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Permissibility and Justifying Reasons in the Formal Objection to Moral Error Theory

Thom Hamer[1,2]

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Abstract
Moral error theory has recently faced formal objections. Since it denies the existence of moral properties that are defined in contradistinction to each other (e.g. permissibility and impermissibility), it appears to fall into incoherence. While some have rejected the duality of interdefinable deontic modals in response to this objection, I defend moral error theory while upholding this duality. Drawing on the distinction between 'weak' and 'strong' permissibility in relation to requiring and justifying reasons, my analysis shows that any plausible formulation of deontic duals must define a strong deontic modal in contradistinction to a weaker dual. This allows moral error theory to deny propositions that ascribe a strong deontic status to action, while affirming those that ascribe only a weak status.

Keywords Ethics · Error theory · Deontic logic · Permissibility · Reasons · Justifying · Requiring

1 Introduction

Moral error theory has recently been challenged by formal objections [1–3]. According to these objections, the theory conflicts with standard deontic logic, as it fails to accommodate the duality of interdefinable deontic modals, such as permissibility and impermissibility. In response to this objection, some have rejected this commonly accepted duality [4, 5]. In this paper, I argue that moral error theorists need not reject it. Instead, we need to carefully analyze the deontic modals and their relation within the respective dualities. By defining strong deontic modals in contradistinction to

✉ Thom Hamer
hamert@cardiff.ac.uk

[1] Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

[2] University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

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weak deontic modals (e.g. $PE^{-}\varphi \stackrel{def}{=} \neg IM^{+}\varphi$), moral error theory avoids conflict with standard deontic logic.[1]

After briefly outlining the basic tenets of moral error theory (§2) and the formal objection to it (§3), I proceed to analyze the concept of permissibility in terms of justifying reasons (§4). I argue that this *strong* notion of permissibility is to be distinguished from its *weaker* variant, which is instantiated in the absence of requiring reasons (§5). The concept of impermissibility, likewise, can be analyzed in terms of requiring reasons (leading to a strong notion of impermissibility) or in terms of the absence of justifying reasons (leading to a weak variant) (§6). With these considerations in mind, I counter the formal objection by defining weak deontic modals in contradistinction to a strong dual, which allows the moral error theorist to deny only the existence of the stronger dual in each formulation of the schema (§7). Thus, moral error theory can avoid self-defeat without giving up the duality of interdefinable deontic modals.

2 Moral Error Theory

Moral error theorists [7–11] analyze moral discourse in terms of beliefs about objective normative facts.[2] This *conceptual claim* can be split up into two components. First, moral error theory is a cognitivist theory of moral discourse. As such, it considers moral judgments to have propositional content. This makes them liable to being true or false insofar as they accurately represent the moral facts. Second, moral discourse according to the error theorist presupposes the existence of objective moral facts. Roughly speaking, all error theorists take moral discourse to be about facts that count in favour of doing something regardless of any agent's particular subjective attitudes.

In its analysis of the basic presuppositions of moral discourse, moral error theory thus resembles robust realism. What distinguishes moral error theory from robust realist theories of morality is the ascription of systematic error to this discourse: none of the abovementioned moral properties or facts exist. While the realist tends to claim that there are indeed (as ordinary moral discourse seems to suggest) facts that count in favour of doing something regardless of any agent's particular subjective attitudes, the error theorist denies this. This is the *negative claim* of error theory.

Consider the following sentences:

(1) Killing is wrong.
(2) People are obligated to help the poor.
(3) One ought not to lie.

[1] Some recent approaches to this problem have focused on the technical side of answering the formal objection [6]. The aim of this paper is to supplement these technical inquiries with a broader philosophical inquiry into the mistaken assumptions within the formal objection.

[2] In this paper, I restrict myself to moral error theory, though my argument might have interesting implications for global normative error theorists [12].

As instances of ordinary moral discourse, the error theorist takes these sentences to be false. For, sentence (1) presupposes the existence of some objective moral standard according to which there are reasons to refrain from killing. Likewise, (2) suggests that there is an objective fact that generates a requirement for all agents to help the poor. And (3) entails the existence of an objective moral standard that counts against lying. Anyone who asserts these sentences is alleged to be mistaken: for the error theorist, there are no objective moral standards.

