Minimizing the misuse of morality

Jessica Isserow[1]

School of Philosophy, *Australian National University*

Introduction

According to moral error theorists, moral discourse is guilty of a systematic error, and so no positive first-order moral claims can be true. The striking consequence of a moral error theory is that nothing is morally right or wrong. Needless to say, this position doesn't exactly make for a good first impression; claims to the effect that there is nothing wrong with torturing kittens to pass the time are bound to strike us as counter-intuitive. Yet moral error theory has gained traction in recent years, and continues to rack up plausibility points.[2] Accordingly, many have thought it prudent to develop a contingency plan: if the moral error theory turns out to be true, then what ought we to do with our moral practices?

An increasingly popular response is to recommend that we do away with our moral practices altogether—that we cease using moral language, thinking moral thoughts, and invoking moral considerations when deliberating about what we ought to do. This is the route recommended by moral abolitionists, who take our moral practices to be harmful on balance (Hinckfuss 1987; Garner 1994, 2007; Greene 2002; Burgess 2007; Marks 2013; Ingram 2015). Since moral discourse can boast neither truth nor usefulness, abolitionists think that we have doubly good reason to get rid of it.[3] In their view, we ought to consign talk of moral rights and duties to the same scrap heap as talk of witches, phlogiston, and dragons.

Why think that our moral practices are on balance harmful, though? In defense of this claim, a common abolitionist strategy is to put forward an Argument from History (AFH). Though this style of argument is rarely laid out in a careful manner (more on which below), it comprises two key steps: a reminder of morality's supposedly grim past, and a warning of an equally grim future if appropriate action (i.e., abolition) is not taken. The first step is often anchored in concrete examples, which are taken to show that our

---

[2] Moral error theory is no longer, as Stephen Finlay (2008) fondly describes it, merely an "antipodean view." It has earned sponsors not only in Hinckfuss (1987), Mackie (1977), Joyce (2001), and Pigden (2007), but also Garner (1990), Burgess (2007), Marks (2013), and Olson (2014), among others.

[3] Many abolitionists take moral error theory to lend support to their proposal (see Burgess 2007: 438; Garner 2007: 500). But abolitionism need not stand or fall with moral error theory. Quite a few abolitionists think that the significant practical costs of moral practice are *sufficient* to justify doing away with it (e.g., Hinckfuss 1987: §1.5). Some have been so bold as to suggest that even moral realists have good reason to do away with moral discourse (Ingram 2015).

moral practices exacerbate interpersonal conflict, too often lend a helping hand to war and violence, and render our societies authoritarian and elitist—to name just a few complaints. (See Hinckfuss 1987, §§2.3-2.4, & §4.2; Greene 2002: 238; Garner 2007: 502-3; Ingram 2015: 240-1.) In what follows, I will be to suggest that neither the first step nor the transition to the second is as straightforward as it may initially appear.

Before proceeding, however, let me note two important qualifications regarding abolitionists' ambitions. Firstly, and *qua* moral error theorists, abolitionists are obviously not complaining that morality has been used for *immoral* purposes. Their real contention is that war, oppression, and the like, are contrary to our practical interests, and that these are precisely the sorts of things that morality tends to help along. Secondly, abolitionists do not aim to show that morality can be used *only* in service of malicious ends. What they wish to bring to our attention is the remarkable *pliability* of moral considerations. History suggests that we can offer a moral justification for just about any agenda, whether harmful or beneficial. Since morality can easily be put to harmful use, it would appear to be an especially dangerous tool—and one that perhaps we'd be better off without. Though it will be admitted that morality can be used for (non-morally) good purposes, we have ample evidence that it can be used for (non-morally) bad purposes as well.[4] And though the good here may be very good, the bad seems especially horrid.

In this chapter, I evaluate the abolitionist's case and find it wanting. My first order of business will be to draw out the finer lineaments of the AFH (section 1). Doing so is needed, for abolitionists are seldom clear on the details here. The task for section 2 will be to assess what I take to be the most promising variety of the AFH, according to which moral considerations have often made things worse than they otherwise would have been. As we shall see, the abolitionist has a slight penchant for exaggeration. Though moral factors plausibly had a role to play, their role is not nearly as central as she would have us believe. This is not to suggest that the abolitionist's concerns are entirely baseless; she is correct in thinking that morality has the potential to exacerbate social hierarchies and oppression. However, she is wrong in thinking that this supports her abolitionism; for there are means by which we can minimize these abuses of the moral overlay. In section 3, I propose that we can do so by attending to the non-moral factors that typically underlie morality's misuse. I conclude that the AFH supports better standards of education and critical thinking going forward, rather than an abolitionist response to moral error theory.

1. The argument from history

Abolitionists are particularly fond of drawing attention to morality's bad track record. Ian Hinckfuss points towards

> … the massacre of the moral Catholic highlanders by the moral Protestants at Culloden and its aftermath, the genocide of the peaceful and hospitable

[4] Hereafter, I omit the "non-morally" qualification, and will intend for talk of goodness and badness to be interpreted, respectively, as talk of non-moral goodness or badness.

stone-age Tasmanians by people from moral Britain, the mutual slaughter of all those dutiful men on the Somme and on the Russian front in World War I, the morally sanctioned slaughter in World War II…and the subsequent slaughter in Korea, Vietnam, Northern Ireland and the Middle East—all this among people the great majority of whom wanted above all to be good and who did not want to be bad. (1987: §2.2)

Stephen Ingram pays special attention to the role that moral considerations have played in helping along social oppression:

If your group is in the business of subjugating some other group, one effective way to help sustain that subjugation is to convince everyone that your group is more competent at moral judgement. …Plausibly, such methods have been used throughout history to help sustain oppressive social hierarchies. Take, for example, the subjugation of women. Opponents of women's suffrage commonly argued that married women did not need the vote because they would be best represented by their husbands. (2015: 238-9)

These are the sorts of claims that characterize what I have dubbed "the AFH." The purpose of drawing our attention to these historical samplings is to motivate the idea that our moral practices are on balance harmful. Moral considerations are pliable; they can be used to further harmful agendas as well as desirable ones. Social conflict and oppression are bad enough on their own. Any mechanism that helps them along is surely (the thought goes) something we can do without.

