

## Chapter Six

### Amoralists, Critics, Pseudo-amoralists, and Abolitionists

**'The amoralist' is the name of somebody.  
Bernard Williams**

**1. Criticizing Amoralism.** As I have been using the word, the “amoralist” is a moral anti-realist who subscribes to an error theory according to which moral judgments are false because of what they claim about the world. As we observed at the end of Chapter One, not everyone uses the term ‘amoralist’ in this way, and others use other terms to stand for what I call amoralism. The amoralist, in my favored sense of the word, thinks that the belief in the existence of moral facts is a pervasive and fundamental error. As Nietzsche and Mackie said, “there are no moral facts,” and as Mackie said, “people believe that there are.”

Challenges to morality are rarely welcomed, so critics of the error theory and of other forms of moral anti-realism abound. Bernard Williams opened his book *Morality* with an attempt to answer “the amoralist,” who is “supposedly immune to moral considerations.” (Williams [1], xii) Gilbert Harman’s book, *The Nature of Morality*, contains an argument against “extreme nihilism,” the belief that we should abandon morality because “nothing is ever right or wrong, just or unjust, good or bad.” (Harman [2], 11) In *Moral Thinking*, R. M. Hare identified the amoralist as someone who is

“unwilling to think morally,” and who “refrains from making moral judgments at all.” He said that such a view is consistent, but he continued to search for “non-logical reasons for not being an amoralist.” (Hare, 169, 183, 186) In what follows we will take a look at some of the complaints moral realists have expressed about amoralism. It will not be hard to show that not all defenders of moral objectivity are aiming at the same target, and that some of their targets are poorly chosen, or invented just to be shot at.

**a. The amoralist is a selfish monster who denies the obvious.** We can hardly expect philosophers under the influence of moralism to wear themselves out constructing a strong and coherent challenge to their own beliefs. But even when moral philosophers do not just ignore the amoralist’s challenge, their defenses have often consisted of quick replies to weak versions of foolish positions, or attacks on those who violate (or promote the violation of) conventional moral standards. Amoralists and other deniers of moral objectivity are imagined to be inconsiderate monsters, sociopaths, and predators. In one place Williams suggests that they may not even be “recognizably human.” (Williams [1], 8)

When Williams said that the amoralist “in his pure form” is “immune to moral considerations” it turns out that he meant that the amoralist is unmoved by the suffering of others. This amoralist “has no inclination to tell the truth or keep promises if it does not suit him to do so.” (Williams [1], 3) By contrast, the individual I call an amoralist has normal feelings of concern for others, and regularly acts on them, but not because of any belief in objective moral truths. Williams and the other critics of “amoralism” assume, quite mistakenly, that the absence of these unintelligible and indefensible

beliefs about objective duty and intrinsic value might, as Samuel Clarke put it, lead to a situation in which “Man for his own present Advantage, should without scruple disappoint the most reasonable and equitable Expectations of his Neighbours, and cheat and defraud, or spoil by violence, all others without restraint.”

Those who choose to defend morality by attacking what they imagine to be the likely attitudes and behavior of amoralists, often pursue their attack by expressing incredulity at the amoralist’s unwillingness to go along with their fervent declarations about the wrongness of torture and child abuse. When amoralists say there are no moral facts, critics outdo themselves thinking up repellent or even monstrous acts, and then daring the amoralist to deny that these things are morally wrong. How, they ask, can there be nothing wrong with bear-baiting, dog-kicking, genocide, or pounding nails into live infants, grinding them up, and feeding them to their mothers? That last horror was provided by Russ Shafer-Landau, who claimed that it is an eternally true moral principle that this is something it would be morally wrong to do. (*Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?*, p. 88) But this proliferation of horrors is wasted effort because, as anyone who understands the amoralist’s position should recognize, no description of a case, however horrendous, is going to convert any alert amoralist to moral realism. A person’s amoralism is not based on ignorance of the world’s cruelty. Nor is a person’s cruelty either caused or amplified by a rejection of a belief in objective moral truths. There are plenty of *compassionate* amoralists and all of them can be said to be “immune to moral considerations.” Unlike the sociopaths, these friendly amoralists will strive to improve the welfare of others, but they will be moved by their concern about

actual instances of suffering, not by being told that suffering is intrinsically bad, that others have a moral right to their help, or that they have a moral duty to provide it.

We all worry about people who are unmoved by the pain of others. We understand Williams when he calls them psychopaths and monsters. But they aren't psychopaths and monsters because they "reject morality," they are psychopaths and monsters because they don't care about the suffering of others. Someone bound only by the dictates of some morality and utterly without affection, sympathy, or kindness would be a monster too—a moral monster.

