Beyond the Surf and Spray: Erring on the Side of Error Theory

by Joel Marks

Penultimate draft of paper appearing in R. Garner & R. Joyce (eds.), *The End of Morality* (Routledge, 2019)

... the things to which we ourselves more naturally tend seem more contrary to the intermediate. ... Hence he who aims at the intermediate must first depart from what is the more contrary to it, as Calypso advises ̶  Hold the ship out beyond that surf and spray.

̶ *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 2, chs. 8-9, trans. W. D. Ross

**Ethics without Question Begging**

It is a pleasure to embark on a discussion of ethics without having first to disabuse you of the belief in the existence of morality, which is a belief in the existence of right and wrong, good and evil, duty and desert, prohibitions and permissions, etc., as objective features of the universe. As J. L. Mackie, Ian Hinckfuss, Richard Garner, Richard Joyce, Hans-Georg Moeller, Russell Blackford, and yours truly have each argued at book length,[[1]](#footnote-1) morality is a myth.  Since there is so much else to discuss once morality has been taken to be mythical, it is, as I say, a pleasure to be able to get down to business.

Morality is to be distinguished from the *belief* in it, as well as the multitudinous practices, institutions, emotions, attitudes, etc., that accord with that belief, such as guilt feelings, conscience, outrage, condemnation, etc.; for of course all of these do exist – alas. I have previously[[2]](#footnote-2) used the terminology “empirical morality” to refer to this real realm and “metaphysical morality” to refer to the unreal realm it presumes. So, for example, it is an instance of empirical morality for somebody to believe that lying is wrong as a matter of metaphysical fact. My position is that that belief, while surely existing, is nevertheless false because there is no metaphysical morality. In this chapter I use “morality” to refer to metaphysical morality.

Moralists are thus *ipso facto* in error, this being the gist of so-called moral error theory. What now? I assume that many, perhaps most people at least implicitly hold a belief in objective, absolute, categorical, universal rules of conduct and/or standards of character and/or values[[3]](#footnote-3) -- in a word, morality. Laypersons and specialists alike would therefore seem to be left in confusion[[4]](#footnote-4): laypersons because we all seek a “guide to life,” and ethical specialists because most assume that ethics is all about morality.

I still find it useful to recognize an area of inquiry that could be called “ethics,” but I see it as asking questions that leave open the possibility that the answers will *not* involve absolute commandments, or inherent value or worth, or any of the other members of the metaphysical menagerie of morality. The more typical conception of ethics begs the very question I now see ethics as asking. For it is common to put ethics’ central question as, “How ought one to live?” or “What is the right way to live?” or “What is the good life?” Yet every one of these formulations incorporates a moralistic term: “ought” or “right” or “good.” I reject all of them because I don’t believe morality exists in the first place. So to me they are like asking whether the king of France is bald.

I suggest, instead, that ethics be conceived as asking “How *shall I* live?” (or “What shall I *do*?” or “What shall *we* do?” etc.). Moralism offers one kind of answer: *Obey morality’s dictates*. But a different kind of answer, one that is amoralist, is also possible, for example: *Act in accordance with your considered desires*. That is the answer I favor, which I call “desirism.”[[5]](#footnote-5) There can also be “in-between” answers, which allow certain accommodations to be made to morality, for example, *Live as if morality existed* (even though you know it doesn’t). This is so-called moral fictionalism.

Thus, all of these answers suggest a source of ethical guidance, but only one of them – moralism – depends on the actual existence of morality, that is, of metaphysical morality. The two others differ about the status of empirical morality: Fictionalism favors retaining it, whereas desirism advocates eliminating it. Desirism, then, is a form of so-called moral abolitionism, or full-blown amorality, according to which not only is there no (metaphysical) morality, but we are advised to eliminate empirical morality as well. Moral abolitionism is therefore a negative thesis. Desirism seeks to offer a positive ethics to fill the void left by the total elimination of morality from both the noumenal and phenomenal realms. It offers reasoned desire as an adequate basis for living.

**Desirist Ethics**

The primary injunction of desirism is to *find out what you really want and then find out how to get it*. There is a typical first reaction to this, which I wish to dispel at once, namely, that desirism is egoistic.[[6]](#footnote-6) The desire in desirism does indeed refer to what “you” or “one” wants. But what you or I or anyone wants need not be anything self-serving, not even in our enlightened self-interest (not to mention outright selfish).[[7]](#footnote-7) Your heart’s desire could be to end human starvation in the world, at whatever cost to yourself; mine could be to liberate other animals from human exploitation, no matter what personal sacrifice this might entail. And yes, of course, somebody else’s might be to grab whatever he can for himself and to hell with everybody else. So an individual desirist could be selfish, but she could also be altruistic or anything in between.

