

Adopting Moral Abolitionism

Marc Krellenstein, Northeastern University

Moral error theory claims that all moral judgments are in error. Moral abolitionism is the view that the error theorist should then eliminate moral talk or judgments. This paper discusses the possible effects of adopting abolitionism on lying, breaking the law, adultery, and murder/vengeance.

Mackie's error theory (1977) argues that moral judgments are false because there is no objective truth of the matter. Many have adopted this view (e.g., Joyce, 2001, Greene, 2002, Garner, 2007, and Hinckfuss, 2018). The resulting 'now what' problem (Lutz, 2014) is what to then do with traditional moral talk and claims. Moral abolitionism (e.g., Garner, 2007) is the position that we should eliminate them just as we eliminated alchemical and astrological talk when we determined their falsity. Individuals could still express and act on strong beliefs about what is acceptable, but Hinckfuss (2018), Garner (2007) and others believe abolitionism would increase tolerance and compromise by eliminating the belief that any values are objectively true and obligatory. "Compromise would not be required (nothing is)...but the choice would be more accurately framed as a practical decision to compromise or not, rather than a decision that allows no compromise by definition" (Krellenstein, 2017, p. 87).

One objection to abolitionism is that adopting it would encourage actions we find undesirable precisely because we would no longer have inviolable reasons for prohibiting them, producing a 'net harm' even if there are some benefits. Some error theorists have therefore proposed positions that would preserve some moral talk (see, Lutz, 2014, or Jaquet, 2020, for a survey of these positions). These alternatives accept some level of dishonesty in return for the expected pragmatic benefits.

Garner (2007) thinks morality may have benefits but believes abolitionism has greater benefits. He admits, however, that "we may never find an indisputable answer to the question of whether the moral overlay helps us more than it harms us," and suggests personal experi-

mentation and seeing “how things go” (p. 111). Marks (2010, 2012 and 2019) believes that a subjective “desirism” would result in behavior not that different from most ‘moral’ behaviors because of pro-social instincts and careful reflection about self-interest. But he admits it’s an open question “to what degree human beings or any particular human being is egoistic” (2010, p. 23).

To further this discussion (and assuming the validity of error theory) I consider how the abolitionist might experience and reason about lying, breaking the law, adultery, and murder/vengeance, and what the benefits and prudential costs might be (there are no ‘moral’ costs for the error theorist).

Lying

Sam Harris (2013) and others (e.g., Frankel and Rachlin, 2010) have discussed the benefits of truth-telling. These include resolving and growing from the conflicts lies often avoid, eliminating the liar’s fear of exposure (and being judged untrustworthy) and maintaining a single coherent self. Lying is also viewed as eroding the intimacy of an otherwise honest relationship, and can result in hurting people whose feelings one cares about.

As a rule of thumb, one might view lying skeptically, since one often rationalizes that a particular lie has more benefits than negative longer-term consequences. This may be the sort of self-destructive impulse morality is discussed as guarding against (e.g., Blackford, 2018, p.65). Still, one might sometimes determine that lying is the right approach. It seems plausible that this is already the position of many, even if they accept some guilt for lying. Adopting moral abolitionism would free the individual of such guilt (at least as an aspiration, since eliminating guilty feelings may be difficult because of one’s history of ‘moral’ thinking and the innate and cultural influences many believe produced morality in the first place).

Breaking the Law

Many regularly park illegally, cheat a little (or a lot) on their taxes or perform other acts of illegality when the benefit seems greater than the risk-adjusted negative consequences. Widespread breaking of the law would imperil the social compact, which most think is for their personal benefit. But more selective, occasional, and/or surreptitious law-breaking would not seem to do that.

While some may rationalize these illegalities as justified in some way, the abolitionist can simply choose to perform them because of sufficient personal gain while still believing in the benefits of government minimizing even minor legal infractions. This isn’t necessarily

inconsistent, but one may determine for oneself any psychological cost in jointly maintaining these positions or the harm resulting from others thinking one acts inconsistently.

