

Moral Skepticism and the “What Next?” Question

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Introduction to *The End of Morality: Taking Moral Abolitionism Seriously*

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Sometimes—quite often, in fact—we discover that we’ve all been horribly massively mistaken about things. We were wrong about the Earth being at the center of the universe, we were wrong about men being smarter than women, we were wrong in thinking that the body contains four humors, and (I’ll go out on a limb here) we were wrong about human affairs being observed and judged by an all-powerful invisible being.

What if we were mistaken about *morality* too? I don’t mean mistaken about the *content* of morality—we’re all familiar with the idea of someone’s judging that one course of action is morally right when really that action is morally wrong (or vice versa). I mean mistaken about the very idea of there being moral requirements and moral values in the first place. Maybe *nothing* is morally right or wrong, morally good or bad, morally praiseworthy or blameworthy; maybe there’s no such thing as a moral virtue or vice, or moral desert, or moral responsibility. Maybe the whole conceptual scheme is just horribly massively mistaken.

Most people find this idea unsettling, to say the least. Some find it dangerous. And many find the very act of advocating the idea itself morally wrong (though it should hardly come as a surprise that the act of denying morality will be considered a moral transgression; one would expect the system to be self-vindicating).

Philosophers have always been aware of the prospect that there is something inherently fishy about morality, and down through the centuries copious amounts of ink have been spilt trying to prove otherwise. The results have been, I think it’s fair to say, underwhelming. No consensus has ever emerged concerning the nature of moral truth or how we have access to it; every attempt ever offered seems vulnerable to pretty obvious objections. It is far from apparent that in over two thousand years there has even been anything deserving of the name “progress” concerning our grasp of the nature of morality. Yet the struggle persists; cottage industries in moral philosophy flourish and wither; the arguments and counter-arguments continue without pause.

This book does not aim to contribute much to those arguments. What it concerns, rather, is the “What next?” question. Suppose, if only for the sake of argument, that we *were* to decide that morality is horribly massively mistaken. What would happen next? The usual thought is that we’d be in some manner substantially *worse off*: that our collaborative society would be threatened, that our motivation to cooperate would be diminished, that no one could be trusted, that perhaps the whole point of living would be lost. It all sounds very grim—at least until one realizes that there’s not a shred of solid evidence that any of it is true.

Similar apocalyptic anxieties have been voiced before and found to be baseless—most obviously when the question was raised as to what would happen if most of us ceased to be religious. Those of a theistic inclination found it enormously challenging to imagine how society could possibly function in a civilized manner without the underpinning of religious

belief. (Many continue to find it challenging.) “Established religion,” wrote the Victorian historian James Anthony Froude, “is the sanction of moral obligation, ... it creates a fear of doing wrong, and a sense of responsibility for doing it, ... it is teaching men to be brave and upright, and honest and just, ... noble-minded, careless of their selfish interests” ([1881] 2004: 237-8). To raise doubts about religion, he concluded, “is a direct injury to the general welfare” (ibid.). But it turns out that the secular society that Froude so feared seems to operate at least as well as its religious predecessor. Atheists still find it in themselves to be trustworthy, they still cooperate, and they often even still find life meaningful.¹ How is this possible? The answer is obvious: because, typically, our reasons for acting in these prosocial ways are *over-determined*. Believing that the gods command us to keep our promises was not the only reason people had for doing so; it wasn’t even necessarily the strongest reason. So when that theistic reason fell by the wayside, other secular reasons remained to keep us flying straight. Even if there’s no god to command promise-keeping, the atheist tells herself, it’s still the morally right thing to do.

It’s possible that the same pattern of over-determined reasons holds for morality. Perhaps even without the backing of morality, people will still find it in themselves to be trustworthy, cooperative, and to find life meaningful. Even if one comes to the conclusion that there’s no *moral obligation* to keep promises, for example, there are still good practical reasons for doing so.

