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The Myth of Morality

In *The Myth of Morality*, Richard Joyce argues that moral discourse is hopelessly flawed. At the heart of ordinary moral judgments is a notion of moral inescapability, or practical authority, which, upon investigation, cannot be reasonably defended. Joyce argues that natural selection is to blame, in that it has provided us with a tendency to invest the world with values that it does not contain, and demands that it does not make. Should we therefore do away with morality, as we did away with other faulty notions such as phlogiston or witches? Possibly not. We may be able to carry on with morality as a “useful fiction” – allowing it to have a regulative influence on our lives and decisions, perhaps even playing a central role – while not committing ourselves to believing or asserting falsehoods, and thus not being subject to accusations of “error.”

RICHARD JOYCE is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Sheffield. He has published a number of articles in journals including *Journal of Value Inquiry*, *Phronesis*, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, and *Biology and Philosophy*.

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Wretched virtue! Thou art a mere name,
but I did practice thee as real!

Unknown; cited by Plutarch
“De superstitione,” *Moralia*

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Preface

This book attempts to accomplish two tasks. The first part of the book examines moral discourse with a critical eye, and finds the discourse fundamentally flawed. Just what it means for a discourse to be “flawed” will need to be carefully discussed. For the moment, it will do to compare the situation with that of *phlogiston* discourse. Through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the dominant theory for explaining a variety of phenomena – most notably combustion – was to posit a kind of invisible substance in the world: phlogiston. The theory allowed for various chemists, such as Stahl and Priestley, to employ what might be called “phlogiston discourse” – they asserted things like “Phlogiston is lighter than air,” “Soot is made up largely of phlogiston,” etc. In the eighteenth century Lavoisier showed that this discourse was utterly mistaken: there simply was no such stuff as phlogiston. I wish to argue that our moral discourse is mistaken in an analogous way. We assert things like “Generally speaking, you mustn’t tell lies” and “Cloning humans is a terrible thing and mustn’t be permitted,” and these assertions fail to be true. They fail to be true not because lying or cloning are really okay, but because they employ predicates like “. . . is forbidden” and “. . . is morally good” which are (in senses to be explored) vacuous. Roughly, when one reflects carefully on what it would take for an action to instantiate a property like *being morally forbidden*, one sees that too much is being asked of the world – there is simply nothing that is forbidden in the specifically moral sense of the word. The thought that morality is a fiction in this way is hardly an original thought, enjoying a long history that can be traced back through Camus, Wittgenstein, Russell, Nietzsche, Hume, Mandeville, Hobbes, and all the way to Antiphon and characters like Callicles and Thrasymachus.

Many pieces of our moral vocabulary, of course, have non-moral uses (moving one’s rook diagonally in chess is *forbidden*); this non-moral language is not under attack. A further part of the project will be to argue that the obvious response of simply “asking *less* of the world” – that is, of

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defining or redefining our moral language in such a way that it matches the “unproblematic” evaluative language – is to strip the discourse of its very purpose. The whole point of a moral discourse is to evaluate actions and persons with a particular force, and it is exactly this notion of force which turns out to be so deeply troublesome. To push the analogy: if Lavoisier’s concept *oxygen* is theoretically successful, then why could we not redefine “phlogiston” so that it means the same thing as “oxygen,” thus rescuing phlogiston discourse from its error? The answer is that when Stahl, etc., asserted things like “Phlogiston plays a central role in calcification,” he meant something quite specific by “phlogiston” – the whole point of talking about phlogiston was to make reference to a substance that is *released* during combustion. To use the word “phlogiston” to refer to oxygen – a substance that is *consumed* during combustion – is to undermine the very heart of phlogiston discourse. Likewise, to use the words “morally forbidden” to refer to an “unproblematic” notion of impermissibility – perhaps one with the same logic as “You mustn’t move your rook diagonally,” or “You ought not stay up so late” – is to undermine the very heart of moral discourse.

Suppose that this first part of the project is correct. One question that it prompts is “Why have we made such a mistake?” – something I spend a chapter addressing in a discussion of the evolutionary origins of a “moral sense.” Another question that it raises, the answering of which can be considered the second task of this book, is the practical query: “What, then, ought we to do?” Finding the fatal flaws in phlogiston theory posed no practical problems: we simply did away with that discourse, and it is now only of historical or philosophical interest. Could we really do the same with our *moral* discourse? And if we could, *should* we? Moral discourse, after all, seems terribly important to us in an intimate, potent way. Important decisions – at the level of individual, institution, and state – purport to be sensitive to moral issues. The mere fact that somebody who argues that morality is a “myth” is seen frequently as maintaining not merely a counter-intuitive position, but a *pernicious* or *dangerous* position, reveals that something precious and consequential is at stake.