 Still, it might be thought that desirism, if not necessarily egoistic in theory, would be egoistic in practice. I cannot deny that as an empirical possibility, but I find it to be exactly as questionable as the claim that human beings are innately selfish. Both everyday observation and evolutionary argument seem to me to put the lie to that attribution. Yes, one can always concoct some selfish motive to account for seemingly selfless acts; for example, “You only gave all your money to Oxfam because you believe you will be rewarded in heaven.” But there might also be leprechauns in the forest. The question is: What is the evidence? What is the reasoning? I see every indication and reason to believe in human generosity and self-sacrifice – in addition to selfishness, of course; furthermore, there are countless other motives that are neither egoistic nor altruistic but simply “for their own sake,” such as wanting to build flying machines.

 But suppose that human beings were, as a matter of fact, incorrigibly selfish: Would that be an argument for morality and against desirism? I don’t see how. For even morality presumes that *ought* implies *can*; so if we were largely impervious to altruistic injunctions, morality itself would have to be egoistic. The moralist’s objection to desirism on the ground that it would be egoistic in practice thereby loses its point.

The arguments for psychological egoism, it seems to me, tend to rest on cynicism and fallacy. The fallacy is to argue that human beings are perforce selfish because we always do what *we ourselves* desire. But the fact that a desire is always “one’s own” does not mean that it is selfish – no more than the fact that a *belief* is always “one’s own” means that you are always thinking about yourself. A desire becomes selfish (or at best egoistic) only when it is a desire “*for*” one’s own welfare (in some way, to some degree). Many desires clearly are not so.

 An attribution to desirism that is definitely on the mark, however, is rationality. For implicit in desirism’s maxim is the idea that, to the degree that circumstances permit, one will bring to bear on any ethical question: knowledge, experience, and logic. Of course this is plausibly true of moralist practice as well. The difference is that the desirist will be reflecting on her own actual desires rather than on mythical obligations; hence the upshot will be not a mere conclusion or judgment but, in one’s own case, the desired action itself. (Let me add “*ceteris paribus*” or “other things equal,” since, of course, the desired action would automatically result only absent an equally strong or stronger conflicting desire, or some other intervening contingency, such as a heart attack or intrusion by a prankster scientist who has surreptitiously planted electrodes in the desirer’s brain.) So for example, if you have the temptation to lie to someone on some particular occasion, and, after careful reflection, are actually motivated to do so and hence (other things equal) tell the lie, your action will be neither right nor wrong. It will simply be the upshot of careful reflection and hence, by definition, what a desirist *would* (not “should”) do.

Similarly, if I were to seek your counsel about whether to lie to someone on some particular occasion, or if you simply felt like butting in with your two cents, you might, after careful reflection, recommend (advise, urge, whatever) that I not do so. But again, what you would *not* be doing was asserting that it was *wrong* for me to lie or that I *should* not lie, etc.[[8]](#footnote-8) Desirism is therefore both more and less than morality. On the one hand, desirism could appear to be but the pale shadow of morality, for, in lieu of objective requirements or “commandments,” it offers to others only recommendations. On the other hand, desirism is inherently more efficacious than morality since, in one’s own case, it issues in actual behaviors (other things equal) and not mere dictates which could be ignored.

These facts have significant implications, for they enable desirism to detour around the chasm between *ought* and *is* that has perennially blocked ethical traffic in both directions. Going from is to ought is not a real problem to begin with, according to desirism, simply because, consistent with its error-theoretic roots, there is no such destination. You can’t get there from here because there is no there there. One need not attempt to explain, for example, how “Lying involves treating somebody merely as a means” implies that “One ought not to lie,” because it is not true that one ought not to lie (or ought or ought not anything else in the moral sense). Similarly, going from *ought* to *is* has no *point of departure*; so one need not be perplexed about how to motivate people to do what they ought, since there is *nothing* they ought, or ought not, to do.

But desirism has both departure point and destination. Thus, it is straightforward how one might go about explaining why Joel Marks’s believing that lying involves treating somebody merely as a means might cause me (for whom Kantianism remains an ideal), after careful reflection, to refrain from lying. This would only involve the *is* of a belief resulting in the *is* of a behavior, presumably via the *is* of my desire to live in accordance with my Kantian ideal of myself or the world. Thus, filtering everything through one’s own desires guarantees (*ceteris paribus*) one’s own compliance. Furthermore, I submit, presenting the reasons one has oneself been moved by is a more effective way of winning *another’s* concurrence than to issue an edict. To those who doubt the persuasive power of speaking of one’s own desires, I would recall to mind the “I have a dream” speech of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Can anything more be said about ethics? – that is, would an amoralist of the desirist kind be able to offer any substantive recommendation(s) about how to live, etc., other than the procedural recommendation to examine one’s own desires? I myself have certainly formed a number of general desires about conduct and character and so forth; for example, I want everyone to refrain from eating other animals (unless they need to in order to survive or to meet their nutritional requirements for health as standardly conceived). Furthermore, this is how I myself behave; and I go about *recommending* it to others on the basis of my belief that most people would desire the same thing if they were relevantly informed and experienced and reflecting rationally.

