NONASSERTIVE MORAL ABOLITIONISM

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Abstract: Proponents of moral abolitionism, like Richard Garner, qualify their view as an "assertive" version of the position. They counsel moral realists and anti-realists alike to accept moral error theory, abolish morality, and encourage others to abolish morality. In response, this paper argues that moral error theorists should abolish morality, but become quiet about such abolition. It offers a quietist or nonassertive version of moral abolitionism. It does so by first clarifying and addressing the arguments for and against assertive moral abolitionism. Second, it develops novel criticisms of assertive moral abolitionism and offers nonassertive moral abolitionism in response. Third, it discusses how various metaethical views might respond to nonassertive moral abolitionism. Its basic claim is that nonassertive moral abolitionism provides superior *therapeutic* benefits over assertive moral abolitionism and other conserving and reforming approaches to moral discourse.

Keywords: metaethics, moral abolitionism, moral antirealism, moral error theory, moral nihilism.

1. Assertive Moral Abolitionism

Nonassertive moral abolitionism (NMA) is a kind of moral abolitionism, which is a kind of moral nihilism. Assertive moral abolitionism (AMA) is the other kind of moral abolitionism. Moral nihilism is the denial of the existence of moral facts and the annihilation, elimination, or abolition of moral belief and discourse. Both NMA and AMA deny the existence of moral facts and annihilate moral belief and discourse. Moral nihilism is usually only an option for moral antirealists, in particular moral error theorists, who deny the existence of moral facts. Moral error theory is the combination of three metaethical views, one semantic, one psychological, and one ontological. Error theory is factualist, cognitivist, and antirealist. It regards moral discourse as meaningful, and so in the business of aiming to report moral facts. It claims we are primarily expressing beliefs when we utter moral judgments. And it claims that these judgments fail to correspond to any objectively existing, mind-independent moral facts. There are no such facts because they are too queer or weird to be real (Mackie 1977). This is because moral facts are by definition

mind-independent, nonnegotiable, practically authoritative obligations or imperatives to behave in certain ways. Moral facts are more than mere hypothetical reasons, pieces of prudence, or practical advice. They are categorical reasons, reasons that cannot be reduced, contextualized, or suspended in any way. The error theorist, being a thoroughgoing naturalist, thinks there is no evidence whatsoever for categorical reasons. They might even be conceptually impossible (Kalf 2015).

The question that arises for the error theorist at this point is, now what (Lutz 2014)? What should an error theorist do with a false discourse like morality? There are three main options: conserve it, reform it by treating it as a useful fiction, or annihilate it. Moral conservationism (Olson 2014) says we should conserve genuine belief in and really assert the existence of moral facts even if we are also convinced of the error theory. Revolutionary moral fictionalism (Joyce 2016) says we should make-believe in and quasi-assert the existence of moral facts that we know do not really exist. (Quasi-assertion is a way of uttering a sentence while reducing assertive force from it, like the way actors utter lines from a play.) Moral nihilism and hence AMA (Garner 2007) say we should annihilate morality. Obviously, the "should" in each of these views is not categorical, only hypothetical. Conservationism and fictionalism think it would be wise and useful to retain moral discourse, while AMA thinks it would be wise and useful to annihilate it. AMA involves accepting moral error theory, annihilating or abolishing morality, and advising others to do the same. What abolishing morality amounts to is the denial of the existence of moral facts and the suspension of the belief in and expression of moral judgments. What is assertive about AMA is that it urges others to accept the error theory and suspend believing in and expressing moral judgments as well. Garner summarizes the view: "Assertive moral abolitionists construe moral judgments as false assertions, but they urge us to stop making them because they believe that any benefits that come from pretending that moral realism is true are outweighed by the harm that comes from having to promote and defend a series of easily questioned falsehoods" (2007, 506). Joel Marks, another proponent of AMA, describes how the revelation of moral nihilism affected him: "Finally I reached a point where I felt that, far from needing to hide my amorality from the world, I should share it with the world. It would be a gift. At the very least, it was important—perhaps the most important thing in the world! I also saw the humor in my situation: it was not lost on me that I was becoming an unbelieving proselytizer" (2013, 14). AMA is thus nonassertive about atomic moral judgments but assertive about both metaethical and metametaethical claims. It says we should abolish believing in and uttering atomic moral judgments (like "stealing is wrong") but should encourage others to do the same by believing the error theory and encouraging others to abolish morality. AMA asserts the truth of the error theory and the wisdom of abolition. Conservationism, on the other hand, continues to assert moral

judgments, while asserting the truth of the error theory and the wisdom of conserving moral discourse. Revolutionary fictionalism differs by only quasi-asserting moral judgments, while asserting the truth of the error theory and the wisdom of treating morality as a useful fiction.

NMA disagrees with each of these views. It comes in weaker and stronger forms. Weak NMA claims that one should become quiet or nonassertive about moral judgments but assert the metaethical truth of the error theory, while also not asserting the metametaethical point that those who accept the error theory should encourage others to abolish morality. Strong NMA, on the other hand, suggests we should not only abolish uttering atomic moral judgments but also abolish asserting the truth of the error theory and the wisdom of abolition. Strong NMA believes annihilation is best completed in silence. All levels of ethical reflection and talk should be abolished. I argue here that strong NMA is the wiser and more prudent option of what one can do with ethical and metaethical discourse if one is convinced of error theory. Obviously, by doing so I render this paper too assertive to be a version of NMA. I don't take this to be a problem, however, as I regard the paper itself as possibly the last rung on the metaethical ladder I can kick away after completion. I address this further, but the main reason for the strong NMA approach is to obtain something like Pyrrhonian impassivity with respect to morality, a therapeutic release from belief in and concern with as much normativity as possible. But before I present the case for NMA, let's ask why would one want to abolish morality in the first place, especially if most error theorists want to conserve or reform moral discourse.

