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Attributing Error Without Taking a Stand

Moral error theory is the doctrine that our first-order moral commitments are pervaded by systematic error. It has been objected that this makes the error theory itself a position in first-order moral theory that should be judged by the standards of competing first-order moral theories.[1] This paper is about whether, and if so, how, error theorists can avoid this charge.

As we will understand it, the charge that the error theory is a position in first-order moral theory can be understood as the charge that it entails *taking a stand* on some claims within first-order moral theory. Some critics of the error theory may have in mind something stronger, and in our view, clearly false – namely that this makes the error theory normative *rather than* metaethical.[2] But we have no objections to the idea that a thesis may be metaethical and also have first-order normative consequences. If a thesis has content that is both normative and metaethical, of course, it can't fairly be judged to be *true* by the standards of normative ethical theory alone – for it should also be beholden to the standard of metaethics. But critics who charge that the error theory has commitments in normative ethics are not claiming that the error theory can be shown to be true by the standards of normative ethics. Rather, they are claiming that it can be shown to be *false* by those standards.

Consider, for example, this argument, against Mackie's error theory:

1. Gratuitous infliction of pain is morally wrong.
2. If gratuitous infliction of pain is morally wrong, there are objectively prescriptive facts.
3. If Mackie's error theory is true, there aren't objectively prescriptive facts.
4. So Mackie's error theory isn't true.

Mackie insists on premise two, as a conceptual truth about moral judgment. And premise three is just a description of his error theory. So it seems like premise one has to be false if Mackie's error theory is true.

However, premise one is favored by the sort of evidence that we tend to acknowledge when we're doing normative ethics. (It's intuitively plausible, and it coheres with other moral claims that we tend to accept, and so on.) If we could rely on premise one in arguing against some theory in normative ethics, we would take ourselves to have a powerful argument against that theory. Do we have the same kind of argument against Mackie's error theory? Some error theorists might say that we do – but insist that the argument isn't compelling in either case.

But our question in this paper is more systematic: *can* an error theorist take this kind of argument to be less compelling against her than it is against a theory in normative ethics? As a first pass, we argue (section 1) that the way to resist the argument is obvious. Error theorists can avoid the argument of taking sides in first-order normative theory by being *even-handed* in their attributions of error – by attributing a pox equally on everyone's houses. (It is as much an error to deny premise one as it is to affirm it.) And the most promising way to be even-handed in the attribution of error, we will argue (section 2), is by taking seriously the idea that the poisoned commitment of ordinary moral discourse which renders it in error is in fact a *presupposition*.

We show that this *presuppositional* error theory can crisply distinguish the sort of evidence that matters in normative ethics from the sort of evidence that matters in evaluating the error theory (section 3). We believe that the presuppositional error theory therefore illuminates a distinction that metaethicists have used for many years without explaining: the distinction between so-called "first-order" and "second-order" moral claims. Unfortunately (section 4), it turns out that contemporary work on presupposition is governed by a dogma that is incompatible with using an appeal to presupposition to maintain total even-handedness. But we will argue that this dogma is mistaken, and that even if we are wrong, that fact itself shows that the error theorist who appeals to presupposition can be *sufficiently* even-handed (section 5). We close with some empirical support for the claim that moral language does in fact carry a presupposition (section 6).

I   Be Even-Handed

The error theory, as we understand it, is committed to the claim that our ordinary moral discourse is systematically in error. It takes some unpacking in order to say exactly what this comes to – to say which claims in ordinary moral discourse turn out to be mistaken, for example, or how many of them have to be mistaken, or how the errors have to be distributed, before we count as having an error theory. But we won't need to resolve any of these questions in order to feel the force of the problem that we are considering in this paper.

The problem is that it is *hard* to see how to attribute error to first-order normative commitments without taking a stand on any first-order normative dispute. We saw one example in the introduction: the error theory seems committed to rejecting claims that are uncontroversial in normative ethics. But we can also find similar examples with more disputed questions. Derek Parfit and T.M. Scanlon disagree about what Parfit calls the 'impersonalist restriction':

> *Impersonalist Restriction*: In rejecting some moral principle, we cannot appeal to claims about the impersonal goodness or badness of outcomes.[3]

Because they disagree about this principle, Scanlon and Parfit disagree about what is wrong. Scanlon thinks, and Parfit allows, that it is wrong to do something if it is forbidden by a principle that no one can reasonably reject. And because he accepts this restriction, Scanlon allows for *fewer* ways of reasonably rejecting a principle than Parfit does. So as a result, there are some things that Scanlon thinks are wrong, that Parfit does not think are wrong. Let us assume that Catherine is in such a situation, and that Scanlon thinks that it is wrong for her press the button.

