

THE GOAL PROBLEM IN THE “NOW WHAT” PROBLEM

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SUPPOSE MORAL ERROR THEORY is true. The natural question that comes next is what we practically should do with this already existing system of morality, a question often dubbed the “now what” problem.¹ For those error theorists who go on to deny even instrumental reasons, this very question of what we *should* do next is to be further paraphrased in metaphysically innocuous terms, but many error theorists wish to hold a non-error theory regarding instrumental reasons, and for them, the “now what” problem can be taken at face value. For the sake of argument, let us further suppose that the latter group is correct and that we can take the question literally.

An array of proposals has been put forward.² Roughly categorized, these proposals fall under three types. First, conservatism suggests that we keep morality as before; second, abolitionism suggests that we discard morality altogether; third, substitutionism suggests that we keep the shell of moral discourse but supply a different, non-erroneous semantics for it.³ Note that substitutionism as such is itself a group of views. According to different substitute semantics, moral terms could be expressing certain conative attitudes or ascribing certain natural properties, among others. In this paper, I do not intend to adjudicate on this dispute; instead, I wish to point out the problematic assumption largely taken for granted by most, if not all, of the proposals. I identify it as the goal problem in the “now what” problem. Simply put, theorists have been too casual in identifying the agents’ set of goals that generates the instrumental reasons to adopt their proposals. In what follows, I will present arguments against the background of

1 The label comes from Lutz, “The ‘Now What’ Problem for Error Theory.”

2 For a careful, up-to-date survey, see Jaquet, “Sorting Out Solutions to the Now-What Problem.”

3 For typical examples of the three types, respectively, see Olson, *Moral Error Theory*; Garner, “Abolishing Morality”; and Lutz, “The ‘Now What’ Problem for Error Theory.” I also intend to count fictionalism (such as Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*) as a species of substitutionism. But for a nuanced taxonomy that treats content fictionalism and force fictionalism differently, see Jaquet, “Sorting Out Solutions to the Now-What Problem.”

Lutz, since his is one of the most recent systematic critiques and defenses on this problem (and indeed also where the useful label of the problem comes from), but the idea generalizes to other proposals that bear relevant similarity.⁴

1. THE ARGUMENT FROM INSTRUMENTAL REASONS

According to the version of substitutionism that Lutz favors, we are to replace the extant moral semantics with a different one that assign properties about the speaker's attitudes to moral terms as semantic values.⁵ For example, "Murder is wrong" would no longer ascribe to murder the property of moral wrongness, which moral error theorists take to be queer; instead, it would ascribe to murder the property of being disapproved of by the speaker. This new semantics may incur other problems, which I will turn to shortly, and it may even fail to count as *moral* semantics, but it is rid of uniform falsity. As long as the speaker does disapprove of murder, "Murder is wrong" expresses a truth. *To the extent that we care about truth*, we should, or at least have *pro tanto* reason to, favor substitutionism over, say, conservatism.

Lutz's argument is clearly in the form of instrumental reasoning:

1. We as normal agents have a normal set of goals (such as to hold only true beliefs).⁶
2. Anyone with this normal set of goals instrumentally should adopt substitutionism (of a certain version—I will drop this qualification for now).
3. Therefore, we should adopt substitutionism.

Call this specific, *actual*, normal set of goals *S*. Lutz is not very explicit about what members are in *S*, besides offering two examples: to hold only true beliefs and to get along with friends.⁷ To better see the goal problem, we need a slightly more detailed list of the members in *S*.

Consider 2. Following Lutz, we may agree that the goal to only believe truths is in *S*, but that is certainly not sufficient for the adoption of substitutionism. For the case to be made, *S* needs also to be such that the agent who has it is willing to tolerate a certain level of discourse disorder and a certain level of insincerity, both of which are necessitated consequences of substitutionism.

4 Lutz, "The 'Now What' Problem for Error Theory."

5 Lutz, "The 'Now What' Problem for Error Theory."

6 Note that, here and throughout, the set needs to be understood as *ordered*, since the same goals that are assigned different priorities should count as forming different sets.