**b. Can we find an argument to "answer" the amoralist?** Williams began his book *Morality* by looking for an answer to the "amoralist" who cares about no one—the amoralist as psychopath. But he realized that *this* (totally uncaring) amoralist will not be moved by arguments, and that "the idea of arguing him into morality is surely idiotic." (Williams [1], 8) Accordingly, he supplied us with a less extreme character—one it is, presumably, not idiotic to try to argue into morality. His example is the stereotype from a gangster movie "who cares about his mother, his child, even his mistress." (Williams [1], 9) He helps people, but only when he feels like it and he considers the interests of others, but not consistently. Williams says that if "morality can be got off the ground rationally," we ought to be able to get it off the ground in an argument with him.

Williams' chances of getting morality off the ground here are pretty good, because it appears that gangsters already do have a moral code. In *The Sopranos*, Tony and his associates do many things they would rather not do; and they often do these things because they acknowledge certain rules and obligations. Is that a

morality? It is hard to say that it is not. It certainly overlaps our conventional morality. Gangsters view themselves as soldiers, and at least many of the fictional ones seem to feel that it is “wrong” to cause unnecessary harm to civilians. Perhaps they have one set of rules for their own group and a weakened version of standard morality that operates when there is no conflict with their group morality or with the acquisition of property or honor. Actually, if we think about it, they may not be that different from the rest of us.

Since gangsters seem to operate with an assorted and not always consistent collection of fragments of morality, it should be easy to offer them an argument based on something they already believe. It is unlikely that many of them have studied metaethics, embraced amoralism, or even managed to free themselves from the moral beliefs they acquired as they were growing up. They are likely to agree that “rats” who betray their friends by talking to the FBI ought to be punished. If we can treat this as a moral judgment, then we may be able to get them to agree that anyone who betrays a friend also deserves some punishment. The moralist who can catch the mobster making a judgment of moral obligation might be able to argue that unless that mobster is willing to make similar judgments about relevantly similar cases he will have to add inconsistency to his list of crimes. So, perhaps we can present the mobster with an argument that he would logically have to accept, but this is only because he is as deluded about morality as everyone else. If he understands how moral arguments work, he knows enough to deny that the cases are relevantly similar, to withdraw his moral judgment, or to tell the moralist to get lost.

**c. Can we persuade the amoralist to behave?** An alert and dedicated amoralist can't be argued into morality, and the gangster who can be argued into morality will turn out not to be an amoralist because he will have already affirmed one, and probably many, moral judgments. Williams, still working on the assumption that we need to respond to the danger of amoralism, suggested that if we cannot argue an amoralist into being moral, perhaps we can at least persuade him. Of course, by 'being moral' here Williams meant something like 'being compassionate and caring'. It is not too hard to persuade attentive, open-minded, and non-defensive people (be they moralists or amoralists) to treat others with more consideration. We can document the results of homelessness, war, death squads, ethnic cleansing, prisons, factory farms, and slaughterhouses. But persuasion takes more than information. Merely knowing that there are such things as death squads is very different from "realizing" that there are. To "**realize**" that there are death squads is to go far beyond giving assent to the words "There are death squads." It is to allow our imaginations to supply some horrible details—orphans, widows, grieving parents, ruined lives, broken hearts, agony, despair, and unbearable loss, for starters. It is to listen to the stories of the victims, and to look into their hearts. Anyone can be persuaded to deal more compassionately with the suffering of someone *if they can be brought to realize what it is like to be the one who is suffering*. The difference between knowing and realizing is as great as the difference between a report of the number of casualties and an interview with a brokenhearted parent or spouse.

We eat veal, pork, beef, and poultry without a thought of what happened to the animal on the way to our plates. Because we are so insulated from the effects of what we do and cause to be done, Peter Singer's descriptions and pictures of animals in labs and factory farms in his book *Animal Liberation* may have done more to persuade people to avoid animal products than all his arguments. But just as arguments won't take hold unless the target of the argument has the right principles, persuasion only works when we can appeal to present desires or attitudes, to some pity, compassion, or sympathy (to use Hume's term) that already exists.

There are, of course, people who will be unruffled by a picture of chickens packed into tiny cages in a huge, hot, smelly, cement-block building, or by a picture of an iron-starved veal calf in a cramped wooden stall. But more will be moved; and, as a general rule, the more we *realize* what we are seeing, the more moved we will be. Fortunately for all living creatures, few humans lack a capacity to be moved by suffering and joy. Unfortunately for all living creatures, humans have learned to ignore and repress many things that might otherwise move them. The best way to persuade someone to deal in a more friendly way with others is to get them to pay more attention to the actual situation of others—to *realize* what it is like to be them. But it is not the amoralist who needs this treatment, it is the person who is able to ignore the suffering of others. Compassionate amoralists will be as interested as compassionate moralists in persuading those with cold hearts to reconsider their ways.

