Chapter 7 – The Myth of Morality
Richard Joyce
Joyce starts the chapter with the following claim:

1. Moral discourse – i.e. specifically categorical imperatives – consists largely of untrue assertions (p. 175).

However, even if we grant (1), this claim still faces an immediate objection: even if Joyce’s error theory is right, it still only undermines a subset of moral discourse – namely, categorical imperatives – rather than the totality of that discourse, e.g. moral goodness talk seems to be untouched by arguments targeting obligation talk in that there could be true moral goodness claims that do not generate moral obligations.

Call this the generation challenge.
Joyce has a few responses to the so-called generation challenge:

First, Joyce argues that moral concepts are largely holistic, so that if the truth of categorical imperatives is undermined, then much of the moral project will be undermined besides.

Second, Joyce claims that talk of virtues and vices generally imply moral obligations – so, for example, if you think that greed is a vice, then this implies that you have a moral obligation (of some kind) to avoid indulging in greedy behavior.

Third, while Joyce argues that you might think that moral goodness and badness imply moral obligations if you accept claims like ‘If an act is morally good, then you have a right to perform it’ and ‘if one has a right to x, then others have an obligation to allow it.’
While it seems reasonable to concede that Joyce’s attack on morality, if successful, effectively undermines large swaths of moral discourse, it seems that we would still be able to salvage a good deal of moral discourse on the good side of things. So, if we respect the distinction between the right and the good, then it seems that Joyce’s challenge serves to undermine much on the right side of the moral universe, leaving the good side largely intact.

Consider a few examples of the good:

2. It would be morally good to feed the starving, homeless family.
3. It would be morally good to defend the gay kid against bullies.
4. It would be morally bad to steal someone’s money.

Perhaps depending on how you think the moral universe is divided up, you might think that moral goods and bad make up only a small portion of that universe. The point is the Joyce’s error-theory only seems a problem for the right side of the universe, leaving the good intact – and this doesn’t seem like error-theory enough (to me at least).
Joyce has a response to this worry:

‘Any system of values that leaves out categorical imperatives will lack the authority that we expect from morality, and any set of prescriptions failing to underwrite that authority simply does not count as “morality” at all. Moral discourse, in other words, is a house of cards, and the card at the center bottom has “categorical imperative” written on it’ (176-7).

While I do not find this response moving – i.e. it seems to me that a world filled with moral goods and bads is a far cry from a world where morality is a myth (or largely untrue) – we should continue forward.

Joyce wonders, if we take his project onboard whole cloth, what we should do from henceforward – i.e. if error theory is true, what *practically* ought we to do?
Joyce’s sums up his concern, nicely:

By asking what we ought to do I am asking how a group of persons, who share a variety of broad interests, projects, ends – and who have come to the realization that morality is a bankrupt theory – might best carry on (177).

So, you might think that if we accept the error-theory of morality, then we should dispense with moral discourse altogether – or, at least, to a large degree. Joyce thinks there are two motivations for this move:

5. As a general rule, we should prefer to have true beliefs, rather than false ones, even if the truth-value of the beliefs in question do not much matter at the moment – after all, you can never tell when having true beliefs will come in handy. (cf. William James).

6. Even if a false belief comes in handy, there would need to be all sorts of other false beliefs, combined with the *useful* false belief, in order for the belief to fit in with our doxastic inventories (cf. Plato).
However, Joyce responds to (5) and (6) by pointing out that, in order to paint a complete picture, we must explore if there are any benefits that might be preserving moral discourse. A benefit Joyce to retaining our moral discourse, is fostering self-control:

‘Morality, I will argue, functions to bolster self-control. It imbues certain desirable actions with a “must-be-doneness,” which raises the likelihood of their being performed (likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, “must-not-be-doneness”)’ (181).

Another virtue is to ensure mutually beneficial interactions with others:

‘By initiating hostility once, the British threatened the confidence of any number of other profitable partners. They lowered the chances of being sought out by others with offers of mutually useful ventures. In this way it can be argued with some plausibility that the moral belief held by the British (that killing Tasmanians was permissible) was instrumentally disadvantageous to them as well as to the ill-fated Tasmanians. The moral judgment that initiating hostile actions is morally forbidden would, in the long run, have been useful all round’ (182).
Despite the benefits to preserving moral discourse, there are still problems:

First, the problem with the reasons from earlier are moral obligations often require more from us than is in our best interest – thus, such appeals do not carry enough weight to preserve moral discourse in its totality:

‘The first is that A’s reason for refraining was that it was in her own interests to do so. But when B morally condemns A’s action, he is not complaining that A harmed herself – he is complaining that A harmed him. When we morally condemn the British for the Tasmanian genocide it is certainly not because of the harm they inflicted upon themselves (what sense would there then be in punishing them?). But the framework we have offered of cooperative relations bound by long-term prudence does not warrant such judgments’ (183).

