Morality's Final Hour

A defense of moral concept-abolitionism in response to error-theory

Abstract

In this dissertation I will be evaluating whether and how moral-concept abolitionism can be a satisfactory answer to the now-what question for moral-error theory. The version of error-theory most people will be familiar with was forwarded by Mackie (1977). Error-theorists are committed to the idea that first-order moral claims are truth-apt, they are trying to refer to some fact out there in the world, but since an ontological investigation does not provide one with moral facts, all moral claims are wrong by default. This leads into the 'now-what' question: what are we to do with our moral language once we accept the error-theory. I will forgo arguing that the known version of the error-theory is plausible or true, since I expect those interested in the now-what question to already have accepted the error-theory. Moral-concept abolitionism is one among the possible answers to the now-what question. It recommends we jettison moral concepts from our language for diverging reasons.

I start my investigation with Anscombe's *'Modern Moral Philosophy'* (1958) in which I argue she forwards an error-theory and her own answers to the now-what question. Her error-theory follows from a historical analysis, rather than an ontological one like Mackie's (1977). Second, I will evaluate how Anscombe's abolitionism compares to the work of abolitionists that are responding to Mackie, as well as show their significant differences, their incommensurability. These differences lead me to demarcate two distinct forms of abolitionism.

Anscombe's version, soft-abolitionism, recommends we jettison moral language, but also provides criteria to meaningfully reacquire moral thoughts and talk. I argue these criteria would not be accepted by modern abolitionists for multiple reasons: moral language, as well as the positive account of virtue Anscombe envisions, is at risk of being elitist, authoritarian, and ineffective, which is detrimental to time-sensitive issues such as climate change. I call the position that recommends jettisoning moral language, full stop, hard-abolitionism. I will compare the nuances of both soft- and hard-abolitionism and conclude that while they offer different merits as an answer to the now-what question, the concerns raised by hard-abolitionists lead me to conclude that, at least when deciding between forms of abolitionism, the modern hard-abolitionist version holds the better cards. I conclude that while both forms of abolitionism could be a satisfactory answer to the now-what question, hard-abolitionism is the more viable abolitionism in the face of our current problems.

1. Anscombe's call for Abolitionism

I will start my investigation of moral concept abolitionism by engaging with a version of it that predates Mackie's moral error-theory as a whole by about twenty years: Anscombe's '*Modern Moral Philosophy*'. I evaluate the first two proposals she makes (1958: 1):

1. We should at present stop doing moral philosophy, at least until we have a more complete understanding of moral psychology.
2. We should jettison our notions of *morally* ought and *morally* should, provided this is psychologically possible, since they are remnants of an earlier conception of ethics that no longer generally survives.

These charges are very serious, they put an axe at the root of moral philosophy as commonly understood. I will evaluate the reasoning behind these charges, and I will argue that they should be interpreted as Anscombe forwarding her own moral error-theory, albeit *avant la lettre.*

1.1 Why no more moral philosophy?

Firstly, considering her decree to stop doing moral philosophy altogether until we have moral psychology sorted out, Anscombe's main concern is the disconnect between Aristotle's '*Ethics'* and modern day moral philosophy. We first encounter the notion of 'Moral' in Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics, Book II)*, but it plays a different role within his system than in those of modern theorists. Aristotle distinguishes between intellectual virtues, like open-mindedness, inquisitiveness, and intellectual rigor, and moral virtues, like honesty, compassion, kindness, and courage. Under modern moral philosophical systems, failure to display any of these qualities could be considered a moral defect, it is *morally* blameworthy.

For Aristotle, it may certainly be blameworthy if you are not inquisitive or open-minded enough in a context where proper application of the virtues would bring about a better world, but that does not make it *morally* blameworthy. We could blame people for a great number of things they do, but not all of these are cases of moral blame. Failure to display an intellectual virtue does not instantiate a moral violation. The notion of moral blame does not appear in Aristotle but is very common in the writings of Ethicists like Mill, Hume and Kant. If Aristotle had something in mind akin to these modern interpretations, why do we not find it in his work?. Anscombe concludes from this that we cannot look to Aristotle to explain the notions of Moral that modern moral philosophers use, all of which are problematic in her eyes. In the interest of time management, I will forgo discussing her individual attacks on Kant, Hume, Butler, and Mill, because her most important point is that they all share problematic conceptual entailments.

Anscombe's general problem with these thinkers' lines of thought is that they are missing a step to move an action from the realm of brute facts to the moral sphere. However, in order for this step to make sense, we need a positive account of virtue, and clear conditions for when a moral actor succeeds or fails to display the relevant virtue. While this is lacking, the conceptual move does not make sense.

This is where she argues it gets problematic, because before such a sophisticated account could even be given, we require a lot more insight into moral psychology. People use moral propositions all the time, but the framework of reference they belong to is fuzzy: there are a lot of concepts involved of which the content is hotly debated and at present unclear. Until we have conceptual clarity, we cannot do meaningful moral philosophy. Normative ethics is littered with fuzzy concepts that are commonplace despite being unclear, the ones Anscombe has in mind are things like 'action', 'intention', 'pleasure', 'wanting', but the list goes on. There is a lot of difficult conceptual analysis on the road from here to there.

