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Against Explanatory Condemnation: Existentialistic Ethics in the Modern Divided Climate

Tyler Chang

Rutgers University - New Brunswick, changt343@gmail.com

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Against Explanatory Condemnation
Tyler Chang
April 27, 2020

Against Explanatory Condemnation

I: Introduction

Suffering is an inevitable and arguably essential element to a person's existence. It permeates the subtle moments of introspection and thunders when announcing its presence. Whether one's suffering comes in the form of physical pain, emotional turmoil, or existential questioning, and regardless of degree of severity, the acknowledgement of the presence of pain cannot be denied or ignored. Even stoicism, which denies the outward presentation of pain, is keenly aware of its existence. In almost all peoples' lives, there are various instances of both immediate and ultimately inconsequential pains, as well as those which can be existentially exhausting to contend with. There is no simple distinction to be made between types of suffering; neither is wholly linked to a physical, emotional, or otherwise source. Moreover, it is seldom the case that the struggles involved in experiencing pain are held within only one of the aforementioned domains. Regardless of the precise formation, however, it can be stated plainly that suffering is a ubiquitous presence among people, albeit never identical between persons.

Whenever pain is present, so is the need for an explanation for it being so. Not only is there an undeniable compulsion to give reason for pain occurring, but it is of particular weight that the answer be found swiftly. Even the mundane case of simple suffering, such as a persistent arm pain with no dire symptoms, a delay in discovering the cause for the pain is felt most keenly. Though the basis for the pain may well be completely inconsequential, it does little to lessen the need for an explanation. That said, an explanation for such a simple case may only consist of the known factors that preceded the pain. For example, if a person has been lifting heavy furniture and subsequently experiences pain, it is likely sufficient to accept that it was said lifting that caused the pain as an answer for the suffering. In this case and those like it, the inconsequential

pains can be explained by their observable causes. It should be noted that this does not necessitate knowledge of the actual cause, but rather that the observable causes are compelling to the persons involved. Hence, a probable explanation is taken to be true until the pain loses its mundanity or is resolved. It is those cases where pain becomes convoluted and thereby existentially taxing that I wish to give special attention to.

Existentially taxing pains (ETP) are far more complicated to explain than their more tranquil counterparts. Their causes are rarely known and in the exceptional case where said knowledge is held by those involved, it alone is far from sufficient for abating the need for an explanation. These forms of pain are often intermingled between the physical, emotional, and circumstantial influences that surround them, with an equal level of volatility to accompany their complex constructions. Hence, answers for their existence cannot be simply bound to only one domain of explanation. Perhaps the greatest threat of an unresolved ETP is the risk of it shifting to an existentially exhausting pain (EEP), as suffering of the latter kind is that which presents a danger to one's continued existence, be it physically or otherwise. Moreover, the precise timing of and methods for controlling said shifts are largely indeterminable prior to their occurrences. Thus, there are innate and potentially fatal consequences to lacking an explanation to one's ETP. If left without addressing, it can evolve into a form of death, as the absence of an explanation is often so terribly consuming that it impedes much of the rest of a life.

ETPs are inherently varied in regard to their sources, forms, duration, and intensities, with the number of explanations ever rising to accommodate such variety. Certainly, the most common amongst them are those rooted in empirical sciences, theology, religion, and rationalism. While critically different in their particular metaphysical allowances and necessities, there is a central element between all; they are explanations rooted in some manner of faith in

their own principles. For the scientifically inclined, it is faith that the world and thereby existence can be well represented by observations and examinations of data. For the theologian, it is in the existence of God and all that such may entail¹. Even for someone who gives rationality the greatest credence, it is still the case that there exists ambiguity as to whether existence is well represented by such. Take, for example, a belief that the world is as it is solely because it is the will of Cerberus. While I assume few would grant the existence of Cerberus as true, let alone that it is his will by which the world is constructed, it remains accurate to say that there is no means of demonstrating a greater degree of falsity than for any other theory.

In this paper, I shall give an account of the types of answers one might supply in defense of their suffering and the related dangers that come from doubting or having challenges made against one's personal answer. From this, it follows, as will be defended later, that it is immoral on a utilitarian and an emotivist basis to condemn any person for their own explanations for ETPs².

II: Types of Explanations

Before discussing the specifics of any given explanation, the essential elements of any sufficient explanation must be identified. First and foremost, it is critical that the explanation has both obvious connections to the world as perceived by the individual and enough ambiguity to endure base-level objections. I am drawing particular notice to connections with the individually perceive world, which may or may not coincide with reality. For example, a person suffering of severe anxiety may regard a small error, such as forgetting to send a personal letter, as a

¹ I am not specifying a specific form of theology on purpose, as doing so serves no necessary purpose and would only be excessive convolution.