But I also recognize that my belief, despite its “rationality,” could contain a large component of wishful thinking; there is enough wiggle room in the imaginable or even available evidence to allow for sincere disagreements on this score. Furthermore, I do not doubt that some people simply *would* *not* share my vegetarian ideal even if they were as well informed and rational as I am. Hence I could not honestly *recommend* vegetarianism to everyone willy-nilly, as much as I wish I could. Nevertheless the wiggle room might also be sufficient for me to say, “Try it, you *might* like it.” If that were enough to count as a recommendation, then, yes, my brand of desirism would offer the universal and substantive recommendation to refrain from eating animals.[[9]](#footnote-9)

But even lacking the basis for an honest recommendation, a desirist has resources for promoting her views. What resort she would take in the face of others’ recalcitrance depends in part on how strongly she desires what others oppose. But this is how people have always behaved, is it not? Thus, some people who desire an end to human carnivorism are content to change their own dietary behavior; others seek to convert meat-eaters by means of rational and civil dialogue; others do an end run around meat-eaters by rallying the faithful to boycott uncooperative restaurants, lobby legislators, and the like; yet others go so far as to deceive, intimidate, vandalize, even …? All that is different about desirism from everyday moralism is that it refrains from putting on objectivist airs.[[10]](#footnote-10) Instead of invoking morality, desirism calls a spade a spade.

Thus do I characterize the distinctiveness of desirist ethics from morality. But there is still a fundamental way in which a moralist could misunderstand the nature of desirism, by failing to appreciate the new conception of ethics that desirism presumes. The moralist’s inveterate thought habits could thus cause her to construe desirism’s recommendations to be stipulating the *ethical* thing to do, in supposed substitution for the moralist’s *moral* or *right* thing to do, or what would be *unethical* in lieu of *immoral* or *wrong*.[[11]](#footnote-11) But desirism does no such thing. For example, suppose you correctly surmise that, if fully informed, etc., I would tell the truth in a given situation, and so you recommend that I tell the truth; but I go right ahead and lie anyway. Have I done anything wrong or unethical? My desirist answer is “No” to *both*. I have simply ignored your recommendation and, assuming your recommendation was based on a correct surmise, done what I would *not* have done had I carefully reflected on the matter. I may subsequently regret my lying, but not, if I am a desirist, because I (believe I) had done anything unethical or wrong – rather, because I came to realize that things would likely have turned out more to my liking if I had told the truth.

This is a subtle point, and it may not be crucial. I have mentioned it as part of my campaign to rid our thinking of any impulse to moralism. It does seem to me that the very notion of there being an ethical thing to do suggests that there is a truth of the matter analogous to there being a truth about what is right or wrong. But I recognize that, strictly speaking, only the latter is a will o’ the wisp; while, presumably, there is in fact a specific thing an individual would do, other things equal, if he or she reflected on the matter – hence, there is in that way an ethical thing to do. But the difference from there being a moral thing to do is twofold: (1) The ethical thing does not presume any universal principle(s), such as *eating meat is unethical*, or *one must treat all sentient beings as ends-in-themselves*, and (2) *failing* to do the ethical thing is not *wrong*. So I am only warning that speaking of something’s being “ethical” or “unethical” might shunt one’s thinking back into a moralist groove.

A final point about the ethics underlying desirism, which moralists also commonly fail to grasp, is that I am recommending desirism itself to you, and not, as it were, commanding it. For a curious phenomenon to note is that *moralists* not only tell us about all of the things that we ought to do, but also tell us that we *ought to be moral*. In other words, a typical moralist would say not only that it is wrong to lie (at least on most occasions), but *also* that it is wrong to ignore the dictates of morality. Thus, amoralists such as myself hear this all the time from critics – that, even though we might in all other respects be sterling citizens, always telling the truth and so forth, we are nevertheless morally wrong and possibly even evil for forswearing morality, which is to say, not having moral reasons for our truth telling and so forth.[[12]](#footnote-12) Alternatively, our critics often argue that our very amoralism is itself a kind of morality, since we are implicitly asserting that it is morally wrong to be moralistic.

But I deny these charges.[[13]](#footnote-13) A desirist is desiristic about desirism itself, just as a moralist is moralistic about morality itself. I myself can’t help but be desirist because, having reflected on the matter these several years, I am sufficiently motivated to be so. And I recommend desirism to you, whoever you are, because, having reflected on the matter these several years, I am convinced that, if you were to reflect on it as I have, you too would be desirist. (I offer additional considerations for you to reflect on in the next section.) But that is as far as the justification of desirism goes. It presumes no higher authority.

**Why Be Amoral?**

I cannot deny that under certain circumstances a desirist might decide that feigning moralism was the best strategy to achieve her ends. (“It is *wrong* to eat meat!”) A moral fictionalist recommends this – in the manner of a shared pretense rather than an outright deception -- as standard procedure. A moral abolitionist such as myself recommends against this under almost every circumstance. But of course there will be exceptions. At the end of this chapter I will explain just how far I would go in deracinating objectivism. But first let’s consider the case for retaining a hefty dose of faux moralism in the world.

