**Moral Eliminativism: An End to Moralizing**

“Once we adopt a naturalistic world view and give up miraculous self-creating powers, it would seem an easy and obvious conclusion that we must also give up moral responsibility. But the moral responsibility system was too entrenched and the emotional underpinnings of retributive ‘justice’ were too powerful: giving up moral responsibility was—and for many still is—unthinkable.”

* Bruce N. Waller [2011, p. 20]

“What Pandora gave us, when she removed the lid of the jar or box the gods sent with her, is grief, cares, and all evil.”

* Roger Shattuck [1996, p. 15]

"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

* Hamlet [Act II, scene ii]

Terms such as “good” and “evil” are residues of a scientifically benighted worldview, fundamentally corrupted by intimations of the supernatural, and the phenomena that moral terms allegedly designate are no more substantial than phlogiston or witchery. Moral “facts”…are fictions. Much as eliminative materialists like Paul and Patricia Churchland have attempted to banish the posits of “folk psychology” to the dustbin of history’s defunct and discarded theories, I hope to begin the relegation of moral terminology to humankind’s pre-scientific infancy and intellectual adolescence. It is prudent to leave moralizing behind, and to retain its memory as nothing more than a souvenir of quaint “folk morality” that is as untenable today as is the “evil spirit” theory of illness, and Ptolemy’s geocentric astronomical theory, or star charts based on the rotations of Aristotle’s “celestial spheres”. In other words, I hope to encourage the elimination of all talk of “morality,” to expose “moral facts” as chimeras, and “moral laws” as superfluous theoretical overlays without which we could readily, and comprehensively, describe the salient concerns of the human condition and of propriety regarding interpersonal relations. In short, I contend that there is no such thing as “morality” and no benefit in resorting to morality-speak. Indeed, the expression “moral fact” not only lacks any referent, it (as well as related terminology) is entirely eliminable in favor of more felicitous and useful explanations that admit of thorough integration with well established naturalistic theories concerning human behavior, its motivations, causes, and consequences. Originating, almost certainly, in the evolutionarily potent “strikeback” response to injury, the concept of moral responsibility probably descends from early attempts to justify retribution by appeal to the supernatural, as Bruce N. Waller indicates in *Against Moral Responsibility*:

When humans began to feel a need to justify the strikeback impulse, the early answers came easy: God commands it. “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.” (Gen. 9:6), and it is worth noting that God often visited His wrath upon future generations along with the actual offenders. But when God’s orders were not enough, the concept of moral responsibility and just deserts entered the picture, and questions of how to justify special benefits and punishments became a challenge. Why does Diane *deserve* punishment for her misdeeds—why is she *morally responsible*? [2011, p. 50 – emphasis added]

A desperate flailing attempt to construct an intellectually viable justification for an evolutionarily common impulse is a poor theoretical foundation for broad ontological suppositions. The urge to hurt someone in response to being hurt is hardly evidence that moral facts exist or that retribution is “morally justified”. My cat, for example, exhibits the same strikeback impulse. I do not hold him morally responsible for scratching or biting me when I absentmindedly touch him in a fashion that displeases him. Perhaps he “feels justified,” or *would* if he could understand the relevant concepts. That hardly makes it so. He is simply exhibiting a very common response to the perceived cause of discomfort. His behavior is neither morally “good” nor “evil”. He is just *being a cat*. Similarly, compulsively violent and otherwise dysfunctional people are simply doing what their heredity and environment have compelled them to do. The outmoded concepts of “moral good” and “evil” are uninformative at best, and actually constitute a significant obstacle to understanding, predicting, and usefully evaluating human behavior and its staggeringly complex motivations and causal antecedents. Let us, therefore, dispense with moralizing once and for all.