In order to see that this is plausible, suppose that it were not the case—suppose that the only reason we had for keeping promises (to stick with that example) was a sense of moral obligation to do so. Then one couldn’t declare that it is *pragmatically good* or *useful* that morality encourages us to keep our promises; one could make only the internal claim that it’s *morally good* that morality encourages us to keep promises. Most believers in morality, however, will be keen to maintain that the question “What’s good/useful about morality?” can receive an answer that makes reference to some framework of *external* values. (After all, mere internal self-vindication is hardly satisfying; even contemptible normative systems can pat themselves on the back.) And as soon as it’s allowed that there is something practically good about morality’s urging us to perform and refrain from various actions, it follows that there are more than moral reasons for doing so.

One thing that is apt to cause misunderstanding here is the unfamiliarity of stepping out of the moral framework altogether, for within that framework the declaration that there’s no moral obligation to do X will be taken to indicate that one believes that refraining from X must be morally permissible. So someone who says “Nobody is morally obligated to keep promises” will ordinarily be taken to be expressing a *tolerance* toward promise-breaking—a tolerance to which most people will object. But this is, as I say, a misunderstanding. If one is doubtful of morality *altogether*, then the implication from “X is not morally obligatory” to “Refraining from X is morally permissible” breaks down: one no more believes that refraining from X is morally permissible than one believes that X is obligatory. (In an

¹ For empirical evidence that non-religious people are no less moral than religious people, see Zuckerman 2009; Hofmann et al. 2014. At the societal level, there is no discernible positive correlation between crime and a lack of religiosity; if anything, evidence indicates a negative correlation (Paul 2005; Jenson 2006).

analogous way, when the atheist rejects the claim that God forbids stealing, he or she does not thereby embrace the claim that God allows stealing.) And therefore the connection to tolerance is severed, too. Just as one does not need a nod from God in order to be passionately opposed to something, nor does one's passionate opposition require *moral* backing. Our reasons to be passionately opposed or passionately in favor of things are often over-determined.

The view under discussion—that morality is horribly massively mistaken—is called the “moral error theory”—coined by John Mackie in 1977. The moral error theorist takes an attitude toward morality analogous to the one that the atheist takes toward religion: the world simply isn't furnished with the objects, properties, or relations necessary to render any of the discourse true. This is a view that this book does not much argue for but takes as its point of departure. Our focus is on the question “If we were to become moral error theorists, then what should we do with morality?”

At the center of this book is the theory known as “moral abolitionism,” which is the view that, generally speaking, we'd be better off without moral thinking. One might be forgiven for thinking that this position follows automatically on the heels of the error theory, for surely if we conclude that some conceptual scheme is fundamentally broken, then we should just do away with it—as we've done away with talk of bodily humors, say. But in fact the two positions can be peeled apart. For a start, one might accept that there *are* such things as moral obligations, moral desert, moral responsibility, etc., but maintain that constantly thinking and talking in these terms—basing our decisions on these concepts—is, in practical terms, counter-productive, and we'd be better off if we stopped. And the reverse is also possible: one might argue that even if there are no moral obligations, etc., it serves our pragmatic purposes best if we carry on talking and thinking in moral terms. Therefore even if one has accepted the moral error theory, further arguments are needed to establish abolitionism. This book is dedicated to the scrutiny of that task.

Before introducing the chapters and the structure of the collection, I will take some time to briefly sketch out the “point of departure” (i.e., the moral error theory) in a bit more detail. On what grounds might one think that all of morality is horribly massively mistaken—that none of it is true? In the course of this introduction I will also identify some key metaethical positions that may help readers orient themselves in subsequent discussions: noncognitivism, naturalism, constructivism, realism, skepticism, fictionalism, and conservatism. (I shan't burden the text with general citations to these positions, but refer the reader to a “further reading” section that follows this introduction.)

Let's begin by reflecting further on the analogy of religion—where the reasons for doubt may be more familiar. There is no master argument that leads people to believe that religion represents a false description of the world; I suppose that fairly common considerations run along the following lines. The atheist knows of no phenomenon that requires a theistic explanation; the very features of a god (along with associated accouterments such as an afterlife, miracles, etc.) seem sufficiently extraordinary to require particularly strong evidence; some of those features (e.g., creating the universe) seem potentially incoherent; it isn't clear by what means people would have access to theistic facts (the atheist likely endorses an epistemology wherein appeals to *faith* are looked upon with deep suspicion); the

multitude of non-equivalent religions in the world and throughout history (the respective believers of which are confident that they are right and the others wrong) sets off alarm bells; and the atheist probably thinks that there is a good naturalistic explanation of the origin and persistence of religious belief—in sociological, psychological, and perhaps evolutionary terms—according to which the whole framework is an illusion (though possibly a socially useful one).