However, Anscombe argues that if a positive account of virtue is on offer, if we understand the psychology of moral reasoning, if it is clear when and why an action is or is not virtuous, and whether this in turn makes the moral actor a good or a bad person, we can do moral philosophy once more (1958: 4). Sadly, those criteria can not be met at present, so it is time to lay moral philosophy aside. In the meantime, I expect people could resolve their issues without bringing up morality even once, but that is a point for later.

1.2 Why jettison our moral oughts?

Second, I evaluate Anscombe's argument for her second claim (2) that we should jettison our moral vocabulary, since it belongs to a conception of Ethics that no longer generally survives. The argument relates back to the worrying disconnect between Aristotle and modern moral philosophers like Hume, Mill and Kant. What could have possibly happened in the meantime? The conceptions of *morally ought* and *morally should* that we find in the Enlightenment philosophers are rooted in the Christian domination of the philosophical canon. Under a Christian framework of reference, where one accepts a divine decree conception of morality, these terms start to make sense. Suppose one holds the devout belief that God exists and that morality is His decree. In such a situation, it is immediately clear why this would have a motivating force on the actor. They cannot deny morality matters, since it flows out of God. They truly feel beckoned by it. However, one could simply point out that devout christians are few and far between these days, at the very least we can say it is no longer the dominant system of thought and an appeal to the divine is rarely a serious argument anymore.

The reason propositions that contain *morally ought* feel so queer is because they are imbued with meaning and motivational force by religious belief, and we live in a mostly secular society now. This by itself is not enough to stop using moral propositions. Simply because *morally ought* has lost the meaning that you are to do it by divine decree does not mean it has lost its psychological beckoning force. After all, there are a lot of secular moralists around today and if they are not moved by Anscombe's critique of poorly

conceptualized moral concepts, they will not be moved by the argument that their framework of reference is dependent on a God they do not believe in, for they are aware they do not believe in God and still feel compared by their moral framework. What the analysis does show is how statements about what *morally ought* to be the case no longer can be inferred from what is the case, since it is clear that the framework of reference moralists use for this is incoherent. As Anscombe argues, the force that is presently behind *morally ought* is merely mesmeric (1958: 6). We might be captivated by the idea, but there is nothing there.

Third, an important part of Anscombe's second charge is the *if*-clause: We should jettison our notions of *morally* ought and *morally* should, *provided this is psychologically possible.* Anscombe does not speak a lot about the psychological difficulty attempting to give up moral concepts would result in. There are some error-theorists that argue we should keep at least some of our moral judgment because they would be difficult to avoid (Lutz, 2014: 357). Anscombe does argue that there are clear advantages to a non-moral concept of 'ought', and I think this might make the transition easier.

We still talk about what acts we do and do not want to see or perform, without positing these have some kind of moral property in common, and this can still generate 'oughts'. This would be a different kind of ought than the moral ought that follows from a law conception of ethics. We can still talk about what we ought to do without morality, but it will be certain things rather than other things in virtue of what we want and what the circumstances are. According to Anscombe, we can still argue about what is reasonable to do without morality. All that we have to do is provide non-moral reasons that the interlocutor might understand and agree with. For example, if you want your car to run properly, you ought to change your oil every once in a while, if you want people to see you as trustworthy, you ought to keep your promises to them.

Without morality, there is no longer a canon of what one ought to do, but we can still recognize what behaviour we would like to promote and condemn, we can still recognize injustice, so we can still talk about what one ought to do. The 'ought' one forwards is an expression of a position on what is reasonable in a prudential sense, not an appeal to an undeniable divine decree, it can move people to agree with you without appealing to mesmeric force.This line of thinking is very similar to the 'prudential ought' that is often forwarded by error-theorists as an alternative to moralizing (e.g. Joyce 2005, Olson 2014, Kalf 2018). I believe this to solve the greatest hurdle in the psychological process of giving up moral concepts and thereby this section has served to alleviate possible worries about jettisoning moral oughts.

1.3 Anscombe's error-theory

I will extricate the claims from '*Modern Moral Philosophy'* that I believe to be constitutive of Anscombe's error-theory. There is something wrong with modern moral philosophy, and the error is so grave that the enterprise is best laid to rest. The way we generally use and think about terms like *morally ought* belong to a law conception of ethics. Such a conception of ethics is only coherent under the condition that there is a legislator. Some moral philosophers,

Kantians come to mind, might argue that the moral actor is a legislator to herself, but Anscombe rejects this idea. '*Whatever you do 'for yourself' may be admirable but it is not legislating'* (1958: 11). So again, a legislator is required, and historically this legislator was the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, after two thousand years of dominating western thought, these traditions have lost their foothold.

