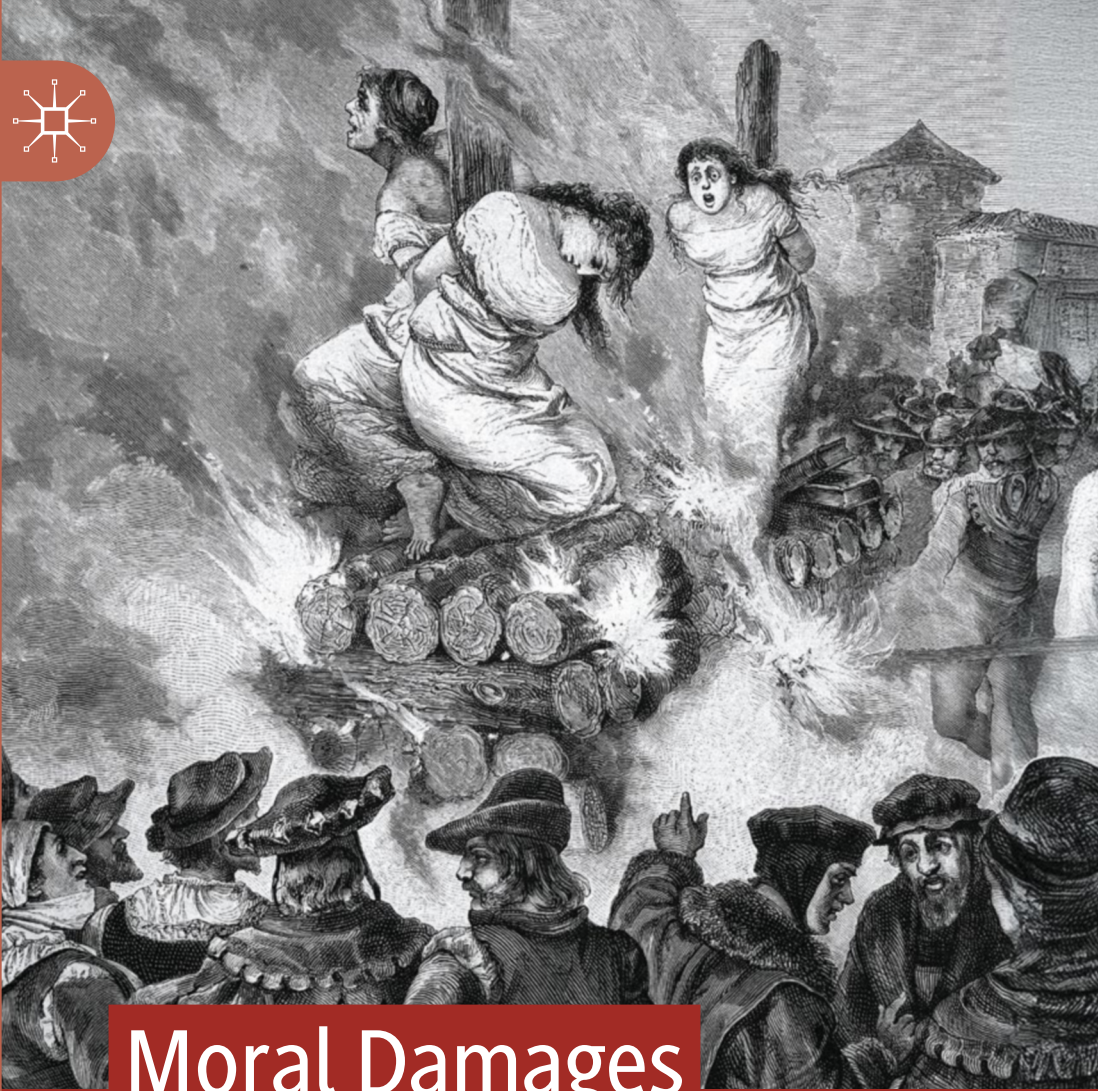




Moral Damages

The Case for Abolishing Morality

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For Lacey, Zoe, and Peter

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Introduction: Opening Statements

What if the very thing that most people believed was the key to solving humanity's biggest challenges was actually the primary cause of them? In this book I argue that this description applies to morality as it is commonly conceived. The philosopher Peter Singer has observed that “two and a half millennia of moral philosophy still have not yielded generally accepted results about the fundamental nature of ethics” (2011, xv). Given that this is the case, it should not be surprising that philosophers have struggled to vindicate any of their claims about morality, including those about which acts are to count as moral or immoral. Given the enormous amount of effort put into the investigation of this subject by some of the world's greatest minds over an enormous time span, it's fair to ask why we appear to be no closer to apprehending definitive moral truths than the ancient Greeks and others that preceded even them. If we assume that objective moral truths about right and wrong exist then it is extremely difficult to account for why humanity has made numerous discoveries regarding fundamental truths about other fields of study like science and mathematics, but seemingly none about ethics. If, however, we accept the likelihood that no such moral truths exist, this curious aspect of our history loses its mystery entirely.