**Eliminative Materialism as a Model for Moral Eliminativism**

Paul and Patricia Churchland have developed a blueprint for eliminating unhelpful terminology spawned by pre-scientific folk theory, and for discrediting the concepts allegedly denoted by such anachronistic language. Placing aside analyses of eliminative materialism as a putative resolution (or dissolution) of the mind-body problem and related issues in the philosophy of mind, I will partially co-opt the Churchlands’ strategy and methodology in my attempt to resolve (or dissolve) meta-ethical problems regarding the proper understanding of terms such as “morally good,” “morally evil,” “morally permissible,” “morally impermissible,” etc., and the concepts allegedly indicated thereby. My contention is that all such terminology lacks referent, denotation, meaning, and can be altogether eliminated in favor of non-moral language that offers a more complete account of beliefs, practices, and other objects of putative “moral analysis” without importing any of the insoluble difficulties inherently attendant upon moralizing, or applied ethical disputation. Asking whether, for example, a particular instance of abortion is or is not “morally permissible” is every bit as wrongheaded and pointless an inquiry as is asking whether it is pleasing or displeasing to the god Thor. The question is meaningless because it indulges in ontological presumptions that collapse upon analysis. As a model of the sort of project that I herein undertake, let us note that Paul Churchland begins his landmark “Eliminative Materialism And The Propositional Attitudes” with this somewhat startling synopsis:

Eliminative materialism is the thesis that our common-sense conception of psychological phenomena constitutes a radically false theory, a theory so fundamentally defective that both the principles and the ontology of that theory will eventually be displaced, rather than smoothly reduced, by completed neuroscience. [1981, p. 67]

He then goes on to make his case against “folk psychology” (i.e. the aforementioned “common-sense conception of psychological phenomena”), and to argue that this folk theory is usefully eliminable in favor of a superior theory involving something like an ideally completed neuroscience. This completed neurobiological-evolutionary account will incorporate none of the terminology endemic to “folk psychology” or the ontology implicated therein. It is my contention that a similar elimination of the terminology endemic to a presumptuous “folk morality” can be accomplished with currently available linguistic resources, and that the “moral ontology” allegedly denoted by terms such as “good” and “evil,” or “morally right” and “morally wrong” can be profitably jettisoned in favor of a non-moral lexicography that, in principle, completely describes all facets of the human condition heretofore subjected to the “radically false” descriptive mechanisms of “folk morality”. Nothing is “morally good,” nothing is “evil” – and nothing is lost with their extirpation from our language and our theories about human behavior.

**“Folk Morality” as Theory**

Ascriptions of “good” and “evil” are grounded in and/or determined by undergirding metaethical theory about the existence and nature of moral facts. Though the existence of such alleged facts is seldom challenged, outside of the relatively small community of ethical nihilists, skeptics, abolitionists, fictionalists, eliminativists, and “moral error” theorists of varying stripes, there exists, nonetheless, a background folk theory regarding morality that purports to explain certain types of normative judgments, psychological and emotional phenomena, and the more-or-less pervasive societal attitudes regarding various behaviors, mores, beliefs, etc. In other words, there exists a broadly shared supposition that a coherent metaphysics of moral facts is available and awaiting either discovery or invention. Moral realists suppose that moral facts are “there” to be discovered, whereas constructivists and (some) other anti-realists insist that moral facts are invented or otherwise generated by human activities. In either case, it is presumed that moral facts exist, that ethical terminology meaningfully denotes, describes, or names moral features of reality, and debates are mostly constrained to explorations of the nature of alleged moral facts, and/or investigations of the proper understanding and application of moral terminology.

Moral eliminativism challenges both the presumption that moral facts exist, and the correlative supposition that the relevant body of terminology serves an ineliminable descriptive or explanatory function in revealing this component of the human condition. There is, I contend, no reason to believe that moral facts of any type exist or obtain, or that moral terminology (“morality-speak”) tells us anything about the human condition that cannot be adequately described and explained in non-moral, naturalistic terms. This challenge to “folk morality” and its alleged theoretical undergirding is similar to Churchland’s broadside against “folk psychology” from which emerges his eliminative materialist alternative. He describes common presumptions about mental states, gathered together under the umbrella term “folk psychology,” (later abbreviated “FP”) and asserts that:

This approach entails that the semantics of the terms in our familiar mentalistic vocabulary is to be understood in the same manner as the semantics of theoretical terms generally: the meaning of any theoretical term is fixed or constituted by the network of laws in which it figures [1981, p. 69]

Churchland then goes on to challenge both the ontological and semantic presumptions of “folk psychology”. Similarly, I contend that “folk morality” constitutes a theory, a radically defective theory at that, and I challenge its most foundational ontological and semantic presumptions. The world without “moral facts” is just the world as it actually is, and a language without morality-speak is a more perspicuous and informative language than the archaic business of labeling this as “morally good” and that “evil”. The practice of moralizing is, really, little more than name-calling.