Parfit thinks that when Scanlon says that it is wrong for Catherine to press the button, he is making a mistake – committing an error. The error theorist – let us call her Erica – paradigmatically also thinks that when Scanlon says that it is wrong for Catherine to phi, he is making a mistake.[4] So in this, Parfit and Erica seem to agree. But Parfit's dispute with Scanlon is a normative one. So it seems that Erica's dispute with Scanlon is a normative one, as well – it is the same dispute, though the evidence that she offers may be different. The dispute between Parfit, Scanlon, and Erica will be our initial case study for how to think about the idea that the error theory carries normative commitments. It makes vivid the fact that attributing error is not far off from denying, and that denying looks like it is taking a stand.

Some error theorists, we take it, will simply accept this characterization.[5] They will restrict their attribution of error to positive claims to the effect that something is wrong, accept the characterization that they are on Parfit's side of this dispute with Scanlon, and comfort themselves that they are on Scanlon's side, when it comes to things that Parfit thinks are wrong, but Scanlon thinks are not wrong. But that is just to

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[3] Parfit [2011, volume 2, p ***].

[4] Note that we have said nothing about *which* claims you must think are in error in order to count as an error theorist, but paradigmatically, error theorists do tend to think that positive assertions that some particular action is wrong count as being in such error, and we could change the example to accommodate some other kind of error theory.

[5] On Dworkin's [1996] reading, as we understand him, Mackie [1977] straightforwardly accepts this conclusion. Dworkin [1996, 113]: "John Mackie […] was an Archimedean who rejected neutrality: he insisted, as I have, that the face value view is part and parcel of ordinary morality. But he concluded that ordinary morality is therefore false."

say that they are okay with taking stands within normative ethical theory, and in this paper we are exploring how an error theorist like Erica can *avoid* taking such a stand.

The answer, we take it, should be obvious: she should claim that Parfit and Scanlon are making the very same mistake about Catherine's case. To make good on this answer, we need to identify the mistake that they're both making.

Here is one option. When Parfit says that Scanlon's claim that it is wrong for Catherine to press the button is a mistake, he thinks that it follows that it is permissible for Catherine not to press the button. And when Scanlon says that Parfit's claim that it is permissible for Catherine to press the button is a mistake, he thinks that it follows that it is wrong for Catherine to press the button. Parfit and Scanlon are assuming, therefore, that the questions of whether it is wrong for Catherine to press the button, and of whether it is permissible for Catherine not to press the button, go hand-in-hand. They are assuming, in other words, that 'wrong to' and 'permissible not to' are *duals*. But this is something that Erica can deny.[6]

If Erica denies that 'wrong to' and 'permissible not to' are duals then she can stake out an intelligible third position, according to which Parfit and Scanlon are each making exactly the same mistake, and are mistaken to exactly the same degree. Since they are taking for granted that the answers to these two questions go hand-in-hand, they are each defending two positions, in their dispute. And so Erica can disagree with each of them about one of their positions. Moreover, she cannot be intelligibly accused of taking sides in their dispute, since her disagreement with Parfit is exactly parallel to her disagreement with Scanlon. And finally, since the assumption that 'wrong to' and 'permissible not to' are duals is in fact a pervasive background assumption of first-order moral theorizing, it follows that Erica has identified a respect in which first-order moral theorizing is subject to an error that is indeed pervasive.

We think this response is on the right track, in trying to identify a mistake the Scanlon and Parfit both make. However, we doubt that this response identifies quite the right mistake. After all, it is not enough for Erica to be even-handed between Parfit and Scanlon. In order to avoid taking a stand within first-order moral theory, she must be even-handed with respect to *all* first-order moral disputes. But on the face of it, Erica is *not* so far being even-handed with respect to all first-order normative disputes. On the contrary, she merely appears to have made a distinction between two different first-order normative disputes in which Parfit and Scanlon are simultaneously engaged, and to have taken *different* stands with respect to these two disputes.

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[6] Compare Olson [2014, 14-15], who denies it.

According to Erica, Parfit and Scanlon disagree about two things. They disagree about whether it is wrong for Catherine to phi, and they disagree about whether it is permissible for Catherine not to phi. And Parfit and Scanlon are definitely engaged in first-order moral inquiry – they are asking first-order moral questions, and their subject matter is that of first-order morality. So it seems that at least one of the things about which they disagree must be a first-order moral question: either whether it is wrong for Catherine to phi, or whether it is permissible for Catherine not to phi, or both. But Erica takes a stand on *both* of these questions – that is the ground on which she claims to have cast a pox on both their houses – to be genuinely even-handed. So in short, she is taking a stand on at least one first-order moral question.

In order to avoid this conclusion, Erica must say one of a number of bizarre things. For example, she could say that neither the question of whether it is wrong for Catherine to push the button nor the question of whether it is permissible for Catherine not to push the button is essentially a first-order moral question, but only when they are asked together. But this is hardly the sort of answer to convince either Parfit or Scanlon that she is not taking a stand in first-order theory.