The most straightforward way to preserve a moral presence, in light of accepting moral error theory, would be to perpetrate a deception; thus, despite myself disbelieving in the metaphysical reality of absolute obligations and so forth, I might encourage others to believe in them ... or at least I might not discourage others from believing so. This could manifest a cynical attitude; what atheist wag said, “I want everyone else to believe in hell fire, especially my wife and my business partner”? But it could also spring from totally benign motives. Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor and Plato’s Guardians stand for the hypothesis that too much truth about ethics could be detrimental to society. Thus the “noble lie.”

But who is to say whether the widespread disbelief in morality in particular would result in social chaos or some other state of affairs that most of us would clearly not prefer to the present arrangement? We are left with our educated guesses or hunches or “intuitions,” which is the time-honored method of philosophers, for better or worse.[[14]](#footnote-14) I have previously laid out my own reasons for believing that an overtly amoral society would be more to my and most people’s liking.[[15]](#footnote-15) I find a belief in morality to correlate with tendencies to be angry, captious, hypocritical, arrogant, arbitrary, imprudent, and intransigent, whereas a disbelief in morality correlates with tendencies to be tolerant, explanatory, compassionate, as well as, *ex hypothesi*, grounded in reality. Since I strongly prefer the latter set to the former, and imagine my readers do too, I embrace and promote moral abolitionism, that is, the elimination of all moralist beliefs and practices.

Perhaps my most general complaint against (the belief in) morality is that it exacerbates existing differences of desire between people, thereby making the resolution of disagreements more difficult. The “right thing to do” is, more often than not, just what the person so labeling it happens to desire, thereby providing her subjective desire with a (seemingly) objective imprimatur. This obviously makes compromise or negotiation with an equally ensconced opponent less likely.[[16]](#footnote-16) But my view of the actual use of morality, as a means of trying to get one’s way, runs counter to the view of morality as primarily a check on one’s own impulses, as well as a spur to one’s own virtuous behavior.[[17]](#footnote-17) Who, as I say, is in a position to judge definitively which of these conceptions, or if some other, rules the world?

Meanwhile, another of my empirical hunches or surmises is that, in the absence of a decisive argument or evidence, each theorist is unlikely to retain a studied neutrality but will instead favor one case over another because of personal factors.[[18]](#footnote-18) And notice that this *ad-hominist* view of ethical methodology applies not only to matters of taste but even to matters of fact. Thus, I myself wish to discourage the belief in morality not only because I prefer the traits of tolerance etc. to arrogance etc., but also because I allow the ambiguous evidence for the respective empirical correlations between amorality/tolerance and morality/arrogance to sway me in my desired direction. I do not believe I am unusual in employing this procedure, but I admire the few who are aware of doing so and admit to it.[[19]](#footnote-19) If I am correct about this, then ethics is a kind of idealism[[20]](#footnote-20) in the sense of creating a guide to life out of the fabric of one’s own desires – or to say, in one’s image.

With this same broad brush, I paint over other arguments and evidence that favor retaining morality in everyday affairs. A less extreme position than the noble lie is moral fictionalism, which seeks, not to publicly (and deceivingly) disavow a disbelief in morality, but only to relegate that disbelief to the background. An analogy might be the way we normally have our own death in the back of our mind, but live in the foreground. Just so, a moral fictionalist would know (i.e., believe) that amorality is reality, but act and even think and feel as if it weren’t.

The reason given is, as with the noble lie, that the belief in morality does serve useful purposes; [[21]](#footnote-21) furthermore, the belief and its attendant attitudes come naturally to us.[[22]](#footnote-22) The evidence for the latter claim can be found in one’s own experience. I myself can attest to the enduring power of my moralist reactions to various actions and traits and states of affairs, even though I have striven to suppress them for several years now. Is it not likely that they are trying to “tell me” something? Would evolution, biological or cultural, have instilled them in us with such force and staying power if they did not serve a valuable, even essential function? But I am no longer cowed by the undoubted utility and salience of belief in morality. For me, as indicated above, the disutility looms larger.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Furthermore, the force of our moralist responsiveness can ultimately be ignored, analogous to sensory illusion, however compelling. I often cite the example of the straight stick that “looks bent” when partially immersed. In the normal case we will realize that the stick is *straight* even though we may never be able to shake the impression of a bend at the water’s surface. Just so, I might never eradicate the outrage I feel whenever I see my friends eating meat; but over time I observe my responses to partake more of sadness (for the animals), empathy (for the carnivores), determination (to change the world’s eating habits), and calculation (of how to do that) than of anger and condemnation.

