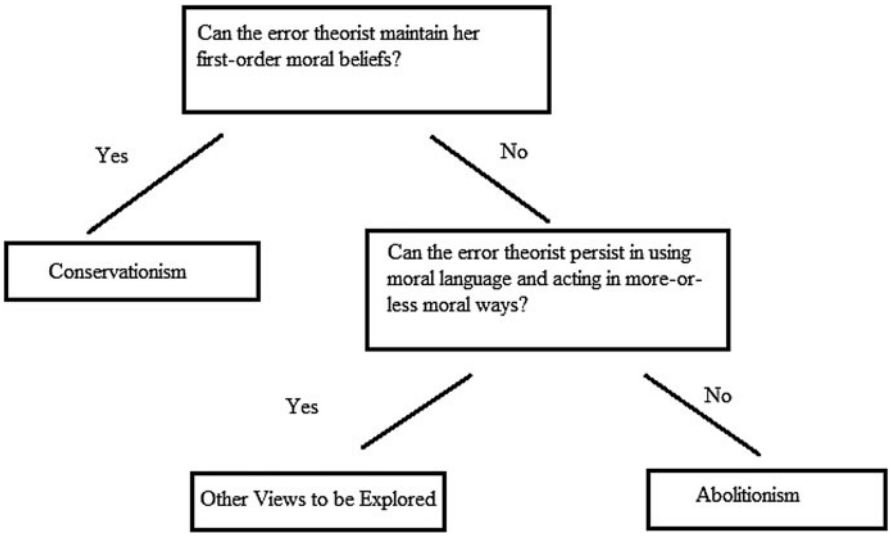

Fig. 2 The taxonomy grows

Errol is (we may assume) *strongly opposed* to murder. He would never commit murder, *ever*. This is one of Errol's core convictions—a "project" (in a broad sense) that is central to how he conceives of himself as an agent and how he lives his life. Although Errol believes that his repulsion to murder is not a reflection of anything intrinsically wrong about murder, this repulsion from murder (and other similar moral attitudes) plays a central role in Errol's life. But the Fictionalist's recommendation is that Errol treat this core conviction as a useful fiction, or a socially-accepted game that it is helpful to play along with. It does not validate Errol's *commitment* to never commit murder. To the extent that we want to validate this commitment, to make our moral attitudes come out as *important* despite the lack of objective moral truth, Fictionalism will be an undesirable response to the 'Now What' Problem. And this is something that I, at least, want very much to validate.

5 Substitutionism

So far we've seen that holding onto moral beliefs while accepting the error theory about morality is irrational, while discarding our moral beliefs, and with them the rest of our normative life, is a way of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Fictionalism fared better than either of these initial solutions to the 'Now What' Problem by rejecting moral belief without rejecting anything else of importance. But Fictionalism's reliance on a partially-committed attitude (as opposed to the wholly-committed attitude of belief) created problems, since the partial commitments that make up Fictionalism can't serve to fully rationalize the aspects of our moral life that we care about, and seem to trivialize our deepest commitments. So

the best solution to the 'Now What' Problem must meet three criteria: It must not endorse any positive moral beliefs. Nonetheless, it must allow us to continue acting morally when appropriate and using moral language. And the moral language and (in particular) action cannot be based on acceptance of a moral proposition (accepting on the basis of a fully-committed attitude generates the problems that plague Conservationism, and accepting on the basis of a partially-committed attitude generates the problems that plague Fictionalism).

Figure 3 gives the full set of possible solutions to the 'Now What' Problem by introducing the final view that we'll be examining: "Substitutionism." According to the Substitutionist, the thing to do in response to the 'Now What' Problem is to adopt a fully-committed attitude to some propositions that are not moral propositions, and use those full commitments to fill the hole in our normative life. We've seen that answering any of these questions in any way that does not put us on the road to Substitutionism will run into problems, so there is a *prima facie* case in favor of Substitutionism by process of elimination. The rest of this section will explore Substitutionism in more detail, examining its commitments and building the case that the Substitutionist solution to the 'Now What' Problem can be very fulfilling.