Beyond the basic point concerning the epistemic hygiene of abolishing false ways of believing and speaking, Garner develops three reasons for AMA first offered in Mackie 1980. The first reason to abolish morality is that it renders disagreements deep and intractable. If a disagreement is over a certain fact of the matter, the fact can be noted and the disagreement resolved. If a disagreement is a clash of interests, then the side with superior force, however construed, will win, and the disagreement will be resolved. But if a disagreement is a conflict between two competing categorical reasons, there is no room for resolution. Value conflicts are irreconcilable. Moral principles cannot be compromised. Not only are moral disagreements intractable, anybody can engage in them, since there is no fact of the matter. Deep, intractable moral disagreements are rooted in the fruitless intransigence and obstinacy that a belief in categorical reasons often entails. There is also some evidence that the more a moral belief is thought to be objective, the less comfortable people are with others disagreeing with it, the less they view those who disagree with it as moral, and the less they are open to changing their mind with respect to the belief. In other words, "greater objectivity is associated with more 'closed' rather than more 'open' responses in the face of moral disagreement" (Goodwin and Darley 2012, 254). Marks argues that morality is not

nearly as useful as conservationists and fictionalists (and realists) claim. In fact, he claims that morality is useless, imprudent, arbitrary, and silly (2013, 88–93). AMA recommends abolishing morality so as to avoid these problems stemming from the basic heavy-handedness of moral judgment and the intractability of moral disagreement.

The second reason to abolish morality is that it is often used to stabilize unequal distributions of power and wealth. This point is similar to the one often made by critical theorists. Morality is regarded as a propagandistic tool for generating obedience, acquiescence, and delusion regarding the vested interests that benefit from the present structure of society and the belief in its legitimacy. Ian Hinckfuss has argued that a "moral society" is one permeated not only by an irrational acceptance of inequality and injustice but also by an elitism and authoritarianism that seeks their justification (1987, 3.2). What Hinckfuss means by elitism is the belief that some members of society are morally better than others and that they thus deserve more power and influence than the morally inferior. Elitism also leads to authoritarianism, which is the belief that those in the moral elite should be authorities in the sense of possessing both expertise and sovereignty. The idea here is that adopting AMA would perhaps lead to the achievement of a more just and equal, or at least less ideologically deluded, society. The abolition of morality could coincide with material and epistemic emancipation.

The third reason for abolishing morality is that it is often used to motivate and justify violence, especially great-power wars. Civil wars or wars against neighbors are usually rooted in specific grievances stemming from long histories of mutual irritation, but morality is often needed to provide motivation to fight strangers halfway around the world. While on the face of it it is rather historically absurd to say international wars have been caused solely by morality, AMA might be onto something in emphasizing the role morality plays in motivating and justifying violence. Hans-Georg Moeller writes, "Hardly any political purge, religious war, or ethnic cleansing was not justified, embellished, or inspired by great moral values: justice, righteousness, freedom, liberty, equality, human rights" (2009, 1). There is some evidence that belief in moral objectivity encourages violent behavior (Ginges and Atran 2009, 2011). In linking his views on the "moral society" being elitist and authoritarian with its being more violent, Hinkfuss writes: "The more that people are motivated by moral concerns, the more likely it is that their society will be elitist, authoritarian and dishonest, that they will have scant respect for most of its members, that they will be relatively inefficient in engendering human happiness, self-esteem or satisfaction, that they will be relatively inefficient in the resolution of conflicts, and that their moralizing will exacerbate conflicts, often with physical violence or even war as a result" (1987, introduction).

Abolitionists thus offer three reasons to abolish morality that amounts to the basic claim that, contrary to conservationists and fictionalists,

morality generates more conflict than cooperation (or at least only an unappealing kind of cooperation, based on force, delusion, and fear). Morality leads to intractable disagreements, injustice and inequality, and international war. Of course, morality is just as often used to criticize these phenomena, but Garner points out that such an approach rarely works, as it depends on those in power in the moral society being susceptible to moral correction, which is rarely the case (2007, 502). AMA does not believe that more or better morality is the solution to the problems morality presents. Only by abolishing morality, and encouraging others to abolish morality, would its problems be solved.

2. Nonassertive Moral Abolitionism

There is another set of reasons for abolishing morality. These reasons have less to do with social matters than psychological ones. They are reasons that are of much more concern for NMA than AMA. They reflect Hinckfuss's concern that morality is often the cause and effect of psychological distress. Morality seems emotionally fraught. If expressivists are correct that moral judgments are primarily the expression of noncognitive states like emotions, we might wonder which emotions are most commonly expressed through moral judgments. The answer seems to be negative emotions. Negativity bias and negativity dominance determine the expression of moral judgments (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, and Hepp 2009; Rozin and Royzman 2001). If the expression of moral judgments is so skewed to the negative and laced with such blinding biases, it might make sense to view morality as pathological. Few people express moral judgments from a condition of general mental stability or well-being. Morality is mostly a vehicle for the discharging of sadness and anxiety. Some work has shown that "higher anxiety [is] associated with stronger moral concerns about harm, unfairness, and impurity" (Koleva et al. 2014, 185). Morality is rarely a means for the expression of joy. NMA is more interested in abolishing morality because it would be better for our mental health.

The reasons given for abolishing morality as a pathological phenomenon are correlated with the specific negative emotions that drive its expression. For example, Marks notes that the many emotions that usually accompany morality include pity, compassion, shame, and guilt. But the one emotion that predominates in most moral expression is anger. Morality is laced with anger and its many variants: "indignation, disgust, condemnation, outrage, contempt, and resentment" (Marks 2013, 83). Nietzsche (1998) famously showed how feelings of impotent wrath and unfulfilled vengeance encourage much moralizing. An aspect of the anger driving morality not yet mentioned by abolitionists is the passive aggression with which moral judgments are often expressed. Morality is what people use when they do not have the power to make others do what they wish. It is

an attempted remote coercion that depends on its ability to make others feel similarly negative emotions. Those who can digest or discharge their anger through action mostly do not need morality. Rarely does one hear much moralizing that is not purely rhetorical from agents with the means to actually affect their situations. So, one should abolish morality not only because of its status as a kind of pathological seething, festering, impotent rage but also because it is an ineffective means for achieving the outcomes one desires. If morality were abolished, perhaps those infected with such anger would finally discover the mechanisms through which they could fulfill their wishes, or recognize that they simply will never be able to realize that toward which their anger inclines them.