This makes our familiar moral framework of reference incoherent, since if one does not believe in God, one has no reason to live by the divine decree. This does not stop us from going through the motions as if the law conception of ethics is still valid, but behind the curtain, the system is incoherent. Simply, under the framework of modern moral philosophy, propositions that contain '*morally ought'* or '*morally should'* posit that there is something about an act that makes it so it would be wrong to not perform it, upon investigation we find that there is nothing that makes it so, since the beckoning force of this conception of morality comes from a god we do not believe in, and so, propositions that contain morally ought are wrong by default. We have ourselves an error-theory.

Anscombe's error-theory comes with its own answers to the 'now what' question. Her recommendation is that we should, at present, stop doing moral philosophy, jettison our moral vocabulary, and in this way she is a clear abolitionist. However, there are ways in which we could return to a moral framework of reference that makes sense, so her call for abolitionism is not driven by the idea that morality is irreparable and is thus more temperate than modern abolitionists.

In contrast to modern abolitionists, Anscombe provides a criterion by which we could do moral philosophy again: a positive account of virtue backed by a more complete understanding of moral psychology. When our moral framework would go through such a transformation, it exchanges moral oughts that are incoherent without belief in God, with moral oughts that are coherent because they are backed up by an account of virtue that then allows us to demarcate good from bad behaviour, provided we have a rigid account of the concepts involved. To be good is to be just and to be just is to do this and that and refrain from such and such behaviour. This line of thinking gave birth to the twentieth century school of virtue ethics, which still counts Anscombe amongst its fundamental influences. The crucial difference between Anscombe and later abolitionists is that she argues there will be a time where we can legitimately use moral language once again.

At this point, I believe there is utility in distinguishing between two different forms of abolitionism, the first one, Anscombe's version, I will call *soft* abolitionism, pointing to the fact that under this view, the abolition of moral concepts is a temporary resolution. The second form of abolitionism, which I will call *hard* abolitionism, holds that there are problems with morality that are so great we best jettison it anyway, and not even a positive account could overcome these problems. In this chapter I distinguished two forms of abolitionism that could both be answers to the now-what question. In the sections that follow, I will be defending hard-abolitionism and show what the problems are that lead some error-theorists to become hard-abolitionists.

2. Hard-Abolitionism

I will now discuss and defend some contemporary hard Abolitionist accounts that present problems for Anscombe and anyone that is optimistic about retaining moral language. I will mainly focus on the works of Ian Hinckfuss (1987), Nicholas Olsson Yaouzis (2019) and Thomas Pölzer (2019) in my defense of Abolitionism as an answer to the now what question. I decided to use these authors specifically since I find their lines of argument flow into each other. For clarity, I will formalize the arguments I will discuss in this chapter below.

(1) While we generally expect morality to be conducive to our social relations, there are reasons to believe moralizing makes our societies more elitist, authoritarian and intolerant towards disagreeing others (Hinckfuss).

(2) In cases where we disagree what is of moral importance, we generally expect we can refer to the work of moral experts, but if the error-theory is true, this expertertise starts to look rather fishy (Olsson Yaouzis)

(3) It is questionable whether the debate between different answers to the now-what question could be solved by means of general reflections, so case studies of particular moral problems, such as climate change, will be more conducive (Pölzer)

2.1 Hinckfuss's 'To Hell With Morality'

At first glance, the idea of abolitionism seems quite unappealing, after all, people are generally convinced that moralizing makes our society better. The common-sense understanding is that if we all abided by our moral beliefs, society would be better for it, so the call for Abolitionism seems bold and perhaps unnecessary to most. The idea is that people benefit from morality, so a satisfactory answer to the 'now-what' question must either outweigh the benefit or dismiss it in a convincing fashion.

Some Abolitionists argue the exact opposite of the common-sense understanding, claiming that moralizing makes our societies more elitist, authoritarian, dishonest, and will cultivate a disdain for those that display moral failure. These points were made most radically by Hinckfuss (1987), and I will evaluate his arguments from elitism and authoritarianism.

The argument that morality is elitist stems from the fact that moralizing exalts the behaviour of the upper class, while at the same time condemning the kind of behaviour that is usually performed by the have-nots. Moralizing under most modern frameworks of reference, at least those that preach categorical commitments, will tell us we morally ought to never steal, but this makes the mother that steals to feed her starving child a bad person. Many moral realists might still defend the mother, but imagine a homeless man with a heroïn addiction, addiction is commonly viewed as a sign of moral weakness. A responsible (virtuous) person does not become an addict, so the heroïn addict is morally to blame for his situation. The rich can tell themselves they are good people because they never steal in the brute sense of the word, they would not give in to the temptation of highly addictive

substances, and this serves to explain the class divide in their eyes: the poor are poor because they are not virtuous, and since it is their own fault, the rich feel morally discharged from providing aid to them. After all, why would one provide aid to 'bad' people?