Adultery

The ethical violations in the case of adultery seem to be the secret (or possibly acknowledged) breaking of a promise or commitment and the deception when such actions are kept secret. The benefits to the adulterer might be to provide variety not found in the marriage, or additional sexual or other forms of stimulation. The adulterer determines (if the act is more than one of impulse) that the benefits are greater than the actual and potential costs. These costs include reduction of intimacy with the spouse, effort and/or self-harm in maintaining a deception, and harm to oneself or others if exposed (or perhaps the alternative costs of ending a committed relationship).

The variability of the benefits (or incidence) of adultery may be partly due to individual differences in temperament, including level of sex drive and desire for sexual variety. Pinker (2007) has documented a stronger preference for sexual variety among males. Camus (1967) has talked about the existence of a Don Juan type who not only wants sexual conquests but needs and enjoys the love of multiple others (and who Camus says “has the moral code of his likes and dislikes,” p. 53). This appears to have been true of Camus himself (Todd, 1997). It was also true of John F. Kennedy (though it’s unclear there was much love in his numerous affairs). Pinker (1997) observes that a woman might be better off as a lover of John F. Kennedy than a committed partner of a far less desirable person, and Tom Lehrer has celebrated the less common ‘Donna Juana’ in his song “Alma” (1965, side 2, track 4) about the accomplished and serial adulterer Alma Mahler.

Murder and Revenge

A thought experiment: an alien civilization invades and commands you to murder a reviled political leader in exchange for saving Earth from destruction. You’re convinced that Earth will be destroyed if you don’t do this, so you decide to murder him/her. Perhaps you find it difficult to take another’s life, but you manage to do it. Maybe you then find you enjoy it to some extent (many fantasize about such acts) or consider it serves the greater good. Some have suggested there could sometimes be pleasure in murder or other acts of violence, or at least indifference (e.g., see Dowd, 2021, in her reference to the portrayal of T.E. Lawrence in the film “Lawrence of Arabia” and on her musings about Donald Trump).

Is there anything questionable about committing this murder or the pleasure one might get from it? The abolitionist might argue that there isn't and that one might murder if forced to or if one is willing to accept the consequences – perhaps murdering the killer of your child. One could take this position without wanting or condoning murder to be legal or generally allowable because they think commanded or isolated murders would not encourage many more of them.

The same may be said of revenge. The urge towards revenge seems at least partly innate (evolutionary psychologists posit that vengeful people tended to be challenged or threatened less). As with murder, the abolitionist might consider the satisfaction of this impulse reasonable if one can escape or accept any consequences while still believing its widespread occurrence is counter-productive to social harmony and unlikely to result from isolated and perhaps undetected occurrences. Many people probably commit small acts of revenge while still condemning it as a general practice.

Perhaps Vladimir Putin is an exemplar of someone who murders (or commits mass murder) and enacts revenge without any 'moral' concerns. Abolitionists can offer strong personal (or shared) condemnation and efforts to stop him given the harm to values they embrace. But it's unclear what explicitly 'moral' condemnation adds. Can one argue that Putin's behavior is bad for Putin himself? Perhaps not. The traditional moral life is often defended as the best way to achieve happiness, and being kind or generous tends to make one feel good (Rosenberg, 2011, suggests these good feelings are the principal reason to be 'moral' in the absence of objective morality). But Terry Eagleton observes that "people who are brutal and violent can be happy" (2003, p. 122), and Street (2009) accepts the possibility of a perhaps more extreme Caligula who lives to torture others. If one accepts 'flourishing' as some sort of prudential (if not moral) goal, it seems plausible to think Putin feels and judges himself to be flourishing.

Conclusion

The above suggests adopting abolitionism supports and perhaps encourages more open or guilt-free enactment of 'immoral' behaviors many already commit or would like to commit. This could provide personal benefits while still incurring potential costs. It seems likely that individuals committing such acts would not want those actions to undermine the basic social compact, and it seems plausible they wouldn't, though it's hard to deny an increased risk of this. It's unclear what 'moral' condemnation adds, though it might further deter us in the moment from self-destructive impulses. How much all of this affects a finding of 'net harm' from adopting abolitionism requires more discussion (and experimentation?) about the cumulative benefits and costs to individuals and society.

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