MORAL ERROR THEORY
AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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Abstract. Moral error theory claims that no moral sentence is (non-vacuously) true. Atheism claims that the existence of evil in the world is incompatible with, or makes improbable, the existence of God. Is moral error theory compatible with atheism? This paper defends the thesis that it is compatible against criticisms by Nicholas Sturgeon.

WHAT IS MORAL ERROR THEORY?

Moral error theory consists in the following four claims. (1) Moral sentences have truth conditions and purport to be descriptions of what is the case.[1] That is, moral sentences are apt to be true or false, and are true (false) if what they describe to be the case is the case (is not the case). Hence, the correct analysis of moral sentences is cognitivist (as opposed to expressivist or prescriptivist).[2] (2) Moral sentences presuppose that there are objective moral values. That is, moral sentences are true only if there are objective moral values.[3] (3) There are no objective moral

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[1] A definition of 'moral sentence' is given in the last section that is adequate for the error theorist's purposes.

[2] What this paper (following fairly standard current philosophical usage) calls 'cognitivism', Mackie calls 'descriptivism'. He distinguishes descriptivist from non-cognitivist analyses of moral sentences, and endorses the former analysis in (1977) p.23. He gives his reason for rejecting non-cognitivism about moral sentences on pp. 32-3.

[3] '… ordinary moral judgements include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values in just the sense in which I am concerned to deny this' Mackie (1977) p.35. (Pp.30-5 of Mackie's book is an extended discussion of the thesis that moral judgements are objective). He sums up the thesis at the end of his first chapter by saying that 'a belief in objective values is built into ordinary moral thought and language' (pp.48-9).

values. Nothing is morally good or bad.[4] Claims (1) and (2) are claims about the correct analysis of moral sentences. Claim (3) is a claim about ontology.[5] A corollary of these three claims is: (4) No moral sentence is (non-vacuously) true.[6] The reasoning is as follows. Moral sentences purport to describe what is the case (claim (1)), and presuppose that there are objective moral values (claim (2)). But those sentences thereby make a false presupposition (claim (3)). Given that a sentence is true only if it does not make any false presuppositions, no moral sentence is (non-vacuously) true. Hence claim (4).

In general, an error theory about a region of discourse D has the following structure:

(1*) Sentences $S_1, \ldots, S_n$ of D are truth-apt. (Conceptual claim)
(2*) Sentences $S_1, \ldots, S_n$ of D presuppose the truth of sentences stating that there are entities of kind K. (Conceptual claim)
(3*) There are no entities of kind K. (Ontological claim)
(4*) Therefore, none of the sentences $S_1, \ldots, S_n$ of D is true. (Error theoretic conclusion)

Since the only error theory under discussion in this paper is moral error theory, in what follows call it simply 'error theory'. Error theory raises many interesting issues; this paper will address just one of them.[7] Nicholas Sturgeon has raised a surprising difficulty for error theory. This paper seeks to overcome that difficulty.

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[4] '… values are not objective, are not part of the fabric of the world' Mackie (1977) p.1.
[5] Mackie is explicit that it is an ontological thesis, and not a linguistic or conceptual one: Mackie (1977) p.18.
[6] '… although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false' Mackie (1977) p.35.
[7] For instance, error theory needs to explain why many people believe that there are morally good or bad acts. This follows from the general requirement on any error theory that it needs to explain why people are under (what it takes to be) certain pervasive illusions.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Error theorists may claim, along with other philosophers, that the existence of evil is incompatible with, or makes improbable, the existence of God. But is it coherent both to be an error theorist and to claim that there is a problem of evil? There is a natural way in which the error theorist can apparently set up the problem of evil without asserting any moral sentences and without re-interpreting moral discourse. Whether this way is genuinely available to the error theorist, however, faces an innovative challenge from Sturgeon. This section will state the natural way in which the error theorist might set up the problem. The next section presents Sturgeon's challenge.