**The Failures of Folk Morality**

Folk morality founders abruptly upon the introduction of any significant cognitive abnormality (e.g. mental illness) into the web of causal antecedents for any putatively immoral act. The insane cannot be held morally accountable for their behavior, we are told by folk moralizers of various inclinations, but “the rest of us” can and must be held responsible. Of course, none of “the rest of us” is perfectly rational and, indeed, a case can be made that each of us is subject to moments of psychological dysfunction bordering upon, if not actually intruding fully into, the domain of “madness”. Who among us has not “lost it” for at least a few moments? How many among us are accustomed to residing in perfect lucidity? Mental health is, after all, something of a sliding scale. Folk morality offers little, if any, apparatus for addressing the plasticity of psychological (dys)function in any individual agent or the spectrum of rationality across which moral responsibility purportedly applies. Folk morality tells us very little about the proper ascription of responsibility to, for example, a serial child molester who was, himself, repeatedly victimized throughout his own childhood. Consider the case of Father Oliver O’Grady, who raped and molested numerous children, but was, himself, repeatedly raped and molested by his father and brother. Is he “morally responsible” for his warped desire, arrested sexual development, and subsequent behavior? Was he “sane” at the moments he committed his crimes? Folk morality offers us little more than ham-handed, vague and shrugging folk-psychological guesswork in such cases. Indeed, Waller argues that moral praise and blame are not merely problematic in “special cases” but that, given the ascendancy of naturalism, the whole notion of moral responsibility for one’s character, beliefs, and actions, relies on an untenable resort to magical thinking. He identifies Pico della Mirandola’s “Oration on the Dignity of Man” as the earliest known account of moral responsibility and points out that the miraculous is an essential component of this version of agent causation:

The delights of Pico della Mirandola’s moral responsibility account not withstanding, it does have one problem: it requires miracles. And although that was one of its charms for Pico della Mirandola and his contemporaries, it is a daunting problem for those devoted to a naturalistic world view that has no room for gods, ghosts, or miracles. [2011, p. 20]

Indeed, Waller’s book is a sustained argument that moral responsibility is no more viable a naturalistic phenomenon than is a poltergeist or an “evil spirit”. The natural world is no place for miracles, and there can be no moral responsibility without resort to the “miracle” of god-like, *ex nihilo* causation—unconstrained by heredity, environment, natural laws, and the rest of the causally deterministic natural world (i.e. the *real* world). Without moral responsibility, what remains of putative moral facts? What can it mean to call an act “evil” if no one can, even in principle, be legitimately held morally accountable for the “sin” in question? Any event that is a product of naturalistic antecedents is neither morally good nor morally bad—it is simply…an event. No matter how many people a tsunami kills, the storm cannot be *morally* evil. Similarly, a mad dog is not morally evil—even if it is prudent that we should kill it before it bites one of us. Extending the same principle to persons, we may have prudential reasons to do away with a Hitler or an Osama Bin Laden, but to call their deeds “immoral” is to ascribe to these mere mortals a god-like power to have “made” themselves and their character (to say nothing of the circumstances that facilitated their deeds) *ex nihilo*. Satisfying though such ascriptions may be to our socially conditioned consciences and feelings of righteous indignation, they simply do not hold up under naturalistic scrutiny. Hitler was no more “morally culpable” than is a tsunami or a rabid dog. The complexity of his brain does not liberate him from the array of neurological, biological, evolutionary, and environmental antecedents that made him (the genocidal maniac) Hitler. None of us is “self made”. We are only what the world makes us—but then, so is everything else.