² A caveat is that I am only speaking about condemning one's internal explanations. If said explanation were externalized as a motivation for violence or other wrongdoing, such as anti-Semitism or misogyny, then condemnation may well be justified.

tremendous flaw and will suffer emotionally for doing so. For the anxious person, their pain comes from having failed to match their exaggerated expectation and so, their explanation will likely involve an account of the unsent letter being of great consequence. In contrast, many people would take the unsent letter to be of little consequence and would not be pained by the failure. Thus, despite the physical events being identical, the perceived realities are fiercely different and so, warrant different explanations. As for the requirement of ambiguity, this comes from the extremely improbable chances that a person's explanation, if detailed to cover all possible situations, would be without contradictions or errors. It is debatable whether any person could actually achieve such a level of detail, but for the sake of demonstrating the need for ambiguity, let us assume that it is possible to do so.

Consider a smaller case: Person X is planning a gathering with friends and is responsible for deciding what food to order. X knows that not all of their friends have the same preference, but their recollection of who had which preference is not perfect. Thus, based on their best guess, X makes the decision that they believe the most people prefer. In this case, X certainly does not want to be wrong about who had which preference, but they cannot guarantee accuracy. Regardless of how accurate X is, many people would be more forgiving of X making a mistake if it is innocent in nature, meaning that X acted in the interest of the greatest number. That is not to say that X's friends may not be as happy as they would have been given their personal preferences, but they are less likely to be angry with X than if X had deliberately disadvantaged them. I take X to be much akin to the average person who acts in a generally well-intended manner. Thus, if X is not capable of perfectly executing a relatively simple task such as selecting food, it seems particularly improbable that X could design an existential explanation that was without flaws. Accordingly, the element of ambiguity allows for a degree of explanatory leeway,

specifically in that it offers the defense of stating that while one may not know why a given phenomenon seems to contradict their personal explanation, it may simply be that the person has a slight error in their interpretation or that it is beyond a human to understand it.

At this point, I wish to preemptively deny what I imagine many of a secular mindset will assume, namely that only religious and theological explanations require ambiguity. As is often regarded to be true, science and rationality are based in logic and therefore avoid ambiguity. This assumption is, however, wholly incorrect, as even the existence of lexical ambiguities within formal logic suggests that ambiguity is present outside religion and theology. It is undoubtedly the case that the precise forms of the ambiguities are crucially different, but that has no bearings on their existences. In addition to the shared ambiguities, it is also worthwhile to refute the claim that only religious and theological explanations are faith-based arguments. While a belief in an omnipotent being, force, or otherwise superhuman account of the world is perhaps loftier in appearance than that of a rational or scientific explanation, that in no way excludes them from being arguments of faith. Whether one takes mathematics, logic, common sense, or any other system of reasoning as their basis, it is still a matter of placing faith in the legitimacy of the associated principles. Thus, one cannot fairly determine the superiority or inferiority of a given explanation over another on the basis of one requiring faith and the other not. There are alternate criteria that can allow for such an evaluation, but I shall save them for a later section.

As was demonstrated by the example of person X, a perfected design is nearly or wholly impossible for a human to create. Resultantly, a pursuit of a perfect answer to why one experiences ETPs is an inherently futile effort. When facing a particularly strenuous ETP, a typical strategy is to look for familiar elements of either the ETP itself, or of a prior explanation. By recognizing an element, a person becomes more comfortable and therefore able to contend

with the ETP. Much like an explanation for a mundane pain need not strictly coincide with reality, it is the case that “a world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world” (Camus, 2018, p.6). Returning to the earlier example of Cerberus’ will, this would be considered by most modern people to be a bad reason for holding a particular view of reality. All the same, if a person finds that Cerberus is a more familiar notion than the Judeo-Christian God, it may be more compelling than an explanation than that of a western theology. A similar argument could be rendered for Cerberus being more believable than a rationalist or scientific account. Although it seems improbable that many people, if anyone, would actually accept the Cerberus explanation, it is still conceivable that it could be believed. Thus, a bad reason for holding a belief does not necessarily imply that it is unconvincing. On a related note, the claims that religion/theology are unaccepted on account of demanding the existence of unseen objects and that rationality/science are unreasonable due to denying non-physical phenomena are also subject to the protections given to the Cerberus case. I will now argue that all of the aforementioned types of explanations are, in fact, bad reasons for explaining the world.

