

Marquette University  
**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

Dissertations (2009 -)

Dissertations, Theses, and Professional Projects

---

# Dangerous Knowledge? Morality And Moral Progress After Naturalism

Daniel Diederich Farmer  
*Marquette University*

---

## Recommended Citation

Farmer, Daniel Diederich, "Dangerous Knowledge? Morality And Moral Progress After Naturalism" (2014). *Dissertations (2009 -)*. Paper 344.  
[http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations\\_mu/344](http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/344)

DANGEROUS KNOWLEDGE? MORALITY AND  
MORAL PROGRESS AFTER NATURALISM

by

Daniel Diederich Farmer, B.A., M.A.

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,  
Marquette University,  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May 2014

ABSTRACT  
DANGEROUS KNOWLEDGE? MORALITY AND  
MORAL PROGRESS AFTER NATURALISM

Daniel Diederich Farmer, B.A., M.A.

Marquette University, 2014

From the perspective of at least some of our valuing practices, the advance of the sciences can seem to constitute a threat. The question I take up in this dissertation is whether or not naturalism—understood as the picture of the world and of ourselves bequeathed to us by the sciences—should be understood as a threat to our moral practices, to moral living. On the account I defend, the knowledge we gain from empirical inquiry need not undermine moral living *in toto*, although a naturalistic mindset does raise some possibly dangerous questions for *particular* inherited moral norms and ideals.

In defense of my claim that the examined life need not destroy the moral life, I develop a social view of morality. On this view, both moral authority and moral justification are viewed as fundamentally social phenomena, and morality itself as a tool for social living. With a case study on the development of the ethics of care, I illustrate ways in which a concern for empirically truthful representations of humanity can also dovetail with liberatory political concerns. That is, I defend not only the claim that moral living can survive critical scrutiny, but also the claim that it can be enriched by this scrutiny—that the truth can be transformative.

Expansive moral ideals, such as those humanist views that see progress in the expansion of our moral vocabularies and institutions, are compatible with a naturalistic outlook, I argue. However, a strong defense of humanist views, according to which such ideals flow unproblematically from the nature of reason or from the history of ethical practice, does not seem possible. A weak defense of humanism, which connects the ideals of humanists to more widely held values, seems more promising. In working socially and politically for their cause, I contend that humanists in some sense have the truth on their side: sexist, racist, classist, or otherwise inegalitarian views regularly trade in falsehoods and obfuscation. Empirically truthful accounts of particular inherited norms and ideals thus continue to be dangerous, at least for those invested in the continued existence of the corresponding institutions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Daniel Diederich Farmer, B.A., M.A.

I am very grateful to my committee for inspiring me and for supporting my work on this project: to Margaret Walker, for patiently steering me in fruitful directions; to Nancy Snow, for consistently direct and consistently helpful comments; to Theresa Tobin, for introducing me to feminism and feminist ethics; and to Kevin Gibson, for the big picture. For their camaraderie, their thoughtfulness, and our many thought-provoking conversations, I thank my fellow Marquette philosophy graduate students, and Celeste Harvey Gustafson, Trevor Smith, and Chad Kleist in particular. I also want to thank the Philosophy Department for nominating me for the Schmitt fellowship, which I received in the 2011-2012 school year. I am grateful to the friends and family members who cared for my children while I worked on the dissertation: Rebecca Keiser, Rachel Stolpe, and Lisa Diederich especially. Finally and most importantly, I am infinitely grateful to my wife and partner Nicole Elisabeth Farmer, whose support every step of the way has meant the world to me.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	i
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER	
I. NATURALISM AND SKEPTICISM .....	6
1. Introduction .....	6
2. Naturalism .....	8
What We Know .....	8
How the World Works .....	10
What Must Disappear .....	14
3. Morality after Naturalism .....	16
The Optimistic View .....	16
Preemptive Adjustments .....	19
4. Skeptical Considerations .....	22
Mortality and Moral Authority .....	22
Evolutionary Skepticism .....	25
Fictionalism and Abolitionism .....	29
5. Conclusion .....	32
II. PICTURING MORALITY AFTER DARWIN .....	35
1. Introduction .....	35
2. Joyce's Master Argument .....	37
Practical Clout .....	37
The Evolution of Conscience .....	40

Usefulness and Justification . . . . .	43
Non-Cognitivism . . . . .	45
The Failure of Moral Naturalism . . . . .	47
Joyce's Conclusion . . . . .	49
3. Revisiting Moral Authority . . . . .	51
Two Sources of Authority . . . . .	51
Convention and Convention-Transcendence . . . . .	54
The Moral-Conventional Distinction . . . . .	58
4. Transparency and Justification . . . . .	60
Pictures of Morality . . . . .	60
Opacity and Transparency . . . . .	64
Moral Justification . . . . .	66
5. Conclusion . . . . .	69
III. MORAL JUSTIFICATION AND THE ETHICS OF CARE . . . . .	72
1. Introduction . . . . .	72
2. The Ethics of Care . . . . .	74
A Different Voice . . . . .	74
Feminine Ethics . . . . .	77
Maternal Practice . . . . .	80
Intersectionality . . . . .	82
Meeting Needs . . . . .	84
3. An Interpretation . . . . .	87
Feminist Skepticism . . . . .	87

Moral Equilibrium . . . . .	91
Naturalism . . . . .	95
4. Conclusion . . . . .	98
IV. THE ROLE OF REASON IN MORAL PROGRESS . . . . .	101
1. Introduction . . . . .	101
2. Singer on Progress . . . . .	103
Sociobiology and Ethics . . . . .	103
Choosing Rationally . . . . .	106
Expanding Sympathies . . . . .	111
Singer's Five Theses . . . . .	114
3. The Rational Altruism Argument . . . . .	115
Beyond Biology? . . . . .	115
Indirect Reciprocity . . . . .	118
Reason as a Psychological Capacity . . . . .	123
The Social Activation of Reason . . . . .	128
4. The Rational Foundation Argument . . . . .	132
Why Reason? . . . . .	132
The Default Utilitarianism Version . . . . .	133
The Normative Truth Version . . . . .	137
Reasons for Whom? . . . . .	142
5. Conclusion . . . . .	144
V. THE CASE FOR UTOPIA . . . . .	147
1. Introduction . . . . .	147

2. Pragmatic Naturalism . . . . .	149
The Ethical Project . . . . .	149
Functions, Ethics, and Progress . . . . .	154
Utopia . . . . .	159
3. Against Functionalism . . . . .	162
The Original Function of Ethics . . . . .	162
Functions, Problems, and Personal Ends . . . . .	167
4. Defending Utopia . . . . .	175
Dealing with Skeptics . . . . .	175
Justifying Utopia to Whom? . . . . .	180
Power, Politics, and Bullying . . . . .	183
5. Moral Progress . . . . .	189
Axes of Progress . . . . .	189
Progress and Human Desire . . . . .	191
Truthfulness and Transparency . . . . .	195
6. Conclusion . . . . .	198
CONCLUSION . . . . .	201
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	205



## INTRODUCTION

Is it possible both to live clear-sightedly, that is, to fully grasp, embrace, and internalize a scientific and especially evolutionary understanding of our world and of ourselves while simultaneously taking morality seriously? That is the question I wrestle with in this dissertation. The answer that I defend is: yes, it *is* possible.

In chapter one, I outline my understanding of science as an empirical project, and of naturalism as a scientific worldview. I suggest that naturalism is a challenge to our valuing practices. While some moral philosophers appear optimistic and unperturbed, I argue that more pessimistic views deserve a hearing. I caution against a whole-hearted embrace of moral skepticism, however, because of its probable pernicious social and political effects. This is not intended as a philosophical criticism, for moral skepticism could be socially pernicious and yet still be true, in some sense. Rather, it motivates my search for a naturalistically respectable understanding of morality that can directly face the strongest scientifically inspired skeptical arguments.

Specifically, my goal is to articulate a picture of morality that meets three broad conditions. It must (1) fit well with what we've learned about human beings from the sciences, and especially evolutionary biology and psychology, (2) provide grounds for resistance to skepticism, and (3) adequately capture the possibility of progressive change. Thus, with the exception of chapter three, the chapters that follow engage with philosophers whose work explicitly aims to fulfill condition (1). In so doing, however, they fall afoul—intentionally or unintentionally—of either condition (2) or condition (3). Accordingly, my own account aims first to identify their mistakes and then to rectify them. (The relevance of the ethics of care to this project lies in its illustration of the

critical, transformative, and progressive potential of empirically informed inquiry for inherited moral norms and ideals.)

In chapter two, I tackle head on what I take to be the strongest formulation of evolutionary moral skepticism: Richard Joyce's argument in *The Evolution of Morality*.<sup>1</sup> On Joyce's account, we take moral norms seriously because of natural selection for the tendency to view biologically important social norms as having convention-transcendent importance, authority, or "clout." Appreciating this fact about the evolutionary genealogy of morals, Joyce argues, means seeing our moral beliefs as evolutionarily useful falsehoods. I argue that Joyce misses the possibility of seeing moral authority as a *social* phenomenon, and morality itself in a social light. I develop what I call a social view of morality according to which moral life can be lived transparently. That account turns back Joyce's concerns about the epistemic justification of our moral beliefs with a social account of moral justification.

In chapter three, I present a case study on moral justification through a brief history of the emergence and development of the ethics of care. By tracing the evolution of philosophical and feminist thought on care, I show how a moral and political concern for self-determination and self-representation (in particular, the self-determination and self-representation of women) can dovetail with an empirical concern for truthfulness in our theories. The evolution of the ethics of care, I suggest, can be read as driven by a concern for the empirical adequacy of representations of women, each new correction to our conception of care driven by the desire to rectify politically harmful empirical oversights in preceding conceptions. This case study illustrates how the process of

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (MIT Press, 2006).

justifying ourselves to each other in shared terms—the process and practice of moral justification—can be driven by the same kinds of concerns that lead Joyce to worry about the epistemic justification of our moral beliefs. It illustrates how our moral beliefs can be justified against the background of increasingly detailed or accurate (truthful) pictures of humanity.

In chapter four, I provide an in-depth critique of Peter Singer’s recently refurbished account of progress in *The Expanding Circle*.<sup>2</sup> Moral progress occurs, according to Singer, when our moral categories and institutions expand—when those who had been previously excluded come to be included in our moral horizons. I take it for granted that the examples Singer has in mind count as progress. That is not the target of my critique. The target of my critique is Singer’s claim that *reason* plays (and has played) a unique role in driving moral progress. Although Singer is to be praised for his early engagement with evolutionary biology and psychology, his ethical arguments are problematic. In addition to missing important developments in the study of the evolution of altruism, Singer at several points underemphasizes the relevance of social, political, economic, and ecological factors in the expansion of our moral horizons. The result is not that reason is shown to be irrelevant to moral progress; rather, it is just that reason alone can hardly be said to lead the charge. I emphasize in particular the role of social exchange and social pressure in the transformation of sociomoral norms.

In chapter five, I take up Philip Kitcher’s recent account of moral progress in *The Ethical Project*.<sup>3</sup> Kitcher’s account is more subtle than Singer’s, and my critique is

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress*, second edition (Princeton University Press, 2011). The first edition was published in 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

accordingly more modest in scope. Like Singer, Kitcher attempts in his own way to plot moral progress on a single axis. Reason is not leading us up to an ever more impartial point of view; rather, moral practice inherits the ethical functions unwittingly designed by our ancestors. Ethics is thus a kind of social technology, and progress consists in the more successful discharging of its functions (a social achievement). In spite of its appeal and sophistication, I argue that ethical functionalism cannot do for Kitcher what he hopes. In particular, it cannot provide any objectivity for a secular, humanist picture of progress. But this does not mean that expansive moral ideals cannot be made naturalistically respectable, so to speak. The humanist naturalist can offer what I call a *weak* defense of humanist commitments, the details of which I explore briefly at the close of the chapter. Further, Kitcher's vision of Utopia can remain a goal for humanists, I contend. But the method by which Kitcher hopes to justify Utopia—an imagined global conversation under ideal epistemic and affective conditions—must be translated, as much as is possible, into concrete social and political action. This can lead to sociomoral change that counts as progress (progress *in* our moralities) in a variety of ways.

The social view of morality I articulate and my defense of the meaningfulness of talk of progress in our moralities provide the heart of a *critical compatibilist* account of the relationship between moral living and naturalism. My account is compatibilist because it allows for the reconciliation of the examined life with the moral life. My account is critical because not all moral norms and ideals can be justified once the reality of their social production has been made apparent.

It is possible, I argue in this dissertation, to reconcile naturalism and moral living. Thus the knowledge provided to us by the sciences need not be morally dangerous.

Throughout the dissertation, however, I hint at a more constructive danger posed by certain forms of knowledge: the danger for those who hold oppressive moral structures in place posed by the understanding that those moral structures are held in place by mere human beings. If, as I believe, our moralities are social constructs, designed knowingly or unknowingly by human beings, then they can be deconstructed and reconstructed by other human beings. For those of us whose basic needs and desires are left unmet under the current moral regime, the danger posed by this understanding is very welcome news.

## CHAPTER ONE

### NATURALISM AND SKEPTICISM

#### 1. Introduction

The past few centuries have been marked by a tremendous growth in human knowledge. The shared pool of knowledge is growing, and access to that pool is growing as well. Speaking very generally, we can say that sustained empirical inquiry, organized in discrete projects of various sorts, has produced increasingly accurate, increasingly truthful, maps of the world. Science can thus be thought of as an empirical project, encompassing all those individual projects that aim to produce truthful maps of some subset of the world.

Though its refinement is ongoing, what has clearly emerged as a result of our empirical engagement with the world is a coherent picture of nature, and of humanity itself as a part of nature. From a philosophical perspective, what is noteworthy about our best scientific engagements with the world is that they seem to be mapping *one* world. Our maps may be as diverse as our forms of interaction with the world, but the world itself does not call for two kinds of maps: some for a natural realm, and others for a *super*-natural realm. We may say then, that our emerging picture or map of reality is naturalistic. As clarity has been gained on a variety of phenomena, from the formation of the planets to the water cycle, from the biological mechanisms of reproduction to the outlines of the human psychological profile, various spirits and life-forces have effectively been exorcized from our maps of reality. Our explorations of nature have

made a notion of the super-natural unnecessary. I shall call this picture of reality *naturalism*.<sup>4</sup>

Naturalism, understood in this way, is simultaneously promising and challenging. It offers the promise of improved understanding, of satisfaction for our fundamental desire to know and to understand. But by improving upon and thereby discrediting older maps of nature and of humanity, it also challenges deeply held convictions about what matters and who we are. Many naturalists, for example, take traditional religion to be in some sense outdated, embodying prescientific assumptions and forms of thought. (Religious believers, as a result, have not been eager to embrace naturalism.) The question that occupies us in this and subsequent chapters is whether *morality* can survive the metaphorical onslaught, or whether, like the mythological dragons on the edge of an incomplete map, it must eventually be banished from a complete understanding of the world.

Moral philosophers are divided on this question. Some argue the natural and social sciences will enrich moral belief and practice, while others argue the sciences largely problematize moral belief and practice. There is something to be said for each perspective. In what follows I give a hearing to both sides. An initial concession must be made, I claim, to the skeptical or pessimistic side. That concession follows from the functional godlessness of naturalism: whatever authority morality might have, it cannot

---

<sup>4</sup> Non-naturalists might reject this “two-world” picture of their view, I suppose. But if they view the work of gods, spirits, or other occult forces as *immanent* in nature, their hypotheses must be amenable to empirical inquiry, and to falsification. Naturalism, taken as the view that (as far as we can tell) there exists only the one world investigated by science, rules out elaborate hypotheses about what allegedly “transcends” nature on epistemological grounds (for how can we know about what is beyond nature?), and it rules out elaborate hypotheses about forces immanent in nature on evidential grounds (there is no evidence for karma, for demons, for abduction-prone extra-terrestrial visitors, etc.). As good empiricists however, naturalists can and should remain open to new evidence, should it become available.

be the divine authority commonly ascribed to it. Having conceded this point, I hope to show that we still have reason to salvage some conception of moral authority. The point is a negative one: that adopting a full-blown moral skepticism entails a socially noxious detachment from moral life. Of course, the possible consequences of adopting a view have no bearing on whether or not the view is true. But by showing that we have reason not to *want* global skepticism to be true, I hope to motivate, if only indirectly, the positive work that follows.

## 2. Naturalism

### *What We Know*<sup>5</sup>

The known universe is roughly fifteen billion years old. It is expanding at a measurable rate and seems to have had its beginning in the sudden and rapid expansion of a dense and inconceivably hot singularity. The energy from this primordial “explosion,” in accordance with the second law of thermodynamics, has ever since become increasingly disorganized on the whole. Various clumps and pockets of matter throughout the universe however, have reached relatively impressive levels of organization, forming

---

<sup>5</sup> I help myself in what follows to the (always provisional) conclusions of various contemporary scientists, science writers, and philosophers. For cosmology and physics, Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality* (Vintage, 2005), esp. part III. For evolutionary biology and psychology, Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder* (Houghton Mifflin, 1998); Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (Touchstone, 1996); Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language* (Harvard University Press, 1998); Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* (Pantheon, 1994); Carl Zimmer, *Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea* (Harper, 2002); for geography and ecology, Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (W. W. Norton, 1997); Robert Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (Pantheon, 2000). The language I use for talking about science is inspired in part by Philip Kitcher, *Science in a Democratic Society* (Prometheus, 2011), Nancy Cartwright, *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), and Miriam Solomon, *Social Empiricism* (MIT Press, 2001). I am grateful to Theresa Tobin for pointing me to Solomon’s work.



innumerable supernovae, galaxies, stars, and planets—including our own. This sets the stage, under certain conditions, for the emergence of life.

In biological systems on Earth, genetic mutation, though random, occurs at a somewhat steady rate. When these mutations generate well-adapted phenotypes, life proliferates. Under various conditions, but also and especially when an ecological niche reaches its limits, a kind of natural selection occurs, such that genes coding for adaptive traits—and with them, their biological “hosts”—do better than genes coding for less adaptive traits. All the evidence indicates that selective pressures operating on natural occurring diversity explain both the structure of biological organisms on Earth and their distribution across the globe. This evolutionary framework helps explain the presence of our species on this planet, as well as our various physical and mental traits. Our genes tell the story of our continuity with nature.

We parted ways with our closest evolutionary cousins, the chimpanzee and the bonobo, some seven million years ago. Having branched away from the other Great Apes, our ancestors were most likely hunters and gatherers for the longer part of the evolution of our species. They spread out across the globe and, some twelve to thirteen thousand years ago, started the transition to more settled forms of life. With the dawn of agriculture, our ancestors formed various cities, states, and even empires. Higher population densities, the effect of more efficient food production methods, have given rise to various forms of social specialization, and to more targeted and intensive collaborative projects. Without wanting to minimize the violence and conflict that has occurred both within and between our civilizations, it's also true that trade, travel, and communications technology have brought at least some of us together. While some

economists have made much of the “invisible hand” of the market, Robert Wright thus emphasizes the invisible *brain*, as it were, that is the product of collective human ingenuity in an age of global communication.<sup>6</sup> We are animals for whom culture has become an important force, and our ideas about the world, along with our techniques for engaging with and manipulating it, have evolved in conversation with the world and with each other. Thus the fabric of human knowledge has been woven ever more densely and richly, and the “we” who know these things has also grown ever more expansive.

Thomas Kuhn famously suggests that science progresses not in a slow accretion of knowledge, but by the “revolutionary” overthrow of outdated paradigms.<sup>7</sup> How well Kuhn’s model in its details applies to particular cases in the history of science is best left to historians of science. But even on Kuhn’s model, science progresses. The view that I will take for granted in this dissertation then, is that we are justified in seeing the history of science as, in broad outline at least, progressive. Whether slowly and surely, or through occasional lurches in understanding, our pictures of the natural world have become increasingly truthful. That progress shows no signs of abating.

### *How the World Works*

It is said that when Socrates was young, he was briefly enamored with the philosophy of Anaxagoras, which promised to show him how Mind had arranged the universe. He was eager, we might say, to find purpose and design in the universe—to see conformity to a pre-existing plan in the natural world. As the story has it, he was ultimately disappointed when Anaxagoras was able to identify only the mechanical

---

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *Nonzero*.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, third edition (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

causes of things.<sup>8</sup> Plato would remedy the situation by articulating a powerful picture of the world in which immaterial and timeless exemplars took ontological priority over the mundane multiplicities of an ever-changing physical world.<sup>9</sup>

Daniel Dennett suggests that the Platonic model is a kind of cosmic pyramid, in which God ontologically precedes Mind, which precedes Design, and Order more broadly, with Chaos and Nothingness at the furthest metaphysical remove from the top.<sup>10</sup> Of course, God as such doesn't figure in Plato's philosophy. He is slotted in, with relative ease, by subsequent religious thinkers. The Platonic model, under some form or other, has dominated Western thought until quite recently. According to this model, the explanation of a natural phenomenon is complete when it has been traced back to a mind, or better, a Mind. Largely due to the influence of Christianity, the immaterial Architect of nature is typically thought to be God.

As late as 1802, when William Paley publishes his *Natural Theology*, apparent design in nature is seen as evidence for the pre-existence of a greater mind—one capable of designing the various fine-tuned organisms that populate the planet.<sup>11</sup> From the obvious structure in a pocket watch, for example, one is amply justified, accordingly to Paley, in inferring the existence of a watchmaker. So too from the allegedly obvious design of biological organisms, one should infer the existence of a designer.