Marks emphasizes other aspects of morality that make it worthy of abolition. For one, morality is often used hypocritically (Marks 2013, 85). Moral hypocrisy is a universal phenomenon that involves not only inconsistency between one's moral judgments (and between one's moral judgments and actions) but also self-delusion regarding the actual motivations for their expression. Moral hypocrisy is so common because it is basic to morality that it involves the use of an objectivist and robustly realist language while remaining a wholly parochial means of registering concern for local and contingent matters (Fessler et al. 2015). NMA is a way of avoiding such hypocrisy. One cannot be a hypocrite if one is not uttering moral judgments or encouraging others to do the same. If the cost of not being a hypocrite is not using moral discourse, such an exchange does not seem too pricey to an abolitionist. Obviously, the realist will recommend we instead use morality in a non-hypocritical way, but one may doubt the feasibility of this strategy. Indeed, a non-hypocritical morality, at least for those who are not moral saints, might be unrealizable. Perhaps occasional hypocrisy is a bullet worth biting for a moralist, as long as the other supposed benefits of morality remain. For an abolitionist, such bullet biting just seems unnecessary and imprudent.

What makes the employment of morality seem so hypocritical is the arrogance with which it is often used. Arrogance is another reason to abolish morality. Marks argues that morality is egotistical in the sense that most moralizing is a way to signal one's own supposed virtues and grandstand on key issues (Marks 2013, 86; Tosi and Warmke 2016). Moralizing is often a way to engage in self-flattery and self-aggrandizement, which is why it seems so smug, sanctimonious, and self-righteous. From an evolutionary perspective, the arrogance of moralizing is most likely an attempt to hide just how difficult and costly it is to actually be consistently, say, generous or honest or brave (Miller 2008). Excessive virtue signaling and moral grandstanding is so common to moral discourse because it is worth the risk of at least appearing morally astute for sexual selection and cooperative reasons even if people have a tendency to become rather upset and impose steep social costs when they discover the marked discrepancy between one's excessive moral presentations and one's real behavior (Barranti, Carlson,

and Furr 2016). Perhaps by abolishing morality one would not risk getting caught and incurring such costs. At least by adopting NMA one could appear less hypocritical and arrogant, and so let one's probable cooperative behavior speak for itself. Obviously, there is nothing about NMA that says one becomes "immoral" by abolishing morality. Rather, one is moved by and speaks only in terms of what is instrumentally sufficient.

I would like to add two other reasons to abolish morality not yet discussed in the literature. While it may not be important or even relevant to many, something that follows from its pathological status that makes morality an undesirable way of believing and speaking is that it is fundamentally unfunny. Morality is humorless. It does not seem that an atomic moral judgment could be even remotely funny. The semantic form of a moral judgment might simply bar humor. Again, any moralist could respond that it is neither the point nor the job of morality to be funny. Fair enough. But he must admit that moralizing is usually permeated by an overwhelming gravity that itself borders on the comical. Morality is almost always characterized by an awful, dreadful solemnity. If having more humor in one's life is a particular goal one has, then abolishing morality may be a way in which it could be achieved. Also, I would say philosophy, historically, in its best and most aesthetically pleasing moments, has both been funny and flirted with amorality. Look to figures like Heraclitus, Diogenes the Cynic, Pyrrho, Zhuangzi, Linji, Nietzsche, Cioran, and others. Plato, Confucius, and Kant, to name just a few rabid moralists, are not especially known for their comedic stylings.

Speaking of aesthetic pleasure, the other reason for abolishing morality not yet mentioned is that there seems to be something unmistakably ugly about moralizing. It is hard to find anything particularly appealing about the sick, sad, and stupid being smug, sanctimonious, and self-righteous. Aesthetic experience might require the suspension of moral impulses and expressions, both moral reactions in general and moral reactions in response to artworks in particular. This approach would at least be consistent with the robust moral antirealism presupposed by abolitionism. After all, both Ayer (1952, 113) and Mackie (1977, 43) were as much aesthetic antirealists as they were moral antirealists. But the point here is that expressing moral judgments might itself be aesthetically repellent and might get in the way of experiencing aesthetic pleasure. This point is echoed in discussions of Japanese aesthetics. Comments in the *Zencharoku* (禅茶録), or *Zen Tea Record*, address the way morality interrupts one's experience of *wabi*, or simple, austere beauty: "*Wabi* means that even in straitened circumstances no thought of hardship arises. Even amid insufficiency, one is moved by no feeling of want. Even when faced with failure, one does not brood over injustice. If you find being in straitened circumstances to be confining, if you lament insufficiency as privation, if you complain that things have been ill-disposed—this is not *wabi*" (Hirota 2002, 275). One might wish to abolish morality in order to enhance one's aesthetic experiences.

Morality stands condemned. For AMA, to summarize, morality is false, generates intractable disagreements, leads to elitism, authoritarianism, and ideological delusion regarding inequality and injustice, and inspires violence and international war. Moreover, for NMA, what is more of concern is that morality is imprudent, useless, irrational, pathological, negative, guilt-ridden, sad, anxious, angry, resentful, passive-aggressive, hypocritical, arrogant, immature, unfunny, and ugly. According to Marks, moral abolitionism, on the other hand, is guilt-free, tolerant, interesting, explanatory, simple, compassionate, and true (2013, 94–104). I would add that NMA is joyful, wise, self-composed, empowering, disciplined, light-hearted, and aesthetically pleasant. Now, most will disagree. They will argue that amorality and abolitionism will lead to, or already entail, all the things abolitionists accuse morality of being. While this is a fairly safe inference, actual criticisms of AMA are rather scant. One response is that the criticisms leveled by AMA are moral in nature, that it sounds as though AMA is condemning morality itself as immoral (Olson 2014, 179). I have sympathy with this criticism and return to it below.