**d. Can the amoralist be controlled by force?** Moralists who identify amoralists as sociopaths with whom arguments and pleas are useless, may conclude

that we have no choice but to threaten them, to isolate them, or even to lock them up. That may be necessary with committed criminals or sociopaths whose lack of concern for others leads them to harmful actions, but there is no need to lock up, or even to bully, the amoralist. There is a place in life for coercion, and while amoralists will not believe that laws can be given a moral justification, they are not likely to want to live without them. Coercion by law falls equally on the heads of moralists and amoralists, and both can be glad there are penalties for murder and for dumping toxic waste in the river. Both moralists and amoralists may at times need to be controlled by force, but coercive remedies are usually unnecessary to cope with the average amoralist, who has as many decent impulses as the next person, or with the informed and compassionate amoralist, who has more. They might, however, be required for the sociopath—especially if that sociopath is also a moralist!

**e. Is the amoralist attacking a straw man?** When it is understood that the typical amoralist is no more likely to act selfishly than the typical moralist, the defenders of morality will have to abandon arguments that depend on demonizing those who disagree with them. Amoralists are not monsters, and, like most moralists, they have plenty of friendly impulses and policies that have nothing to do with morality. When moralists can no longer attack amoralism by attacking sociopaths, they may be forced to consider the real differences between themselves and their opponents. The amoralist is an error theorist who believes that all moral judgments are false because they claim a kind of objectivity and mind-independence they do not have. How can the moralist, who obviously has a different view, deal with this claim?

At the end of Chapter One I said that “if moralists believe that morality is objective and not subjective, that moral rules inescapably bind those capable of understanding them, that moral judgments, principles or ways of life can be rationally justified, let them come forth with explanations of what they mean, and with convincing reasons why we should believe what they say.” The problems religious moralists face when they try to do this were discussed in Chapter Three, and in Chapter Four we saw that secular moralists, from Plato on, have been unable to make sense of the inescapable demands of morality. I suggested that the moralists’ best hope might be to put the burden of proof on the amoralist, but that probably won’t work either because rhetorically competent amoralists can make a good enough case for rejecting that burden. If so, the moralist will once again face the need to explain how the demands of morality can be both objective and prescriptive.

But maybe not. What if the moralist can shift the argument by accusing the amoralist of attacking a “straw man,” that is, an unreal position, created for the sole purpose of being easily refuted. The amoralist, it might be said, has very convincing arguments, but they are directed at an enemy who only exists in their imaginations. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and very few people believe in those queer, magnetic, hypnotic, Platonic moral properties anymore. According to Simon Blackburn, the matter of the correspondence of our moral statements with moral reality can be set aside as something only philosophers take seriously. While the “theorist” may “misinterpret the nature of our judgments, their origins, and the standards that justify them,” he says, “the first-order user of the vocabulary makes no mistake.” (“Attitudes and Contents,” in

*Essays in Quasi-Realism*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 185.) I would say that Blackburn may have failed to appreciate how quickly and naturally ordinary people (first-order users) can turn into philosophers. When challenged, which happens often, it doesn't take "first-order users" of moral language long to become "theorists" and to start making familiar moves, producing ancient arguments, and, as witnessed by everything they say and do, embracing an objective difference between right and wrong.

It is indeed the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and one might think that no one would still embrace and try to defend a belief in objective values, but one who had such a thought would be out of touch with the vast majority of those who actually use moral language. In 2001, The Gallup Poll News Service released a story with the heading "Majority Considers Sex Before Marriage Morally Okay." (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/3163/Majority-Considers-Sex-Before-Marriage-Morally-Okay.aspx>) When asked if sex between an unmarried man and woman is "morally acceptable or morally wrong," 53% said it is morally acceptable, 42% said it is morally wrong, 3% said it depends on the situation, 1% said it isn't a moral issue, and 1% had no opinion. The 95% who answered "morally acceptable" or "morally wrong" understood that they were not asked if they disapprove of unmarried sex, if unmarried sex is forbidden by whatever standards they embrace, or if "fully rational creatures" would desire that such an act not be performed—they were asked if unmarried sex is morally wrong, and that is the question they answered.