As it turns out however, the watchmaker is blind.<sup>12</sup> The processes by which biological organisms, human or otherwise, come to be “designed” for survival in their

---

<sup>8</sup> The story is told in Plato's *Phaedo*.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, *Phaedo*; *Republic*.

<sup>10</sup> Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 64 ff.

<sup>11</sup> See William Paley, *Natural Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design* (W. W. Norton, 1996).

environments are not prescient and they do not make plans. That is, the posit of a superintending teleological force in explaining the trajectories of biological evolution is unnecessary, given a suitable understanding of the relevant selective forces. The incredible empirical success of the evolutionary framework suggests that, in contrast to the Platonic model, mind is not a “first cause” of human or any other animal existence. Mind is rather an *effect* of mindless causes that have, unthinkingly, produced thinking primates. From an evolutionary standpoint, we can explain the temptation to see purpose in nature as a kind of “hypertrophy of social cognition”—as a misleading overextension of our otherwise useful interpersonal “mind-reading” abilities.<sup>13</sup> To put the conclusion schematically, on a naturalist and evolutionary view, the cosmic pyramid is inverted.<sup>14</sup> Matter (whatever it is<sup>15</sup>) comes first, and then, much later and only under certain very specific conditions, organisms evolve, some of which have those impressive social and cognitive abilities we christen with the label “mind.”

As I suggested earlier, we can call this picture of the world *naturalism*.

Naturalism is helpfully opposed to supernaturalism, which attempts to explain various phenomena—whether important events, natural disasters, or even the existence of the universe—by appealing to immaterial minds, usually the mind or “will” of God. From a naturalistic perspective, such an explanation is not an explanation at all, but rather a kind of mystification, a “here be dragons” on the map of human experience. We have no

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (Basic Books, 2001), esp. chap. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 66.

<sup>15</sup> It is sometimes imagined that materialism (which I take here to be part and parcel of the naturalistic worldview) cannot be meaningfully defined, or at least that no definition of matter is uncontroversial. Like others, I think an indirect definition of materialism via the negation of supernaturalism is all we need. That leaves us free to be good empiricists about matter—not needing to claim to know more about it than we currently do.

evidence for the existence of immaterial agents, and all the evidence suggests that human beings themselves are fully material beings.<sup>16</sup> Once we have accounted for an individual's cells, organs, various biological systems (digestive, reproductive, nervous etc.), there is nothing left to say about what makes up that person. There *is* more to each one of us, in some sense, than our biological make-up. But our *personalities* (to pick one name for that something more) are best understood as ways in which the biological beings we are interact with our various natural and social environments. Or, if the focus is on our *minds*, we should follow cognitive scientists and say, “the mind is what the brain does.”<sup>17</sup> Naturalism denies that the human person is made up of more than just a material body, where that something more, soul or mind, is supposed to be a thing.<sup>18</sup> This straightforwardly entails mortalism—the view that death is the extinction of the personality, and that expectations of an afterlife are ill founded.

In brief, naturalism is a matter-first view of cosmic history, of nature, and of human beings. It provides no home in its conception of the world to occult personal or purposeful forces that might superintend over human affairs. It is a perspective poetically summarized by Bertrand Russell as follows.

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must

---

<sup>16</sup> See for example, Paul Bloom, *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human* (Basic Books, 2004); David Eagleman, *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain* (Vintage, 2012); Corliss Lamont, *The Illusion of Immortality*, fifth edition (Continuum, 1990). I'm grateful to Alan Shear for pointing me to Lamont's work.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (W. W. Norton, 1997), 21.

<sup>18</sup> I am simplifying. Although most naturalists are materialists, one need not be a materialist to be a naturalist. See for example David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.<sup>19</sup>

This naturalistic perspective is the one that I assume in all that follows.

### *What Must Disappear*

For a wide range of natural phenomena, it is possible both to understand and to appreciate the phenomenon in question. Early researchers in optics may have been accused of “unweaving the rainbow,” but a poetic appreciation for the “mystery” of rainbows is no real reason to resist scientific understanding. We can “unweave” the rainbow—by articulating an explanation of why human beings see rainbows—without undercutting the beauty or poetic evocativeness of our ordinary experiences of rainbows.<sup>20</sup>

The work of scientists also sheds a great deal of light on otherwise puzzling phenomena. We now have powerful ways of understanding the occurrence of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, lightning and thunder, and much more. Demystifying these phenomena isn’t so much “disenchanted” the world, as some have suggested, as it is making it intelligible—and not nearly as terrifying, I would add.<sup>21</sup> So understanding often leaves the world untouched. But there is a real sense in which understanding can also be destructive. Traditional religion, in particular, seems especially under threat.

Religious thinkers and practitioners have adopted a variety of stances toward science, some conciliatory, and others less so. The evidence that I’m familiar with

---

<sup>19</sup> Bertrand Russell, “A Free Man’s Worship,” quoted in George I. Mavrodes, “Religion and the Queerness of Morality,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William Wainwright (Cornell University Press, 1986), 216.

<sup>20</sup> See Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, esp. chap. 3.

<sup>21</sup> See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

suggests that many of the practices and beliefs that characterize traditional religion have their roots in psychological capacities easily explained in evolutionary terms.<sup>22</sup> The trouble is that this same evidence suggests that traditional religious beliefs (about the existence and importance of ancestors, spirits, and souls, say) come to “stick” in human social life regardless of their epistemic merits. Certain ideas may be especially attractive or “contagious,” as it were, regardless of whether they are true or false. So the risk here is that religion will be explained *away*; that truthful genealogies of religious beliefs will undermine those beliefs rather than provide justification for them.

The Mennonite theologian Gordon Kaufman, in an effort to reconcile Christian faith with the deliverances of science, has argued that personal metaphors for God are no longer tenable, and that the Christian God should rather be thought of as an impersonal creative force, which can be harnessed, for good or for ill, in human affairs. Jesus of Nazareth, on his analysis, is an unusually creative and thus inspirational human being some people will choose to emulate.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Kaufman’s system works as a kind of naturalistic religion. But its distance from traditional Christian orthodoxy might be judged problematic for many Christians. If religious belief must reinvent itself so drastically to accommodate our best understandings of the world, it may be simpler just to say that naturalism and traditional religion are incompatible. I do not think it is inappropriately bold to suggest, borrowing here an idea from Bernard Williams, that on a naturalist view, religion “must come to understand itself as a human construction; if it does, it must in the end collapse.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> See Boyer, *Religion Explained*.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman, *Jesus and Creativity* (Fortress Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 1985), 33.

In these ways, naturalism is both promising and challenging. It promises to enrich our experience and understanding of the natural world and of ourselves. But it also challenges, and even threatens, deeply held hopes and values. An example of this threat is the possibility that a thoroughgoing naturalism might be incompatible with traditional religion as we know it. The question now raised is whether other important values might likewise be endangered by the naturalistic onslaught. More specifically, we can ask what place, if any, *morality* has in an empirically respectable worldview. Will morality naturalized go the way of the rainbow or of the angels?

### 3. Morality after Naturalism

#### *The Optimistic View*

Philosophers have taken up the question with gusto. They fall into two broad camps. Philosophers in the first camp are optimistic about naturalism's impact on moral belief and practice. Morality, on their view, will go the way of the rainbow. It will be better understood, but its fundamental power will remain untouched. Philosophers in the second camp are less optimistic, and may, for all intents and purposes, be called pessimists. On their view, morality will go the way of the angels. Their claim is that coming to know the natural origins of morality will undermine our ability to take it seriously. Morality, on this view, cannot escape the progress of science unscathed. I'll have more to say about the pessimistic view in what follows, but I begin with the optimistic view.

There are many forms the optimistic view might take. In a sense then, there may be several optimistic views. Yet they all share the same conviction that however much



tinkering is needed here and there to tighten things up, morality can and should continue to be an important force in the lives of even the most empirically minded.

On what we might call a scientific utilitarian view, for example, right and wrong are correlated with pleasure and pain. We are all capable of making judgments about what is pleasant and what hurts, but scientific inquiry nevertheless enriches our understandings of pleasure and pain, and provides quantitative measures by which to judge courses of action, whether characterizing individual choices or political programs. Just as “scientific terms refer to real features of the world, and the sciences provide us with successively more and more accurate knowledge of the world,” so also “our moral claims not only purport to but often do state facts and refer to real properties, and [...] we can and do have at least some true moral beliefs and moral knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> Those moral properties, such as an act’s being cruel or a practice’s being unjust, supervene nonmysteriously on everyday nonmoral properties. Moral knowledge can thus be gained and moral progress made in much the same way as scientific knowledge is gained and progress made.<sup>26</sup> David Brink and others have made this argument in philosophy, and Sam Harris has recently offered a popularized version of the view.<sup>27</sup>

On a broadly Aristotelian view, the starting point isn’t pleasure and pain but rather the notion of a good, full, and flourishing life. What is characteristic of such a view is the insistence that morality is a natural extension of biological existence, rather than, say, an autonomous realm with its own unique words and rules. As Philippa Foot puts it, “evaluations of human will and action share a conceptual structure with evaluations of

---

<sup>25</sup> David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Brink, *Moral Realism*, 6. See also chap. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (Free Press, 2010).

characteristics and operations of other living things.”<sup>28</sup> Thus moral goodness is not a distinct and unique kind of goodness, but rather just the goodness of a human being *qua* human being. Foot says, “there are objective evaluations of such things as human sight, hearing, memory, and concentration, based on the life form of our species. Why, then, does it seem so monstrous a suggestion that the evaluation of the human will should be determined by facts about the nature of human beings and the life of our own species?”<sup>29</sup> Once we understand how the notion of goodness is employed for natural things in general—oak trees, squirrels, or a digestive system, for example—there is no further puzzle about goodness and badness in human beings. Full knowledge of the natural world is no impediment to moral judgment. To the contrary, it enriches moral judgment.

Finally, there is what we might call an ecological view. On the ecological view, particular moral practices, customs and vocabularies are adaptations to a local natural and social environment. The view is straightforwardly relativistic. Moral knowledge is not a single unified body but rather, as Owen Flanagan puts it, “Moral knowledge is the result of complex socialization processes”<sup>30</sup> aimed at regulating a local form of life (and thus it varies from ecological niche to ecological niche). Moral socialization, Flanagan is careful to note, is not *mere* socialization because it incorporates to varying degrees the languages and practices of critical self-reflection. Moral goodness on the ecological view is thus a kind of social adeptness, akin, perhaps, to wit or tact, though broader in scope. In brief

---

<sup>28</sup> Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Owen Flanagan, *Self-Expressions: Mind, Morals, and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 129.

ethics is “concerned with saying what contributes to the well-being of humans, human groups, and human individuals in particular natural and social environments.”<sup>31</sup>

The scientific utilitarian, Aristotelian, and ecological views just mentioned certainly do not exhaust the possibilities for an optimistic view on morality’s naturalistic prospects. They do nicely illustrate the unity of the perspective however. There is little trepidation in their pronouncements, and no fear that the natural sciences might undermine moral belief or practice. Morality comes out on the side of science rather than superstition, and science in turn enriches moral practice—a fortunate outcome.

### *Preemptive Adjustments*

Have the optimists underestimated the threat posed by naturalism? One way of answering the question involves noting the distance between these philosophically elaborate accounts and more common conceptions of morality.

First of all, not everyone agrees that harmfulness and wrongness are coextensive. Brink insists on a nonreductive account of morality and moral language, and so he’s well aware of this fact. But the revisionism implicit in his theory needs to be drawn out. The psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that everyday moral judgment in most people is emotionally driven. One piece of evidence he provides involves people’s reaction to a vignette depicting one-time, consensual, non-procreative incest between opposite-sex siblings. The hypothetical scenario makes it clear that no harm is done either directly in the encounter, or indirectly as a result of the encounter. Nevertheless, Haidt reports that most people insist the siblings have done something morally wrong. That is, they insist that the imagined deed is wrong in spite of its not being harmful. This provides evidence,

---

<sup>31</sup> Flanagan, *Self-Expression*, 133.

Haidt argues, that moral judgments are usually formed intuitively, and that moral reasoning, when present, is usually a post hoc construction developed to support an already formed emotional judgment.<sup>32</sup> For our purposes, the point is this: that it is not obvious to many people that what is wrong is that which is harmful (Brink's view). That conclusion is rather a refinement, an interpretation, to which Brink and other utilitarians are attempting to convert us, as it were. Thus morality survives "naturalization" on the scientific utilitarian view only because it has already been stripped down ahead of time, in ways that manifestly conflict with common moral judgments.

The Aristotelian proposal is problematic in a different way. As I understand it, the strategy of neo-Aristotelians such as Foot involves putting human *moral* goodness on the same evaluative spectrum as the biological "goodness" of specimens of other species. I suspect there is a bad (pre-Darwinian) understanding of biology at work here. Biological evolution "aims" to produce not flourishing beings (in the sense that they are strong and happy, say), but rather reproducing beings.<sup>33</sup> From a strictly biological perspective, it is unclear what the judgment that a particular specimen is good might mean, if not that its constitution is such that it will likely lead to reproductive success in a given ecological niche. But the strategies that lead to reproduction are more varied than just those that human beings might judge to involve a good life. A good peacock is one with a beautiful tail, not because human beings happen to find its tail beautiful, but because peahens do. And a biologically "good" parasitic wasp may have great reproductive success, but any

---

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108 (2001): 814-834. Thanks to Lucas Sclipper for the reference.

<sup>33</sup> Or, if not actually reproducing beings, then beings (like sterile ants) that will contribute to the passing on of their genes by helping their biological kin.

analogy with moral goodness seems stretched.<sup>34</sup> Linda Mealy has argued that sociopathy, a condition in human beings that involves a complete lack of empathy, is an evolutionary stable strategy.<sup>35</sup> That is, that sociopaths, from an evolutionary perspective, have adopted a good strategy for reproduction. Whether or not she is right, this is a possibility in keeping with our best understanding of evolutionary biology and psychology. But even if being Ted Bundy is “good” from an evolutionary standpoint, that is clearly insufficient for being morally good.<sup>36</sup> My point is that there may be a considerable distance between modern, Darwinian biology and the morally rich Aristotelian biology of Foot and other neo-Aristotelians and virtue ethicists. Foot is not proposing an analysis of morality from within a naturalistic framework, in my sense of “naturalistic.” Rather, her view owes more to Aristotle than to Darwin. For this reason, I am hesitant to view it as truly naturalistic.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, it may be the case that moral customs vary the world over, as Flanagan and others are happy to note. But many perceive the fact of moral variance as a problem. As John Mackie suggests, it may be the case that ordinary moral discourse characteristically involves a claim to objectivity. The idea is just: if something is morally

---

<sup>34</sup> Charles Darwin wrote in a letter to the American botanist Asa Gray, “I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae [parasitic wasps] with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of Caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice” (quoted in Wright, *The Moral Animal*, 331-332).

<sup>35</sup> Linda Mealy, “The Sociobiology of Sociopathy: An Integrated Evolutionary Model,” *Brain and Behavioral Sciences* 18, no. 3 (1995): 523-599.

<sup>36</sup> Ted Bundy was “an American serial killer, rapist, kidnapper, and necrophile who assaulted and murdered numerous young women and girls during the 1970s and possibly earlier” (“Ted Bundy,” Wikipedia, accessed January 10, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted\\_Bundy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted_Bundy)). Although sociopaths are notoriously cavalier with human life, they are not all such systematic murderers. If they were, sociopathy could hardly count as a successful evolutionary strategy.

<sup>37</sup> See also William J. FitzPatrick’s powerful critique of Foot’s later views in *Teleology and the Norms of Nature* (Garland, 2000). FitzPatrick was a student of Foot’s.

wrong, it is wrong for everyone, everywhere. Thus the fact that moral vocabularies *vary* in lockstep with forms of life problematizes the implicit claim to objectivity of ordinary moral language. For Mackie then, the cultural relativity of morality is a building block in the case for moral skepticism.<sup>38</sup> I am not arguing that we need to follow Mackie down the path of error theory. My point is that a real grasp of the variability of moral norms across cultures is transformative. So the picture we get from Flanagan and other relativists of morality as an ecological adaptation is already in some sense an adjustment to the lessons of empirical science.

The morality that survives naturalization on the optimist view is thus a modified, pared down, or otherwise interpreted morality. *Something* survives the transition to naturalism, and optimists call it morality or moral goodness. In the case of Foot's view, the alleged normative force of biological considerations may be at odds with an evolutionary picture of our species. So there the transition to naturalism (as I understand it) is quite possibly only apparent. I offer this overview of optimistic views simply to point to the range of possibilities. Transplanting our moral beliefs and practices to a truly naturalistic framework is *work*. The possibility to be explored presently is that the transition might involve leaving some things behind.

#### 4. Skeptical Considerations

##### *Mortality and Moral Authority*

What is characteristic of modern moral philosophy, according to Elizabeth Anscombe, is its retention of law-related moral metaphors in the absence of a

---

<sup>38</sup> J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin, 1990). See esp. 36-38.

commitment to a law conception of ethics. “[B]etween Aristotle and us came Christianity,” she says. “In consequence of the dominance of Christianity for many centuries, the concepts of being bound, permitted, or excused became deeply embedded in our language and thought.”<sup>39</sup> Thus modern moral philosophy is in the awkward position of deploying and attempting to demonstrate the intelligibility of a language displaced from its original home. The notions of moral law or *obligation*, the notions of right and wrong, Anscombe insists, require a lawgiver. That is just how the concepts work. A course of action cannot be “forbidden” unless someone in a position of authority is doing the forbidding. Something may be called morally wrong, but in the absence of a lawgiver—traditionally, God—“all the atmosphere of the term is retained while its substance is guaranteed quite null.”<sup>40</sup>

Against the backdrop of Anscombe’s historical scheme, in which Greek moral philosophy is succeeded by Christian moral philosophy and then by modern moral philosophy, Immanuel Kant can be read as a transitional figure—the first modern moral philosopher. The command of morality, on Kant’s view, comes not from any source outside ourselves, but rather from our rationality itself. Morality is in that sense self-legislated. It is authoritative and inescapable for each one of us.<sup>41</sup> From the perspective of Anscombe’s historical scheme however, this notion of a categorical imperative, of a command that applies to us as rational beings regardless of our personal ends, appears as a kind of last-ditch effort to save the idea of the moral law from the obsolescence of God.

---

<sup>39</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 4-5.

<sup>40</sup> Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 15.

<sup>41</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

The point becomes clear if we consider, not Kant's arguments, but alternative, religious foundations for the authority of morality.

In a religious worldview that promises post-mortem judgment, the inescapability of morality, from which its practical authority follows, is simply the result of that judgment's inevitability. "It is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment."<sup>42</sup> If God's post-mortem judgment is inescapable, then that is all that's needed to make the authority of his commands inescapable, and hence morality "authoritative" in the relevant way. The biblical authors themselves can be seen to connect the anticipation of post-mortem judgment with the practical force of moral injunctions: "If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."<sup>43</sup> If, however, we bracket the existence of God and the possibility of an afterlife, as Kant attempts to do, whatever "authority" or "inescapability" morality is supposed to have will seem quite weak, in light of the Christian alternative. That, I take it, is Anscombe's point. The Kantian scheme that is supposed to save moral authority for a post-religious society seems contrived when set in a broader historical context. No doubt this is why Philippa Foot says that to insist on inescapability is to rely "on an illusion, as if trying to give the moral 'ought' a magic force."<sup>44</sup> If God is dead, as the slogan has it, then the categorical imperative must die with him.

Making the transition to naturalism involves leaving some ideas behind. I am suggesting that *both* the more obviously religious conception of morality's authority *and*

---

<sup>42</sup> Hebrews 9:27, NASB.

<sup>43</sup> I Corinthians 15:32, NASB.

<sup>44</sup> Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Clarendon Press, 2002), 167. This early work of Foot's articulates a perspective that she rejects in *Natural Goodness*—rather unfortunately, in my opinion.



the allegedly secular alternative for it that we find in Kantian ethics are problematic. In a traditional Christian picture of moral life, the authority of God's commands is backed up by a final, post-mortem judgment. If death is just death however, and there is no final judgment of this sort to be expected, then there is no final *enforcement* of the rules. As Anscombe argues, this guts divine law based moral metaphors of their original significance. They can have no real force. (I take no stance here on the viability of neo-Kantian accounts of moral authority.) Thus we must do without conceptions of authority that trade on the clout of a divine sovereign's commands. Morality naturalized must abandon pretensions of divine authority, under whatever name.

### *Evolutionary Skepticism*

Making the transition to a naturalistic framework is work. In contrast to theistic moral philosophies, in which the conviction is that "reality itself is committed to morality in some deep way,"<sup>45</sup> a naturalist moral philosophy must find its anchors in the contingencies of human nature. Morality may have evolutionary antecedents in our region of the tree of life, but naturalists don't generally look for morality in "reality itself."

Inferences about our history can be made on the basis of observation of our closest evolutionary relatives (chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, and orangutans). The primatologist Frans de Waal has documented the extent to which our evolutionary relatives share important psychological and social similarities with human beings. Emotional contagion, empathy, consolation behavior, gratitude, kindness, a sense of

---

<sup>45</sup> Mavrodes, "Religion," 220.

fairness—all of these characterize at least some of our relatives.<sup>46</sup> Some have accused de Waal of anthropomorphism. Appealing to evolutionary parsimony, de Waal has responded by arguing that fear of misplaced anthropomorphism needs to be balanced against the risk of falling into “anthropodenial”—the denial that we are in fact evolved animals and therefore share much in common, especially in terms of cognitive architecture, with at least some other mammals.<sup>47</sup> It would be very surprising after all, if *Homo sapiens* exhibited some capacity (for morality, say) that was an absolute evolutionary novelty.

