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Moral Fictionalism *vs* Moral Abolitionism: Why it Makes No Sense to Continue Talking About Objective Morality If We No Longer Believe It Exists

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ABSTRACT: After denying the existence of objective morality, the moral error theorist faces a dilemma. Should they talk and behave as if it still exists, or should they attempt to eliminate morality from their language and judgements altogether? This dilemma is known as The Now What Problem. This paper explores two possible options available to the error theorist: moral fictionalism and moral abolitionism. It argues that fictionalism is unpersuasive because morality can only motivate us to override temptation if we believe it exists. If the error theorist has stopped believing in objective morality, then it would be redundant for them to continue pretending it exists. The paper will then argue that letting go of objective morality would not leave the error theorist without any reasons to continue acting in ways we deem moral, and they would likely make similar decisions, good or bad, in an abolitionist society. Ultimately, a society that no longer talks about objective morality may not look so different from our own.

KEY WORDS: J. L. Mackie, moral abolitionism, moral error theory, moral fictionalism, Richard Garner, Richard Joyce.

Introduction

Moral error theory[1] is the theory that all of our moral judgements are false. Objective moral values such as rightness and wrongness don't exist, so when we claim that an act is immoral, we're simply incorrect.

[1] From here on, any mention of error theory will exclusively refer to moral error theory.

We talk, think and behave as if a mind-independent objective morality exists but, actually, we are 'just horribly massively mistaken' (Joyce and Garner 2019: x). This theory was introduced by Mackie (1977), and has been the source of much debate thereafter. For some, the claim that there are no moral facts is both preposterous and alarming. They reject error theory, not only because they find Mackie's arguments unpersuasive, but because they find the nihilistic conclusion that morality doesn't exist to have implicitly dangerous consequences for society. For others however, error theory is not so easy to brush off. In recent years, philosophers are becoming increasingly open to the idea that there are no moral properties.

Whilst there's been much discussion around the persuasiveness of error theory, there's a relatively new debate which is growing in popularity; the 'Now What' debate (Lutz 2014). What should error theorists do with their moral judgements after deciding that they're false? This is the question that I wish to investigate in the following paper. Before continuing, it's crucial to note that throughout this paper, any use of 'morality' will refer solely to the objective, mind-independent morality that error theorists deny the existence of.

In section I, I'll outline moral error theory in more detail, before illustrating precisely what the 'Now What' Problem means for an error theorist. I'll explain the two conflicting solutions that this paper will investigate: moral fictionalism and moral abolitionism. Moral fictionalism is the view that, due to the benefits it brings to society, morality should be preserved. Although the error theorist believes that moral values don't exist, fictionalism recommends that they continue pretending as if they do. Moral abolitionism, on the other hand, recommends that once we[2] stop believing in morality, we should abolish it altogether.

In section II, I will discuss fictionalism. I'll firstly explore the benefits of maintaining a make-believe morality, before showing why fictionalism is unpersuasive. I'll suggest that, in order for morality to be effectively action-guiding, we must be motivated by it. I'll then argue that a fictional morality cannot be motivating in the right way, so fictionalism is unable to incur the benefits of morality that it wishes to preserve.

In section III, I will defend a mild form of abolitionism. I'll argue that, to be an abolitionist, the error theorist need not think that morality is harmful to society. I'll distinguish between varying degrees of the view, demonstrating that the abolitionism advocated for by some is unnecessarily extreme. I will suggest that, due to the numerous non-moral

[2] Throughout this paper, I'll use 'we' to collectively refer to a group of error theorists.

reasons we each have for making decisions, the elimination of morality from our language and judgements wouldn't have a profound effect on our behaviour. Furthermore, we wouldn't find ourselves particularly restricted in what we're able to say without appealing to objective moral values. I will not suggest that a non-moral society would be especially better or worse than a moral one, but simply that it wouldn't be too different.

The debate between fictionalists and abolitionists typically centres around the question of whether morality itself is worth preserving; with fictionalists answering positively and abolitionists answering negatively. I aim to take a different approach to the debate. I argue that fictionalism fails, not because morality isn't worth preserving, but because if we stop believing in its existence, we will cease to find it motivating. This is my first point. My second point is that moral abolitionism, in a mild form, wouldn't have the disastrous consequences that many fear it would.

I. Moral Error Theory and the 'Now What' Problem

In *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977) Mackie makes the bold claim that 'there are no objective values' (Mackie 1977: 16). He argues that there lies a deep error in each of our moral statements; we are appealing to objective moral values that don't exist. Mackie is a cognitivist regarding moral discourse. This means he thinks that: 'moral sentences are apt for truth or falsity, and that the state of mind of accepting a moral judgement is typically one of belief' (Van Roojen 2018). So, according to Mackie and other moral cognitivists, when we assert that *murder is morally wrong*, we're asserting that we believe it to be true that the act of murder carries with it the objective property of moral wrongness. However, if there is no such thing as the objective property of moral wrongness, this assertion is false. We're ascribing a property to murder that doesn't exist.