As we pursued our "War on Terrorism" we became more attached than ever to the distinction between good and evil, and to the idea that both good and evil "are real." Few doubted that the terrorists who planned and executed the evil plot on 9/11 were

evil, and even those who opposed the war in Iraq were willing to allow that Saddam Hussein was an evil man—in the same league as Stalin and Hitler. When emotions are strong, relativistic talk or skeptical doubts about moral objectivity may seem insensitive or even dangerous. But it is as true after 9/11 and Saddam as it was before, that there is no intelligible, non-mythological explanation of what it means for “evil” (or “good”) to be “real.” An “evil-doer” is, obviously, someone who “does evil,” but as Hobbes said, there is no “common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of objects themselves.” The word is used to express revulsion and to condemn what we oppose, but it also carries a strong imputation of objectivity. Evil, people believe, is not something we imagine—it is real! The prevailing opinion is that “the world” *does* contain a “common rule of good and evil” that *is* “taken from the nature of objects themselves.”

So it appears that the moral anti-realist does have a genuine target, because almost everyone either already believes, or is ready to believe, exactly what the anti-realist is denying. Moral realists may not subscribe to anything as fanciful as Dworkin’s “moral field” theory, but when it is time to protect their moral beliefs, they will not be at a loss for words. The class of “moral philosophers” is not limited to a few of out-of-touch professors, as Blackburn suggests, but includes everyone who has used moral language and been called upon to back it up, everyone who has projected and then defended the projections—in short, everyone.

**f. Is the amoralist really a moralist who either doesn’t know it or won’t admit it?** “Very well,” the critic of amoralism may admit, “the world does contain moralists who sincerely believe and assert that moral judgments are objectively true, so

maybe the real truth is that *everyone* is a moral realist and there are no genuine moral *anti*-realists, and in particular, no amoralists.” This would be true if, in spite of their claim that moral judgments are all false, amoralists invariably ended up believing and making them. Other critics of amoralism say that even the rejection of a moral judgment (or of morality itself) is a move within morality, and that even silence might signify a moral stance in favor of not taking a moral stance.

We can begin with the claim that even amoralists will find themselves believing and making moral judgments. Amoralists, by definition, don't *believe* moral judgments, but of course an amoralist can *make* a moral judgment in order to influence others who do believe in morality. The critic of amoralism might do better by saying that amoralists will not be able to keep from making moral judgments *and meaning them*. Amoralists, they could say, will eventually and inevitably find themselves backsliding into moralism. They will insist that George, an amoralist damaged by Martha's deceit, will eventually find himself asserting, if not to others, then at least to himself, that Martha ought not to have deceived him and that she is a very bad person. But why should this be? There are many quite nasty things George can say and think without dipping into moralist language which, we are assuming, he has knowingly foresworn. Atheists rarely find themselves breaking into religious belief and prayer (even, I venture, in foxholes), so why think that amoralists will inevitably backslide into moralism?

What moralists and amoralists do share is the human condition—which means that they come to each event with a unique collection of plans, habits, hopes, and desires. Moralism critics try to use the perfectly normal and even inevitable desires of

amoralists against them. They say that since to desire something *is* to value it, and since to value something *is* to think that it is valuable, no one who admits to a desire can deny the reality of value. The amoralist, unimpressed by this bit of sophistry, will point out that desiring something may *not* be the same as valuing it, but even if it is, desiring something is definitely not the same as thinking that it is valuable. Infants and animals, after all, have and express desires, but they certainly don't think that the things they want are valuable in any way that would satisfy the rhetorical needs of a moralist.

Other critics try to say that when amoralists help someone or tell the truth, this shows that they do have moral principles, perhaps without even realizing it. Amoralists who are fair can be accused of believing in justice, and those who tell the truth and help others can be charged with holding moral principles of truthfulness and beneficence. But this is misleading. A non-duplicitous amoralist may simply have a policy of telling the truth. This will be filed under what we have been calling their "ethics." Moral realists might call this policy a moral principle, but amoralists will not think of it in the way moralists think of a duty to tell the truth. They will not see their policy of truthfulness as in any way expressing some "objective demand or requirement," and they will be flexible enough to realize that sometimes it is foolish not to lie.

What about the claim that the very rejection of a moral judgment, or of morality generally, is itself a move within morality? It seems a simple matter to deal with this, at least as long as we understand what external negation is. "Bear baiting is morally wrong" is a positive moral judgment. "Bear baiting is not morally wrong" *can* be understood as a moral judgment if '*not-morally-wrong*' is treated as a moral predicate

that means something like '*morally permissible*'. But "It is not the case that bear-baiting is morally wrong," the *external* negation, does not have to be understood as a moral judgment, so rejecting a moral judgment (or even all of them) does not presuppose morality.

Just as there is no non-fallacious path from the claim that something is desired to the claim that it is desirable, there is none from my desiring something to my believing that it is desirable, or from my choosing something to my believing that I ought to have chosen it. The non-duplicitous amoralist simply has a policy of telling the truth. Honest and reflective amoralists may be willing to try to explain why they have adopted this policy, and why they recommend it to others, when they do, but since they are amoralists, they will not even try to give it a moral justification.