Or she could say (along with Olson [2014, 14-15]) that while the claim that it *is* wrong for Catherine to push the button is a moral claim, the claim that it is *not* wrong for Catherine to push the button is not. But again, this is a peculiarly fine-grained way to carve up normative inquiry. On a more natural view, first-order moral inquiry is in the business of asking first-order moral questions, and questions have more than one possible answer – or they are not worth asking. So of course answering a moral question in the negative is arriving at a conclusion of moral inquiry just as much as answering it in the affirmative. Put differently, what makes first-order moral inquiry distinctive is its subject matter, and subject matters are closed under the negation operation – if the proposition that dinosaurs had feathers is part of the subject matter of paleontology, then so is the proposition that dinosaurs did not have feathers. Similarly, if the proposition that it is wrong for Catherine to push the button is part of the subject matter of first-order normative ethics, then so is the proposition that it is not wrong for Catherine to phi. So even-handedness, while it does look like the right *aspiration* for Erica if she wants to avoid the charge of taking a stand within first-order moral theory, is not so trivial to obtain.

2   True Even-Handedness Requires Presupposition

But fortunately, we can do better for Erica. Her key insight, recall, was that she could be even-handed between Parfit and Scanlon by identifying something that they both took for granted, and denying *it*. In

general, things that are taken for granted in a conversation or debate are *presupposed*. And linguistic presuppositions exhibit just the right kind of striking features for Erica to take advantage of.

In particular, one of the distinguishing characteristics of linguistic presuppositions is that they *project*. A standard example of the kind of term that carries a presupposition – a presupposition *trigger* – is 'stopped'. The sentence 'Jill stopped falling' presupposes that Jill was falling at an earlier time, and so does 'Jill didn't stop falling'. If Jill was never falling, then both of these claims are committed to the same error. Another familiar example of presupposition is 'knows'. The sentence 'Jack knows that Jill came tumbling after' presupposes that Jill came tumbling after, but so does 'Jack doesn't know that Jill came tumbling after'. If Jill did not come tumbling after, then both of these claims are committed to the same error.

Because presuppositions project through negation, they are commitments that can infect both a sentence and its negation, and hence a false presupposition can be a pox that falls equally on both houses. In contrast, entailments tend not to project through negation. So by endorsing the claim that the fundamental error that infects moral thought and discourse is a *presupposition*, an error theorist like Erica can stay true to the strategy of avoiding taking any stand in first-order moral theory by being even-handed. Since the problem is one of how to stay even-handed even with respect to moral questions of whether P or not-P, therefore, and since one of the distinguishing marks of presuppositions is that they are commitments that can infect both the claim that P and the claim that not-P in this way, we therefore conclude that appealing to presupposition is the path that Erica should take, if she truly wishes to avoid commitments in first-order moral theory.

In a way, the suggestion that error theorists like Erica might mean to be saying that ordinary moral discourse carries a presupposition should not sound terribly surprising. Stephen Finlay [2008], [2011] and Richard Joyce [2011], after all, have popularized the characterization of the error theorist as claiming that ordinary moral discourse is infected by a "poisoned presupposition". But in fact, both Finlay and Joyce seem to be using the term 'presupposition' loosely, just as a general term for a common commitment. What both seem to believe, is that the error theorist ascribes a false *entailment* to ordinary, first-order, moral claims. And in fact, discussions of the idea that ordinary moral discourse might involve a presupposition are surprisingly rare, even among discussions of the error theory. Joyce [2002], for example, gives the idea that some moral claims might carry false presuppositions a brief mention before moving on, and Kouf [2013] is

the only author that we know of to give it serious comparative consideration as an interpretation of the error theory.[7]

3   Advantages of a Presuppositional Error Theory

At this point, we've noted three related questions about the error theory. We've asked (i) whether the error theorist can allow that 'wrong to' and 'permissible not to' are duals, (ii) what the error theorist should say about the normative dispute between Scanlon and Parfit, and (iii) whether the error theorist is vulnerable to arguments from intuitions that we acknowledge to be forceful in normative ethics. The presuppositional error theory gives clean answers to all of these questions.

In section I, we considered the possibility of denying that 'wrong to' and 'permissible not to' are duals.[8] But duality is not just a feature of moral uses of possibility and necessity modals; it is a feature that is encoded into our best semantic theories about the meanings of possibility and necessity, in general. 'Must' is an all-purpose modal necessity word that can be used to say what is obligatory, what follows from some body of information, or what is metaphysically necessary. Similarly, 'may' is an all-purpose possibility word that can be used to say what is permissible, what is consistent with some body of information, or what is metaphysically possible. The words 'must' and 'may' are able to accomplish so much because of their semantic flexibility. They have a common sematic core that we make use of, in different conversational contexts, to communicate different forms of necessity and possibility – deontic, epistemic, alethic, or otherwise. But that means that certain constraints will follow from this common semantic core – and on the best developed theories of their meanings, these terms are duals. So denying duality, as Erica was tempted to do in section I, is costly.