When we further salt in the (to say the least) uncertainty that “free will” is anything more than a chimerical residue of pre-neuroscientific folk psychology, we should see even more clearly the degree to which folk morality is left untethered and free floating on a sea of archaic, mystical presumptions. There are increasingly many reasons to conclude that there is, in fact, no such thing as free will. As Sam Harris compellingly argues in *The Moral Landscape*, the neurosciences have, by now, provided an all-but-conclusive case against the traditional notion of free will and “agent causation”:

All of our behavior can be traced to biological events about which we have no conscious knowledge: this has always suggested that free will is an illusion. For instance, the physiologist Benjamin Libet famously demonstrated that activity in the brain’s motor regions can be detected some 350 milliseconds before a person feels that he has decided to move. Another lab recently used fMRI data to show that some “conscious” decisions can be predicted up to *10 seconds* before they enter awareness (long before the preparatory motor activity detected by Libet). Clearly, findings of this kind are difficult to reconcile with the sense that one is the conscious source of one’s actions. [2010, p. 103]

The illusion of “free will” arises from ignorance of these and many other causal antecedents of our choices, deliberations, and actions. Human actions are, our conscious “feel” of freedom notwithstanding, no more free than are tumbling dice. We do not know what result the laws of physics and the antecedent conditions surrounding any given roll of the dice will determine, but ignorance of these matters does not imbue the dice with freedom (or moral responsibility). Once a die is cast, we can but dumbly await the outcome (hence the familiar platitude). Similarly, once hereditary and environmental antecedents are in place, we can only behave as the laws of nature dictate. What we shall do is not always revealed to our conscious introspection ahead of time, but it is, nonetheless, what we *shall* do. Our “*free* agency” is an *ex post facto* attribution and in no way entails independence of causal determinism. Bruce Waller agrees that there is no such thing as moral responsibility, but maintains, nonetheless, that we can still make sense of moral facts and proper attributions of moral good and evil as real properties of human behavior:

“Ought” is an ambiguous term and can be employed in two distinct senses. There is the admonition use of “ought” and there is also the quite different judgment use. If Uncle John cannot stop smoking—for whatever complicated combination of genetic and conditioning factors—then it would be silly to admonish him to stop. In that case, when you hear me tell John, “You ought to stop smoking,” you may well instruct me to “Leave the poor fellow alone; he can’t stop smoking, and your admonition is useless.” [2011, p. 187]

Indeed…I may well. If we *know* (somehow) that John *cannot* stop smoking, then the admonition is, in fact, useless—at least as far as *John’s* smoking is concerned. Waller goes on to argue that the judgment use of “ought” may be very efficacious in convincing *others* (one’s children, for example) not to smoke, or to stop doing so. In other words, such statements can serve a conditioning and/or deterrent function as part of the environment within which the intended audience is embedded. This does not point out any *moral* fact. It merely indicates that we can causally influence people through speech acts. Doing so does not make them (or us) *morally* better or worse than before the relevant statements are made, but merely *different* in some manner that may make their habits healthier, their beliefs more conducive to well-being, etc. To claim that such influence is *morally good* is simply to beg the question against moral eliminativism (or any other form of moral error theory). Healthier and wiser people are, generally, *preferable* in most respects to their benighted counterparts, but there is no ineliminable *moral* component to a prudentially preferable condition or population. Convincing teenagers not to smoke will probably reduce their long-term suffering (other things being equal). Suffering less is probably preferable to suffering more (though perhaps not optimal for the career of an aspiring blues musician). What do we add by insisting, “and suffering less is *morally* good”? One may as well add the locution, “and suffering less is *suffering* *less*”.

The “judgment use” of “ought” is as infelicitous and misleading as is the “admonition use”. The “judgment use” is just a species of a conditioning or training mechanism. We can alter beliefs, attitudes, and desires by speech acts, and we can do so in such a way as to improve various elements of one’s overall well-being. All attendant morality-speak is needless and uninformative. Such locutions constitute an empty, theoretical overlay, and introduce a way of talking about preference satisfaction in superfluous moral terminology. One may claim to have exorcised the “evil spirit” causing nicotine addiction, but that does not make it the case that any such “evil spirit” ever actually existed or “possessed” the hapless smoker—nor does it legitimize the rite of exorcism and the attendant flailing about with a crucifix and holy water, or the frantic spluttering of Latin commands directed at “the Beast”.