The Substitutionist solution to the 'Now What' Problem is very flexible. There are many different fully-committed attitudes that might serve as acceptable substitutes for our moral beliefs. For instance, someone with a subjectivist bent might substitute moral beliefs with beliefs about her own attitudes and projects. Someone with a relativist bent might substitute moral beliefs with beliefs about the dominant norms of her culture. And the substituted attitude need not be belief—someone with non-cognitivist sympathies might replace all of her moral beliefs with "hyperplans," of the kind that Gibbard (2003) has argued for (although, obviously, Gibbard is offering up a view about the actual nature of our moral thought and language-use, not a suggestion for a substitution). There are many more possibilities here, but clearly not any substitution instance will do. To borrow a tongue-in-cheek example from Stevenson (1937), replacing all of our moral beliefs with our beliefs about what is "pink with yellow trimmings" will not generate a productive use of moral language or a rational basis for moral action. The most important task for the Substitutionist, then, is to find an acceptable substitute for our moral beliefs. Fortunately, we can find our substitute by deriving it from our moral beliefs themselves—with some suitable modifications. Here's how:

According to the error theorist, our normative concepts are not directly referential.[18] The content of our normative concepts and the meanings of our normative words are given by a set of platitudes regarding what it takes to be good or bad, right or wrong, etc. A comparison with the term 'God' is apt here. God is, as a conceptual matter, omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and the creator of the Universe. He also gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, revealed the Koran to Mohammad, and is the father of Jesus of Nazareth. Note that the first

[18] There could be a version of error theory where our moral terms are directly referential. But the common statement of the nature of the reference failure of our moral terms, according to most error theorists, follows the pattern given in the main text here, so I will not pursue this other option.