On the presuppositional form of the error theory, however, there is no need to deny duality. The presuppositional form of the error theory gives us a way of attributing error to both 'it would be wrong for Catherine to press the button' and 'it would not be wrong for Catherine to press the button' equally. Remember that presuppositions *project*. So if an utterance of the first sentence presupposes something objectionable, an utterance of the second sentence will, too. So since the presuppositional error theory already allows us a place for such errors, it has no separate need to distinguish between 'it would not be wrong for

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[7] Kouf also cites only Joyce [2002] and Finlay [2008] for discussion of presupposition in the context of the error theory. And the only reason Joyce [2002] mentions the possibility of presupposition-carrying moral language is in order to explain why it would be uncareful to describe the error theory as the view that all moral claims are false, since he is assuming Strawson's view that claims which carry presuppositions are neither true nor false, and *some* moral claims, like, 'the present king of France is evil', might carry presuppositions.

[8] Olson [2014], for example.

Catherine to press the button' and 'it would be permissible for Catherine not to press the button'. So our view is that Erica can and should embrace duality.

Similarly, in section 2 we encountered the problem that it was hard to distinguish what the error theorist was doing from taking on commitments in first-order normative theory. Our question was whether in disagreeing with Scanlon, Erica is thereby agreeing with Parfit. Our answer is negative. Erica can regard Scanlon and Parfit as both sharing the same poisoned presupposition, and agree neither with Parfit nor with Scanlon.

But there is a residual problem. Parfit could disagree with Scanlon by saying "Catherine did not act wrongly". And Erica will disagree with Scanlon by using the exact same sentence. In using the same sentence, is Erica asserting the same proposition that Parfit is? If she is, how can she really disagree with Parfit?

To answer this residual problem, we need to note another important fact about how presuppositions behave. We've already noted that presuppositions usually *project* from a range of different embeddings: for example, that if an utterance of S presupposes *p*, utterances with the form 'never S' usually do too. But it turns out that there are an important class of exceptions to this principle. Utterances of the sentence "it stopped raining" normally presuppose that it was raining earlier. But we can still understand someone who says "if it never rained today, it never stopped raining today, either." If the presupposition projects in the way that it usually does, she's saying something incoherent: that if it never rained today, it was raining at some point today and never rained at a later point. In this case, then, we don't interpret the presupposition as projecting. We rather interpret it under 'never': the utterance communicates that if it never rained today, then it's never true that (it rained at some earlier point and not at some later point.) This phenomenon is known as *local accommodation*: the presupposition does not project, but is rather *locally accommodated* under the attitude verb.[9]

Local accommodation allows us to make sense of the three-way disagreement between Scanlon, Parfit, and Erica. When Parfit uses a term like 'not' or 'it's false that', the presupposition of moral language (for example, that *there is an objectively prescriptive standard*) projects. When Erica uses those terms, by contrast, the very same presupposition is locally accommodated. We understand that what she asserts is true if the presupposition that normative ethicists share is false. So though Erica and Parfit may say similar-sounding things about what Scanlon says – they will both deny it, for example, and both say that it is false – they are not actually making the same claims. Parfit's use still carries the presupposition that Erica takes to be false, but Erica's use denies that presupposition, and carries no presupposition at all.

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[9] See Heim [1983] for an influential early discussion of local accommodation.

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This gives us an interpretation for an expression that we have been using throughout this paper – an expression that comes from Mackie, but which he never successfully explains and of which we know of no successful explanation despite the fact that metaethicists use it routinely as if it had been successfully introduced as a helpful technical terms. This is the distinction between so-called 'first-order' and 'second-order' claims. If first-order moral claims carry the normal presupposition of moral language, but second-order claims locally accommodate that presupposition, then that offers a principled explanation of why such a distinction might actually exist, and why it behaves in the way that the error theorist says that it does.

Armed with a theory of this distinction, we're now – finally! – in a position to return to the argument from the introduction.

> 1. Gratuitous infliction of pain is morally wrong.
> 2. If gratuitous infliction of pain is morally wrong, there are objectively prescriptive facts.
> 3. If Mackie's error theory is true, there aren't objectively prescriptive facts.
> 4. So Mackie's error theory isn't true.

This argument was pressing, we thought, because there seems to be good evidence for premise one. (If a theory in normative ethics was inconsistent with premise one, we would think that we have good evidence against it.) But if that evidence is good, it should equally be evidence against Mackie's error theory.

If our presuppositional proposal is right, the claim that there's good evidence for premise one is ambiguous. Premise one is associated with two commitments – a commitment which is presupposed, which we'll say is the *not-at-issue* commitment, and the commitment which is not presupposed, which we'll say is the *at-issue* commitment. As a result, claiming that there is good evidence for premise one can mean:

> (i) there is good evidence for the *at-issue* commitment of premise one, or
> (ii) there is good evidence for both the at-issue and not-at-issue commitments of premise one

The presuppositional error theorist can allow that (i) is true, while denying that (ii) is true. After all, she takes the objectionable commitment of moral discourse to be a presupposed, not-at-issue commitment. And (i) is totally silent about the not-at-issue commitment – so the error theorist can be perfectly happy to allow that (i) true! It's (ii) that she takes to be false.