Typically, treatments of evil distinguish two kinds of evil: moral evil and natural evil. An evil event is a moral evil if it is an evil brought about by an agent, otherwise it is a natural evil. Call an event a 'gratuitous' evil if and only if it is an evil event for which there is no morally sufficient reason.[8] An omnipotent and omniscient being would be able to prevent that event from occurring, and would not have been morally justified in not doing so. The problem of evil concerns gratuitous evils, whether natural or moral. To set up the problem, the error theorist arguably need not assert any moral sentences and need not have any moral standards. He can present the problem in an *ad hominem* form against the theist. The theist is typically not an error theorist about morality but is instead a moral realist. By taking the theist's own moral standards, and by taking moral sentences that the theist would assert, the error theorist can present the problem as follows.

The theist asserts that God is morally perfect, and so would prevent any (moral or natural) evil occurring if he had the power and intelligence to do so and if he believed that there was no morally sufficient reason for its occurring. If the theist then admits that *prima facie* there is gratuitous evil of at least one of the two possible kinds in the world, the error theorist claims – and invites the theist to concede – that the preceding assertions are mutually incompatible. (Or, at least that they are jointly very improbable). The error theorist concludes that any theist

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[8] For further discussion, see OConnor (1993) pp.391.

who is not an error theorist should revise his belief that God exists, and should believe that God does not exist.

Two points should be noted. First, it will be a working assumption of the paper that the problem of evil remains unsolved. Given that assumption, the key issue for the paper is whether the error theorist can consistently take the problem of evil to be a problem for theism.

Second, it was stated above that typically the theist is not an error theorist about morality but a moral realist. In fact, all that the error theorist needs to run his *ad hominem* is the premise that the theist is not a fellow error theorist. Besides that, it does not matter what meta-ethical view a given theist holds. He may accept divine command theory, or ethical naturalism, or prescriptivism, or expressivism.[9] The *ad hominem* can be run in terms of these, or any other, non-error theoretic meta-ethic. Take expressivism. Theism is compatible with expressivism, and the problem of evil could be re-stated in terms of this conjunction of views. The problem would run as follows. The theist who is an expressivist about ethics asserts that God has a strong con-attitude to suffering whether this suffering is brought about by agents or by nature, and so would prevent such suffering occurring if he had the intelligence and power to do so, and if he did not have a correspondingly strong pro-attitude to any of the consequences of that suffering. But, as the theist presumably concedes, there *is* such suffering.

The point here is that the *ad hominem* against the theist does not even have to assume that the correct analysis of moral sentences is cognitivist, despite the fact that it is the preferred analysis of the error theorist. This tells us something about the depth of the problem of evil – that it faces the theist whatever meta-ethical theory he holds, short of error theory. It also tells us something about how easily the problem can be set up – that it can be set up even by someone who believes that no moral judgement is (non-vacuously) true.

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[9] Cf. Tooley (1991) p.100.

STURGEON'S OBJECTION

Sturgeon agrees that the error theorist can present the problem as an *ad hominem*.[10] But he thinks that this tactic cannot meet various replies that the theist might make. To illustrate this, Sturgeon focuses on one particular reply available to the theist. This is the view that 'God's goodness is different':[11]

> [The response is that] when the theist says that God is wholly good he does not mean that God has anything like the purposes and tendencies that would count as good in a human being.

Mackie's response is to say that:[12]

> In effect, God is being *called* good, while at the same time he is being *described* as bad, that is, as having purposes and acting upon motives which in all ordinary circumstances we would recognise as bad. . . . Now certainly if such motives as these are ascribed to God, there will be no difficulty in reconciling his omnipotence with the occurrence of what would ordinarily be called evils. But to argue in this way is merely to defend a shadow, while abandoning the substance, of the traditional claim that God is good.

Sturgeon claims that Mackie's criticism is not an *ad hominem*. Mackie is criticising the theist's response on moral grounds. But then whose moral standards are at issue? There are two options. Either they are

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[10] Sturgeon (1995) pp.160, 162. Of course, Sturgeon was not the first philosopher who thought that the error theorist might present the problem of evil as an *ad hominem* against the theist. See, for example, Nelson (1991) p.376. But Nelson and Sturgeon then go on to make quite different, and novel, claims. Nelson claims that the argument must contain the premise that if there were an all-good God, he would want there to be little or no evil in the world, and Nelson queries whether the theist need accept that premise. (For an effective reply to Nelson, see O'Connor (1993)). Sturgeon's novel claim is that if the theist makes certain responses to the problem, the error theorist cannot reply to those responses in the form of an *ad hominem*. Nelson and Sturgeon's claims appear to be logically independent.