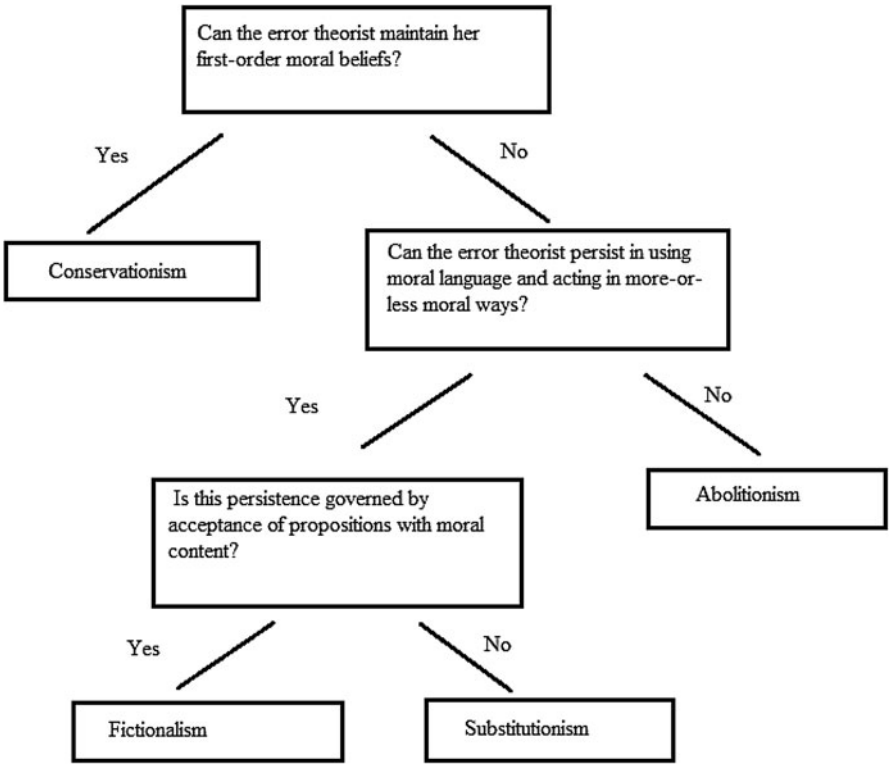

Fig. 3 The taxonomy completed

set of platitudes about God is not like the other in at least one way. The first set of platitudes is about *what it takes to be* God. If it were discovered that some being satisfied many of the platitudes concerning God, and yet was not, say, omnibenevolent, that being would not properly be called 'God.' The second set of platitudes, on the other hand, is not so strict. If it were discovered that there was a being who was omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and the creator of the Universe, yet who did not give the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, the thing to say is not that there is no God, but rather that God did not do one of the things that the Judeo-Christian faiths hold him to have done. Let's use some terminology to mark this distinction. Call the first set of platitudes the *non-negotiable conceptual commitments* of 'God'—"non-negotiable" because anything that fails to fulfill all of these commitments would *ipso facto* not be God. Call the second set of platitudes the *negotiable commitments* of 'God.'[19]

We can apply this framework to our moral discourse. The non-negotiable conceptual commitments of our concept of a moral reason, say, might have something to do with the desire-independent nature of that reason's normative force,

[19] For more discussion of negotiable commitments, see Joyce (2001, Chap. 1), as well as Joyce's debate with Steve Finlay in Finlay (2011) and Joyce (2011).

and the fittingness of certain attitudes of approval or disapproval towards someone who does or does not do what they have most reason to do. The negotiable commitments might have to do with what it takes to have a moral reason—for instance, many hold that pain is the kind of thing that provides a moral reason, yet someone who held that pain did not provide a moral reason would still seem to understand what reasons are, provided that person still held that reasons have the right kind of connection with desire (or lack thereof), and with the fittingness of certain attitudes. Some might disagree about which of the commitments of our normative discourse are negotiable and which are not, but the rough framework offered here should be enough to go on.

Among those who accept this framework for the meanings of our moral terms, what makes an error theorist an error theorist is the belief that nothing in the world instantiates all of our non-negotiable conceptual commitments about morality. Because nothing satisfies all of our non-negotiable commitments, nothing has everything that it takes to count as a moral reason, and hence there are no moral reasons. But there might be something that satisfies *many* of our non-negotiable commitments.

Let us assume for a moment that there is nothing that satisfies all of our commitments about morality, but there is something that satisfies all but one of our commitments about morality. (Call the unsatisfied commitment the *defective commitment.* Call the remaining cluster of satisfied commitments the *salvaged concept*.) Suppose we were to make the following recommendation: While there is nothing that satisfies all of our commitments about morality, the salvaged concept is close enough; let's use our moral language to talk about the salvaged concept, instead. Would following this recommendation be compatible with moral realism? It depends on the nature of the defective commitment. If the defective commitment is negotiable, then the salvaged concept will still capture all of the non-negotiable commitments about morality, and so the thing that satisfies the salvaged concept will still properly count as morality. But if, on the other hand, the defective commitment is non-negotiable, then the salvaged concept will not capture all of the non-negotiable commitments about morality, and so to talk about the salvaged concept would no longer constitute talk about morality.

The suggestion to carry on with the salvaged concept if there is a negotiable defective commitment is something that has been offered before in metaethics. Those who do so are said to be offering a reforming definition of morality. So, for instance, Brandt proposed that we adopt a salvaged concept that deals with only the uncontroversial non-negotiable core of morality, which he identified with rationality.[20] And working in a slightly different vein, Railton proposed that we reform our moral concept to deal with something reason-giving yet non-categorical, which he identified with the results of a kind of ideal-advisor theory.[21]

What I want to suggest here is that we can adopt this basic move of the reforming-definition theorist—to reorient our moral thought and language toward

[20] See Brandt (1998, pp. 10–16).

[21] See Railton (1986).

the salvaged concept—*even if the defective commitment is non-negotiable*. The salvaged concept is different enough from our moral concept that following this suggestion would not constitute a type of realism about morality. But it is similar enough that doing so looks like a promising way to capture enough of what we want from a solution to the 'Now What' Problem. This is how the Substitutionist can find a substitute for morality that is "good enough."