And it is natural for the error theorist to think that there *is* an ambiguity somewhere in this argument. It's natural to think that premise one can be used to make either a first-order claim or a second-order claim, and that there might be good evidence for the first-order claim without there being good evidence for the

second-order one. The presuppositional proposal makes good on this natural idea. Reading (i) is the first-order reading, and reading (ii) is the second-order reading. The presuppositional conception of the first-order/second-order distinction maps exactly onto the natural way of using that distinction.

Our treatment also leaves room for revisionary moral fictionalism. Indeed, on the picture that we have been describing, adopting revisionary fictionalism is as simple as accepting the presupposition of moral language for practical purposes rather than because we think that it is true, and continuing on precisely as before. No shift in meaning is required! This allows Erica the possibility – if she chooses – of both denying what Scanlon and Parfit are both committed to in a careful philosophical context in which it matters whether our presuppositions are true, and then going on to engage in normative inquiry in another context with lower epistemic stakes, with no prior commitments incurred by her error-theoretic claims – as Mackie [1977] himself appears to do, and as revisionary fictionalists like Joyce [2002] advocate.

4   A Problem

So far, the presuppositional error theory seems to be working smoothly. It allows the error theorist to avoid the problems that we were trying to help her avoid. But we are about to encounter an obstacle.

The obstacle arises because the presuppositional error theory really consists of two parts. One part is an empirical conjecture: the conjecture that moral discourse carries a presupposition that the error theorists find objectionable. The other part is a philosophical interpretation of the significance of that empirical conjecture: an interpretation of what's going on in the three-way disagreement between Scanlon, Parfit, and Erica if the empirical conjecture is true. In fact, though, both parts of the presuppositional error theory are controversial. This section and the next (sections 4-5) take up a challenge to the philosophical interpretation of the empirical hypothesis. And Section 6 will make a partial case for the empirical hypothesis.

So in this section, we'll assume that moral discourse does carry a presupposition that error theorists find objectionable. Our claim is that (a) would be ambiguous if it does carry some such presupposition.

(a) There is good evidence that (i) gratuitous infliction of pain is morally wrong.

(a) would then be ambiguous between the claim that there's good evidence for (i)'s at-issue commitment and the claim that there's good evidence for (i)'s at-issue and not-at-issue commitments both. Suppose, for example, that (i)'s at-issue commitment is that $\forall x$ (if x is objectively prescriptive, then x forbids gratuitous infliction of pain) and (i)'s not-at-issue commitment is that $\exists x$: x is objectively prescriptive. Then we're claiming that one of (a)'s readings is that there is good evidence that $\forall x$ (if x is objectively prescriptive, then

x forbids gratuitous infliction of pain). On this reading, the not-at-issue commitment ∃x: x is objectively prescriptive is not interpreted as something that there's good evidence for.

Unfortunately, though, positing these two readings is in tension with one of the most orthodox contemporary ideas about linguistic presuppositions. The orthodox idea is that propositions that are presupposed are *often* also entailed – even *always* entailed, under certain conditions. On this idea, "gratuitous infliction of pain is morally wrong" entails that ∃x: x is objectively prescriptive if it presupposes that ∃x: x is objectively prescriptive. And if the presupposition is entailed, you wouldn't expect (a) to be ambiguous in the way that we've just suggested. You'd expect (a) to require that you have good evidence that ∃x: x is objectively prescriptive. So the orthodox idea seems to doom the suggestion we've just made.

Moreover, the orthodox idea about presupposition is very appealing, fitting well with some of the simplest examples of presupposition triggers. For example, take the case of 'knows'. One of the oldest and least controversial ideas in the history of philosophy is that 'S knows that P' entails that P. But 'knows' is also a standard example of a presupposition trigger. 'S doesn't know that P' is also ordinarily taken to carry a commitment to the claim that P, and that behavior – projection through negation – is the hallmark of presuppositions that we have already observed. So 'S knows that P' must presuppose 'P' as well as entail it.

'Knows' is just one familiar example of a presupposition trigger. But according to orthodox views, they *all* work this way. Of course, not all presuppositions are entailed. 'S does not know that P', for example, presupposes but does not entail 'P'. But it is standardly assumed that *all presuppositions that are not inherited* are entailed. For example, 'Bill stopped running' is standardly assumed to both presuppose and entail that Bill was running, and 'it was Felicia who found him' is standardly assumed to both presuppose and entail that someone found him.

It is hard to tell from cases whether presuppositions are also entailed. The case of 'knows' is vivid because the idea that knowledge entails truth is so orthodox throughout the history of philosophy.[10] And since 'it was Felicia who found him' entails that Felicia found him, it clearly must entail that someone found him. But in general, though it is clear that someone who says 'Bill stopped running' conveys a commitment to the claim that Bill was running, it is hard to get probative intuitive judgments about whether that commitment is an entailment, or just a presupposition. The differences between presuppositions and entailments are a matter for linguistic tests, not just for brute intuitions.

But the idea that presuppositions that are not inherited must be entailed isn't solely motivated by its fit with intuitive judgments about cases. It also fits with a powerful and influential explanation, due to

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[10] Though compare Hazlett [2010].