The argument that morality is authoritarian stems from the fact we teach our children to be moral, and reward them with affection when they are, while punishing children that display immoral behaviour. This causes us to associate moral behaviour with feeling pleasant and immoral behaviour with feeling unpleasant or guilty. Beyond the children, within a social context when we take a stance on issues we believe to be of moral significance, abortion for example, we generally expect others to agree with us, lest they be immoral. However, and here Hinckfuss argues as Anscombe did, it makes no sense to say one's moral beliefs have a beckoning force on other people, this is only the case if they share those moral beliefs (1987: 35). If the interlocutor has different moral beliefs, an appeal to the morality of the issue might only be incendiary.

I will show what I mean by having a look at the public debate on abortion. People that are pro-life and pro-choice might agree on the brute facts like 'some women would like to have an abortion', but since they disagree on what is of moral importance here, the fetus' right to life or the mother's right to choose, viewing the disagreement through a moral lens will only result in name-calling and perhaps violence. As Anscombe argues, we cannot meaningfully talk about the just thing to do without a positive account of justice.
In contrast, such a positive account would not satisfy Abolitionists like Hinckfuss.They would argue it only serves to make the authoritarianism and elitism morality fosters more extreme. I believe this skepticism is not unfounded. Suppose a positive account of justice would be on offer, I fear it would only serve to silence one side of the discussion in public debates that are by their nature an open affair[1].

An important consideration to be made here is that Anscombe might not see this as a problem. An account of how we are to live is bound to be authoritarian and elitist, irrespective of whether it is backed up by the proper conceptual framework. In the case of contempt for poor and addicted people, this is obviously a problem, but it seems to border on bad faith to judge the possibilities of such a framework by only this example. Suppose the positive account is anti-discrimination. I generally do not have a problem thinking I myself am more 'moral' than racist or sexist people, where 'moral' is a vague sense of superiority, nor do I have a problem believing they would better alter their behaviour.

Unfortunately, more often than not, moralizing accounts are not used to shame bigots into being more accepting, but to explain one's way out of the uncomfortable idea one might be contributing to injustice. This line of thinking is backed up by recent developments in social psychology, such as the work of Claude Steele (1988). His research shows that when people are faced with a situation, such as racial injustice, that might lead them to believe their conduct is morally wrong, or that they might be an oppressor, Steele calls thoughts such as these a threat to the self, they are more likely to adopt new moral beliefs than to alter their behaviour. An upper-class white man that hears about the disparity between white people and people of color that go to university is more likely to point to racial inferiority than to acknowledge he sits at a privileged position within an oppressive system. Moralizing is often

[1] This line of thought is very similar to the argument by Olsson Yaouzis I cover later, so I will return to it then.

a choppy way out of cognitive dissonance, rather than a code to live by to better reflect certain values.

The general idea is that moralizing is conducive to maintaining our social relations, but if we find morality to display all the problems Hinckfuss lays bare, if it stagnates public debates, is incendiary to them, and is problematically authoritarian and elitist, this presents a serious problem not only to moral realists, but also to those that are drawn to Anscombe's idea of a rigid positive account, such as the modern day school of virtue ethics. Beyond that, it is a concern that prudentially ought to be considered by anyone answering the 'now-what' question. In the case that moralizing is not conducive to social relations, as both realists and virtue ethicists propose, but instead unhelpful or even harmful, a strong counterargument is required to dismiss the thought of abolitionism so easily as it has often been done.

2.2 A Moralist Defense: Moral Expertise

This idea that moralizing accounts make resolving public disputes more difficult is by no means uncontroversial. Those that would defend Morality[2] might object that moral philosophy is an excellent tool for dissolving public tensions, since we can rely on expert accounts by academic moral philosophers. I expect Anscombe could rally herself behind this line of thinking, provided her criteria for the positive account are met first. This so-called expert defense is a beloved tool in the moralist's arsenal. Contemporary abolitionists, such as, but not limited to[3] Nicholas Olsson Yaouzis (2019) provide us with cogent critiques to condemn the expert defense and I believe the objections on the table to be a problem for both the common-sense understanding of morality and Anscombe's positive account. In this section I will discuss two of them. Namely, there is nothing out there in the world for moral experts to identify, and secondly, since there is nothing for moral experts to identify, we have reasons to believe their enterprise has a different purpose than it purports to have.

As for the first objection to the idea of the expert defense, we should be very suspicious of anyone that claims to have a greater sensitivity to recognize moral facts. This seems fishy to any error-theorist, because if the error-theory is true, there is nothing at all to be an expert on. What then does it signify to claim you or someone else is a moral expert?

Under our modern paradigm of political philosophy, especially in the United States, being a moral expert approximately equates to being an expert on Rawls. Rawlsian political philosophy conceptualizes justice as a feature of social relations that is not decided on by all parties, but identified by those that are sensitive to recognizing its nature. However, if the error-theory is true, which means there are no moral facts, there is nothing for the Rawlsian expert to identify, so we are left to wonder whatever he *is* doing.