Let us first consider the case for rationality and science. While these two ideologies are distinct, my arguments for their being bad reasons are nearly the same and so, I shall only elaborate on one. Under a rational view, there is a sequence of choices, events, and other influences that led to a particular outcome. Thus, if a person was given knowledge of all the preceding elements, it is possible to build the sequence in the order in which each element took effect. This is useful to the rationalist in explaining how they came to their conclusions, but it also exposes them to counterarguments against each of the elements. For example, if person X is, as before, designing a food plan for a gathering and fails to avoid disappointing any of their friends, then one of the friends may take personal offense to their being disadvantaged. Even if X

had no such malicious intent, it does not bear on the frustrated friend's perception of the events. Hence, when reasoning how they came to be disadvantaged, the friend may conclude that the sequence of events is radically different than those actually performed. Similarly, a friend that gets their preference may feel that they are of special worth to X and will have a relatedly skewed account of the events. So, there are multiple accounts of the same physical events and each is equally rational on the grounds of each person's perceptions. Thus, rationality does not necessarily supply a consistent explanation and so, is a bad reason for explaining the world. The case for science only varies from this in that it is the interpretation of data, rather than rational sequences, that is disagreed upon.

Theological and religious explanations are also bad reasons, but they suffer from the opposite concern as that of rationality and science. Within these ideologies are suppositions of superhuman and often unobservable objects or entities. To show the critical concern for the quality of one such an explanation, let us consider the parable of the gardener ("Theology and", n.d.). Since there is an unobservable factor in these forms of explanations, one can simply deny that said factor exists. In this case, the theologian or religious explainer may make the argument that one lacks faith and therefore is incorrect in claiming that the factor is nonexistent. This is, however, a poor defense, as it was earlier shown that all explanatory theories are faith-based. So, the argument that one lacks faith is not accurate; rather, it is the case that the denier lacks faith in a specific ideology and not a general absence of faith. Thus, these are also bad reasons for explaining the world.

It is, however, plainly observable that, despite their being bad reasons, many people do not regard them as such. In fact, it is arguably these problems that makes them appealing to

many. Nonetheless, it is now relevant and vital to consider the degree to which people will defend their explanations and the sources of such vigorous devotion.

III: The Dangers of Insufficient Explanations

To be able to understand why it is so crucial to one's existential health to have sufficient explanations, the dangers associated with ETPs must first be made explicit. Following in the views of Ernest Becker, if we accept the view that "nature seems unconcerned, even viciously antagonistic to human meanings" (1997, p.120), then it seems that the vital criteria of sufficiency is a matter of distracting from or otherwise obfuscating the nihilistic relationship between humans and reality. Under this notion, it appears initially possible for one to attempt to accept the uncaring quality of the world and proceed without giving further regard to inherent meanings for existence. This, however, seems thoroughly difficult and, save those wholly devoid of emotions, likely impossible to genuinely enact. Consider what one would need to engage with in order to even attempt an acceptance of a nihilistic world, namely a detachment from our reactive attitudes to various stimuli. By reactive attitudes, I am utilizing what I take Peter Strawson to mean by the term in "Freedom and Resentment", meaning that "reactive attitudes are essentially natural human reactions to the good or ill will or indifference towards us, as displayed in their attitudes and actions" (2003, p.80). Although Strawson is speaking as to other people's interactions with us, it seems reasonable that the same sentiment should apply to our interactions with the world itself. When we are the recipient of benefits, especially those for which we did not make a deliberate effort to achieve, we regard ourselves as being lucky. Luck and good will are not equivalent, but they serve similar enough of a function to justify their practical equivocation. On the opposite end, when we are disadvantaged by circumstances outside of our control, we feel as though the world has wronged us, thereby demonstrating a form of ill will.

While the exact origins of these existential difficulties vary between persons, I would regard it as largely uncontested that most people have a notion of unfairness (or at least unevenness) in the world. In terms of indifference, that accounts for any other times in which someone is not being advantaged or disadvantaged to a degree that warrants an explicit reaction. As Strawson notes, these reactions are naturally occurring and “too thoroughly and deeply rooted for us to take seriously the thought that a general theoretical conviction might so change our world” (2003, p.81). Thus, unless one can remove oneself from all stimuli that might illicit a reaction, it seems plainly unrealistic to adopt a genuine acceptance of nature being nihilistic and uncaring. Truly, outside of being dead or in a vegetative state, the complete avoidance of reactive attitudes is unobtainable.