The difference between the Substitutionist and an advocate of a reforming definition can be summarized in this way: "Our standard account of morality is defunct," says the reforming-definition-theorist, "so let's reorient our moral thought, language, and practice toward the salvaged concept. We can do so without incurring any costs, since the salvaged concept still captures everything that's important about morality." The Substitutionist, on the other hand, says this: "Our standard account of morality is defunct. The salvaged concept is also defective, but in another way, since that omits something that is central to our concept of morality. But let's reorient our moral thought, language, and practice toward the salvaged concept anyway! While we won't really be talking or thinking about *morality*, we'll be thinking about something close enough to get along."

It is not essential that the Substitutionist identify any one salvaged concept as *the concept* that we should be concerned with—which salvaged concept will do the job the best will depend on what the commitments of our moral discourse are, which are non-negotiable, which are fulfilled, and which are not. Answering these questions falls outside of the scope of this paper.[22] But in the rest of this section I will flesh out Substitutionism more by exploring a Humean-style Substitutionism where we take beliefs about our attitudes to be the salvaged concept.[23]

First up: what is it that a Substitutionist will believe? A Substitutionist will not believe any moral proposition, e.g. murder is wrong; the Substitutionist will follow the Abolitionist in straight-out *disbelieving* the moral proposition. But unlike the Abolitionist, the Substitutionist will replace every discarded moral belief with a new

[22] There are some interesting scenarios that arise from the possibility that a Substitutionist might apply this procedure incorrectly and misidentify either which commitments are non-negotiable or which are genuinely problematic. Some of these might introduce substantial problems for the Substitutionist—if, for instance, the Substitutionist misidentifies the defective commitments in such a way that the salvaged concept ends up being more problematic than the original concept, the Substitutionist has worsened her situation, not improved it. This is a reason to take care in applying this procedure. But a more interesting possibility arises when the error theorist misidentifies the commitments that are negotiable and those that are non-negotiable, as then she might end up reorienting her moral thought and discourse towards things that actually do constitute moral reasons, even though she will (wrongly) take them not to be moral reasons. This might seem to collapse the error theory into some non-error-theoretic view. But this actually amounts to an advantage for Substitutionism over Fictionalism and Abolitionism (although not Conservationism). Since we are assuming in this scenario that the error theory is false and there are moral reasons, it would clearly be better if our error theorist ended up orienting her first-order normative life around those moral reasons. And Substitutionism provides a framework within which she might end up doing just that. This makes Substitutionism a kind of safe error theory. If the error theory is false, then every error theorist will have false second-order moral beliefs. But a Substitutionist stands as good a chance as any reforming-definition theorist of getting things right as far as first-order morality is concerned.

[23] As I mentioned earlier, I think that a Humean-style Substitutionism is the best reading of Mackie's solution to the 'Now What' Problem.

belief about his attitudes. In discarding the belief that murder is wrong, the Substitutionist will instead accept the belief that he disapproves of murder. Of course, any kind of error theorist might have beliefs about his attitudes—what is distinctive of the Substitutionist approach is that it advocates for a kind of replacement procedure, where every moral belief is replaced by a corresponding belief about one's attitudes.

This replacement procedure is not limited to the beliefs that the Substitutionist accepts. It extends to the ways in which the Substitutionist uses language. The Substitutionist will make moral utterances (i.e., utterances that use words with conventional meanings that ascribe moral properties) just like any realist, but in the mouth of the Substitutionist, these words will have a speaker-meaning that is very different from their conventional meaning. While most people use the phrase "murder is wrong" to say that murder is wrong, the Substitutionist will use the phrase "murder is wrong" to assert that he disapproves of murder. Generally, the Substitutionist will use moral language with the exact same surface-form as any normal language-user, but will use that language to assert propositions about his attitudes, not to assert moral propositions.