Moralists believe that some of the behavior they find objectionable has something wrong with it that explains and justifies their dislike or disgust. Amoralists have other explanations for those feelings, and they add that moral emotions (and beliefs), though natural, are to some extent optional. Unable to show that this is not so, moralists change their strategy and set out to describe the amoralist as a monster, a sociopath, or a selfish jerk who needs to be persuaded or even forced to be "moral." When that slander finally fails to stick, and it becomes clear that the real monsters usually act in the name of morality, moralists need to find something else to say to defend their belief in the objectivity of morality. They can, for example, claim that the amoralist is attacking a straw man because almost no one believes in the queer properties that the amoralist has been attacking. What we have just learned, however,

is that almost everyone believes, or is just next door to believing, what the moralist appears to believe. But the 'almost' is important because the moral realist's final move was to do a complete flip-flop and to claim that *everyone* is actually a moralist, including the amoralist, who can't or won't admit it. With all of these silly and desperate arguments out of the way, we are ready to add one further clarification to the idea of amoralism by looking at two "pseudomoralists," that is, two famous personages who sound like amoralists until we listen closely to what they are saying.

**2. Pseudoamoralists.** We are about to meet two characters (one fictional and one real) who may be mistaken for amoralists. Calicles and Nietzsche attack conventional morality, but both turn out to be moralists with what we can describe as a conventionally immoral morality.

**Calicles.** In Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, Calicles defends the view that conventional morality is a system devised by the weak to keep the strong from getting everything they can. Conventions and laws are made

by the weaklings who form the majority of mankind. They establish them and apportion praise and blame with an eye to themselves and their own interests, and in an endeavour to frighten those who are stronger and capable of getting the upper hand they say that ambition is base and wrong, and that wrong-doing consists in trying to gain an advantage over others; being inferior themselves, they are content, no doubt, if they can stand on an equal footing with their betters. (Plato [5], 78)

We should not allow this attack on conventional morality to trick us into calling Callicles an amoralist. He rejects conventional morality only to claim that nature “demonstrates that it is right that the better man should prevail over the worse and the stronger over the weaker.” (78) He holds that strength and political power are good, and that the powerful and strong, being superior to the weak, deserve whatever their strength enables them to take. Callicles looks back with favor on the old aristocratic morality that rejected equality, opposed measures to protect the weak, and found the existence of a class-system proof that some people are better than others.

When Callicles says that this is the kind of view most of us want to discourage, he is right. The point here, however, is that whether we can discourage, or even refute, conventionally immoral forms of moralism or not, they are forms of *moralism*. Take away the moralism of Callicles and you take away his ability to defend his selfish behavior. What Callicles needs to be told is that strength is only one property among many, and that there is nothing about any naturalistic characteristic of anyone that can be cited to justify giving preferential treatment to anyone. Without moralism, nobody is in a position to claim to be someone’s “better” and there can be no moral defense of inequality and exploitation.

**Nietzsche.** Nietzsche is well-known for his desire to take a stand “beyond good and evil,” and for his claim that “there are altogether no moral facts.” It is now time to ask what these amoralist-sounding utterances amount to, and whether Nietzsche deserves to be called an amoralist. He probably does not, but it is hard to know what to make of some of his remarks.

One knows my demand of philosophers that they place themselves *beyond* good and evil—that they leave the illusion of moral judgments *beneath* them. This demand follows from an insight first formulated by me: that *there are no moral facts whatever*. Moral judgment has this in common with religious judgment that it believes in realities which do not exist. (Nietzsche [3], 55)

This certainly seems to be a denial of moralism—at least until we realize that when Nietzsche talks about going beyond good and *evil* he does not mean going beyond good and *bad*.

Nietzsche is known for having distinguished between “master morality” and “slave morality.” Slave morality is, as Callicles said, introduced by the many and the weak to keep the strong and the few from taking advantage of their strength. Master morality, on the other hand, is Nietzsche’s name for the morality of the strong.

Here is the place for the origin of that famous opposition of “good” and “evil”: into evil one’s feelings project power and dangerousness, a certain terribleness, subtlety, and strength that does not permit contempt to develop. According to slave morality, those who are “evil” thus inspire fear; according to master morality it is precisely those who are “good” that inspire, and wish to inspire, fear, while the “bad” are felt to be contemptible. (Nietzsche [2], 207)

'Evil' is the name the weak use to refer to the strong. 'Bad' is the name the strong use to refer to the weak and the "base." 'Good' is, naturally, used by the strong and the weak to refer to themselves.