This leads into Yaouzis' second objection, the idea of moral expertise under our current paradigm of Rawlsian political philosophy contributes to preventing challenges to the status-quo, and that this is a key factor in its continued popularity, despite its deficiencies. This is to my insight the most complicated argument against moralizing, and it requires some

[2] With big 'M', to indicate we are talking about the dominant project, which purports to be true morality.
[3] Hinckfuss makes a similar argument (1987: 30)

introduction. Many different objections of this kind have been given in the philosophical cannon that predate error-theory, examples include Rousseau's '*A Discourse on Inequality',* (1887) and Nietzsche's *'On the Genealogy of Morality'* (1877)[4], which aimed to display problematic aspects of moral philosophy in their own time, many of those aspects still persisting today. Since we are currently dealing with the aftermath of Rawls' '*A Theory of Justice'* (1971), Yaouzis' argument is given as a reply to Charles Mills (2005), one of Rawls' well-established critics.

The concern at hand is that Rawlsian ideal theory obscures social injustice, rather than helping to recognize it like it purports to. As Mills (2009) reports, all comments Rawls made on racism in his major works could fit on about six pages. This is especially poignant in the light of the American civil-rights movement that was very prominent during the time Rawls wrote 'A Theory of Justice', we could give Rawls the benefit of the doubt, but sceptics have a reason to assume willful ignorance. A great deal has been written to complicate the debate on Rawls and racial injustice, (examples from both sides of the debate include Shelby (2013), Farrelly (2020)) but the crux of the debate is that Rawls' theory of justice is an ideal theory (Rawls 1971: 8) and thus holds that we need an ideal conception of justice before we can apply it to acute injustices out there in the world, which are a matter of non-ideal theory. This might seem unproblematic, it is reminiscent of Anscombe's proposal for a positive account. Both Anscombe and Rawls agree we need clear terminology before we address the real world, lest we get conceptually confused.

The problem with this line of thinking, according to Mills (2005, 179) is that the institutions and experts that work under the Rawlsian framework never moved on to non-ideal theory. The acute injustices that the American civil-rights movement aimed to address are still very much out there and while the Rawlsian might be able to identify injustices in accordance with Rawls' theory, the conceptual toolkit available to move from the acute injustice to the idealized conception is severely lacking. Despite this deficiency, Rawlsian ideal theory remains immensely popular. Mills (2005, 170-172) postulates a possible explanation for the discrepancy between the theory's defects and its popularity.

> (1) The majority of students in American political philosophy departments are middle- to upper-class white males.
>
> (2) Members of historically disadvantaged groups have reason to be suspicious of ideal-theory, since it does not address the acute injustices they are concerned with.
>
> (3) There is no countervailing group interest within political philosophy departments that would motivate dissatisfaction with dominant paradigms and a resulting search for better alternatives.

As Yaouzis notes, it could be argued that Mills' postulate does not show Rawlsian political thought remains popular *because* it alienates members of minority groups. The remaining problem for the Rawlsian is than that at least Mills second assumption ((2) above)

[4] Nietzsche's argument is quite similar to Anscombe, since it is based in historical analysis of Christianity

is highly plausible, and since members of historically disadvantaged groups have reason to be suspicious of the Rawlsian framework and the resulting conception of justice, it follows that they will have a diverging concepting and make different judgments. The Rawlsian philosopher and the non-white, non-male layperson will have incommensurable ideas on how to arrange a just society. This is not a problem by itself, people often have incommensurable positions.

The problems arise when we look at political disagreement through a Rawlsian lense. For as Yaouzis notes (2019, 173.), under a Rawlsian framework the political philosopher is to questions of social justice what the grandmaster is to chess. It is not a problem for the legitimacy of the Rawlsian's claim that they have identified the nature of justice that laypersons might contest. The insights of laypersons are irrelevant, they are not skilled enough at the game[5] for their thoughts on playing it properly to be taken seriously.

Yaouzis contests this appeal to expertise by returning to Mackie's argument from relativity (1977, 36.), where Mackie argues that the differences in moral beliefs between group members within a complex society is best explained by viewing moral beliefs as projections of approval and disapproval to particular actions. People that believe stealing is wrong have not identified an intrinsic property of the act, but have projected their disdain for the idea of stealing to individual cases of it. Moral facts are not required in the explanation.

In summary of the argument, Rawlsian academics claim to have identified the nature of justice. However, if the error-theory is true, and provided we can explain moral disagreement very well without an appeal to expertise, this enterprise is starting to look fishy. The Rawlsian claims to have grounds that make their moral beliefs in some way more legitimate than those non-Rawlsians, which is nothing more than a stick to wield: if laypersons disagree with the conception of justice Rawls has on offer, they simply do not understand how justice works. A main problem of Rawls's theory is that it seems to gloss over historical injustices in its idealizing thought experiments[6]. This leads non-white, non-male philosophers that are more familiar with social injustices than the average middle-class white male Rawlsian to turn away from the framework. However, this is not a problem for the framework, since those that work under it are more sensitive to the nature of justice than a layperson. If the layperson wants to be taken seriously by political philosophers in their talking about justice, they should read Rawls. In this way, the Rawlsian framework is a key factor in preventing challenges to the status-quo.

