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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Risky Thoughts

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In his excellent, thought provoking book *A Wild West of the Mind*, George Sher argues that one's mind is a "morality-free zone". He maintains that "Within [the purely mental] realm, no thoughts or attitudes are either forbidden or required… each person's subjectivity is a limitless, lawless wild west in which absolutely everything is permitted." (Sher 2021: 1).

One reason to oppose this view is that *certain thoughts create an unacceptably high risk of bad outcomes in the world beyond one's mind.* Let's call the view that some thoughts (or other purely mental events) are morally wrong because they are too risky the **Excessive Risk View**. In his book, Sher responds to this sort of view. But I will try to defend it. In my view *some* thoughts are indeed wrong. But there is still a great deal of moral freedom to think risky thoughts.[1]

Let me make an initial clarification of the view I will defend. I believe that only avoidable actions (and omissions) can be wrong. Mental states which are not actions cannot be morally wrong. So when I say that a certain thought was wrong I am assuming that either (1) thinking the thought was itself an avoidable action or (2) there was an avoidable mental act that led to the thought and (strictly speaking) it was the prior act that was wrong.

1 Sher's Initial Case Against the Excessive Risk View

Sher's case against the **Excessive Risk View** has two components. First, he argues in Chapter 3 of *A Wild West of the Mind* that the risks of troubling thoughts are often not so high and that there are other reasons for doubting that these risks generate

[1] I am also inclined to the view that some thoughts are wrong to think because of their intrinsic badness. These intrinsically bad thoughts can be wrong even if they pose no risk at all of bad external behavior. But I will not defend that view in this paper.

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obligations. Second, he argues in Chapters 6–7 that the costs of not being permitted to have risky thoughts are high.

In this section I will discuss some of the points Sher makes in Chapter 3. (I cannot discuss all of the important points that he makes.)

(A) First, Sher makes the clearly correct point that it is not always wrong to increase the risk that you will perform a wrong act in the future. Some risks of acting wrongly are worth running.
(B) Second, Sher makes the plausible point that a great many people can indulge in troubling thoughts without any significant risk being led by them to morally wrong action. He says:

> "…a person who secretly holds a certain group in contempt but is too principled or prudent to show it may be no more likely than anyone else to display overt bias or hostility. Because such self-control is the norm, the twisted fantasies and biased beliefs of those who acknowledge moral constraints on behavior do not often pose unacceptable risks of harmful action, and neither, *mutatis mutandis*, do any of their other nasty thoughts." (Sher 2021: 44).

Something in the neighborhood of this thought seems correct to me. Many of us have the ability to reliably keep various evil thoughts from leading to action. It is often very easy to do so. (But I do not think it is always easy to do so, even for generally self controlled people.)

(C) Third, Sher notes that when our thoughts increase the risk of (or create an expectation of) our acting wrongly "we always have the final say about whether those expectations will be met" (Sher 2021: 48). Between the hateful thought and the potential wrong action stands the agent.

Sher suggests this fact can play some role in resisting the **Excessive Risk View.** His thought seems to be that the agent's control over whether a risk will eventuate (in conjunction with the high costs of imposing moral requirements on thought) reduces the pressure to posit a moral requirement to refrain from risky thoughts (Sher 2021: 48–49).

It is plausible that agential control over one's future potential action limits the amount of risk posed by a risky thought. Perhaps agents cannot be 100% sure they will perform a particular free action. If so, they cannot be 100% sure that they will act wrongly due to some thought.

So I agree that there is a sense in which the agent's future control matters. Future control over an act may rule out being sure that one's troubling thoughts will result in a bad act. But I think limiting the probability of a bad action is the only contribution the agent's control makes. I don't accept this principle:

> *Control Principle* Suppose there is an X% chance that (mental or nonmental) act A will result in bad act B. There is less pressure to posit an obliga-

tion against A if the agent will later have control over whether A will result in B.

Consider these two cases:

Hidden Gun 1 Peter hides a gun in a restaurant bathroom knowing that there is an 80% chance that Michael will retrieve it and commit a murder. He knows that if he doesn't hide the gun no murder will occur.