3 The Formal Objection

Most arguments against moral error theory rest on substantive commitments. Take the Moorean objection [13, pp. 87–139; 14, pp. 115–117; 15, 16]. According to this line of reasoning, moral phenomenology suggests a high level of confidence in some specific moral beliefs, such as the belief that it is wrong to torture babies for fun. Assuming that we are more confident in the truth of this belief than we are in the truth of moral error theory, and that the two are incompatible, it follows that we have reason to reject moral error theory.

In contrast with substantive objections, a formal objection targets the formal consistency of moral error theory. Among others, Christine Tiefensee [1–3] has argued that moral error theory is incompatible with standard deontic logic. For, it rejects the moral claim that

(IMk) It is impermissible to kill.[3]

The falsity of this proposition entails (assuming standard deontic logic) that

(PEk) It is permissible to kill.

However, this arguably assumes the existence of a moral property: permissibility. Judging something to be morally permissible ordinarily suggests that there is a reason to permit it. If the moral error theorist wishes to deny the existence of all moral properties alike, they seem forced to deny both (IMk) and (PEk). And indeed, many moral error theorists have been inclined to include the property of being permissible among the victims of moral error theory [10, p. 9; 17, p. 453; 11, pp. 11–15; 12, p. 106]. Hence, moral error theory's conclusions seem at odds with a principle of standard deontic logic – the Dual Schema (DS):

(DS) Every action is either permissible or impermissible [$PE\varphi \veebar IM\varphi$].

[3] $IM\varphi$ is usually understood as equivalent to $OB\neg\varphi$. In this case, the impermissibility of killing entails that it is obligatory not to kill – and vice versa. Also, $OB\varphi$ is considered equivalent to $IM\neg\varphi$. What I say about impermissibility will therefore apply to obligation as well.

This dual schema presupposes that impermissibility and permissibility are duals: they are interdefinable (PEφ $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$ ¬IMφ; and IMφ $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$ ¬PEφ).[4] The interdefinability of deontic modals is taken to be analogous to the dualities within modal logic [18, p. 1458], such as that between possibility and necessity (□p $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$ ¬◇¬p). Together with the Law of the Excluded Middle (LEM; p ∨ ¬p), this interdefinability thesis entails the truth of the Dual Schema.

If the moral error theorist accepts (DS) while also denying both (IMk) and (PEk), then their position falls into self-contradiction [1–4, pp. 254–255; 5, pp. 732–733; cf. 19, pp. 40–44]. Unless the moral error theorist devised some alternative way of making sense of deontic logic, denying both moral properties (permissibility and impermissibility) would be untenable.

In response to this concern, Bart Streumer and Daniel Wodak have rejected the Dual Schema, arguing that it is not a fundamental theorem of deontic logic [4, 5]. I think they are mistaken. Not because the Dual Schema is indispensable (it might or might not be), but because we need not deny the Dual Schema in order to counter the formal objection. What we need, rather, is a thorough analysis of the meaning of deontic modals within formulations of the Dual Schema.

4 Permissibility in Terms of Justifying Reasons

To see where the formal objection to moral error theory goes awry, we should analyze the terms employed in the Dual Schema: permissibility and impermissibility.[5] Let's start with the latter. Why do people in ordinary moral discourse claim that some action or omission is required? According to the standard interpretation, this has to do with reasons for action. More specifically, something is made obligatory by a requiring reason. This type of reason essentially counts in favour of a course of action by counting *against* its omission – or conversely, in favour of omitting an action by counting against doing it.[6] Thus, a requiring reason requires the performance of an action by conferring a deontic status of impermissibility upon its omission [20]. For example, it is common for people to claim that

(OBp) It is obligatory to keep one's promises.

Following standard deontic logic, this can be reformulated in terms of impermissibility:

(IM¬p) It is impermissible to not keep one's promises.

[4] The interdefinability thesis is sometimes formulated as OBφ $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$ ¬PE¬φ or, conversely, PEφ $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$ ¬OB¬φ [2], p. 603]. Assuming (LEM), it follows from this that OBφ ⊻ PE¬φ. For the sake of simplicity, I focus on permissibility and impermissibility.

[5] As will become clear throughout the paper, this analysis of the formal relations between permissibility and impermissibility can just as well be applied to other duals, such as obligation and permissibility (PEφ $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$ ¬OB¬φ), obligation and omissibility (OMφ $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$ ¬OBφ), or impermissibility and omissibility (OMφ $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$ ¬IM¬φ).

[6] As such, a requiring reason can serve either to require or to prohibit a course of action. The concept of a 'prohibitive reason' is ordinarily subsumed under the concept of a 'requiring reason' [20].