Up until this point of the chapter, I have argued that morality is incendiary to public debates, stagnates their development (both 2.1), and excludes people that disagree with the dominant framework (2.2). These are only general reflections, and I would be overplaying my hand if I purported this to be an open and shut case. Not every moral judgment is harmful in the ways I have discussed. Not all uses of 'moral' hang together, though they do share family resemblance. Moralists could still put the benefits of moralizing in the balance and take their chances holding on to the framework. In what follows, I will present a concern directly related to the above-mentioned structural problems of moralizing that moralists will undoubtedly agree is one of our greatest puzzles to solve at present: climate change.

[5] As in language game (Wittgenstein 1953: PI23)
[6] Such worries were also addressed by Young (1990)

2.3 Hard-abolitionism and climate change: a response to Pölzer

It seems doubtful that we could resolve the debate on the retention of moral language by way of general reflections. As the argument that morality is authoritarian shows, many of such general reflections could be fielded by both hard-abolitionists and more hopeful error-theorists such as Fictionlists (i.e. Joyce (2019), Conservationists (i.e Olson (2011)), and Anscombe's soft-abolitionism, since they hold different aspects of the reflection to be crucial. Different error-theorists will draw different conclusions in the face of the same brute facts. It might be more useful to the current debate to proceed by looking at case studies, such as Pölzer (2019: 203) suggests. The specific case he has in mind is whether moralizing is conducive to our acting against climate change. I will briefly evaluate how he arrives at his conclusion, and explicate my objections.

Pölzer argues as follows: Abolitionists generally view moral judgments as harmful, while Conservationists and Fictionalists generally view moral judgments as beneficial. This is their basis as answers to the now-what question. Pölzer tests these views against the moral judgment that people in industrialized countries have a moral obligation to act against climate change. He argues moral judgments *could* have an effect on our actions in one of two ways.

(1) By prompting immediate action
(2) By affecting our thoughts and talk about problems

Firstly, I evaluate how and whether, according to Pölzer, the moral judgment we have an obligation to act against climate change has an immediate effect on our immediate actions. He lays out three criteria that a particular action must meet to a certain extent in order to trigger an affective reaction (2019: 207).

(1) The harm is inflicted intentionally, the agent wants to harm the victim
(2) The affected people are socially similar, perceived as one of us
(3) The action can be processed in a cognitively effortless way

Immediately, it becomes clear how polluting behaviour does not meet these criteria. The harm of global warming is not inflicted intentionally, it is merely a byproduct of trying to survive in an industrialized world. Generally, we do not emit greenhouse gasses because we want the sea-level to rise and destroy less-developed low lying countries such as Bangladesh, we emit greenhouse gasses because we have to eat, travel and live somehow and there are no alternative means to these ends. This already points to the problem with the second criterion. Namely, the people most affected by the increasing number of natural disasters as a result from global warming generally live in developing countries, far away from the greatest emitters. The victims are very dissimilar to us, so this creates a problem for the affective reaction. Finally, I would argue climate change, out of all of the problems we are facing at present, is the hardest to process cognitively. It is a sublime problem, in the sense that its scale and complexity overwhelm our ability to comprehend. It is an impossible task for the individual, and our scientific models have no way to causally determine the road from causing emissions to instantiating harm for particular cases (Jamieson 1992: 148). These

considerations show how the moral obligation to act against climate change does not prompt an affective reaction.

Secondly, I evaluate Pölzer's claim that beyond the lack of an affective reaction, the moral obligation to act against climate change has little influence on our thoughts and talk. Moral judgments could possibly influence our thoughts and talk if they are either difficult to avoid, or inconvenient (Lutz, 2014: 357-358), or if they cause us to be less tolerant to disagreeing others (Hinckfuss 1987, Garner 2007, Olsson Yaouzis 2019). Pölzer argues that the moral obligation to act against climate does none of these things.

As for Pölzer's first argument, citizens of industrialized countries can easily avoid judging themselves morally obliged to act against climate change for a number of reasons. This can be supported by simply pointing to the fact that around half the people in industrialized countries do not consider climate change to be a moral issue at all. (Markowitz 2012) Alternatively, even if one considers it to be a moral issue, this could be the case because one believes future policy to combat climate change will hamper economic growth or require solidarity between groups, which the political right has come to equate with communism. It might be a moral issue to some to *not* act against climate change.

For the second criterion, being inconvenient to avoid, Pölzer argues the moral obligation to act against climate change does not meet it. Unless your social group is particularly dense with environmentalists, denying you have a moral obligation to act against climate change will unlikely get you into trouble, and Pölzer argues this is for the same reason why the moral judgment is not likely to make your less tolerant towards disagreeing others, which is a main concern for abolitionists. The problem is that the climate change debate is, relative to other social problems such as racism and classism, still in its infancy. Since the brute facts about climate change do not trigger an affective reaction, people generally view the position that we have a moral obligation to act against climate change as subjective. Pölzer argues it is not a problem, in the context of being inconvenient or decreasing tolerance, if one denies this moral obligation, since people generally regard people's positions on controversial moral issues to be subjective. Because the climate change debate is so abstract and underdeveloped, it does not deserve the attention it requires. As Gilbert (2006) notes, if climate change was caused by gay sex or murdering kittens, millions of protesters would be massing in the streets.