De Waal’s point is that, whatever comes together to constitute that phenomenon we call human morality, the hypothesis that it must have evolutionary antecedents is well borne out by observation of our closest relatives. If morality in any way involves these important psychological capacities, then we can see the capacities and behaviors of other apes (and thus also plausibly the ancestors we share with them) as in some sense proto-moral.

Having conceded the untenability of an excessively strong understanding of moral authority, de Waal’s remarks on the evolution of morality might be taken to lay the groundwork for an optimistic take on morality’s “naturalization” prospects. But the evolutionary approach might just as easily generate an argument for moral skepticism. I want to briefly outline that skeptical argument here, before revisiting it in detail in the next chapter. I do think a somewhat optimistic conclusion is in the offing—morality need

---

<sup>46</sup> See Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> See de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, appendix A.

not go the way of the angels. But I want to provide in what follows some consideration of why we might not *want* to concede too much to the skeptic.

From an evolutionary perspective, the reason an organism has any particular trait is that that trait contributed to its ancestors' actual reproductive success, or that it is a side effect of such a trait. That means morality has emerged only because of its relation to this procreative imperative. To put the thought a bit more precisely, we might say that the psychic structures that generate our feelings of love, justice, and guilt (etc.) were likely "chosen" by natural selection because they were useful for increasing the evolutionary fitness of our ancestors. Recall Haidt's incest vignette. Even when it is made clear that no one is harmed, either physically or emotionally, most people judge sibling-sibling incest to be wrong. They find it disgusting. From an evolutionary perspective these responses make perfect sense. The offspring of incestuous unions are often at a significant genetic disadvantage, and so natural selection should favor the evolution of mechanisms that channel sexual interest away from immediate kin.<sup>48</sup>

This observation can be used to fuel a skeptical argument. If we find incest disgusting, we are not content to call it biologically disadvantageous. We call it twisted, sinful, wrong, or whatever. That is, we describe it under suitably heavy terms of condemnation. While the evolutionary perspective makes sense of why we heap moral scorn on incest, it thereby problematizes the conviction that, in addition and not reducible to its genetic riskiness, such behavior is objectively wrong. The reasons we give to justify our moral judgments in such cases don't seem to be explanations of those judgments, but

---

<sup>48</sup> See Debra Lieberman, "Moral Sentiments Relating to Incest: Discerning Adaptations from By-products," in *Moral Psychology, Volume 1: The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (MIT Press, 2007); Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 283-285. I'm grateful to Lucas Sclipper for pointing me to Prinz's work.

rather post hoc rationalizations of them. That, at least, is Haidt's conclusion. "The reasoning process in moral judgment may be capable of working objectively under very limited circumstances" but usually, "moral reasoning is [...] likely to be hired out like a lawyer by various motives, employed only to seek confirmation of preordained conclusions."<sup>49</sup> Those preordained conclusions on his view are driven in part by strong moral feelings bequeathed to us by our evolutionary history. Though moral judgments purport to be about the good and the bad, the just and the unjust, then, the driving force behind them is the evolutionary usefulness of the intuitions they express.

This is troubling. As Richard Joyce puts it, "the faithful representation of reality is of only contingent instrumental value when reproductive success is the touchstone, forcing us to acknowledge that if in certain domains *false* beliefs will bring more offspring than that is the route natural selection will take every time. Moral thinking could very well be such a domain."<sup>50</sup> Joyce's argument will receive close attention in the next chapter. For now, we can jump to his conclusion: that the evolutionary genealogy of our capacity for moral judgment undermines whole-hearted participation in moral discourse. Our moral judgments, on this skeptical view, don't refer to anything real in the world. They merely codify evolutionarily useful prejudices. If this is correct, then what Williams says in the religious case applies here too: in a naturalistic worldview, morality must come to understand itself as a system of post hoc rationalizations of evolutionarily useful feelings. If it does, it must in the end collapse. Before we accept this conclusion, it's worth asking what reasons we might have to resist it.

---

<sup>49</sup> Haidt, "The Emotional Dog," 822. Thus, "moral reasoning is usually a post hoc construction intended to justify automatic moral intuitions" (823).

<sup>50</sup> Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, 222.

*Fictionalism and Abolitionism*

John Mackie's argument against the objectivity of moral value occupies less than half of his *Ethics*. The rest of the book is devoted to positive normative ethical theory. This may seem surprising in light of his moral skepticism, but Mackie is convinced that human belief in morality has a beneficial impact on the species.<sup>51</sup> "The function of morality," Mackie suggests, "is primarily to counteract [the] limitation of [our] sympathies."<sup>52</sup> If I believe it is *wrong* to break a promise, for example, rather than merely unwise, I am more likely to keep my promises and to feel bad when I break them. The net effect of this type of belief is to reinforce social bonds and encourage altruistic behavior, which, in the long run, benefits humanity as a whole. Rather than jettison moral talk entirely then, Mackie suggests that it be maintained—and transformed where needed—to serve as a useful fiction. It isn't *actually* wrong to lie, cheat, and steal, on this view, but it's better for us to act and talk as if it were.

This moral fictionalism, which both Mackie and Joyce defend, is on my view problematic. Where moral obligation and personal desire are in harmony, moral obligation is superfluous. Presumably then, the social benefit of morality accrues where moral obligation and personal desire conflict. But if morality is known to be a fiction, individuals have no reason to allow their personal desires to be thwarted by "moral obligation" (since there is no such thing). Perhaps they have a desire to live in a healthy society, and they view acting on so-called "moral obligations" as the only means to fulfill

---

<sup>51</sup> At least in *Ethics*, Mackie believes that morality is still a good idea. Richard Garner argues in "Abolishing Morality," in *A World without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Error Theory*, ed. Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin (Springer, 2010), that Mackie is more skeptical about the benefits of morality in his later work.

<sup>52</sup> Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 108.

this desire. But then moral obligation “itself” is causally epiphenomenal. Individuals can be seen as acting on personal desire—in this case, the desire to live in a particular kind of society. There is no fiction here.

The only sense I can make of this talk of moral fiction is if moral fictionalists exempt themselves from the system altogether. *They* know morality isn’t real, but they keep that information a secret. Morality has become superfluous for them, but by maintaining the fiction in public, the rest of society continues to benefit from its social effects. In public, that is, fictionalists must “pass” as moral realists. If their views are espoused only outside the centers of power, fictionalists remain impotent amoralists (willfully so). But vested with political authority, fictionalists become an amoral elite that moralizes for the greater good. I take it many today would view this possibility as socially noxious and politically dangerous.

As an alternative to moral fictionalism, skeptics have entertained the possibility of moral abolitionism or eliminativism. The idea here is to get rid of morality altogether. Richard Garner suggests that “morality inflames disputes and makes compromise difficult, it preserves unfair arrangements and facilitates the misuse of power, and it makes global war possible.”<sup>53</sup> Thus we should purge our vocabulary of moral notions altogether. Garner specifically mentions moral rights, moral personhood, and moral desert. In lieu of standard moral terminology, we may speak of interests, desires, and emotions, but no more. “What good is morality,” Garner asks, “if it can so readily be marshaled to defend the sanctions of a tyrant?”<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Garner, “Abolishing Morality,” 219-220.

<sup>54</sup> Garner, 219.

What are we to make of this proposal? While Garner is certainly right that moral talk can inflame disputes, and that it can even be used to start wars, it's not obvious that this is enough to indict all such talk. One obvious response would be that this constitutes a *misuse* of moral language. For example, talk of justice and freedom may be misused, or it may be used as window dressing for what is in fact self-interest. But it is unclear why such abuses should move us to abandon justice and freedom as rich moral ideals. Identifying and correcting misuses seems like the simpler and politically more promising alternative. It's also interesting to note that Garner has trouble stripping all moral resonance from his prose. Arguably, a "tyrant" is just a powerful figure whose actions violate some moral standard.

The case of the tyrant is instructive. Presumably, Garner would have tyrant-fighting revolutionaries speak not in terms of "justice" or their "moral rights," but rather in terms of their interests, emotions, and desires. Without wanting to venture too deeply into questions of moral semantics, I think it's important to note that, on some views at least, talk of "justice" and "rights" is not fundamentally different from talk of human interests and desires. That is, the language of justice might be used to express opposition to an otherwise unjustified thwarting of basic human desires or needs. Maybe "your policies are unjust" or "we want justice!" is just emotionally effective shorthand for "you've provided us with no justification for policies that serve your interests but not ours." If a defense of moral language along these lines works, Garner's abolitionist prescription can be reinterpreted. Rather than prohibiting moral language as such, he could be read as insisting that moral vocabularies intersect meaningfully with central human desires, emotions, and interests. The problem with moral language that does *not*

meet this criterion would then be not so much a failure to refer to anything real, but rather uselessness. On the other hand, if the abolitionist really *does* want to get rid of *all* talk of justice, rights, and so forth, it hard to see how the result wouldn't be politically disempowering.

What I'm arguing, in brief, is that we have prima facie reason to resist moral skepticism. Expressed either as fictionalism or as abolitionism, the political result is unattractive—to those of us who find Enlightenment ideals of self-determination and freedom from oppression attractive, at least. Fictionalists play the moral game in public, but don't really believe in the rules. Abolitionists refuse to hear talk of justice, rights, or personhood. There are ways to render such commitments more palatable: for example, if the fictionalist's personal desires line up perfectly with what the "fiction" of moral obligation is supposed to get us, or if the abolitionist is only concerned with those parts of moral talk that don't connect with vital human interests. But on a strong interpretation of each view, the result is social disengagement. The fictionalist lives with ironic detachment from all moral discourse; the abolitionist doesn't respond to talk of justice. If this is where naturalism leaves us, then some kinds of knowledge really are dangerous.

## 5. Conclusion

Science is an empirical project. It encompasses a wide variety of engagements with nature. And it pays off. We've learned a lot about the world and about ourselves. We know the basic workings of matter. We know how life evolves, how various lifeforms adapt to changing environments. We know human beings are continuous with nature, and that human society, though complex, can in principle be studied with some of the same tools as other animal societies. All of this is incredibly exciting, and promising,



from the standpoint of our fundamental desire to know, from the standpoint of curiosity and a hunger for truth.

It is also daunting, frustrating, and threatening, from the standpoint of traditional value systems. Some of the metaphysical anchors for our various social systems have come loose, and comparable tethers in the newly understood natural world are not always available. The aim of this chapter has been to provide a bird's eye view of this tension for morality—as understood, at least, by philosophers. I have drawn attention to optimistic points of view—the scientific utilitarian, Aristotelian, and ecological views—that have high hopes for moral talk after the advent of naturalism. I have argued that, whatever merits these views have, and whatever challenges they face, they do not simply codify prevailing moral thought. Rather they articulate sophisticated and reformatory theories of morality that aim to be immune from the sharpest edges of naturalist criticism.

What then is this potential naturalist criticism? Well, at first pass, there is the simple fact that religious moral systems can prop up morality with hopes about or threats from the afterlife. If all of us stand to face judgment post mortem, after all, then the commands of a divine legislator may deserve our attention for that simple reason. The authority claimed for morality in such a scheme is just the authority of God himself. But if there is no room for God, as traditionally conceived, in our new maps of reality, then this approach to moral authority is fruitless. Morality's "inescapability" can no longer be thought of in such drastic terms, for death is actually death: the extinction of the personality. Morality appears to be a human system, and it appears to be, at least in this sense, "escapable."

There is an even stronger criticism waiting in the wings. If, as naturalism now requires, we understand human beings as the product of a long evolution, the psychological mechanisms that make morality possible must have some evolutionary purpose. There is a chance then, that morality might be a kind of social veneer on genetically useful drives, without any real world referent. Facing the facts of morality's evolution would on this view require us to become either fictionalists or abolitionists about morality. I've argued that both options are socially and politically unattractive.

We have reason, I have claimed, to *want* a naturalistic picture of morality that resists the skeptical conclusion. It must do so without reviving the specter of divine authority. Of course, it is possible to want something, to have good reason to want something, without it ultimately being possible. But thankfully, I do think a naturalistic and non-deflationary picture of morality is in the offing. Its articulation, in light of a more thorough treatment of Joyce's skeptical argument, is the task I take up in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO

## PICTURING MORALITY AFTER DARWIN

## 1. Introduction

Evolution has made us what we are. Our bodies are the products of evolution. Our minds are the products of evolution. Specifically, the capability—the tendency—we have to think (and feel) about the world and about our lives in moral terms is a product of evolution. And like most products of evolution, it is with us today because it gave a procreative edge to our ancestors. Technically speaking, a trait can emerge and persist in a population without it enhancing inclusive fitness, so long as it does not have an unduly negative effect on fitness. So I'm making the assumption that the mental capacities that underlie moral thought, motivation, and behavior are not selectively neutral in this way. Cross-culturally, moral norms tend to govern central aspects of human life (reciprocity in social relations, reputation, sexual behavior, etc.), and this strongly suggests that the tendency to moralize is unlikely to be fitness-neutral.<sup>55</sup> On the assumption then that the human tendency to moralize was naturally selected for, we are left with something of a dilemma. *Morality* is supposed to be about what is good or right, and what is bad or wrong. But *evolution* is concerned only with procreation. Is this a problem?

In this chapter, I tackle the claim made by evolutionary moral skeptics that a close examination of morality strips it of its power. Daniel Dennett, for example, suggests that evolution has made moral terms into “magic words” that trick us, as it were, into

---

<sup>55</sup> See Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph, “Intuitive Ethics: How Innately Prepared Intuitions Generate Culturally Variable Virtues,” *Daedalus* 133 (2004): 55-66. Cited in Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, 65.

behaving prosocially, for the good of our genes.<sup>56</sup> And Michael Ruse argues that our minds deceive us into viewing moral norms as objective. “If our biology did not make us think that [morality] has an objective referent, even though it does not,” he says, “then our substantive ethics would break down. We would start to cheat, and before long everyone would be cheating and the selective advantage of substantive ethics would be lost.”<sup>57</sup> On the skeptic’s view, in other words, the advance of naturalism is a genuine threat to morality, the knowledge of morality’s origins, dangerous knowledge.

Richard Joyce’s book-length presentation of the skeptical case in *The Evolution of Morality* is my target here. On Joyce’s view, our tendency to make moral judgments evolved because of its contribution to genetically beneficial social cohesion. While this provides morality with a kind of instrumental justification, it falls short of an epistemic justification. If evolution can enhance the fitness of an organism by predisposing it to believing falsehoods, there is nothing to prevent it from doing so. Our moral beliefs, Joyce says, may well be such falsehoods.

As I shall argue however, Joyce’s case depends on a peculiar understanding of morality’s authority. In a brief response to Ruse, Owen Flanagan, Hagop Sarkissian, and David Wong offer what I find to be a plausible suggestion, namely that,

Moral imperatives and judgments can guide action and motivate individuals not because of anything internal to their syntax, semantics, or logical structure, still less because our biology makes us think that they refer to something objective (as Ruse claims), but rather because of how they relate to vital human needs, desires, and interests, such as a need for safety, security, friendship, reciprocity, and a sense of belonging.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 506. Dennett has not explicitly endorsed skepticism. But his picture of morality’s evolution and function does not impart confidence in the truth of our moral judgments.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Ruse, “Response to Duke Naturalists,” in Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Psychology*, 36.

<sup>58</sup> Owen Flanagan, Hagop Sarkissian, and David Wong, “What Is the Nature of Morality? A Response to Casebeer, Railton, and Ruse,” in Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Psychology*, 37.

My response to Joyce fleshes out this insight. I argue that morality's authority can be seen as flowing from its role in structuring fundamental human institutions that intersect with basic human needs. This hints at the possibility of a social conception of moral authority, and with it, a social conception of morality itself. On that view, morality is seen as a tool for social living, rather than as something external to ordinary human life.

My response to Joyce moves from a social conception of moral authority to a social picture of morality itself, and then to a social understanding of moral justification. Viewing justification as something we do amongst ourselves, rather than as something we must do to the universe, to the academy, or which philosophers must do for us, I argue, helps capture the dynamic tension inherent in moral practices—the possibility for critique and for change. It also answers Joyce's contention that moral judgments can never be epistemically justified.

Briefly put, my goal in this chapter is to show how taking naturalism seriously need not lead to moral skepticism. There is a way of thinking about morality—the social view—that captures both the seriousness of existing moral norms and the possibility for creating new and possibly better norms. I begin with a reconstruction of Joyce's master argument.

## 2. Joyce's Master Argument

### *Practical Clout*

According to Joyce, moral norms have practical clout. "Practical clout" is a term of art. Joyce employs it to denote the conjunction of *inescapability* and *authority*.<sup>59</sup> The

---

<sup>59</sup> See Joyce, *Evolution*, 62.

terminology is borrowed from David Brink, who uses it to isolate the component parts of categoricity in Kantian ethics (according to which moral norms always take the form of a categorical imperative).<sup>60</sup> To say that a norm or an imperative is *inescapable* is to say that it is non-hypothetical. (For the sake of this discussion, I will use the terms “norm” and “imperative” interchangeably, as denoting the type of proposition that indicates what one ought to do.)

A hypothetical imperative is an imperative that takes for granted certain personal ends. One might tell a friend that he ought to quit smoking, for example. The imperative assumes that the friend prefers to be healthy or at least to not die young. The underlying logic is thus of the form: if you want to be healthy, you ought not smoke. If the friend cares nothing for his health, or if he is trying to set a smoking record, say, the force of the imperative vanishes.

The significance of inescapability is that non-hypothetical norms apply to individuals irrespective of their ends. If, for instance, the rules of etiquette make it improper to use one’s dinner fork to eat one’s salad, the fact that one cares nothing for the rules of etiquette is irrelevant to the fact that one has done something improper in using the wrong fork. The institution of etiquette does not exempt one from its rules on any private grounds. To be clear, one may have good reason to break the rules. For example, if one’s dinner companion is about to inadvertently eat a wasp, one may choose to break a rule of etiquette forbidding speaking with a mouth full of food.<sup>61</sup> But that does not mean the rule ceases to apply (otherwise one wouldn’t be *breaking* it). The rules of

---

<sup>60</sup> David Brink, “Kantian Rationalism: Inescapability, Authority, and Supremacy,” in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, ed. Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>61</sup> This is Joyce’s example. See Joyce, *Evolution*, 61.

etiquette and of similar institutions are thus “inescapable” on this account. They apply to us not in virtue of our personal ends, but simply in virtue of our being in the relevant social context (a dinner party, say). Some have called the relevant norms or imperatives “categorical” because they are not hypothetical. I will simply call them “institutional” or “non-hypothetical.”

A norm can be non-hypothetical, and a norm can be practically authoritative, but these are distinct qualities, Joyce says. This is evident from the fact that moral norms have deliberative importance beyond that which follows from simply being non-hypothetical. In and of themselves, Joyce says, non-hypothetical imperatives are in fact quite “wimpy.”<sup>62</sup>

Suppose that some strange cult in Idaho believes that everyone ought to dye their hair purple. This isn’t, let me stipulate, a piece of advice; they aren’t saying that we ought to do this in order to avoid the wrath of the Great Purple Lizard God or whatever. Rather, it is, like etiquette, just a set of rules that is applied to people irrespective of whether they care. If you were to say to one of these cult members “I’m not going to dye my hair because I don’t care about your silly cult,” he might reply “There is nothing in the rules about their depending on whether you care about them; you simply must dye your hair purple.” It is obvious that you would (and should) remain unmoved.<sup>63</sup>

The norms of the purple hair cult leave us unmoved. But *moral* norms, Joyce contends, are supposed to move us. They are supposed to be importantly unlike the norms of the purple hair cult. To say that moral norms have *authority* then, is to say that they are the kinds of norms that essentially have some kind of deliberative weight. Crucially, they have this weight not because we are a part of the “morality cult,” but just because they are moral norms (or in other words, *just because*). If moral imperatives were merely institutional imperatives, their authority, Joyce thinks, would be fundamentally illusory.

---

<sup>62</sup> Joyce, 62.

<sup>63</sup> Joyce, 62.

We would be as free to ignore them as we are to ignore the dictates of the purple hair cult.<sup>64</sup>

On Joyce's account then, moral norms are essentially non-hypothetical *and* authoritative. They have practical clout (or a certain "oomph," as he sometimes says).

This is Joyce's first premise: (1) Moral norms have practical clout.

*The Evolution of Conscience*

Let us simply assume what I will call Joyce's second premise: (2) Social cohesion was important for the genetic success of our ancestors. The emergence of prosocial or cooperative behavior is well accounted for in mainstream evolutionary theory. As Joyce notes, there are a variety of ways in which collaborativeness can benefit the genetic fitness of individuals in a social group.<sup>65</sup> Given that ours is an exceedingly social species, we have every reason to assume social cohesion played an important role in our evolution.

There is, however, an important difference, on Joyce's view, between simple prosocial feelings and a moral sense. We can imagine individuals in a community, he says, "all of whom [...] want to live in peace and harmony, and violence is unheard of. Everywhere you look there are friendly, loving people, oozing prosocial emotions. However, there is no reason to think that there is a moral judgment in sight."<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> See Joyce, 63.

<sup>65</sup> See William Hamilton, "The Genetical Evolution of Social Behavior," *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7 (1964): 1-52; Robert L. Trivers, "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism," *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46 (1971): 35-57; Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Granada, 1981). Joyce offers an overview of the main models for the evolution of cooperation in his first chapter. See also Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*, esp. part I.

<sup>66</sup> Joyce, 50.