In ordinary moral discourse, many people endorse (OBp) for the following reason: failing to keep one's promises tends to produce some moral wrong. Some seek further support for a moral claim like this by appealing to a principle of universalizability. According to one version of this argument, promises would lose their meaning if everyone decided to break promises whenever convenient. Hence, one must rationally consider promise-keeping obligatory. Others paint a different picture of the reasons to affirm OBp. In some forms of consequentialism, promises ought to be kept because promise-keeping tends to promote well-being, for example through fostering interpersonal trust. Whatever the specific reasons behind judging (OBp) to be true, ordinary speakers substantiate the obligation in reference to some reason that counts in favour of performing the action.

Likewise, an action is ordinarily deemed impermissible by reasons that count in favour of omitting it. For example, many people believe the aforementioned proposition:

(IMk) It is impermissible to kill.

People are inclined to defend (IMk) in light of reasons against killing. Some consider life to be intrinsically valuable, which counts as a reason not to terminate it. Others think that killing tends to deprive people of an otherwise happy future. Again, ordinary speakers judge (IMk) to be true for a variety of reasons, but the common ground between them is the belief that there are reasons that count against the act of killing. Although not strictly speaking requiring (but rather prohibitive), this type of reason is commonly subsumed under the category of requiring reasons, along with the previously discussed type of reason.

Sometimes, however, people consider it justified to break promises and even to kill. Considerations of self-defense are commonly cited as a justifying reason to act against the moral reason to refrain from killing. Likewise, one may be allowed to break a promise if keeping it would pose a significant threat to one's well-being or that of others. The role of justifying reasons, then, is to render permissible what would otherwise be impermissible – or to render omissible what would otherwise be required. They are, in effect, "permissibility-conferring reasons" [20, pp. 395–398; cf. 21–23]. Thus understood, they fulfil a normative role opposite to requiring reasons. While appeals to requiring reasons serve to explain why an action is non-optional (being either required or prohibited), justifying reasons are meant to override such reasons and make the action optional (being both omissible and permissible).[7]

To illustrate, consider the following proposition:

(PEsd) It is permissible to kill in self-defense.

[7] Support for the idea of 'justifying reasons' as distinct from 'requiring reasons' has grown in the last two decades, starting with the work of Joshua Gert [22]. Earlier precursors include 'agent-relative permissions' Parfit [33], Slote [34] and 'prerogatives' [24, pp. 207–236]. Likewise, Patricia Greenspan distinguishes between 'positive' and 'negative' reasons [25]. As a result of this development, the distinction between requiring reasons and justifying reasons is now fairly commonplace in normative philosophy.

When we encounter an utterance like this within an ordinary context, we take this to mean that an otherwise impermissible action (killing) is permissible in light of a justifying reason (self-defense). This justifying reason also suggests that, in the absence of considerations of self-defense, one is required to refrain from killing.

In ordinary moral discourse, then, many instances of ascribing permissibility (or omissibility) to an action convey a belief that there are reasons that justify doing what's normally impermissible or omitting what's normally required. It is not uncommon, that is to say, for people to judge actions impermissible unless there are justifying reasons to perform it.

If we understand permissibility and impermissibility solely in these terms, then the moral error theorist is (as the formal objection suggests) in trouble. For, the view denies the existence of reasons, whether they be requiring or justifying. As a result, no action can be said to be impermissible or permissible in the abovementioned sense. According to moral error theory, the following claim is false:

(IMsd) It is impermissible to kill in self-defense.

It is false, the moral error theorist holds, because there are no moral reasons that require any agent to refrain from killing in self-defense. But moral judgments about the permissibility of killing in self-defense are false as well:

(PEsd) It is permissible to kill in self-defense.

Moral error theory denies this claim, because there are no moral reasons that justify (i.e. render optional) killing in self-defense. Denying both (IMsd) and (PEsd), the moral error theorist again appears to be in conflict with the Dual Schema (assuming LEM):

(DS) Every action is either permissible or impermissible [$\mathrm{PE}\varphi \veebar \mathrm{IM}\varphi$].

If permissibility presupposes justifying reasons and impermissibility presupposes requiring reasons, how can the moral error theorist avoid this conflict?