Note that I do *not* mean to suggest that my moral feelings have sublimated into nonmoral ones, as if a substratum of psychic energy were liable to redirection, analogous to the drawing which can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit. Or to use a different well-worn image: Morality does not have to climb a ladder to the unlocked second-story window of one’s psyche in order to unlock the front door for amorality’s entry. Having moral responses is not, I believe, a necessary developmental preliminary to having compassionate responses.

I also see the latter as likely to be more effective at furthering my (or one’s) ends in the long run; for example, would not my meat-eating friends be more likely to hear me out if I approached them with caring (for both the animals and them) rather than accusation?[[24]](#footnote-24) In sum, then, the fictionalist sees error theory as posing a problem – how to maintain society in the face of morality’s demise – that fictionalism solves, whereas the abolitionist sees error theory as presenting an opportunity – to make the world more to our liking – that abolitionism seizes. Desirism presumes abolitionism and offers a positive program to replace the “abolished” morality. The non-existence of morality is, thus, not an inconvenient truth but the cornerstone of a new ethics.

**Beyond Amorality**

Despite my sanguine take on the possibility of amoralist transformation, I fully acknowledge that the process can be difficult. That is why I prefer, to the bent-stick, the analogy of feeling yourself to be in motion when peering down from a bridge at the water rushing under you (in the opposite direction). It is not so easy to ignore the latter illusion, even though you are cognizant of its falsity. One needs a clean break – to look away. Just so, I therefore embrace, not the mere disbelief in morality (moral error theory), which is compatible with public and even private moralism of the fictionalist type, but the full-blown public and private avoidance of all things moralist (moral abolitionism). Indeed, my particular claim to fame is to go to the opposite extreme from fictionalism and, so to speak, err on the side of abolitionism. What I mean is that I recommend against using the vocabulary and assuming the attitudes of not only morality but also of other value realms to the greatest degree practicable.

The implicit strategy here is Aristotle’s, or Odysseus’s.[[25]](#footnote-25) In the epigraph, Aristotle alludes to the episode in the *Odyssey* when the cunning captain orders his helmsman to steer away from the whirlpool of Charybdis and toward the cliff of Scylla. Both are dangerous, but the whirlpool more so. Once you are sucked into its surf and spray your ship is a goner; but cleaving to the cliff holds out some hope of saving the ship, even though you may still suffer some losses (as Odysseus lost six members of his crew to the hungry mouths of the mythological Scylla). Analogously, Aristotle advises us to seek the virtuous mean that his ethics recommends by erring on the side of the lesser extreme or vice. I would say that the same applies to the project of achieving a genuinely amoral world: Since many or most or all of us (?) have a strong bias in favor of morality, we are well-advised to err on the side of amorality in our thinking, feeling, and action, including speech behavior.

But this is not quite what I have in mind. The specific image I wish to convey, like the present volume and the present study, already presumes that there is no morality. Thus, the whirlpool (Charybdis) stands for fictionalism and the like, that is, error theories that still pay some degree of obeisance to morality. They are therefore the stronger “vice” because we are naturally moralist in our thinking and feeling. Indeed, that is the fictionalist’s argument for retaining some connection to morality. This “extreme” is therefore “more contrary to the intermediate.”

What is the intermediate in my image? None other than moral abolitionism. This is error theory in the raw, not moderated by any sort of moralist concessions or trappings. It is the regime I seek to promulgate. It is equivalent to sailing straight through the Strait of Messina. But since doing so risks drawing us into the strong whirlpool, ultimately to drown in moralism, I propose instead that we cleave to the cliff, which is also dangerous but less so.

What, then, does the cliff (Scylla) stand for in my conceit? It would have to be amorality in the sense of Mackie 1977’s opening line: “There are no objective values.” Morality strictly so-called concerns the (objective) value of rightness/wrongness only. But there are many other values commonly taken to be objective, and what I am proposing is that we attempt to treat *all* of them as subjective instead. This is less “contrary to the intermediate” -- moral abolitionism – because, like it, this “extreme” involves the project of subjectifying value in our thinking, speaking, and acting; whereas the extreme of fictionalism involves none of that.

In fact, I balk even at giving the *appearance* of objectifying moral value itself. For there are ways in addition to fictionalizing that an error theorist might do this. One way is to assert hypothetical obligations, such as “If you want to spare other animals unnecessary distress and death, then you ought not to eat any,” or employ hypothetical imperatives, such as “If you want to spare other animals unnecessary distress and death, then don’t eat any.” It might be thought harmless enough to use “ought” and related language so long as it were not intended categorically or absolutely. And, indeed, desirism does conceive ethics to be purely hypothetical, since desirist recommendations are contingent on someone’s desire. Nevertheless, I want to avoid *any hint* of allusion to categoricity; therefore I avoid even the mere locutions of the old morality,[[26]](#footnote-26) and what is more, I see *no reason* to retain them.