It now follows that if there cannot be a true acceptance of reality, then there must be a method by which each person obscures their vision of the world. I will also note here that exposure to reality in an obfuscated state is one of the more prominent, albeit not nearly the only, sources of significant ETPs unto EEPs. As I have already given some consideration to religious, theological, scientific, and rationalist explanations for the world, I shall not recount them here. Rather, it is now appropriate to give thought to the omnipresent condition of human existence, namely that, as Becker states, “we are fundamentally dishonest about reality” (1997, p.55). Given the vast history of existential thought, I shall not attempt to cover all views on humanity’s dishonest relation with the state of our own existences. Rather, I will give special attention to three views, namely those of Albert Camus, Miguel Unamuno, and Arthur Schopenhauer.

Camus’ absurd man is, although described abstractly, fairly similar to many persons experiencing ETPs, or more precisely, those for whom their ETPs have intensified into EEPs. Thus, those possessing EEPs must rely upon an absurd ideology in order to obscure their views

of the world, which necessitates thoughts as to how to bring such about. For Camus, thoughts are not merely representations of the perceived world, but rather the mechanisms that spawn or inhibit one's perceived world (2018, p.99). Since one cannot anymore avoid thinking than one can cease breathing, it follows that by simply existing, the world will appear to be ever shifting and potentially absurd to those experiencing EEPs. The consistency of change is not necessarily to one's benefit or deficit, nor is it by any means constant in terms of degree of impact. For those enveloped by their EEPs, however, most events and experiences appear to be to the detriment of their being, or otherwise serving as a further impediment towards a positive change. Despite the extraordinary complexity of the formation and continuation of an EEP, Camus holds that "a single truth, if it is obvious, is enough to guide an existence" (2018, p.84). I do not take Camus to be declaring that a positive solution to EEPs is actually simple; rather, it is that a single truth that is sufficiently convincing without need for convoluted studies is enough to obscure the world as to avoid worsening an EEP. If one succeeds in finding one such an explanation, then it seems possible to halt the rising intensity of one's EEPs, but that does not resolve the already accumulated harm. In order to pursue actual reparations, there must be far greater stories. Camus' tale of Kirilov gives an opportunity to observe one such story in effect and so, I shall now move to elucidate a Camus-esque methodology for restoring oneself from EEPs.

With the story of Kirilov's suicide to disprove God's existence, the discrepancy between that which one feels to be true and that which actually is truthful is made salient. Perhaps the most critical comment about Kirilov's disposition is that "he feels that God is necessary and that he must exist. But he knows that he does not and cannot exist" (Camus, 2018, p.106), as it gives insight into the internal dilemma that plagues any person presently considering their existential explanations. Consider that for Kirilov, there is some level of recognition that God does not

actually exist, but that does not deter his need for God existence. This, in turn, is an instance of the need to obscure the world, although Kirilov's solution of killing himself is likely not a welcome answer for most. Regardless of whether one believes suicide to be morally permissible, I imagine that most people do not exist on the threshold of killing themselves. Thus, while suicide, assuming one does not grant the existence of a postmortem punishment system, i.e. Hell and the like, is a manner of avoiding the uncaring and potentially cruel nature of world, it is not a generally accepted answer. Despite killing oneself being unacceptable for most, there can still be value in recognizing the availability of the option to end oneself.

If one feels sympathetic towards Kirilov's viewpoint, then his brief consideration that it is possible that "Jesus at his death did not find himself in paradise. He found out...that his torture had been useless" (Camus, 2018, p.107) is a most concerning matter. For the theologically inclined, the idea that even the son of God could not avoid the apathetic nature of existence, in tandem with the denial of a salvific realm, leaves very little hope for the ordinary person. Those of a secular mindset are also endangered, as one can simply replace Jesus with a morally virtuous person (whatever that implies) and paradise with worldly significance beyond oneself. In either case, the perils of an ill-disguised world remain ever potent. Even if one does not wish to die, making the ability to commit suicide gives an exit from suffering, should said pain become too much to bear. As Camus regards Sisyphus, the severity of the danger of seeking an explanation and any associated EEPs is contingent on one's consciousness (2018, p.121). Hence, if one regards death as a severance of consciousness, the availability of suicide gives a method by which to terminate the one's recognition of the world and thereby immediately negate any EEPs. This is, as noted previously, thoroughly unpleasant for many and likely would be considered a

choice of last resort. Thus, a positive (i.e. non-fatal) method of contending with EEPs must be sought.