Though all of these considerations can be beefed up into more rigorous arguments, I suspect that most actual atheists find them sufficiently plausible even in this sketchy form that their disbelief is grounded in nothing much more complicated. The atheist need not claim to *know* that there are no gods; it is enough that the considerations are deemed strong enough that *disbelief* is reasonable. And my point is not that these arguments are sound (though I happen to believe at least some of them are); my point is just to sketch out the familiar kinds of reasoning that lead ordinary people to come to believe that an extremely widespread way of thinking—one which is deeply important to billions of people, one which lies at the heart of every historical culture we know of—is utterly mistaken.

The moral error theorist is an altogether less familiar creature than the atheist, but in all likelihood is moved by similar considerations against morality. The error theorist knows of no phenomenon whose explanation requires moral facts; the very features of moral properties seem sufficiently extraordinary to require particularly strong evidence; some of those features (e.g., free will) seem potentially incoherent; it isn't clear by what means people would have access to moral facts (the error theorist likely endorses an epistemology wherein appeals to *moral intuition* are looked on with deep suspicion); the multitude of non-equivalent moral systems in the world and throughout history (the respective believers of which are confident that they are right and the others wrong) sets off alarm bells; and the error theorist probably thinks that there is a good naturalistic explanation of the origin and persistence of moral belief—in sociological, psychological, and perhaps evolutionary terms—according to which the whole framework is an illusion (though possibly a socially useful one).

Again: some of these considerations can be beefed up into more rigorous arguments, but an ordinary person may be a confident error theorist while resting his or her disbelief on just these rough grounds. And again: my claim isn't that these are uncontroversial arguments—on the contrary, any of them will provoke howls of protest. My point is just to draw attention to the fact that although moral thinking is widespread and considered of deep importance—to the point that many will find the idea of doubting it simply unspeakable and unthinkable—in fact the kind of grounds that one might have for concluding that morality is utterly mistaken are not so very unfamiliar.

Some will object to the analogy. Religion, they will say, necessarily involves a reference to *things*—albeit invisible and supernatural things—like gods and heaven; and therefore it is possible for us to be mistaken if it turns out that the world lacks these things. But morality (they will say) is different, because it doesn't involve reference to *things*; so when we say “Promise-keeping is morally good” (for example) we are not really asserting anything about the world (in the way that we are if we say “God loves you”); therefore, regardless of what is or isn't in the world, it simply isn't possible for moral judgments to be *mistaken*.

It is true that religion deals in objects (e.g., gods), events (e.g., miracles), and places (e.g., heaven) more than morality does. Morality deals more in *properties* (e.g., being

blameworthy) and *relations* (e.g., X's having an obligation to Y). But this doesn't show that the latter is somehow immune from error in a way that the former is not, since mistakenly thinking that something instantiates a property (when in fact it does not) is no more unusual or puzzling than being mistaken about the existence of an object, event, or place.

There is, however, a longstanding view that denies that moral judgments do involve the ascribing of properties or relations—that maintains that moral judgments are not really in the business of making assertions at all, in which case moral discourse would be by its very nature exempt from the kind of mistake of which the error theorist accuses it. This is the noncognitivist view. Assuming that noncognitivism about religion is implausible—assuming, that is, that religious language typically is in the business of making assertions about the nature of reality—then the moral noncognitivist would argue that the analogy that I've been pushing, between moral error theory and atheism, is misguided. Atheism (it will be said) is at least a *coherent* position, since if religious discourse involves assertions then it might involve *false* assertions; but if moral discourse doesn't even involve assertions then it cannot involve false assertions. So, for example, if we consider one of the aforementioned reasons that might lead someone to sympathize with the error theory—that one knows of no phenomenon whose explanation requires moral facts—the response will be that this is based on a misunderstanding: that moral judgments do not refer to moral facts, that the very idea of “moral facts” is flawed, and hence that it's misguided to expect any phenomena to have such an explanation.