From these considerations, Pölzer concludes that considering oneself morally obliged to act against climate change has no significant influence on the life of people in industrialized nations. He then raises the question whether it might simply not matter whether error-theorists make moral judgments. We might not be able to make any general points about this, but for the case of climate change, Pölzer concludes it might simply not matter. I agree with Pölzer's arguments and his main point that case-studies rather than general reflections are most conducive to the debate on what to do with morality. However, I disagree with his conclusion that it might not matter for error-theorists whether they make moral judgments in the climate change debate, due to what I call 'the Acute Problem Objection'.

We could grant Pölzer that moral judgments about climate change are neither beneficial, as the Fictionalist and Conservationist believe, or harmful by themselves, as the Abolitionist purports. My objection follows from his conclusion. Whether people consider themselves morally obliged to act against climate change will generally have no significant

influence on their lives. He believes this does not help solve the debate, but I argue this is an argument *for* Abolitionism, because the problem of climate change is already great and ever-increasing. The time we have to solve tensions in the climate change debate before damage becomes irreversible is very limited and as Pölzer also notes (2019: 210-212), there are ways to boost people's non-moral motivation to act against climate change. It seems ludacris to still hold on to a conception of morality that does not refer, if we generally think it solves problems for us, but it turns out it does not, and while there are non-moral ways to address these problems. Pölzer concludes that more case-studies are required to say something meaningful about moralizing in general, and I certainly agree, but it seems clear as day to me that doing away with an ineffective tool in a time-sensitive issue is more conducive to solving it, than clinging to the tool.

To conclude this chapter, the arguments raised here serve to show where hard-abolitionists are coming from, what their main concerns are. I believe these worries cannot simply be swept under the rug and serve to show Abolitionism's legitimacy as an answer to the now-what question. At least, hard-abolitionism's legitimacy: the legitimacy of Anscombe's version is to my insight still in tension with arguments that stem from concerns about authoritarianism, elitism, and 'moral expertise', that the virtue-ethicist is left to dismiss in a satisfying way. This might not prove an impossible task, but it will involve biting *some* bullets.

3. Abolitionism as a possible viable strategy

In this final chapter, I will evaluate the plausibility of abolitionism as an answer to the now-what question. At present, there are no hard demarcation criteria in error-theory to differentiate satisfactory from unsatisfactory answers. In absence of these criteria, I will be testing my interpretation of hard-abolitionism against the four criteria set out by Kalf in '*Moral Error Theory' (*2018: 210). These criteria are not the end-all, be-all way to tell an answer to the now what question is acceptable, but rather a useful tool for reflection. I will evaluate how a hard-abolitionist account handles these criteria, as well as note some differences with the soft-abolitionist account.

I. Their ability to provide a bulwark against practical irrationality
II. Their ability to provide a bulwark against lapses in moral motivation
III. Their ability to allow us to communicate with people that share our outlook on life
IV. Their ability to allow us to communicate with people that do not share our views

3.1 Practical Irrationality & Lapses in Moral Motivation

Firstly, one of the supposed benefits of moral language is that it allows us to state certain non-moral facts in a particularly economical way (Pölzer 2019: 206, Lutz 2014: 357-358). Abolitionists, at least hard-abolitionists, are committed to the idea that we should communicate what we want for ourselves and others in a clear and honest non-moral fashion. Abolitionists generally desire to live in a world of mutually beneficial coöperation as much as proponents of other answers to the now what question, this is referred to as the 'fundamental desire' in the literature (Mackie 1977: 111, Kalf 2018: 164). However, Abolitionists cannot use economical moral terms to communicate this. Being a revolutionary[7] abolitionist requires great cognitive effort. This leads into a problem with the abolitionist motivation, since they cannot use the proposition '*stealing is wrong*', but have to use a proposition akin to '*I desire to live in a world of mutually beneficial coöperation, and stealing is ill-conducive to this desire, so I should not steal'*. This might lead Abolitionists to be tempted into acting against their fundamental desire if, on a particular occasion, I get great value out of defecting and our mutually beneficial coöperation is not impaired in a way I find significant enough, it would be tempting to be a free-rider (Kalf: 2018, 191-192).

A similar problem arises when evaluating Abolitionism's ability to provide a bulwark against lapses in moral motivation. As Kalf argues, the soundness of the second bulwark is in virtue of the first bulwark's soundness (2018: 214-215). Since hard-abolitionism cannot provide a bulwark against practical irrationality, it cannot provide this bulwark either.