5 Permissibility in the Absence of Requiring Reasons

What we have been talking about so far is action that is either strongly impermissible (in light of requiring reasons) or strongly permissible (in light of justifying reasons). In order to avoid conflict with the Dual Schema, however, it is paramount to flesh out what has been called "weak permissibility" [26, p. 95; 27, pp. 6, 25; 28, p. 161; 5, pp. 738–739; 9, p. 140] and allocate a proper place for it within the formal relations of deontic logic.[8]

[8] Matthew Kramer [29, pp. 4–7; 30, pp. 4–5] also invokes a strong/weak distinction for two types of permissibility, but this is notably different from what is being discussed here. For instance, both of his notions of permissibility are defined in utterly negative terms, while the notion of strong permissibility

The shortcomings of focusing only on strong permissibility can be illustrated with additional instances of ordinary moral discourse. We have seen that ordinary moral discourse often understands permissibility in terms of justifying reasons. When someone says that 'it is permissible to kill in self-defense' they mean to say that considerations of self-defense justify the act of killing even though it is impermissible under normal circumstances. That is, there is a normative fact that makes the action permissible. A justifying reason overrides the prohibition.

But different cases render different results. Consider the notion of permissibility present in the following judgment:

(PEc) It is permissible to pour some coffee.

This appears to be a fairly trivial judgment. When I utter this sentence and my interlocutor asks me to explain the purported permissibility of that action, I will be inclined to respond that there are no reasons against it – hence its being permissible. There are no prohibitive reasons; and unless my interlocutor offers something by way of prohibition – that is, an appeal to some requiring reason – this will conclude deliberation about the permissibility of the action.

The formal objection to moral error theory presupposes that all claims of permissibility are like the former, employing a *strong* notion of permissibility in virtue of positively justifying reasons. The claims of moral error theory, however, are more akin to the latter claim of permissibility. Nothing prohibits, nothing requires; in other words, there are no moral facts that would make action non-optional. What the error theorist means by omnipermissibility, then, is that there is never a reason (or at least not a moral reason) to require from someone that they refrain from performing an action. There is no reason to stop them, and permissibility in the weak sense consists in nothing more than this. An action's being weakly permissible, then, derives from the absence of requiring reasons rather than the presence of justifying reasons.

Thus, weak permissibility can be defined in contradistinction to strong impermissibility in the following way:

(WPE-SIM) An action is weakly permissible if and only if it is not strongly impermissible [$PE^{-}\varphi \stackrel{def}{\equiv} \neg IM^{+}\varphi$].[9]

Assuming (LEM), this brings us to a new formulation of the Dual Schema:

(DS1) Every action is either weakly permissible or strongly impermissible [$PE^{-}\varphi \veebar IM^{+}\varphi$].

in the works of von Wright and those following his lead (including myself) denotes a positively justified course of action.

[9] Likewise, if we want to treat permissibility and *obligation* as interdefinable [2], we can say that an action is weakly permissible if and only if its omission is not strongly obligatory: $PE^{-}\varphi \stackrel{def}{\equiv} \neg OB^{+}\neg\varphi$. This grammatical construction can be confusing, hence my focus on permissibility and impermissibility.

Since strong impermissibility is instantiated by the presence of requiring reasons (specifically, by prohibitive reasons) and weak permissibility by the absence thereof, this formulation of the Dual Schema seems better equipped to account for the contra-distinction between deontic duals. There is a tendency, however, to confuse the relationship between permissibility and impermissibility by defining the strong notion in terms of a strong dual. Consider this version of the Dual Schema:

(DS*) Every action is either strongly permissible or strongly impermissible [$PE^{+}\varphi \veebar IM^{+}\varphi$].

This is not a plausible formulation of the Dual Schema, as it is unclear how the absence of requiring reasons would entail the presence of justifying reasons and, conversely, how the absence of justifying reasons would entail the presence of requiring reasons. An account of that entailment relation is lacking. As such, this formulation also suggests that it is not a formal truth but presupposes a substantive view about the existence of reasons [5, pp. 734–740]. Since both strong permissibility and strong impermissibility are generated by the presence of moral reasons, an action is either supported by moral reasons of the requiring kind or moral reasons of the justifying kind – but moral reasons either way. Thus, (DS*) begs the question against the moral error theorist. As we have seen, there is at least one formulation of the Dual Schema available that is devoid of such substantive presuppositions and thus more fitting as a theorem of deontic logic.