While many philosophers have acknowledged the *possibility* that no moral truths exist, very few have been persuaded to deny their existence. Still fewer, in fact far fewer, agree that the world would be a better place

were the rejection of moral truths to become widespread. I suspect that the latter point (and perhaps the former to some extent) can be explained by how philosophers have lacked access to the kind of evidence I will provide indicating that morality produces more harm than benefits. In this book, I will argue for a position that is best captured by the term *moral abolitionism*. This position recommends eliminating all vestiges of moral thinking from our lives, and is based on two primary claims. The first of these, known as *error theory*, holds that all moral statements are false insofar as they entail properties (e.g., moral wrongness) that do not exist. The second claim, and the one that this book will mostly focus on, is that the belief in morality does humanity more harm than good and should, therefore, be eradicated. Thus, in addition to having good reasons for rejecting morality based on theoretical arguments supporting error theory, I will argue that there are purely pragmatic and self-interested (i.e., *prudent*) reasons for people to work toward abolishing morality as well. By saying that we should abolish morality, I mean that insofar as possible, we should work to eliminate all literal remnants of traditional morality from our language and in our deliberations about what to do.

It may help to clarify the particular error theory that I accept by calling it *retributivist moral anti-realism*. This label signifies the key element at play in my error theory; namely, its denial of any moral properties that could justify retributivist attitudes or the retributivist treatment of human beings. By “retributivist” I mean the justification for treatment whereby one is deemed a proper target of either reward or punishment on the sole basis of having performed either a morally good or morally bad decision/action respectively. The administration of such rewards or punishments from this perspective is seen as an intrinsic good, and any justification for treatment that is geared to bringing about positive outcomes in the future (such as less bad behavior on the part of the punished individual) is irrelevant. Retributivist justice, furthermore, implies that the extent of the reward or punishment corresponds to the relative goodness or badness of the action or decision in question. Thus, an act deemed to be extremely bad (such as murder) would warrant a harsher punishment than an act deemed to be slightly bad (such as lying about being sick to get out of work). As I discuss in more detail in Chap. 2, my choice to focus on a notion of morality that contains a heavy retributivist element stems from the fact that this captures the conception of morality that most laypersons (i.e., the folk) have. With this in mind, my primary aim in this book is to establish that: (1) all statements implying that human agents are genuinely

deserving of retributivist treatment (i.e., what I consider to be genuine moral statements) are false; and (2) humanity would be better off were it the case that people never allowed moral beliefs with retributivist underpinnings to influence their decisions or behaviors.

The abolition of morality will no doubt strike many readers as a preposterous and perhaps downright dangerous proposal. From a purely philosophical perspective, the very idea of morality being a mass delusion flies in the face of what the vast majority of philosophers both past and present, as well as non-philosophers, have accepted (the “preposterous” aspect of my view). And while I think it is fair to categorize moral abolitionism as a fringe theory, its status as such appears to be due less to a lack of credible arguments in its favor than to a combination of philosophically irrelevant factors, including biologically based psychological predispositions and concerns that the wholesale rejection of morality in our lives would have a devastatingly negative impact (the “dangerous” aspect of my view). Despite whatever negative predispositions toward moral abolitionism people might have, my hope is that after presenting my case the reader will be left with a greater appreciation of the negative impact of morality (e.g., how it has been used to justify some of the more horrific episodes in human history including slavery, ritualistic human sacrifice, the persecution and killing of ethnic and racial minorities, and virtually all large-scale warfare), as well as optimism regarding our prospects for a better world. And while it may be too much to expect the typical reader to become a full-blown moral abolitionist after completing this book, I will be satisfied if readers are persuaded to view moral abolitionism as somewhat less preposterous and dangerous than they did prior to doing so.

1 A CALL TO (FEWER) ARMS

On the afternoon of March 15, 2019, the country of New Zealand was shaken to its core when an Australian national and white supremacist began a killing spree at two Christchurch mosques that left 51 dead and another 40 wounded. It was the single worst peacetime massacre in the country’s history, and it was especially shocking given New Zealand’s status as one of the safest and least violent countries in the world. Much of the damage inflicted by the shootings came by way of two semi-automatic military-style rifles with expanded magazines. In response to the attack, New Zealand’s then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern spoke later that day about the need to change the country’s gun laws. Then, in a concise but

powerful ten-minute speech given to the public on March 20, Ardern vowed to alter New Zealand's gun laws in order to, among other things, make it illegal to either sell or own military-style semi-automatic weapons. In her speech, she stated that her expectation was that "the law will be in place...by the 11th of April" (Dessem 2019). Making good on Ardern's prediction, the law was passed by the New Zealand Parliament on April 10th by an overwhelming 119 to 1 vote in favor of it.