I believe the objection to be legitimate, but it is part of a trade-off that is made when committing oneself to either soft- or hard-Abolitionism. A positive account like Anscombe envisions could deliver the goods in the sense that it could provide these bulwarks, but this would come at a cost many hard-Abolitionists might find difficult to swallow. The positive account could very well be elitist, authoritarian, or at the very least ineffective. I argue hard-Abolitionists like Hinckfuss, Yaouzis and Garner might bite the bullet here and accept that they cannot keep practical irrationality at bay at all times, if this means their conduct is ridded of the problems they are most concerned with. Beyond that, I see no reason to worry committed hard-abolitionists will often turn out to be free-riders without these bulwarks. After all, hard-abolitionists are aware of answers to the now-what question that can provide both bulwarks, but are too concerned about matters like oppression to accept them, for they might become oppressors with bulwarks against irrationality. Since they are primarily motivated by their anti-elitist, anti-authoritarian beliefs, I would argue they will seldom be free-riders.

[7] revolutionary here meaning it is a response to the error-theory.

3.2 Intra-group understanding

Third, I will evaluate Abolitionism's ability to communicate with people that share their outlook on life. To recap what that means, these people share the fundamental desire, they want to live in a world of mutually beneficial coöperation, they are committed to the error-theory, and they believe that the concerns about matters such elitism, authoritarianism, false expertise are so great we should jettison morality. Important to note is that Anscombe does not belong to the in-group on such an account of group-membership. Her account and the resulting call for abolitionism are not tied to the same concerns as the hard-abolitionists. She might be an error-theorist and share the fundamental desire, but there are incommensurable elements between her conclusions and those of, for example, Hinckfuss.

Returning to Abolitionism's ability to communicate with those that share our outlook on life, I argue it hinges on whether it turns out to be psychologically possible or not to live and speak in a nonmoral world. There are Abolitionists who hold that this can certainly be done, and does not take as much effort as we generally envision. For example, Garner argues that stopping to use moral language would be about as difficult as giving up on swearing, and certainly not as difficult as getting rid of an accent (2010: 232). Provided we could do as he proposes, and assuming the lack of bulwarks against practical irrationality and lapses in motivation does not make us into free-riders , I envision Abolitionists would have a way easier time talking about what they believe, mean, and desire than people still holding on to the common-sense understanding of morality.

3.3 Intergroup understanding

Finally, I evaluate Abolitionism's ability to communicate with people that do not belong to our meta-ethical in-group. In the previous section, I briefly mentioned some criteria for being a member of the in-group, those being (1) having the fundamental desire, (2) being an error-theorist, (3) convinced the problems with morality outweigh its benefits. I will forgo arguing how to deal with people who do not share the fundamental desire, since they will be insensitive to my point anyway, so I start by looking at non-error theorists that do share the fundamental desire. My personal experience tells me that the idea of moral-concept abolitionism sounds particularly queer to those people that are not already aware of and commited to the error-theory. Among my friends who have not read meta-ethics, or are not particularly concerned with matters of political philosophy, I often find myself defending this position. The argument I have found to be most cogent in these situations was delivered by Anscombe. As soon as non-philosophers realize their moral overlay is an inheritance from the Judeo-Christian domination of western-europe, they become quite suspicious of it. Concerns about elitism, oppression or false expertise are less palatable for a layperson[8].

How and why these things happen can not be processed in a cognitively effortless way, but every layperson I have encountered can easily assert they will not obey the divine

[8] Members of historically oppressed groups are of course quicker to recognize problems such as these, but since I mostly find myself defending Abolitionism against white upper-class men in their twenties, an appeal to their 'rational atheism' is more conducive to mutual understanding.

command, since they have no faith in the divine. The idea that you act like you believe in God while you do not is strange to anyone who sees it. This does not mean that all these laypersons eventually become hard-abolitionists, but it does serve to show abolitionists can communicate and defend their positions in relation to people who are not in the in-group.

Conclusion

I set out to show whether and how moral-concept abolitionism could be a satisfactory answer to the now-what question. I identified two distinct forms of abolitionism, hard and soft, and argued that the hard version is more defensible, since it flows out of error-theorists' concerns about elitism, authoritarianism and oppression. In order for this answer to be satisfactory, the worries that come with it had to be alleviated. Through the works of Hinckfuss, Olsson Yaouzis and Pölzer, I critiqued the common-sense view that morality is conducive to our social relations and solving political disputes. These critiques show why error-theorists would opt for hard-abolitionism as an answer to the now-what question. I argue these critiques serve to answer the ‘how’ part of my research question, though not yet exhaustively, since hard-abolitionists cannot provide bulwarks against practical irrationality and lapses in motivation. As I argued, since these error-theorists are motivated by anti-elitist, anti-authoritarian concerns, I believe they will seldom be tempted to be free-riders. This, to my insights, alleviates the worries one might initially have about jettisoning moral language. Moral-concept abolitionism can be a satisfactory answer to the now-what question for error-theorists that agree the concerns I displayed above outweigh the possible benefits of moralizing, and as my ‘Acute Problem Objection’ shows, we are in no position to wait for a generally accepted positive account in the face of the most pressing problem of our time.

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