As Nietzsche sees it, a healthy society has strong rulers who see themselves as *good* and their slaves and even their subjects as inferior beings, that is, as *bad*. This is the distinction Nietzsche does not want to abandon. Those at the bottom resent their lowly status and envy the privileges of their masters. Wimps that they are, they band together to promote and praise the virtues of altruism, passivity, and temperance. They call themselves and these virtues (which they would discard in a moment if they had the strength) *good*, and they call their "masters," those strong and fear-inspiring aristocrats, *evil*.

Nietzsche thinks that conventional morality, compassion, pity, and aversion to suffering (one's own or another's) are born of weakness and fear. They may provide security and comfort for the herd, but they lead in the end to mediocrity and decline.

Let us articulate that new claim: we need a critique of all moral values; the intrinsic worth of these values must, first of all, be called in question. . . . Nobody, up till now, has doubted that the "good" [Nietzsche is here using the word as the weak and the base would use it] man represents a higher value than the "evil," [that is, than those the weak would call "evil," namely, the strong] in terms of promoting and benefiting mankind generally, even taking the long

view. But suppose the exact opposite were true. What if the “good” [the weak] man represents not merely a retrogression but even a danger, a temptation, a narcotic drug enabling the present to live at the expense of the future? More comfortable, less hazardous, perhaps, but also baser, more petty—so that morality itself would be responsible for man, as a species, failing to reach the peak of magnificence of which he is capable? What if morality should turn out to be the danger of dangers? (Nietzsche [1], 155)

Morality may indeed hold us back from something higher, or at least from something different and more satisfying than our present situation. Yet what Nietzsche sees as higher is neither what most people would see as higher, nor is it the state of affairs that an amoralist would choose. Nietzsche opposes conventional morality not because it is morality, but because it is too kind, and he urges us to replace it not with any form of amoralism, but with an unconventional morality that promotes strength, competition, aggression and the elimination of compassion, which Nietzsche identifies with weakness.

You want, if possible--and there is no more insane “if possible”—*to abolish suffering*. And we? It really seems that *we* would rather have it higher and worse than ever. Well-being, as you understand it—that is no goal, that seems to us an *end*, a state that soon makes man

ridiculous and contemptible--that makes his destruction *desirable*. The discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering—do you not know that only *this* discipline has created all the enhancements of man so far? (Nietzsche [2], 153-154)

There is nothing obviously wrong with “well-being,” and when Nietzsche calls a contented person ridiculous and contemptible, and then desires his destruction, one is led to wonder not about the contented person, but about Nietzsche. Nevertheless, his point deserves to be taken seriously. We must struggle in order to survive and grow, and a serious pursuit of excellence in any field demands dedication and a certain amount of competition, struggle, and suffering. But this is not what Nietzsche is talking about when he says that only “great suffering” brings about the “enhancements of man.” For *those* enhancements we need the suffering of martyrs and heroes, and of the masses unable to get out of the way of the heroes. What are these “enhancements” if not the political and financial monuments and empires built on the suffering and deaths of millions of soldiers, slaves, and workers?

From what has been said, it is likely that Nietzsche, like Callicles, fails to qualify as an amoralist. Both hold a theory of value that makes strength a good, and a theory of obligation that permits the strong to do as they please. Nietzsche asks “What is good?” and answers “All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man.” Then he asks “What is bad?” and answers “All that proceeds from weakness.” (Nietzsche [3], 125) These values deviate from those of the conventionally moral person, but they are still values. Nietzsche is not just expressing affection for

power and distaste for weakness. If we say that an *immoralist* is a moralist with a morality that most people would consider immoral, we can call Callicles and Nietzsche *immoralists*. They do not appear to be amoralists.

**3. From Amoralism to Moral Abolitionism.** As Bentham grumpily admitted, moral principles are not open to proof. Nevertheless, moralists still treat them with the kind of respect due to established laws of nature, and use them to justify their own demands. Moral intuitions are mysterious and unverifiable, but moralists still trust them and are satisfied that they can give us moral knowledge. Arguments about right and wrong are interwoven with personal interest, self-esteem, indoctrination, and confusion, but moralists still pursue them as if they might be won, and as if winning them had something to do with arriving at the truth. If Hume and Mackie are right, these moralists, misled by their strong feelings and their projections, have become enthralled by the mistaken moralistic view of the world embedded in their language. By the end of Chapter Five it should have become clear that consequentialists, deontologists, and rights theorists are capable of attacking or defending any answer you can think of to any moral question you can ask. The error theorist is not surprised by this because it is just what we should expect to find if there really are no objective moral truths or facts.