Unfortunately, abolitionists are seldom explicit about the finer details here. It isn't clear, for example, who is included in the scope of this "we"—just whose interests are frustrated by these moralized agendas? Oppression and war are not certainly contrary to *everyone's* interests; profiteers and warmongers, for instance, often stand to gain. I will assume in what follows that by "we" abolitionists mean to refer to *most* of us, who presumably want to avoid an untimely demise, see to it that others are well, and live in a stable and cooperative society. Not everyone has these ends, of course. (Sensible knaves remain.) But we need not require that abolitionism be sound advice for everyone. It need only be sound advice for most of us, who share a broad variety of interests and concerns.

There is further ground-clearing work to be done. It's not obvious what sort of role abolitionists take morality to have played in these samples from our history: does morality make bad things happen, or does it simply make things far worse? It's also not entirely clear why abolitionists take moral considerations to have been especially helpful in promoting these unfortunate agendas. Addressing these questions will be useful for the purposes of distinguishing more plausible varieties of the AFH from those that can be dispensed with rather quickly.

1.1. The role of morality

Abolitionists argue that moral considerations have played an important role in their depressing catalog of historical events. But there are different roles that moral

considerations may be thought to have played. One possibility is the following:

Strong role
Moral considerations were counterfactually responsible for these unfortunate events.

On this reading of the AFH, the unfortunate events in question would not have come to pass had it not been for the moral justifications that were offered in support of them. Certain remarks from abolitionists suggest that they intend to put forward this strong claim. Joshua Greene (2002) seems to think that nations could not garner requisite support for aggressive foreign policies without moral language:

One might go so far as to say that nations require the language of moral realism to marshal popular support for aggressive actions. Has a military aggressor ever not claimed a moral right to carry out its plans? Has a nation ever been moved to war by leaders who said, "It would be good for us economically, and we can get away with it, so why not?" (2002: 238)

I think that we can safely dispense with this strong variant of the AFH, for our answer to Greene's question ought to be a resounding *yes*. I take it that Genghis Khan did not have to tread carefully around his marauders' moral sensibilities, ensuring that they felt morally justified in riding off to rape and pillage.[5] Desires for glory and conquest appear to have been sufficiently strong motivators. Of course, identifying the full range of causal factors involved in any particular historical episode is difficult. But identifying unwelcome social agendas that succeed without morality is not. Wall Street profiteers do not seem to require any moral justification to advance their own financial interests at others' expense. *Pace* Greene, "We can get away with it, so why not?" can sometimes suffice.

Let us therefore set to the side the proposal that moral considerations were needed for war efforts (etc.) to gain a foothold. Perhaps their contribution is better characterized as follows:

Moderate role
Moral considerations were causally sufficient for these unfortunate events.

One finds this suggestion in Hinckfuss (1987). In maintaining that moral societies (i.e., those that participate in the institution of morality) are "elitist, authoritarian" and "inefficient in the resolution of conflicts," he does not intend to suggest that they would not be this way were they not *moral* societies. His claim is that that "the way morality perpetuates itself within a society is *causally sufficient* for the perpetuation and aggravation of these aspects of society" (1987: §2.2, emphasis added).

As I understand Hinckfuss's suggestion, it is perfectly possible that an *amoral* society could be elitist and authoritarian; morality is certainly not necessary for things to go awry. This is plausible. But the flipside of the sufficiency claim is not. Hinckfuss seems

---

[5] I thank Ben Fraser for the example.

to think that introducing moral practice into a peaceful and well-functioning society would be enough to send it on the path to rack and ruin. And that seems false. Just how morality manifests itself within a society will presumably depend upon the nature of that society: its members, its social organization, and the like. I defer further development of this idea to section 2. If what I have to say there is right, then the moral edifice is certainly not enough to render a society conflict-ridden, authoritarian, and elitist (though a healthy dose of ignorance and insensitivity may sometimes suffice).

But all is not lost for the AFH. Even if morality was neither necessary nor sufficient for these atrocities, it is still possible that things would not have been nearly *as bad* were it not for moral considerations. The abolitionist may accord the following weaker role to moral considerations:

> **Weak role**
> Moral considerations made things worse than they otherwise would have been.

Quite a few abolitionists seem to have this weaker role in mind. Ingram (2015: 238) concedes that moral considerations do not themselves generate social hierarchies, but argues that they help to perpetuate them. Richard Garner does not think that moral conviction is what leads people to war, but he does think that moral considerations have often made things worse, since they can be used to "justify inflicting any cruelty deemed necessary for victory" (2007: 507). I take this weak variant of the AFH to be the most promising, and so, I will assume in what follows that it is this argument that must be reckoned with.

There is one final matter in need of address. It is the abolitionist's contention that morality exacerbates war, oppression, and other social ills. But it's not obvious why portraying these agendas in a moral light would serve to make them even worse. Our final ground-clearing task will be to ascertain why abolitionists take morality to have such far-reaching consequences.