[11] Mackie (1982) p.156.

[12] Mackie (1982) p.156, his italics.

the theist's moral standards, or they are Mackie's. Sturgeon rejects the
first option:[13]

> [Mackie] explicitly concedes that *if* we accept the proponents' somewhat
> alarming standards for divine moral perfection, the problem of evil
> disappears.

Therefore, the moral standards that Mackie is appealing to must be his
own. But now the error theorist faces the charge of bad faith: namely,
that of making moral claims despite denying that any moral claim is
(non-vacuously) true.

Recall that the error theorist faced this charge when he initially
presented the problem of evil. To avoid this charge, the problem of evil
was then presented as an *ad hominem* objection to the theist. Sturgeon
claims that the charge simply recurs when Mackie tries to block the
theist's 'God's goodness is different' reply. *Either* the error theorist has no
objection to the response, and thereby has to concede that the problem
of evil can be solved by the theist, *or* he meets the response by appealing
to his own moral standards, and thereby compromises his error theory.
Either way a philosopher cannot both be an error theorist and maintain
that theism faces the problem of evil.

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[13] Sturgeon (1995) p.163, his italics. Sturgeon's ground for rejecting the first option
would also be a ground for rejecting the problem of evil as formulated in O'Connor (1993).
O'Connor seeks to show that the problem can be formulated *without* the premise that
(a) if there were an all-good God, he would want there to be little or no evil. O'Connor's
re-formulation of the problem is given by the following conjunction (b)-(d): (b) If God,
as defined in traditional theism, exists, he would not want the world to contain unjustified
natural evil, i.e. any natural evil which had no morally sufficient reason for existing; (c)
claim (b) is basic in both theism and atheism and all formulations of the argument from
(natural) evil; and (d) there exists types or tokens of *prima facie* gratuitous natural evil.
(See O'Connor (1993) pp.391-2). Sturgeon's challenge would then be that, *according to the
'God's goodness is different' view*, (d) is false; how would the error theorist reply? Meeting
this challenge takes us beyond what O'Connor establishes in his excellent paper.

HOW NOT TO DEFEND ERROR THEORY

How should the error theorist respond to Sturgeon's challenge? One suggestion runs as follows. The error theorist claims that there are no objective moral values because such values would have to be 'entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe'.[14] Such values would be, as Mackie puts it, metaphysically queer. Now, the argument continues, the concept of God is such that, if God existed, God would be morally perfect. But that is to say that if God existed, God would have a metaphysically queer property. The response concludes that Mackie's argument from metaphysical queerness against the existence of objective moral values carries over as an argument against the existence of God.

The above response has two demerits. First, it concedes ground to Sturgeon. Let's grant that the error theorist can make a case for atheism on grounds *other than* that of the problem of evil. What Sturgeon denied was that the error theorist can make a case for atheism on the basis of the problem of evil. There is nothing in the above response which challenges Sturgeon's denial. And, as will be argued below, Sturgeon's denial *is* open to challenge. Second, and more importantly, although the suggested response provides an argument for atheism, the argument assumes error theory about morality. That is not an assumption which any theist would accept. So the argument would have no force against the theist. In contrast, the strength of the problem of evil is that it depends on premises all of which (at least many) theists accept. So there seems to be a dialectical advantage in arguing against theism on grounds of the problem of evil rather than on grounds of error theory.