The short period of time it took to pass major gun reform in New Zealand—less than one month after the massacre—is astonishing, particularly in comparison to the exceedingly slow responses that many other wealthy democracies have taken to address similar threats. The U.S., in particular, has consistently found itself unable to pass major gun reform despite having many more nonmilitary related gun deaths and mass shootings than any other developed country. And while the speech that Ardern gave on March 20, 2019, cannot be given sole credit for passing gun reform in New Zealand, it likely played a significant role in galvanizing popular and political support for it that had been lacking in the past. In a matter of weeks, both the country's citizens and politicians acknowledged that something needed to be done, and swift action was taken to do it.

One of the most notable aspects of Ardern's speech is how one finds a virtual absence of anything resembling a *moral argument* in favor of tougher gun control. Instead, Ardern chose to make her case by simply stating some of the facts surrounding the massacre (including the weapons involved), offering a timeline of when she expects the legislation to be passed, and mentioning that such legislation would be "in the national interest."¹ Commenting on Ardern's speech and New Zealand's subsequent success in passing gun reform, journalist Matthew Dessem (2019) discusses how if a version of Ardern's speech were to be given by a fictionalized U.S. politician in a Hollywood movie, we could expect a much wordier monologue featuring hollow moral talk about "the meaning of America" and so forth. One of the reasons that Dessem's speculation rings so true is that we have seen this kind of act played out all too often in the U.S., especially where discussions about gun reform following mass shootings are involved. In fact, it has gotten to the point where any casual yet astute observer of U.S. politics should be able to accurately predict how prominent U.S. politicians will react to particularly heinous mass shootings:

¹ A complete transcript of Ardern's speech can be found in Dessem (2019).

1. Express sadness for the killed/injured victims and their families. Make the obligatory mention of “thoughts and prayers” (Democrats and Republicans);
2. Condemn the “evil” acts of the killer (Democrats and Republicans);
3. Argue for stricter gun laws—sometimes, though not always, appealing to moral arguments (most Democrats, few Republicans);
4. Argue against stricter gun laws—almost always appealing to moral arguments, the majority of which are based on either general claims about personal freedom or a narrow interpretation of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that may or may not be reducible to personal freedom (most Republicans, few Democrats);
5. No significant gun control legislation passes;
6. Mass shooting number *X* for the year fades from the public consciousness—back to business as usual.

While the U.S. has seen the preceding script played out again and again over the past several decades, it is worth noting that on the heels of a mass shooting in a Uvalde, Texas elementary school in May of 2022, the U.S. government was able to pass a new gun law a month later (*The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act*, hereafter BSCA). Though this achievement is notable in that it represents the most significant gun legislation passed in the U.S. since the 1990s, it failed to put into law many of the key safeguards that gun reform advocates there have emphasized. For instance, it does not ban any types of weapons, ammunition, or magazines, nor does it establish any universal background checks or so-called national “red flag laws” designed to keep guns out of the hands of citizens whose backgrounds suggest a high risk for harming innocent victims. The reforms established by the BSCA look very weak compared to the stricter gun laws that have passed in New Zealand and other countries throughout the world. In light of this, it’s no wonder that many advocates of meaningful gun reform in the U.S. have referred to the BSCA as “toothless,” and that a U.S. poll found that 78% of respondents feel that the gun law is likely to do either little or nothing at all in reducing gun violence compared with only 7% of respondents who believe that the law will do a lot to stem gun violence (Pew Research Center 2022a, 2022b).²

² An article published in July 2023 notes how the grim milestone of 400 mass shootings occurred more quickly than in past years despite the passing of BASCA in 2022 (LeBlanc and Choi 2023).

The takeaway here is that when it comes to significant gun reform in New Zealand and the U.S., moral arguments seem to have played a much greater role in obstructing the passage of such laws than in promoting them. As I mentioned before, Prime Minister Ardern's only real argument for banning certain weapons and weapon accessories in her speech was that doing so served the public interest. She evidently felt no need to provide an additional explanation for why serving the public interest—cashed out in terms of positive consequences, in this case fewer gun-related deaths—is more *morally justifiable* than other conflicting political aims, such as not infringing upon personal freedoms (e.g., the freedom to own a firearm). It was simply assumed that serving the national interest is worth doing.³ We can easily imagine that had some major U.S. politician made the same speech following one of that country's innumerable mass shootings, it would have been met with vociferous opposition by politicians relying on moral arguments centering around individual freedoms and very little on claims about what is in the nation's interest. And the reason why opponents of stricter gun laws would rely heavily, if not completely, on such moral arguments is that it is difficult to think of any compelling reason for why the overall well-being of a country (particularly one with so many gun deaths and mass shootings) is best served by giving citizens easy access to semi-automatic military-style rifles.

