An Essay about Error Theory in Metaethics

1. Introducing the Issue: What is the metaethical question discussed in this course that you (and your opponents) are trying to address?

Error Theory claims that our moral talk and thought are systematically in error. Usually, there are three options we can take. Eliminatism embraces truth at the cost of all our moral language. Conservationism retains moral beliefs despite the error. Revolutionary Fictionalism recommends we keep moral practice by "pretending to assert" or "make-believing", which seems to protect both the truth and the moral. But is it really the best theory? On the premise of accepting Error Theory, which recommendation should we choose?

2. Thesis Statement: Clearly and rigorously state the position you take on the above metaethical question. This statement will be the view you defend in this essay. The remainder of this essay should revolve exclusively around supporting this statement here.

Facing Error Theory and recognizing benefits of morality, I think Conservationism is a better choice than Revolutionary Fictionalism. Based on Conservationism, we should continue to engage with existing moral thought and moral talk in everyday context despite the error. But we can still know about, discuss about, and reason about the error in critical context, through a strategy of Contextualism.

3. Elaboration: Elaborate on and clarify your position to avoid potential misunderstanding and confusion with similar positions.

Conservationism is not a passive attitude. It is different from remaining silent on what to do. It argues we have good reason to believe that the current ethical discourse needn't further revolution.

My position is based on Conservationism in general, but here I make some additions. I distinguish everyday context from critical context. People's beliefs in both contexts can be true. By adopting Contextualism, the position is not self-contradictory.

Revolutionary Fictionalism also has critical context, where it supports Error Theory and claims what we say literally is false. I agree with the critical context level but deny their fictional level. Instead of "pretending to assert" or "make-believing" within fiction, we can truly believe moral sentences in everyday context.

Like Revolutionary Fictionalism, Conservationism involves all the participants in moral discourse, not only philosophers. They both have to take ordinary speakers into consideration.

4.   Opposition: State and explain your target opponent position(s) in preparation for your attack of it later. Note that your answer here should not include everything about this opponent position. Rather, you should analyze it to highlight its disadvantageous features to be compared with your own position in the next question. Your answer to this question serves purely as a preparation for your answer to the next question. But remember to represent your opponent fairly.

Revolutionary Fictionalism thinks beliefs are unconditionally fixed. But it ignores their change in different contexts.

Besides, the binding force of morality within fiction is limited. The fiction is an outcome of choosing consciously. People can clearly distinguish the fiction from the reality when make-believe. Since they know moral facts do not exist, they are more likely to struggle with lack of self-control and surrender to their personal interests with less moral restraint. Also, moral practice needs people's engagement. When people accept but not really believe something, this acting behavior may lead to inconsistency between thoughts and deeds, easily causing self-doubt.

Finally, Revolutionary Fictionalism faces problems in practice. Appealing to everyone to changing their speaking habits is a hard task. Also, it has difficulty telling what the content of fiction is and deciding which fiction we should choose.

5.   Main Argumentation: Compared to your main target opponent position(s), what advantage(s) does your own position have, what problems does it solve/avoid?

There are three main advantages:
1. We can believe the non-existence of moral facts without affecting our everyday beliefs in moral discourse. Just assume in a Philosophy class, students may recognize that ideal mathematical models do not exist in reality and mathematical propositions are ontologically false. At that time, they believe the truth and admit the error. However, in the next whole semester, they still actively participate in Math class and also truly believe everything they learn. In this analogy, the Philosophy class is a critical context asking for serious and rational metaphysical thinking, while the Math class is an everyday context with lower truth standards. Truth value of moral judgments also depends on conditions and contexts. Combined with Contextualism, Conservationism does not need to avoid the error in critical context. Instead, it protects the value of truth, as Revolutionary Fictionalism does.
2. We can guarantee the effectiveness of morality better by sincerely believing, instead of "pretending to assert" or "make-believing". Usually, the authenticity of information decides our actions. We may feel angry at a murderer in reality. But when we read a murder plot in a novel, the intensity of our anger seems to diminish, since we know that it's not real. Obviously, authority from beliefs is stronger. Fictionalizing unavoidably reduces the credibility of morality, weakening its authority. Revolutionary Fictionalism

is true if and only if it is the best solution to Error Theory and maximizes benefits. If Conservationism and Revolutionary Fictionalism both succeed in protecting the truth, then the latter needs to prove the fiction serves better, at least the same well, otherwise it is wrong.

3. Conservationism is a more practical and natural choice for most ordinary speakers. Most people are already accustomed to their moral discourse and it works well. The conceptual engineering seems counter-intuitive and superfluous. Even supporters, including Joyce, do not have expectations for ordinary speakers to change and have motivation to act out. There is no mass base for the revolution.

6. Foreseeing Objections: What would your main target opponent(s) say to attack your position and/or to defend her own position from your attack?

Objections:
1. We should always follow the doxastic policy, which says we should believe p if and only if p is true. This helps us eliminate false conclusions from our thought. If we continue believing non-existing moral facts in our daily life, we sacrifice the value of critical thinking.

2. "Make-believing" within fiction may provide the same or more benefits than beliefs. Many fictions like movies and novels have more powerful and positive effects on us than things in reality. A person who pretends to believe he should do more exercise than actual standards may benefit a lot from this fiction.

7. Response to Objections: How would you respond to this attack/defense of your opponent?

Response:
1. The standard of truth is not absolute according to different truth conditions. Truth in metaphysics is not superior to truth in practical applications. Some error in metaphysics is fundamental but makes no difference to real life, like the wrongness of mathematics in ontology. We don't make people pretend to assert in applied math. Allowing beliefs in different contexts respect both the doxastic policy and also ordinary speakers.

2. Examples here are not neutral. People may be moved by a novel since they already accept certain values. The presupposition of a person doing more exercise is that he wants to be healthier, which is exactly the purpose of restraint. If he is forced to exercise, the fiction may lose efficiency for his laziness. If a person is morally bad, the fiction may be excuses for cheating, stealing, and killing, finally leading to serious consequences in society. Especially in some extreme dilemmas, only beliefs can make people give up temporary interests and follow moral rules. Even if a fiction is indeed better, which is the fiction and how do we know it? Revolutionary Fictionalists haven't given a clear answer for now. So until they do, we have reason to believe it is not the best recommendation and the construction of fiction, if not bad, is unnecessary.