Sturgeon himself considers a different response on behalf of the error theorist. This involves distinguishing between what Sturgeon calls the theist's *express* standards – the standards by which the theist would sincerely judge the issue, 'perhaps after minimal discussion or questioning' – and his *implicit* standards – the ones by which he would judge the issue 'if he were to subject his views to an appropriate, perhaps quite

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[14] Mackie (1977) p.38.

idealized, process of reflection and rational adjustment'.[15] Mackie might then be seen as offering an *ad hominem* argument that appeals to the theist's implicit standards. But Sturgeon thinks that this suggestion fails because of its 'optimism about the rational resolvability of deep evaluative disagreements'.[16] That is, the suggestion optimistically assumes that reflection and rational adjustment would lead the theist to form just those standards that Mackie appealed to in his reply to the 'God's goodness is different' view. But such optimism, Sturgeon claims, would be alien to the error theorist.

It is unclear why Sturgeon makes this last claim. The optimistic suggestion is not incompatible with error theory. Nor does error theory make the suggestion more improbable than it antecedently is. The most that Sturgeon should claim is that error theory is not committed to the suggestion, and that there is independent reason to reject the suggestion. This independent reason would draw upon some of the reasons for rejecting pragmatist accounts of truth.[17]

A better reply is open to the error theorist. But before presenting this way, we need first to clarify various issues. That is the task of the next section.

CLARIFYING THE ISSUES

Call the theist's opponent 'the atheologian'. The atheologian may be a moral realist – call him 'the moral realist atheologian' – or he may be an error theorist – call him 'the error theoretic atheologian', or 'the error theorist' for short. Standardly, when the problem of evil has been presented by atheologians, it has been presented by moral realist atheologians. Theists have made various replies to these presentations. To focus matters, let's consider just one such reply: the view that God's goodness is different. Standardly, when atheologians have responded to this reply (and indeed to any others), the responses have been made by moral realist

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[15] Sturgeon (1995) p.166.
[16] Sturgeon (1995) p.167.
[17] See, for example, Plantinga (1982) pp.64-7.

atheologians. What is non-standard is for error theorists to present the problem of evil and to respond to theists' replies to the problem. This dialectical situation raises the following three questions:

    (Q1) What responses can the moral realist atheologian make to the 'God's goodness is different' view?

    (Q2) How cogent are those responses?

    (Q3) Can the error theorist consistently make the same (or relevantly similar) responses to the 'God's goodness is different' view?

(Q1) concerns a purely descriptive issue. The moral realist atheologian can make at least two responses to the 'God's goodness is different' view.

    One response is the Objection from Bad Semantics. The objection runs as follows. The pattern of use of the predicate 'is good' among competent language users fixes the meaning of 'is good'. That same pattern of use is present in predications of that term of humans as it is in predications of that term of God. Those facts disconfirm the theist's claim that 'is good' is ambiguous between being predicated of human beings and being predicated of God. Therefore, the proponent of the 'God's goodness is different' view involves an incorrect view about the semantics of 'is good'. (Since a competent user of a language can be mistaken about the semantics of terms in his language, this conclusion does not imply that the theist in question is not a competent user of 'is good').

    The other response is the Objection from Bad Methodology. Sturgeon notes that:[18]

> . . . it does often seem to atheists that theists, in these debates, bend their standards of evaluation unreasonably to save the deity and the deity's works from adverse judgment . . .

We should not focus on what Sturgeon calls the theist's express and implicit standards. Instead, taking a leaf from the above passage, we should focus instead on the standards that the theist uses outside of the debate, and the standards that he adopts during the debate. Call these the theist's *pre-debating standards* and his *debating standards*, respectively.

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[18] Sturgeon (1995) p.165.

(We can allow that the latter are what Sturgeon calls the theist's express standards). The Objection from Bad Methodology is that the 'God's goodness is different' view involves a case of double standards. Prior to the debate, the theist uses one set of standards in forming moral beliefs. These standards are used in stating what Mackie was quoted as calling 'the substance' of the traditional claim that God is good. But when the debate is engaged, and the problem of evil arises, the dialectical pressure is on. The theist who uses the 'God's goodness is different' defence shifts standards to side-step the problem. Prior to the debate, he uses one set of standards to judge human actions. To avoid the problem of evil, he uses another set to judge God's actions.

But what exactly is the objection? So what if the theist shifts his view of divine goodness as a result of the problem of evil? It is widely accepted that a theory may undergo revision or refinement as it undergoes experimentation. The revision can deepen our understanding. Can't the theist say something similar? Theists have long been aware of, and troubled by, the existence of apparently gratuitous evil. The concept of God is modified in full awareness of this.