The most common complaint, however, is that AMA is extreme in the sense that it would be too difficult for us to ever consistently adopt it. Nolan, Restall, and West write, "Giving up moral talk would force large-scale changes to the way we talk, think, and feel that would be extremely difficult to make" (2005, 307). It would be too socially and psychology difficult to act in accordance with AMA. Socially, if we abolished morality we would perhaps lose the most useful tool for coordinating and regulating interpersonal interactions. If we dropped moral discourse, how would we know whom or what to trust? How could we cooperate with the merely instrumentally inclined? Just as with God, as the cliché goes, even if moral facts did not exist, we would have to invent them. Emotionally, moral intuitions, impulses, and reactions might simply be too baked into our evolved and everyday psychology to be eradicated, at least within one generation. It might amount to requesting the impossible to ask of people that they suspend believing in and uttering moral judgments.

There are a few ways to respond to the accusation that AMA is extreme. There is Garner's response, which is to simply deny the assertion and request that doubters try out abolitionism for a little while and see how it goes. The hunch is that not much would change for the worse, but much would change for the better (Garner 2007, 511). Another response is to admit that AMA is extreme but to claim that sometimes extremity is required because the solution AMA represents is preferable to the problems generated by morality. Just as with atheism, perhaps deluded believers need to be confronted in order to save them from their own irrationality and to save society from the negative effects of their false beliefs. This approach need not deny that certain benefits accrue from belief in God or moral facts, but it argues for the greater benefits for rationality and cooperation resulting from disbelief and abolition. The problems caused

by morality and religion are extreme, so only the extremity of their abolition would solve them.

A third way to respond to the charge of extremism against AMA is to simply agree and stop being assertive about one's annihilation of morality. Yet instead of backsliding into conservationism or fictionalism, one just becomes quiet about one's abolitionism. This is my proposal: NMA. But why would one prefer NMA to AMA? What is so unwise about AMA? By combining two recent sets of findings in moral and political psychology, we find that the imprudence of AMA, and just about any "loud" ethical or metaethical view, becomes apparent. The first set of findings deals with the backfire effect, the second set with moral essentialism about personal identity. With respect to the backfire effect, there is evidence that not only do people engage in the usual motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990) and exhibit the expected confirmation bias (Nickerson 1998) when it comes to their political and moral beliefs, they also have a tendency to cling even harder and believe even more fervently in a supposed piece of information or ideological belief if it is shown to be false or confused. Confronting people with evidence or argument that their strongly held political and moral beliefs are misperceptions or delusions leads them to hold them with even greater strength. Showing people the facts about climate change or vaccination or raw milk, if their beliefs about these issues are firmly held, merely leads them to dismiss the facts and hold their beliefs even more firmly (Konnikova 2014). People thus have a tendency to "counterargue preference-incongruent information and bolster their pre-existing view" (Nyhan and Reifler 2010, 308). From a neuroscientific perspective, some work has shown that the neural mechanisms governing the backfire effect involve areas associated with negative emotion, areas that are activated when people read stories dealing with "values that are perceived as strongly held and non-negotiable (i.e. 'protected values')" (Kaplan et al. 2016a, 6; Kaplan et al. 2016b) and when people feel anxious and threatened (Kaplan et al. 2016a, 8).

The set of findings dealing with moral essentialism about personal identity shows that people tend to view their widely shared moral beliefs as essential to their personal identity. One's moral beliefs are so important that if they were to change one would cease to be the same person. Researchers have found that other aspects of one's physical and mental life are less important in determining personal identity (Strohminger and Nichols 2014; Heiphetz, Strohminger, and Young 2017). One could lose or gain body parts, lower-level perceptions, preferences, and memories and still roughly remain the same person, but if one were to lose one's moral beliefs and behaviors one would tend to be regarded as a different person. What is essential to one's personal identity is one's moral beliefs and how they determine one's social relationships. After all, the whole point of morality is to monitor, evaluate, reward, and punish others in terms of their probable trustworthiness for cooperation and reproduction. Nothing

is more important, from an evolutionary perspective, than one's perceived moral character and behavior. Distinct from other physical or psychological changes, if the moral character of a person changes, her entire evolutionary and social relevance is altered. Thus, "the self is not so much the sum of cognitive faculties as it is an expression of moral sensibility; remove its foothold on that world, and watch the person disappear with it" (Strohminger and Nichols 2014, 169).

It seems safe to infer that what mostly explains the backfire effect is that people feel their deepest sense of self attacked when confronted with contrary moral beliefs or threating information. What makes ethical (and perhaps metaethical) disagreement so deep and intractable is that one would literally have to give oneself up, all that matters to one socially and morally, in order to change one's mind. Now a few philosophers, and probably only philosophers, might not be too troubled by the prospect of losing a version of themselves in order to obtain a new, more rational self, but such cannot be said for the vast majority of philosophers and people more generally. Besides, if philosophers show degrees of recalcitrance about belief change similar to those of non-philosophers, as they seem to, and exhibit roughly the same behaviors as non-philosophers (Schwitzgebel and Rust 2016; Schwitzgebel and Cushman 2015), what hope is there that ethical and metaethical disagreements could ever obtain definitive resolution?