And;

Hidden Gun 2 Peter hides a gun in a restaurant bathroom knowing that there is an 80% chance that Peter himself will retrieve it and commit a murder. He knows that if he doesn't hide the gun no murder will occur.

I am inclined to think that the obligation against hiding the gun is close to equally strong in each case. The claim that the obligations are close to equally strong in each case is in tension with a view in ethical theory known as *possibilism*.[2] Possibilists maintain that when deciding what to do, you should ignore the risk that you yourself will freely act wrongly in the future. Possibilists think you should perform the act that will work out best if you always act rightly in the future, regardless of the likelihood that you will in fact act rightly in the future.[3] Thus, they will often regard a risk of someone else acting wrongly in the future as much more serious than an equal risk of you yourself acting wrongly in the future. But this is implausible in cases such as *Hidden Gun 1* and *Hidden Gun 2*. We can reveal the implausibility with a third case:

Hidden Gun 3 Peter must choose between hiding the gun for himself or for a murderous automaton. If he hides it for the automaton, there is a 1% chance the automaton will commit a murder. If he hides it for himself, there is an 99% chance that he will commit murder.

Here it seems clear to me that Peter should hide the gun for the automaton. Possessing control over whether the murder happens does not compensate for a massive increase in the risk that a murder occurs. Clearly Peter should take into account the high probability that he will freely commit murder if hides the gun for himself.

But Sher need not endorse anything so extreme as possibilism. He could grant that in *Hidden Gun 3* Peter should hide the gun for the automaton. He could maintain that Peter's maintaining control over whether the murder will happen only *somewhat reduces* the pressure to posit an obligation. It does not make up for a 98% difference in the likelihood of a murder.

Hidden Gun 4 Peter must choose between hiding the gun for himself or for a murderous automaton. If he hides it for the automaton, there is an 80% chance

[2] More precisely, since we are dealing with choices involving risk, it is *subjective possibilism* that is in tension with my claim. For a formulation of subjective possibilism see Timmerman and Swenson (2019).

[3] For an overview of possibilism and its rivals see Timmerman and Cohen (2020). And for a critique of subjective possibilism see Timmerman and Swenson (2019).

the automaton will commit a murder. If he hides it for himself, there is an 85% chance that he will commit murder.

Perhaps you aren't convinced that agential control makes no difference at all. You might still be convinced that the role agential control can play is fairly limited.

2 Some Cases

Sher holds that there are no moral requirements *at all* on the purely mental. I think there are cases that put significant pressure on his view even if we grant his claim that *the costs of morally regulating the mental realm are quite high*.

In order to fully evaluate Sher's view we need to consider his arguments for the claim that the costs of moral regulation are very high. (I will do this in the next section.) But there are some mental states that carry extreme risks. In my view we can be fairly confident they are morally prohibited, even if Sher is right about the costs of such prohibitions. Consider two examples:

Intentions to commit very serious wrongs in the near future Sher includes intentions in the mental realm immune from moral regulation. It is only when we begin to act on our intentions that we begin to violate moral requirements. But some people are extremely consistent in carrying out their intentions. If they intend to kill tomorrow, they are highly likely to carry out the act. It is hard to see how their forming the intention to kill is not excessively risky.

Sher points out that, until we act, we have the opportunity to back out of following through on our intentions (Sher 2021: 24). But, since I reject the Control Principle, I don't think this matters much. The opportunity to change our minds does not remove excessive riskiness if it is very unlikely that we will change our minds.

Beliefs that will almost certainly lead to horrible acts. Imagine a shipowner who believes, against all evidence, that his ship is seaworthy. Suppose that if he maintains that belief he will almost certainly send sailors to their deaths. He occasionally has evidence based doubts bubble up in his mind, but quickly quashes them and stubbornly maintains his belief.[4]

These are extreme cases. And we could accept moral regulation of the mental in these cases while still granting to Sher that the mental world is mostly a lawless realm. But these cases do strongly suggest that there are at least some moral limits on thought. Thus, it is difficult to maintain Sher's very strong claim that there are no moral requirements *at all* on the purely mental.