1.2. Why morality?

A common theme underlying the AFH is that morality exacerbates interpersonal conflict, something which abolitionists put down to two factors.

Firstly, and we have seen, moral considerations are *pliable*—they can be recruited to support almost any agenda. When someone breaks a promise to me, I may be quick to tout the values of honesty and commitment. But should I find myself guilty of any promise-breaking, I can instead elect to emphasize the greater good that was served by my actions. Perhaps the problem isn't too concerning for such trifling cases. But a substantial worry suggests itself once we consider more sinister agendas. Greene notes that terrorists "can justify their actions in terms that sound eerily similar to those used by their victims in other contexts" (2002: 237).

Given this pliability, moralized conflicts seem especially difficult to resolve; it is difficult to convince the terrorist to come around if each of us can take morality to be on

our side. One might suspect that inter-societal conflict is an inevitability in any case, but the problem is closer to home. Garner notes that morality can help along intra-social conflicts as well:

> If the issue is not moralized, Roe v. Wade looks like a sensible compromise between two extreme positions, but when the right to life is set against the right to choose, neither side can yield without violating morality. (2007: 502)

Secondly, there is a distinct kind of *obstinance* that moral conviction seems to legitimize. This isn't to say that we don't butt heads over non-moral matters as well; we might disagree, for instance, over how to best divide an inheritance, or how to budget for an upcoming wedding. But at least in cases of conflicting preferences and interests, there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel; compromise isn't typically off the table. Yet matters seem different in moral disagreement. If I think that we morally ought to refrain from genocide, and you think that we ought to go for it, then ought I to meet you half way by agreeing to wipe out just half of the relevant population? I don't think so. It seems that we often feel entitled to stand our ground when we butt heads over moral issues (Enoch 2011: ch.2).

Some abolitionists have proposed to explain this obstinance by appealing to the idea that we invest moral requirements with *categorical authority* (Ingram 2015: 239-41). The demands of morality present themselves as inescapable; we take ourselves to have reason to comply with them independently of our ends. (See Joyce 2001.) This goes some way towards explaining why we tend to remain obstinate in the face of moral conflict. We may very well have ends that would be well-served by reaching an amicable compromise. But insofar as one party takes the termination of fetuses to be wrong, they take themselves to have categorical reasons to oppose it—and such reasons do not cease to apply when they frustrate an agent's other ends.

These two aspects of morality make for a precarious marriage. The problem is not only that we can recruit a moral justification in service of almost any agenda. Once these agendas have garnered moral support, they are apt to be seen as giving rise to inescapable obligations. I will not take issue with these claims in what follows. There are more important places to push. I think that we need to question the extent to which morality plausibly contributes to the harms that abolitionists have in mind. Later, I will suggest that we should also be deeply suspicious of the inference from morality's harmful potential to the recommendation that we do away with it.

2. Other culprits

According to abolitionists, moral considerations have played an important role in the massacres and oppressive social structures of history, making matters worse than they otherwise would have been. I should acknowledge from the outset that this claim is not easy to assess. We can speculate, of course. But it is incredibly difficult to state with any great confidence how history would look without talk of moral rights, duties, and obligations. In any event, it is certainly not something that we ought to be confident of

coming to know merely as a result of armchair speculation.

Let me be clear: I am no historian. My strategy will not be to tirelessly tease apart the many potentially relevant causal factors at play, finally arriving at a principled conjecture as to whether things would have been just as grim without morality. Instead, I shall simply grant to the abolitionist that moral considerations exacerbated the atrocities that she invites us to consider. Even granting this, I think there is something to be gained from turning our attention to the many non-moral factors as play. As we shall see (in section 3), doing so puts us in a position to challenge the assumption that the relevant harms are unavoidable.

2.1. Religion and intolerance

I want to devote some space now to examining the non-moral factors that have plausibly helped along war and oppressive social structures. Needless to say, religion has often been an important contributing factor. The Crusades in Jerusalem were driven by a Christian objective to reclaim the Holy Land from Muslims; the Thirty Years War was spurred by Protestants' refusal to comply with Ferdinand II's attempt to impose Catholicism upon them; and the French Wars of Religion were, at least in great part, the result of Catholics' intolerance towards Huguenots.

As far as social subordination is concerned, the role of religion in facilitating oppression can hardly be overstated. The inferiority of women is enshrined in religious scripture—as is the validity of slavery. Religious teachings can also legitimize the status quo in the minds of both oppressor and oppressed. Kevin Bales notes that for many slaves in Mauritania (which uses Sharia as its legal system),

> … freedom is a dismal prospect. Deeply believing that God wants and expects them to be loyal to their masters, they reject freedom as wrong, even traitorous. To struggle for liberty, in their view, is to upset God's natural order and puts one's very soul at risk. (1999: 108)

I do not want to pretend here that morality is easily dissociable from religion. Religious teachings do, after all, prescribe and prohibit certain kinds of behavior, and these directives are seldom free of moral language. Indeed, it is sometimes customary to interpret people of faith as (tacit) champions of a distinct kind of metaethical position, according to which God's will is the source of moral obligations. Religious wars and oppression may very well have been fueled by a sense of moral duty.