What, after all, does “ought” add to the purely *predictive* “If you wanted to spare other animals unnecessary distress and death, then, other things equal, you *wouldn’t* eat any”? I think the “ought” only serves to sustain the illusion of objective authority on matters of value. This is especially so since we commonly omit the hypothetical clause in our assertions. Our excuse is that it is harmless and efficient to omit what everybody agrees about, such as wanting to avoid inflicting unnecessary distress and death on other creatures. But I have come to see this instead as an – however unwitting – effort to impose a regularity of preference where there may not in fact be one.

Another faux objectivity I now try to avoid, or at least not rely on, is to speak in what I call “moral mode.” This would occur in the context of discussion with a moralist. Perhaps we are debating whether to support animal experimentation. An advocate of vivisection would typically argue that animal experimentation is justified because of its utility, namely, in speeding up progress in medical science and testing and treatments and the like. My natural response, having been well trained in moral argumentation, would be that the utility of animal research for the advancement of medicine has been abundantly questioned; and then to point out that it is arguable that *human* experimentation might be even more urgent on account of its utility for the same purpose, but we don’t consider *that* justified.

Since this is a sufficiently stunning reply to the vivisectionist, I am tempted to use it. [[27]](#footnote-27) However, a career in moral argumentation has convinced me that a dedicated opponent will always be able to reply with arguments that satisfy *her*. And my diagnosis of the whole situation is that this is only to be expected since our primary use of morality is to advance our own agendas. So moral argumentation is indeed a temptation to me, but one which I feel is better avoided even in this “modal” usage; for the reality of indulging in it is to end up stuck to a quagmire of endless dialectic. While that may be just fine for someone who enjoys debate for its own sake, it no longer appeals to me, since endless debate serves mainly to entrench the status quo,[[28]](#footnote-28) whereas I have my sights on bringing about change in the world.[[29]](#footnote-29)

**The Full M****ackie**

Notice, then, that I have already steered away from “the intermediate” of strictly moral abolitionism and gone “beyond the surf and spray” in the direction of eliminating, in addition to the literal use of moralist language, the use of some of the same vocabulary in nonmoralist contexts, such as the hypothetical and the modal. But I would tack farther still in this direction by avoiding talk of nonmoral *values*. After all, Mackie 1977 wrote, “The claim that values are not objective, are not part of the fabric of the world … also includes non-moral values, notably aesthetic ones …” (p. 15). I seek to implement this claim in an abolitionist way by eliminating speech and attitudes that mistakenly uphold the objectivity of these values too.

Thus, I now strive to avoid declarations of the value of art works or musical compositions or films, etc., that I happen to love or hate, and instead say things like, “This is my favorite song” (in lieu of “This is the best song ever written”) or “I love so-and-so’s paintings” or “This is what I especially like about so-and-so’s writing.” I also sidestep assertions about jokes or other (supposedly) *funny* things, opting for purely subjective “valuations” such as, “This movie made me laugh more than any other I’ve seen” (in lieu of “This is the funniest movie ever made”) or “This movie really tickled my funny bone. I think you might enjoy it too.”

Am I thereby being too serious about humor, or about taking humor seriously? Possibly. We are not so used to viewing different senses of humor or different artistic tastes as pretexts for wars and such,[[30]](#footnote-30) as we are different convictions about right and wrong. But keep in mind that my goal is to pass through the Strait of Messina, that is, rid myself and the world of moralist attitudes, for which, I am suggesting, it may be necessary not only to eliminate moralist trappings (which fictionalism fails to do), but also cognate attitudes and behaviors in far-flung realms, such as aesthetics and humor. I for one commonly experience a tenacity in the funniness of a joke or a cartoon or a film that reinforces my general belief in the existence of objective value. Therefore I am now willing to risk “erring” by observing a perhaps too scrupulous literalness in my dealings with humor and other nonmoral values, all the better to undermine moralism.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Another, and perhaps the ultimate value “beyond morality” that I would, ideally, banish from our external and internal discourse is good/bad. This is not to be confused with *moral* goodness or badness. Satan is morally bad, whereas a toothache is nonmorally bad. Desirism asks (rhetorically), “What fact of the world does the attribution of goodness or badness to something assert other than that we do or don’t like it (either for itself or for what it can get us)?” Admittedly there is also a functional use of “good”[[32]](#footnote-32) that – analogous to the use of the hypothetical in the moral realm – does not have the same objectivist pretensions as good *tout court*; for example, one could speak of a good car even though one considered cars themselves to be baneful (since they pollute the environment and cause carnage on the highways to both humans and other animals and contribute to obesity and urban sprawl, etc.). However, as with hypotheticals, I discourage the use even here, and for the same sort of reason: What may seem harmless, and even useful, in itself nonetheless facilitates objectivist attitudes, whose overall effect is contrary to what I desire for myself and the world.