AMA might seem doubly unwise at this point: not only does it argue for a minority view in metaethics by defending a kind of moral antirealism (Bourget and Chalmers 2014), it tries to convince other antirealists to give up believing in, conserving, or reforming morality. We have evidence that directly confronting people's moral beliefs is counterproductive. It is probably equally unwise for moral antirealists to try to convince realists to switch sides, considering that realists are motivated to hold their views so they can moralize with greater confidence and vindication. It is probably just as unwise for moral nihilists to try to convince other antirealists to give up conserving or reforming morality. Indeed, what could explain the tendencies of nearly all antirealists to aim to conserve or reform morality in the first place is the threatening sense of loss of self they must feel as they accept antirealism. Error theorists tend toward their view because they feel that truth matters, but it does not seem to matter so much that they will not bend over backward to save morality from its falsity. Moral conservationists and fictionalists want to redeem not just morality but their very selves, which they have threatened with extinction by accepting error theory.

Now just imagine an assertive abolitionist telling people expressing sincere moral judgments that they should not talk that way because there are no moral facts and morality causes more problems than it solves. Most likely the abolitionist will be dismissed instantly, and his interlocutors will believe in the veracity of their moral judgments with even more relish. Now imagine an assertive abolitionist telling moral realists to become

antirealists, to accept the error theory. An intractable metaethical debate will commence, and the moral realists will probably have even greater faith in their realism. Finally, imagine an abolitionist trying to convince other error theorists to stop redeeming morality. This will fail as well, since if accepting the threatening belief in error theory was not enough to get them to give up their practice of moralizing, then surely nothing will. These error theorists have already endured the tumultuous process of coming to accept their minority view. They have probably reached the limits of their daring. Moral nihilism is a step too far for just about everyone engaged in ethical and metaethical reflection. It is most likely imprudent to try to peddle the view to anyone, no matter how susceptible to it she might appear. Moral nihilism is something perhaps only a very small minority could endure. Morality, true or false, means too much to too many.

Asserting moral abolitionism is unwise; I recommend not asserting it. NMA is not only wise for avoiding the imprudence of AMA but is specifically wise for the therapeutic benefits that accrue from going quiet. NMA accepts all the reasons for abolishing morality offered by AMA but does not think it would make sense to engage in much metaethical debate or to recommend abolition. The key difference between AMA and NMA is that AMA is primarily motivated by epistemic concerns, while NMA is primarily motivated by therapeutic concerns. Of course, as we have seen, morality is more than false for AMA, though AMA does recognize that morality is pathological, a source of psychological distress. As Hinckfuss mentioned, morality blocks happiness and satisfaction. The problem is that AMA, by openly confronting moral realists and error theoretic redeemers, intensifies the very emotional and behavioral turmoil that causes and is caused by morality. This is especially the case because some of their criticisms sound moral. Openly confronting morality with normative failure can smack of its own kind of inconsistency and hypocrisy. Not asserting one's moral abolitionism would be a way to avoid this appearance. This is how NMA solves the problem of AMA sounding too moral in its critique of morality.

NMA is a more therapeutic approach in the sense that its primary aim is to overcome the agitation and anguish of moralizing through de-escalation, detachment, and quietude. The disquietude of morality is confronted by the quietude of nonassertive abolition. That morality is false is less important than its role in occasioning emotional and behavioral disturbance. And the best way to overcome disturbance is to snuff out its cause. Morality is best abolished by being disregarded and ignored, not confronted. And the best way to disregard and ignore morality is not just to deny its truth but to overcome and avoid the disturbance of ethical and metaethical reflection and debate in the first place. After avoiding morality, avoiding metaethical reflection and debate would be even more effective in achieving the desired freedom from disturbance. For strong NMA, abolishing metaethics would be a necessary step to obtaining the

full therapeutic benefits of moral nihilism. Now, we might wonder at this point, what exactly is meant by "therapeutic"?

Historically, philosophy often had a therapeutic or consolatory function. Some treat philosophy as a kind of therapy today. Konrad Banicki argues there are seven elements that constitute a therapeutic model of philosophy. There needs to be a disease or illness and its symptoms, an ideal of health, a process of treatment, a therapeutic theory, a physician, a patient, and a physician-patient relationship (Banicki 2014, 20–21). Banicki notes how it is specific to philosophy that it can be a kind of self-therapy whereby the physician and patient are the same person. Applying the model to our topic, we can say the disease and its symptoms are morality and all its noted negative effects; the ideal of health is a persistent state of detachment, equanimity, or tranquillity that results from quietly abolishing morality; the process of treatment is the experience of learning value theory, normative ethics, metaethics, and moral psychology; the therapeutic theory is the approach that treats metaethics and moral psychology as a means for overcoming the turbulence of moral belief and expression; and the physician-patient relationship is the self-therapeutic way one treats one's learning about metaethics and moral psychology as a means for curing one's own disturbed state resulting from infection with morality.

Eugen Fischer (2011) also considers the possibility of philosophy serving a primarily therapeutic function. He claims that philosophy as therapy can come in two forms: a *philosophical therapy*, intending to use philosophy as a means for solving emotional and behavioral problems that emerge in everyday life prior to studying philosophy, and a *therapeutic philosophy*, intending to use philosophy as a means for solving emotional and behavioral problems that emerge from studying philosophy. NMA as a kind of metaethical therapy can be both a philosophical therapy and therapeutic philosophy. The emotional and behavioral problems that lead to or result from moralizing in everyday life can be solved by studying metaethics and adopting NMA as a kind of therapy. The emotional and behavioral problems that lead to or result from studying metaethics can also be solved by NMA, as the main point of the position is to overcome the disturbance of ethical and metaethical reflection and debate. Of course, as stated, NMA itself, and moral nihilism more generally, might be too much for many people and cause a further set of emotional and behavioral problems, as NMA abolishes what is often regarded as essential to one's self. But it all depends on one's particular constitution. The argument here is not that everyone would be better off affirming NMA but that if one finds morality false and a source of turmoil in one's life, one might want to consider it. At least that is how I have reached this point. Morality was a source of great discomfort in my life, so I wanted to figure out why and studied value theory, normative ethics, moral psychology, and metaethics and realized that moral nihilists were right in their delineation of all of morality's problems. I realized then that the approach of AMA was a little too assertive

and came with its own problems. I decided the best possible cure for myself was NMA. I suspect others might be dealing with similar issues.