The experiences of New Zealand and the U.S. regarding gun control are illuminating insofar as they are indicative of both the problematic role that morality has come to play in human societies generally, and how we can effectively deal with some of the most serious challenges facing modern society without having to engage in moral discourse. In the same way that morality has effectively made the U.S. worse off by enabling the unprecedented gun ownership we find there (the U.S. is the only country with more firearms than people)—which is, in turn, directly related to the number of that country's fatal shootings—I will argue that morality has been a major source of other problems to the extent that it has caused more human suffering than it has prevented. For the first time in human history, we have at our disposal both persuasive arguments indicating that

³ Although Ardern's speech lacked any explicit moral language, it may nonetheless have stimulated moral considerations in the minds of New Zealand citizens which, in turn, could have played a role in catalyzing popular support for gun reform. Even so, I will argue that moral considerations *need not* have played such a role given the purely prudential reasons in favor of enacting reform that Ardern cited.

our moral beliefs are ill-founded *and* compelling empirical evidence of how morality likely poses an overall disadvantage to human societies. Furthermore, we have good reason to believe that whatever advantages morality does offer can be provided just as effectively by other resources available to us. If I am right about all of this, the blueprint for overcoming the primary ills that have confronted humanity since the onset of civilization is in our laps. The question is whether we have the wisdom and courage it takes to follow its recommendations.

2 MORALITY: AN OBSTACLE TO PROGRESS

What kinds of reasons do we have for believing that human societies would be better off were we to free ourselves from the dominion that morality has had over us from time immemorial? What could step in to play its regulatory role? The events surrounding New Zealand's success in implementing stronger gun restrictions offer guidance. As I mentioned, the case for tighter gun laws that Prime Minister Ardern presented to the citizens of New Zealand was based solely on serving the national interest of the country (a pragmatic aim). Furthermore, the political will of citizens to change the law was almost certainly forged to some extent by empathy for the victims of the massacre and their families. Add to these elements the capacity of the citizenry to reason that restricting access to semi-automatic military-style rifles and high-capacity magazines is likely to decrease the likelihood of a similar massacre occurring in the future, and you have, I submit, all of the ingredients that were needed to change the laws for the greater good of the country: *self-interest*, *empathy*, and *reason*. Without the appearance of persuasive moral arguments to oppose them, it is hard to believe that the citizens of any country that experiences a mass shooting of this nature would not overwhelmingly move to enact similar restrictions. And while the subject of gun control is a prime example of how the combination of self-interest, empathy, and reason appears to serve as a sufficient impetus to creating a better society in the absence of persuasive moral arguments to the contrary, there are other examples as well.

Looking at how New Zealand and the U.S. have addressed the COVID-19 pandemic reveals many similar features. On the one hand, the citizens of New Zealand have generally been unified in agreeing with the government's mandates and strict quarantine laws on the basis of serving the country's long-term self-interest (i.e., having fewer citizens die or suffer from the disease), and a concern for their fellow citizens (McClure

2021). I should also point out how that country's citizens are *reasonably* following what the relevant experts (i.e., scientists and doctors) recommend. No further appeal to morality seems necessary to convince the average New Zealander to abide by the recommended safeguards.

On the other hand you have the U.S., where moral arguments against the implementation of safeguards like masks and vaccines have been rampant and are contributing to the extreme political polarization we find there. The results? While the U.S. has seen the greatest number of COVID-19 deaths in the world (over one million as of the middle of 2022) and has a COVID-19 fatality rate of almost 2,600 people per million (19th worst out of 155 nations), New Zealand has the world's third lowest COVID-19 fatality rate (less than 11 deaths per million), with only 52 citizens having died from it at the time of this writing (Statista 2024). As I discuss in detail later, there is reason to believe that what we find in these cases points to a more general pattern of morality being more of an obstacle than a facilitator for the kinds of social benefits recommended by long-term self-interest, empathy, and reason.

Before moving on it will help to address a possible objection. The case I will build for eliminating morality from our deliberations in favor of considerations based solely on self-interest, empathy, and reason relies on the claim that doing so is likely to serve the overall welfare of human beings. Where one is not interested in living in a world where human welfare is advanced—be it by having the needs of ourselves and others better provided for, having greater general happiness, having less overall violence, etc.—I admit that such an individual is likely to find little in the pages that follow that can persuade them to abandon morality, other than perhaps the arguments I offer against moral realism. Fortunately, those who have little to no interest in seeing the welfare of humanity (including themselves) advanced are likely to be very few in number. Even so, one might argue that insofar as my perspective assumes the value of promoting human well-being I am, in fact, giving a moral (more specifically, utilitarian) argument about what we ought to do. This, however, is incorrect. I want to be clear from the start that I am rejecting any suggestion that anyone is *morally obligated* (i.e., that anyone *morally ought*) to do anything, whether that involves contributing to the greatest amount of human happiness or anything else. In Chap. 7 I will, in fact, offer reasons for why we should abstain from taking up a utilitarian moral perspective which places ultimate value on human welfare.