The name *Moral Error Theory* arises from Mackie's claim that our moral discourse is systematically in error. Despite our constant appeal to them, there's no such thing as mind-independent moral values. Mackie puts forward several arguments for his claim, one which he calls 'the argument from queerness', where he argues that objective moral properties are 'too queer to be instantiated' (Mackie 1977: 38; Kalf 2018: 176). Mackie claims that moral facts, if they existed, would be completely unlike any other facts that we've ever come in contact with. To know their truth is to simultaneously feel a categorical demand to obey them, even if this goes against our desires. There are no other facts that are 'intrinsically

action-guiding' in this way (Mackie 1977: 49). There's also the bizarre issue of how we can come to know such moral facts. Mackie points to the empirical observation that moral norms differ across cultures, and asks whether this is best explained by the fact that 'there is a realm of objective moral facts to which some cultures have inferior epistemic access than others' or that there are no such objective moral facts (Joyce and Kirchin 2010: xvii). Predictably, Mackie answers with the latter.

The 'Now What' Problem

This essay will take the conclusion of error theory as a starting point, and will set aside the question of whether Mackie's, or other error theorist's, arguments for such a conclusion are cogent. This essay is concerned solely with exploring what's become known as the 'Now What' Problem for the theory.

Suppose someone finds themselves convinced that error theory is correct and that objective moral values don't exist. It follows that all of their past moral assertions are false, and that any moral assertion they make from now on will also be false. Naturally, they might ask 'what now?' What should the new-found error theorist do with all their moral judgements which they deem to be irrevocably faulty? It's important to note at this point, alongside all other philosophers who engage in this debate, that the *should* here is a non-moral one. If this were not the case, then error theorists wouldn't be able to engage in the 'Now What' debate without immediately contradicting their own theory.

As well as helping error theorists decide the best way forward, this debate is useful in addressing serious objections to error theory. Some fear that it could have dangerous consequences for society. This is partly due to the common misunderstanding that, in denying that murder is morally wrong, the error theorist is in some way condoning murder. There's a prevalent worry that the wide-spread disbelief in objective morality would result in a catastrophic collapse of society. This alone can be a strong enough reason to reject the theory. It's therefore a matter of great importance that we investigate precisely what the consequences of error theory might be, and if they're as dire as some suspect.

As Jacquet notes, there are two questions we could investigate. One is the question of what error theorists should do with their moral beliefs in our current, largely moral society. Another is what error theorists should do with their moral beliefs in 'a possible future society mainly made of error theorists' (Jacquet 2019: 40). I wish to consider the latter question.

The two solutions offered to the 'Now What' Problem that this paper will explore are moral fictionalism and moral abolitionism. Moral fictionalism claims that we should preserve moral discourse, but treat it as a useful fiction. A moral fictionalist will continue to talk and think *as if* morality exists, but will never actually commit themselves to its existence. Then there's moral abolitionism. Usually, if we discover that some entity or concept which we once believed to exist doesn't in fact exist, we eliminate this belief from our discourse and inner thoughts. This is the route we took once realising that Phlogiston didn't exist, and it's the route that any atheist will take who once believed in God. It's also the route that moral abolitionists recommend we take regarding moral discourse and beliefs. We should, or at least try our best to, eliminate them altogether.

II. Moral Fictionalism

A moral fictionalist denies the existence of objective morality but, motivated by its apparent benefits, decides to continue talking about it as if it exists. Thus, morality becomes a useful fiction.[3] Joyce argues that 'just as we can discuss Sherlock Holmes without committing ourselves to his existence,' we can talk about stealing being immoral without committing ourselves to the existence of moral properties (Joyce 2019a:154). Much of the debate around fictionalism centres around a 'cost-benefit analysis' of morality itself, in order to determine whether it's worth preserving, and hence whether fictionalism is the best option for the error theorist (Ingram 2015: 231). In my discussion of fictionalism that follows, I'll argue that the principal reason for rejecting fictionalism isn't that morality is more harmful than beneficial. Rather, it's because the benefits of morality depend on our belief in its existence. Any use that morality has is greatly minimised, if not eliminated, once it's recognised as fiction.

When a fictionalist claims that murder is wrong, they mean to assert that murder is objectively wrong; in the same way that a moral realist might assert it. The crucial difference is that the fictionalist doesn't really believe this. Joyce claims that 'the fictionalist would prefer it if the user of the moral fiction is not even aware that it is fiction (at the time of use)' (Joyce 2019a: 158). It's important to understand what he means

[3] The form of fictionalism under discussion is revolutionary fictionalism. This is to be distinguished from hermeneutic fictionalism, which is the theory that we already treat morality as fiction.

by this. When the fictionalist asserts that *stealing is immoral*, they may forget about error theory, and feel strongly that stealing is objectively wrong. Nevertheless, when pressed, or thinking deeply, the fictionalist will admit that they're merely *pretending* to believe that stealing is immoral. The fictionalist is in a permanent state of disbelief; they just might forget this when engaging in every-day moralising.