Robert Stalnaker, of how and why presuppositions project. Stalnaker's explanation starts with the basic idea that simple presupposition triggers like 'stop' contribute conjunctive contents – where the intuitively presupposed content is one of the conjuncts. For example, 'Mark stopped drinking diet soda' has the content that Mark was drinking diet soda and Mark is not drinking diet soda. And here, the intuitively presupposed content is the first conjunct – that Mark was drinking diet soda.

Stalnaker explains this by appeal to the simple idea that presupposition is something that agents *do*, in making utterances. A speaker presupposes a proposition if she takes it to be part of the *common ground* – that is, part of what parties to the conversation accept, and take others to accept, and so on. And since this is all that presuppositions are, we can therefore use simple and general pragmatic principles about cooperative communication in order to explain why it will in general be cooperative to assertively utter 'Mark stopped drinking diet soda' only if you take for granted that Mark was drinking diet soda, and similarly, why it will in general be cooperative to assertively utter 'Mark didn't stop drinking diet soda' only if you take the same thing for granted. In other words, general pragmatic principles will explain why presuppositions project. And this also extends to explain why presuppositions should project in every natural language. The assumptions about rational communication to which his explanation appeals are just the sorts of things that would hold cross-linguistically if they hold at all.

So even if we weren't compelled by intuitive judgments about examples like 'knows', or by the testimony of the experts, it is still not safe to disregard the orthodox idea that presuppositions that are not inherited must be entailed. There *are* general, more theoretical, reasons why this idea is widely accepted, as is illustrated by Stalnaker's explanation of projection behavior.[11] And this idea poses a serious challenge to the presuppositional error theory, as we've described it in Sections 2 and 3.

5   Toward a solution

We believe that the orthodox idea about presupposition is actually false.[12] The problem for the orthodox assumption is that it struggles to accommodate an important range of facts about how presuppositions behave under attitude verbs. We believe but will not have the space to fully demonstrate here that the orthodox assumption cannot overcome these struggles. But fortunately, it turns out that even if we are wrong, the

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[11] In addition to Stalnaker [1973], [1974], [1984], [1999], [2002], this principle is also accepted by, for example, Atlas [2005], Boer and Lycan [1976], Levinson [1983], Kempson [1975], Schlenker [2010], Simons [2001], Tonhauser et al. [2013], and Wilson [1975].

[12] We are joined in rejecting the orthodox assumption by Comesaña and McGrath [2014], though we don't accept their main argument.

presuppositional error theory still wins. This is because it turns out that *any* theory that can accommodate the important facts about how presuppositions behave under attitude verbs will vindicate exactly the claims about the presuppositional error theory that we made in section 3.

The general fact about how attitude verbs interact with presuppositions is that they treat presuppositions differently than asserted content. This is easiest to see if we move away from attitude verbs like 'thinks' and 'believes' and focus on emotive verbs like 'is glad' or 'is sad'. Consider the following minimal pair:

1   Shieva is sad that Mark used to drink diet soda. But she's glad that he has stopped.
2   Shieva is sad that Mark isn't drinking diet soda these days. *But she's glad that he has stopped.

According to the orthodox assumption, 'Mark has stopped drinking diet soda' is semantically equivalent to a conjunction something along the lines of 'Mark used to drink diet soda and Mark does not drink diet soda (these days)'. And conjunctions are symmetric. But what this minimal pair illustrates is that the attitude verb 'glad' treats these two conjuncts differently. The report 'she is glad that Mark has stopped drinking diet soda' always communicates that she is glad that Mark is not drinking diet soda (these days), and never communicates that she is glad that Mark used to drink diet soda.

In contrast, attitude verbs like 'glad' never treat ordinary conjunctive contents in this asymmetric way:

3   I'm sad that you're buying a car. But I'm glad that you're buying a hybrid car.
4   I'm sad that you're buying a hybrid. But I'm glad that you're buying a hybrid car.

Here, both statements are intelligible – the first one coming from someone with environment-friendly values, and the second from someone with environment-hostile values who is glad that at least it's not a hybrid motorcycle. There is no fundamental asymmetry in what someone has to be glad about, in order for their state of mind to be aptly reported by 'I'm glad that you're buying a hybrid car.' They have to be glad about *something* that is entailed by your buying a hybrid car, but there are no constraints on what that has to be.

The same fundamental asymmetry for how attitudes verbs work patterns with the negations:

5   Shieva is sad that Mark used to drink diet soda. But she's glad that he hasn't stopped.
6   Shieva is sad that Mark is drinking diet soda these days. *But she's glad that he hasn't stopped.

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Of course, the frame of mind of someone who is sad that Mark used to drink diet soda but glad that he does now requires more explanation than the frame of mind of someone who is just against drinking diet soda whenever it happens, and so **5** is not as natural as **1**, but it makes sense if Shieva cares about sharing drinking experiences with Mark (for example) and has recently started drinking diet soda, herself. And the contrast with **6** is still sharp. 'She's glad that Mark hasn't stopped' drinking diet soda can be used to report that that she is glad that Mark is drinking diet soda, but can't be used to report that she is glad that Mark used to drink diet soda.