Second, if we justify holding onto moral discourse by appealing to the practical benefits, that’s a good reason to “cut out the middle man,” and look to practicality directly for why we should do x, rather than y:

‘After all, if we have arguments to the conclusion that people ought to cooperate (generally), and that this cooperation ought to be regulated by a direct concern for the welfare of others, then what need is there for moral thinking? Would not clear-headed instrumental thinking lead to the same results?’ (184).
Joyce has a response to these worries in that he argues that moral beliefs and convictions help, in part, to make up the motivational gap between that which is recommended by pragmatic deliberation and acting on that recommendation:

‘Moral thinking, I contend, is just such an expedient, in that it functions to bolster self-control against such practical irrationality. If a person believes φ-ing to be required by an authority from which she cannot escape, if she imbues it with a “must-be-doneness,” if she believes that in not φ-ing she will not merely frustrate herself, but will become reprehensible and deserving of disapprobation – then she is more likely to perform the action’ (184).

Perhaps we should sum up the story that Joyce tells as follows:

While morality and practical rationality often produce the same conclusion, practical rationality cannot motivate you to do what it recommends. This is how morality earns its theoretical keep, by filling in the motivational gaps.

**On a related note: Mark Alfano has a book, *Moral Character as Fiction*, where he argues that although the situationalist challenge poses a serious problem for the claim that we have a stable moral character, we should still praise others more than we blame them. This is because people tend to live up to what’s expected of them (i.e. our motivations are undetermined).
We finally reach the point of Chapter 7: *addressing the error-theorists predicament*. What does the predicament amount to? Simply put, the predicament is this:

How is the error-theorist suppose to navigate between (a) holding onto the instrumental benefits of moral discourse, without (b) incurring the costs and risks of believing falsehood?

It might help, if we start with Joyce’s conception of the fictionalist stance toward moral discourse:

‘[…] to take a fictionalist stance towards a discourse is to believe that the discourse entails or embodies a theory that is false (such that there is no error-free revisionary theory available), but to carry on employing the discourse, at least in many contexts, as if this were not the case, because it is *useful* to do so’ (185).
You might notice that the fictional stance seems to require a belief or affirmation of that known fictional claim. For instance, suppose that I judge that ‘it was morally wrong for Andy to drink and drive’ – call this proposition \( P \).

It seems that no only should I accept that \( P \), but as a good fictionalist I should believe that not-\( P \); after all, if I know that I am talking within a fictional context, then it cannot be that \( P \) is true.

Joyce expresses this worry (\textit{a la} Vaihinger):

‘Put bluntly: if to make a fiction of \( p \) is to believe (judge, accept) that \( p \) while knowing that not-\( p \), but to know that not-\( p \) is to believe that not-\( p \), then to make a fiction of \( p \) is to believe that \( p \) while believing that not-\( p \)’ (187).

This problem might be addressed in a couple of ways:

7. Sometimes it is better to believe in a fiction, without knowing it is fictional.
8. Sometimes it is better to believe a fiction, knowing it is such.
Joyce then considers a kind of judgment, he calls ‘disbelieving acceptance.’ This is to ‘accept’ p, while disbelieving that p.

Putnam attacks this approach, as follows:

‘But, Putnam objects, the rational grounds of acceptance are the same as the rational grounds of belief (‘at least in the sense in which one ever ‘believes’ a scientific theory – as an approximation to the truth which can probably be bettered’), and therefore “disbelieving acceptance” is incoherent’ (189).

Joyce responds that Putnam misunderstands how to accept p, without thereby believing that p: the fictionalist is reserving the word ‘acceptance’ for a different attitude than is picked out by ‘belief.’

After all, Joyce responds, the fictionalist is not an epistemic position, but rather a stance taken because of its other benefits, such as pragmatic considerations – i.e. you disbelieve moral claims track the truth, but accept moral discourse because of the benefits such a practice enjoys (190).
Given all that has come before, we might ask the following question: *how are we to make sense of the fictionalist stance?*

Joyce has an answer:

Rather than think you possess different, conflicting beliefs to which you attend separately, depending on the relevant circumstances – e.g. in the philosophy class I attend to my p-beliefs, but while grocery shopping I attend to my not-p-beliefs – you might think that the fictionalist stance is similar to critical thinking.

For example, suppose you believe that the Democrat is the best candidate in the upcoming election. However, suppose that someone approaches you and asks, ‘Do you *really* think the Democrat is a better candidate than the independent?’ This kind of probing question might put you in a more critical mindset, with respect to whom you are thinking of casting your vote, even though you do believe in a less critical sense – e.g. someone at the grocery store asks about who you plan to vote for – you favor the Democrat.
Joyce explains how critical contexts explain a fictionalist stance like so:

‘The position may be summarized by a sequence of questions. Consider any agent, S, and her relation to some thesis T. Is S disposed to assent to T on some occasions and dissent from T on other occasions? If “No” then S’s attitude to T does not interest us; if “Yes,” then continue. Let us call the contexts in which S is disposed to dissent from T “C1,” and those in which she is disposed to assent to T “C2,” and let us confine C1 and C2 to contexts that S has actually occupied at some point, and therein dissented from T and assented to T, respectively. Let us, further, summarize some of the above discussion with the premise:

∀n ∀m, Cn is more critical than Cm if and only if Cn involves scrutiny and questioning of the kinds of attitude held in Cm but not vice versa.