The error theorist therefore must maintain that the noncognitivist is mistaken (i.e., error theory is a form of cognitivism). Noncognitivism has many potential problems, and I won't run through them here. But let's once more consider the religion analogy. A moment ago the assumption was made that noncognitivism about religion is implausible. The intuitive basis of this assumption is that it seems farfetched to claim that there is no such thing as religious belief or assertion. There is probably no other discourse that so explicitly prizes *belief*! Could it be that no one has ever believed in God, that no one has ever asserted that God exists, that all the people who adamantly claim that they do believe in God are deluded about themselves? It seems hardly credible. It is one thing to be deluded about the nature of the world (a commonplace condition); it is quite another to be utterly deluded about the nature of one's own mental states (which is not to say, of course, that one is an infallible judge of one's own mental states).²

But once we reflect on the implausibility of religious noncognitivism, the prospects of *moral* noncognitivism appear to fade too. Could it be that no one has ever believed that what the Nazis did was morally wrong, that no one has ever asserted that what they did was morally wrong, that all the people who adamantly claim that they do believe that what the Nazis did was morally wrong are deluded about themselves? It seems reasonable to think that the answer to these questions is probably “no.” This, in any event, is what the error theorist thinks. We appear to treat many moral claims as if they are assertions, as if they do express beliefs—and the error theorist sides with appearances here.

² Despite my pessimistic tone, noncognitivism about religion has had its defenders. See Santayana 1906; Braithwaite 1955; Randall 1958.

If the noncognitivist is mistaken—if moral judgments are what they appear to be: assertions—then the next question to ask is “What would the world have to be like in order for these assertions [some of them, at least] to be true?” Since what a standard moral judgment does is ascribe a property to something (say: ascribe the property of *wrongness* to the action *stealing*), then we are really asking about the nature of moral properties. Here there is no shortage of different and competing answers, and my goal on this occasion is just to provide a very broad sketch.

The fundamental distinction in which we are interested here is between answers that have the result that moral assertions are sometimes true and those that have the result that they are never true. Consider analogous questions concerning what it takes for someone to be a witch. One account might say that witches are women who revere Satan and who practice rituals in an attempt to win his favor. A competing account might say that witches are women who communicate with Satan and who practice rituals that sometimes do win his favor. The variation in wording is slight but makes all the difference: according to the former account there may well actually *be* witches, since all it requires is certain attitudes and attempts; whereas according to the latter account there presumably aren’t any witches, since it requires actually being in causal contact with Satan, who (going back out on my limb here) doesn’t exist.

One might say that this would be “just a verbal dispute”—and I suppose it is, but admitting so isn’t to denigrate the importance of the disagreement. It would be particularly important if there were a law that all witches are to be executed, for example. On the other hand, we can envisage a dispute that is more than verbal. Suppose two people agreed upon the second definition of “witch.” One of these people might accept a worldview that includes supernatural beings like Satan, while the other does not. And so according to the former, assertions of the form “She’s a witch” might be true, while according to the latter no such assertions will be true. Thus we see that to be an error theorist about witches involves two components: a conceptual claim (concerning what the word “witch” means) and an ontological claim (concerning what the world is like).³

This imaginary dispute over the existence of witches boils down to whether there is an essential component to the concept *witch* that fails to fit within the naturalistic world order. The same is true of the dispute over the morality. The error theorist is, in all likelihood, a *methodological naturalist*: accepting into her global ontology only things that can be integrated into the scientific worldview. Since she maintains that moral properties are essentially imbued with characteristics that don’t fit comfortably into this worldview, she rejects their existence. She is therefore no *moral* naturalist.