That said, we shouldn't swiftly infer that a sense of moral duty is what's doing the heavy lifting in these cases. Religious belief-systems tend to come pre-packaged with threats to the non-compliant: a smite from above, an eternity of damnation, and the like. And a fear of divine reprisal has motivational force; whatever one's considered moral judgment on the matter of war and oppression, the threat of fire and brimstone can surely suffice to motivate supporting a religious agenda. The promise of avoiding divine reprisal was especially salient to those participating in the Crusades, who were promised absolution from their sins.

Religious conviction also has the potential to breed intolerance. The religiously affiliated have been found to be more intolerant of ethnic minorities than the unaffiliated (Allport & Kramer 1946; Hall et. al 2010). Religious fundamentalism in particular seems highly correlated with prejudicial attitudes (Altemeyer & Hunsberger 1992; Kirkpatrick 1993; Hunsberger 1996).[6] And intolerance can certainly help along social oppression. The intolerant feel no need to refrain from exercising their power to interfere with others.[7] Even if religion is not easily dissociable from morality, then, it is far from obvious that a sense of moral duty is the dominant force at play in the cases to which the abolitionist appeals. Many of these atrocities were likely helped along by prejudicial attitudes as well.

2.2. Ideological factors

The above considerations notwithstanding, we do need to be wary of using religion for target practice. The two world wars were not carried out in the name of faith. Nor has oppression always been rooted in religious belief-systems. Other sorts of ideologies have also proven effective in sustaining social hierarchies.

The Sambia of Papua New Guinea are an interesting case. The general attitude towards women in Sambia society is one of contempt; "abusive language, squabbling, and wife-beating, as well as suicides resulting from some such incidents, are pervasive in Sambia life" (Herdt 1982: 194). Hostility towards women is rooted in Sambia ideology, which prizes masculinity, and takes women to be its greatest threat. In order for boys to transition to manhood, they must be removed from the contaminating influence of women (especially their mothers) at age 10, ingest the semen of older males during coming-of age ceremonies, and undergo induced nose-bleeding to purge them of female contaminants that inhibit male growth (the latter continues throughout life). None of these aspects of Sambia ideology seems distinctively moral; masculinity very much seems to be a non-moral ideal—one that men are prepared to go to great lengths to achieve.[8]

That ideologies can breed contempt comes as no surprise—Nazism is a commonly cited example. Nazi ideology combined an especially toxic nationalism with an emphasis on racial purity. Added into the mix was a deep-seated anti-Semitism: many of the country's social and economic woes were put down to the scheming interference of German Jewry (mistakenly, I hasten to add). Once again, the boundaries can be murky; it

---

[6] My claim here is that religious conviction has the potential to breed intolerance—not that it always does. Indeed, studies suggest that the positive correlation between religious affiliation and intolerance is more robust for those with an "extrinsic religious orientation" (who use religion to further their other ends) than for those with an "intrinsic religious orientation" (who internalize the values of their faith) (see Allport & Ross 1967). Batson and Ventis (1982) propose that another orientation which involves searching for answers to existential questions—what they call "quest"—is associated with greater tolerance and sensitivity toward others.

[7] I draw upon Cohen's (2004: 69) understanding of intolerance here.

[8] I acknowledge that cleanly distinguishing non-moral ideals from moral ones is difficult, and it is not a task that I can hope to undertake here. I also recognise that on certain ways of carving things up, Samba ideology may very well qualify as moral. But the general point does not stand or fall with what we choose to say about this particular case. So long as people's non-moral values and ideals have demonstrated harmful potential—something which, I believe, quite a number of cases canvassed here show—it would seem unfair to lay all of the blame at the feet of morality.

is not unlikely that certain aspects of Nazi ideology may have been moralized. Nonetheless, many facets of Nazism can plausibly be taken to have represented people's non-moral values and preferences: values attached to racial purity, and ambitions for territorial expansion, for example.

2.3. Epistemic complacency

The list above should not be surprising; religion, intolerance, and ideological factors are the usual suspects. But there is a further suggestion that I want to develop here. It seems to me that there is one explanatory factor in particular that we find in almost all of these cases: many historical atrocities seem to have been marked by a staggering sort of *epistemic complacency*—an utter failure to carefully reason through the relevant issues, or to challenge the dominant beliefs of the day. Many of the beliefs that these people held—beliefs regarding the legitimacy of slavery, the inferiority of women, or the contribution of the Jewish people to Germany's loss in WW1—were, by all appearances, simply taken for granted.[9]

It is my contention that epistemic complacency has played a substantial role in these samples from our past. This is, of course, an empirical hypothesis—one that would require further research and reflection before it could be pronounced with any greater confidence. But the hypothesis seems to have a high degree of *prima facie* plausibility; it is difficult to maintain that these undesirable social agendas would have been just as successful had the parties involved been epistemically *vigilant*. Showing that Nazism would have gained the traction that it did even if theories of racial purity and the stab-in-the-back-myth had been subjected to further scrutiny seems like a tall order (though I shall qualify my confidence somewhat in section 2.4).