Miguel Unamuno's Saint Manuel Bueno serves as a more optimistic form of Kirilov. Both characters recognize the uncertainty of their respective theologies as well as the need to sustain the existence of the supernatural, but Saint Bueno does not extend his belief into the need for suicide. Moreover, and more importantly, Unamuno's tale gives great value to the collective over the individual, as Saint Bueno manages to deal with ETPs, and later EEPs, through his providing explanations to his village populace. Although he regards "the truth...[as] perhaps something so unbearable, so terrible, something so deadly, that simple people could not live with it" (Unamuno, 2004, p.276), he manages to hold off the full onslaught of EEPs by taking refuge in the existential health of those to whom he preaches. From this, a crucial element of any efficient explanation emerges, namely the need for a community of those who grant similar explanations. All of the explanations of any significance within rationalism, science, theology, and religion are critically dependent upon this principle of commonality. Whether one takes their community to be academic peers, a congregation, philosophers, or otherwise, the power of any explanation is granted and maintained through the ability to find others of a like mind. Accordingly, Saint Bueno's comment that "The solitude would crush my soul...I was not meant live alone, or die alone" (Unamuno, 2004, p.267) conveys a sentiment shared by far more than just those of a religious or theological sentiment. So, while Unamuno's story is distinctly religious in its origin, it gives a vital insight into one of the necessary components to sustaining an explanation for the world.

With the need for community established, it remains to be shown what sorts of qualities or ideologies are sufficiently powerful to bring people together. Kirilov's mentality of suicidal

salvation is reminiscent of those for whom depression or other mental illnesses are a bonding force. Thus, participation in a support group for depression, suicide survivors, or similar gatherings is a form of a community that might protect against EEPs. Similarly, Saint Bueno's village is held together by the theological explanations he provides to the inhabitants. For those inclined toward science, logic, or rationalism, the acceptance of modern philosophical faith in reason in all manners of disciplines might serve as an intangible community. In this way, it should be noted that by community, I am not necessarily attributing a directly interactional situation, as one may feel highly supported through distanced communications, such as online forums or journals. The precise form of a community is not the critical detail; rather, it is that one feels the community exists and that they are a part of it that is of paramount importance.

Before proceeding, I will acknowledge a few caveats to my claims thus far. First, the degree to which one must feel connected to a community can vary tremendously between persons and even within one individual from moment to moment. Additionally, the feeling of connection is not necessarily dependent upon the length of exposure to a chosen community, as one may feel profoundly impressed by a single comment or especially discouraged after a long time. Since communities can also exist in an innumerable amount of forms, it cannot be reasonably asserted that there is a correct method for finding a community. At the core of the search is plain luck, albeit it is somewhat influenceable by actively exploring various communities. So, it is unreasonable to condemn one for being unable to find a community and perhaps even following Kirilov to the grave, but I shall save the defense of this claim for section V.

IV: Challenges to One's Own Explanations

If all persons' explanations and communities could be simultaneously sustained, then there would be little justification for condemning another's explanation. While I will ultimately defend the claim that it is morally impermissible to condemn explanations, I will temporarily assume that there may be reasons for condemnation of this kind. It is, perhaps unfortunately, obviously impossible for all explanations to coexist without conflict. There need not be a complicated example to demonstrate this, as all the following paired explanations are in direct contrast to one another: atheism vs. theology, rationality vs. emotions/irrationality, philosophical theories vs. empirical sciences, and various others. Even if it is accepted by some that these pairings, or any others, can be reconciled, there still remains no small number of people for whom their conflicting ideology is threatened by the mere existence of a different viewpoint. This compulsion to demonstrate the correctness of one's explanation over others can be seen in the case of friends disagreeing about a mundane subject. Consider two friends who are arguing over the quality of a film. Unless one of them is unusually obsessed with the film, there are minimal stakes involved and it is unlikely that any substantive harm will be done to their friendship as result of the disagreement. Nonetheless, neither is eager to abandon their stance and may even become annoyed or angered as a result of the disagreement. Thus, the challenge to either friend's opinion exists and is keenly felt, despite there being no significant threat to either and a previously existent good will between them. This, therefore, begs the question of what it is that causes the feelings of endangerment in ideological exchanges.

As was noted earlier, all of the broad styles of explanations (theology, science, etc.) are rooted in bad reasons for their sustainment. There are vulnerabilities for each that are not difficult to discover and so, any challenge to a given ideology endangers said view's ability to obscure reality. For any person who has glimpsed a non-obfuscated world, even for the briefest

of moments, the threat of a conflicting ideology gaining power or worse, crippling one's own explanation, revives the ETPs and EEPs faced prior to accepting an explanation. Since an insufficient explanation leaves one exposed to reality, the acceptance must be complete and as Schopenhauer notes, "it is always a hazardous undertaking to attempt to put a new foundation under a finished structure" (1966, p.166). As was shown via Kirilov, it is dangerous unto suicide to risk leaving or altering one's explanation. EEPs are developed in these exposed states and a person's ability to bear them is finite. With each successive instance of exposure, one begins to accumulate existential damage and gradually approaches their respective existential pain threshold (EPT).