A clarification: “prosocial” can be taken in a narrow sense or in a wide sense. In the *narrow* sense, prosocial feelings are positive feelings correlated with cooperation—as with the love we feel for our children, or the mood lift we sometimes experience when choosing to help others in need. In the *wide* sense, prosocial feelings are simply feelings that structure our social lives. Narrowly prosocial feelings obviously play that role, but so do some negatively valenced emotions. In his landmark article on reciprocal altruism, for example, Robert Trivers identifies the human capacities for dislike, moralistic aggression, and suspicion—among others—as aspects of our psychology that transparently function to regulate social life.<sup>67</sup> Joyce sometimes slips from the one sense of “prosocial” to the other. I am not sure which he intends here. No matter. His point that prosocial feelings do not by themselves constitute a moral sense can be interpreted in a wide sense. Inclinations are not prescriptions; inhibitions are not prohibitions; thus there is something more to the moral sense than prosocial feelings.

That “something more,” on Joyce’s view, is the conceptualization of projected emotions. At some point in recent evolutionary history, Joyce suggests, our ancestors underwent a psychological change that took them from *desiring* certain things to viewing them as *desirable*.<sup>68</sup> By selecting for this psychological propensity to project our feelings onto the world, evolution pushed us from having inclinations, aversions, desires, and inhibitions to viewing certain courses of action as prescribed or prohibited. In conjunction with our ancestors’ newfound linguistic capabilities, this emotional

---

<sup>67</sup> Trivers, “Reciprocal Altruism,” 47 ff.

<sup>68</sup> “What is needed” for the transition, Joyce says, “is a movement from desiring something to finding it desirable, from feeling contempt for something to judging it contemptible, from praising something to regarding it praiseworthy, from not accepting something to considering it unacceptable, from demanding something to deeming it demanded” (Joyce, 133). While I understand the conceptual distinction Joyce is making here, I think Joyce’s historical claim is probably false.

development made available a conceptual space rich with what we recognize as distinctly moral concepts (desert, guilt, and so on).

Why did this transition occur? Joyce argues that prescriptions and prohibitions are more powerful, more effective in maintaining social cohesion, than mere inclinations and inhibitions.<sup>69</sup> Simple desires, Joyce suggests, are easily overridden. One might desire to live a long and healthy life, for example. The desire may be genuine, but it might also be quite weak in the face of temptation. The prospect of immediate gratification for some other desire (fatty food, say) might unceremoniously overwhelm the desire for long-term health. Joyce hypothesizes that evolution may have favored the development of the moral sense as a general solution to this problem of weakness of will. Suppose theft of some person's property is likely to result in my ostracization. I may prefer not to be ostracized, but that preference might find itself overridden if the easy-to-steal item is just too tempting. The moral sense, on this view, serves as an inhibition booster in such situations. Rather than simply reminding me of my preference not to be ostracized and therefore not to steal, my conscience tells me stealing is *wrong*.<sup>70</sup>

Thus the psychological capacity to view certain norms as having practical clout (which is to say, to view certain courses of action as being prohibited, rather than merely undesirable), Joyce argues, tends to silence further calculation. Moral considerations provide a predetermined terminus for practical reason beyond and greater than the merely self-regarding. Joyce endorses, in other words, Daniel Dennett's suggestion that moral

---

<sup>69</sup> To be clear, Joyce's point is not that external behavioral sanctions are psychologically more compelling than internal sanctions. That claim may well be false. Rather, Joyce views the moral sense precisely as an *internal* sense of what is prescribed and prohibited. This peculiar internal sense—the moral sense, conscience—has been selected for, on Joyce's view, for the behavioral impact it had on our ancestors.

<sup>70</sup> Like our "hard-wired" urges for food, sleep, and sex, our moral sense is flexible. But its motivational power, Joyce argues, is nevertheless considerably stronger than that of mere personal preference (see Joyce, 118).

principles can be viewed as “magic words” and “conversation-stoppers.”<sup>71</sup> These moral terms, moral ideas, and associated emotions, thus foster social cohesion by overriding more egoistic and socially disruptive desires and inclinations. We have here Joyce’s third premise: (3) The moral sense (which imbues certain norms with practical clout) functions to enhance social cohesion.

In brief then, to think and feel in moral terms is to be governed by more than inclination and inhibition. It is, on Joyce’s view, to be governed by a sense that stands above, that *judges*, those personal preferences, and to which those preferences are accountable. And the evolutionary purpose of the moral sense, on Joyce’s view, is to foster social cohesion. “Natural selection [...] has designed us to think of our relations with one another in moral terms. Why has Mother Nature granted us this bounty? Not for any laudable purpose [...], but simply because being nice helped our ancestors make more babies.”<sup>72</sup> Let this be Joyce’s fourth premise (which follows loosely from premises 2 and 3): (4) The moral sense probably evolved because it was genetically useful to our ancestors.

#### *Usefulness and Justification*

On Joyce’s view, evolution helped our ancestors “make more babies” by making them hyper-social animals. And it made them hyper-social animals by giving them a moral sense that was stronger, motivationally speaking, than their most socially disruptive desires and inclinations. With this picture of human nature in mind, one might be tempted to suggest that our prosocial natures provide sufficient justification for

---

<sup>71</sup> Joyce, 111; Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 506.

<sup>72</sup> Joyce, 222.

morality. With Richmond Campbell, for example, one might say, “Since the biological explanation for the existence of morality implies that having some morality rather than none overwhelmingly improves the life prospects of everyone in the group, it follows [...] that having some morality rather than none is justified.”<sup>73</sup> Its evolutionary genealogy, on Campbell’s view, would thus vindicate morality.

Joyce is skeptical. We should consider, he says, for the sake of an analogy, the proposition that religious belief is comforting, that it brings happiness, or that it fosters social cohesion. “Suppose we could show that having religious beliefs (in comparison to having none) improves the prospects of everyone in a group. Perhaps it is simply comforting to believe that one’s life fits into a Grand Scheme, that there are larger forces at work than we observe.”<sup>74</sup> We could then transpose Campbell’s logic and call such religious and metaphysical beliefs “justified.”

But the notion of justification at work in the religious case is suspect. And if it is suspect in the religious case, it is suspect in the moral case too. We must distinguish, Joyce suggests, between *instrumental* justification and *epistemic* justification.

“Something is instrumentally justified for a person if it contributes toward the satisfaction of her ends,” he says.<sup>75</sup> Belief in an afterlife, for example, might well be instrumentally justifiable for some. It might ease a person’s grief, speed up the mourning process, or bring people together in the face of tragedy. But the comfort and other benefits one draws from a belief say nothing as to the *truth* of that belief.<sup>76</sup> Naturalists do not generally

---

<sup>73</sup> Richmond Campbell, “Can Biology Make Ethics Objective?” *Biology and Philosophy* 11 (1996): 24. Quoted in Joyce, 160-161.

<sup>74</sup> Joyce, 161.

<sup>75</sup> Joyce, 162.

<sup>76</sup> So says Jesse Prinz: “Consider the Christian idea of Heaven. This belief fits into a coherent cosmology that makes sense of worldly suffering, and it carries an emotional reward through hope. [...] the optimistic message may have been attractive during times of plague, and it may have made people more likely to offer

countenance the continuation of conscious experience beyond biological death. If the naturalist view is correct, then a false belief might in some sense be “justified.” It would, however, still be false. For now then, Joyce will allow us to say only this, and this is his fifth premise: (5) The mode of its evolution provides morality with an instrumental justification.

### *Non-Cognitivism*

Morality, on Joyce’s view, may well be instrumentally justified. Evolution seems to have wired us for social life, and morality seems to serve social life better than amorality. Our lives might accordingly be richer and more satisfying if we accept our lot, if we content ourselves with being animals of conscience—moral animals. But we should not confuse this instrumental justification of morality with epistemic justification.

As suggested above, in what I will now call Joyce’s sixth premise: (6) Instrumental justification is not epistemic justification. Epistemic justification, on Joyce’s view, has to do with a belief being sensitive to the available evidence, being the product of a process that reliably yields true beliefs, or more generally, satisfying the appropriate epistemic standards.<sup>77</sup> But the evolutionary genealogy of morality explains why we hold our moral beliefs while nowhere appealing to moral facts. Thus it gives us no reason to think our moral beliefs are epistemically justified. The epistemic justification of our moral beliefs would require that those beliefs be responsive to a realm of moral facts. But no such realm appeared in the genealogy. On this point Joyce echoes John Mackie,

---

assistance to those in need, rather than taking flight. [...] So belief in Heaven may be narratively compelling, emotionally seductive, and materially beneficial”—all while being false. Prinz, *Emotional Construction*, 222.

<sup>77</sup> Joyce, 162.

according to whom the intended referents of ordinary moral discourse—namely, objective moral norms—fail to exist.<sup>78</sup>

To this line of reasoning, Joyce considers two possible rejoinders. According to the first, it is a mistake to assume that moral judgments are in the descriptive business. “Moral beliefs,” Campbell says, “are [...] essentially dispositions to think, feel, and act in accordance with certain norms.”<sup>79</sup> Moral judgments do not describe the world, but rather structure our attitudes towards the world. Thus there is no question as to the correspondence of our judgments to a realm of moral facts. There is no question as to their truth. If moral statements are not truth-apt, then moral beliefs are justified if and only if they are instrumentally justified. The question of epistemic justification is on this view irrelevant.

As Joyce notes, Campbell’s evolutionary “vindication” of morality thus requires a non-cognitivist rendering of moral judgment. Pure non-cognitivism (roughly speaking, the view that moral judgments do not express moral beliefs) is controversial. On Joyce’s view, it is implausible. It is much more plausible, according to Joyce, that “moral judgments (as speech acts) express both beliefs and conative non-belief states.”<sup>80</sup> To say that someone is “evil,” for example, would on this view be *both* to describe them in a particular way *and* to express one’s feelings about them (or express one’s adherence to a normative system according to which their behavior is to be condemned). Thus Joyce rejects both pure cognitivism, according to which moral judgments express only beliefs,

---

<sup>78</sup> Joyce says, “ordinary moral discourse *does* seem to be committed to the existence of demands ‘floating around in the world’—if by this latter phrase we mean demands that do not acquire their authority from any human source” (Joyce, 174). See Mackie, *Ethics*.

<sup>79</sup> Campbell, “Can Biology Make Ethics Objective?” 21. Quoted in Joyce, 163.

<sup>80</sup> Joyce, 56. His whole discussion is instructive (52-57).

and pure non-cognitivism, according to which moral judgments express only conative non-belief states. This explains his dissatisfaction with Campbell's non-cognitivist vindication of morality. And it gives us Joyce's seventh premise: (7) Morality needs epistemic justification because moral judgments express moral beliefs.

Beyond the rejection of these metaethical extremes, Joyce does not take a detailed stance on questions of moral semantics. Having rejected pure non-cognitivism, he finds Campbell's defense of morality's instrumental justification unsatisfactory. For my purposes, it is enough to note that Campbell's defense of morality's justification is available only to strict non-cognitivists. It is for that reason controversial. If an alternative justification of morality can do without the commitment to pure non-cognitivism, it will have broader appeal. I do think an alternative justification is in the cards, and so I bracket the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate in what follows.

### *The Failure of Moral Naturalism*

We should now consider the second rejoinder to Joyce's skeptical train of thought. It may be the case, as Joyce argues, that a genealogy of morality can be given without making reference to "moral facts" as such. However, if moral properties supervene on non-moral properties, then that genealogy does not imply that there are no moral facts. Moral facts might be implicit in the genealogy, so to speak. This Joyce's eighth premise: (8) Moral beliefs would be epistemically justified if moral facts were reducible to natural facts. Joyce calls this view—that moral properties supervene on natural properties—"moral naturalism."<sup>81</sup> (This is, I should note, a narrower conception of moral naturalism than the one I sometimes make use of in this dissertation.)

---

<sup>81</sup> Joyce, 145 ff.

Very briefly, Joyce's response is as follows. The success of moral naturalism (thusly defined), he says, depends on the reducibility of the moral to the non-moral. Attempted reductions along these lines however, are bound to fail. Whatever norms or prescriptions can be pulled out of the details of human evolution, Joyce argues, none amount to practical clout. We might be able to specify what constitutes species-typical functioning, evolutionary stable strategies, or whatever. But without norms that are non-hypothetical and especially authoritative, the "oughts" of various moral naturalisms will be merely predictive—"wimpy"—"oughts." It may be the case that a chimp "ought" to help a vulnerable conspecific, for example, if it is to behave in typically chimp-like fashion. But this is not the deeply *moral* ought that Joyce has gone to great lengths to argue is characteristic of human morality. It may be the case that I "ought" to help someone in need, if I am to be true to my characteristically human, evolved, prosocial drives (and even this is controversial). And yet I don't really *have* to.

The mistake made by evolutionary ethicists, Joyce says, "is that of locating the wrong kind of normativity in the evolutionary process. Richards and Casebeer,"—the two "moral naturalists" (in his sense) whose views Joyce considers in depth—"recognize that what is needed is epistemic, not instrumental, justification, but fail to appreciate the special kind of practical oomph with which moral values and imperatives are imbued."<sup>82</sup> There is no practical clout to be found in the natural world, Joyce says. Hence his ninth premise: (9) Moral facts are not reducible to natural facts.

---

<sup>82</sup> Joyce, 176.



*Joyce's Conclusion*

“[D]escriptive knowledge of the genealogy of morals,” Joyce says, “(in combination with some philosophizing) should undermine our confidence in our moral judgments.”<sup>83</sup> To understand how evolution has made us moral animals is to see through the felt force of conscience. We feel so strongly about certain behaviors not because they have the objective properties of rightness or wrongness, but because having those strong feelings was good for the social cohesion of our ancestors. This is Joyce’s conclusion:

(10) The fact of morality’s evolution should undermine our confidence in the truth of our moral judgments. The conclusion may be troubling; but we should face the truth “like intellectual adults,” Joyce says, “rather than eschewing open-minded inquiry or fabricating philosophical theories whose only virtue is the promise of providing the soothing news that all our heartfelt beliefs are true.”<sup>84</sup>

The reconstructed master argument runs as follows:

- (1) Moral norms have practical clout.
- (2) Social cohesion was important for the genetic success of our ancestors.
- (3) The moral sense (which imbues certain norms with practical clout) functions to enhance social cohesion.
- (4) Thus the moral sense probably evolved because it was genetically useful to our ancestors.
- (5) We can accordingly say that the mode of its evolution provides morality with an instrumental justification.

---

<sup>83</sup> Joyce, 223.

<sup>84</sup> Joyce, 230.

- (6) However, instrumental justification is not epistemic justification.
- (7) Morality needs epistemic justification because moral judgments express moral beliefs.
- (8) Moral beliefs would be epistemically justified if moral facts were reducible to natural facts.
- (9) But moral facts are not reducible to natural facts.
- (10) Therefore the fact of morality's evolution should undermine our confidence in the truth of our moral judgments.

In the brief conclusion to his book, Joyce comes out cautiously in support of moral fictionalism. Moral fictionalism is the view that we are better off with our moral vocabularies and practices left more or less intact, and that those of us who are philosophically inclined might withhold assertoric force in moral utterance. The fictionalist speaks perhaps not ironically, but with the mental acknowledgment that moral talk is a useful fiction.

I gave some reasons for resisting moral fictionalism in the previous chapter. So far as I can tell, Joyce's argument would (if correct) force us to choose between social cohesion and truth, roughly speaking. We can either reap the benefits of moral talk and moral motivation, so long as we don't scrutinize our moral talk too closely, or we can live with both eyes open, understand that morality is a fiction foisted upon us by our genes, and live with the potentially destructive social consequences of that understanding.

Neither option is attractive. Mercifully, there is a third option, as I shall presently argue. The point is not to provide "soothing news that all our heartfelt beliefs are true," but rather to show how we can, as moral animals and intellectual adults, be both clear

sighted and sincere. It is possible, on my view, for our moral beliefs to have all the epistemic justification they need.

### 3. Revisiting Moral Authority

#### *Two Sources of Authority*

My point of entry will be Joyce's remarks about the "morality cult." You'll recall that Joyce invites us to consider a fictional cult out in Idaho according to which we must all dye our hair purple. Though the prescription is non-hypothetical, Joyce says, it is laughably weak. It certainly does not have the same weight as a *moral* prescription. These are his words:

We do not, I suggest, think of moral requirements as like this. No human culture allows the authority of its moral rules to be so easily shrugged off. Now, it is possible that, despite this observation, moral imperatives really are just a species of Foot's non-hypothetical (i.e., inescapable but non-authoritative) imperative, but we're all just too deeply embedded within the "morality cult" to recognize this (for presumably the cult members from Idaho will also not agree that you are free to opt out from their normative system). But the price of accepting this is to acknowledge that the authority of morality is an illusion, that people who genuinely don't care about it are as a matter of fact as legitimately free to ignore it as we are all free to ignore cult members telling us to dye our hair purple, that if we were able to see things as they really stand we'd recognize that it may be perfectly reasonable for a person to scoff "Morality, schmorality!"<sup>85</sup>

(Etiquette and this purple hair prescription of the fictional Idaho cult are Joyce's two main examples of non-hypothetical but non-authoritative norms.)

I think Joyce is right to say that the purple hair prescription has no authority. But the simplest explanation for this lack of authority, on my view, is the fact that the imagined cult *is in Idaho*. The point is not that Joyce's readers are most probably not in Idaho (though that is likely true). Rather, the point is just that the interests of the purple

---

<sup>85</sup> Joyce, 63.

hair cult are utterly foreign to the real-world concerns of Joyce's audience. The example is exotic enough that, even for Joyce's readers who are in Idaho, the prescription can have no traction. The purple hair cult is governed, in brief, by an entirely alien normative system—one that has no point of contact with the lives of ordinary human beings, with Joyce's readership. We would do better, I submit, to look for moral authority in the requirements of social living, in the demands of everyday life.

One can have a stake in a normative system or institution, I propose, in two ways. First, one can be a willing participant in that institution. Chess is governed by a very specific system of rules, for example, and those rules are authoritative for participants simply to the extent that they care about playing chess. If they have a personal investment in chess, then that grounds the authority of the rules of the game. Absent that investment (and perhaps also a similar investment of their opponent's), they are free to break the rules—to play a different game, or no game at all. Chess, tennis, debate, etiquette, and so on—let us call these *elective* institutions. They are governed by systems of norms that become authoritative for us when we choose to participate in the discrete activities they define.

There is a second way one can have a stake in a normative system however. If a normative system is *materially inescapable* for an individual or set of individuals, then its rules are de facto authoritative for those individuals. Let us call such institutions *fundamental* institutions. This kind of “inescapability,” it should be noted, has nothing to do with the semantics of non-hypothetical norms. Such norms are in fact inescapable, in the straightforward sense that one cannot escape the social space they structure.

Consider for example the “institution” of *normal public dress*. We commonly assume fellow members of our human societies will dress in ways appropriate to the social situation. In some contexts those expectations are loose (for example, the mall). In others, those expectations are rather precise (a business meeting, a costume party, the APA). But these expectations are not just predictive expectations; they are normative expectations. Which is to say they are expectations that we enforce. To take one of the more clear-cut examples, we do not allow public nudity (here in the U.S. at least). The point is not that nudity is illegal—though it is in fact illegal in most public spaces, to the best of my knowledge. The point is that *we* do not allow people to be naked in public. We dress ourselves, and our children, when we leave home. We reprimand those who fail to comply. The law, in this case, is a reflection, an expression, of popular preference, and not an imposition upon it.<sup>86</sup>

Is the institution of normal public dress really inescapable? The committed rebel might attempt an escape, by joining a nudist colony, say. But this is a radical move (and the nudist might just be trading one set of normative expectations for another: perhaps nudists frown on those who are clothed<sup>87</sup>). A more decisive escape, such as never wearing clothes again, is for most people not possible. North American nudists, at least, still have to work, to buy groceries. They can be called for jury duty. A complete opting out of the system—of the sort only owners of well-stocked private islands are capable of—would require a loss of face-to-face contact with family and friends, at the very least.

---

<sup>86</sup> For the sake of the example, I am suggesting that the law merely codifies a pre-existing preference. I realize however that legal systems also *produce* moral outlooks, and that the prejudice against public nudity might be such a product. My intent here is just to separate the legal enforcement of norms from the social enforcement of norms.

<sup>87</sup> I am grateful to Franco Trivigno for pointing this out.

It would require opting out of society. This is what I mean when I say norms surrounding dress are *materially inescapable* or *fundamental*.

The authority of a system of norms can thus be grounded, I am suggesting, either in one's voluntary participation in a discrete institution, or in one's materially inescapable social situation. I have characterized institutions of the former type as "elective," and of the latter type as "fundamental." Elective institutions include various sports, hobbies, occupations, and other activities in which participation is not meaningfully required. Fundamental institutions might be thought to include (among others) normal public behavior and dress, the legal order, gender, and so on. Participation in such institutions is essentially forced upon us simply in virtue of being who we are, as we are, where we are. They can be seen as flowing from the social nature of our species. Though I have described them as distinct types of institutions, I am eager to add that these types are undoubtedly ends of a long spectrum. The more elective an institution, we might say, the easier it is to move out of its sphere. The more fundamental an institution, the more difficult it is to move out of its sphere. More elective institutions are typically nested within more fundamental institutions, and take for granted their norms. What matters for my purposes is the simple point that one's social situation, one's material limitations, impact what norms have authority for a person.