6 Impermissibility in the Absence of Justifying Reasons

So far, we have explored three notions: strong impermissibility, strong permissibility and weak permissibility. But since strong impermissibility must be coupled with weak permissibility, we should explore the implications of what appears to be the dual of strong permissibility: weak impermissibility.

A weak notion of impermissibility has rarely been explored, possibly because of an assumption that something can only be judged impermissible in light of reasons against the action. Still, one may imagine a pairing with impermissibility as strong permissibility's dual. In the absence of justifying reasons, an action can thus be seen as weakly impermissible:

(WIM-SPE) An action is weakly impermissible if and only if it is not strongly permissible [$IM^{-}\varphi \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \neg PE^{+}\varphi$].

Assuming again (LEM), we arrive at a converse way of coupling permissibility and impermissibility:

(DS2) Every action is either weakly impermissible or strongly permissible [$IM^{-}\varphi \vee PE^{+}\varphi$].

In short, the Dual Schema can be defined in terms of weak permissibility and strong impermissibility (DS1) or in terms of strong permissibility and weak impermissibility (DS2). Strong permissibility and strong impermissibility, on the other hand, should (as we have seen) not be treated as duals, lest we bring unnecessary substantive baggage into the supposedly formal truths of deontic logic.

With two formulations of the Dual Schema now on the table, should any of these formulations receive priority over the other? It is common to treat (weak) permissibility as the default. Take, for example, the concepts of legal permissibility and impermissibility. According to many legal systems, everything that is not prohibited (in the strong sense) is permissible, while it is rare to see a legal system premised on the idea that everything that is not permitted (in the strong sense) is forbidden [31, pp. 280–281; 32, pp. 29–30]. Likewise, many instances of ordinary moral discourse, such as the aforementioned example of coffee-pouring, suggest that an action is permissible unless there are reasons against it.

Although a status of weak permissibility seems intuitively more default, the alternative should not be so easily discounted – i.e. the view that actions are by default *im*permissible. This is due to two important considerations. First, there may be a liberal bias behind the intuition that actions are permissible by default. Arguably, Western society is in part premised upon the idea that human beings should be free unless there are reasons to constrain them. Since it is likely that our intuitions are at least in part shaped by our cultural backgrounds, this diminishes the credibility of the intuitive support for considering permissibility the default status of action.

Second, one might think that default permissibility becomes less plausible when we consider epistemic permissibility as an analogous notion. In the absence of reasons to believe that p, it seems common-sensical to say that it is (weakly) *im*permissible to believe that p. Taking permissibility to be the default seems less intuitive here: it is difficult to defend the view that a belief would be permissible (even in the weak sense of the word) unless there were reasons against it.[10]

But can we really make sense of impermissibility in the weak sense? In the epistemic case, someone might retort that the absence of justifying reasons itself counts against belief. In ordinary discourse, it is common to say that one ought not to believe what is not supported by evidence, which seems to presuppose a normative principle that prohibits belief in what lacks justification.[11] Thus, what appears on the surface to be weak impermissibility may actually be an instance of the strong variety. The same presupposition might be made in ordinary practical discourse: behind seeming cases of weak impermissibility, there is a normative principle that prohibits doing what is

[10] One might think that if we can consider permissibility or impermissibility the default deontic status of action, we could also opt for an obligation-first account. This view is implausible, however. For one, if every action were by default obligatory, then the default position would be that incompatible actions are simultaneously obligatory, which leads to contradiction. And second, if we suppose that omissions would be obligatory as well, it might be inferred that in the default state it is obligatory to perform as well as omit an action. This latter problem also applies (as we will see further on) to the view that actions are by default *impermissible*.

[11] It seems unlikely that a parallel line of reasoning can be given with regard to the notion of weak *permissibility*. For, the absence of prohibitive reasons doesn't appear to count against or in favour of any action or belief.

in no way supported by reasons (including, perhaps, reasons that arise from one's motivational set). Thus, one might conclude that all alleged cases of weak impermissibility collapse into cases of strong impermissibility.

Whatever we make of this reasoning around weak impermissibility, there is a stronger argument that supports foregrounding weak permissibility. It builds on the idea that an action can be both permissible to perform and permissible to omit. If everything can permissibly be omitted or performed by default, then everything is simply optional. When impermissibility is the default, however, then we run into a contradictory state-of-affairs if we intend to subsume omissions under the purview of impermissibility. That is, it will be both impermissible to φ ($IM^{-}\varphi$) and impermissible to ¬φ ($IM^{-}\neg\varphi$). As these prohibitions are usually taken to be mutually exclusive, this is a theoretical cost, one that is not incurred by the view that actions are permissible by default.