The epistemic complacency hypothesis certainly seems to have something going for it, but let me say a little more to motivate it. It's important to appreciate that a culture's (dominant) moral belief-systems are seldom—if ever—divorced from its stock of non-moral beliefs. So-called *caste societies* attach moral significance to hierarchy and social order, but their moral systems have long been intertwined with mystical beliefs concerning purity and pollution (Haidt 2012). For much of history, moral justifications were offered for the enslavement of people of color—but, again, we cannot ignore the influence of the non-moral beliefs held by the subordinators. They regarded the inferiority of their slaves as scientific fact; studies from phrenology, for instance, suggested to them that certain races were more "advanced" than others (Hanlon 2003). Though abolitionists tend to emphasize the role of people's moral convictions in helping along social subordination, it's difficult to shake the impression that people's inaccurate

---

[9] This is not to suggest that such matters were taken for granted *by all*. Coalitions of willing dissenters have certainly not been lost in the annals of history, and I shall have more to say about them in section 3.1. However—and to relay an observation that Goodrick-Clarke (1993: ix) credits to Konrad Adenauer—it is unlikely that Nazism could have gained the momentum that it did had it not "found, in broad strata of the population, soil prepared for its sowing of poison…Broad strata of the people, of the peasants, middle classes, workers and intellectuals did not have the right intellectual attitude."

non-moral beliefs were the primary source of harm.[10] If they hadn't held these false beliefs, then it is far less likely that they would have been in a position to offer a moral justification for their oppressive practices.

None of this is to suppose that there was anything *epistemically special* about those involved. As Gideon Rosen points out when discussing the sexism of the 1950s, a failure to "see through a pervasive and well-protected ideology need not be a sign of culpable negligence or recklessness…It might just be a sign of ordinariness" (2003: 67-8). Epistemic complacency isn't restricted to the epistemically challenged; few wander through life reflecting upon or questioning the presuppositions of everyday thought.

Ordinary or not, however, epistemic complacency seems very much to have played a key role in the cases under consideration. Members of oppressive groups don't tend to be very open to the possibility that they might be mistaken about the legitimacy of their status. That women might have had equal intellectual potential to men is a consideration that seems to have given pause to few who lived before the 20th century. But if that's right, then the real root of the problem would appear to be bad reasoning, or false empirical beliefs. If the abolitionist is really concerned to prevent war and oppression, then, it seems to me that she needs to be casting a much wider net; she ought to be taking issue with human stupidity as well.

2.4. A lack of human feeling

I have suggested that epistemic complacency played an important role in the lesser moments of our history. However, it would be naïve to think that cognitive shortcomings were the only culprit. It is unlikely that things would have been any better had Khan's marauding followers been paragons of epistemic rationality (indeed, they may have been far *worse*). It is not merely epistemic complacency, but also a lack of human feeling that can help along undesirable agendas. I intend to refer to something quite broad here: everything from unbridled selfishness to acute hatred. It is remarkable just how little thought Khan and his posse seem to have given to the suffering of their victims. But, of course, it is not only them who exhibited such insensitivity. A strong willingness to be self-serving appears to have been a significant contributory factor in many of the abolitionist's examples. It is not in the least bit surprising that the institution of slavery was favored by those who stood to gain economically, nor that the elite had a penchant for social stratification. (See Enoch 2011: 192-3.)

My tentative hypothesis, then, is that epistemic complacency and a lack of human feeling (especially when working in concert) were important and under-appreciated contributory factors in the cases that the abolitionist brings to our attention. This is not to suggest that all warmongering and oppression can be put down to human stupidity and selfishness. But we should be careful not to underestimate the damage that ignorance and insensitivity can do.

---

[10] I am not here endorsing the claim that all moral disagreements come down to disagreements over non-moral matters (see Brink 1984: 116-7; Boyd 1988: 213). I am endorsing only the more modest claim that people's (specific) moral beliefs tend to be shaped by their non-moral beliefs.

2.5. Taking stock

The non-moral factors singled out for mention above are not exhaustive. But they will suffice for my purposes. When put together, these factors seem to form a large part of the explanation for the atrocities to which the abolitionist appeals. It is not implausible that they sometimes would have would have sufficed. If anything, our dark past would seem to be overdetermined. The case isn't dispositive by any means; it's difficult to tease apart the many causal factors at play here. Nonetheless, we do seem to have good grounds for doubting that moral considerations were the only—or the even most important—culprits.

But just what is to be inferred from all of this? At this stage, not much. I have suggested only that many non-moral factors operate in tandem with morality in the cases that abolitionists invite us to consider; I have not denied that our moral practices play some role in generating harm. That said, emphasizing the contribution of non-moral factors is important in our argumentative context. Doing so helps us to identify some promising avenues for minimizing the misuse of morality.

3. Minimizing the misuse of morality

I have suggested that abolitionists tend to ignore (or at least, significantly downplay) the role that non-moral factors have played in the atrocities that they bring to our attention.[11] But I have not denied that moral considerations have played a role in helping along wars and oppressive social structures. I am certainly willing to grant that morality has something to answer for here. Perhaps moral considerations weren't necessary for women's subordination, but it seems difficult to deny that they helped.

My arguments would therefore appear to leave the abolitionist in a comfortable position. It may very well be true that war and systematic oppression have resulted largely from a lack of human feeling, bad reasoning, and false empirical beliefs, but those who engage in faulty reasoning and disseminate false information do walk among us. And so long as they do, it seems imprudent to hand them any tools that would serve to make their actions even worse. What is important to appreciate at this stage, however, is that the abolitionist doesn't think that morality can be used only in service of malicious or self-serving agendas. She concedes that morality can be and has been used for good purposes as well. What the AFH really shows, then, is that morality can be of great benefit or great harm, depending upon the manner in which it is used. However, the right response to this problem isn't necessarily to do away with morality. A better response is surely to seek a means by which we can reap the relevant benefits while avoiding the associated costs.

Suppose that we could *not* reap the benefits of moral practice while avoiding the costs. In that case, the AFH may very well support abolitionism.[12] Morality might be said

---

[11] Though in fairness to Garner (1994), he acknowledges the contribution of religion as well.