#### *Convention and Convention-Transcendence*

The authority of moral norms, on Joyce's view, far exceeds that which follows from their being non-hypothetical. Strictly speaking, he says, one is free to ignore non-hypothetical or institutional norms in the event of a mismatch between one's private ends and those norms. Institutional norms, according to Joyce, are merely conventional.

In light of the foregoing however, this is too quick. What Joyce misses, I submit, is the way in which certain institutions fundamentally structure our lives. When an institution is fundamental, one is *not* free to ignore its norms in any meaningful sense. If I fail to perform my gender properly, if I openly break the law, if I walk around town naked—I do not “escape” the relevant norms; on the contrary, I am subject to normative retaliation—a sign I am still in normative space. This is significant because Joyce substitutes “convention” for “institution” on a variety of occasions (as when he describes the practical clout of moral norms as “convention-transcendent”<sup>88</sup>). If something is “conventional,” Joyce assumes, it can legitimately be ignored. Given that ordinary language users do not view morality as something that can legitimately be ignored, he concludes, the authority of morality must be “convention-transcendent.” This conclusion fuels Joyce’s skepticism. Though ordinary moral discourse seems committed to it, Joyce does not think there is any way to make sense of convention-transcendent normative authority on a naturalist view of the world.

But to say something is “conventional,” in ordinary parlance, is just to indicate that some aspect of a practice serves a coordinating function. That function might be served equally well by an alternative norm (e.g. the side of the road we drive on). However, to say that a particular norm could in principle be exchanged for some other norm is not to say we could have done without *any* norm. A traffic system can have drivers on either the right or the left side of the road. But no workable traffic system, I think, can do without specifying *some* side of the road.

---

<sup>88</sup> Joyce, 63.

“Convention” in this coordinating sense might play some part in both elective and fundamental institutions. The number of squares (one or two) a pawn is permitted to move from its initial position on a chessboard is plausibly “conventional” in this sense. So also the legal voting or drinking age strikes me as conventional, within limits (given the ends it serves). The relevant system of norms (here: the rules of chess, and the legal system) incorporates to this degree a measure of arbitrariness. It is “conventional” to do things in precisely *this* way. But this arbitrariness does not signify that one is “free” to ignore the rules. To the contrary. Conventions arguably exist for coordination’s sake, and coordination requires *not* granting fellow participants in an institutional practice the “freedom” to flaunt the rules.

In brief then, to call something “conventional” is not to say that one is free to ignore it. One is free, by definition, to ignore the norms that undergird an elective institution. One is not free, again by definition, to ignore the norms that undergird a fundamental institution. Perhaps someone will suggest that the “conventional” nature of certain fundamental norms implies that they can be renegotiated (as when a U.S. state changes the legal drinking age, say, or comes to allow same-sex marriage). And this is true. Crucially, renegotiating is not the same as ignoring.

By substituting “convention” for “institution” and playing off the “arbitrariness” of convention, Joyce is able to claim that morality has “convention-transcendent” authority. The authority of morality, on Joyce’s account, is not grounded in any concrete aspect of human life. It transcends the merely human. Moral demands, he says, “do not



acquire their authority from any human source.”<sup>89</sup> Let us call this an *objectivist* conception of moral authority.

If, however, we define morality as a fundamental institution, we can articulate an alternative account of moral authority. On this view, the authority of moral norms flows from the material inescapability of certain social institutions. Let us call this a *social* conception of moral authority. Whereas Joyce views moral norms as demands that “float around in the world waiting to be perceived by moral agents,”<sup>90</sup> this alternative view sees moral norms as demands that emerge from shared forms of life. Moral norms are demands *we* make, directly or indirectly, of each other. Moral considerations on this account are authoritative for me simply because I share an inescapable social world with others.<sup>91</sup>

My goal here is not to develop the social conception of moral authority, nor is it to pick out morality from other fundamental institutions (if it can be picked out). For now, my intent is simply to carve out some space between the two spheres of authority recognized by Joyce. Practical or instrumental reason is authoritative for me, according to Joyce, simply because it allows me to fulfill my personal ends. And morality is authoritative for everyone—or at least purports to be so—simply *because*. This way of thinking about authority, I have argued, is blind to the possibility that one might have a stake in an institution by virtue of one’s material circumstance. If an institution is fundamental, which is to say, materially inescapable, then that is why and how its norms are authoritative for me. This is a social conception of moral authority.

---

<sup>89</sup> Joyce, 174.

<sup>90</sup> Joyce, 174. Here he is paraphrasing and endorsing the view of John Mackie.

<sup>91</sup> Which is not to say responsibility or power for said enforcement is equally distributed. It is not. A fact that may or may not be problematic in any particular context.

*The Moral-Conventional Distinction*

Joyce's account of moral authority, and hence of the practical clout of moral norms, does not simply depend on the intuition that human institutions are insufficient to give morality its "oomph." Joyce relies also on the large body of empirical evidence that documents the divergence of the *moral* from the *conventional* in ordinary thought. Children as young as three mark the distinction, Joyce points out. And the phenomenon is cross-cultural.<sup>92</sup>

The psychologist Elliot Turiel makes the now canonical distinction between the moral and the conventional along four axes.<sup>93</sup> "Moral transgressions are taken to be more serious, more generalizable (e.g., wrong in other countries too), are justified differently (e.g., with reference to harmful consequences), and are considered independent of authority."<sup>94</sup> On Joyce's view, this last demarcating criterion is of special importance. Conventional rules, Joyce reports, are responsive to human authority. For example, children tend to revise their judgment that a boy shouldn't wear a dress to school when the teacher says it's okay. However, rules prohibiting striking others (for example) are not flexible in this way. It would still be wrong to punch a classmate even if the teacher said it was okay.<sup>95</sup> These empirical findings, on Joyce's view, mesh well with his contention that moral norms enjoy a special status in ordinary moral thought—what he calls "practical clout."

---

<sup>92</sup> Joyce, 136.

<sup>93</sup> See Elliot Turiel, *The Development of Social Knowledge: Morality and Convention* (Cambridge University Press, 1983); Elliot Turiel et al., "Morality: Its Structure, Functions, and Vagaries," in *The Emergence of Morality in Young Children*, ed. Jerome Kagan and Sharon Lamb (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>94</sup> Joyce, 136.

<sup>95</sup> Joyce, 136.

Above I introduced the distinction between elective and fundamental institutions. What I'd like to suggest now is that, as a general rule, fundamental institutions emerge (or become fundamental) not for arbitrary reasons, but because they serve some of our basic needs and desires. Whereas elective institutions do serve felt needs and desires, these are more often than not somewhat superficial. A desire to play chess, for example, may be a genuine desire. But it undoubtedly does not run as deep, so to speak, as the desire to survive, the desire to eat, the desire for bodily integrity, and so forth. We mark this distinction in everyday speech by distinguishing desires from needs. I don't intend to make that distinction any clearer here than it is in everyday speech. My claim is just that fundamental institutions more often than not aim to serve basic human needs. The claim is problematic to the extent that fundamental institutions have often *not* served the basic needs of (all) those they have claimed to serve. Nevertheless, where fundamental institutions fail to serve the basic needs of all, their existence is typically justified by *claims* that they serve such needs. For now then, I will assume a general correlation between the fundamentality of an institution and the basic-ness of the needs it serves, without denying that, in situations of unequal social power, the needs of some might matter more as a matter of fact than the needs of others.

If this connection holds, then the empirical evidence can be made to fit a social view of moral authority just as well as it can Joyce's objectivist view.<sup>96</sup> The *seriousness*

---

<sup>96</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, I am conceiving of needs as especially serious, deep, abiding, or basic desires. If we picture a spectrum of desire running from the most basic (deep, fundamental) desires at one end to the most superficial, transient, and malleable desires at the other, then, for my purposes, needs are the more basic desires, and basic needs the most basic of those basic desires (consider this a formal framework for speaking of such things, not a substantive account of what our needs are). As I emphasize below, the point is that the empirical data upon which Joyce relies to buttress his objectivist account of moral authority fit just as well with a social view, at least under ideal conditions, when moralities serve human needs.

of moral norms is a function of their role in serving basic needs and desires. Their *generalizability* is a function of the generality of basic needs and desires. Their *justification* makes reference to these characteristically human needs and desires. And their *independence of authority* is in fact an independence of *particular* authority.

Fundamental institutions are community-wide. Only much smaller, much more elective institutions can typically be changed by individual decree. A teacher can't make hitting someone "okay" simply because the desire to be free from harm is a human universal that remains unchanged by the edicts of teachers or other authorities. Another useful way of distinguishing elective from fundamental institutions (and it is a rough distinction once again) is thus in terms of the flexibility of the desires served. An inclination to play chess is, for all but the most hardened chess enthusiasts, easily redirected towards backgammon or some other game. The "desire" not to be tortured is not so easily recalibrated.

In brief, a social view of moral authority can be made to fit the psychological evidence as well as Joyce's objectivist view. The data do not force us to view the "practical clout" of morality as supra-institutional, so long as our ideas about human institutions are sufficiently rich. The data only suggest that most people think morality is serious business. And if morality intersects meaningfully with basic human needs and desires, then that's a reasonable stance to take.

#### 4. Transparency and Justification

##### *Pictures of Morality*

The objectivist and social views of moral authority are at home in different conceptions of morality itself. There are, we might say, two pictures of morality here.

The objectivist view of moral authority is at home in an objectivist picture of morality itself. The social view of moral authority is at home in a social picture of morality itself.<sup>97</sup>

On the objectivist picture of morality, the moral matrix is just *there*. In it we live and move and have our being. Morality is a part of the fabric of reality, and it exists with or without us. It is not human, it is natural. Or perhaps supernatural. To behave morally is on the objectivist picture to respond properly to the demands made upon us by the universe itself (or by its author). To behave immorally is to be epistemically or motivationally deficient—misaligned—in some way.

On the social picture, morality is the fabric of our relationships. It is the means by which we make sense of ourselves to each other. Like our relationships, it can be strengthened or torn; it can unravel completely (when our relationships fall apart, as in war). It is how we get along together, if we get along, and it is our picture of what it means to “get along.” It is negotiated through gestures, through practices of accountability, through reactive attitudes, through reasoned discussion, through power struggles, and so on. It depends, that is, on the needs, priorities, and choices of human agents. It is a human creation—a human project.<sup>98</sup>

The objectivist picture is hard to make sense of. Metaphysically, it seems out of place in the world revealed by the natural sciences. It is largely on this basis that Joyce, like Mackie before him, embraces skepticism. What is more, it is difficult even to

---

<sup>97</sup> I realize that this way of framing the options completely sidesteps the possibility of a Kantian constructivist picture of morality. Unfortunately, it would take me too far afield to mount a critique of the Kantian picture here. As noted in the previous chapter, I think Kant is best seen as a transitional figure in the history of ethics, one for whom broadly Christian categories still matter. But it’s not clear to me why a naturalist *needs* anything like Kantian categorical imperatives for a picture of morality. Further, I find Kant’s understanding of reason to be problematic—a poor foundation for a naturalistic view of morality. But again, here I can only *state* my position without giving it an adequate defense.

<sup>98</sup> That metaphor is borrowed from Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*.

imagine an adequate moral epistemology that is simultaneously compatible with the objectivist picture and that explains why people throughout history and across the world have made the moral judgments they have made. Moral codes seem to co-evolve with forms of life. What then is the relationship between these shifting moral codes and morality itself? If our evolving moral codes are not the universal morality of the cosmos, how do we come into epistemic contact with that morality? There may be ways of answering these questions. But I think Mackie is right to suggest that the moral metaphysics and moral epistemology of an objectivist view are not very far from a Platonic picture of the world.<sup>99</sup> Few contemporary philosophers are willing to go that route.<sup>100</sup> The chasm between Platonism and naturalism is quite deep.

The social picture, on the other hand, has this much going for it: neither its metaphysics nor its epistemology are mysterious. Moral facts are social facts, and social facts are natural facts. To that extent, we may speak loosely of the “reducibility” of the moral to the natural. But the point is not that moral talk *redescribes* certain natural features of the world. Rather, moral talk is used to *navigate* and when necessary construct or reconstruct a social world that inescapably surrounds us. To say moral talk is used to navigate social life is not to endorse non-cognitivism. I take no stance in this chapter or in this dissertation on the question of whether moral judgments express beliefs. The point is simply that morality, on the social picture, is a tool, or a social technology of sorts, and not a fixed feature of the natural (or supernatural) order human beings inhabit.<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> See Mackie, *Ethics*, 40. Also Mavrodes, “Religion,” 224.

<sup>100</sup> But see Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>101</sup> The notion of morality or ethics as a “social technology” is from Kitcher. His metaphor is useful, but I do not endorse Kitcher’s theoretical elaboration of that metaphor. See the discussion in chapter five.

The transition to a social picture of morality has important implications, three of which I want to emphasize here. First, if morality is a tool for social living, then moral codes are essentially negotiable. It is not a matter getting morality “right” (“perceiving” it correctly) but of crafting with others workable forms of life governed by shared understandings.<sup>102</sup> Moral negotiation of course makes little sense on the objectivist view. Second, if morality is a tool for social living, then there are no moral experts. Some people are better at getting their way no doubt, and others are better at perceiving and attending to the needs and desires of others. But no one can claim any full or final moral revelation. And third, there may be but there need not be any disconnect between moral life on the one hand and the examined life on the other. If we could only picture morality as an objective, supra-institutional reality, then self-understanding would always be morally destructive. But on a social view, morality is a tool for social living *and can be seen as such*, so moral language can be used and moral life lived in good faith. Moral life can be lived transparently.

These three points are interrelated. In denying the existence of moral expertise as such and emphasizing the negotiability of moral norms and ideals, I am hinting at the possibility of a social view of moral justification, which will be important in completing my response to Joyce. But I want to shift to this topic by focusing specifically on this last point: the possibility of transparency.

---

<sup>102</sup> See the presentation of an “expressive-collaborative model” of ethics in Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*, second edition (Oxford University Press, 2007).

*Opacity and Transparency*

There is no philosophical difficulty surrounding the epistemic justification of normal institutional beliefs. Judgments about what is required, permitted, or prohibited in chess, for example, are epistemically justified under rather mundane conditions related to the undistorted social transmission of codified rules. If there is no dispute about the official rules of chess, and my judgment about the permissibility of a particular move is informed in the relevant way by my epistemic access to those rules, then that judgment is justified.

Things are a bit more complicated if access to the official rules is limited, or if there are multiple, conflicting sets of “official” rules. But so long as players agree to the same set of rules, there is no need to be worried about their judgments being epistemically unjustified. We can even imagine two intrepid players attempting to play a more freeform kind of chess. Perhaps they negotiate the rules on the fly. Pawns can move sideways, kings can move like queens, and so on. The rules might even be asymmetrical, with one player being allowed more flexibility than the other, say. Even in this case, there is no special problem about the epistemic justification of judgments made by the players. So long as the players are clear about what they’re doing, what game they’re playing, everything is as it should be. When the game is transparent to the players, we might say, their game-related judgments can be epistemically justified—as epistemically justified as they need to be. More generally then, when the workings of an institution are transparent to its participants, I am proposing that their institution-related judgments can be epistemically justified—*as epistemically justified as they need to be*. (Putting things this way is intended to leave my account neutral on the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate.)



The question of morality's epistemic justification arises for Joyce because of morality's alleged supra-institutionality. We talk and act as though responsive to objective, "official" rules not written by human hands. That is the heart and essence of the moral game. But there are in fact no official rules. And so we're blind to the logic of our own moral practice. The game we're playing is rigged (not by any particular person, but by our evolved minds). So says the skeptic.

The problem here is helpfully reframed as a problem of *opacity*. On the skeptical view, evolution has wired us to be ignorant. Our moral institutions function properly so long as we are blind to their institutionality. This is what is hanging on all this talk of epistemic justification. The problem is that we are prevented from taking responsibility for moral rules that are ultimately rules of our own making. Instead, we are condemned to relinquishing responsibility for our moralities by a "moral sense" that externalizes the authority of morality.

But in fact we are *not* "condemned" in this way. At least, Joyce has marshaled no evidence to support such a claim. At best, to judge from the empirical literature, some of us (especially children), at this historical juncture in Western culture, may have a predisposition to project or externalize the authority of moral norms and ideals. And the legacy of Christianity in Western culture here is not inconsequential. But none of this means that a social picture of morality is psychologically impossible for most adult human beings. And I have argued that the distinguishing marks of moral norms in the psychological literature can be reconciled with the social view. If we substitute a social view of moral authority and of morality for the objectivist view, then there is no obstacle to moral agents understanding the true nature of their "game." To say this is to say that

morality, on the social view, can be practiced transparently. And if that's the case, then on my analysis, our moral judgments can have all the epistemic justification they need.

*Moral Justification*

I've been arguing that Joyce's skeptical argument misses the possibility of a social understanding of moral authority, and with it, a social picture of morality itself. While the norms of elective institutions are not inescapably binding for us simply because we can opt out of the institution at any point, most of us cannot, in any meaningful sense, opt out of social life as a whole. For this reason, fundamental institutions—those that structure our basic social existence—are literally inescapable for us. If we think of morality as a fundamental institution then, moral authority can be pictured as a social phenomenon, and morality as structuring the complex web of our relationships. Morality may be “conventional” to the degree that norms and ideals can be renegotiated, but it is not escapable—unless what one “escapes” is social life itself. Joyce's concern about the epistemic justification of our moral judgments can be reframed, I have suggested, as a concern about opacity. But institutional judgments made by clear-sighted participants in the relevant institution have all the epistemic justification they need. Thus, to the extent that our moralities can be made transparent, our moral judgments can also have all the epistemic justification they need.

At this point, it behooves me to clarify the manner in which my account captures a tension inherent in philosophical accounts of morality. By suggesting that we picture morality as a fundamental institution (or as the set of our fundamental institutions—it makes no difference), I have offered what might be called an *anthropological* picture of morality. To view things in the way that I propose is to see *all* human communities as

having a morality of some sort, and all moral norms as being authoritative in the social sense (as a simple matter of definition). This is the picture of morality and of moral authority I want for my account—to be supplemented momentarily in a very important way.

According to Joyce, however, the “value systems that clearly count as moralities [include] Christian ethics, deontological systems, Moorean intuitionism, Platonic theories about the Form of the Good, and so on.”<sup>103</sup> I do not intend to argue for the “correctness” of my account of morality, or for the “incorrectness” of Joyce’s. I think my “anthropological” account of morality is generally more *useful*, but no doubt that could be debated as well (useful for what?).

What Joyce’s examples share in common, and what my account might be thought to forfeit, is a perspective from which to judge existing moral norms and ideals. What Christian ethics, deontological systems, Moorean intuitionism, and Platonic theories about the Form of the Good each in their own way provide is critical leverage, or the possibility of critique (and of progress). One might worry that a merely anthropological account of morality could only be crudely relativistic, christening all social norms and ideals as equally “moral.” But this is not what I intend.<sup>104</sup>

To suggest that morality is first and foremost a social phenomenon is not to suggest that we are mere vessels or mouthpieces for inherited norms. On my view, rather, we interpret, extend, reinterpret, or reject moral norms as we use them in the process of making ourselves and our form of life intelligible to each other and to ourselves. Or, to

---

<sup>103</sup> Richard Joyce, “Morality, Schmorality” in *Morality and Self-Interest*, ed. Paul Bloomfield (Oxford University Press, 2008), 64.

<sup>104</sup> I am committed only to the view that *fundamental* social norms are “moral” in the *descriptive sense*. The *normative* sense of “moral” is what my account of moral justification captures.

put the point schematically, I view moral justification as a social process. I am inspired here by Alison Jaggar and Theresa Tobin, who argue that a moral conclusion “is justified by the account that is given to others about why the action is wrong, by the argumentation and reasons offered, and *by others’ responsive uptake of that account*,”<sup>105</sup> with the result that “No claims are justified in general, for all time, or *sub specie aeternitatis*.”<sup>106</sup> Moral justification, in other words, is not something we do in the abstract, or to God, or even to the Academy, but rather something we do amongst ourselves. And this is how the social view captures the possibility of moral critique.

Moral authority and moral justification, on the social view I am articulating, are bookends of the tension that any philosophical account of morality needs to capture. For, on the one hand, moral norms are all around us, and inescapable, in what is sometimes a distressing way (think of a Black person under Jim Crow, or of a queer person in normatively hostile environments); and, on the other hand, when these socially enforced and authoritative norms are distressing, we are tempted to call them *bad* moral norms, or simply *immoral* norms. On a social view of moral justification then, norms and ideals are justified (or not) *to particular others*, in real time, when they pass muster (or not) with those they guide. Previously “passing” norms can in principle always be problematized, and moral systems always be renegotiated. Thus moral justification, when and where it

---

<sup>105</sup> Alison M. Jaggar and Theresa W. Tobin, “Situating Moral Justification: Rethinking the Mission of Moral Epistemology,” *Metaphilosophy* 44, no. 4 (2013): 404, my emphasis. See also Walker, *Moral Understandings*, 238.