Fictionalism claims that morality is worth preserving due to the benefits that it brings to society. The common thought is that abiding by codes such as 'keeping promises is moral' allows us to 'coordinate attitudes and regulate interpersonal conflict' (Garner 2009: 504). There's a concern, one held by Mackie himself, that humans are inherently selfish, so morality is required to 'protect the interests of others than the agents' (Mackie 1977: 106). So, even if we stop believing in its existence, morality is too important to eliminate from society. Fictionalists argue that the categorical nature of a moral imperative such as *it's wrong to steal* has more force than any prudential suggestion such as *it would be in your long-term interest not to steal*. This is because 'applying a moral property to some act implies that this act is inescapably right' (Ingram 2015: 235). This point is two-fold. Moral commands are effective in firstly telling others how to behave, and secondly in helping us override our temptations.

Can we be motivated by fiction?

In order to reap the benefits of morality, we must be motivated by it. A central question for fictionalism then, is whether we can still be motivated by a morality that we don't believe exists.

Imagine that Simon is walking down the street and finds a purse full of cash, along with the ID of an elderly woman. It would benefit Simon to take the money, and he knows that there are no security cameras on this street, so it's likely that he'll get away with it. According to fictionalism, in order to overcome this temptation, Simon must be motivated by the powerful thought that stealing is immoral. Without this thought, there's nothing to stop Simon taking the money. In instances such as this, moral thoughts are necessary to 'bolster self-control and combat weakness of will' (Eriksson and Olson 2019: 120).

For a moral realist, the belief that stealing is immoral will be powerful and authoritative. But can the same be said for Simon if he is a fictionalist? It's possible, as Joyce notes, that Simon will occasionally forget that he doesn't believe in moral facts. However, when he enters the

'critical mode', he will consistently recall this. In moral discussions that don't directly concern him, Simon may be able to assert that stealing is immoral and forget he doesn't genuinely believe it (Ingram 2015: 232). However, if Simon is weighing up his reasons for taking or returning the purse, and the only reason he can produce for not taking it is that it would be immoral, then in all probability, Simon will consider that this isn't something he believes. It's now much harder to see how Simon will be motivated by a belief he doesn't hold.

To strengthen the claim that Simon could be motivated by a fictional morality, it may be helpful to examine other instances where we are motivated by something that we don't believe in. Finding such examples proves rather difficult. It's possible to think of scenarios where we might find appealing to a fiction useful. Plenty of parents find it useful to tell their child that Father Christmas only visits children who are well behaved, because this stops their child from being naughty. However, if one parent thought the other was being unkind, and told them that they should be nice otherwise Father Christmas won't visit, they'll likely be met with incredulous laughter. Moreover, once the child comes to understand that Father Christmas is fictional, the parents will no longer be able to use him to prevent the child from acting out. The child will no longer be motivated by the prospect of Father Christmas once they cease to believe in his existence. The fiction is only effective in motivating those who believe it. Those who don't believe it are unmoved by it.

Similar examples are in abundance. Joyce frequently offers Sherlock Holmes as a fictional character who we are able to talk about *as if* he exists, without committing ourselves to his existence. Indeed, I may engage in a conversation with a friend about Sherlock Holmes' most impressive deductions as passionately as I would if talking about a real person. However, if I was tempted to do something, and my friend told me that I shouldn't because Sherlock Holmes would tell me off, it's extremely unlikely that this would deter me.

A final example involves the belief in God. It's understandable that a religious person with full faith in God's existence will be motivated to act in ways that would please him. They might feel a strong temptation to steal something, but fear that they'll be punished by God for doing so, and this will prevent them from stealing. Alternatively, an atheist who denies God's existence won't be influenced by the prospect of punishment from someone who, to them, is a fictional character. Whether or not two people will find the fear of God motivating depends entirely on whether or not they believe God exists. Of course, there are more complex cases,

for example someone who isn't religious but will occasionally pray to a God. This is still an imperfect analogy for fictionalism though. Firstly, there may be a small part of this person that believes there could be a God, or at least is open to the possibility. This therefore wouldn't be a case of being motivated by something that they wholly deny the existence of. Secondly, there's still an important difference between someone finding it beneficial to pray to a God that they don't believe exists, and finding the idea of this God action-guiding. They may find peace or clarity from the act of prayer, but it's still extremely unlikely that they will be moved to act in certain ways by a God that they don't believe in.

If we could provide examples of being motivated by something that we don't believe exists, perhaps fictionalism would have a stronger case. The severe lack thereof is rather damning for fictionalism. Admittedly, a cluster of counterexamples doesn't actually prove that we couldn't be motivated by a fictional morality. However, these counterexamples are effective nonetheless. They demonstrate that, in other aspects of our lives, if we don't believe in something's existence then we will fail to find it action-guiding in any way. We may occasionally find it useful to talk about it *as if* it exists, but we won't be motivated by it to behave in certain ways. Fictionalism must therefore show why a make-believe morality would be any different. If Simon is an atheist, the fear of God's punishment won't motivate him to return the purse to its owner. Simon is an error theorist; he firmly denies that the property of objective wrongness exists. Why would he then be motivated not to steal the purse by the thought that stealing is objectively wrong? Furthermore, if a fictionalist finds themselves unable to be motivated by their own fictive moral thoughts, then it's unlikely that they'll succeed in persuading a fellow fictionalist to do something by giving a moral command; particularly if it's something they don't want to do. Ultimately, the proposed benefits of maintaining a make-believe morality, that it will be effective in telling others what to do and overcoming our weaknesses of will, both collapse under examination.