It is moot, however, what modifications are available. Peter van Inwagen for one says that 'two features that God is supposed to have are "non-negotiable": that he is omnipotent and morally perfect'.[19] That aside, we should distinguish between the motivation for revising a theory and the methodological permissibility of doing so. Not all the revisions that might be made in a theory are methodologically permissible. In particular, *ad hoc* changes in a theory are methodologically impermissible. It is a generally accepted methodological principle that belief systems should not be defended on *ad hoc* grounds. Now there is an issue of when a defensive move is *ad hoc*. For example, it is not *ad hoc* for a theist to appeal to the free will defence as a response to the problem of evil, because, quite independently of that defence, it is a key claim of theism that human beings have free will. The Objection from Bad Methodology is that the 'God's goodness is different' view is *ad hoc*. The theist adopts the view only in order to defend his belief both that God exists and that gratuitous evil exists. This last claim can be supported in the following way.

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[19] van Inwagen (2004) p.59.

Suppose that T and T^* are rival theories. Suppose too that T faces a problem that T^* does not, and that T is changed solely in order to avoid that problem. Lastly, suppose that the change in question makes T more complicated than T^* without otherwise making T a better theory than T^*. Complicating a theory does not make the theory worse if the complication increases (say) the explanatory power of that theory. But complicating a theory without introducing any compensating benefit makes the theory worse. Such a change is what is meant by an *ad hoc* change in T. Now theism and atheism are rival theories. Initially, neither theory takes the phrase 'morally good' to be ambiguous between predications to human actions or to divine actions (if there are any). Theism then faces the problem of evil. The view that 'God's goodness is different' reinterprets 'morally good' as being ambiguous between predications to human actions and predications to divine actions. But the only reason for this reinterpretation is so that theism avoids the problem of evil. Moreover, atheism neither faces the problem of evil nor reinterprets 'morally good' as ambiguous. In this respect, the 'God's goodness is different' view makes theism a more complicated theory than atheism. Furthermore, it does so without otherwise making theism a better theory than atheism. Therefore, adopting the 'God's goodness is different' view would be to make an *ad hoc* change in theism.

This completes the answer to (Q1), the descriptive question of what responses the moral realist atheologian can make to the 'God's goodness is different' view. (Q2) is the evaluative question of how good those responses are. This paper does not attempt to answer that question. So it will not assume that the two responses just mentioned succeed. Indeed, at least for the sake of argument, the paper will assume that the *two responses completely fail, and that the theist can show why they completely fail*. The task of this paper is to meet Sturgeon's challenge. Whether or not those responses by the error theorist are good ones, Sturgeon claimed that the error theorist cannot consistently make those responses. That challenge was encapsulated in (Q3), the question of whether the error theorist can consistently make the same (or relevantly similar) responses to the 'God's goodness is different' view. It is to that question that we now turn.

HOW TO DEFEND ERROR THEORY

Sturgeon assumes that the error theorist cannot consistently make first-order moral claims – claims such as 'Torturing babies is morally wrong' or 'Giving to charity is good'. Indeed, he apparently assumes that the error theorist has to eschew moral language altogether. Those assumptions are debatable. It has been argued that it *is* consistent for the error theorist to assert first-order moral claims.[20] Alternatively, it can be argued that even if the error theorist cannot assert moral sentences, he need not eschew moral language.[21] The error theorist can be a fictionalist about morality: he can treat morality as a useful pretence. He can pretend to assert first-order moral claims without believing them, and still reap the benefits of participating in moral practice. Nevertheless, we need not press these points. It will simplify matters if we take Sturgeon's assumptions to be correct, and suppose that the error theorist cannot consistently make (or even pretend to make) moral claims, and that he must eschew moral language. Making this concession makes the defence of error theory even more difficult, and so more interesting.

The error theorist can straightforwardly and consistently co-opt the responses that the moral realist atheologian makes to the theist's replies to the problem of evil. As a test case, let's consider the two responses given above to the 'God's goodness is different' view. Take the responses in turn.