<sup>106</sup> Jaggar and Tobin, “Situating Moral Justification,” 405-406. I should note that for Jaggar and Tobin, moral authority and moral justification are closely related (the former in some sense flowing from the latter). Without claiming that their view is incorrect, I do want to point out that my notion of moral authority is very different.

happens, is a social and political achievement, rather than a distinctly philosophical one. It consists in our being at home in a system of fundamental norms.<sup>107</sup>

Of course, to say moral justification is social is only to provide a formal framework for making sense of the justificatory project, rather than to provide a substantive account of justification. But this is because justification, on the social view, is not something a philosopher as such can provide. Neither my colleagues nor I occupy a privileged normative space from which we can definitively rule on the moral status of the fundamental norms and ideals that govern and guide our lives with others. We are rather participants, among many, in a conversation about the norms and ideals that inescapably structure our many and very different lives. With that caveat in place, I concede that there is a lot more to be said about moral justification on a social view, and specifically, about how moral justification can be driven and guided by the kinds of concerns voiced in Joyce's skeptical arguments. I take up that task in the following chapter.<sup>108</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

To the best of my knowledge, Joyce's argument for evolutionary moral skepticism in *The Evolution of Morality* is the most extensive and compelling philosophical case for what we could call a *deflationary* moral naturalism, for the view that the knowledge we get from the sciences is morally dangerous. On Joyce's view, natural selection has predisposed us to view certain social norms as having convention-transcendent practical clout. Realizing that our moral convictions can be accounted for in

---

<sup>107</sup> Although, just because *I* am "at home" in some moral system does not mean *you* will be "at home." I will then experience the authority of morality as benign, but you will not.

<sup>108</sup> For a very fruitful discussion of the possibilities here, see also Theresa W. Tobin and Alison M. Jaggar, "Naturalizing Moral Justification: Rethinking the Method of Moral Epistemology," *Metaphilosophy* 44, no. 4 (2013): 409-439.

evolutionary terms, without reference to any objective moral facts, should undermine our confidence in the truth of our moral judgments, he says.

I have argued that Joyce misses the possibility of a social understanding of moral authority according to which moral norms become authoritative for us by structuring our fundamental forms of life. Morality is a fundamental institution, not an elective institution like chess or etiquette. It has become fundamental, in at least some cases, because it intersects in important ways with basic human needs, rather than merely with superficial desires. It is for most of us effectively inescapable. We are social animals, and morality is how we get along—how we *must* get along, lest we not.

A commitment to naturalism, in brief, need not incline us to adopt a deflationary moral naturalism. That has been the central thesis of this chapter. We can instead adopt a social picture of morality, according to which the authority of moral norms is social—it flows from the inescapability of those fundamental institutions that structure our lives as social animals—and according to which the justification of moral norms is social as well. The heart of morality on this picture is in social exchange, in dialogue, in the work of making ourselves and our form of life intelligible to each other. The social construction of morality is a joint project in which we justify ourselves to each other in shared terms, replicating or adapting and reinterpreting extant norms and ideals to suit our evolving needs.

The largely schematic nature of my remarks in this chapter calls for supplementation. In particular, it would be helpful to see how the social process of moral justification works in more detail—how, in conversation with others, we make sense of,

or fail to see the sense in, existing norms and ideals. That is the process I offer to illustrate in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

## MORAL JUSTIFICATION AND THE ETHICS OF CARE

## 1. Introduction

Considered in isolation, the social view of morality appears to have one major, glaring flaw. Because it incorporates a social understanding of moral justification, it might be taken to simply baptize all extant moralities (morality in the descriptive sense) as moral or *good*. If I don't have to justify myself to God or to the academy or to pure reason or any other transcendent force, agent, or thing, then isn't it just open season? Can't I just "justify" myself and my actions to others by beating them over the head with a stick, or lying to them, or in any other way I happen to fancy? A person might legitimately wonder, that is, if saying that moral justification is a social and political matter (rather than a distinctly philosophical one) isn't opening the field to marketers and sophists and an impure legion of evil deceivers. But of course, the field is already open. And our operant moralities are already a reflection of that fact. It is a strength and not a weakness of the social view that the plain fact of morality's messiness should be accounted for in this way.

We can say more. There's a plain sense in which, if I "justify" myself to you by clubbing you over the head and proclaiming "it's my way or the highway," I haven't in fact *justified* myself to you at all. What I've done is beaten you over the head and maybe gotten my way. To say that moral norms and ideals are justified in and through interpersonal exchange is already to say that such norms and ideals at least purport to be more than a club over the head. The more difficult case is the one in which the conditions



of our co-construction of moral norms and ideals are opaque—when one, many, or all of us are deceived or mistaken in some way about the nature of our project, our language, our practice. We (or some of us) might think in such cases that our shared understandings are justified, when in fact they are not. They lack the epistemic justification Joyce was concerned with in the previous chapter.

According to the social view, this problem of opacity can in principle be resolved. That resolution, as I suggested in the previous chapter, involves efforts towards transparency. It involves trying to understand, to see clearly, our form of life. In a sense then, it is the spirit of empirical project that not only generates the skeptical question about morality, but also provides the resources for an answer. In this chapter, accordingly, I narrate the emergence and evolution of the ethics of care as a case study in moral justification driven by this concern for transparency—for truth. The payoff is both an illustration of how moral justification can work and a positive example of how to “do” moral justification for those of us who, in the spirit of the Enlightenment tradition, share a concern about unacknowledged power in social exchange, and an aversion to oppression, whether overt or covert.

The account of this chapter hinges on seeing a certain kind of investigation as part and parcel of the empirical project. The type of investigation I have in mind seeks to bring to light the social mechanisms by which certain norms and ideals, along with representations of morality, come to cultural prominence. From the perspective that I favor, such social-genealogical scrutiny can be said to describe the means by which our moralities are created and sustained. This is consistent with my (naturalistic) refusal to picture morality as a “real” or transcendent *thing* beyond the realm of human practice.

But we can bracket this naturalistic commitment, and start with the observable truth that *claims* about moral norms and ideals and *claims* about morality come from somewhere, socially speaking.

While social-genealogical inquiry can begin by tracing the social generation and propagation of claims about moral norms and moral ideals, and about morality itself, the picture that emerges from such inquiry fits nicely with the social picture of morality I have outlined. Thus we can appropriate the results of social-genealogical inquiry for the social picture of morality. Those results suggest that transparency is transformative. The empirical project does not simply leave morality alone, christening all extant moralities with naturalism's "thumbs up," but rather requires revisions in our moral understandings. Some of our moral norms and ideals can survive in the light of day; others cannot.<sup>109</sup> Thus, to take the empirical project seriously is neither to become a global skeptic nor, conversely, to just leave morality alone. It is, rather, to see the need for ongoing revision, for ongoing conversation, in the co-creation of our shared forms of life.

## 2. The Ethics of Care

### *A Different Voice*

The American psychologist Carol Gilligan first published her landmark book *In a Different Voice* in 1982.<sup>110</sup> Gilligan's work focuses on models of human moral

---

<sup>109</sup> In the previous chapter, I suggested that, at least in some cases, moral norms and ideals might serve deep human needs rather than merely superficial desires. To anticipate the argument just a bit, then: one reason moral norms might not survive in the light of day is if it becomes clear that those norms serve the comparatively superficial desires of some at the expense of the deeper needs of others (provided those others have some political leverage, direct or otherwise). At the very least, such awareness is likely to be morally destabilizing.

<sup>110</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

development, and takes as its central critical target the six-stage moral development scheme of her colleague Lawrence Kohlberg.<sup>111</sup> On Kohlberg's model, human moral development can be traced through six distinct stages. The stages are clustered in twos, the first two under the header of *pre-conventional* morality (in which reasons for action center on the self), the second two under the header of *conventional* morality (in which reasons for action center on social order), and the last two under *post-conventional* morality (in which reasons for action center on abstract principles of justice and human rights). In principle, it is possible to situate individuals at one of the stages, on the basis of their response to (hypothetical) moral dilemmas.

Though sympathetic to Kohlberg's normative goals—of making judgments of *maturity* in moral thought—Gilligan reports being troubled by the tendency of girls and women to appear morally immature in these studies. Whereas boys and men in her studies strongly prefer abstract analyses of moral problems, girls and women frequently offer more contextual, relational approaches. For example, Jake and Amy, two eleven-year-olds in one of Gilligan's studies, offer very different answers to the question “When responsibility to oneself and responsibility to others conflict, how should one choose?” Jake says, “You go about one-fourth to the others and three-fourths to yourself.”<sup>112</sup> Amy says,

Well, it really depends on the situation. If you have a responsibility with somebody else, then you should keep it to a certain extent, but to the extent that it is really going to hurt you or stop you from doing something that you really, really want, then I think maybe you should put yourself first. But if it is your responsibility to somebody really close to you, you've just got to decide in that situation which is more important, yourself or that person, and like I said, it really

---

<sup>111</sup> See Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development, Volume 1: The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice* (Harper & Row, 1981).

<sup>112</sup> Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 35.

depends on what kind of person you are and how you feel about the other person or persons involved.<sup>113</sup>

Examples of this sort abound in Gilligan's work.

The relationship between self and other, Gilligan claims, "differs in the experience of men and women"—something she says is "a steady theme in the literature on human development and a finding of my research." Male voices typically speak of "the role of separation as it defines and empowers the self," whereas female voices typically speak of "the ongoing process of attachment that creates and sustains the human community."<sup>114</sup> While she is careful not to suggest that one perspective is better than the other, Gilligan notes the invisibility of the female voice in traditional developmental models, such as Kohlberg's. Kohlberg's model, she points out, was initially developed from an all-male sample. Left unmodified then, Kohlberg's model effectively *masks* the moral maturity of women, Gilligan contends.

The relational moral reasoning, or "care perspective" of women, Gilligan claims, can be seen to develop through its own pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional phases. On Gilligan's analysis, the difference between the "justice" perspective, associated with almost all men, and the "care" perspective, associated with a number of women, is that the latter culminates in multifaceted contextual and relational reasoning, which balances responsibilities to others and responsibilities to the self.<sup>115</sup> The takeaway, according to Gilligan, is that researchers who care about understanding and

---

<sup>113</sup> Gilligan, 35-36.

<sup>114</sup> Gilligan, 156.

<sup>115</sup> Gilligan sometimes speaks of the justice and care perspectives as complementary. She has also compared them to incompatible "gestalts," mutually exclusive ways of framing situations. See Carol Gilligan, "Moral Orientation and Moral Development," in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers (Rowman & Littlefield, 1987).

mapping human moral development in its fullness need, at the very least, to pay attention, to listen, to the “different voice” of women in order to rectify the male bias of dominant psychological models. The troublesome thought is that, prior to Gilligan, the unmarked male bias of developmental models made such listening difficult or impossible. Or rather, researchers *had been* listening to female voices—voices filtered through and distorted by an inadequate psychological model.

### *Feminine Ethics*

American ethicist and education theorist Nel Noddings argues that we need a relational ethics, one that is “feminine.” She aims to provide an ethics of precisely this sort in her 1984 book, *Caring*.<sup>116</sup> Such an approach is needed, on Noddings’ view, to counterbalance the detached and “paternal” ethics of law and principle enshrined in the Western canon. “It is feminine in the deep classical sense,” she says, “rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness.”<sup>117</sup> Whereas “masculine” approaches oppose morality to feeling, Noddings views morality as growing out of feeling, and specifically, out of caring relationships.<sup>118</sup>

On Noddings’ account, a caring relationship “requires the engrossment and motivational displacement of the one-caring, and it requires the recognition and spontaneous response of the cared-for.”<sup>119</sup> Caring is thus fundamentally relational and

---

<sup>116</sup> Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, second edition (University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>117</sup> Noddings, *Caring*, 2.

<sup>118</sup> As Rosemarie Tong notes, the idea of a distinctly feminine moral orientation is not new. She joins other feminists in viewing it as being as old as patriarchy. See Rosemarie Tong, *Feminine and Feminist Ethics* (Wadsworth, 1993), chap. 3. In Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile*, for instance, a woman’s distinctive virtues suit her to complementing a man in his life and projects. The man’s virtues do not return the favor. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979); Tong, *Ethics*, 31-33.

<sup>119</sup> Noddings, 78.

affective. In the absence of pathology or serious abandonment, all of us have already been in and benefited from at least one such caring relationship. Having survived the extreme vulnerabilities of infancy and early childhood, we have our mothers to thank, and/or our fathers and extended and adoptive families. This caring can be called *natural*. It is natural in the sense of being uncoerced—we parents, siblings, and friends care because we want to care. It (usually) takes no great effort to be responsive to the cries and concerns of a newborn, or of a child in need. We are moved to action by feelings that well up inside of us apart from any conscious effort. This response is near universal in our species. It can be “identified as the human condition that we, consciously or unconsciously, perceive as ‘good’.”<sup>120</sup> We want to be moral, Noddings says, “in order to remain in the caring relation and to enhance the ideal of ourselves as one-caring.”<sup>121</sup>

Morality, on this account, has its roots in natural caring. What grows from these roots, Noddings says, is an ideal. In response to the experienced goodness of our early caring relationships, we develop an ideal of ourselves as caring and responsive beings. It is because caring relationships give our lives meaning that we come to value them, and thus come to value those traits in us (and in others) that make those relationships work. This ideal in turn gives rise to what Noddings calls *ethical* caring.

Ethical caring, unlike natural caring, is an effort. We will ourselves to care (as opposed to simply finding ourselves caring), Noddings suggests, under guidance of the caring ideal. Because we have come to value caring relationships and ourselves as carers, we care actively, ethically, even when affectively ambivalent.<sup>122</sup> This might be caring for

---

<sup>120</sup> Noddings, 5.

<sup>121</sup> Noddings, 5.

<sup>122</sup> Noddings, 79 ff.

an infant when we ourselves are tired and hungry, or it might be caring for a stranger, at some inconvenience to ourselves. We are carried in such effortful activity by an ideal with its roots in essentially effortless caring, and by the joy and satisfaction of living in congruence with that ideal. Though ethical caring constitutes what we sometimes recognize as stereotypically “moral” behavior, Noddings insists that natural caring is just as important as ethical caring. We would be just as impoverished without the one as we would without the other (although natural caring could conceivably exist without ethical caring, but not vice-versa).

Although women are capable of arranging principles hierarchically and reasoning to logical conclusions, Noddings says, they seem to have a heightened capacity for relational thought and insight—for *care*. The general difference between men and women is thus not one of capability, but rather of orientation, of preference. Women, she says, “enter the practical domain of moral action [...] through a different door, so to speak. [...] Faced with a hypothetical dilemma, women often ask for more information. We want to know more, I think, in order to form a picture more nearly resembling real moral situations.”<sup>123</sup> She speculates that this capacity might be grounded in biology.<sup>124</sup> “If it is the case that females have easier and more direct access to caring through biologically facilitative factors,” she says, “this does not imply that males have no access, but it might help to explain why men intellectualize, abstract, and institutionalize that which women treat directly and concretely.”<sup>125</sup> Noddings’ work accordingly aims to represent the voice,

---

<sup>123</sup> Noddings, 2.

<sup>124</sup> In her more recent book, *The Maternal Factor: Two Paths to Morality* (University of California Press, 2010), Noddings acknowledges the possibility that differences of gender might be purely social, but seems to prefer an evolutionary, biological explanation.

<sup>125</sup> Noddings, *Caring*, 130.

perspective, and moral orientation of women in a culture that has been shaped by the voice, perspective, and orientation of men.

### *Maternal Practice*

Although her work can be seen to reprise some of the themes that emerge in Gilligan's research, Noddings' emphasis on femininity and her easy attribution of "feminine" traits to women is controversial. In contrast to Noddings' conception of care as a psychological (and largely female) predisposition to think about life in concrete and relational terms, many feminists have preferred to talk about care as a practice—as work. Caring, on this view, is a kind of interpersonal labor. This is the approach adopted and developed at length in Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking*, which was originally published in 1989, seven years after Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*.<sup>126</sup> Early versions of Ruddick's work were published in article form in 1980—before Gilligan.<sup>127</sup>

Ruddick's original contribution to philosophical discussion of care and its implications involves an explicit appeal to what she calls "practicalist" philosophy. To the question "What is the relation of thinking to life?" practicalist thought responds, "All thinking [...] arises from and is shaped by practices in which people engage."<sup>128</sup> The significance of this approach lies in its ability to offer an informative and meaningful answer to the question "how do women think?" The thought of women grows out of the practices of women. And in the history of Western culture, one prominent practice of women has been that of mothering.

---

<sup>126</sup> Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Beacon Press, 1989).

<sup>127</sup> See Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1980): 342-367. It is on this basis that Virginia Held, in *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford University Press, 2006), traces the emergence of care ethics back to 1980, rather than to 1982 as I have done.

<sup>128</sup> Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 9.



Maternal practice or mothering, on Ruddick's account, is an activity or practice, a job. It is therefore essentially genderless. One is a "mother" on Ruddick's view "just because and to the degree that [one is] committed to meeting demands that define maternal work."<sup>129</sup> The demands that define maternal work in turn flow from the needs and capabilities of children, and from the desires of society. Those needs are (1) to be kept alive (preservation), (2) to grow, mature, and develop (nurturance), and (3) to be made socially acceptable (training). Children need to be kept alive, before they need anything else. Assuming they are safe from bodily harm, their emotional and psychological needs and potential call for nurturance, for a safe and welcoming world to accept and embrace the persons they are becoming. That acceptance is never unconditional however, and so mothering also involves shaping a child to "fit" society in some way. Ruddick recognizes a potential for deformation here, when society's norms are harmful, and she insists that because social acceptability is never automatic, maternal practice triggers reflection on the nature of "acceptability." Maternal practice, in other words, gives rise to maternal thought—to reflection on maternal practice, the values it assumes, and the values it creates.

Mothers are not naturally good, Ruddick says, but at its best, mothering is nonviolent. In her words:

The four ideals of nonviolence – renunciation, resistance, reconciliation, and peacekeeping – govern only some maternal practices of some mothers. Yet it is also true that to elucidate these ideals is to describe, from a particular perspective, maternal practice itself. Peacemaking mothers create arrangements that enable their children to live safely, develop happily, and act conscientiously; that is, they preserve, nurture, and train, exemplifying the commitments of maternal work.<sup>130</sup>

---

<sup>129</sup> Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 17.

<sup>130</sup> Ruddick, 176.

When they learn to respond to the needs and desires of children, to negotiate with them, and to help them negotiate with others, mothers at their best resist violent coercion and create peace. The ends specific to maternal practice, in other words, generate a preference for some ways of being in relationship over others. This maternal nonviolence, Ruddick argues, can set the stage for a politics of peace.<sup>131</sup> The caring practice of mothers has the potential to change our world for the better.

### *Intersectionality*

The practical shift evident in Ruddick's work is no mere accident. Claims made about "women" simpliciter, such as those found in Noddings' work, and sometimes in Gilligan's, came under critical scrutiny through the work of feminists like bell hooks, Maria Lugones, and Elizabeth Spelman.<sup>132</sup> hooks, for instance, recounts an experience from the first women's studies class she attended. Gender, it had been claimed, would be the most important factor in determining the kind of life a newborn child would live in our society. hooks, the only non-white person in the class, objected. "[W]hen the child of two black parents is coming out of the womb," she said, "the factor that is considered first is skin color, then gender, because race and gender will determine that child's fate."<sup>133</sup> hooks directs some pointed criticism in this vein at the influential work of Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*.<sup>134</sup> What Friedan portrays as the predicament of

---

<sup>131</sup> See esp. Ruddick, chap. 9.

<sup>132</sup> See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, second edition (South End Press, 2000); Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for 'the Woman's Voice'," *Hypatia: A Special Issue of Women's Studies International Forum* 6 (1983): 573-581; Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Beacon Press, 1988).

<sup>133</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory*, p. xii (in the preface to the second edition). The first edition of *Feminist Theory* was published in 1984.

<sup>134</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (W. W. Norton, 1963).

“women” in the 1950s and 60s, hooks shows, is in fact the predicament of *some* women—namely, white middle-class women. If female children who are also Black face systematically different social prospects than, say, white female children, and if the lives of white women are importantly unlike the lives of non-white women, then gender is only one of potentially many social categories that deserve close critical scrutiny. Refusing to broaden the analysis along the axis of race would only replicate for non-white women the erasure that white feminists had learned to fight in male representations of “humanity.” Likewise with respect to class. Thus the intersection of gender with other social categories such as race and class problematizes representations of “women” simpliciter.<sup>135</sup>

Though Gilligan is aware of this problem of representation, she nevertheless slips into broad generalizations about women. And yet class shapes performance on the standard moral development scale, as Kohlberg himself notes,<sup>136</sup> and subsequent studies on the influence of race in moral development likewise problematize those generalizations.<sup>137</sup> In Carol Stack’s study with a community of African-Americans, for example, participants employed both “justice” and “care” arguments in their response to a moral dilemma. And Stack’s study found no gender difference in the group.<sup>138</sup> Joan Tronto traces the problems with Gilligan’s research back to her chosen lens of object-relations theory, which “posits two universal human psychological problems: oppression [...] and abandonment.”<sup>139</sup> The voices of subjects in Gilligan’s studies, examined in this

---

<sup>135</sup> See Walker, *Moral Understandings*, 19-28.

<sup>136</sup> Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument For an Ethic of Care* (Routledge, 1993), 82.

<sup>137</sup> See the discussion in Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 82-85.

<sup>138</sup> Carol B. Stack, “Different Voices, Different Visions: Gender, Culture, and Moral Reasoning” in *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*, ed. Faye Ginsburg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Beacon Press, 1990); cited in Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 83.