Fictionalist responses

Joyce anticipates the objection that 'merely make-believing morality will strip it of its usefulness', and offers several responses (Joyce 2019a: 156). He provides his own instance where we may be motivated by something we don't really believe, imagining a scenario where he desires to be fitter, so tells himself that he must do fifty sit-ups a day. He knows that he

could still get fit by doing roughly 50 push ups a day, sometimes more, sometimes less. He claims however that 'I do better if I encourage myself to think in terms of fifty daily sit-ups as a non-negotiable value, as something I *must* do if I am ever to get fit' (Fisher 2011: 164).

There are numerous issues with this example. Firstly, Joyce is motivated by this 'non-negotiable value' because it helps him achieve an end that he already desires; to get fit. The role that fictionalism wants morality to play goes beyond this. Since fictionalism argues that we need morality to override our selfish temptations, we must find it *so* motivating that it deters us from doing something which is actually in our interests to do. Generally, Joyce will be motivated by his maxim as it helps him to achieve his desired ends. Even so, there might be a day where Joyce feels especially tired. He does twenty sit-ups and finds that he really doesn't want to continue. He could attempt to motivate himself by reminding himself that he *must* do fifty push-ups a day if he wants to get fit, however it's likely that on this occasion he'll consider that this isn't really true. It's in Joyce's long term interest to get fit. However, if it's in his short-term interest to do twenty sit-ups, then considering he knows that he doesn't really have to do fifty each day, he'll probably stop after twenty. Joyce's example must demonstrate that we may be motivated by a fictional belief to do something that's not in our interests. It fails to do this.

Another reason why this example isn't effective is that Joyce's 'fictional' rule is actually grounded in fact. Whilst it's not true that he *must* do fifty sit-ups a day to get fit, it is true that if he does fifty sit-ups a day, he'll get fit. Furthermore, the maxim 'I must do fifty sit-ups a day' isn't dissimilar to the maxim that Joyce genuinely believes: 'I must do sit-ups everyday, sometimes less than fifty, sometimes more.' For a moral error theorist, there's nothing remotely true about the belief that any act is objectively wrong, nor do they hold any beliefs of a similar nature. Joyce's belief that he must do fifty sit-ups a day to get fit therefore isn't wholly fictional in the same way that a moral belief is for an error theorist.

A different way that Joyce responds to the objection is by claiming that it's misplaced because it 'overlooks serious and weighty *non-moral* considerations that lie behind the moral overlay' (Joyce 2019a: 163). It seems that Joyce is attempting to defend fictionalism by taking a judgement externalist view of moral motivation, suggesting that we aren't necessarily motivated by the moral judgement itself, but by motivations contingent to it. Earlier, when outlining my objection to fictionalism, I wrote that 'in order to reap the benefits of morality, we *must* be motivated by it', and that 'Simon *must* be motivated by the powerful thought that

stealing is wrong' This language implies that I take fictionalism to endorse judgement internalism, positing a necessary connection between moral judgement and motivation. It could be objected that I'm making an unfair and incorrect assumption by doing this, for here is Joyce supporting a judgement externalist view of moral motivation. On the contrary, for reasons I will explain, I believe that the crux of the fictionalist's *depends* on an internalist view of moral motivation. First though, I wish to delve further into Joyce's response.

Consider again Simon, who finds the purse on the street. Joyce claims that there'll be non-moral considerations continuing to motivate Simon even after he recalls that he's an error theorist. Indeed, it's possible to think of many non-moral[4] factors that might motivate Simon to return the purse. He may think about the older woman and the effect that losing this money will have on her. Perhaps he'll think of his own grandmother, and what he would want someone to do if they found her purse. It might be argued that these empathetic considerations are inherently moral, however there's nothing about these thoughts that commit the thinker to the existence of an objective morality. Whilst they're often thought to be linked, feelings of empathy and compassion are not fundamentally tied to the belief in moral properties. Empathy is defined as 'the ability to recognise, understand, or share the thoughts and feelings of another person' (*Empathy* 2023). This psychological ability carries no commitment to objective moral values. An error theorist will deny that they have any moral duty to treat others with kindness, but this need not prevent them from feeling deep compassion for others, and wanting to treat them with kindness anyway. Alternatively, Simon could have selfish reasons for returning the purse. He might still fear being caught, or worry about being judged by his peers. Perhaps he desires to feel heroic, and thinks he'll achieve this by returning the purse.