3. Responses to NMA

How might error theorists respond to NMA? On the one hand, they would not like it very much. Conservationists and fictionalists think the truth of the error theory is no reason to abolish expressing not only atomic moral judgments but also metaethical and metametaethical views. These redeemers of debunked morality recommend we should still argue for the error theory while continuing to assert or quasi-assert moral judgments. They think other error theorists should do the same. So, they would argue against NMA. They would probably regard it as still too extreme. What about AMA? These abolitionists might be susceptible to the argument for NMA, but they too might feel that fighting the good fight against realists, conservationists, and fictionalists is too important to give up. Assertive abolitionists might see the therapeutic upshot of NMA and yet still feel too compelled to pitch abolition in the face of the detrimental effect of moralizing.

To look deeper into these differences between AMA and NMA, let us add some conditions to NMA that could make it more appealing. The assertive abolitionist might find the nonassertive abolitionist to be extreme in a different way. For AMA, NMA can come off as too categorical and as seeming to require some sort of self-imposed social seclusion, a withdrawing into physical, emotional, or intellectual solitude that might not be desirable or even possible. Of course, this is fair point. The nonassertive abolitionist can seem like someone taking his ball and going home. And yet the nonassertive abolitionist does not want it to be a necessary condition for the effective employment of NMA that it require total exile from all forms of human community or interaction. I have argued elsewhere (Dockstader 2018) that it is both theoretically and practically possible for error theorists to coherently combine different answers to the "Now what?" question in different contexts. In some contexts, say, in some very specific moments with friends or family, it might make sense to assert the wisdom of moral abolition instead of remaining silent. In other, more moralized and momentarily inescapable contexts with those who are not friends or family it might be more prudent to employ a conservationist or fictionalist response instead of either the louder policy of AMA or the relative quietism of NMA. Also, along with fictionalism and conservationism, another error theoretic metametaethical option could be to substitute moral discourse with a normative language more determined by hypothetical reasons or practical desires (Lutz 2014; Marks 2013, 2018). Since the goal of NMA is to obtain the maximal therapeutic upshot of accepting the error theory, it would be rather self-defeating for quietist abolitionists to employ nonassertion in some rigidly universalist manner and thereby

bring attention or disapprobation to themselves by being noticeably and oddly quiet in contexts that usually demand a moral response or the use of ethical discourse.

What are some of these contexts? For one, many of us probably have to teach ethics in our jobs as university lecturers and professors. I had to teach deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics just last term. Ethics is one of the most common courses offered by philosophy departments. Most of us will have to teach it at one time or another. Obviously, I could not have stood in silence in front of my class, nor could have I launched into a highly complex metaethical discussion without having first taught the basics of normative ethics. I had to do my job, and I did. What was I doing when I did this? I prefer to think I was employing ethical discourse in a fictionalist manner. I never asserted anything I really believed but rather only quasi-asserted moral make-believe. I merely described a sub-field of philosophy, delineated its various views, and uttered the various preferred answers to the question of what one ought to do. It was like being in a play. I learned my lines and gave my best performance, ventrilo-quizing the various ethical positions. In other educational contexts as well, where not using ethical discourse would have been personally detrimental, I have employed this approach, which I have called elsewhere "reactionary moral fictionalism" (Dockstader 2018). To be a reactionary moral fiction-alist is not to try to reform morality like the revolutionary moral fiction-alist but to respond to contexts where moral discourse is expected with enough minimally moral-sounding utterances that would most effectively guarantee one's not being noticed as a moral nihilist. Likewise, when I have had to teach metaethics I have also presented the field in a more fictionalist manner, asserting little to no genuine beliefs about the various views on offer. From the perspective of NMA, a possible solution to these pedagogical situations is to simultaneously employ a reactionary fictional-ist approach while also aiming to change one's teaching schedule so as to teach fewer classes on ethical and metaethical topics.

Along with classrooms where ethics and metaethics are being taught, other contexts where it would be imprudent to practice AMA or NMA include, for example, dealing with and talking to recalcitrant children, old or dying religious relatives, or just the many mostly irrational people one encounters on a daily basis. There are certain contexts that, and certain people who, need to be dealt with in moral terms for practical reasons, if only to suspend the interactions as quickly as possible. In these con-texts, since it would be self-defeating and troublesome to remain quiet, not to say to openly pitch moral abolition, I recommend that error theorists employ another answer to the "Now what?" question, but only in a very passive manner, only as a mere reaction to the context so that one can go unnoticed and leave that context with as much ease as is plausible. I pre-fer a passive and reactive fictionalist approach, but others could speak in terms of their mere desires or preferences. What is most important to keep

in mind is that the main approach of NMA is to reduce overall moralizing by ignoring and avoiding morality as much as possible. This involves minimizing one's ethical, metaethical, and metametaethical utterances as much as one can while being sensitive to the fact that one will simply find oneself in any number of contexts where it is neither practical nor prudent to remain quiet. NMA will be most effective if it is relativized to contexts where it will draw the least amount of notice and resistance.

This combinatory approach could be utilized by non-philosophers as well. I have noticed that many ordinary people (people who aren't professional philosophers) employ a latent and at times unconscious moral skepticism that leads them to avoid having many moral beliefs or partaking in many moral conversations. They seem to doubt that there are really any answers to moral questions and so try to avoid getting sucked into moral exchanges. For example, my father is a bus driver and rarely if ever uses religious or moral language. He seems to think, insofar as he has thought about the issue at all, that such ways of speaking are fruitless, boring, and ugly. Now, of course, if he finds himself stuck talking to some religious fanatic or rabid moralizer, at the bar, say, he will indulge her momentarily but not actively participate in the conversation. Instead, he will try to change the subject as quickly as possible to something worth talking about, like the weather or sports or sex or movies. He will do this by saying things like "perhaps" or "maybe" or "you're probably right" and then try to change the subject. He need not be a professional metaethicist to be effectively employing a combination of NMA and reactionary moral fictionalism. Those approaches are simply already his tendencies. How one answers the "Now what?" question depends a lot on personal temperament, but there still seem to be better or worse ways of being an error theorist. The argument here is that NMA, occasionally modified with a passive and reactionary approach dependent on context, might be the best, the most practically and therapeutically beneficial, approach, and some people might even already be unconsciously employing it. NMA mixed with occasional pretense, conservation, or substitution might be a better way of employing and exhibiting one's latent or achieved moral skepticism than the open confrontation implied by AMA.

