Richard Garner and Richard Joyce

The End of Morality: Taking Moral Abolitionism Seriously. New York: Routledge, 2019. Pp. xxiii+221. ISBN: 978-0-8153-5860-2 (pbk)

This is a collection of twelve original essays exploring the consequences of moral error theory. The central topic is the case for and against abolitionism about morality, or the view that it would be advisable to do without engaging in moral thought altogether. Yet some of the papers also explore alternatives to the abolitionist view. And several papers consider the empirical case for abolitionism based on specific case studies, such as social oppression, feminist critique and climate change. It is possibly in this last group of papers that readers will find most that is genuinely novel in this book. Many of the core contributions, on the other hand, consist in the re-elaboration of ideas that are either already familiar from the recent literature or, when they transcend it, only do so in embryonic form.

Moral error theory is by now an established part of the philosophical 'mainstream'. This is mainly due to the great strides made over the last twenty years by a small vanguard of scholars, including Richard Garner and Richard Joyce, the joint editors of this volume. One mark of the 'arrival' of moral error theory as part of mainstream philosophy was the publication in 2007 of a special issue in *Ethical Theory and Moral* Practice, devoted to J. L. Mackie's 1977 work *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, a collection which was then subsequently published by Springer in book form under the title *A World without Values* in

2010. Where the primary focus of the 2007/2010 papers was the intrinsic plausibility of a moral error theory, the primary focus of *The End of Morality* a decade later is what follows from its acceptance. It is therefore only natural to consider Joyce and Kirchin's 2007/2010 volume and Garner and Joyce's 2019 volume as a complementary pair. And there is much, apart from the topic, that the two volumes have in common. There is a significant (but not excessive) overlap among the contributors. Thus, both the two editors and Caroline West appear in both collections. Both volumes also include the reproduction of work written a considerable time before this topic became fashionable. Thus, in the present volume we find extracts of an unpublished monograph by Jordan Howard Sobel and selections from a work by Ian Hinckfuss initially published in 1987 and reprinted here under its intended title 'To Hell with Morality'. Although the contents of these two pieces are arguably of more historical than philosophical interest given all the things that have happened since, the editors are to be thanked for doing their bit as custodians of the philosophical record. Apart from that, it is only fair to report that I found the general quality of the papers in the 2007/2010 volumes to be higher than those in the 2019 volume. Most probably, this is because the literature on the 'What next?' question is at an earlier stage of development in 2019 than the literature on the 'For and against' question was at in 2007.

Even so, in a relatively short space of time those writing on the 'What next?' question have come to form a cluster of identifiable 'camps', three of which are represented here. The clear way in which it reveals how the error theoretic landscape has already begun to crystallize in this way is one of the most useful

services provided by this book. First and foremost, then, we have the *abolitionists*, who argue that we do better by abolishing moral thought altogether, the most unambiguous proponents of which in this volume are Garner, Hinckfuss, and Joel Marks. The most obvious challenge for abolitionism, as repeatedly noted by the authors, is to show that by 'abolishing' morality we are not just reinventing it under another name (such as what Bernard Williams called 'ethics'). Second, we have the *fictionalists*, who argue that we do better by putting literally false moral thoughts to use as a convenient fiction. The most prominent defense of this view has been provided by Joyce, whose discussion in this volume concedes that a fictionalist menu might be better prepared with a sprinkle of *ad hoc* abolitionism thrown in. Either way, the most obvious challenge for fictionalism is that it seems to require a certain amount of psychological acrobatics in handling the human costs of morality as make-believe, with the inevitable danger of evaluative schizophrenia that this arguably entails. Third, we have the *conservationists*, who argue that we do better by hanging on to moral thought with all its faults, the idea being that the general usefulness of sticking to what we've got outweighs the intellectual value of aspiring to not believe falsely. Or: *almost* sticking to what we've got. For in the chapter that comes closest to endorsing the conservationist line, Björn Eriksson and Jonas Olson propose a 'negotiationist' alternative that, much like Joyce's revised view, sprinkles a bit of abolitionism on the menu to cater for different tastes. The obvious pattern that emerges from all of this is that none of the three error-theoretic options just mentioned is recommendable for consumption in unadulterated form. Instead, the error theorist does better by considering a mixture of strategies depending on the circumstances. The chapter that arguably

comes best to terms with the contextual vagaries of this challenge, both philosophically and in terms of its sensitivity to empirical evidence, is Jessica Isserow's 'Minimizing the Misuse of Morality'. Yet serious empirical sensitivity to the contextual complexities of these matters is also on display among the three authors who have been tasked with providing 'case studies' of moral error theory in practice, namely Nicolas Olsson Yaouzis (on oppression), Caroline West (on feminism) and Thomas Pölzler (on climate change), and occasionally elsewhere.