**No Moral Responsibility, No Moral Facts**

Without free will (*pace* Harris), there can be no moral responsibility, and without moral responsibility, (*pace* Waller) there can be no moral facts at all. Moral claims are ultimately *normative* and, for that and other related reasons, much more reliably incorrigible than simple empirical claims. What, after all, could constitute compelling “proof” to the contrary of the claim that (for example) elective abortion is *evil*? It is not as if anti-abortionists claim to have access to some recondite empirical facts that have escaped their opponents’ notice. The various parties to the abortion dispute have (for the most part) access to all the same available data regarding gestational development, the onset of fetal sentience, viability, etc. As Richard Garner argues in *Beyond Morality*:

Not only does the moral overlay inflame disputes and make compromise difficult, the lack of an actual truth of the matter means that every possible moral value and argument can be met by an equal and opposing value or argument. The moral overlay adds an entire level of controversy to a dispute, and introduces unanswerable questions that usurp the original question, which is always some practical question about what to do or support. This “moral truth” guarantees that the participants will be distracted from the real issue, and that genuine disagreements will be subverted by rhetoric, confusion, or metaethics. [2012, pp. 24-5]

The metaethical rhetoric in question will inevitably deploy normative claims to which opponents will feel no compulsion to accede. A moral fact is a fact about what *should* be done, *should* be believed, etc. The claim that one *should* do that which one *cannot* do is (to say the least) problematic, and is, arguably, incoherent. Suppose, for example, I were to claim that you (reader) *should not* interpret the marks on this page as English words and propositions—knowing full well that your brain has been conditioned to perform this function automatically. Could such an injunction be satisfied or, indeed, even constitute a coherent normative claim? Can it be a *fact* that you *should* read these words but *should not* understand them to be words in the English language expressing propositions, questions, etc.? If it can be true that one *ought* to do the *impossible*, then immorality is a necessary concomitant of every human action (and/or omission). It would *always* be the case that I (and you) *should* have engaged in every morally salutary counterfactual behavior, including those that happen to be mutually exclusive (as this is just one species of impossibility that does not, *ex hypothesi*, preclude immorality). Just now, for example, I *should have* saved starving children in Southeast Asia, prevented genocide in Darfur, toppled every despotic regime around the globe, etc. Of course, I *could not* have done *any* of those things, much less *all* of those things, but let us not quibble about such irrelevant trivia. I should have accomplished each (and *all*) of the aforementioned tasks—not to mention the indefinitely many other (im)possible “good” deeds one might imagine. This kind of profligate moralizing is, obviously, nonsensical (not to mention stultifying and disheartening to anyone misguided enough to take it seriously). The pervasive inescapability of moral “failure” under such circumstances is not only mind-numbing, it is, quite literally, inconceivable. To call an act “evil,” in the absence of free will and moral responsibility, is no more informative (or coherent) than is declaring it “contrary to the will of Zeus”. Both designations presume some *sine qua non* (free will, moral responsibility, and Zeus, respectively) in the absence of which no sense can be made of the assertion in question.

The practice of moralizing will, however, die only slowly and only after vigorous efforts to root it out (if it *can* be killed at all). Any moral error theorist, abolitionist, fictionalist, or eliminativist has met the incredulous, exasperated challenge to the proffered heresy. As Garner notes, its various permutations share a distinctive family resemblance:

Defenders of objective morality outdo themselves thinking up repellent or even monstrous acts and then daring the error theorist to deny that these tings are morally wrong. How, they ask, can there be nothing wrong with bear-baiting, dwarf bowling, genocide, [etc.]…But this proliferation of horrors is wasted effort because, as anyone who understands the position of the error theorist will realize, no description of some act, however horrendous, is going to convert an alert moral anti-realist to moral realism. A person’s rejection of moral objectivity is not based on ignorance of the world’s cruelty. Nor is a person’s cruelty inevitably caused or amplified by a failure to believe in objective moral values or obligations. [2012, p. 4]

The *ad nauseum* litany of man’s inhumanity to man, and the suffering caused thereby is, as Garner points out, irrelevant to the question of whether acts of cruelty and behaviors that increase suffering are properly (or usefully) designated as “evil”. This tiresome tactic deployed in defense of moral realism misses the fundamental point of moral anti-realism (in all of its many forms). Once all the horrors of (say) genocide have been enumerated, described, and otherwise presented in their most terrifying aspects, what amplification, clarification, or explanatory benefit is derived from labeling genocide as “evil”? If “evil” is something over and above the horrors described, what exactly *is* it? If, on the other hand, “evil” is *not* something additional to the aforementioned horrors, then what descriptive, explanatory, or other useful theoretical role can it play? Why do we need “evil” and other moralistic terminology in our lexicon at all?