‘Now we can ask: Is C1 more critical than C2? If “Yes,” then S is making a fiction of T’ (193).

Presumably, following Joyce’s lead, we simply follow his recipe with respect to moral discourse. If there are contexts in which we scrutinize and question moral discourse in some contexts, but not in others, than we are treating moral discourse as a fiction – and if we reject moral discourse is the stricter context?
Joyce holds that the fictionalist stance, in the case of moral discourse, and how we approach fiction, though different in some respects, has a common core:

‘The moral fictionalist is in important respects like this third Holmes fan. He is not self-deceived, since it is within his grasp to enter the “critical mode” should he care to – it does not take a course of psychotherapy to get him to admit the flaws of morality. When the context of discussion shifts towards the more rigorous, philosophical end of the spectrum – when the person is asked about what he really believes – then the maker of the fictive judgment can, but the victim of self-deception cannot, move with the context’ (196).

According to Joyce, the moral fictionalist does the following: she rejects moral claims – i.e. she believes that moral claims are untrue (or false?) – while acting and thinking as if they are true, within the fictionalist context:

‘Certain authors have presented an account of self-deception which stops short of describing the agent as believing p and believing not-p; instead the subject of self-deception believes that not-p but “thinks” and acts as if p. This is similar to the account of the fictive judgment that I favor... this kind of analysis may serve perfectly well as a description of the agent participating in a fictive judgment’ (196-7).
Simply put, it is not that the fictionalist stance requires that we believe that p and not-p, depending on which part of our doxastic inventory we focus on, but rather that we can disbelieve that p, while thinking that p in the context in which we are supposed to take the fiction seriously:

‘What is going on in our minds when we participate in make-believe? The correct answer, I believe, is “thoughts.” When a child make-believes that the upturned table is a ship, she is thinking the proposition “The table is a ship” (with all its associated imagery), or perhaps simply “This is a ship,” without believing that proposition. The proposition is, of course, false, but we could not on that account accuse the child of any error. It is also worth noting that “mere thoughts” can engage our emotions. If one sits vividly thinking about one’s house burning down and all one’s worldly belongings with it — not believing it, nor even believing it particularly likely — that may be sufficient to prompt anxiety or fear’ (197 — emphasis mine).

So, I take it that Joyce’s position, in a nutshell, amounts to the following: if an individual, S, takes a fictionalist stance toward moral discourse just in case he disbelieves that tenets (or commitments) of that moral discourse, but entertains thoughts that such-and-such is morally wrong — and acts accordingly, in less critical contexts.
Let’s start the process of summing up. Joyce captures an important point:

‘Let me sum up where we have gotten to. To make a fiction of some thesis T is to be disposed to assent to T in certain circumstances without believing T. This covers acts of story-telling and engaging with literary fiction in general: both activities involve an act of make-believe, which is to be understood as having the thought of T’ (199).

So, you might think that Joycean-fictionalism has a kind of implicit story-operator in from of each fictionalist statement – i.e. Joyce gives the example of Gideon Rosen (1990) who thinks this applies to modal talk, e.g. possibility and necessity claims. Joyce, however, has a different talk on fictionalist talk, at least where moral discourse is concerned:

‘This is not the kind of view that I am proposing for moral discourse. The fictionalism that I prefer sees moral discourse as ceasing to be assertoric altogether’ (200).
At this point, we should consider an interesting twist. Joyce writes:

‘The important upshot of my kind of fictionalism is that, were it adopted, moral discourse would cease to be assertoric, and would therefore be something towards which we ought to be noncognitivists. Since it is not being claimed that fictionalism is true of our actual moral discourse, the proposal is not that noncognitivism is true of our actual moral discourse. Rather, fictionalism amounts to the claim that noncognitivism might become true, if we were to alter our attitude towards moral discourse’ (200-1).

But, there is a catch: while noncognitivism holds that the claim ‘A is morally good’ it is expressing a kind of approval of A. This is different than moral fictionalism in that:

‘By contrast, the kind of fictionalist noncognitivism offered here holds that “. . . is morally good” is a logical predicate – it does function to pick out a property (though it may not succeed) – but we may utter “ϕ is morally good” without assertoric force: not as an expression of a belief, but an expression of a thought. For this reason, the kind of noncognitivism I am suggesting does not involve a “translation” of moral sentences (analogous to “ϕ: hurrah!”)’ (201).