The first response was The Objection from Bad Semantics. This objection says that competent language users display the same pattern of use when they apply 'is good' to humans as when they apply it to God, and that this (alleged) fact about word usage disconfirms the theist's claim that 'is good' is ambiguous between the two kinds of predication. It follows that the 'God's goodness is different' view involves an incorrect view about the semantics of 'is good'. Now we have granted Sturgeon's assumption that the error theorist himself does not make any first-order moral claims. But it should be clear that the above objection does not require that he makes any first-order moral claims. In general, the objection does not require that

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[20] Burgess (1998).
[21] See, for example, Joyce (2001).

any proponent of it uses the predicate 'is good' in first-order moral claims. What it requires is that any proponents who are competent language users employ 'is good' with the same pattern of use when they apply it to humans as when they apply it to God. The error theorist abstains from applying 'is good' to anything. Therefore, it is vacuously true that he meets this requirement. Consequently, the error theorist can consistently level the Objection from Bad Semantics.

The second response was the Objection from Bad Methodology. This objection says that the only reason for adopting the 'God's goodness is different' view is to avoid the problem of evil, and that that makes the view *ad hoc*. An *ad hoc* view is thereby a complicated view, and such a view should not be adopted if a rival and simpler view is available (here: atheism). The objection concludes that the 'God's goodness is different' view should be rejected.

Again, we are not assuming that the error theorist has any moral standards. But he can consistently comment on what moral standards others have. In particular, he can comment on the (alleged) fact that the theist shifts between his pre-debating standards and his debating standards solely in order to avoid the problem of evil. That is, the error theorist can comment that, prior to the debate, the theist uses one set of standards to judge human actions, and, solely to avoid the problem of evil, he uses another set to judge God's actions. Such a shift of standards is *ad hoc*. By arguing in this way, the error theorist runs The Objection from Bad Methodology as an *ad hominem* argument against the theist. The error theorist does not illicitly appeal to moral standards of his own. He notes the moral standards of the theist, and criticises their shifting nature on the basis of the methodological standard that theories should not be *ad hoc*.

It might be replied that the above methodological principle is normative in some sense, and so it is not obvious that the error theorist can consistently employ the principle. But that reply makes a puzzling conflation of the normative with the moral. Granted, moral sentences are normative sentences, and the error theorist asserts that no moral sentence is (non-vacuously) true. But since moral sentences form a proper sub-set of the normative sentences, it does not follow that the error theorist is committed to asserting that no normative sentence is (non-vacuously)

true. The above methodological principle is a normative claim without being a moral claim. So, in appealing to that principle, the error theorist is not appealing to 'his own moral standards'.

But consider a worst case scenario for the error theorist. Perhaps Mackie's reasons for being an error theorist about morality – the arguments from relativity and from queerness – ramify and provide arguments for being an error theorist about normative claims in general. That is, there are no evidential, moral or prudential reasons.[22] All the same, the error theorist can still run an *ad hominem* against the theist. The theist thinks that belief systems should not be defended on *ad hoc* grounds. The error theorist can argue that, by the theist's own standards of argument, the 'God's goodness is different' view is defended on *ad hoc* grounds. By those standards, the theist should not accept that view.

As noted in connection with (Q2), it is further matter whether the Bad Semantics or Bad Methodology Objections are cogent – but that is not the issue here. Whether or not either objection is cogent, they are available to the moral realist atheologian if and only if they are available to the error theorist. Sturgeon's contention that the error theorist cannot consistently respond to various theistic replies to the problem of evil is mistaken.