All in all, the moral error theorists we meet in this volume strike me as a friendly bunch. Although nothing systematic is said to confirm this impression, they all seem to be secular naturalists with a commitment to human and other sentient well-being; basically egalitarian; generally drawn towards broadly consequentialist reasoning; and sincerely concerned to combat oppression, domination and the destruction of our natural environment. Moreover, they all seem perfectly serious about promoting these values and to argue for their pursuit by others. The obvious puzzle, as already noted, is why we should not read these recommendations as a convoluted form of tacit moralizing. In spite of repeated attempts to address the puzzle by various authors, I confess to having no clearer sense of what the answer is at the end of the book than I had at the beginning. I had three specific concerns on this score, each of which I hope does the spirit of the volume justice by taking moral abolitionism seriously.

The first is a point about the use of historical examples to illustrate the error theorist's predicament, which on more than one occasion is either misleading or

tendentious. One case will have to suffice. Hinckfuss argues that we do better by abolishing morality because of the tendency of moral thought to reinforce 'elitism' and inflexible social hierarchies. To this end, he briskly reviews Nietzsche's genealogical critique of morality in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Yet his use of Nietzsche in the present context is doubly misleading. First, in the material quoted, Nietzsche is not rejecting morality in virtue of its elitist and hierarchical tendencies. On the contrary, Nietzsche is bemoaning the loss of an ethics of nobility (and hierarchy) exhibited by the Ancients and its unfortunate replacement by the egalitarian ethics of Christianity as a result of what Nietzsche notoriously calls the 'slave revolt'. In this respect, the 'morality' *rejected* by Nietzsche is pretty much indistinguishable from the 'post-morality' *favoured* by Hinckfuss. Second, the issue that both Hinckfuss and Nietzsche have with the 'morality' they claim to reject consists in a substantial conflict of *values*, not a disagreement about the existence of moral facts or properties, or the metaphysical grounding of the Categorical Imperative. (Of course, both Hinckfuss and Nietzsche also have skeptical points to make about realist moral metaphysics, but these are made under separate cover.) In spite of some valiant efforts to keep these issues apart (Blackford's chapter is a case in point), this tendency to cite substantial conflicts of values to illustrate the predicament of the moral error theorist reappears quite frequently throughout the volume, sometimes at the cost if muddling up discussions of issues that are potentially more interesting on their own terms. Moeller's intriguing discussion of Taoism, 'carnivalism' and 'negative ethics' is another unfortunate victim of this general tendency.

My second concern is one about the choice of case studies to test the abolitionist claim. On a positive side, this volume contains a pleasingly large number of case studies. So even if the detail in which these case studies are pursued could sometimes be improved, there is nothing wrong about the sheer amount of them. The issue is instead one about what justifies the choice of these case studies in particular, as opposed to other candidates the discussion of which would either corroborate or undermine the abolitionist response. In particular, I would suggest that more attention could be paid to the kind of case that would lend itself to be used as a potential 'falsifier' of abolitionism. The kind of case I have in mind is one where there is historical evidence that the question of whether or not to abolish moral thought from some area of discourse has actually been explicitly discussed during the course of practical decision making outside the context of philosophical debate, within the latter of which participants will inevitably bring substantial assumptions about the connections between ethics and meta-ethics to the table. While some of the examples used in the volume could in principle qualify for this theoretical role, most of them do not. Yet we do have such examples to hand. For example, there is a substantial body of work on the significance of moral thought (or its absence) in the context of professional life, from the strategic deliberation of corporate CEOs to the doctor-patient relationship in public and private health care. Indeed, one influential hypothesis from the ethics of finance is that systematic 'shocks' such as the 2008 'financial crisis' have been aided and abetted by a culture in which key stakeholders are generally incentivized to think about their professional roles in morally 'mute' or purely amoral terms. Whatever the merits of this and related hypotheses, they have the obvious advantage of not only being empirically tractable, but also

having been systematically studied to the extent that some of the results are actually being operationalized (for better or worse) in medical training and in business schools. Future work on the 'What next?' question would do well to attend to these, and analogous, examples before drawing general conclusions about when, and where, we would be better off by abandoning all, or most, of moral thought from social life.