In contrast, again, are the case of ordinary disjunctions — that is, negations of conjunctive content.

7   I'm sad that you're moving to the Dakotas. But I'm glad that you're moving to South Dakota.
8   I'm sad that you're moving to the Dakotas. But I'm glad that you're moving to North Dakota.

Clearly, neither of these makes more sense than the other. If it is possible at all to be glad that someone is moving to South Dakota while being sad that they are moving to the Dakotas, it is equally possible to be glad that someone is moving to North Dakota while being sad that they are moving to the Dakotas — these just require contrasting preferences about residency in each of North and South Dakota.

So when we look at how attitude verbs interact with claims that carry presuppositions, what we find is that attitude verbs seem to behave as if they selectively operate only on the 'at issue' content of the presupposition-carrying claim, and not at all on the presupposed content. However, the orthodox theory about presupposition triggers is that they express conjunctive propositions, and that attitude verbs operate on the conjunctive proposition. So we are skeptical that the orthodox theory can capture this data.

Certainly it does not fit at all closely with the data at a superficial level. Along one dimension it is too symmetric, and along another, it is too asymmetric. According to the orthodox account, the semantic content of 'Mark stopped drinking diet soda' is completely symmetric in the same way as any other conjunction, yet attitude verbs like 'glad' and 'sad' treat the two conjuncts asymmetrically. And similarly, according to the orthodox account, the semantic content of 'Mark didn't stop drinking diet soda' is completely symmetric in the same ways as any other disjunction, yet attitude verbs like 'glad' and 'sad' treat the two disjuncts asymmetrically. And at a different level, attitude verbs treat the at-issue and presupposed contents of 'Mark stopped drinking diet soda' and 'Mark didn't stop drinking diet soda' in the very same way, but according to the orthodox account, this must be merely a convergence from very different underlying

explanations, because the semantic content of one of these sentences is a conjunction, while the other is a disjunction. The orthodox theory has many tricks to deploy, but we are skeptical that those tricks will succeed.

In contrast, we believe that the simplest and best explanation of the data is that presupposition-carrying sentences do not have conjunctive contents at all. Rather, they have *pairs* of contents, one of which is interpreted as presupposed, and one of which is interpreted at-issue. So 'Mark stopped drinking diet soda' expresses the pair of propositions, <Mark used to drink diet soda (presupposed), Mark no longer drinks diet soda (at-issue)>, and 'Mark didn't stop drinking diet soda' expresses the pair, <Mark used to drink diet soda (presupposed), Mark drinks diet soda (at-issue)>. Unlike the orthodox account, this account achieves a basic symmetry between what is going on with positive and negative presuppositional claims, which has the right structure to explain why positive and negative presuppositional claims behave in the same way under not just one or two attitude verbs, but under any attitude verbs. And unlike the orthodox account, it does not treat the contents of the complements of attitude verbs as symmetric; rather, these contents are asymmetric, because one is interpreted as presupposed, and one is interpreted as at-issue.

On this account, when a sentence carries a presupposed content, it semantically expresses a set of propositions, one of which is interpreted as at-issue. And when an attitude verb takes such a sentence for its argument, it ordinarily expresses a set of propositions – all of the original presupposed propositions, together with the result of operating the attitude verb on the at-issue proposition. (We also believe that the resulting sentence normally implicates that the subject of the attitude verb *accepts* each of the presupposed contents, but this is a separate claim.)

This account vindicates our earlier analysis of sentences like (a).

(a) There is good evidence that (i) gratuitous infliction of pain is morally wrong.

For us, (i) is associated with a pair of contents: <∃x: x is objectively prescriptive (presupposed), ∀x (if x is objectively prescriptive, then x forbids gratuitous infliction of pain (at-issue)>. And we understand "there is good evidence" as behaving like an attitude verb, so that it can just operate on the at-issue proposition. That's why you can use (a) to assert only that there's good evidence that ∀x (if x is objectively prescriptive, then x forbids gratuitous infliction of pain).[13] That's the use of (a) where it expresses just the first-order

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[13] In using (a) in that way, you're also accepting that ∃x: x is objectively prescriptive.

claim.[14] So the presuppositional error theory is home free if we associate presupposition triggers with pairs of contents, some of which are interpreted as at-issue and others as not-at-issue.

Our pair-of-contents conception of presupposition is also a model of what an empirically adequate account of presupposition needs to look like. Any adequate account needs to predict that it's possible to V that S without V-ing S's presuppositions. (That's the only way to capture the earlier facts about Mark's stopping drinking diet soda.) And there may be tricks that allow the orthodox idea about presupposition to predict this fact.[15] But the orthodox idea is plausible only given those tricks: it needs to make the same predictions about attitude ascriptions like (a) that the the pair-of-contents picture makes. So the presuppositional error theorist can rest secure in claiming that sentences like (a) have both a first-order reading and a second-order reading, whatever account we give of foundational questions about presupposition.