[12] The AFH wouldn't *necessarily* support abolitionism in this case, since the benefits of engaging in moral practice may still outweigh the costs. But it would at least give us good *prima facie* reason for thinking that the costs are much too high. And it seems that good *prima facie* reasons are all that can be hoped for in this context.

to carry far too much baggage; we could not hope to enjoy the relevant benefits without opening the door to (or worsening) oppression and war. But suppose that we *could* reap the benefits of moral practice while avoiding (or, at least substantially minimizing) the costs. If this were so, then abolitionists wouldn't so much have motivated abolitionism as they would have motivated the need for reform.[13]

In what follows, I will argue not only that that there are tangible benefits of moral practice, but that we can conceivably reap these benefits while controlling for the costs. Simply put, there are means by which we can *minimize* the misuse of morality. I won't, however, rely upon the abolitionist's concession that morality can do some good to make my case. Instead, I shall introduce a new player into our dialectic—*the moralist*. The moralist thinks that our error-ridden moral practices are useful to us on balance. And she has an AFH of her own.

3.1. The moralist's argument from history

The moralist takes our moral practices to be incredibly useful (on balance), and so she holds that the appropriate response to moral error theory is one that preserves moral discourse in some form. This may amount to holding onto moral discourse in its current error-ridden form (Olson 2014; see also Eriksson & Olson, this volume). Or it might involve preserving moral language in the spirit of a useful fiction (Joyce 2001, 2005; Nolan et. al 2005). The moralist might even make use of a revised moral discourse—one that has been liberated from error (Lutz 2014). For our purposes here, there is no need to choose.

Why think that our moral practices are on balance useful, though? In defense of this claim, the moralist advances her own argument from history. She argues that our moral systems have often been instrumental in overthrowing oppressive regimes, and putting an end to war and violence. Here, she draws our attention to morality's *good* track record: the role of moral values in the eradication of slavery, and the importance of women's rights discourse in their liberation from domestic servitude. The moralist does not pretend that morality can be used only in service of desirable ends; she acknowledges that it can be put to harmful use as well. Nonetheless, she insists that there is ample evidence that moral considerations can be put to very good use indeed. And though the bad here may be rather bad, the good is especially helpful.

Moreover, and as the moralist is keen to emphasize, moral considerations offer us a particularly effective means of *countering* harmful uses of morality. Moral conviction might reinforce oppressive social structures, but it is also of great help in overturning

Indeed, some have suggested that we ought to be agnostic as to whether morality does more harm than good (See for example, Moeller 2009.)

[13] Lenman anticipates this line of reply when he writes that "vile things are done in the name of moral ideals. But that is not a good objection to morality any more than the existence of bad music is a good reason to dislike music.… Rather it is an objection to bad morals and to the stupid, twisted and pathological forms that moral motivation, like any kind of motivation, can sometimes take. It may sometimes favour reform but it hardly favours abolition" (2013: 397). Joyce (2001: 181) touches upon this issue as well: "My response to Hinckfuss's claim that moral beliefs have wrought such dramatic damage is that this just shows that people have had the wrong moral beliefs".

them. As Caroline West notes:

> Ideas such as that women have a moral *right* to be treated with equal concern and respect, that current unequal social arrangements are *unjust*, that sexual discrimination is *wrong*, that men *ought* not be differentially advantaged, and so on, function as a check on the behavior of the powerful, protecting the comparatively powerless from suffering further at their hands. (2009: 192)

Thus, morality doesn't just get us into these unhappy situations, it's also often what gets us out. Slavery in the US might have been reinforced by twisted moral values, but the abolitionist movement was driven by moral conviction as well. On first appearances, this might not seem like much of a defense, for we presumably could have done without the years of systematic oppression in between. But recall the lessons of section 2. If we are right in thinking that much of our depressing past was overdetermined—that religious differences, selfishness, or intolerance would, in many cases, have sufficed—then we should count ourselves lucky that there were folk around whose moral convictions moved them to challenge the status quo.

Of course, the moralist must say something more about the role that she takes moral considerations to have played. It is not completely implausible that moral conviction may have been necessary for the eradication of slavery and the enfranchisement of women. But a weaker claim will serve her purposes: she need maintain only that moral considerations played a key supporting role—that they amplified prosocial tendencies and added momentum to campaigns for positive social change. Perhaps morality is not necessary for social progress, but it can often make progress easier to achieve.

Yet why is morality in particular useful for such purposes? The moralist's answer parallels that of the abolitionist: moral demands have a distinct kind of practical import. When people judge that women have a *moral right* to be treated with equal concern, or consider their society *unjust*, they take themselves to have reasons to work against these oppressive social structures. And they take themselves to have such reasons independently of whether these arrangements happen to be to their benefit. Moral requirements are invested with *categorical authority*; they present themselves as inescapable demands. One cannot evade their force by citing an interest in non-compliance.

Of course, the moralist is an error theorist, and so regards the authority of morality as mere illusion. What is important is the instrumental value of a conceptual framework that presupposes such authority. When people conceive of oppressive social structures as the sorts of things that must be opposed independently of their ends, their motivation to work against them is likely to be stronger.[14]

Admittedly, there is no guarantee that morality will continue to play these roles once it is seen for the farce that it is. That will depend upon whether a fictional, revised, or conserved moral discourse proves an adequate stand-in for its error-ridden predecessor. But absent any reason for thinking that none of these proposals can deliver the goods, the moralist thinks that we have good reason to favor them over abolitionism.

---

[14] See Joyce (2001, 2006), for a number of convincing arguments in support of this claim.