Nor am I arguing that anyone is morally obligated to maximize his or her own self-interest. However, insofar as a person happens to value their own welfare (and who doesn't?), I will argue that it is probably *rational* (in the sense that one has purely prudential as opposed to moral or any other sort of reasons) to belong to a society in which morality plays a minimal or non-existent role. To take an analogous though far less contentious example, I would consider it rational for a person who doesn't like experiencing pain not to stick a fork in their eye. Note that in recommending to this individual that they not stick a fork in their eye—which may be imparted by a phrase such as, “You should not stick a fork in your eye”—this in no way implies any sort of moral claim or justification. It is rather a recommendation based only on what I take this individual's subjective desires to be. All of this is to say that the basis of the practical case that I will build for abolishing morality is that an amoral world of the kind I advocate would likely be superior to the current one in terms of satisfying the average individual's subjective preferences. Returning to the main issue at hand, the prudential case for belonging to an amoral society becomes even stronger, I will argue, for the vast majority of people who value the interests of others (be it one's family, friends, or community members in general). Simply put, this book will argue that since there are good prudential reasons for doing away with moral considerations, and since there are no moral reasons whatsoever, it is reasonable for us to work toward a world in which morality ceases to inform our deliberations about what to do.⁴

3 MORAL ABOLITIONISM: AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME

My call to abolish morality—or perhaps put more accurately, my call to abolish false beliefs about alleged moral facts as well as the attitudes and ways of communicating arising from them—is no doubt radical in its suggestion that we strive to eliminate a facet of our existence that is to some extent engrained in our collective psyche, has a biological basis, and is

⁴ I am assuming here that insofar as one has self-interested reasons for doing something, it is self-evident that one (prudently) ought to do it all things being equal. And while things may not be equal if, say, there are other legitimate reasons—either prudential or moral—for not doing them, I will argue that reasons of the moral sort are never justified.

found in every human society ever documented.⁵ Nonetheless, I believe the time has come for such a radical move for two reasons. The first is that there has never been such a strong philosophical basis for rejecting the existence of objective moral truths, much of which has been provided by recent empirical research. As I discuss in the first few chapters of this book, the work of moral psychologists provides us with a much clearer understanding of the nature of our moral judgments and beliefs. As important and fascinating as this research is, however, these psychologists seem mostly unaware of the full philosophical implications of their work, including the extent to which this research calls morality itself into question. The second, and in my view the most important, reason for why the present state of the world calls for the radical step of dispensing with morality is due to the unprecedented challenges that humanity currently faces. While some of these challenges, including growing political strife both within and between nations, are attributable exclusively to the actions of human beings, others, such as climate change, are rooted in features of the natural world. In each of these cases, however, human activities are either the primary source of the problems or they have exacerbated them. And as I aim to show, morality not only seems ill-fitted for ameliorating these crises, but it generally worsens them.

⁵There are two main senses of the term *morality* at play when philosophers address the issue of moral abolitionism. The first is the more common conception of morality as referring to standards of right and wrong conduct that are applicable to human beings and which place demands on our decisions and behaviors. These standards imply the existence of certain metaphysical properties (such as *moral rightness* and *moral wrongness*) that are applicable to human agents and their activities. Call this *metaphysical morality*. The second refers to people's beliefs about morality that influence their judgments about the activities of human beings—such that some are considered to be morally good or morally bad—and motivate their behaviors. Call this *psychological morality*. In agreeing with the error theorist's statement that "morality does not exist," I am referring to metaphysical morality since I don't deny that people have certain moral beliefs. Likewise, when concurring with the moral abolitionist recommendation that "we eliminate morality," I am referring to psychological morality since we can't eliminate that (namely, metaphysical morality) which doesn't exist given my commitment to error theory.

This difference between metaphysical and psychological morality notwithstanding, I will abide by the common practice of using the term "morality" in referring to both metaphysical and psychological morality. The specific sense in which I will be using it should be clear given the context. This is, as I have said, the common practice of philosophers who have written specifically on the subject of moral abolitionism, and I will assume that the reader is sophisticated enough to realize which sense of morality I have in mind without having to be given any further explicit distinctions throughout the remainder of this book.

While my contention that morality is ill-suited for dealing with the greatest challenges facing us today is hardly the consensus view among contemporary philosophers, a few others have shared this sentiment. The late Australian philosopher Ian Hinckfuss was the first to provide a thorough, albeit somewhat brief, treatise arguing that humanity would be better off dispensing with morality. In his manuscript *The Moral Society: Its Structure and Effects* (1987), Hinckfuss foreshadows my own project by suggesting that morality is damaging on both a personal level (via guilt and self-denigration) and societal level (via wars, etc.). Unsurprisingly, Hinckfuss's ideas were so controversial and out of the mainstream at the time that he encountered difficulty publishing the manuscript, which only saw the light of day as part of a series of papers published through The Australian National University.⁶ It is telling that some thirty-plus years later it is regarded by many as a seminal work that has framed much of the current discourse concerning the practical merits of morality. Thus, we find Richard Joyce remarking how "Hinckfuss's arguments set the agenda for subsequent discussion...on the institution of morality" (Joyce 2019, pp. xix, xx) and Bjorn Eriksson and Jonas Olson writing that "The error theorist's *locus classicus* for reflections on the downside of morality is Ian Hinckfuss's the *Moral Society*..." (Eriksson and Olson 2019, p. 123).