6   Empirical evidence

This paper has in effect argued that error theorists can be evenhanded *if* moral discourse carries a certain kind of presupposition. And there are several advantages for the error theorist in being evenhanded in this way. But the conjecture that moral discourse *does* carry this sort of presupposition is a substantial empirical conjecture — not the sort of thing to be evaluated by its philosophical advantages. We close by laying out some empirical evidence for this conjecture. It's not just that we take this conjecture to help the error theorist be evenhanded. We also think that this conjecture is highly plausible, when considered purely on its own merits.

The first kind of empirical evidence lies very close to the surface, given the earlier sections. Certain natural language sentences are, we think, intelligible ways of expressing the error theory. And the best way to explain why they are intelligible is to adopt our presuppositional conjecture. For example, **9** is interpretable in a way that **10** isn't.

9   Killing isn't morally permissible; it's not true that it's morally impermissible, either.

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[14] Doesn't this account preclude the other reading, the one where (a) is used to assert that there's good evidence for the at-issue and not-at-issue commitments both? It seems to claim that uses of (a) can't be used to assert that there's good evidence for the not-at-issue commitment. Not at all. Its only claim is that (a) can be used to communicate only that there is good evidence for the at-issue commitment. This claim is compatible with the further claim that (a) can be used to communicate about the evidence for the at-issue and not-at-issue commitment. And in fact it would be implausible to deny that further claim, because that's the reading where the presupposition is locally accommodated — the sort of reading that we would expect to hear.

[15] For two different options, see Heim 1992 and Villalta (2000)

10   *That very pencil isn't present in China; it's not true that it's absent from China, either.

If I told my doctor that I'm teaching my students **9**, she might well think that I'm corrupting the youth. That is, she seems to understand me, and come to a conclusion about my moral character. If, by contrast, I tell her that I'm teaching my students **10**, she'll be initially confused. She'll struggle to understand what I'm trying to say. (Maybe she'll think that I don't understand what "absent" and "present" mean.)

Our conjecture about presupposition is, we think, the best way to capture this observation. The doctor can interpret **9** because she can interpret the predicate 'is morally permissible' as triggering a presupposition that is locally accommodated. The first conjunct in **9** then communicates that it's not true that [both ∀x (if x is objectively prescriptive, then x forbids killing) and ∃x: x is objectively prescriptive], and the second clause communicates something similar. And those two propositions are both true, if the error theory is right. That's why we can coherently interpret **9**. By contrast, it's harder to find material in **10** that the doctor can locally accommodate to achieve a coherent interpretation. It looks like **10** just involves predicating incompatible properties (being present in China and being absent from China) of the very same object. And this observation is powerful evidence for our presuppositional proposal. Local accommodation is a genuine hallmark of presupposition; no other phenomenon exhibits it.[16]

It turns out that there *is* in fact one coherent way that the doctor might interpret **10**. She might take the speaker to be putting forward a metaphysical theory about the nature of pencils – that they are the sort of thing that aren't located in physical space on way or another. Then she might be able to interpret **10**. But this possibility bolsters the presuppositional gloss of **9**, rather than undercutting it. We should already suppose that the predicate 'is absent' triggers a presupposition that its argument is a physical object. This follows from the general fact that sortally restricted predicates presuppose that the relevant sortal applies.[17] Crucially, then, someone who interprets **10** as putting forward a metaphysical theory of the nature of pencils is doing exactly what we're suggesting happens with **9**. They are locally accommodating a presupposition. So in that case, **10** communicates that it's not true that (this very object is a physical object and is present in China) and it's not true that (it's a physical object and is absent from China). And that proposition is true just in case the object isn't a physical object. So we conclude that the very expressibility of the error theory by saying things like **9** is itself evidence that moral claims do indeed carry presuppositions which at least *might* be denied.

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[16] Christopher Potts [2005, 35-36] argues for this point in illuminating detail.
[17] See Thomason [1972].

A second kind of evidence comes from attitude ascriptions. Compare two kinds of characters: one character who's a reformed error theorist, who comes to reject the error theory, and one character who's a reformed act consequentialist. They're both sad about what they've become convinced of. (They both feel like they've wasted their lives arguing otherwise.) But there is a striking asymmetry about what they can be glad about.

> 11   I'm sad that there are objectively prescriptive moral truths. Given that fact, though, I'm glad that it's wrong to kill one to save five. I've always argued that if there are objectively prescriptive moral truths, that action would be wrong. And I'm glad I wasn't wrong about everything.

> 12   I'm sad that morality forbids killing one to save five if it forbids anything. *Given that fact, though, I'm glad that it's wrong to kill one to save five. I've always argued that there are objectively prescriptive moral truths. And I'm glad I wasn't wrong about everything.

As we've seen, this contrast is exactly what we should expect if the claim that there are objectively prescriptive moral truths is presupposed, rather than entailed.

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