3.2. How to minimize the misuse of morality

Having made her case, the moralist concludes that it's not all doom and gloom when it comes to our moral past. She concedes that the abolitionist has identified a significant problem. However, she takes that problem to be surmountable.

To address the abolitionist's challenge, the moralist begins by revisiting the argument advanced in section 2. There it was claimed that epistemic complacency and a lack of human feeling have played a substantial role in many unfortunate incidents of history. Selfishness, and false empirical beliefs, though not the only culprits, have certainly helped along harmful social policies, allowing them to go about unchallenged.

The moralist takes these considerations to point toward a promising means by which we might minimize the misuse of morality. To begin with, we might cultivate people's dispositions to seek further evidence for their beliefs, to challenge existing dogmas, to question the ideologies to which they are exposed, and to carefully reason through the arguments in favor of competing social policies. In short, we might furnish ordinary folk with a philosophical toolkit of sorts—one that nurtures and encourages epistemic vigilance.

It's worth clarifying what this epistemic vigilance entails. It is certainly not the moralist's contention that oppression and violence can be curtailed by way of providing ordinary folk with the resources to acquire true *moral* beliefs. (She is, recall, a moral error theorist.) Her foremost ambition is to ensure that morality is not put to harmful use. And she thinks that we can partly circumvent this by preventing false *empirical* beliefs from gaining a foothold—beliefs in the inherent inferiority of other groups, say. By encouraging people to challenge or to further reflect upon the information that comes their way, we can hope to stop at least many harmful agendas in their tracks.

It should be noted that the case for epistemic vigilance doesn't rest *only* upon our interest in securing these particular benefits. We have good independent reasons to challenge what we take to be uncontroversial. Most of us care about acting in a way that furthers our ends, and we're generally better positioned to further those ends—whatever they may be—if we track truth effectively. (See Kornblith 2001.) However—and importantly—we are not epistemically infallible. Even that which strikes us as obvious may yet turn out to be false. This suggests a further reason to subject our beliefs to scrutiny (at least on a more regular basis) if we want to discover the truth.[15]

According to the moralist, then, it is reasonable to suppose that we can enjoy the benefits of the moral edifice while controlling for the costs. More specifically, we can work to prevent moral considerations from becoming attached to harmful agendas by encouraging epistemic vigilance—such agendas are less likely to gain a foothold if they have been subjected to scrutiny. When our empirical beliefs fall in line with the facts— facts regarding the equal intellectual potential of other groups, say—we are less likely to be a position to offer a moral justification for warmongering and oppression.

But we are not done just yet. Though epistemic vigilance will be of considerable help,

[15] I borrow here from Mill's justification for freedom of expression ([1859] 1977).

the moralist acknowledges that it is unlikely to put an end to all of our troubles. This becomes especially evident once we distinguish the participants from the promoters of conflict (e.g., the poor folk dying in the mud from those giving the orders). It may be in the interests of those in charge to encourage going to war (say), and they may be effective at manipulating others to do so (via skillful rhetoric or misinformation, perhaps) even with such epistemic safeguards in place. The problem is that we have restricted our attention to people's *beliefs* (or belief-forming methods). We have neglected to consider their *desires*; in particular, the degree to which they care for others. To the extent that people remain cruel and inconsiderate, the potential for morality's misuse is disquieting. When combined with a willingness to be self-serving, moral considerations will often make matters worse.

This suggests that better standards of evidence and critical thinking will need to be supplemented with particular emotional dispositions. We might, for instance, work to cultivate our capacities for empathy.[16] In coming to empathize more with others, we would be in a better position to understand and identify with their needs. This would by no means guarantee that we would quickly transition to a peaceful and loving society, but it could certainly encourage us to take others' needs into account more often when deciding what to do.[17]

The moralist hastens to add that we should not expect this strategy to be foolproof. She certainly does not mean to suggest that morality would never be put to harmful use if most of us grew to be more empathetic and epistemically responsible.[18] But we do not need this strategy to be foolproof to justify preserving our moral practices; it is not necessary to establish that these practices have no costs. We need only provide grounds for thinking that the cost-benefit analysis favors their continued use. So long as our moral practices confer distinctive benefits, and the relevant costs can be minimized (to a suitable degree), we would seem to do better to hold onto them.

Abolitionists have given us no reason for thinking that such harm-minimizing efforts would be unsuccessful. Indeed, they never seriously consider the possibility of minimizing these harms (at least not to my knowledge). This is surprising. Abolitionists acknowledge that moral practice confers distinctive benefits. One might have expected them to have sought a means by which these benefits could be retained and the relevant harms avoided prior to recommending that we scrap the moral edifice altogether.

To summarize, abolitionists have plausibly established that morality can support war as well as peace, breed fanaticism as well as fellow feeling, and drive violence as well as

---

[16] Some abolitionists (e.g., Garner 2007: 501; Hinckfuss 1987, §4.5) have suggested as much—though they do so in the context of arguing that we could make do without morality. It is surprising that they do not consider the implications of cultivating these capacities while preserving moral practice.

[17] There is good evidence that empathy (or, at least many of the empathetic emotions) encourages prosocial behavior. See Eisenberg (2014).

[18] Indeed, empathy may not be quite enough to promote other-regarding attitudes toward *everyone*. The empathetic emotions are vulnerable to a number of well-known biases; it is typically easier to empathize with those in the "here-and-now" (Hoffman 2015: 94, 81) or with those who are similar to us (Ugazio et al. 2015: 169–170). For this reason, empathy may very well function best when supplemented with moral judgments (along with reasonable empirical beliefs).

positive social change. But they have not thereby established abolitionism. These arguments merely suggest that morality is something to be used with greater caution—not that it is something that shouldn't be used at all.