There is a special problem about the use of goodness in the defense of amorality as such, for it is tempting for both moral fictionalists and moral abolitionists to argue that retaining or eliminating moralism, respectively, would be a *good* thing … lead to a *better* world than would the other. It is easy and natural to speak in this way. But it would only be to jump from the frying pan into the fire, according to an abolitionist such as myself who wants to go the “full Mackie.” For “a good thing” could only be a way of speaking (since there is no objective goodness) and, in accordance with the standard abolitionist rationale, possibly a misleading and even dangerous way of speaking at that. To embrace the elimination of moralism on such grounds would be tantamount to a consequentialism, which is itself a form of moralism.[[33]](#footnote-33) Hence, an error theorist who argues that either a fictionalist or an abolitionist regime would be a *good* thing is just as misguided as one who argues that either retaining or eliminating moralism would be the *right* thing to do.

**Cleaving Yet Closer to the Cliff**

Avoiding the language of morals and other values, and substituting the language of desires and “liking,” is the method I have been advocating for eliminating moralism from our thinking and behavior. But even that is not enough. For our psyches, and hence our lives, are saturated with moralism.[[34]](#footnote-34) Hence if we wish to uproot moralism, we must make a greater effort still. For example, if I encounter a meat-eater who defends the practice by asserting that other animals are not capable of experiencing pain or distress or suffering – which is false – or that the Bible condones meat-eating – which, true or false, is surely not logically relevant or at least not logically decisive – I discover in myself a kind of contempt for that person’s intellect. And when I examine this contempt, I am impressed by its phenomenological affinity to the *moral* contempt or outrage I spontaneous feel for the meat-eater’s meat eating. Am I not, then, also feeling moral contempt for the meat-eater’s ignorance and illogic? Similarly, am I not myself morally prideful in making my own assertions and inferences? But this will never do for a moral abolitionist.

What I have come up with as a *modus operandi*, therefore, is to try to refrain from assertions like “This is true” or “You are being irrational” and replace them with “This is what I believe and here’s why” or “I don’t see how that follows. Could you explain?” This retreat to belief is of course analogous to my switching from moralist and other normative talk to talk about my desires. The difference is that the psychologizing and subjectifying I am doing now is epistemic rather than metaphysical, since the humility it manifests is purely instrumental and not indicative of a disbelief in truth and rationality. Hence also I am more tempered in my beliefism than in my desirism. I don’t feel it incumbent on me or us in strict truthfulness to refrain from baldly asserting that 2 + 2 = 4, whereas I do feel so constrained about asserting that kicking the dog is wrong. Even so, we need not pound somebody on the head with the former, while I would forcefully express my displeasure and intervene to prevent the latter.

But moralism is more pervasive still. Consider so-called thick concepts, which piggy-back descriptive notions with an evaluative connotation.[[35]](#footnote-35) Thus, to call someone a liar is implicitly to condemn them. However, “lying” is first and foremost only a description, namely, of the act of saying something that you believe to be false for the purpose of convincing someone else that it is true. My advice for the aspiring moral abolitionist, therefore, is to put all of our thick concepts on a reducing diet and get rid of that unsightly moral fat. But this is more a matter of mind than of vocabulary. We cannot “abolish” the use of all such words and concepts since we would be left practically speechless. But a “thin” vocabulary would be quite adequate for expressing our preferences. And isn’t this a delightful prospect, especially for a society: to be able to speak forthrightly yet without accusatory judgment? “You are lying, and I wish you would stop it (and here’s why, etc.)” rather than (in effect) “You dirty liar.”

This ends my brief survey of what I consider to be the true scope of moral abolitionism if it is to be effective. I have argued that moralism is so widespread and entrenched (perhaps even “wired in”) that we must go to extremes to expunge it. I have also tried to convince you that moralism is so baneful on balance (to what I and, I suspect, you most care about) that you, like me, will be motivated to go to these extremes. Eliminating explicitly moralist language is only the most obvious first step, for moralism can be found in the way we use almost any vocabulary. The ultimate goal, however, is not the reform of speech but the removal of an attitude from our psyche, and hence of its influence on our behavior and the world. Thus do I commend desirism to your consideration and experimentation: Try it, you might like it.