Moral naturalism comes in two flavors: constructivist and realist. The constructivist thinks that moral properties are constituted by certain attitudes and conventions. (Think, by analogy, of the property of *being illegal*.) The realist thinks that moral properties are mind-independent (in a sense that actually proves difficult to nail down⁴): moral facts are there to be discovered, not invented. Both the constructivist and the realist believe in moral facts, but they disagree about the nature of those facts. The error theorist need disagree with no part of

³ Two components, that is, in addition to requiring cognitivism about “witch discourse.”

⁴ See Joyce 2015; Tropman, forthcoming.

the naturalistic constructivist's or naturalistic realist's *ontological* views, but she thinks that these naturalists make *conceptual* errors about morality: they misidentify or underestimate what a proper use of moral discourse commits speakers to.

There need be no single reason why moral properties cannot be naturalistic, any more than there is a single reason why *God* cannot be naturalistic. For example, the error theorist might think that the central moral concepts of *blameworthiness* and *praiseworthiness* depend on an idea of actions performed *autonomously*, but that the latter notion of *free will* isn't naturalistically defensible. (Needless to say, there is much to argue over there.) Or the error theorist might think that moral properties are imbued with a certain kind of practical authority: that moral requirements aren't considered simply as ways of satisfying our desires, but often place demands on us regardless of our desires. (After all, one cannot evade morality just by saying "Yeah, but I don't care about that"—even if that is entirely truthful.) These categorical demands, moreover, seem imbued with more force than can be provided by the rules of any human institution—since, again, a person might reasonably ignore institutional requirements if he doesn't care and can avoid any negative repercussions. The error theorist may find no place for such institution-transcending desire-independent requirements within a naturalistic worldview. (Again: there is much to argue about there, of course.) In short, the error theorist believes that morality consists (conceptually) of types of demand and value that no combination of naturalistic properties alone can accommodate.

In contrast to the naturalist, the moral *non-naturalist* maintains that moral properties exist but that it is a mistake to expect them to be able to be integrated into the scientific worldview. Again, we can recognize constructivist and realist flavors. The view that moral properties depend on the decrees or preferences of a supernatural being could be categorized as a version of non-naturalistic constructivism. As for non-naturalistic realism, consider the following thoughts that might be said to do a decent job of capturing a package of common inchoate folk beliefs:

Of course it's morally wrong to imprison people just because of the color of their skin. It would be wrong for you to do this even if you didn't care and could get away with it; and it's morally wrong regardless of whether everyone accepts that it's wrong—its wrongness isn't something we just make up. But, no, of course one wouldn't expect this wrongness to be something that science can demonstrate or investigate. We don't need science to tell us that it's wrong; any decent person *just knows* that it's wrong.

The error theorist may well hold that non-naturalism has gotten things right at the conceptual level: it has correctly identified what an ordinary use of moral discourse commits speakers to. But she thinks that non-naturalism makes *ontological* errors about what the world is like. If we take the above lines as capturing folk platitudes surrounding the concept of *moral wrongness*, then (the error theorist thinks) there simply isn't any property in the world answering to that concept. Any version of non-naturalism will, obviously, offend against any principle of methodological naturalism to which the error theorist has a standing commitment.

We have seen, then, that the error theorist's argument is a combination of a conceptual claim and an ontological claim, but it is worth stressing that neither claim considered alone

has the label “error theory” stamped on it. The conceptual claim is one that moral non-naturalists may also want to endorse, and the ontological claim is one that is attractive to moral naturalists. We can, thus, interpret the error theorist as pinching a premise from each camp and combining them to come to a skeptical conclusion to which both will emphatically object.

[A word on the word “skeptical.” Moral skepticism is the view that there is no such thing as moral knowledge. If we think of knowledge as *justified true belief*, then there are three forms of moral skepticism, two of which we have now encountered. The noncognitivist denies that moral judgments consist of beliefs, and therefore noncognitivism is a form of moral skepticism. The error theorist denies that moral beliefs are ever true, and therefore is also a type of moral skeptic. The third kind of moral skeptic denies that moral beliefs are justified. (Note that an unjustified belief may nevertheless be objectively true, so moral skepticism is compatible with moral realism.)]