By existential pain threshold, I am speaking of the finite volume of EEPs a person can bear without inflicting permanent harm to their existential health. While a person's EPT is finite and the damage done by any given EEP is, at least theoretically, finite, I shall not give an account of the calculus for computing an EPT. It is simply an impossible task to mathematically qualify the state of one's existential health, as EPTs vary in scope and scale between persons. Furthermore, since it is an incalculable thing to determine the proximity of a person's present condition to their respective EPT, only the individual in question can give an account of their threshold. It should be noted that matching or exceeding one's EPT does not imply a desire to die, nor does it follow that a person cannot be happy thereafter. Survivors of genocides are likely to have met their EPTs multiple times, but many have gone on to live worthwhile lives. If people placed under such miserable conditions can still pursue pleasant lives, then it certainly seems true that most people have the same ability. That said, it is also possible that by exceeding an EPT, suicide becomes a viable and arguably reasonable response³. Regardless of the particular

³ I will return to the moral status of suicide in section VI.

response, however, it is the ever-present danger of approaching or exceeding one's EPT that motivates the compulsion to ensure the apparent correctness of an accepted ideology.

V: Why is it Immoral to Condemn Explanations?

To make my argument explicit, I will first explain what I am not claiming to be true. Most importantly, it is in no way my intention to defend ideologies that necessitate racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, or violence without reasonable justification⁴. I am also not claiming that deeming explanatory condemnation immoral will carry much of a practical effect. As noted, when discussing Strawson's reactive attitudes⁵, a philosophically motivated argument has little impact on our immediate reactions to stimuli, especially when said stimuli are ETPs or EEPs. Rather, my argument is that, regardless of our personal reactions, it is morally impermissible on the basis of two meta-ethical theories, namely utilitarianism and emotivism, to condemn others for their internal explanations, i.e. the explanations used to obscure their view of reality.

When I say utilitarianism, I have two variations in mind, namely hedonistic and negative. It is also worth noting that I am not strictly following any one philosopher's account of either theory; rather, I take them as general notions of basing utility on happiness or the avoidance of suffering. As will be shown, it is not relevant to give explicit defenses for all the possible consequences of accepting either theory, as it follows from the general utilitarian notion that it is impermissible to condemn explanations. With that said, I shall begin with the issue under the view of hedonistic utilitarianism.

I take the concept of pleasure, insofar as it relates to a person's existential health, to be loosely synonymous with that of happiness. From the definition of ETPs and EEPs, it

⁴ By reasonable justification, I mean instances such as defending oneself when attacked, wars against malicious ideologies, and otherwise similar events.

⁵ See p.5 for specific reference.

immediately follows that in order to maximize happiness, one should want to minimize the number of existential pains that they experience, or, failing that, attempt to reduce the intensity of their suffering. For example, if a person is severely depressed but through some method becomes more optimistic, it would be an instance of someone moving from feeling an EEP to dealing with an ETP. Since ETPs are essentially less intense forms of EEPs, even if the person is still unhappy, the movement towards optimism would improve ability to find happiness. Thus, it is not necessary for the majority of people to be actively happy for a hedonistic utilitarian goal to be realized. Moreover, a person's internal explanation is the most crucial element of their being that aids in the management or avoidance of ETPs. Accordingly, maximizing happiness among people is equivalent to maximizing the number of coexistent and utilized explanations⁶. An immediate objection one might make here is that many of the atrocities committed throughout human history have been motivated on the grounds of conflicting explanations. I, in no way, deny such and, in fact, would readily agree that it is precisely the differences between ideologies that stands at the crux of most conflicts. That said, recall that I am not defending the external ramifications of holding a particular explanation. My argument is strictly against condemning another's explanation when it is internalized. Once externalized, there are certainly serious consequences to be considered, which I shall discuss in section VI, but for now, this objection does not pose a significant threat to my claim. It is now particularly relevant to consider whether the coexistence of various explanations can actually be sustained.