I wish to argue that morality *is* precious and consequential, but is no less flawed for that. What we *do* with our moral discourse, once we see its flaws, is a pragmatic issue, to be resolved by reference to what is the optimal practical outcome. If morality is useful, then doing away with it incurs a cost. On the other hand, keeping a flawed discourse – one that appears to commit us to holding untrue beliefs and making untrue

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assertions – also comes at a price, for truth is a very valuable commodity. The latter part of this book is devoted to exploring a means of resolving this tension – a stance which I will call “fictionalism.” To take a fictionalist stance towards a discourse is to carry on using it, but in a way that does not commit one to error. One employs the discourse, but does not believe, nor assert, its propositions. Merely in order to gain an initial impression of what I mean, think of a story-teller. The story-teller utters sentences that are false – “Once upon a time there lived a dragon,” etc. – but we do not accuse her of lying, error, self-deception, cognitive dissonance, bad faith, or any other dramatic failing. This is because she does not believe the proposition in question, and utters it without assertoric force.

It is not being claimed that our present attitude towards morality is anything like a story-teller’s attitude towards her fictional tale. Rather, the attitude is being suggested as something a group might adopt once it has become convinced by arguments for a moral error theory. As such, fictionalism must be seen a piece of advice, not as a “truth.” For it to count as good advice, it must win a certain cost-benefit contest. First, we must attempt to ascertain the costs and benefits of doing away with morality altogether. Then we must surmise the costs and benefits of believing (and promulgating belief in) a theory evidence of whose falsehood is available. Lastly, we must examine the costs and benefits of the fictionalist option – the possibility of maintaining the discourse but taking an attitude other than belief towards it (uttering it without assertoric force). I will argue that it is plausible that the third option promises the better results. Examining costs and benefits is, of course, an empirical matter, and the above comparison involves far-fetched and complex counterfactuals. I am sympathetic to anyone who thinks that it is no job for a philosopher to be confidently adjudicating such things, and I make no claims about having a special insight for making such a calculation. My primary task is to ensure that the avenue is properly mapped out, that we at least understand what is involved in taking a fictionalist stance towards a problematic subject matter. Whether it is the stance we *ought* to take towards morality is not something I pretend to assert with any assurance, though I will certainly offer considerations to that conclusion.

My calling morality a “myth” has both a less interesting and a more interesting connotation. The less interesting interpretation is simply that I think morality is a fiction, that it embodies falsehood; in the same way one might speak of “the myth of phlogiston.” But “myth” also has a more complex implication, when it signals a false narrative which is important

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to us – which, perhaps, underlies or regulates many of our actions – a set of images or narratives which we *employ*. This is the view championed by the anthropologist Malinowski, who writes that myth is “a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter.”¹ What particularly interests me is the possibility that myths are frequently identified *as such* by the culture employing them – they are not treated as history or cosmology in any straightforward sense; in other words, those who appeal to the myth realize that they are doing something other than describing the world in a conventional way. The Dorze of Ethiopia, for example, take it that leopards are Christian animals which observe the fast days of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.² This is not a metaphor, for metaphors are something they understand perfectly well, and they do not treat this claim about leopards as one. Nevertheless, a Dorze is no less vigilant in guarding his livestock from leopards on fast days than on any other days. We may simply ascribe to the Dorze inconsistent beliefs on the matter, but the more intriguing possibility is that their attitude towards the proposition “Leopards observe fast days” is a kind of acceptance – one that may modify their behavior in certain circumstances – but is something other than belief.

Whether a particular claim like this will stand up as descriptive psychology is not something that I am qualified to judge, but it does serve as an illustration of the stance that is being suggested for our moral discourse. We may be able to carry on endorsing moral claims, allow them to have a regulative influence on our lives and decisions, perhaps even playing a central role – all the while not committing ourselves to believing or asserting falsehoods, and thus not being subject to accusations of “error.” This is, no doubt, all more suggestive than edifying, but at this stage I am just outlining the program in a rough-handed way. The following chapters will attempt to clarify these claims, marshal arguments, and address the obvious criticisms.

This book began life as a Ph.D. dissertation at the Princeton philosophy department, written under the supervision of Gil Harman and Gideon Rosen through late 1996 and early 1997. Without their early support and advice, I doubt that the project would ever have gotten off the ground. Paul Benacerraf, Sarah Broadie, and Harry Frankfurt all contributed productive

¹ B. Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London: Kegan Paul, 1926), p. 23.

² This example is from Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 93–5.

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feedback (the latter being the first person to encourage me to turn it into a book). In the following years the project was intermittently worked and reworked, until it bore little resemblance to my first attempt. During that time several elements have appeared as journal articles: “The Fugitive Thought,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 34 (2000), pp. 463–78; “Rational Fear of Monsters,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40 (2000), pp. 209–24; “Darwinian Ethics and Error,” *Biology and Philosophy* 15 (2000), pp. 713–32. I thank the editors concerned for providing useful criticism. J. E. J. Altham, David Lewis, Michael Smith, and R. Jay Wallace read penultimate drafts of the manuscript and gave invaluable comments. (They did their best, and any foolishness that remains is entirely my own.) I should like, finally, to thank my wife, Wendy, whose faith in the project was invariably there when my own flagged.