7 Lutz, "The 'Now What' Problem for Error Theory," 353.

Since the semantics has changed, not all original discourse patterns can be preserved. Some parts work as before, others not. Consider again the discourse involving right and wrong after the substitution. When I say "Stealing is wrong," I am in fact saying that I disapprove of stealing, and from this we may infer, as before, that I have a reason (at least of an instrumental kind) not to steal. Similarly, just as before, my discovery that my neighbor approves of lying does not warrant my assenting to "Lying is right," since now my assenting to "Lying is right" is only warranted by *my* approval of lying. However, some discourse patterns are disrupted by the substitution. Suppose I approve of donating. Now, according to the new semantics, my approval would automatically render my utterance "Donating is right" true, or in other words, "Donating is right because I approve of it" would express a trivial truth. Similarly, suppose I believe that lying is wrong. I would now *not* be making a legitimate move if I infer from this that my neighbor has a reason not to lie, because my disapproval of lying certainly should not affect reasons for my neighbor to lie if he decides not to care about my (dis)approvals. The moral discourse is to a certain extent in disorder.

Moreover, as Lutz has pointed out, substitutionism may leave the agents who adopt this approach at an insincere position, since they knowingly talk to people with a semantics that the interlocutors do not know they have adopted. In a sense, substitutionists are being deceptive.⁸

For Lutz, these problems should not prevent us from adopting substitutionism, because the new semantics and the old have a substantial degree of overlap, so that, by and large, our moral discourse should function as smoothly as before. From this, we can say something more about the set of goals *S*. Roughly put, *S* needs to be such a set of goals that any agent with it wants to believe in and assert truths only and has a certain level of tolerance toward discourse disorder and conversational insincerity, and that there are no members in the set that may override these features. Perhaps yet more details are needed in order for *S* to suffice for substitutionism, but suppose this rough characterization will do, so that 2 is rendered true.

2. THE GOAL PROBLEM

When we have specified what *S* is like in the way above, 2 comes out true, but now we have the goal problem: it is no longer clear that 1 is true. That is, *do* we, as normal agents, have *S* as our set of goals? There is very good *prima facie* reason to think not, and this can be most clearly shown by counterexamples. We can easily imagine scenarios where agents have different goals that generate instrumental

8 Lutz, "The 'Now What' Problem for Error Theory," 366.

reasons for them to accept "now what" solutions other than substitutionism, but may count as perfectly normal agents nonetheless.

Consider George, someone who shares a deep concern for truth and finds erroneous moral discourse unpalatable, just like the substitutionist. However, he is a direct and honest person and has little to no tolerance for twisting language like substitutionism requires, and finds totally unacceptable thoughts like donation is right because he approves of it. "If I approve of it, I approve of it. Just forget about right and wrong!" says George. His honesty also prevents him from using words like "is wrong" to privately mean that he disapproves of something when he talks to a friend; instead, he spits out (what he takes to be) the truth when he talks to his friends in the most direct, honest language, which he regards as the best way of treating a friend. This means that George has a different set of goals than S, but is George a "normal agent"? Does he count as one of "us"? I think he most certainly does.

For another counterexample, consider Peter, someone who also shares a deep concern for truth, but not unconditionally. Peter forms beliefs according to truth-oriented epistemic norms only if it does not make him suffer from major negative feelings. He believes in an afterlife because that alleviates his existential angst; he believes stone and sand have minds capable of human understanding because that makes him feel less lonely; he also believes in values and rules because that provides him with something he can cling on to for navigating himself through people with very different personalities and commitments. He is also familiar with error-theoretic arguments that moral properties are queer or even impossible, but he remains unmoved by this. Morality serves him well, and disbelieving it incurs too big a price for him, so he decides to continue belief in morality. Is Peter one of us normal agents? It might seem not at first glance, but we should be much more inclined toward a positive answer if we consider the number of non-philosophical believers who are devout but ask for no minimally plausible arguments for their beliefs. Indeed, if normality is defined in terms of population percentage, it is we argument-hunting philosophers who are abnormal.

We can have further counterexamples with yet different sets of goals. For example, Dockstader identifies a therapeutic need of agents, and argues for what he calls "reactionary moral fictionalism," according to which we should shy away from moral discourse as much as possible, and assume a fictionalist stance when hiding is no longer an option.⁹

9 Dockstader, "Reactionary Moral Fictionalism." Novel as the idea is, I am not sure that Dockstader's development is successful, since it seems to me that the therapeutic need is incompatible with the occasional insincerity this approach requires. I leave the assessment of the argument to the readers' discretion.