When I introduced the idea of the EPT, I did so in order to give an account of the limitations to which a person can bear EEPs. Contained within the notion is the implication that a person need not be maximally distanced from their respective EPT in order to be happy. As I

⁶ I include utilized as a qualification as there are conceivably explanations that are held by no one in any seriousness.

acknowledged in the first line of this paper, suffering is an inevitable part of existence and so, any theory of hedonistic utilitarianism cannot aim to judge happiness and suffering in a binary manner. Most lives consist of some balance of happiness and suffering, but none are wholly composed of happiness. Conversely, there can be an existence that is completely devoid of happiness, be it for the entire duration of a person's life or for a portion of it. Thus, for a given individual, the danger of losing all happiness is both existent and nontrivially dependent on the integrity of their explanation. Hence, if the goal is to maximize happiness, it is centrally important to avoid compromising the explanations of others. Condemning another's explanation makes the possibility of their belief being incorrect more salient, which results in more ETPs or ETPs becoming EEPs. Each explanation, in order to be sustained by any person, necessitates a degree of confidence in the correctness of said belief and it is this confidence that allows for a person to simply regard others as incorrect for disagreeing. When not aggravated, such an internalized caveat is tolerable, but it is made unbearable when under the duress of condemnation. So, it is impermissible under a hedonistic view to condemn explanations.

Negative utilitarianism, by which I refer to the theory of minimizing suffering, follows a similar pattern to that of hedonistic utilitarianism. Since ETPs and EEPs are forms of suffering and the EPT is the limit to the amount of bearable pains, it follows that minimizing suffering means to maximize one's distance from their EPT. As with hedonistic utilitarianism, condemnation moves one closer to their EPT and so, it is impermissible to condemn others' explanations. It might also be the case that by condemning another, the agitators are also making themselves more aware of their own explanations' flaws. If so, it then follows that it is also impermissible to condemn on the basis of self-inflicted decrements to happiness. Thus, on both versions of utilitarianism, the condemnation of others' internal explanations is morally

impermissible. For the sake of not limiting my argument to objective systems of ethics, I will now consider the moral status of condemnation on the basis of emotivism.

Emotivism places the criterion of moral evaluations in our emotional reactions to events, actions, or other stimuli. Accordingly, one might be tempted to dismiss the ability to declare condemnation of explanations on an emotivist basis. Were emotivism claims merely descriptive, I would agree with such a sentiment. I do not, however, take emotivism to be so topical. Like Alfred Ayer, I hold it to be a quality of emotivism that our expressions are not merely stating our opinions, but rather, “in such expressions we are also encouraging others to share those feelings, and to act accordingly” (Macdonald & Krishna, 2018). So, when I speak of impermissibility on an emotivist account, I refer to the hope to urge others to regard condemnation as morally impermissible, as opposed to an objective immorality. So, while one might object to a given person’s view being a reasonable standard for ethics, it would not be a fair counterargument to protest on the grounds of it not being universal.

Consider the following example: person F has an explanation that they accept as true and feel comforted by. Furthermore, F is well-reasoned, meaning that F understands that not everyone shares their belief and that disagreement does not necessitate their explanation being incorrect. Nonetheless, it would make F all the more protected against their ETPs and EEPs if more people agreed with them. Being well-reasoned, F realizes that if they go about condemning others’ explanations, F’s own will likely be deemed aggressive, dangerous, or otherwise undesirable. Thus, F would not want to condemn others, as that would diminish the odds of swaying others towards F’s beliefs. Similarly, if F tells others of their belief without explicit condemnation of any other, then F becomes exposed to being condemned by others. So, it seems that unless F never interacts with others, they are forced to risk ETPs or

EEPs. Were F an isolated instance, meaning no other person shared F's qualities of being well-reasoned and having a preferred explanation, then it would be a rather hopeless situation. I claim, however, that F is not unlike many, if not most, people. None of F's characteristics require a complicated analysis, as they are all implicitly known through conversational and emotional experiences. Still, this could simply imply that all people are trapped between a rock and a hard place, but that seems untrue. Rather, the choice between condemning and nonconfrontationally interacting is not an even one, as one is necessary and the other not.