So far we can see that the Substitutionist view should fare rather well when it comes to promoting ends that we generally care about. It is important that we have true beliefs and no false beliefs to the extent that we care about epistemic norms—the Substitutionist does well on this account. It is important that we be able to use moral language intelligibly, as this generates substantial communicative and coordinative benefits. The Substitutionist does well on this point, too.

There is a cost for the Substitutionist in the linguistic arena: the Substitutionist's language will generally be deceptive on some level. Unless the Substitutionist makes his reforming inclinations explicit as a preface to any conversation, the Substitutionist's interlocutors will take him to be asserting something he is not. Consider Errol again: He says to Rachel "Serial killing is morally repugnant." What he means is that he strongly disapproves of serial killing. What Rachel takes him to mean is that serial killing is morally wrong. But that isn't what Errol actually meant—and what's more, Errol could easily anticipate that Rachel would interpret his remarks in this way.[24] So he's being deceptive, and this looks rather bad.

But it's not as bad as all that. Because the Substitutionist is appealing to a salvaged concept, which is derived from our moral concepts, there is going to be a substantial degree of overlap between what can and should be said about morality and what can and should be said about the salvaged concept. Consider: when Rachel asks Errol "Isn't that serial killer awful?" she probably doesn't care very

[24] In a rather straightforward way, the Substitutionist shares this problem with the Fictionalist. The Fictionalist uses her moral utterances with a kind of story-telling force—she no more asserts that murder is wrong than she asserts that, once upon a time, there was a dragon. Yet unless this story-telling intention is made clear, a Fictionalist's interlocutor will systematically misinterpret the Fictionalist's communicative intentions. Joyce tries to evade this problem by saying that his account is meant to apply only to the linguistic practices of a *community* of Fictionalists. This response is good as far as it goes (and it's worth noting that the Substitutionist can appeal to the same fix), but we do not live in such a community, and it is not likely that we will any time soon. This is why I've focused in this paper on the more immediate, pressing concern of how error theorists should *actually* use moral language.

much at the moment about whether or not the serial killer instantiates a property of awfulness, or about what kinds of reasons the serial killer has, or what the modal status of those reasons are, or anything of that kind. She wants to voice her disapproval of the serial killer's actions, confirm that Errol is just as repulsed by the serial killer as she is, and reaffirm her own intentions to never engage in violent acts of the kind under discussion.[25] Errol's response of "Yes, that serial killer is awful" is meant to directly address these concerns—to voice his own disapproval of the act, to confirm that he and Rachel have adopted the same policy of both intending to refrain from violence and to condemn the actions of the killer on the television, and so on. And Errol can fulfill these communicative intentions just as easily by making assertions about his attitudes as he can by making assertions about moral properties.

Of course, since the salvaged concept is not identical to the normal concept, there will be conversations in which the Substitutionist's interlocutors will be interested primarily in aspects of the moral concept that the Substitutionist, as an error theorist, will reject. For instance, in a philosophical context, Rachel might well be using moral language in order to talk specifically about the categorical nature of moral claims. In such a context, Errol could not felicitously use his reformed moral language to communicate with Rachel. But why would he? The reason he cannot use his reformed language with Rachel here is because he disagrees with Rachel on the very point at issue! Rather than using a reformed moral language to demonstrate the extent to which his commitments align with Rachel's, Errol should be trying to convince Rachel to be an error theorist.

There are two common objections to deal with at this point. First: The account of moral language use defended here looks flawed in some way. The Substitutionist use of moral language does not rely on the conventional meanings of moral terms. But it can't really rely on the *speaker-meanings* of moral terms, since the common account of speaker-meaning is generally given in terms of the speaker's intending that his interlocutor understand his meaning. But Rachel doesn't know that Errol is using moral language in a non-standard way.