This book takes the error-theoretic view of morality as its point of departure. With the exception of the first chapter, by Jordan Howard Sobel, there isn’t much attention paid to establishing this skeptical position; rather, we are focused on the “What should happen next?” question.

Earlier in this introduction I suggested that one answer to this question—abolitionism—has a kind of default status: it seems natural to assume that if we come to the conclusion that some topic or way of talking is just false, then we should pretty much drop it. Of course, nobody is recommending a complete moratorium on even uttering moral words. The abolitionist doesn’t object to people saying “Moral wrongness doesn’t exist” or saying “Many people believe that breaking a promise is morally wrong,” or even saying “Breaking promises really is morally wrong” as a line in a play (for example).⁵ What these three examples have in common is that the speaker doesn’t commit herself to the existence of moral wrongness, and therefore makes no error about the nature of the world. But it’s probably fair to describe these uses as “peripheral.” For all those more standard uses—where people use moral language *to make moral judgments*—the abolitionists recommend that we cease. Instead, they propose that our assertions, beliefs, decisions, and negotiations should involve a candid and truthful engagement with what we need and want.

The abolitionist faces competition from the fictionalist, who looks at some of these non-committing uses of moral language that the abolitionist allows, and wonders whether they might be extended more generally, such that a lot more moral language can remain than the abolitionist envisages. The fictionalist might take a particular interest in the third example: of how the context of being in a play (i.e., being involved in a fiction) removes assertoric force from one’s speech, allowing one to say essentially anything without epistemic error. When, for example, an actor playing the lead in Orwell’s *1984* writes “ $2 + 2 = 5$,” no one later

⁵ The abolitionist need not object even to someone’s saying “Abolitionism is utterly false and moral realism is definitely true!” *if it’s a line in a play*—that is, so long as the speaker isn’t *asserting* this proposition. (It’s hard to imagine that it would be a good play, though.)

lambasts him for his foolishness, for everyone knows that the actor never asserted this.⁶ The fictionalist thinks that so long as we employ similar commitment-removing devices in our speech, we could carry on using moral language in many of the standard contexts that we currently do. The fictionalist is an error theorist about our current moral discourse, wherein things like “Breaking promises is morally wrong” are *asserted*; but if we were to alter our practices, such that we no longer asserted these claims, then the resulting moral discourse would no longer be in error.

But why would anyone want to do this? On the face of it, carrying on with a way of talking which we believe to be false, even if we transform it into a kind of non-committing fictional talk (perhaps *especially* if we thus transform it), seems an odd thing to want to do. The fictionalist’s answer is that maintaining moral discourse, even as something similar to a fiction, is in some manner *useful*. This, then, is an important battleground for the fictionalist and the abolitionist. The abolitionist emphasizes the *harm* that morality has wrought and claims that therefore we should do away with it; the fictionalist stresses its *benefits* and claims that therefore we should keep it. Both parties recognize that this is, at bottom, an empirical dispute.

If, though, these theoretical decisions are to be decided on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis, then the possibility should be recognized that the course of action with the greatest net benefit might be that of simply carrying on *believing* in morality—even if these beliefs would be false and, moreover, the speaker accepts that they’re false. This is the recommendation from the conservationist. The conservationist joins with the fictionalist (and against the abolitionist) in thinking that morality is, on balance, a useful practice. But the conservationist is skeptical that the non-doxastic attitude recommended by the fictionalist can deliver the practical goods. Surely (the conservationist thinks) in order for us to get the benefits of morality, we need to *believe* in what we’re saying. And so the conservationist proposes that even if we come to accept the moral error theory (even if we believe that nothing is morally wrong, for example), when engaged in everyday decision-making we should pay no attention to this belief but instead carry on with our regular moral beliefs (believing, for example, that breaking promises is morally wrong).

This book is a collection of chapters focused largely on the cost-benefit analysis of what we should do with moral discourse were we to become moral error theorists. Each of the three positions just outlined—abolitionism, fictionalism, and conservationism—is, in its own way, an uncomfortable one, and none could fairly be described as “popular.” Yet the debate warrants sensitive and charitable attention, to which it is the ambition of this volume to contribute.