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1. Mackie 1977, Hinckfuss 1987, Garner (1994) 2014, Joyce 2001, Moeller 2009, Marks 2013a, Blackford 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Marks 2013a. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This assumption has been challenged. For example, Stich 2008 has suggested that the belief in morality is peculiar to Western culture, Finlay 2008 that the assumption of the belief’s prevalence is peculiar to antipodean philosophers, and Sarkissian et al. 2011 that the assumption of the belief’s prevalence is peculiar to the folks like me who declaim against ... the belief’s presumed prevalence! The present volume presumes that these challenges have been met or at least not been proven. And in any case some people clearly do believe in morality as I have characterized it, so my remarks are addressed to them. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I certainly was, and in both capacities, when I first had my “anti-epiphany” of the unreality of morality. I relate the story in Marks 2013c. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Marks 2013b and Marks 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I thank Bill Irwin for vigorous debate on this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I take egoism to be the “enlightened” form of self-interest, whereas selfishness – when not just the generic term for caring about oneself – would be the “unenlightened” form. So, under normal circumstances, taking the biggest piece of the pie for oneself would be selfish because short- and narrow-sighted, while an egoist would share equally with everyone since this would likely serve her best interests in the long run (by helping her cultivate circumspection and self-control, keeping her weight down, not alienating others, etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Making a recommendation to someone else is also a behavior of one’s own, of course, so complications can arise. For example, you might conclude, after careful reflection, that, if you were me, you would, after careful reflection, want to lie. This suggests that you recommend that I lie. But you might also conclude, after careful reflection, that you wanted me to tell the truth. This suggests that you recommend that I tell the truth. What to do? The desirist answer depends on (the relative strength of) another desire, namely, how much, after careful reflection, you want to be completely honest with me. If this desire were stronger than your desire that I tell the truth, then, other things equal, you might make no recommendation yay or nay but simply explain to me why you felt stymied. If you were more desirous of *my* telling the truth than of *your* telling the truth, then, ironically, you might lie to me or mislead me by recommending that I tell the truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I need not even say “*other* animals” since I don’t think most of us would, under most contemporary conditions, care to be cannibals either! [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Although it could do so *deceptively* under exceptional conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Lederman 2014 appears to be doing this, but in fact his main point is a different one (personal communication), about the rationality of desirism, with which I agree. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cf. Dworkin 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I sought to circumvent them at the very outset by reformulating the central question of ethics as “How *shall* we live” rather than “How *ought* we live?” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Pigliucci 2013’s definition of philosophical analysis as “a matter of critical reflection on empirically underdetermined issues.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Marks 2013a, chs. 3 and 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The exacerbation of disagreement is not the only problem, however, since there can also be a stifling of healthy conflict and change from the hardening of attitudes in the absence of disagreement – conative (as well as cognitive) sclerosis, if you will. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I thank Mitchell Silver (personal communication) for reminding me of this. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cf. Nietzsche: “Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been - namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir …” (*Beyond Good and Evil,* trans. Walter Kaufman, [New York: Vintage, 1966], sec. 6). Whether or not my own philosophy of desirism is a “great” one, I have attempted to discern the purely personal causes of my predilection for it in the “Ad Hominem Addendum” to Marks 2013b. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cf. Joyce 2001: “I do not pretend to have established the truth of this claim with any assurance, but rather to have proposed considerations in its favor” (p. 222). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “Or narcissism?” asks Richard Garner (personal communication). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Thus Joyce 2001:

The whole point of [morality, although Joyce at this point in his monograph is describing the function of “the moral *fictive* stance” since he, like me, denies the existence of morality as such] is that it is a strategy for staving off inevitable human fallibilities in instrumental deliberation. Without the stance, the knave [Joyce’s stand-in for “the average person”] will be vulnerable – he will make mistakes; he will rationalize to himself poor decisions; he might get what he immediately desires, but not what he values; he will defect on deals and he will pay the price. (p. 223) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “moral thinking … suits our psychological configuration [and so] can be fast and frugal” (Joyce 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Perhaps this is a change from humanity’s previous circumstances. (Moeller 2009 alludes to Dylan to this effect: “the times they are a-changin’” (p. 108).) Thus, if we do not take control of our own destiny by eliminating or at least moderating our moralism, evolution/nature might do it for us by wiping us out. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. A scientist would see my question as substantive rather than rhetorical. But I am skeptical about science’s capacity to answer the *general* question of morality’s versus amorality’s relative efficacy. And one reason for my skepticism is the perennially contested nature of the concepts involved; thus, some ethicists would label the *caring* attitude as the truly *moral* one, either intrinsically or because of its instrumental efficacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Or Circe’s? Aristotle appears to have erred in attributing this advice to Calypso, for in Homer’s *Odyssey* it is Circe who warns Odysseus about Scylla and Charybdis, and Odysseus does not meet Calypso until after the encounter with them. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Hinckfuss 1987 drew explicit attention to the fact that “certain words of constraint that are commonly used in making moral statements can also be used within contexts that are logically unrelated to morality.” However, he also observed that “'ought' and 'should' do not change meaning as we move from moral to non-moral discourse.” I (unlike Hinckfuss) am urging on that basis that we might want to avoid using them altogether. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. And have done so; see e.g. Marks 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. I expand on this in Marks 2013d. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. What I have called the moral mode might be viewed as an occasional variant of moral fictionalism, as it is used only on particular occasions for strategic purposes. But I think that is not quite right since the moral fictionalist is indulging in a pretense even as regards his own awareness, whereas the user of moral mode is well aware of speaking only hypothetically. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. And yet one may wonder what would be the correct analysis of, for example, the violent protests around the world against the publication by a Danish newspaper in 2005 of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Of course I do not want to be so “scrupulous” as to impose on others an off-putting hence counterproductive political correctness. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Blackford (2016); cf. Mackie 1977, pp. 53-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Consequentialisms hold that one *ought* to do whatever will have the best consequences. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Cf. Pettit and Knobe 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See Kirchin 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)