This inevitably invites the question of why the moral language is needed at all. If the moral overlay is only motivating for the fictionalist due to the non-moral considerations lying behind it, then it seems inconsequential and unnecessary. Joyce proposes that moral language 'focuses attention in a way that straight talk cannot' (Joyce 2019a:161). It seems then that the moral overlay acts as a shortcut for us, with the simple thought *but it would be wrong* encompassing many non-moral considerations such as those previously mentioned. This doesn't align with

[4] 'Non-moral' refers to any consideration which isn't rooted in objective morality, or doesn't presuppose any objective moral values.

the essence of fictionalism's argument though. Joyce claims that morality is necessary for 'strengthening motivation' and 'combatting weakness of will' (Joyce 2019a: 161). According to fictionalism, the reason that we should continue using moral judgements to guide our behaviour is because they are powerful enough to do so; a judgement internalist view. If the moral judgements themselves aren't necessarily motivating, and we're actually motivated by other factors, then it becomes unclear why we should preserve such judgements. My chief objection to fictionalism is that a moral judgement only has the power to motivate us if we believe it's true. Admittedly, this objection carries the most weight if fictionalism holds an internalist view of moral judgement. So, yes, taking an externalist viewpoint may help the fictionalist to respond to this charge however, in turn it weakens their initial argument as to why we should maintain a make-believe morality in the first place. If a proponent of fictionalism admits that we won't be motivated by a fictional morality, but argues that moral language has more vivacity than non-moral language, then this should be seen as an admission of defeat, for it's a considerably watered down version of their original argument.

A final and related response from a fictionalist may be something along the lines of this: we might not agree with certain societal rules such as being quiet in the cinema, however we play along with them anyway because we choose to be members of a society with such rules in place. Similarly, the fictionalist could argue that, although we no longer believe that objective morality exists, we can and should continue to play by certain moral rules because we choose to play the moral game. Firstly, it's worth noting that this isn't an appropriate analogy. Regardless of whether we think we should be quiet in the cinema, we are motivated to do so because we believe that we'll be judged by other cinema-goers if we talk, perhaps even asked to leave. Once again, error theorists do not believe that any moral rules actually exist. Therefore, a more accurate example would be if we were told that it was perfectly alright for us to talk in the cinema, so long as we didn't mind one of the characters stepping out of the screen and shouting at us. We would not believe that this would happen, and it's consequently extremely unlikely that it would motivate us to be quiet.

Secondly, whatever the fictionalist's reasons may be for choosing to play the moral game, it certainly wouldn't be because it's *morally right to do so.* It will most likely be because they think that certain moral rules, though non-existent, are useful for co-operating with one another and maintaining a fair society. No moral language or belief in objective

morality is necessary to explain these motivations. Again, perhaps the fictionalist desires to continue playing by these moral rules and using moral language because it's easier and familiar to them, but this is by no means a strong enough reason for one to pretend that morality exists if one is certain that it does not; especially within a society of people who all share this view. Crucially, these are also not the benefits that fictionalists such as Joyce list when arguing that we should preserve talk of morality.

Why fictionalism is unpersuasive

Most moral abolitionists who reject fictionalism do so on the basis that morality is harmful to society. In his paper "To Hell With Morality", Hinckfuss argues that a moral society is typically 'authoritarian and dishonest' (Hinckfuss 2019: 23). Dockstader describes morality as 'useless, imprudent, pathological and guilt-ridden', arguing that it's 'often used to motivate and justify violence, especially great-power wars' (Dockstader 2019: 488; 184). In reality, it's an empirical matter beyond human scope to determine whether morality is more beneficial or harmful to society. In all probability, it's a bit of both. I contend that the error theorist need not believe that morality is ruinous to society in order to find abolitionism attractive. They just need to believe that morality doesn't exist, and consequently discover that they're no longer motivated by it. My suggestion isn't that fictionalism has got it wrong about the benefits of morality. It's that, by postulating a morality which is merely make-believe, it's unable to incur these benefits.

For fictionalism, the problem lies in the fact that 'when push comes to practical shove, make-believe will rightly give way to genuine belief' (Oddie and Demitriou 2007: 487). The fictionalist may find they're able to utter a moral judgement, perhaps when condemning a stranger's actions, without considering that they don't believe it. When struggling with their own egoistic desires, they may attempt to override these temptations with the thought *but it would be immoral*. In a situation of careful consideration, it's unrealistic to suggest that the fictionalist won't recall that they don't believe this. It's then even more unrealistic to suggest that the fictionalist will still be motivated by something that they believe to be unequivocally false. Joyce appears to allow that fictionalists are actually motivated by the non-moral considerations lying behind the moral overlay. Not only does this support the objection that fictionalists won't be motivated by make-believe moral judgements, it

also implies that they don't *need* to be, further suggesting that morality isn't as indispensable as fictionalism claims.