What, then, are the options for a convinced error theorist? If moralism is really so mistaken, if its statements are never true, its commands never justified, its advice merely advice, and if an amoralist is as likely to be a good neighbor as a moralist, why bother with what Mackie described as the moral overlay? Why not, as Simon Blackburn once asked, abandon moral concepts and ways of thought, or at least replace them “by

ones that serve our legitimate needs but avoid the mistake?" (Simon Blackburn, "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value," in *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 149.) Why not move from amoralism, which is a set of beliefs about morality, to what has been called "moral abolitionism?" This option was mentioned by both Harman and Hare in passages quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Harman identified what he called "extreme nihilism," according to which "nothing is ever right or wrong, just or unjust, good or bad." That part was the moral anti-realism. But he also attributed to the extreme nihilist the further idea that "we should abandon morality." That was the abolitionism (as long as his 'should' is not understood morally). Hare identified the amoralist as someone who is "unwilling to think morally," and who "refrains from making moral judgments at all." Blackburn calls this position "revisionist projectivism," but we shall continue to call it "moral abolitionism," because it is the recommendation to abolish morality, and because that is what it is called by some of its recent critics and defenders.

The respect in which morality is held flows from the widely accepted assumption that moral demands are objectively authoritative, categorical, and inescapable. People are encouraged to think of moral requirements in these ways, and most people do so to such an extent that it is hard for them to take the error theory seriously. Even after becoming convinced of the error theory, many are tempted to think that we and everyone else will be better off if we all continue to treat morality as if it were objective and authoritative. Mackie spends much of his book arguing for the error theory, but he also supports the continued use of moral language, and Warnock and Foot, both of

whom are sensible enough to reject objective prescriptivity, still want to know what sort of a morality we need.

The answer favored by the moral abolitionist is that we do not need any—that we would be better off without morality. This is far from obvious, but there are many considerations that suggest it. If morality really requires objective prescriptivity and if there is no such thing, then unless we do abandon it we will end up knowingly promoting false beliefs. This is a risky enterprise because it is more difficult than we think to try to control others by misleading them about the way things are. If moral judgments are really false, then our moralistic remarks will surely conflict with reality at many points, and we will need to resort to evasion, obfuscation, or sophistry to maintain our fiction. It is hard to estimate the damage this does to our integrity and to our victim's ability to make sense of the world.

There are dangers in treating morality as a useful fiction, but it is easy to think of reasons for continuing to exploit the power of moral language. In *Hume's Moral Theory*, Mackie argued that if we supplement social practices like recognizing property and keeping agreements with the moral overlay, then people will be more likely to leave our possessions alone and to abide by their words. He then added a second reason for promoting a belief in morality. He said that when people believe in an objective truth about what is right and wrong it is easier to support and rationalize legal decisions and sanctions. If we could not anchor the use of force in some claim to a legitimate, objective, and moral ground, that use of force and the useful practices it supports could be more easily challenged. (p. 154)

There may be something to this, but these two reasons for adopting a moralist approach to life are surprisingly weak. Consider the first. We all want others to respect our property, to tell the truth, and to keep their agreements. If we insist that these practices are required by morality some people may be encouraged to adhere more closely to them. But it is not true that a practice plus a moral overlay will always be as fully, regularly, or willingly followed as that practice supplemented by some of the many available non-moral devices. We might promote the practice of keeping promises by early and extensive training in empathy, by strict surveillance and strong penalties for promise-breakers, or by massive doses of advertising by celebrities. Since we have access to these and other powerful ways to encourage promise-keeping, the moral abolitionist can argue that the moral overlay may be set aside in favor of more effective and less peculiar devices, some of which are already operating at full strength.

It is hard to know what role “moral considerations” actually play in our choices because our behavior is a function of innumerable known and unknown factors. It is possible that when some of us make decisions, moral considerations are completely idle. But even when moral beliefs do play a role in choices, morality is, as we have seen, flexible enough to support any choice anyone is likely to want to make, including the choice of government officials to suppress what they choose to call immorality. This throws a different light on the idea that the moral overlay is useful when we want to justify social and legal sanctions, the second of the reasons Mackie gave for preserving our error-infested moral judgments and language. What good is morality if it can so readily be marshaled to defend the sanctions of a tyrant?

On the other side of the ledger, Mackie acknowledged three things that can be said in support of moral abolitionism: Morality inflames disputes and makes compromise difficult, it preserves unfair arrangements and facilitates the misuse of power, and it makes global war possible. It inflames disputes because moralizing an issue tends to excite and confuse the parties involved. If we hope to resolve conflicts by arriving at a compromise, our task will be easier if moral disagreements are seen as conflicts of interest “without the embroidery of rights and moral justification.” (Mackie, *Hume’s Moral Theory*, p. 154) The controversy over abortion would not be nearly as intractable as it has become if the fiction of moral rights had not been appropriated by both sides. 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. A human embryo is what it is, but someone who insists on describing it with morally loaded terms like ‘person’ or ‘innocent human baby’ leaves no room for compromise over issues like abortion or embryonic stem cell research. How can anyone compromise with someone they see as wanting to murder babies?