This objection can be addressed with an analogy. Suppose that Rhonda doesn't know what a rhombus is. She has been told several times, but the concept just doesn't seem to stick for her. She does have the concept of a square, but she misapplies this concept, often thinking that rhombuses are squares. Suppose Steve knows all of this, and he and Rhonda are sent on a scavenger hunt together to find figures with four equal sides. Steve sees such a figure, but it is not a proper square, it is merely a rhombus, since its angles are unequal. Still, Steve, to ease his communication with Rhonda, points out the rhombus to her by saying "There's a

[25] This might seem to be in tension with my observation in the introduction that Rachel intends to use moral language to ascribe a property of awfulness, but the tension is not very deep. Rachel intends to use moral language with its normal assertive force, whatever that may be, and to do so in order to voice her disapproval of the serial killer's actions, etc. So Rachel is intending to make her point regarding her attitudes towards murder *by* utilizing the standard semantic content of the utterance "That is awful." This distinction between the semantic content of an utterance and a speaker's communicative intentions in making that utterance will be explored in more detail shortly.

square." It's not a square, and Steve knows it. He is using his language in a non-standard way. Furthermore, Rhonda doesn't know that Steve is using his language in a non-standard way, since she lacks the capacity to recognize that this figure is a rhombus and not a square. But Steve's utterance still fulfills his intentions. He doesn't really care whether the object is a square or merely a rhombus, he just cares that it has four equal sides, because that's what he needs for the scavenger hunt. And Rhonda only cares that it has four equal sides, because she is on the same scavenger hunt. Steve's use of "square" in this context is rather odd (it might not count as a proper assertion), but it does the job by utilizing features of the concept "square" that he knows Rhonda will pick up on, and are the features of the concept that Steve is interested into begin with. This is exactly how the Substitutionist's use of moral language works—he does not use moral language with its conventional meaning or with any meaning that his listener will pick up on (typically), but the concept he is appealing to is close enough to the conventional meaning, and the similarities between the Substitutionist's concept and the conventional concept are close enough, that it gets the job done.

A second objection: The account given here in terms of desires runs into the old problem that afflicts speaker subjectivism: How can a Substitutionist like the kind described here account for disagreement? There are a few answers to be given here. First and most importantly, if this is a problem, it is only a problem for certain kinds of Substitutionism, like the Humean version of Substitutionism used here for illustrative purposes. But not all versions of Substitutionism will encounter this problem. Second, the disagreement problem is not really a problem for Humean Substitutionism. Speaker subjectivism is an account of how our moral language is actually used—hence, its prediction that we don't really disagree when we make conflicting moral claims is a huge problem for speaker subjectivism, since we *do* disagree when we make conflicting moral claims. But Humean Substitutionism is not an account of how we actually do use our moral language, it's a suggestion for substitution—and so it makes no false predictions. Still, there might be a related concern here. We often use moral language to disagree with each other. Yet a Humean Substitutionism would not allow us to use our language to disagree with each other, and thus it seems that this particular substitution recommendation would lose out on something essential to moral discourse. But we can use moral language to disagree with each other even if the contents of our utterances are consistent with each other—this was Stevenson's (1937) great insight. If, for instance, Rachel says that abortion is wrong, and Errol replies that it isn't, Errol has not contradicted the contents of what Rachel has said if he is a Substitutionist. But the attitude governing his utterance is an attitude that Rachel does not share, and that attitude grounds action that Rachel would not approve of. That's enough disagreement for most quotidian contexts[26]—and again, the Substitutionist can break out of the Substitutionist frame in order to engage in debates over moral theory if that is what the conversation calls for.

[26] Some non-error theorists, like Stevenson, think that this is all that disagreement on moral matters ever amounts to in any context.

The mention of action in the last paragraph raises the last major issue to discuss in elucidating Substitutionism: the Substitutionist's approach to moral action. As we saw earlier, since even error theorists can have strong moral convictions, it seems desirable to provide some rational basis on which an error theorist can act in a more-or-less moral way. This proved to be a substantial problem for the Abolitionist, who recommends abandoning all of our moral convictions, and the Fictionalist, since acting on a proposition that one only fictionally accepts seems irrational. But here, the Substitutionist can fare quite well. While there might not be any moral reasons, the salvaged concept can refer to something that can ground strong *non-moral* reasons for actions that are commonly considered to be moral. This would make it the case that the same belief grounds both the Substitutionist's use of moral language and her moral actions.