These are important considerations when deciding which formulation of the Dual Schema should receive priority, if any. Because moral success theorists are committed to the existence of moral reasons, they are burdened with addressing this question of priority. Moral error theory, in contrast, need not commit itself to any of these views about the default deontic status of actions. For, it can counter the formal objection by distinguishing between weak and strong permissibility and impermissibility, coupling the duals correctly, and denying only the existence of the stronger dual in each formulation of the schema.

7 Two Dual Schemas

Thus, we return to the formal objection. Given moral error theory's denial of the existence of moral reasons that forbid a course of action, it is bound to endorse the following claim:

(ET1) No action is strongly impermissible [$\forall\varphi\neg IM^{+}(\varphi)$]

which entails, given (DS1), that

(ET2) Every action is weakly permissible [$\forall\varphi PE^{-}(\varphi)$].

This should not be confused with the claim that

(ET2*) Every action is strongly permissible [$\forall\varphi PE^{+}(\varphi)$].

Contrary to (ET2), this proposition presupposes the existence of moral reasons that justify performing the action. According to moral error theory, such reasons do not exist, which allows it to reject (ET2*). In light of the absence of justifying reasons, the moral error theorist can also claim that

(ET3) No action is strongly permissible [$\forall\varphi\neg PE^{+}(\varphi)$].

which entails, given (DS2), that

(ET4) Every action is weakly impermissible [$\forall\varphi IM^{-}(\varphi)$].

Even when we accept (LEM), (DS1) and (DS2), these error-theoretical conclusions are perfectly consistent.

The important lesson here, to be borne in mind by those attracted to formal objections to moral error theory, is to avoid conflating weak and strong notions of permissibility and impermissibility. A denial of the existence of strongly impermissible actions entails only weak permissibility. Because actions are weakly permissible in light of the absence of reasons that would require their omission, this property of being weakly permissible is not normative but denotes the absence of normative support. Likewise, the nonexistence of strongly permissible actions entails only weak impermissibility. An action is weakly impermissible in the absence of justifying reasons, which means that weak impermissibility is not a normative property but similarly denotes an absence: that of strong permissibility. Compare this with the alleged godlessness of the universe, which is not a supernatural property of the universe but denotes the very absence of such properties.

Thus, moral error theory avoids the formal objection. Whether one considers (DS1) to be basic or (DS2), or both equally fundamental, moral error theory is not in conflict with the Dual Schema, since its proponents can always deny the stronger of the duals (on account of its moral presuppositions) and endorse the weaker. For, the weaker dual within any plausible formulation of the schema only denotes the absence of the stronger and is thus not itself a substantive moral property. And if the notion of weak impermissibility is deemed incoherent (on grounds discussed earlier), the moral error theorist can always explain the absence of moral properties using the other version of the Dual Schema (DS1).

Contrary to Streumer & Wodak's [4, 5] responses to the formal objection, I have argued that the moral error theorist need not reject the Dual Schema in order to circumvent conflicts with standard deontic logic. Rather, any plausible formulation needs to distinguish between weak and strong versions of the deontic modals employed within the schema and to couple a strong dual with a weak one. Then, the moral error theorist is in a position to deny that the strong dual picks out anything in reality (hence the error) while conceding that, consequently, all actions acquire a weak deontic status (e.g. all actions are weakly permissible). This weak deontic status does not presuppose the existence of moral properties, since it merely denotes the absence thereof.

8 Conclusion

In short, moral error theory can counter the formal objection by conceptualizing duals in deontic logic as respectively weak and strong (e.g. $PE^{-}\varphi \stackrel{def}{\equiv} \neg IM^{+}\varphi$; or, similarly, $PE^{-}\varphi \stackrel{def}{\equiv} \neg OB^{+}\neg\varphi$). The distinction between requiring reasons and justifying reasons [20] supports this conceptual analysis. This move allows the moral error theorist to reject propositions that presuppose the existence of requiring reasons (in the case of

strong impermissibility and requirement) as well as those that presuppose the existence of justifying reasons (in the case of strong permissibility). Meanwhile, moral error theory can judge actions to be weakly permissible or impermissible without self-defeat. Thus, contrary to other responses [4, 5], moral error theorists need not sacrifice the Dual Schema as a theorem of deontic logic.

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