Conclusion

I have argued that abolitionists do not succeed in their ambitions. Morality may have helped along conflict and oppression. But this hardly supports doing away with morality. Indeed, history suggests that we have very good reasons to preserve our moral practices, for moral commitment may well be among our most effective tools for countering oppression and other social ills. None of this is to suggest that abolitionists are completely off the mark. Morality's harmful potential is concerning. But we can plausibly control for these harms. When people are furnished with better standards of evidence and are encouraged to take others' needs more seriously, harmful agendas are less likely to gain a foothold, and so moral justifications are less likely to be offered in support of them. This provides those who propose to preserve moral discourse in some form with reason to extend their focus beyond moral practice. Empathy and epistemic vigilance ought to be exercised alongside it.

References

Allport, G. & Kramer, B. 1946. "Some roots of prejudice." *Journal of Psychology* 22: 9-39.

Allport, G. & Ross, J. 1967. "Personal religious orientation and prejudice." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 5: 432-443.

Altemeyer, B. & Hunsberger, B. 1992. "Authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, quest, and prejudice." *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2: 113-133.

Bales, K. 1999. *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Batson, C. & Ventis, W. 1982. *The Religious Experience: A Social-psychological Perspective*. NY: Oxford University Press.

Boyd, R. 1988. "How to be a Moral Realist." In G. Sayre-McCord (ed), Essays on Moral Realism. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 181-228.

Brink, D. 1984. "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness." Australasian Journal of Philosophy 62: 111-125.

Burgess, J. 2007. "Against ethics." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10: 427–439.

Cohen, A. 2004. "What toleration is." *Ethics* 115: 68-95.

Eisenberg, N. 2014. "Empathy-related responding and its relations to socioemotional development." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education* 8: 1-17.

Enoch, D. 2011. *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defence of Robust Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Finlay, S. 2008. "The error in the error theory." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 8: 347-369.

Garner, R. 1994. *Beyond Morality*. Philadelphia, PA.: Temple University Press.

Garner, R. 1990. "On the genuine queerness of moral properties and facts." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 68: 137-46.

Garner, R. 2007. "Abolishing morality." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10: 499-513.

Godfrey-Smith, P. 1998. *Complexity and the Function of Mind in Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goodrick-Clarke, N. 1993. The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology. NYU Press.

Greene, J. 2002. *The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and What to Do About it*. PhD dissertation, Princeton University.

Haidt, J. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. NY: Pantheon.

Hall, D. L., Matz, D. C. and Wood, W. 2010. "Why don't we practice what we preach? A meta-analytic review of religious racism." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14:126–139.

Hanlon, C. 2003. "O. S. Fowler and Hereditary Descent." In M. Lowance Jr. (ed.), *A House Divided: The Antebellum Slavery Debates in America, 1776-1865*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Herdt, G. 1982. "Sambia nosebleeding rites and male proximity to women." *Ethos* 10: 189-231.

Hinckfuss, I. 1987. *The Moral Society: Its Structure and Effects*. Discussion Papers in Environmental Philosophy 16. Canberra: Philosophy Program (RSSS), Australian National University.

Hoffman, M. 2015. "Empathy, justice, and social change." In H. Maibom (ed.), *Empathy and Morality*. NY: Oxford University Press. 71-96.

Hunsberger, B. 1996. "Religious fundamentalism, right-wing authoritarianism, and hostility toward homosexuals in non-Christian religious groups." *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 6: 39-49.

Ingram, S. 2015. "After moral error theory, after moral realism." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 53: 227-248.

Joyce, R. 2001. *The Myth of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Joyce, R. 2005. "Moral fictionalism." In M. Kalderon (ed.), *Fictionalism in Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 287-313.

Joyce, R. 2006. *The Evolution of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kirkpatrick, L. 1993. "Fundamentalism, Christian orthodoxy and intrinsic religious orientation as predictors of discriminatory attitudes." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32: 256-268.

Kornblith, H. 2001. *Knowledge and Its Place in Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lenman, J. 2008. "Ethics without errors." *Ratio* 26: 391-409.

Lutz, M. 2014. "The 'now what' problem for error theory." *Philosophical Studies* 171: 351–371.

Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. NY: Penguin Books.

Marks, J. 2013. *Ethics without Morals: In Defence of Amorality*. NY: Routledge.

Mill, J. S. [1859] 1977. *On Liberty*. In J. Robson (ed.), *Collected Works*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Moeller, H. 2009. *The Moral Fool: A Case for Amorality*. NY: Columbia University Press.

Nolan, D., Restall, G., & West, C. 2005. "Moral fictionalism versus the rest." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83: 307-330.

Olson, J. 2014. *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pigden, C. 2007. "Nihilism, Nietzsche and the doppelganger problem." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10: 441–456.

Rosen, G. 2003. "Culpability and ignorance." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 103: 61-84.

Ugazio, G., Majdanžić, J., & Lamm, K. 2015. "Are empathy and morality linked? Evidence from moral psychology, social and decision neuroscience, and philosophy." In H. Maibom (ed.), *Empathy and Morality*. NY: Oxford University Press. 155-171.

West, C. 2009. "Business as usual? The error theory, internalism, and the function of morality." In R. Joyce & S. Kirchin (eds.), *A World Without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Error Theory*. Dordrecht: Springer. 183-198.