As revolutionary as Hinckfuss's work might have been at the time, he acknowledged that his claims did not rise much above speculation. Hence, he states that "the arguments which will be offered for [moral abolitionism] are unlikely to be conclusive. This issue falls within the realm of moral sociology, and the fact is that there is little solid sociological evidence available for or against the position" (Hinckfuss 1987, p. 3). Among the very few moral abolitionists that have written on this subject more recently, they seem to share Hinckfuss's view that it is difficult to make a strong case in favor of its practical merits. The late philosopher Richard Garner, to take one example, has suggested we focus on the question of whether or not moral abolitionism might be beneficial to adopt from the perspective of an individual's own self-interest since he believes that the question of whether society would be better off without morality is not "going to get a definitive answer" (Garner 2019, p. 82). Expressing similar doubt about whether we could ever situate the burden of proof when it comes to

⁶Hinckfuss's manuscript originally had the much more colorful title, *To Hell With Morality*. I can only presume that he changed it to make it more acceptable to potential publishers.

determining morality's net impact on society, moral abolitionist Joel Marks offers the following reflection:

...who is to say whether the widespread disbelief in morality in particular would result in social chaos or some other state of affairs that most of us would clearly not prefer to the present arrangement? We are left with our educated guesses or hunches or 'intuitions'." (Marks 2019, p. 100)

I do not share these fellow abolitionists' reservations about the strength of the case that can be made to establish that society is better off without morality. In fact, this book aims to provide the first definitive account of how morality detracts from the overall welfare of human societies by drawing on the latest research from a variety of empirical fields. Hinckfuss has said that "whether morality engenders satisfaction or otherwise is a contingent matter and the question arises as to what extent one can justify or refute such theories by empirical research" (1987, p. 61). As I intend to show, the relevant empirical work on morality since Hinckfuss's book has developed to the point that it can provide us with the kind of evidence we need to establish the likelihood that our overall welfare would be best served by abandoning morality to the greatest extent possible.

4 THE UNCERTAIN TRAJECTORY OF THE "MORAL UNIVERSE"

Despite the occasional dissenting voice such as Hinckfuss's, most philosophers and moral psychologists share the opinion that morality is an indispensable ally in the quest for a better future. Though many in these fields are willing to acknowledge the role morality has played in causing significant hardships—such as the role moral arguments play in instigating wars and smaller-scale conflicts—they typically defend it nonetheless by pointing to how morality has succeeded in helping individuals throughout history formulate the kinds of ideas and arguments that have pushed civilization in a positive direction. Hence, we find prominent academics including psychologist Steven Pinker, biologist Richard Dawkins, and philosopher Derk Pereboom essentially espousing Martin Luther King Jr.'s pronouncement that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." However, even if this has been the trend historically speaking, there is no guarantee that it will continue, and recent events provide evidence for doubting that it will.

Let me state here that I do not question the role that morality has played in being a major contributor to many of the most important social and political changes that have benefitted millions, if not billions, of individuals. No reasonable person could deny the role that moral arguments have played in the abolition of slavery, the promotion of civil rights for women and ethnic minorities, defeating the German Nazis in World War II, or the development of policies aimed at improving the greater good, such as free education. I will argue that despite these important achievements, however, it is likely the case that morality's net contribution to humanity—both in the past (at least since the onset of agricultural societies) as well as in the present—is negative. Looking back to the past, it is important to note that with regard to the kinds of negative events and institutions that morality has helped eradicate (slavery, wars, civil strife, etc.), they would likely have never occurred in the first place without moral arguments to justify them.⁷

Turning to the present, one need look no further than the current state of the U.S. to see how morality has exacerbated many of the most significant problems the country currently faces. Even for those who do not live in the U.S., it is hard to deny that they are likely to be impacted by the events there some way or another given the country's global military presence and its impact on the world's economy and environment. I have already discussed how morality has compromised the U.S.'s ability to adequately deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and gun violence. It has also fanned the flames of political division to such an extent that many experts are worrying about the future of U.S. democracy. The optimism that individuals like Pinker and Dawkins expressed about morality's capacity to promote social progress in the U.S. and beyond over a decade ago led them to make declarations—such as Pinker's statement that “We are all feminists now” (Pinker 2011, p. 404) and Dawkins' claim that “the progressive trend is unmistakable and it will continue” (Dawkins 2006, p. 307)—that look somewhat embarrassing today given the current realities in the U.S., including the growth of far-right extremism we find there and in other countries.

The misplaced optimism that many U.S. social commentators expressed before Donald Trump's ascension to the presidency in 2016 is perhaps best illustrated by Pinker, who was encouraged enough by what he saw to write in a 2011 book that “for all the publicity that hate crimes have

⁷I'll return to this point in Chap. 6.

received, they have become a blessedly rare phenomenon in modern America” (p. 388). In reality, however, we find that hate crimes have steadily been increasing since 2014 in America’s 30 biggest cities according to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, culminating in 2020 seeing the highest amount of hate crimes in over a decade according to FBI statistics (Carrega and Krishnakumar 2021). It is telling that following Trump’s unexpected victory in the 2016, Dawkins was moved to write a panic-stricken letter to New Zealand pleading with the leaders of that country to offer citizenship to scientists from both Britain and the U.S. looking to escape the growing anti-intellectualism in their home countries. In the letter, the optimism that Dawkins expressed ten years earlier has given way to a perceived reality in which “the distinction between the surreal and the awfulness of the real seems to merge in a bad trip from which a pipe dream is the only refuge” (Gawrylewski 2016).⁸