But I think the message is already clear: 1 is most likely false. Many agents, whom we are inclined to regard as perfectly normal, simply do not seem to have *S* as their set of goals, and since 2 shows only that agents with *S* have instrumental reasons to accept substitutionism, it does not follow that *we* as normal agents should accept substitutionism. George may have good reasons to adopt abolitionism, and Peter conservationism, both being members of “us,” and for those of us with yet different sets of goals, yet other options may be more suitable than substitutionism.

This line of comment generalizes beyond Lutz’s case. Theorists who have proposed different routes forward after moral error theory have produced many interesting and compelling arguments to the effect that we should accept a certain proposal *if* we have certain set of goals. But this falls short of validation of the proposal *per se* since, in addition to the conditional, they would still need arguments to the confirmation of the antecedent, namely, that we do in fact have the set of goals.

But what exactly our set of goals is in fact like is a strictly empirical thesis that can only be determined through serious empirical investigation. We philosophers’ armchair pondering can be fatally misleading in this respect for at least three reasons. First, when we engage in armchair theorizing, the potential agents we can think of can easily fall prey to selective bias. We surround ourselves with philosophers and may therefore naturally assume that all “normal” agents are rational and very willing to follow arguments, but that could be an inaccurate representation of the actual world. Second, the real goals of agents are not always obvious. Testimony and apparent behavior may well be misleading, since under the habitual mean lines and aggressive postures there could be very kind intentions, and vice versa: cruel, selfish goals could hide behind the guise of warm smiles and friendliness. Again, philosophers should claim no expertise in this field. Third, many goals are interrelated in a way unbeknownst to the agents having them, and even unbeknownst to experts prior to substantial long-term studies, so that our actual overall goal may still elude us even if we know the goals separately with certainty. Imagine someone wants to be the most powerful person in the community, but further imagine, as a matter of fact unknown to him, being in a powerful position would bring a huge amount of stress, frustrating his other goal of living a happy life, where happiness is defined in terms of subjective feelings. When this happens, we might say he really does *not* have the goal of living a happy life, or that his goal is in fact overridden, despite his own self-conception to the contrary. Once more, such interrelatedness of possible goals is discoverable only through empirical investigation.

Perhaps it will turn out that we do have the set of goals like the previously

characterized S , and then we do have good reasons to adopt substitutionism. But insofar as characters like George and Peter also look like normal agents, we have at least very good *prima facie* reason to question what exactly our set of goals is in fact like. It may turn out to support abolitionism, conservationism, or what have you. Indeed, it could also turn out that there is no such set shared by all, and the “now what” problem framed in terms of instrumental reasons and a collective “we” simply evaporates. But no matter which is the case, there is no armchair solution to be drawn for the “now what” problem because of the empirical nature of the goal problem.

Of course, the philosophers who have proposed different solutions may choose to retreat to some conditional solution, in the form of 2, that *if* we have such-and-such set of goals, then we should adopt this or that solution. True, but we should also note that a play-safe strategy of this kind may deprive the solutions of a substantial amount of theoretical interest. As we have seen in the discussion of Lutz’s proposal, the set of goals may yield a rather long antecedent of the conditional solution. When we unpack the set, the solution will eventually be something like “If we care about $x, y, z, \dots$ and if these items are prioritized in a certain way, then we should adopt...” The truth of the proposal comes at some cost of its nontriviality, and I am not sure whether this is a price that philosophers in the debate are willing to pay.

3. CONCLUSION

In this brief note, I argued that the philosophers who propose solutions to the “now what” problem typically face a goal problem. The problem has its root in the argument they back up their proposal with, which is one of instrumental reason, consisting of two premises. First, we as normal agents have a certain set of goals. Second, agents with this set of goals instrumentally should accept their proposal. I have argued that when we specify the set of goals with sufficient detail so that the second premise comes out true, the first premise will most likely come out false. These philosophers could retreat to a conditional solution, but that comes with the cost of the solution being less nontrivial; instead, they may try to establish the truth of the first premise, but that requires sufficient empirical investigation for which no armchair speculation will suffice.

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