My third concern is about exactly what abolitionism is. It would be natural to expect this volume to focus especially on producing further clarity on this topic, so it is somewhat disappointing to record that it falls noticeably short in this respect. What the volume could really have done with, I think, is a contribution that sets out the range of alternatives of what abolitionism could be, maps out the logical connections between them, and begins to say something clear and definite about their comparative merits. Why does the volume not contain a contribution of this kind? I can only speculate, but one obvious hypothesis that it is a function of a corresponding lack of clarity about what is actually to be abolished. I shall close this review by very briefly articulating four alternatives of what that might be (the list is not exhaustive).

First, we may be asked to reject the ends and aspirations with which moral thought has historically been associated, each of us perhaps aspiring instead to the evaluative profile of the leading character in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. As I suggested above, I take it as pretty much axiomatic that this is not what our error theoretic friends have in mind.

Second, we may be asked to stop employing moral terms, including the so-called 'thin' ones of *right and wrong*; *good and bad* and the so-called 'thick' ones of *courage*, *cowardice,* or *charlatan*. There is some evidence that this is what some authors in the volume have in mind, including Joel Marks, who suggests that we do better to think in terms of what people *desire*. This is at least a testable proposal, but one which is subject to at least two important qualifications. First, and as several author in the volume point out, not all uses of paradigmatically *moral terms* are *moral uses* of these terms. Some such uses make better sense as interpreted against the background of some alternative social parameter, such as a game. Second, and as none of the authors in the volume seem to make anything significant of at all, not all uses of *non-moral terms* are *non-moral uses* of those terms. Thus, one potential reason why we might get along better by talking about what people *desire* is that we implicitly assume that it is *morally bad* to frustrate people from getting what they want. The scope for further examples of this kind is virtually endless.

Third, we may be asked to give up on some of the inferential dispositions normally associated with moral terms, such as the disposition to infer that if it is wrong for someone to be prevented from getting what they want, this would be wrong regardless of what anyone, including them, happen to desire. It is arguably inferential dispositions like these, with their obvious connection to the Categorical Imperative, that is the primary target of most of the arguments in this book, including not only those of the abolitionists (Hinckfuss, Garner, Marks), but also those of the fictionalists (Joyce) and the ecumenical conservationists (Eriksson and Olson). So perhaps if we identify abolitionism

with this alternative, we shall finally have hit the nail on the head. Even so, however, we shall have to proceed with caution, and for the same kinds of reason as before. First, and as recently argued by Stephen Finlay and others, it is not obviously compulsory to interpret all moral thought as being inflexibly committed to the allegedly problematic inferential commitments associated with the Categorical Imperative. Second, there are ways for people to exhibit inferential commitments very much like those associated with the Categorical Imperative that have nothing essentially to do with the moral content (if any) of what they assert, for example when – during the course of a long business negotiation – I reveal myself to be exceedingly stubborn or inflexible in what I am prepared to accept. The topic of what constrains the interpretation of our inferential dispositions is a very difficult one about which much more could usefully be said (and in due course hopefully will be).

Fourth, we may be asked to abandon the ontological commitments that error theorists attribute to moral thought, such as the postulation of a set of irreducibly normative, mind independent and extensionally specifiable 'facts' and 'properties'. There is some evidence that this is what's bothering at least some of the authors in this book, but on the whole such ontological considerations tend to play a secondary role in their arguments, at least on this occasion. The point is obviously controversial, but I think this is probably for the best. From the point of view of practical deliberation, and for the 'What next?' theorist as well as for everyone else, the troubling question is what to care about and which ends to promote. Provided we can earn the right to have the courage of our convictions in this respect, we should arguably resist the temptation of

letting the content of our practical commitments rest on an academic power struggle focused on the ownership of theoretical terms. Either way, whoever gets to be in charge in the error-theorists' 'post-moral' universe, let's hope it is not the terminological thought police. On this topic, as on the two issues raised in the immediately preceding paragraphs, there is much scope for valuable future contributions to this expanding field of philosophical debate.

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