An assertive abolitionist could reply that this combinatory approach is fine as far as it goes, but that it still skirts the larger institutional issue of all the social damage morality brings. This might simply be an irreconcilable difference between AMA and NMA. The assertive abolitionist wants to openly confront the sources of all the harm morality causes, while NMA would much rather avoid any sort of abolitionist activism, thinking instead that such an approach would merely exacerbate morality's ill effects on society and block the hoped-for therapeutic upshot of believing the error theory in the first place. In fact, NMA could argue that it is precisely by going as quiet as possible that one can help bring about the positive social effects that could follow from abolishing morality. This seems to

be the approach found in the Daoist classic the *Laozi*, or *Daodejing*. In this text we find both a proto–moral error theory and a recommendation to employ a nonassertive and nonactive approach in response to the hyper-activity of moralists, especially Confucians. After declaring that "heaven and earth are not humane" (Moeller 2007, 15)—which means that nothing in nature or the world (the Dao) instantiates the chief Confucian virtue of humaneness, benevolence, or goodness—the *Laozi* tells us the best way to go about living in accordance with the Dao's amorality is to go quiet, practice stillness, withdraw from intentional or deliberate activity, let events unfold spontaneously, accept nature's fated transformations, and not judge the Dao's amoral indifference: "The sage resides with the task of nonaction, practices the teaching of nonspeaking" (Moeller 2007, 7). "To withdraw oneself when the work proceeds—that is the Dao of Heaven" (23). "One who knows does not speak. One who speaks does not know" (131). The *Laozi* mentions certain benefits that come from becom-ing quiet and adopting a nonassertive approach. Silently abolishing moral discourse, quelling the affective and conative turmoil that causes and results from moralizing, is a way to experience tranquillity. By embody-ing a kind of calm self-control and equanimity, the Daoists empty their heart-minds of the beliefs, desires, and emotions that drive and result from moral projection, thus freeing themselves from the agitation of anxiety and contentiousness: "To reach emptiness—this is the utmost. To keep stillness—this is control" (Moeller 2007, 41).

The *Laozi* emphasizes that such an approach will result in the very pro-vision of the social order Confucians and other moralists so heavy-hand-edly try to impose. The quiet abolition of moral discourse actually allows people to spontaneously coordinate their interactions and even display what Confucians would regard as virtuous behavior: "Abandon sageli-ness and discard knowledge, and the people will benefit a hundredfold. Abandon humanity and discard righteousness, and the people will return to filial piety and care" (Moeller 2007, 49). The silent example of the sage's suspension of moral judgment and overall theoretical contention seems to leave dormant in people the emotional turmoil and false beliefs that drive such judgments and to provide them instead with a light-hearted joy and affirmation, enabling them to simply get along: "The ordinary people are in a good mood—as if enjoying a great sacrifice or climbing the terraces in the spring" (Moeller 2007, 51). Perhaps the example of NMA as exhib-ited by the Daoism of the *Laozi* could convince assertive abolitionists that the very social and institutional goals they hope to achieve by asserting abolition could be better achieved by employing a more quietist approach. NMA could in the end achieve what AMA wanted all along by focusing on the social ills caused by morality. Overall, the point is that NMA can be viewed as the preferable option when contrasted with AMA because it seems capable of exhibiting many of AMA's benefits while avoiding many of its costs.

Now, to return to how other error theorists might respond to NMA, we can ask why they should even care all that much if nonassertive abolitionists are not pitching abolition. After all, all the parties involved agree that error theory is the true metaethical view, and weak NMA will say as much, but nonassertive abolitionists will not try to convince them to abolish morality. Rather, they will express no view about what to do with morality once it is known to be systematically false. Weak NMA will express the truth of error theory but then check out as much as possible from the metametaethical debate, becoming quiet about what to do next. Proponents of strong NMA will go even further, neither arguing for a specific metaethical view (though they are convinced of error theory) nor arguing for an abolitionist answer to the "Now what?" question. Error theorists of all stripes should not mind either way. NMA is not trying to contend with them. Nonassertive abolitionists want no part in the metametaethical debate. They are too busy enjoying the nonexistence of moral facts in silence, avoiding as many forms of ethical debate as they can. How would other error theorists even know? They probably would not, and they probably should not mind if they do not know. As a metaphilosophical point, philosophers should not get upset that some use philosophy as a means for overcoming philosophy, especially if those now tranquil and silent agree with their initial arguments. They merely want to reap the benefits of having completed their task. So, neither conservationists nor fictionalists nor assertive abolitionists need confront NMA, for nonassertive abolitionists are not their disputants. They are likely not even practicing metaethicists any longer.

How might moral realists respond to NMA? On the one hand, they would obviously find it objectionable. They think there are moral facts and that we should express judgments about them. Also, they think we should develop metaethical views that vindicate their expression. On the other hand, there are tendencies among certain moral realists toward becoming quiet about metaethical issues. There are also other realists who even recommend abolishing the expressing of moral judgments altogether. Thus, there are realist quietists and realist abolitionists. Let's look first at realist quietists to see how they might respond to the antirealist quietism of NMA. What do realist quietists recommend we become quiet about? Moral metaphysics, it seems. Some realists are non-naturalists. They think moral facts cannot be reduced to anything in the world. Moral facts exist in their own realm or dimension or in their own inexplicable way or as expressible only through their own distinct discourse. Some of these non-naturalists (Dworkin 1996; Parfit 2011; Scanlon 2014) do not think any other metaphysical questions about irreducibly sui generis nonnatural moral facts could or should be asked. They think they could not be asked because nonnatural moral facts are brute facts that require no further explanation. They think they should not be asked because metaphysical questions about moral facts beyond queries concerning their nonnatural

status are moral questions that are themselves morally wrong. That is, to ask further metaphysical questions about moral facts after learning of their nonnatural status is to do something morally wrong. Either way, quietest realists counsel moral realists to become quiet about moral metaphysical matters and to focus instead on expressing correct moral views, one of which is nonnaturalist moral realism itself.