III. Moral Abolitionism

Moral abolitionism recommends that if we decide morality doesn't exist, we should try and eliminate it from our discourse and inner judgements. This is typically seen as the default solution to the 'Now What' Problem because 'it seems natural to assume that if we come to the conclusion that some topic or way of talking is false, then we should pretty much drop it' (Joyce and Garner 2019: xvii). However, as we've seen, many people believe that morality is a special case; given it's too valuable to eliminate. In fact, they argue, abolitionism would result in the end of civilisation. Whilst there are several objections made against moral abolitionism, this is the most common and arguably the most serious. The objection is that we, humankind, are too selfish to live without morality. If we stop talking and thinking about moral values, we'll stop considering anyone other than ourselves when making decisions. We'll do whatever we want all the time, leading to an exponential rise in crime and the eventual breakdown of society. If this turned out to be the case, then moral abolitionism would be a very bad idea. I'll therefore dedicate this section to demonstrating that this objection isn't well-founded.

It's crucial to note that the form of abolitionism I'll be defending is a mild one. I don't intend to argue that morality is especially harmful or dangerous, or that we'd be far better off without it. Some moral abolitionists appear to be advocating for an abolition of all expressions or practices which are remotely moral. Lutz understands abolitionists to be claiming 'that any norm which is held on largely moral grounds is essentially defective and therefore needs to be discarded' (Lutz 2014: 356). This extreme form of abolitionism is perhaps partly responsible for the strong adverse reaction that the view typically elicits. Alternatively, I aim to suggest that many expressions and norms which are *thought* to be strictly moral, aren't necessarily, and could potentially survive an abolishment of morality. This 'partial moral abolitionism' has been endorsed by Blackford and Marks, and is the form of abolitionism that I wish to defend (Blackford 2019: 74). It recommends that the error theorist abolish any use of the terms *moral* and *immoral*, alongside any reference to objective moral values and the supposition of a categorical obligation to follow a moral duty.

Acting in accordance with our interests

A point often raised in relation to the 'Now What' Problem is this: even if morality doesn't exist, 'what would work in its place?' (Garner 2019: 503). Several abolitionists have attempted to provide a prudential framework which could replace the moral one. Ingram and Garner agree that we should 'figure out what is in our short, middle, and long term interest, and base our decisions on that' (Ingram 2015: 236). For those worried that humans are too egoistic to exist without morality, this recommendation will likely fuel their concern. This is understandable. At the centre of morality, many would argue, is the idea that we should help others, even when it isn't in our interest to do so. Yet, here is the suggestion that we should base our actions solely on our own interests. How could this do the same job as morality?

I don't think that attempting to provide one prudential framework which could single-handedly replace morality is the most promising approach for abolitionism. Nevertheless, it's useful to examine why the notion of acting in accordance with our interests doesn't necessarily translate as mistreating others for our personal gain. The anxiety is that humans are inherently selfish, so they need morality to cooperate with others and maintain social harmony. Whilst I don't believe that all humans are incurably selfish, it's undeniable that some are more egoistic than others. It may be reassuring therefore to consider the numerous selfish reasons which could lead someone to continue acting in ways that we consider moral. For instance, it's in most people's interest to treat others how they would wish to be treated; this is sometimes known as 'reciprocal altruism' (Hinde 2001: 106). If we want to trust that someone will keep our promise, then it's in our interest to do the same for them. Equally, it's in our interest not to go around stealing everything that we desire, for we don't want others to steal from us, nor do we want to live in a society where the concept of ownership collapses. Moreover, people may hold back from committing a crime due to the self-centred reason that they're afraid of the legal consequences. A legal framework and sanctions would still exist in a non-moral society, and the abolitionist may find that the prospect of being fined, or going to prison, is enough to deter them.

On the other hand, it's vital to emphasise that not every interest we have is necessarily a selfish one. Marks outlines his alternative to the moral framework; *Desirism,* which recommends that we act in accordance with our desires (Marks 2019: 95). He notes that a typical objection to

desirism is that it's egoistic, but argues this charge is mistaken. He writes that 'the fact that a desire is always "one's own" does not mean that it is selfish', adding that 'your heart's desire could be to end human starvation in the world, at whatever cost to yourself' (Marks 2019: 96). Marks makes an important point here. Any recommendation that we should base our decisions on our desires is plausibly hard to digest due to the assumption that these desires will always be self-serving. Of course, they can be, but they can also be entirely self-sacrificing, or anywhere else on the scale. Once this is acknowledged, the suggestion that we act in accordance with our interests appears far less alarming. It could be in our interest to do as much as we can to make ourselves and the people around us happy, and do our best to avoid doing anything which would hurt ourselves or others. It's difficult to see anything controversial about this.

Choosing to act morally

In our current society, people do find morality motivating. If this were not the case, then the concern for fictionalism that we don't find fictions motivating would become redundant, for if we aren't motivated by morality in the first place, then the point that we wouldn't be motivated by a fictional morality becomes moot. Even so, it is not the case that *everyone* is motivated by morality *all of the time*. In theory, the moral law demands that we obey it, regardless of our own desires. In practice, it doesn't always do this, because some people are able to ignore it.