5 STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In the chapters that follow, I maintain that morality should be viewed in much the same way as the sickle-cell trait in human beings. This trait—named after the sickle-shape that it imparts to red blood cells and which results from an abnormal expression of a hemoglobin gene—was once highly adaptive in certain human populations due to its propensity for resisting malarial infection. However, in areas where malaria is no longer widespread and where people have access to drugs that can easily cure the disease, carriers of the homozygous sickle-cell trait are at a survival disadvantage due to the serious health issues associated with it. I intend to show that the human moral faculty was also an evolutionary adaptation that once played an integral role in allowing human beings to flourish and outperform their competitors. But like the sickle-cell trait, its maladaptive consequences (primarily in the form of fostering human conflict) have come to outweigh any benefits it bestows. Continuing with the sickle-cell analogy, I will also show that like the malaria-preventing drugs we now have available, we also have the kinds of tools—such as our natural

⁸This seems a good time to mention that while this book is not intended primarily as a piece of political advocacy, I will not shy away from discussing political matters. After all, this is a book with pragmatic aims and few domains have as much practical import as the political. That said, I will not be relying on any *moral* arguments to either support or attack any political ideologies or policies.

occurring empathy, our capacity to reason, and, perhaps most importantly, a scientifically advanced understanding of both the natural world and human psychology including emotional well-being—that are capable of allowing us to overcome the most threatening challenges to human welfare without having to appeal to the primitive, unreliable, and all too often damaging counsel of moral arguments. In sum, I will demonstrate why we have good reason to believe that humanity would flourish without morality to hold us back.

This book will be divided into three parts. In Part I my focus will be on providing philosophical arguments against an important kind of moral realism. Though I believe that the arguments I offer are strong enough to merit the outright rejection of morality, I will employ them with the more modest aim of establishing that they warrant, at the very least, an agnostic attitude toward the existence of objective moral properties. The thought is that if people could agree that agnosticism (if not outright skepticism) toward the existence of such properties is warranted, then the question of whether we should preserve morality boils down to the pragmatic question of whether we would be better off doing so. Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of the specific notion of moral realism that I will argue we ought to abandon.⁹ Among the key features of this notion are the objectivist and retributivist elements that we find at play in most people's moral judgments.

In Chap. 3 I address whether there are compelling theoretical and empirical reasons for rejecting this account of morality. I will first consider what I take to be the most compelling *theoretical* arguments against the existence of objective moral truths, including the so-called “argument from queerness” first presented by J.L. Mackie (1977). From there I consider *empirical* reasons for rejecting morality. To this end I discuss recent research indicating that human beings lack the kind of free will required for morality. In the last section of the chapter, I discuss research indicating that our moral faculty owes its existence to evolutionary factors involving its propensity to encourage cooperation among our ancient ancestors. On the basis of morality's origins, I argue that judgments coming by way of this faculty are unlikely to correspond to any facts.

⁹Henceforth, whenever I use the term “ought” in making a recommendation, it should be interpreted in either the prudential sense (e.g., one ought not poke themselves in the eye under normal circumstances) or the rational sense (e.g., one ought to believe that one plus one equals two) depending on the context.

Rather than agreeing that we should adopt moral abolitionism in light of compelling arguments suggesting that the folk notion of morality (with its inherent retributivist and objectivist elements) is untenable, one may argue that there are less extreme and more philosophically plausible conceptions of morality available to us. In Chap. 4 I consider some of these alternatives. One possible maneuver is to suggest that while a kind of morality based upon objective mind-independent properties is difficult to defend, a constructivist moral perspective based either on cultural or personal values could do the trick. Another move is to suggest that rather than eschewing the objectivist features of the folk notion of morality, we could preserve a *forward-looking* form of moral objectivism that eliminates elements of retributivism. Instead of aiming to justify backward-looking reactions to agents' behaviors (such as retributivist punishment), this alternative moral perspective seeks to explain why certain reactions to agents (including punishment) can only be justified on consequentialist foundations such as future protection, future reconciliation, or future moral formation.

Toward the end of this chapter, I consider whether there are preferable alternatives to moral abolitionism available to error theorists. As many error theorists have pointed out, there are various alternatives to moral abolitionism open to those who reject the existence of moral truths, all of which involve pretending in some fashion that morality exists. Error theorists who reject moral abolitionism are motivated by the belief that the world is better off when people deliberate and act as though moral properties exist. The second part of this book will consider whether this belief is justified.