Quietist realism is probably the view most opposed to error theory and moral nihilism. While quietist realists want us to believe in nonnatural moral facts but not be concerned with the seeming metaphysical mystery of their existence, error theorists want us to positively disbelieve in these moral facts by rather vocally emphasizing the metaphysical absurdity of their existence. Quietist realism and AMA seem to be diametrically opposed. The quietist realist wants silence about metaethics, but the abolitionist wants silence about ethics. Assertive abolitionism is triply immoral for the quietist realist: not only does it do too much moral metaphysics, it lands on the wrong moral metaphysical view, and then peddles it to others, recommending we all accept the error theory and abolish morality. The quietist, however, might find nonassertive abolitionism—in particular, strong NMA—to not be so completely reprehensible. Strong NMA will join quietist realism in becoming silent about metaethical and ultimately metametaethical issues. Of course, this will be so for extremely different reasons, but the quietist realist and the strong nonassertive abolitionist will never openly disagree, as neither will be caught doing much in the way of moral metaphysics or offering prudential metametaethical views. Though quietist realists will be upset that the nonassertive abolitionist is not expressing moral judgments, at least they will never have to endure metaethical disagreement with such a figure. They should appreciate not having to deal with a kind of error theorist who aims to utterly avoid all levels of ethical debate. Even if the nonassertive abolitionist avoids them because of their rank moralism, quietist realists will probably never know that.

There is another kind of curious moral realist, one who thinks there might be something immoral about openly expressing moral judgments themselves. This realist thinks there are moral facts but there is something either impractical or plainly wrong about expressing moral judgments or engaging in moral debate. This is the realist abolitionist (Ingram 2015). This figure finds the arguments offered for AMA to be correct but does not believe that they make moral facts unreal. Rather, the existence of moral facts does not entail that morality will always be practiced wisely. For realist abolitionists, most moralists are moral grandstanders who utter moral judgments that defeat their very purpose as declarations of concern for and belief about what should or should not be done in a full categorical sense. They believe that the assertive abolitionist is right that morality leads to intractable disagreement, inequality and injustice, and a defense of international war. They think there is either a practical or a categorical reason

to abolish morality. So, on the one hand, realist and antirealist abolitionists agree morality should be annihilated because it is impractical and unwise. Yet, on the other hand, the realist abolitionist thinks morality itself might be immoral, that is, there might be a moral fact that believing in moral facts and using moral discourse is immoral and so should not be done.

AMA thus seems to have a realist partner in crime here. They both openly pitch abolishing morality because it is imprudent. But there is a problem insofar as AMA requires first a belief in the error theory, which the realist abolitionist does not hold. Should this matter? If the outcome is the same and morality is getting abolished, does it concern the assertive abolitionist that his new abolitionist friend is a realist? Practically, no, it should not matter. Even if there is metaethical disagreement, there is metametaethical agreement that trumps it. Realist and antirealist abolitionists will not avoid abolition just because they cannot agree on the metaphysical status of moral facts. On the other hand, however, the assertive abolitionist might wonder if the realist abolitionist is actually right that there is a moral fact that morality itself, the expressing of genuine moral judgments, is immoral. It seems the opposite would more likely be the case, that if there are moral facts there would be a moral fact that morality is moral, that moral realists have a moral obligation to express, not abolish, moral judgments. This would appear to take us back closer to the quietist view that the correct metaethical view is itself morally correct and that the sooner we give up on metaethical and metametaethical debate and return to moralizing the better. In other words, the realist abolitionist, according to the quietist, is doing something immoral by arguing for a moral fact that morality is immoral. The assertive abolitionist will be torn here because the quietist will probably appear right about whether, if there are moral facts, morality is moral or immoral, but at the same time she would like the realist abolitionist to remain an abolitionist because it is also wiser to abolish morality. It will be up to realist abolitionists at this point to decide if they are convinced by the quietists that there is a moral fact for morality, and not against it, and that engaging in too much metaethical and metametaethical speculation is itself immoral. Likely, the realist abolitionists will stay abolitionist even if the assertive abolitionists will have to admit they think the quietist is right that, if there are moral facts, there is probably a moral fact that abolishing morality is wrong, not right.

What will the nonassertive abolitionists be doing during all this? Not much, as usual. They might appreciate that with the emergence of realist abolitionists there are more total abolitionists now, thus leading to less moral discourse to endure or evade. But, for NMA, realist abolitionism has the same problem as AMA: it is openly pitching abolition, which it finds mostly imprudent. Whether or not the realist quietist or the realist abolitionist is right about moral facts is irrelevant, as the strong nonassertive abolitionist will already have given up on metaethical debate after having accepted the error theoretical point that there are simply no

moral facts whatsoever. At this stage, the nonassertive abolitionist will let the quietist realists and the realist and antirealist abolitionists have their metaethical and metametaethical debate. The purgatory of all forms of ethical reflection have been left behind. All that remains is the joy of a tranquil and amoral life. NMA is the ticket to deliverance from all levels of ethical agitation. To repeat, the other metaethical and metametaethical approaches really should not mind all that much. They would have one less competitor. There is no need to care that much about the impassive and silent. This lesson has larger implications. Disagreements, in most areas of life, rarely get resolved. Instead, they are usually ignored through separation and detachment. And in such situations, a cessation of interaction is best for all concerned.

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