The collection is divided into four sections of three chapters each. The first section (“Background thinking”) consists of chapters by Jordan Howard Sobel, Ian Hinckfuss, and Hans-Georg Moeller. The piece by Sobel is being published posthumously; it is extracts from an unfinished book-length manuscript which covers many of the broad moves of metaethics

⁶ Maybe the *character* (Winston) asserted it, but that’s a different matter entirely. The fictionalist advice may conceivably be construed roughly as “Become like an actor engaging with a fiction,” but not as “Become like a character within a fiction.”

in the 20th century. It is unusual in this collection insofar as much of Sobel's energy is spent clarifying and arguing for our "point of departure"—moral error theory, with a particular focus in Mackie—and for this reason it makes a fitting opening to the collection. Sobel's thoughts eventually turn toward the "What next?" question, where he outlines some options without taking a strong stand. Hinckfuss' piece is also presented posthumously; it is excerpts from a book published in 1987 (but never widely disseminated). In many ways, Hinckfuss' arguments set the agenda for subsequent discussion—his was the first unashamed unambiguous no-holds-barred attack on the institution of morality. For this reason we are quite pleased to reinstate the title that he originally intended for his book but was prevented from using: *To Hell with Morality*. Moeller provides some fascinating historical scene-setting: discussing amorality in the context of ancient Chinese philosophy and revealing unexpected connections with modern social theorist Niklas Luhmann. Moeller's chapter is noteworthy for the rich threads it ties together around the topic of moral skepticism, including (inter alia) examination of a passage from *Huckleberry Finn*, discussion of the medieval carnival, and even the analysis of a mundane German joke.

The second section of this collection ("The case for abolitionism") consists of a trio of chapters that all firmly advocate the abolitionist view—by Russell Blackford, Richard Garner, and Joel Marks—all of whom have in the past published books arguing for this view. Very broadly speaking, all three chapters pursue the same strategy—they situate abolitionism within contemporary metaethics, they criticize alternative options, and they stress the harm that moral thinking has done and does—but, of course, each author does this in his own nuanced way. All three are confident that we could get by perfectly well without the conceptual framework of morality—indeed, could probably get by a good deal *better*—and they paint complementary pictures of what life without morality might look like.

The third section ("Alternatives to abolitionism") consists of a pair of chapters arguing in favor of conservationism, and one chapter arguing for moral fictionalism—two positions that currently represent the main alternatives to abolitionism for the moral error theorist. The chapter by Björn Eriksson and Jonas Olson ends up arguing for a qualified kind of conservationism that they call "negotiationism," which is designed to allow for a degree of flexibility in the extent to which a person conceives of a decision in moralistic terms, tailoring his or her response to the situation. In her chapter, Jessica Isserow offers a critique of abolitionism, arguing that rather than jettisoning morality entirely, our practical ends would be better served by maintaining it with care and vigilance. In the third chapter of this section I present the case for moral fictionalism, arguing that those who attack it (including abolitionists) often have a skewed view of what the position entails.

The fourth and final section of this book ("Moral skepticism: Case studies") critically examines the practical role that moralized thinking plays in some particular areas of real debate. Such empirically-oriented discussions are invaluable to the metaethical dispute we are concerned with, the discussion of which all too often consists of "plausible speculation" sorely in need of evidential grounding. Nicolas Olsson Yaouzis' chapter examines contemporary debates about the nature of social justice. He argues that moralized political beliefs encourage the persistence of a status quo that serves the interests of the powerful, and that political activists have nothing to fear, and much to gain, by abolishing moral considerations from their arguments. Caroline West takes a contrary view when discussing

feminism, arguing that the aspirations of those committed to feminist ideals are well served by the availability of a moral framework and would be badly undermined if we abolished it. Thomas Pözlzer examines the debate over climate change, and comes to the conclusion that the “moralization” of this debate has neither the obviously harmful effects that the abolitionists would predict, nor the obviously beneficial effects that the conservationists and fictionalists might suppose. Pözlzer’s chapter, thus, sounds a cautionary note for those engaged in this debate: human psychology is often more complicated and odd than our speculative and simple metaethical theories accommodate.

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