There are people who, in Simon's shoes, might consider that stealing is wrong, but find that this isn't enough to stop them. Perhaps they discover that their egoistic reasons for taking the purse override any moral reasons for returning it. Alternatively, as previously discussed, there may be people who are motivated to return the purse for reasons which are entirely non-moral, such as fear of punishment. In both scenarios, those in question are not motivated by moral considerations. The fact that not everyone is automatically motivated by morality demonstrates that there is an element of choice involved in finding morality motivating. For those who do find themselves motivated by morality, there's an aspect of their character which causes them to *want* to behave morally, and refrain from doing things which are immoral. There's no reason to believe that an elimination of moral language would drastically alter someone's character or general disposition. Therefore, this aspect of their character will remain, and will likely cause them to want to make similar decisions in the absence of a moral law.

A worry may be raised here that, whilst people do choose to act morally, they do so simply because they desire to be moral. They make decisions based entirely on the belief that *it's the moral thing to do.* Therefore, an elimination of moral language would render these people with no reason to continue acting in ways which we consider moral. This need not be a worry for abolitionism though, for this claim rests on the assumption that we make moral decisions based on purely moral considerations, which a closer inspection of our decision-making will show is rarely the case.

It's widely accepted that for any decision we make, there'll be a myriad of factors that lead us to make it. Therefore, even for those who make decisions based on morality, the strictly moral consideration[5] will be 'at most one of the factors at play' (Garner 2019: 79). Those who are motivated to do the moral thing will still have their own personal beliefs about why certain acts are moral. This set of personal beliefs will not change with the elimination of moral language. Consider once more Simon. His initial reaction to finding the purse may be a moral one. He might judge that the moral thing to do would be to return it, and this alone could motivate him to do so. However, if he asks himself *why* the moral thing to do would be to return the purse, then unless his answer is *it's an objective fact about the universe,* it will still be available to him after he stops thinking in moral terms. His answer will most likely be the empathetic considerations that we explored earlier. Again, these considerations can be classified as non-moral. To solidify this claim further, imagine a child raised in an abolitionist society. It's perfectly plausible to imagine the child's parents teaching them all about the importance of empathy and compassion, without teaching them anything about mind-independent moral properties. Following their parents' guidance, the child will learn to consider the feelings of others when making decisions. They will do so without any concept of a moral law which commands them to. In contrast, it's not possible to imagine the parents teaching their child that some acts are inescapably right or wrong, without also teaching them about objective moral values. This is because the latter are intrinsically linked, whereas the former are not.

To clarify, in claiming that we can usually provide non-moral reasons for why we behave morally, I don't intend to suggest that someone would be mistaken in believing that they make a decision based on

[5] By strictly moral considerations, I mean moral statements such as 'it would be immoral', accepted as brute facts without further explanation.

moral factors. It's not the case that moral factors are non-moral factors in disguise, and it seems clear that people do base their decisions on moral considerations. I suggest instead that someone would be mistaken in believing that they base their decisions on *exclusively* moral factors. For people who decide to act morally, the strictly moral consideration will be just one in a complex set of factors that lead them to make this decision. Thus, the extraction of this strictly moral consideration from their decision making is unlikely to have a significant effect on the outcome of their decision. If there are people who blindly obey the moral law, without at least one of their own reasons for doing so, then perhaps they'll find that their behaviour will change with the abolition of morality. The question remains whether people like this exist. Whilst I'm not sure I've ever come across any, this is by no means an indication that they don't. Even so, if there are such people, and they come to stop believing in objective morality, then I maintain that they'll have no choice other than to find alternative motivations for their behaviour. A make-believe morality simply won't do the same job.

Our personal ethics

Both Garner and Marks agree that the notion of 'ethics' could survive moral abolitionism. Garner writes that 'we each have a fully functioning collection of dispositions, habits, policies and principles that make up our ethics' (Garner 2019: 79; 78). An abolitionist could still have their own personal ethics; a code of conduct that they choose to live their life by. Provided that they don't assume any level of intrinsic objectivity, or believe they have an obligatory duty to follow it, then this doesn't involve anything that they deny the existence of. The abolitionist may have a personal policy that they'll always consider how their actions might affect others before making a decision, and a promise to themselves that they'll strive to help others whenever they can. If they desired, the abolitionist could even go as far as holding themself to the standard that they will never steal. They won't believe that stealing is objectively prohibited, for them or for anyone else, but they simply will choose to never do it.

The upshot of all these points is that, contrary to initial fears, an abolition of morality may not have any substantial effect on our behaviour or decision making. I don't intend to suggest that a society which doesn't appeal to objective morality will be notably better or worse off than one which does. I make the modest suggestion that it wouldn't be so different. When we make moral decisions, or act in ways which we

typically deem to be moral, we're also motivated by a countless number of non-moral factors. All of these factors will continue to influence our behaviour once we stop talking and thinking in moral terms. The overwhelming worry is that humans are too selfish to exist without morality. There may be people who are especially selfish, or have a particularly cruel nature, but it's unlikely that they'll abide by a moral law anyway, so their behaviour probably won't be affected by moral abolitionism. In most cases, it's over-simplistic to suggest that any one person is wholly selfish or wholly altruistic. We each may be motivated to behave morally by considerations based on self-interest, empathy, and anything in between. Whatever our reasons are, they will continue to motivate us even if we let go of objective morality.