Whenever we interact with another person, we express our temperaments, biases, and to some degree, our explanations. While there may be little to no control over our emotional inclinations, our methods of interaction are certainly influenceable. Accordingly, I may present my explanation as correct without making my disagreement with any other explicit. For example, the difference between saying "God loves me because I have faith" and "God loves me because I have faith, unlike you" is solely contained to the inclusion of condemnation in the latter case. For the sake of not appearing to be simply condemning theology and religion, consider the phrases "I believe in science over faith" and "I believe in science, unlike people of faith". Even ignoring the assumption that faith is not a part of science, as was explained earlier, it is again unnecessary to the point of the statement to include condemnation. Thus, since being exposed to ETPs and EEPs is thoroughly unpleasant and desired to be avoided, most people are likely to believe it is better to interact without condemnation. It then holds that under emotivism, each person is hoping that others will also follow in their avoidance of condemnation. This is in keeping with our common conversational tendencies and teachings. Children are taught at a young age to "be nice" and

not to make mean or rude comments. A similar sort of expected behaviors carries over to adult interactions, be they professional, academic, or colloquial. I will not make a complete defense of the social discourse practices I have mentioned, but it seems obvious enough to be sustained all the same⁷. So, it is by the shared desire to not be exposed to ETPs that it is impermissible on an emotivist standard for any person to condemn another's explanation.

VI: Concerns with Regarding Condemnation as Impermissible

There are two potentially substantive concerns that I imagine one might have with my defense of condemnation being impermissible thus far. One possible objection would be that if accepted, one would need to be able to snuff their own emotions in order to abide by the principle of not condemning. The second concern comes from Shaun Nichols' "Brute Retributivism", specifically his concept of the bare retributive norm (2013, p.27). Since the former objection is the greater of them, I shall begin by defending my claim against it.

First and foremost, I fully accept that when speaking about explanations that are externalized into unjust violence or other morally unpleasant actions, there may well be morally impermissible consequences. Since, however, my argument does not concern itself with such cases, I would argue that it is not required that one abandon their emotional reactions to follow the proposed principle. It is also not the case that I am denying the existence of times in which no ill is intended in an interaction, but the result is nonetheless undesirable. Take, for example, the following scenario: a decidedly atheistic person has recently lost two close relatives and is now mourning. One of the funeral attendees, who is a devout theologian, approaches the bereaved person and states that "they're in a better place". Unless the theologian is especially nasty, the

⁷ I recognize that the exact manifestations of being polite, friendly, etc. vary tremendously across cultures and eras, but the specifics are not relevant here. So long as there is a prevalent theory of acceptable social play, the comparison holds as reasonable.

comment is meant to give comfort to the mourner. Nonetheless, the mourner replies that “I don’t care. They aren’t here”. In this case, one might be tempted to claim that the rebuttal by the mourner is a form of condemnation. While that seems to be an overzealous conclusion, I shall assume that it is indeed condemnation. Even under said assumption, it is an externalized opinion by the theologian to attempt to convince the mourner of an alternate account of the world. Accordingly, it is not an internal explanation that is being condemned and therefore not contrary to my argument. A similar defense could be mounted against any other non-malicious encounter. It should be noted that I have said nothing of the limitations on what counts as justified responses to rightful condemnation. If the mourner were to violently insult the theologian for his comment, it could be argued, and I would think readily accepted by many, that such a reply would be excessive and immoral. It is beyond this paper to consider such an issue, but it is worthwhile to recognize its existence.

Nichols’ theory of the bare retributive norm is the view that “wrongdoers should be punished for their past actions” (2013, p.27). I imagine that many people find such a view appealing, albeit not necessarily independently sufficient to explain our ethical views. For the sake of giving the objection maximum likelihood of succeeding, let us assume that someone who exposes others to ETPs is committing a wrongdoing. In that case, punishment would be warranted for the exposor and by association, condemnation. There is a critical element that saves my argument from this objection, however, as it is necessary that an explanation be externalized in order to expose it to others. As noted in section V⁸, interactions give a view of a person’s explanation and so, upon deliberately exposing others to an ETP, the agitator would

⁸ See page 11 for reference.

have externalized their explanation. Thus, even if the bare retributive norm is true, it does not apply to my argument.

VII: Against Explanatory Condemnation

I have now defended the view that it is morally impermissible to condemn others' internal existential explanations on a hedonistic and negative utilitarian, as well as an emotivist view. Beginning with a demonstration of the shared requirement of faith in the critical principles of a respective ideology, it was then argued that science, rationalism, theology, and religion are all composed of bad reasons for explaining the world. The theory of ETPs/EEPs and their relation to a person's EPT gave an account of why it is particularly dangerous for a person to be without an explanation or to attempt to change said explanation once accepted. As was argued, utilitarianism, both hedonistic and negative, supports the impermissibility of condemnation on the basis of it moving people closer to their EPTs. For the emotivism defense, I declared and defended that each individual wants to avoid ETPs and that said desire would lead to promoting the idea of condemnation being impermissible. Finally, I considered two objections that I believe to be fairly common and immediate. While there are alternate moral theories against which to test my claim, at a minimum, this paper serves as support for the general claim that explanatory condemnation is immoral.

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