Not only does the moral overlay inflame disputes and make compromise difficult, the lack of an actual truth of the matter means that every possible moral value and argument can be met by an equal and opposing value or argument. The moral overlay adds an entire level of controversy to a dispute, and introduces unanswerable questions that usurp the original question, which is always some practical question about what to do or support. This “moral turn” guarantees that the participants will be distracted from

the real issue, and that the disagreement will flounder in rhetoric, confusion, or metaethics. The dangers of the moral overlay are far worse than Mackie thought.

These considerations have been amplified by Ian Hinckfuss, who stressed the dangers that infect what he called a “moral society,” that is, a society in which almost everyone accepts the literal truth of many moral judgments. In this society, which is *our* society, we regularly make moral assertions, but, as Hinckfuss insisted, they are all false. He acknowledged that false moral beliefs may have some benefits, but argued that any moral society will come with a number of disagreeable features that are essential to its propagation and preservation, features like “elitism, authoritarianism, guilt complexes, ego competition, economic inequality and war.” (v) Moral societies, he added, are intellectually dishonest, “inefficient in maximizing human happiness, satisfaction, or self-esteem,” and “because of the threat of war with other societies, physically dangerous.” The moral overlay actually hinders the resolution of conflicts and fosters the exploitation of the “poor and the weak by the rich and powerful.” (20 – 21)

In a moral society children will be raised in “an environment of continual moral injunctions.” They will be conditioned to want to be good, and trained to respect the moral authorities of their society. When they reach this point they are “in a position to be morally propagandized by those whom they regard as their ‘betters’, that is, those who they feel know more about what is right and what is wrong than they do.” (p. 23) Ordinary members of a moral society will not be able to discover the moral truth for themselves (because there is none), but they will have learned to believe in moral truth, and to rely on the members of a moral “elite,” who take themselves to be superior in

knowledge, virtue, and worth. When one is an honored member of a moral elite “it is easy to believe that what one wishes for oneself is morally permissible, and how one wants others to behave is morally obligatory.” (p. 27)

Hinckfuss was more emphatic than Mackie about the tendency of those with strong moral beliefs to go to war. After mentioning a dozen or so of the world’s bloodiest conflicts, he asks us to “think of how the situation would have been if, by a miracle, moral thought could have been eradicated from the minds of all the agents involved. . . . There would be no sense of duty, no sense of loyalty, no patriotism, no feeling morally obliged to fight for a cause, no sense that the people one is trying to kill or subjugate are less worthy of survival or freedom than oneself or anyone else.” (pp. 45-46) In *The Myth of Morality* (p.180) Richard Joyce replied to this by pointing out that morality didn’t cause these wars, which is right; but he neglected both the serious likelihood that morality made it more difficult to resolve the conflicts that led to those wars, and the sad fact that once a war starts, morality can be used to justify inflicting any cruelty deemed necessary for victory.

Getting rid of morality will not solve all the world’s problems, and no moral abolitionist would claim that it would, but it will allow us to see conflicts of interest for what they are and other people for who they are, and that by itself will undermine demagoguery and fanaticism. If Hinckfuss is even partially right about what it takes to institute and enforce morality, it may be a far more dangerous institution than its defenders realize.

Mackie considered abolishing the moral overlay, but he was unable to find an answer to the question of what we might use in its place. This question will not be so difficult if it turns out that morality does less than we think it does, or if we discover that compassion and kindness can be called upon to fill any motivational deficiency brought on by the departure of morality. Moralists will argue that morality beats compassion and kindness, which, being feelings, come and go. But morality only beats compassion and kindness if it does its job better than compassion and kindness do its job; and it can be argued that morality is not as reliable as those feelings when it comes to influencing behavior and moderating the force of selfishness. Compassion, after all, is a direct motivator, and it doesn't have to be justified. It is a way of looking, and a disposition to help. If you care about somebody, if you want them to be happy, there is nothing to prove and no problem about motivation. If you merely think it is your duty to help them, then it will always be possible to dig up some excuse for not doing anything.

But 'compassion' and 'kindness' are just words. The reality is that we have a large and varied collection of resources, habits, strategies, and agreements that have nothing to do with morality, and it is on some of these that we will focus in the remaining chapters. In Chapter Seven, as we listen to the advice of some historic sages about how to live, we may be surprised at how much they can say without even mentioning anything like intrinsic value or moral obligation. In Chapter Eight we will look at factors other than morality that are effective in shaping our dispositions and regulating our actions, and we will pay special attention to the business of making decisions.