What the abolitionist can still say

It's not possible to offer a full outline of what a non-moral society might look like, however it's helpful to attempt this at a much smaller scale by examining the language that remains available to an individual abolitionist. I'll therefore close this section with a brief summary of what the abolitionist can still say without appealing to objective morality. As Blackford remarks, 'we may go on expressing our disapproval of X-ing, our belief that Y-ing is bad (it leads to outcomes that we don't desire), or our conviction that only a *horrible* person would engage in anything as *cruel* as Z-ing' (Blackford 2019: 68). *Cruel* is an example of a thick moral term. This means that it 'combines evaluative and non-evaluative description' (Väyrynen 2021). There's a set of behaviours that fit the non-evaluative description of being cruel, and the adjective carries with it the evaluative description that being cruel is bad. Thick moral terms would survive moral abolitionism. For an abolitionist, *cruel* will be used to describe the same types of behaviours, and will carry with it the same negative evaluation; it will just be a personal rather than objective evaluation.

It's prudent to consider an extreme example, for the more upsetting we find an act to be, the more resistance we'll likely feel to the suggestion that we stop calling it immoral or categorically wrong. Take child abuse. The abolitionist can still say that child abuse is abhorrent and sickening. They can say that anyone who abuses children is disgusting and inhumane, and should be put in prison. They can say that they don't condone child abuse in any circumstance. The only thing that the abolitionist will

not say is that child abuse is immoral, or objectively prohibited. It's not clear why this would be an issue for the abolitionist, considering they don't actually believe this anyway. Anyone who finds this impossible to accept is unlikely to become an error theorist in the first place. As for what the abolitionist can say if they're urging someone to do something, Garner puts it succinctly; 'we can tell them what we'd like them to do, and then we can explain why' (Garner 2007: 512).

Conclusion

It's prevalent in the current literature that most moral abolitionists find their solution preferable to moral fictionalism because they believe morality to be harmful to society. In fact, this belief appears to be attributed to the abolitionist as a prerequisite for their holding their view. Joyce asserts that 'the abolitionist emphasises the harm that morality has wrought and claims therefore that we should do away with it' (Joyce 2019: xix). Whilst this is an accurate portrayal of abolitionists such as Hinckfuss and Dockstader, I've shown that one can find abolitionism preferable to fictionalism for different reasons altogether.

The benefits of morality that fictionalism identifies are its power to help us override temptations, as well as motivating us to help others even when it's not in our interest to do so. I don't disagree with fictionalism on this point. What I wish to emphasise is that a make-believe morality won't be powerful enough to incur these benefits. An error theorist has concluded that objective moral values don't exist. It's at this point of departure from belief that any benefits which morality could have are lost for the error theorist. It has proved challenging to provide any other instances where we are motivated by something that we don't believe exists, and further, motivated to do something which isn't in our interests to do. Fictionalism hasn't successfully demonstrated that a fictional morality would be any different.

Joyce's admission that fictionalists will actually be motivated by the non-moral considerations lying behind the moral overlay does nothing to help his cause. He seems to be suggesting, as I've argued, that the make-believe morality won't motivate the fictionalist to override their temptations, other factors will. This leaves us wondering why the moral overlay is useful at all, considering the essence of fictionalism's argument is that it will continue to motivate us to exhibit prosocial behaviours. Ultimately, I have argued that it doesn't particularly matter whether

fictionalists are correct or incorrect regarding the benefits that morality brings to society. Fictionalism fails because these benefits hinge entirely on our belief in morality's existence.

Moral abolitionism is typically seen as an extreme view with dangerous consequences. I've demonstrated that this isn't necessarily the case. A mild form of abolitionism, where all that's eliminated from our language and judgements is any belief in objective, mind-independent moral properties, wouldn't lead to the breakdown of civilisation, or anything close. In our current society, people disobey the moral law and act in ways we deem immoral. These people would likely make the same decisions if we dropped talk of objective morality. As for the people who do find themselves motivated to act morally, there'll be a complex web of factors that lead them to make this decision, with the solely moral consideration being just one. All the other factors will continue to motivate them to make the same decision; including the aspect of their character that chooses to be motivated by morality in the first place.

Feelings of kindness and empathy aren't intrinsically linked to a belief in objective moral values. Therefore, an abolitionist will continue to act in accordance with these considerations, should they be so inclined. Eliminating objective morality from our inner judgements wouldn't prevent us from having a personal code of conduct that we live our life by. Eliminating objective morality from our discourse wouldn't prevent us from expressing many of the same condemnations or approvals, or engaging in debates about the permissibility of certain acts.

I have argued that moral abolitionism is a more promising solution to the 'Now What' Problem than moral fictionalism, not because morality is harmful, but because it's no longer useful to us if we stop believing it exists. Some feel strong resistance to moral error theory due to the potentially disastrous consequences of the wide-spread disbelief in objective morality. I have shown that this fear, although understandable, is not justified.[6]

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