If acts of genocide are causally determined and unavoidable, given the actual antecedent circumstances and laws of nature, then those committing such acts *could not* have done otherwise—without being different people or living in a different world (which they *are* not and *do* not). Their actions are no less horrific for being causally determined, but the agents cannot be held morally culpable for being “monsters” (and behaving “monstrously”), any more than a plague can be held morally blameworthy for the deaths and pervasive suffering that it causes. To suggest that Hitler, for example, *should not* have committed genocide is tantamount to suggesting that the world (including Hitler’s heredity and environment) *should have been* otherwise than it, in fact, was. Whatever the word “should” allegedly means with respect to Hitler’s heredity and environment, it clearly cannot indicate any *moral* injunction. What can it mean to say that Hitler’s DNA “should” have been different? Had it been, he would *not* have *been* Hitler! Can normative claims coherently apply to his environment or “the environment” at large? If one claims that a meteor “should not have” crashed into Earth and killed off the dinosaurs, we are compelled to regard this as a misconceived normativity or a category error of some kind. The collision resulted in deleterious consequences for the dinosaurs (extinction among them), but the extant antecedent conditions and laws of nature *causally determined* the event. The collision was *not* avoidable (in the actual world). It was neither a great good, nor a great evil…it was just a great impact. Hitler’s Holocaust, likewise, was neither morally good, nor morally evil…it was just hideous and horrifying (much as the aforementioned collision between the meteor and Earth must have been for any animal capable of experiencing horror). There is an extraordinarily complex story to tell about why it happened, what happened, its aftermath, etc. No *moral* terminology, however, is necessary (or useful) in a complete telling of Hitler’s disturbing exploits. Events occur. There is no benefit in slathering them in “moral” gobbledygook. Purely naturalistic descriptions and explanations are sufficient to tell the tale accurately and completely.

**Morality as Superfluous Overlay**

In *The Moral Landscape*, Sam Harris argues that morality is a matter of consequences pertaining to the well being of conscious creatures. He wonders, however, if morality-speak is necessary for considering questions of well-being, or if we might do just as well to dispense with this way of talking:

I began this book by arguing that, despite a century of timidity on the part of scientists and philosophers, morality can be linked directly to facts about the happiness and suffering of conscious creatures. However, it is interesting to consider what would happen if we simply ignored this step and merely spoke about “well-being.” What would our world be like if we ceased to worry about “right” and “wrong,” or “good” and “evil,” and simply acted so as to maximize well-being, our own and that of others? Would we lose anything important? [2010, p. 64]

My contention, of course, is that “we” would *not* lose anything important and would, to the contrary, gain a clearer conceptual path to a more informative naturalistic account of wise, beneficial conduct and cognition. Much as relinquishing the “evil spirit” theory of disease cleared the path for viral and bacterial theories, letting go of “folk morality” might well clear the field for purely naturalistic accounts of well-being, autonomy, wisdom, and other accounts of propriety in human affairs.

Richard Allen Davis raped and murdered Polly Klaas, and we suspect that we could, in principle, learn the totality of physiological, psychological, emotional, and societal consequences for all concerned or impacted parties. Let us further suppose that Davis’ motives are thoroughly revealed and their etiology fully traced. Finally, let us imagine that the full evolutionary-biological and neurophysiological story of antecedent and subsequent events is ideally explained. Nothing additional is uncovered, described, or otherwise revealed by adding the locution “and *that* was *evil*”. No new fact is thereby indicated, no additional feature of the events in question is revealed, and our understanding of the totality of the phenomena under consideration (i.e. Davis’ crimes against Klaas) is enhanced not a whit. The introduction of morality-speak, of the designation of Davis’ behavior as “evil” tells us precisely nothing of any value at all. One may as well offer further “explanation” by saying “and *that* was *that*.” We are in a situation analogous to having a full physiological description and explanation of influenza, its symptoms and effects on the body, its evolutionary history, its societal and historical impact, etc., and then “learning” the “additional fact” that the flu is caused by an evil spirit invading the body. The spirit is obviously evil because the flu is so unpleasant and damaging to human well-being. Even as a metaphor, the “evil spirit” account is entirely unhelpful and, quite probably, misleading in our search for causes, cures, and understanding. Now that we have eliminated such “facts” as part of the description and explanation of the phenomenon of influenza, we have lost nothing of the slightest descriptive or explanatory value. We have, in fact, cleared an explanatory space for the far superior viral theory of the illness. We no longer cling to expressions such as “natural evil” in our account of the flu, its causes, treatment, etc. This is an improvement in both epidemiological theory and medical practice. Our current understanding of influenza as a purely natural phenomenon does not require, is not enhanced by, and would, indeed, be muddied to the brink of uselessness by the gratuitous theoretical overlay of descriptions or explanations involving “natural evil” or “spirits” or any kind. The “evil spirit” folk theory of illness has been supplanted by naturalistic theories involving bacteria, viruses, congenital defects, etc. The “spirit” theory has, in short, been *eliminated*—and we have, thereby, enjoyed advancements that would, almost certainly, have been otherwise forestalled. Consider Churchland’s analogy to pre-scientific animistic assumptions that have gone the way of “celestial spheres” and “phlogiston”:

In primitive cultures, the behavior of most of the elements of nature were understood in intentional terms. The wind could know anger, the moon jealousy, the river generosity, the sea fury, and so forth. These were not metaphors. Sacrifices were made and auguries undertaken to placate or divine the changing passions of the gods. Despite its sterility, this animistic approach to nature has dominated our history, and it is only in the last two or three thousand years that we have restricted FP’s literal application to the domain of the higher animals. [1981, p. 74]

Any contemporary reference to the sea as “furious” is properly understood as a quaint, metaphorical residue of a pre-scientific, benighted worldview that can no longer be taken seriously among even moderately enlightened people. Similarly, uses of the term “evil” to denote behavior that is displeasing to the gods, has been supplanted by a variety of theories claiming that “evil” is properly understood to mean (roughly): engendering hedonic disutility, violation of the categorical imperative to treat persons as “ends in themselves” and never as “mere means,” departure from nature’s design plan, failure of proper expressions of caring within the contexts of particular relationships, or the favored metaethical foundation of any other theory regarding “moral permissibility” as distinguished from “evil”. Why, however, should we *replace* the archaic concept of evil as related to the supernatural, rather than simply dispensing with it altogether as we have dispensed with “evil spirits” causing illness, and rotating “celestial spheres” as explanations of our observations of astronomical phenomena? Why not simply *eliminate* all mention of “evil” and supplant the “moral” mode of discourse with more useful naturalistic descriptions and explanations that comport more felicitously with contemporary naturalistic accounts of other aspects of the human condition and the reality in which we find ourselves embedded? What do we *lose* when we banish all talk of “evil”? More importantly, what might we *gain*?

**Conclusion**

Paul Churchland concludes “Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes” with the suggestion that folk theory not only can, but *should*, be dislodged:

The thesis of this paper may be summarized as follows. The propositional attitudes of folk psychology do not constitute an unbreachable barrier to the advancing tide of neuroscience. On the contrary, the principled displacement of folk psychology is not only richly possible, it represents one of the most intriguing theoretical displacements we can currently imagine. [1981, p. 90]

Similarly, my thesis is that ascriptions of moral responsibility and references to “moral good” and “evil” can be dislodged and abandoned without any loss of descriptive efficacy or explanatory power. It is time to take seriously the potential displacement of folk morality, moral responsibility, and the pious moralizing that inevitably attends these anachronisms. In doing so, we would “lose” another maladaptive residue of our pre-scientific infancy. We would grow up a little. Humanity can put away one more childish habit and banish one more bogeyman to the netherworld of myth and superstition. Perhaps it is time that moralizing went the way of propitiations to the gods of Olympus or letters addressed to Santa Claus. Let us think and speak as adults who have no further use for the trappings of a childish fantasy world populated by congeries of ancient imaginations infected with presumptions of supernaturalism. Today, we can agree that there are no “evil spirits” causing disease, and there are no rotating “celestial spheres” accounting for the movements of stars across the night sky. Upon careful reflection, we might also find that there is nothing to fear from dispensing with moralizing judgment and all of the theoretical trappings thereof. There is *nothing* either good or evil—nor can thinking make it so.

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