THE PROBLEM OF EMOTIONAL NEGLECT

The previous section defended the error theorist's tactic of framing the problem of evil as an *ad hominem* objection to the theist. In closing, it should be pointed out that another tactic is available to the error theorist. He can argue as follows: 'Call an act of suffering gratuitous if the suffering was not the consequence of any human being's action or omission. Suppose God exists. As theists themselves typically agree, if God exists, God is an all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful, and perfectly rational being. Such a God would have the overriding loving desire to prevent gratuitous suffering; would know how to prevent such suffering; would have the power to prevent it; and would have rational self-control sufficient to act

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[22] See Black (1989-90).

on that desire. Yet there is gratuitous suffering in the world, as witnessed by (say) cancerous animals. The preceding claims are mutually incompatible. (Or, at least they are jointly improbable)'. Stating the problem of evil in this way is to state it in non-moral terms. So the argument does not have to be construed as an *ad hominem* against the theist. The error theorist can consistently assert the conjunction of the premises and, on that basis, assert the conclusion. Perhaps it would be a misnomer to call this a statement of the problem of *evil*. But other labels are forthcoming. We might call it the problem of emotional neglect: the problem of why a supremely loving being would neglect emotionally distressed beings, despite having the knowledge and power to care for them.

The point here is that even if Sturgeon had shown that the error theorist cannot present the original problem of evil in an *ad hominem* form, there is a variant problem that the error theorist can devise that is neither an *ad hominem* nor vulnerable to Sturgeon's objection. Note that it would be irrelevant to respond to the variant problem by appealing to a morally charged view, such as the 'God's goodness is different' view, since the variant problem is presented without using any moral terms.

It might be objected that it is not obvious that a claim such as 'an all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful being would prevent pain or injury occurring' is a non-moral claim. To address this concern we need to define what a moral sentence is. The following two-stage procedure is available. In the first stage, we identify the moral terms – the so-called 'thin moral' terms (of English).[23] These terms are defined by being listed. The list

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[23] The so-called 'thick' moral terms (of English) include such terms as 'courageous', 'nasty', 'considerate', and 'cheerful'. This paper does not define the class of thick moral terms. It seems to be an open issue whether an error theorist should hold that sentences ascribing thick moral terms to subjects are globally false. The reason for this is that it seems to be an open issue how thick moral terms should be analysed. For instance, it might be suggested that when speakers ascribe a thick moral term to a subject they both ascribe a non-moral property to the subject, and implicate that the subject has a certain moral property. The speakers can cancel the implicature by stating that they are moral error theorists. If this suggestion is tenable, then the error theorist can believe and assert sentences ascribing thick moral terms to subjects. Suppose an error theorist and a moral realist each utter the sentence 'Bullying is nasty'. They each say that bullying has a certain non-moral property. What is said by an utterance contributes to the truth conditions of that utterance. What is said by an utterance is (roughly) the statement made by that utterance. In that sense, the error theorist and the moral realist say the same thing: they make the same statement by

includes terms such as 'morally good', 'morally right', 'morally ought', and so on. This method of definition is familiar: logic texts frequently identify logical constants by listing them. In both cases, the moral and the logical, the list produced is a short finite one, and there is general agreement about what goes on the list and what does not. The method is valuable if it is agreed to be extensionally correct. Having completed the first stage, we proceed to the second stage: that of defining a moral sentence. This is done as follows. A sentence S is a moral sentence if and only if either (1) S is an atomic sentence consisting of the ascription of a moral term to an entity, or (2) S entails a sentence satisfying (1). The notion of an atomic sentence as used here is to be understood in the following intuitive way. A sentence is a well-formed sequence of syntactical items. S is an atomic sentence if and only if S is a sentence, and no sub-sequence of the syntactical items from which S is formed is itself a sentence. (A sentence such as 'It is morally good to be charitable' is elliptical for 'It is morally good to perform charitable acts', wherein a moral term ('is morally good') is ascribed to the members of a class of events, namely the class of charitable acts).

Let us now apply the suggested definition of a moral sentence to the target sentence, 'an all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful being would prevent gratuitous suffering'. The target sentence does not include any moral term as understood above. *A fortiori*, the sentence does not consist in the ascription of such a term to an entity. Nor does it entail any sentence that consists in the ascription of a moral term to an entity. On these grounds, the target sentence should not be classified as a moral sentence. Therefore, the problem of emotional neglect can be stated without using any moral sentences.[24]

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uttering the sentence in question. What is meant by an utterance may go beyond what is said by that utterance. In that sense, the error theorist and the moral realist do not mean the same when they utter the sentence in question. One of them preserves an implicature of the utterance that the other does not.

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