Here is a less extreme case which also seems excessively risky to me:

Long term negative reflection. Imagine that for many years a professor maintains the belief that his students are over-privileged brats who don't deserve his attention. He not only believes this, but often dwells on the thought prior to entering the classroom. He often resents the fact that he must spend energy

[4] This case is based on the (very similar) well known case presented in Clifford (1877).

> teaching them. Suppose also that he has no good evidence for these beliefs about his students.

It seems to me very likely that this line of thought will, in the long run, cause the professor to fail his students in important ways. Perhaps he will possess enough self control to avoid insulting his students to their faces. But, if he is like most of us, it would be very difficult for him to continue to work as hard as he should on teaching and advising. He will very likely fail to live up to important obligations to his students. I am inclined to think this renders his long term pattern of thought excessively risky. And I suspect that there are many similar sorts of cases in which long term patterns of thought will be excessively risky for agents like us.

The example of the professor is not an extreme case. No lives are on the line. So the motivation for moral regulation of his thought life may well be outweighed. Perhaps imposing moral obligations on his patterns of thought is too costly. We must now evaluate Sher's claim that the cost of moral regulation of the mental is very high.

3 The Costs of Moral Prohibitions on Thought

Sher makes many intriguing points on the value of freedom from moral restrictions on thought. I can only discuss a few of them. So my response will be incomplete.

A significant claim of Sher's is that a prohibition on one thought T will generate many derivative obligations to avoid lines of thought that may lead to T. A prohibition on one thought will spread to others "like dye in the water". Sher says:

> "It may be, for example, that to guard against thinking of shooting you, I must turn my attention away from the many wrongs that you have done to me; must abstain from recalling the plots of movies in which people like you (or, perhaps, people not like you) are shot; must not look ahead to our upcoming meeting while I am at the gun range; and must not meditate on Stalin's aphorism "No man, no problem." If performing these mental acts is within my direct control, then I am likely to be under a derivative obligation to do so…" (Sher 2021: 93).

Furthermore, it is very unpredictable which thoughts will lead where. Perhaps even a few prohibitions on thought will leave us walking on eggshells. Sher says:

"[The moralist's] musings can never be fully spontaneous or open-ended because he must always be aware of (and, indeed, must always *be*) the internal censor who is lurking to spoil the fun. Thus, even if his range of thought options is undiminished, the moralist is not free to pursue any of them with a whole heart or an unencumbered mind" (Sher 2021: 101).

I agree with Sher that a requirement to be constantly vigilant, to be constantly attending to the possibility of falling into a forbidden thought, would be extremely burdensome. But I do not think we need to accept such extreme requirements. Here are two important claims that Sher's overall view relies on:

- It is not always wrong to increase one's risk of acting wrongly.
- The costs of a derivative obligation count against possessing the derivative obligation.

Just as Sher makes use of these claims to resist derivative obligations to avoid risky thoughts, we can make use of them to keep derivative obligations from running amok through our mental lives.

Since it is very costly to remain constantly vigilant again thinking immoral thoughts. We will not normally have the obligation to do so. Even if failing to remain constantly vigilant somewhat increases my chances of thinking an immoral thought, that will be a risk worth running. Unguarded thought is risky, but it is often a justified risk.

My line of argument here is inspired by an analogy that Sher draws between thought and conversation. He says:

"In a time like ours, in which so much of life has been politicized and political passions run high, it is easy to say and do things that put other people's backs up; and as a result, we all proceed with caution when we're talking to people we don't know well. To avoid eliciting hostility or giving offense, we are guarded in what we say and we stick to safe subjects. This…reduces our chances of making any real intellectual progress or real contact with our interlocutor's mind. A freewheeling conversation is organic, and we can have one only if we feel free to allow it to develop. But private thought, too, is a kind of conversation—one that we have with ourselves—and it's no less vulnerable to the stultifying effects of self-imposed limits than its public counterpart." (Sher 2021: 100).

I believe it is common ground that there are things we could say during a freewheeling conversation that would be wrong to say. Nonetheless freewheeling, unguarded conversations are extremely valuable, and we should sometimes engage in them. We do so at some risk of harming or wronging our conversation partners. But that risk is often justified.