Part II will be aimed at rejecting the claim that human beings would somehow be worse off if morality had either zero or minimal influence over our lives. As I discuss in more detail later, this worry about the alleged ills of an amoral world is not only shared by moral realists, but most anti-realists (including error theorists) as well. Summing up this kind of fear, Caroline West, a fellow error theorist, writes that without the "institution of morality" to counter the darkest impulses of humanity, we are more likely to end up closer to a horrific Hobbesian state of nature (think *Lord of the Flies* on a global level) than to "peace on earth" (West 2019, p. 188). The fact that even most error theorists refuse to endorse the kind of complete rejection of moral judgments and practices that I am advocating on the grounds that human societies *need* morality to function well is indicative of how widespread the worry about life without morality is. When

pressed to explain the reason behind this worry, I suspect most philosophers would adopt the view of Mackie (another error theorist no less) that without what he called the “moral overlay” to supplement the more amiable aspects of our nature, humans would be unable to exert the type of control over their baser narrow self-interest that they would need for humanity to prosper. My main goal in the second part of the book will be to provide reasons for rejecting this view.

The three chapters comprising Part II of this book address whether morality poses more of a benefit or a detriment to humanity from different angles. In each of these chapters, I will be drawing on the latest empirical research to provide the most thorough assessment of morality’s impact on human beings and our societies to date. Chapter 5 explores both the historical and present role that morality has played in both preventing and promoting violence. Given the profound impact that political institutions have on people’s lives and how moral principles are essential in both establishing and maintaining these institutions, any detailed analysis of morality’s effects on civilization must address how it has affected lives through its influence on politics. In Chap. 6 I evaluate morality’s influence in this arena by examining how it has impacted several key aspects of the political realm.

Chapter 7 explores how morality impacts individual and social well-being in ways that are not directly related to either violence or political institutions. The first part of the chapter considers arguments for why the belief in moral realism is necessary for personal well-being. The second part examines how the widespread rejection of morality could be expected to impact people’s personal relationships with one another. A key question here is whether the abandonment of morality would lead to an overall decline in the kind of social capital that is integral to individual well-being. As I mentioned previously, Chap. 4 explains why it is unlikely that we will come across any viable philosophical defense of a forward-looking account of morality. In the third part of Chap. 7, my concern is more with investigating whether the widespread acceptance of a prominent forward-looking account of morality—namely, utilitarianism—would lead to better outcomes than moral abolitionism. I will also discuss how the belief in morality can actually detract from one’s happiness.

To conclude this chapter and Part II of the book, I summarize the reasons why I believe morality contributes more to human problems and suffering than it resolves. To build a stronger case for the view that humanity would benefit from the universal rejection of morality, however, it

would help to demonstrate how we have at our disposal the kinds of resources that could provide the various benefits that morality offers (e.g., fostering cooperation, etc.). After all, were one to provide both a credible account of why morality poses more of an impediment than a boon to human well-being *and* a convincing argument for why the benefits that morality bestows can be provided by other means available to us, it is hard to imagine a more convincing pragmatic case for abandoning morality.

Part III of the book will argue that we do, in fact, have at our disposal resources that can provide the various benefits that morality offers without encumbering us with the numerous disadvantages that I spell out in Part II. It will also provide specific recommendations for how societies could work toward improving their overall welfare. Chapter 8 discusses the three prime candidates—namely enlightened self-interest, empathy, and reason—that I argue can provide us with all of the primary advantages that are typically attributed to morality. A key feature of my overall argument in this chapter is an empirically plausible account of how people’s interests are generally connected to those of others.

Chapter 9 concludes the book by offering some takeaways for different segments of society (academics, policymakers, and laypersons), and suggests some specific measures that could be taken to secure a better future in view of the preceding arguments. And while it is possible that some of these measures could be implemented without fundamental changes in our moral attitudes, it is likely that implementing them on the scale that is necessary to adequately meet the greatest challenges facing humanity requires a drastic reduction in the belief in moral truths that has served to keep the implementation of such beneficial measures at bay.

PART I

Why Moral Realism Is False



CHAPTER 2

What Sort of Morality Should We Abolish?

While it is probably true that virtually every adult of average intelligence or higher has the same general understanding of what the term “morality” means (notwithstanding the enormous divergence we find regarding people’s specific moral judgments), settling on a particular notion of it is trickier than it might first appear. Morality can be understood in a variety of ways, and disputes among ethicists often amount to nothing beyond different individuals defining key terms differently (such as “moral responsibility,” “moral blame,” and even “morality” itself). Given that this book’s primary aim is to argue that the world is worse off insofar as people allow their moral attitudes and judgments to dictate their behavior, it makes sense to adopt an understanding of morality that reflects the general concept of morality that the folk have. This chapter sets out to elucidate this concept by discussing the key common elements that link the widely divergent moral views that we find throughout the world.

It is worth noting here that I will be using the terms “morality” and “ethics” interchangeably. While many have tried to distinguish between these terms, I suspect that such efforts are more likely to cause confusion than to clarify matters, especially considering that the particular kinds of distinctions made between them often differ from one philosopher to the next. To keep things simple, therefore, I will be using both “morality” and “ethics”—in the metaphysical sense discussed in a Chap. 1 footnote—in referring to the idea that there are standards of right and wrong conduct