<sup>139</sup> Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 80.

light, speak of rights that prevent oppression (the justice perspective) or of connections that prevent abandonment (the care perspective). Whatever insight this framework succeeds in capturing, Tronto claims, “the problem with this view of psychological development is that it makes gender the only relevant category of difference.”<sup>140</sup>

Ironically then, from this intersectional perspective, Gilligan is largely guilty of the same methodological sin she exposes and critiques in Kohlberg—that of generalizing from an unrepresentative sample. Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman argue for the importance of this lesson, and offer a caution for theorists: “Categories are quick to congeal,” they say, “and the experiences of women whose lives do not fit the categories will appear as anomalous when in fact the theory should have grown out of them as much as others from the beginning.”<sup>141</sup> Feminists have since been typically very cautious about claims to represent women (or human beings, or Blacks, or whomever). With the publication, in 2000, of a second edition of *Feminist Theory*, hooks says, “There has been no other movement for social justice in our society that has been as self-critical as feminist movement.”<sup>142</sup>

### *Meeting Needs*

As Virginia Held notes, “the practice of mothering had been virtually absent from all non-feminist moral theorizing” until the emergence of care ethics in the 1980s.

“[T]here was no philosophical acknowledgment that mothers *think* or *reason*,” she says, “or that one can find moral values in this practice.”<sup>143</sup> On the standard feminist view, the

---

<sup>140</sup> Tronto, 81.

<sup>141</sup> Lugones and Spelman, “Theory,” 579.

<sup>142</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory*, xiii.

<sup>143</sup> Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 26.

invisibility of caregivers in Western moral theories can be traced back to their typically marginal societal position. Those at the centers of power—typically propertied white men—have passed off care work to those at the periphery: women, non-whites, the lower classes. The focus here is on practical caring: meeting the needs of children, the ill, the disabled, the elderly. The experience of the less powerful and the powerless has been eclipsed in Western moral theories, on this analysis, by the experience of the powerful, which has not usually included caring for the weak and the vulnerable.

Joan Tronto argues that this analysis can be refined. Care, she suggests, “consists of four analytically separate, but interconnected, phases. They are: caring about, taking care of, care-giving, and care-receiving.”<sup>144</sup> To *care about* something or someone is to be motivated by the state of that object, event, or person. It is to be moved to respond. When one *takes care of* something or someone, motivation has been transformed into action. If I come to care about victims of a natural disaster on the other side of the globe, say, I might make a donation or raise money for those victims. To that extent I am taking care of the problem, even if only in a very small way. One can take care of something or someone at a distance. Being a *caregiver* however, in Tronto’s sense, requires proximity to the object of care. I might write a check for tsunami victims, but it is the relief worker who feeds, clothes, and provides housing for those victims. I am “taking care,” but the relief worker is giving care—concretely. Finally, care cannot properly be given without being *received*. Attention to whether and how care is received differentiates good care from bad care. To ignore how a gesture intended as help is received is in fact to be careless.

---

<sup>144</sup> Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 105-106.

On this analysis, care is a multifaceted process that must be conscientiously carried out from beginning to end to count as genuine or successful care. Gender enters the picture (as do race and class), on Tronto's account, insofar as "caring about, and taking care of, are the duties of the powerful. Care-giving and care-receiving are left to the less powerful."<sup>145</sup> Doctors, politicians, and professors, may lay claim to care—they "care" about patients, the poor, students—but more often than not delegate the work of concrete caring to others—nurses, social workers, teaching assistants, etc. This is how powerful people can do so little actual care work and still view themselves as caring individuals (as with the traditional "bread-winning" middle-class North American father of the 1950s and 60s).

Tronto's view of care can be called "holistic" insofar as it insists on the unity of the four phases. Good care is caring about and taking care of (abstract care) with follow-through: care-giving and care-receiving (concrete care). This holism is philosophically and socially significant because care has been marginalized and made invisible in Western culture and thought precisely through its fragmentation and through the delegation of its concrete phases to the less powerful. Coming to see care as a unity thus requires questioning the effectiveness of this partitive strategy.

To the extent that the needs of the vulnerable remain poorly met or unmet, Tronto insists, we have no legitimate claim to care. She explains: "The qualities of attentiveness, of responsibility, of competence, or responsiveness," which correspond to the four phases of care, "need not be restricted to the immediate objects of our care, but can also inform our practices as citizens. They direct us to a politics in which there is, at the center, a

---

<sup>145</sup> Tronto, 114.

public discussion of needs, and an honest appraisal of the intersection of needs and interests.”<sup>146</sup> In such a political ethics of care, it is therefore insufficient for the powerful to say, “we care.” The effectiveness of that care, holistically understood, must be given clear-sighted scrutiny. Are we as a society sufficiently attentive to the needs of those among and around us? Are we sufficiently responsive to their needs? Do we meet those needs competently? Is our care being met with the expected response? These are the questions an ethics of care puts front and center, according to Tronto.<sup>147</sup> The distribution of care and of care work, she says, must be just.<sup>148</sup>

### 3. An Interpretation

#### *Feminist Skepticism*

The thinkers I mention above all reflect in some way on “care,” but their approaches are very different. Gilligan is concerned with moral maturity, Noddings with “femininity,” Ruddick with mothering, hooks, Spelman, and Lugones with differences between women, and Tronto with the politics of care work. Is there any thread of continuity here? Yes: the emergence and evolution of the ethics of care, as reflected in the work of these thinkers, can, I submit, be read as a kind of dialectic, driven from start to finish by the engine of *feminist skepticism*.

Feminist skepticism in ethics, explains Margaret Walker, is skepticism “about whose experiences and judgments are taken as definitive or representative of moral thinking, whose self-images and motivations are normative for moral personhood, and

---

<sup>146</sup> Tronto, 167-168.

<sup>147</sup> See Tronto, chap. 6.

<sup>148</sup> See Tronto, 168-169.

whose presumed entitlements and liabilities set the standards for moral responsibilities.”<sup>149</sup> It is, in other words, a kind of reflexive “who says?” leveled at claims about morality that purport to represent others in some fashion, whether human beings, women, or some other subset of humanity.

As Walker notes, Gilligan’s own work centers on the idea that “the failure of women to fit existing models of human growth may point to *a problem in the representation*, a limitation in the conception of human condition, an omission of certain truths about life.”<sup>150</sup> Psychological models that take (some) men as the benchmark of moral maturity effectively mask the moral maturity of “deviant” women (and “deviant” men). The point is not that the project of devising models of moral maturity is doomed, or that it has to make everybody look good. Gilligan’s own positive work presupposes the viability of Kohlberg’s normative project. The point is that social facts, social boundaries, may create limits to generalizability. Gender, in Gilligan’s work, is shown to be one of the variables with a non-negligible impact on the relevance—on the *truthfulness*—of Kohlberg’s model in mapping the moral maturity of various subjects.

Likewise, Noddings’ “feminine” approach can be read as a response to the marginalization of certain traits (“receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness”<sup>151</sup>) in philosophical ethics. “Human caring and the memory of caring and being cared for,” she says, “have not received attention except as *outcomes* of ethical behavior.”<sup>152</sup> Noddings aims to broaden the landscape of ethics by emphasizing care as a *source* of ethical

---

<sup>149</sup> Margaret Urban Walker, “Feminist Skepticism, Authority, and Transparency” in *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (Oxford University Press, 1996), 267.

<sup>150</sup> Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 2, emphasis mine. See Walker, *Moral Understandings*, 24-27.

<sup>151</sup> Noddings, *Caring*, 2.

<sup>152</sup> Noddings, *Caring*, 1, emphasis mine.



behavior. As with men and “masculinity,” the relationship between women and “femininity” is problematic. Insofar as the principal features of mainstream ethics (abstract principles and deductive logic, for instance) are coded “masculine” in our culture however, and insofar as the producers of mainstream ethics have predominantly been men, Noddings’ attempted recovery of “femininity” can be seen as a challenge to the representativeness of mainstream ethics, in both form and content.

Ruddick’s work remedies the complete *invisibility* of mothering in philosophical ethics. Consider the framing of a recent introductory text on ethics.

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with how we ought to live, with the idea of the Good, and with such concepts as *right* and *wrong*. [...] The theoretical aspect, *ethical theory*, deals with comprehensive theories about the good life and moral obligation. [...] The applied aspect, *applied ethics*, deals with specific moral problems such as abortion, suicide, euthanasia, sexuality, capital punishment, affirmative action, business dealings, environmental issues, and war.<sup>153</sup>

Ethical thought, on this account, solves ethical problems—few or none of which, apparently, emerge in parenting, or in domestic life. This is not to say that good human living, moral obligations, or any of the issues mentioned don’t deserve close attention. They do. But it is at least curious that a practice we have all benefited from doesn’t appear at all on this particular map of the moral terrain. The fact that this theoretical invisibility of mothering is widespread, more than ironic, might be judged pernicious—damning, in fact, for a field of study that “deals with how we ought to live.” There is nothing wrong with being selective in one’s inquiry. But if philosophical ethics is consistently selective in ways that do not flag mothering or other forms of care work as

---

<sup>153</sup> Louis P. Pojman, *How Should We Live? An Introduction to Ethics* (Wadsworth, 2005), xv-xvi. Pojman allots three pages to “Feminism and the Ethics of Care,” folded into a section on “Virtue-Based Ethical Theory,” for which the general takeaway is that “principles without character are impotent and that the virtues enliven the principles and empower the moral life in general” (187).

morally noteworthy, it can hardly claim to study “how we ought to live.” Its paradigmatic moral agent “is none of us at all times, and many of us at no times.”<sup>154</sup>

What Gilligan, Noddings, and Ruddick *do*—namely, identify and attempt to correct incomplete representations of human life (posturing as complete representations)—later care ethicists generalize to a methodological point. Theories do not come to us directly from the world. Rather, particular theorists create theories (ideally in dialogue with the world!). And in societies politically stratified along the axes of gender, race, and class, those theories will inevitably carry the social fingerprints of their makers. When hooks, Spelman, Lugones and other social theorists point to evidence in theories that situates their makers (as white, well-off, or whatever), the point is not to play an interminable and ultimately fruitless game of “gotcha!” Their aim is rather to foster reflexive theory-making. As Cheshire Calhoun puts it, “If we hope to shape culture, and not merely to add bricks to a philosophical tower, we will need to be mindful of the cultural/political use to which our thoughts may be put after leaving our wordprocessors.”<sup>155</sup> Theories are often produced in institutional contexts that bestow a kind of authority on those theories—as when they inform psychological research, or policy proposals—and that authority should be able to withstand the laying bare of the concrete mechanisms of theory-production. Otherwise their authority is shown to be illegitimate.

Likewise, Tronto’s ethics of care can be seen as proposing a reflexive transformation for politics. In order to adequately care for all citizens, lawmakers cannot simply claim to “care.” A society’s political structures must make possible a true

---

<sup>154</sup> Walker, *Moral Understandings*, 22.

<sup>155</sup> Cheshire Calhoun, “Justice, Care, Gender Bias,” *Journal of Philosophy* 85, no. 9 (1988): 453.

representation of the needs of citizens. Insofar as the concrete phases of care, in which human needs are actually met, are passed off to the politically voiceless, a society's provision of care is bound to be inadequate, regardless of its public discourse about care and needs.

On my reading then, the common thread that runs through the ethics of care, from its emergence to its ongoing evolution, is this feminist skepticism, this wariness about representation, and about socially recognized "expertise"—socially granted power—that often outruns the empirical foundations of the relevant theories. Feminist skepticism can be seen as concerned with truth. But the issue is not just the empirical adequacy of our social, psychological, and moral theories, abstractly considered. The central issue is the harm for outliers of being theoretically "disappeared" by accounts of human life formulated at a considerable social distance from them. Women do not benefit from and can be harmed by psychologists who hear them through male-biased developmental models. Black women do not benefit from and can be harmed by white feminists claiming to know what "women" want and need. So also along other axes of difference that mark differential positions of access to opportunity and power in society.<sup>156</sup>

### *Moral Equilibrium*

Feminist skepticism, I have claimed, is the driving force in the emergence and evolution of the ethics of care. Two points remain to be made: first, that feminist skepticism is morally transformative; second, that it is an extension of the empirical

---

<sup>156</sup> I am endorsing, in brief, Walker's reading of care ethics and feminist ethics more broadly. See *Moral Understandings*, 23. See also Alison M. Jaggar, "Ethics Naturalized: Feminism's Contribution to Moral Epistemology," *Metaphilosophy* 31, no. 5 (2000): 452-468. Jaggar says: "feminist moral philosophers find it necessary to emphasize that moral reasoning cannot be morally adequate if it is not empirically adequate" (465).

project. I'll elaborate on that first point here, and on the second in the next section. My central thesis remains that the overlapping of the empirical project with moral practice and thought is transformative—that naturalism neither destroys morality nor leaves it alone, but rather transforms it.

What feminist skepticism does is put pressure on the norms and ideals that structure our fundamental institutions. “It puts the *authority* and *credibility* of representative claims about moral life under harsh light, and challenges epistemic and moral authority that is politically engineered and self-reinforcing.”<sup>157</sup> Feminist skepticism involves taking a hard look about what “we” supposedly know—about human beings, women, or whomever—sourcing these authoritative claims, these authoritative representations of humanity or parts of it, and asking whether or not the theorist or theorists who theorize are in a position to know what they claim, on behalf of us all, to know. The history of feminism is replete with illustrations of this line of inquiry, and with embarrassing revelations about the smallness of the lived experience of those privileged men who have claimed, in socially sanctioned, authoritative ways, to know all about “man” or about “women” or what have you. In the ethics of care and in much of contemporary feminist theorizing, we see that skeptical eye turned inward as well.

When does it end? Is the skeptical feminist stance an eternal unmasking with no positive contribution? Can it offer anything constructive without undermining itself? The positive vision of feminist skepticism in ethics can best be articulated, I submit, on a social picture of morality. On the social picture, you will recall, morality is a tool for social living, for coexistence and cooperation. Walker calls it a “*socially embodied*

---

<sup>157</sup> Walker, *Moral Understandings*, 23.

medium of understanding, adjustment, and accounting *among* persons in certain terms, especially those defining people's identities, relationships, and values."<sup>158</sup> It (at least initially) takes for granted and seeks to preserve the value of a shared life. A shared social life is made possible by fundamental institutions that are supported norms and ideals by which we make ourselves and our behavior intelligible to each other. We may thus speak of those norms and ideals as moral understandings—understandings which are in principle, though often not in practice, mutual. They are the shared terms of our common life. By laying bare the social workings and power dynamics of the production of moral understandings, feminist skepticism ultimately aims to increase the intelligibility of those understandings. For if those understandings collapse under conditions of full intelligibility—what I, following Walker, have been calling “transparency”—then they are not genuine, or not genuinely mutual, understandings.

Walker comments:

A system of complementary gender roles, for example, may support a shared understanding between spouses of their different responsibilities in family life, under a presumption of reciprocity and respect. But a wife's depression, labor department statistics on patterns of sex-segmentation in the workforce, or sociological studies of relations between power and earned income in marriage, might reveal to one or both that this arrangement is something other than it had seemed.<sup>159</sup>

The spouses in this case think they understand each other. More precisely, their respective, socially sanctioned roles are the means by which they understand each other—their responsibilities, rights, and value in the relationship. Whole-hearted performance of their respective roles is in turn grounded in an assumption of fundamental fairness or appropriateness of the roles (the “presumption of reciprocity and respect”). If

---

<sup>158</sup> Walker, “Feminist Skepticism,” 277. The emphases are hers.

<sup>159</sup> Walker, “Feminist Skepticism,” 280.

the particular picture of gender complementarity that governs their relationship is shown not to grow out of a concern for fairness or appropriateness (or to do so under demonstrably false assumptions), this then undermines the whole-heartedness of that performance. This moment of destabilization is the necessary precursor to a more mutually acceptable restabilization (assuming one can be found). Concretely, this might mean adopting different roles, adopting a more fluid attitude towards gender roles in relationships more generally, or perhaps ending the relationship, if no new equilibrium can be achieved.

Feminist skepticism can be destabilizing in this way. But the destabilization is not an end in itself. Rather, the destabilization makes possible moral recalibration, that is, the search for better equilibrium, rewriting mutual understandings to make them more intelligible and more mutual.<sup>160</sup> In our contemporary context, this approach is appealing, if it is appealing, in virtue of its resonance with liberal, democratic ideals we owe to the Enlightenment. Perhaps these ideals will be found problematic on other grounds. In any case, they express what Bernard Williams calls a “hope for truthfulness”—a hope “that ethical thought should stand up to reflection, and that its institutions and practices should be capable of becoming transparent.”<sup>161</sup> Transparency here is not conceived as a state that some society achieves once and for all, but rather as the outcome of a process of examination, undertaken at a particular time, for a particular reason, and from a particular vantage point. Likewise, moral justification, on the social view, is not accomplished once and for all, but is that ongoing process of making ourselves and our behavior intelligible

---

<sup>160</sup> The metaphor of moral equilibrium is from Walker, “Feminist Skepticism,” 279 ff.

<sup>161</sup> Williams, *Ethics*, 199. Walker cites Sabina Lovibond and Annette Baier invoking similar ideals (*Moral Understandings*, 79).

to each other in shared terms. Equilibrium *can* be found, justification can be had, but first it has to be sought.

A ship at sea cannot be rebuilt all at once. Those concerned with staying afloat can nevertheless patch leaks where they find them, replacing rotting wood or rusted metal with whatever materials happen to be at hand. Feminist skeptics have a keen eye for rust and rot. Feminist skepticism is relentless. It is well worth appreciating, however, that this focus on rust and rot is not just that. It is not the expression of a love of criticism. It is first and foremost the expression of a desire is to stay afloat.

### *Naturalism*

Stephen Finlay has recently suggested that a certain form of moral skepticism (namely, error theory) may be popular with Australasian philosophers (Mackie was Australian, Joyce was raised in New Zealand) because such countries “are melting pots made up of immigrants from a wide variety of backgrounds,” and accordingly feature “the greatest diversity of cultural heritages and moral viewpoints.”<sup>162</sup> In conjunction with relatively few social problems, Finlay speculates, this inclines philosophers to “have an acute appreciation of the contingency of moral standards and more sympathy towards rival viewpoints.”<sup>163</sup> Moral claims are ordinarily indexed to some largely shared normative framework, on Finlay’s account, and it is the absence of this shared background, in conjunction with relative social stability, that makes it easier for

---

<sup>162</sup> Stephen Finlay, “The Error in the Error Theory,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 3 (2008): 368.

<sup>163</sup> Finlay, “The Error in the Error Theory,” 368. See also Richard Joyce, “The Error In ‘The Error In the Error Theory’,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89 (2011): 519-534; Stephen Finlay, “Errors Upon Errors: A Reply to Joyce,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89 (2011): 535-547; and Richard Joyce, “Enough With the Errors! A Final Reply to Finlay” (unpublished), Richard Joyce’s Online Papers, accessed August 25, 2012, [http://www.victoria.ac.nz/staff/richard\\_joyce/onlinepapers.html](http://www.victoria.ac.nz/staff/richard_joyce/onlinepapers.html).

Australasian thinkers to miss how morality normally works.

Joyce's response to Finlay is hostile.<sup>164</sup> He says, "if a philosopher's allegiance to a metaethical theory can be explained by reference to the surrounding sociological, economic, and cultural forces, then of course there is no need to take his or her arguments entirely seriously."<sup>165</sup> Finlay's comments "are most charitably interpreted as a joke."<sup>166</sup> Joyce's desire to keep social details out of philosophical argumentation is understandable. As in the philosophy of science, a person might reasonably distinguish between a context of philosophical *discovery*, in which the social details of a person's life may inspire him or her to come up with some theory, and a context of philosophical *justification*, in which the theory is critically scrutinized by fellow philosophers without reference to its provenance. On this model of philosophical argumentation, which Joyce seems to be assuming, Finlay's sociological remarks are clearly inappropriate. But this model of philosophical analysis is itself problematic.

If there is any lesson to draw from the ethics of care or from feminist theory more broadly, it is that the social provenance of theories matters, as does the social location of its allegedly dispassionate evaluators. In the history of ethical thought, theory makers have been men in patriarchal societies. With few exceptions, this has had a predictable impact on their theories, and on the reception of those theories. "Philosophical reasoning," as Cheshire Calhoun puts it, "is shaped by extra-philosophic factors, including the social location of the philosophic reasoner and his audience as well as the contours of the larger social world in which philosophic thought takes place."<sup>167</sup> After

---

<sup>164</sup> See Joyce, "Enough with the Errors," 1.

<sup>165</sup> Joyce, "Enough with the Errors," 1.

<sup>166</sup> Joyce, "The Error in 'The Error in the Error Theory'," 534.

<sup>167</sup> Calhoun, "Gender Bias," 463.



documenting the pervasive gender bias of the received ethical canon, feminists have, as good theorists, offered an explanation for the pervasiveness of that bias: the canon's theorists have mostly been men in patriarchal societies. This "inappropriate" reference to the social provenance of the theories is required to make sense of the pervasiveness of anti-female bias in the canon. It is, in a way, an error theory—an explanation of why so many theorists have been blind to the fact of female rationality and female moral agency.

