

Review of Joel Marks's "Reason and Ethics: The Case Against Objective Value"

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Joel Marks: *Reason and Ethics: The Case Against Objective Value*. New York: Routledge, 2022. 226 pp.

In 2007 Joel Marks had what he describes as an "anti-epiphany". Previously committed to morality in both private and professional life, he came to see it as a sham; a harmful collective illusion. Since then Marks has become one of the staunchest and most prolific defenders of amoralism, to be understood as the conjunction of the views that (1) moral judgements presuppose objective moral values that in fact do not exist (nihilism) and (2) people have practical reasons for wanting to stop making these judgments (abolitionism).

Marks's new book *Reason and Ethics: The Case Against Objective Value* focuses on amoralism as well. In addition, he broadens the notion of amoralism to encompass the non-existence of, and elimination of judgements about, *all* objective values, not only those about morality but also those about truth. This helps explain his preferred methodology. In what follows, however, I will not address this radical extension of Marks's views but focus on the traditional eponymous core of amoralism, namely the critique of morality in particular (which also makes up the bulk of the book).

Following a helpful introduction, Marks begins by explaining what he means by certain key terms and then moves on to present a number of initial arguments for amoralism. Most importantly, nihilism is defended by arguing that people's beliefs in objective moral values can be explained without assuming the truth of these beliefs (e.g., by scientific theories about biological evolution); and abolitionism is defended by arguing that making moral judgements about an issue decreases one's tolerance for those who hold divergent views about this issue, and also fosters or involves double standards, egotism, anthropocentrism and feelings of guilt (all things that are detrimental to what we, on reflection, desire for human prospects).

Marks's preferred alternative to the practice of morality is desirism: expressing and acting upon those of one's desires that withstand rational scrutiny. For example, he would

urge us to replace “Lying is wrong” with “On reflection, I don’t want you to lie” or “You ought to stop eating meat” with “On reflection, I want you to stop eating meat”. This view is defended by introducing an empirical account of rationality as well as arguments against moral relativism and moral reasoning.

Marks then defends his amoralism against a number of potential objections, such as that it implausibly commits one to the rejection of rationality (the so-called *Companion in Guilt* argument), that people widely agree on moral matters (which would cast doubt on an argument from moral disagreement) and that seeing the world in moral terms is so hard-wired in humans that we cannot possibly get rid of it. Finally, the book returns to more practical matters, arguing that amoralism tends to be associated with beneficial attitudes (tolerance, curiosity, sympathy, practicality, etc.) and can be fruitfully applied to all sorts of issues. This is demonstrated by a number of examples and case studies; most importantly, the case of laboratory experimentation on nonhuman animals.

Are Marks’s arguments against objective moral values and the practice of making moral judgements convincing? Should we all strive to have our amoralist anti-epiphanies?

I suspect that many academic philosophers will remain unfazed, mainly because *Reason and Ethics* takes an approach that diverges from their usual ways of doing things. For example, the book does not aspire towards comprehensively engaging with relevant literature (readers might unavailingly look for considerations about the compatibility of conceptual indeterminacy and objectivism, about the Harman-Sturgeon debate on the explanatory potency of moral facts, etc.); and rather than only straightforward arguments, it also involves anecdotes, case studies, analogies, dialogues, metaphors and other rhetorical devices (raising the suspicion that Marks’s amoralism might be grounded in personal experiences rather than interpersonally accessible evidence).

But then again, analytic philosophers are an extremely small and specific sub-group, while the book’s target audience may in fact be much larger. On the very first pages of the book Marks explicitly states and justifies his unorthodox approach by pointing out that, in his view, philosophical disagreements cannot be resolved rationally (because they depend on what we mean by essentially contested concepts or are empirically intractable for methodological reasons), and that philosophers hence cannot *prove* anything, but only try to *move* someone. And of course, many people outside of analytic philosophy may be moved more easily by devices other than bare syllogisms.

Personally, *Reason and Ethics* moved me a bit but perhaps not too much. This is to some extent because I felt that at several points it measures claims against unrealistically — and

hence inappropriately — high standards of evidence. The fact that we cannot come up with bulletproof analyses of philosophical concepts does not mean that we cannot make progress in understanding them; the fact that scientific studies are almost always open to methodological challenges does not mean that converging findings from a sufficiently high number of sufficiently methodologically diverse studies cannot justify empirical hypotheses relating to morality; and so on.

More specifically, my main worry about Marks's nihilism is that moral judgements may not presuppose the existence of objective moral values, since people actually believe moral values to be mostly subjective; and my main worry about Marks's abolitionism is that even though moral judgements sometimes do have negative consequences, this may not give us reason to eliminate them completely, but only to make them less often or restrict them to specific contexts or make them in ways that minimize these negative consequences (e.g., by cultivating intellectual humility to counteract intolerance). These worries are supported by evidence from moral psychology that, in my view, is stronger than Marks acknowledges.

The above points of disagreement notwithstanding, *Reason and Ethics* also exemplifies a number of commendable features. Among other things, it is written in an accessible and engaging style; it provides a soothing antidote to increasing moralistic tendencies (the dark sides of morality are overlooked all too easily!); it is upfront about the challenges that lie ahead for those who really want to abolish all or even only some moral judgements from their psyche; and it involves a variety of personal observations which, even though sometimes generalized too quickly, may well contain surprising kernels of truths.

As an example, consider the following observation about the psychological roots of guilt feelings, reminiscent of some of Nietzsche's writings on these matters: "[...] *guilt* is also based on egotism. For, in actual experience, guilt (feeling) arises on many occasions when one is not 'in fact' guilty. Indeed, the reason guilt is so pervasive is that it has a tendency to arise *whenever* something 'goes wrong.' Thus, there is an underlying superstition that one is oneself responsible for things not working out as planned, as they ought to, or even only as one wants or wishes. But isn't that an egotism? Does it not imply that the universe revolves around oneself?" (p. 47)

By far my favorite thing about this book, and all of Marks's work, is its sincerity. For some philosophers, putting forward radical theses is either a mere mind game or a publicity stunt. Marks, on the other hand, gives the impression of someone who holds his amorality in all honesty and sincerity, and actually tries to live according to it; the life and the philosophy

merge into one. This alone makes *Reason and Ethics* an interesting read for all those who can appreciate its unorthodox approach.

Readers of *Reason and Ethics* may also want to turn to Marks's even more recent, self-published book *The Spread*, a collection of short essays on moralism and guilt which reassess his views on amoralism, apply it to further matters of practical significance and address objections that have been raised against it, including some of the objections that I have sketched above.