Suppose our Substitutionist adopts a Humean theory of reasons, according to which reasons are provided by our desires (where desire is construed broadly enough to encompass everything with a desire-like direction of fit).[27] In this case, the Substitutionist's commitment to the wrongness of murder can ground a reason not to commit murder. This is because, for the Substitutionist, "murder is wrong" is reformed to the statement that the Substitutionist disapproves of murder. And on the Humean theory, that's precisely the thing that generates a reason not to commit murder. This fact is no coincidence. Because acting on our moral convictions is so central to our cognitive life, in picking the concept towards which we should re-orient our moral thought and discourse, the Substitutionist will pick a concept that actually can ground reasons for action.[28]

The version of Substitutionism according to which we shift our discourse to talk about our attitudes will be very attractive to someone who adopts a Humean Theory of Reasons, while other versions of Substitutionism can accommodate other theories of reasons. For instance, a more Joycean version of Substitutionism would be one that talks about what one's fully-informed self would advise, since this is the theory of reasons that Joyce favors. Yet I prefer a Humean version of Substitutionism, since it answers first-order moral questions in the same way that it answers higher-level questions about how to solve the 'Now What' Problem. At its most general, the 'Now What' Problem is a problem for the error theorist about *what to do*—and this problem has its applications at both the first-order level—how should I live my life?—and at a higher level—how should I *decide* how to live my life? In the first section of this paper, I argued that this higher-level question should be solved by appeal to instrumental rationality, by looking at which general policies of action will promote or sacrifice which ends. This was why the discussion of solutions to the 'Now What' Problem was couched in terms of desires and goals that might be fulfilled or frustrated. A Humean Substitutionist will take the same approach to

[27] The Humean Theory of Reasons is highly controversial, of course, but the details of the controversy need not concern us here, since it is not my intention here to argue for Humean Substitutionism, but rather to illustrate the kind of view that a Substitutionist might defend. For those interested in a defense of the Humean Theory, see Schroeder (2007).

[28] The account of normativity offered here as stemming essentially from the things that matter most to us is inspired in a number of ways by Foot's (1972) "Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives."

first-order questions about how to live her life—she does so by talking about and acting on her goals and desires that might be fulfilled or frustrated. This provides Humean Substitutionism with a theoretical unity and symmetry that is theoretically parsimonious and powerful.

6 Conclusion

If I may be allowed for a moment to indulge in some speculation, I believe that the presumption that there is no good solution to the 'Now What' Problem is, in large part, responsible for the current unpopularity of error theory. Error theory is often glossed as the view that all first-order moral statements are false, and most people see this as a truly terrible consequence of error theory. But this should be somewhat puzzling—what's so repugnant about the falsity of moral propositions, as such? The repugnance of error theory is, I think, best explained by the fact that many people think that a commitment to the existence of moral facts provides us with our only hope of living a fulfilling normative life, where we take things to be important and are rational in so doing.[29] But this does not mean that the error theory itself is unacceptable. It just means that finding a solution to the 'Now What' Problem is incredibly important for the error theorist. Perhaps if a fully satisfying solution can be found, the error theory will become a more respectable position within metaethics.

None of the arguments here is intended as a knock-down objection to any given solution to the 'Now What' Problem, particularly because of the instrumental nature of the considerations advanced here; someone with an abnormal set of goals might well find a different solution to the 'Now What' Problem to be best. Instead, this paper serves as an articulation of the challenges that each of these solutions to the 'Now What' Problem must face for an agent with a normal set of goals. But if my arguments here have been on the right track, some version of Substitutionism is the least troubled solution to the 'Now What' Problem. A Substitutionist error theorist has very good prospects for living a fulfilling normative life without morality.

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[29] This is not pure speculation; as evidence, I can point to the shocked protests of a substantial number of people to whom I have confessed my error-theoretic sympathies.

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