Similarly we engage in freewheeling thought at some risk of thinking wrongfully, but that risk is often justified.

One might worry that in some cases the agent will know that the only way to avoid impermissible thought T is to maintain extreme vigilance. Perhaps in that case an obligation to avoid T would entail an obligation to be hyper vigilant. My response is that the costs of hypervigilance will then count against there being an obligation to avoid T. Unless the risks imposed by T are very high indeed, avoiding T will no longer be required.

For example, suppose only hypervigilance will prevent a professor from occasionally having the irrational thought that his students don't deserve his time. Perhaps he is then not obligated to avoid the thought entirely. Perhaps he is instead required to turn away from the thought as soon as it pops up.

So I agree with Sher that hypervigilance is normally uncalled for. But I think there are a variety of obligations concerning our thought lives which can survive a rejection of hypervigilance. Here are three candidate rules governing our thought lives which I suspect we are often morally required to follow.

(1) Don't intentionally entertain a thought which you know (at the moment you are about to entertain it) is excessively risky.
(2) When you find yourself (perhaps as the result of a justified indulgence in freewheeling thought) entertaining a thought which you know is excessively risky, try to turn your thoughts in another direction.
(3) Occasionally, perhaps every few weeks or so, reflect on your thought life. Ask yourself whether your thoughts are falling into risky patterns. If so, consider whether there are acts (short of hypervigilance) which could improve the quality of your thought life. For example, if the professor discussed above takes a moment every few days and directs his attention to his student's admirable qualities, perhaps this will reduce his tendency to see them in such a negative light.[5]

None of these rules require hypervigilance. It is true that hypervigilance might make us more likely to succeed in following these rules. But as we have just seen, we are not obligated to do everything we can to decrease our chances of moral failure. So we can accept that we should follow these rules without sacrificing a mostly freewheeling thought life.

4 Risky Beliefs

Sher rightly contends that it is very valuable to be permitted to infer whichever beliefs are supported by one's evidence (Sher 2021: 114–117). The costs of not being able to follow the evidence where it leads is high. Does this mean that there are no (or only a very few) prohibitions on belief?

I suggest that irrational beliefs are far more likely to be morally prohibited than evidentially supported beliefs. This is because.

(a) irrational beliefs often create much more risk of bad behavior; and
(b) prohibitions on irrational belief have lower costs.

Consider the shipowner case. His belief that the ship is seaworthy is so risky precisely because it is contrary to the evidence. If the evidence supported his belief, then he would not be putting the sailors at much risk by maintaining it. Similarly, if a professor believes, against the evidence, that his students don't deserve his attention, he runs a significant risk of not giving them the attention they deserve.

Also, the costs of prohibiting irrational beliefs are lower. Irrational beliefs don't contribute to increased knowledge and understanding of the world in the way rational beliefs do.

Sher argues that the costs of prohibiting irrational belief are still high. Suppressing irrational beliefs for moral reasons leaves the agent "divided against himself" (Sher 2021: 121) and can render his conscious thoughts "no longer expressions of [his] true nature" (Sher 2021: 123). (And Sher argues that there are further costs as well.)

[5] Thanks to Kenny Boyce for helpful discussion of these candidate rules.

I suggest that these costs are mitigated by the fact that irrational beliefs are already prohibited by epistemic norms. If we already have one set of rules prohibiting a belief, perhaps the cost has already been paid. We are already constrained to follow the evidence.

5 Total Freedom?

One advantage of Sher's view over mine is that it gives us *total moral freedom* over the mental world. My view does "relinquish our mastery of the one thing that is totally and entirely ours: the vast world of subjectivity in which we can go anywhere and do anything" (Sher 2021: 131).

But to maintain complete mastery, we would have to say that in the extreme cases presented above (the shipowner case and the intending to commit murder case), the risks are not too great to be permitted. And in my view, the cost of that is too high. If my claim about the extreme cases is granted, the remaining difference between Sher and me would be only a matter of degree.

The wild west of the mind is not a completely lawless place. Occasionally we must call the sheriff. But the mind is still a place for freewheeling exploration. There are plenty of permissible risks to be run.

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