It is ironic then that Joyce, an "error theorist" according to whom morality is misunderstood by the masses on account of their evolved cognitive biases, would be closed to an error theory that accounts for his own errors (of course, he does not agree with Finlay that his views are erroneous). Finlay's "error theory" of Joyce, it is important to note, is offered not in lieu of critical interaction with Joyce's positive claims, but as a cautious addendum to twenty-one pages of engaged analysis. While a sociological dismissal of serious philosophical arguments is undoubtedly inappropriate in philosophy, Joyce's out-of-hand rejection of the possibility that social facts about a theorist may well matter is unjustified. This is not to say that Finlay is correct in his speculation. Just that tracing a geography or social genealogy of moral skepticism is not an illegitimate project for an empiricist or naturalist. To the contrary.<sup>168</sup>

The empirical project, I suggested early on, expresses a natural human curiosity, a desire to understand, to make sense of, to render intelligible, the world in its entirety. What I want to suggest now is that feminist skepticism is an extension of that project. It is a kind of social-genealogical inquiry that takes as its object the norms, ideals, and values of a given culture. It is a search for transparency that can (in conjunction with the right

---

<sup>168</sup> See the discussion in Jaggar, "Ethics Naturalized," 463-466.

political leverage, no doubt) destabilize coercive or otherwise less-than-mutual understandings. It modifies moral norms and ideals by digging up and airing the stories of morality's construction. Motivated by a concern for truth—the same desire for understanding that drives the empirical project more generally—feminist skepticism leverages that concern to move our moral lives in the direction of greater intelligibility and mutuality. Thus the empirical project, I submit, should be seen as transformative, as revisionary, for morality. Once the lens of inquiry is turned on the social fabric of morality itself, the results of that inquiry unravel parts of that fabric. Those critical openings make possible (although never necessary) transitions to more new and more robust, more genuinely mutual, moral understandings.

Feminist skepticism unquestionably goes beyond the kind of speculation we find in Finlay's analysis. But both are curious in (what an empiricist should see as) the right way. Theorists are not simply observers of moral phenomena, but are also participants in some moral space. Thus the connections between particular moral spaces and the theories produced there are a proper object of empirical scrutiny as well.

#### 4. Conclusion

On the social view, morality is a social tool we use to get along together. It helps us get along in part by giving us an understanding of what “getting along” looks like for us. The norms and ideals of our fundamental institutions, I have suggested, are the shared understandings that make possible our shared moral life. From the perspective of the social view, moral justification is not the province of philosophers as such, but is rather the everyday process of employing, rejecting, or reinterpreting the normative resources, the moral understandings, of that shared form of life. The point of this chapter has been to

illustrate this process, not only as an interesting phenomenon in its own right, but also as a process that can be motivated by the same concerns that give rise to skeptical questions about morality in the first place.

What Joyce considers a question about the epistemic justification of our moral judgments, I have reframed as a problem of opacity in moral living. Our moral judgments can be as epistemically justified as they need to be, I have argued, precisely to the same degree that our moral life can be lived transparently. To say this much is not to give blanket approval to any and all extant moral norms. It is rather to say that, to the extent that we value the spirit of empirical inquiry, we can also extend that inquiry to the values we live our lives by. The feminist skepticism at the heart of the emergence and evolution of the ethics of care embodies that empirical spirit. Thus it shows us how transparency (or in Joyce's terminology, the epistemic justification of our moral judgments) is possible: we must scrutinize the production of our ideals with an eye to the distorting effects of social distance. If we are to live a shared life in the full light of day, we must seek to understand how the norms and ideals that structure our fundamental institutions were created. To the degree that they can withstand such scrutiny, the moral life and the examined life can be one and the same.

The social view is my answer to the question of how morality can and should be understood after naturalism. It incorporates a social understanding of moral authority and a social understanding of moral justification. What I have emphasized here is that the empirical spirit that generates the question "are our moral judgments epistemically justified?"—Joyce's question—also has social and political force. Contra the skeptics, whose view of morality is static, the social view suggests that moral practice *can be made*

reflectively sustainable. It views reflective sustainability as a social and political achievement—one that requires ongoing efforts.

The conclusion to which I have come is that the examined life need not destroy the moral life. Shedding light on our moralities can be transformative, I have argued, but morality—the network of shared understandings by which our form of life is fundamentally structured—remains. I turn in the following chapters to the topic of moral progress. For the purposes of this dissertation, I am concerned with the naturalistic respectability (so to speak) of expansive moral ideals. In the final tally, I do find expansive, humanist ideals to be compatible with naturalism. However, getting from naturalism to humanism is admittedly not so simple a matter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## THE ROLE OF REASON IN MORAL PROGRESS

## 1. Introduction

I argued in chapter one that naturalism poses a challenge to our inherited ideas about morality. My concern in chapters two and three has been to turn back that challenge by articulating and defending a naturalistic, social view of morality. We are not forced to adopt a skeptical stance, for the fundamental institutions of our societies can be made transparent—giving our moral norms and ideals all the justification they need. The case study of the previous chapter illustrates how that process can work.

In this chapter and in the next, I tackle the question of moral progress. Specifically, I take for granted a modern and humanistic understanding of progress as the expansion of our moral categories and institutions in the direction of greater inclusivity and universality, and I inquire into possible naturalistic foundations for such ideals. Here my task is largely negative: I offer a critique of Peter Singer's account of moral progress as a distinctly *rational* phenomenon.<sup>169</sup> In chapter five, my I will allow myself some more constructive remarks.

Singer's account involves two key claims about reason, one backward-looking, and one forward-looking. Singer's backward-looking claim is that reason explains how we have transcended the more limited genetically and emotionally based forms of altruism elucidated in standard sociobiological accounts. His forward-looking claim is that reason charts a progressive path forward: it provides a solid *foundation* for ethics, for

---

<sup>169</sup> Singer, *The Expanding Circle*.

adjudicating conflicting moral claims. In a sense then, Singer is proposing that we get on board with the work that reason has already been doing in human history. Our capacity to reason has slowly and surely been expanding our moral categories. To the extent that we care about overcoming moral disagreement, or about being rational, we should therefore follow reason's lead, and let it guide us to a fully impartial and fully ethical point of view.

In what follows, I situate these claims in the broader context of Singer's response to sociobiology, and of his progressive moral vision. In addition to the two aforementioned claims made on behalf of reason, Singer defends two theses on sociobiology, which I find unproblematic, and he offers a thesis on progress, which I find attractive. Thus my critique focuses on Singer's two theses on reason. Regarding the backward-looking claim, I argue both that Singer's understanding of the sociobiology of altruism is obsolete, and that his account ignores the significance of social and other factors in the expansion of altruism. Regarding the forward-looking claim, I contend simply that Singer's arguments for a rational foundation for ethics fail.

The result of all this is not that expansive, humanist moral ideals are doomed. Rather, the grounds on which such ideals commend themselves may simply be more variegated than Singer imagines. But I must defer making my positive case for such ideals until the next chapter. Here I begin with a detailed overview of Singer's account.

## 2. Singer on Progress

### *Sociobiology and Ethics*

In 1975, the Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson published *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*.<sup>170</sup> There Wilson advocates “the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behavior.”<sup>171</sup> In the opening pages, he writes,

The biologist, who is concerned with questions of physiology and evolutionary history, realizes that self-knowledge is constrained and shaped by the emotional control centers in the hypothalamus and limbic system of the brain. These centers flood our consciousness with all the emotions—hate, love, guilt, fear, and others—that are consulted by ethical philosophers who wish to intuit the standards of good and evil. What, we are then compelled to ask, made the hypothalamus and the limbic system? They evolved by natural selection. That simple biological statement must be pursued to explain ethics and ethical philosophers . . . at all depths.<sup>172</sup>

Wilson’s sprawling study of the evolutionary explanations of animal behavior can be read as the beginning of a “takeover bid.”<sup>173</sup> Philosophers, in Wilson’s estimation, have treated the mind as a kind of black box. But science is now in a position to deliver accounts of *why* the mind works the way it does, why we have the emotions and desires we have. Accordingly, says Wilson, “Scientists and humanists should consider together the possibility that the time has come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and biologicized.”<sup>174</sup>

Singer’s book, *The Expanding Circle*, is explicitly positioned as a response to Wilson’s work (its original subtitle is *Ethics and Sociobiology*). Wilson’s remarks on the

---

<sup>170</sup> E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Harvard University Press, 1975).

<sup>171</sup> Wilson, *Sociobiology*, 595. Quoted in Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, 5.

<sup>172</sup> Wilson, 3.

<sup>173</sup> The phrase is Singer’s (see *The Expanding Circle*, 54).

<sup>174</sup> Wilson, 562.

substance of ethics are often ambiguous, and so Singer is careful to distinguish several ways in which sociobiology might be relevant to ethics. Sociobiology might paint a richer picture of human nature or human society, shedding light on the consequences of certain behaviors and institutions; it might debunk the aura of self-evidence or metaphysical weight of particular values; it might even provide us with new values.<sup>175</sup> Wilson flirts with all three ideas, but Singer is clear: the first two are indeed live possibilities; the third is not.

To ignore biology is to ignore one possible source of knowledge relevant to ethical decisions. There is, however, no justification here for dramatic claims about explaining ethics ‘at all depths’ or fashioning a biology of ethics which will do away with the need for ethical philosophers. Even if we should uncritically accept the sociobiological view of human nature in its entirety, the new facts we would have learned would affect ethics only at a relatively superficial level. The central question of ethics, the nature and justification of fundamental ethical values, would remain untouched.<sup>176</sup>

Though his engagement with sociobiology has this critical edge, Singer nevertheless finds value in its ability to illuminate the evolutionary origins of altruism. Sociobiology can explain how behavioral altruism (apparent or actual self-sacrificing behavior) can be reconciled with the evolutionary mechanisms that govern gene dissemination. On this point Singer rehearses the now standard account of how kin selection, reciprocal altruism, and maybe even group selection have shaped human psychology. Parents share genes with their children, and to a lesser extent siblings and cousins also share each other’s genes. Psychological tendencies to care for or even sacrifice for kin could thus be selected for by ordinary evolutionary mechanisms. So also in animals that have some means of recognizing individual, non-kin conspecifics or other

---

<sup>175</sup> Singer, 62-63.

<sup>176</sup> Singer, 68.



organisms, a capacity for cooperation (along with the psychological traits that generate the behavior) can evolve under ecological conditions that put non-cooperators at a disadvantage. And in highly cohesive social groups in competition with other groups, psychological attitudes favoring effective group function might also come to be selected for.<sup>177</sup> Let's call this Singer's first thesis on sociobiology, TOS1: sociobiology explains the evolutionary origins of altruism.

In all the aforementioned ways, the psychological underpinnings of moral emotion and moral judgment have been forged in the evolutionary fires of the past. This is the solid body of findings Wilson is inspired by in hinting that the insights of moral philosophers have been surpassed. But Singer is insistent: whatever empirical research into the origins of our emotions and psychological capabilities for altruism might reveal, no *values* will fall into our laps as a result. To think that biology can provide us with new values is to commit "the naturalistic fallacy."<sup>178</sup> It is to jump illegitimately from fact to value, and to confuse the observer stance of the scientist with the participant stance of the normative ethicist.

Singer explains: "Facts, by themselves, do not provide us with reasons for action. I need facts to make a sensible decision, but no amount of facts can make up my mind for me."<sup>179</sup> What we value, on the other hand, is precisely what moves or motivates us to act. If a person finds herself in possession of a large sum of money, for example, she can spend it on herself, on her family and friends, on the well being of strangers, or on some other cause. She can gather facts about the impact of these potential investments ad

---

<sup>177</sup> Singer, chaps. 1 and 2.

<sup>178</sup> Singer, 74.

<sup>179</sup> Singer, 75.

infinitum, but no fact can (by itself) tell her what she values. At the end of the day, she must *choose* to spend her money in some way or other. “The gap between facts and values,” Singer says, “lies in the inability of the facts to dictate my choice.”<sup>180</sup> He presses the point:

Would more facts, or facts of a different kind, bridge the gap? What about those facts that sociobiologists think important: facts about the nature of human beings as biological organisms with a specific evolutionary history; facts about the genetic basis of altruism; and facts about the hypothalamus and limbic system of the brain, which produce our emotions? . . . Our values and ethical systems are the products of our evolved nature. Isn't it then possible that as our knowledge of biology and physiology advance, they should come to reveal ethical premises inherent in our biological nature, thus bridging the gap between facts and values? The short answer to this is: ‘No, it is not possible.’ . . . We do not find our ethical premises in our biological nature, or under cabbages either. We choose them.<sup>181</sup>

Here we have Singer's second thesis on sociobiology, TOS2: sociobiology cannot provide us with a foundation for ethics.

### *Choosing Rationally*

No scientific finding can, by itself, determine our fundamental values. These we must choose for ourselves. This is a point that has been emphasized, Singer notes, by existentialists. On his reading, existentialists “propose that the choice of ultimate values is simply a commitment, a ‘leap of faith’, which is beyond any rational assessment, and thus ultimately arbitrary.”<sup>182</sup> Singer's own account consists in an attempt to escape that arbitrariness. The existentialist position, Singer says, “smacks of desperation, for it implies that the leap of faith which one existentialist philosopher (Heidegger) made to Nazism is, in the end, no less justifiable than the leap which another existentialist

---

<sup>180</sup> Singer, 76.

<sup>181</sup> Singer, 76-77.

<sup>182</sup> Singer, 84.

philosopher (Sartre) made to resistance to the Nazis.”<sup>183</sup> So the existentialist view is not an attractive position for Singer.

Singer is hopeful that *reason* might have something to offer us in our search for non-arbitrary ultimate ethical premises. “Though we must choose our ethical premises,” he says, “we may be able to choose rationally.”<sup>184</sup> Thus the heart of his constructive proposal is a substantive account of reason. Reason, Singer says, “is a special sort of capacity because it can lead us to places we did not expect to go.”<sup>185</sup> In mathematics, for example, a particular equation can appear false or implausible, and yet be proven true by a continuous line of mathematical reasoning. When Thomas Hobbes happened on a copy of Euclid’s *Elements of Geometry* open at the 47<sup>th</sup> theorem, his initial response was to swear it couldn’t be true. Yet as he worked through the proof, and through the proofs of each theorem invoked in the proof, he realized he could not but concede the correctness of the 47<sup>th</sup> theorem.<sup>186</sup> What this shows, Singer thinks, is that reason is like an escalator that leads up and out of sight. Counting one, two, three hyenas in the bush (for example) is a long way off from articulating the concept of a prime number, and drawing squares in the sand is a long way off from the Pythagorean Theorem. But the logic of the latter is in a sense implicit in the former. It is not dependent on the human will. By learning to count, our ancestors “stepped onto an escalator of reasoning that leads by strictly logical steps to square roots, prime numbers, and the differential calculus.”<sup>187</sup> We can decide not

---

<sup>183</sup> Singer, 84.

<sup>184</sup> Singer, 86.

<sup>185</sup> Singer, 88. I think what Singer is getting at here is that reason is uniquely difficult to bend to our wills if we play by its rules. But I think many of our psychological drives lead in unexpected directions. How many of us choose or expect to fall in love, or to get addicted to cigarettes, for example?

<sup>186</sup> The story is from John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 1898), 332; cited in Singer, 88.

<sup>187</sup> Singer, 89.

to step onto it, but if we do, it has the power to take us to unexpected places. Singer characterizes this feature of reason as a kind of *autonomy*.<sup>188</sup>

On Singer's view, the autonomy of reason shapes *ethical* reasoning in the same way that it shapes mathematical reasoning. The practice of moral reasoning initially took hold in our species when our hominid ancestors, already quite social, acquired linguistic and sophisticated conceptual abilities. This evolutionary transformation enabled us to become "more conscious of the patterns of our social life."<sup>189</sup> In particular, it made possible more sophisticated responses to conflict, actual or anticipated. From "responding with a friendly lick or an intimidating growl when another member of the group does or does not repay favors," we went to "responding with an approving or a condemnatory judgment."<sup>190</sup> The key difference between the two sets of responses, on Singer's account, is that while the former leaves no room for questioning, the latter invites it. Having evolved to be language-using animals, our ancestors learned to ask, "Why did you do that?" In doing so, they initiated a practice of asking for (or perhaps demanding) and giving reasons for action. Like learning to count, learning these skills of mutual accounting was a first step onto an escalator that leads up and out of sight.

Singer fleshes out the details as follows. "In a dispute between members of a cohesive group of reasoning beings," he says, "the demand for a reason is a demand for a justification that can be accepted by the group as a whole."<sup>191</sup> Articulating such a reason requires a measure of impartiality. I must frame my own intentions in terms acceptable to

---

<sup>188</sup> Singer, 113. By calling reason "autonomous," I take it Singer is resisting merely *instrumental* accounts of rationality. Reason may initially be used as a tool, on his view, but after that it takes on a life of its own. This is a point I explore in more detail below.

<sup>189</sup> Singer, 92.

<sup>190</sup> Singer, 92.

<sup>191</sup> Singer, 93.

my audience, in terms they themselves could adopt under relevantly similar circumstances. That leaves it open, of course, what group members will recognize as relevantly similar circumstances. But the basic point stands. Giving a reason for action, in a group context, involves stepping back from one's immediate desires and articulating a social justification, in the form of an impartial principle, for the desired course of action. If I claim a large share of the nuts my group has gathered, for example, I must tell a story about why I *deserve* the nuts, and that story must pass with the others.

So the first step in Singer's speculative reconstruction of human ethical history is this demand for the justification of action. It leads, on Singer's account, to the emergence of early normative systems—what he calls *custom*. “As inherently public,” Singer says, “customs are necessarily impartial between individuals, in form at least. They may oppress whole groups, like women, or the poor, but they do so in a way that the oppressed can—and often do—accept as proper.”<sup>192</sup> The function of a system of custom is to serve as a public guide to social life in a given tribe or society. While custom may codify patterns of action we presently condemn, it nevertheless represents an improvement, in an important sense, over a customless society. As Singer puts it, “To be a victim of oppressive customs is very different from being a victim of personal malice.”<sup>193</sup> That's not to say it's “better” to be oppressed than it is to fall victim to malice—and in any case, the two categories are not mutually exclusive. The point is just that an oppressive moral system justifies itself (it attempts to, at least) to those it oppresses.<sup>194</sup> In that regard, it addresses them on a level not reached by simple,

---

<sup>192</sup> Singer, 94.

<sup>193</sup> Singer, 94.

<sup>194</sup> Singer assumes that the social pressures of justification are evenly distributed in different societies. His remarks about oppression hint at the possibility that this might not be the case. But he doesn't seem to

unjustified assault. It also opens the door to the transformational critique that characterizes later stages of development.

In later phases of moral evolution, systems of custom come under question. This critical moment is sometimes possible when tribes or societies come to have knowledge of each other and of their differences. “From the outsider’s point of view, the customs of my own society appear as one among a number of different possible systems. Thus they lose their sense of natural rightness and inevitability.”<sup>195</sup> At such junctures, questioners in the mold of Socrates appear, calling into question the customs of the ancestors, demanding, in effect, a justification of custom itself. Disputes over conflicting interests within and between human societies lead to conflict between ethical codes of conduct.

These disputes are not in principle irresolvable, according to Singer. Rather, “we can progress toward rational settlement of disputes over ethics by taking the element of disinterestedness inherent in the idea of justifying one’s conduct to society as a whole, and extending this into the principle that to be ethical, a decision must give equal weight to the interests of all affected by it.”<sup>196</sup> Just as, when I justify myself to my peers, I must frame my action impartially, in terms my peers can see as action-guiding for themselves, so also competing customs can be bridged by articulating impartial principles to cover the relevant interests.

Conflict between individuals or societies can provide the impetus to articulate ever more general, ever more impartial, principles of action, which, in virtue of their impartiality, can be recognized as such and adopted by reasoning beings. The value of

---

notice the fact that justifications of oppression are often not directed at the oppressed. Yet oppression can in part be *constituted* by not being seen as one to whom the privileged must justify themselves.

<sup>195</sup> Singer, 98.

<sup>196</sup> Singer, 100.

ethical reasoning is not merely prudential however. According to Singer, the logic of impartiality has inherent force. “The idea of a disinterested defense of one’s conduct emerges because of the social nature of human beings and the requirements of group living,” he says, “but in the thought of reasoning beings, it takes on a logic of its own which leads to its extension beyond the bounds of the group.”<sup>197</sup> This explains Singer’s metaphor of the escalator: once moral dialogue has begun, reasoning animals can understand how one step leads to the next, and thus come to recognize the inherent logic of ethical justification. Old moral boundaries are recognized as arbitrary, and distinctions of sex, race, and nationality come to matter less and less. The result is what Singer describes as an expanding circle: self-interest is mitigated in dialogue with others, and moral principles are found to govern a life that is increasingly fair to everyone.

### *Expanding Sympathies*

The endpoint of this process of expansion in moral thought, Singer argues, is a single action-guiding principle: the principle of the equal consideration of interests. “[T]o be ethical, a decision must give equal weight to the interests of all affected by it.”<sup>198</sup> According to this principle, ethical judgments must be made “from a totally impartial point of view.”<sup>199</sup> The principle of the equal consideration of interests is the logical terminus of the process of ethical reasoning, and thus also the only possible rational foundation for ethics.<sup>200</sup> Although the shift to a fully universal ethical point of view is not universally accepted today, Singer says, “it is the direction in which moral thought has

---

<sup>197</sup> Singer, 114.

<sup>198</sup> Singer, 100.

<sup>199</sup> Singer, 100.

<sup>200</sup> His argument to this conclusion is a bit more complicated than I’m portraying it here, as we shall see below.

been going since ancient times.” This is no accident of history. It is, rather, “the direction in which our capacity to reason leads us.”<sup>201</sup>

There are alternative explanations for our broadening ethical horizons. Singer mentions Edward Westermarck’s explanation of those expansive tendencies in terms of growing “altruistic sentiments.” But such explanations are not necessarily incompatible with the reason-first account. “We do not have to choose one or the other,” Singer says, “we can accept both explanations.”<sup>202</sup> New patterns of trade might facilitate a broadening of our sympathies, for example. But this does not impugn the explanatory power of reason. “[I]t is independently plausible,” according to Singer, “that reasoning should lead us to a more and more universal view of ethics.”<sup>203</sup> Moral thinkers from all of the world’s traditions have tended to converge on that ideal (Singer cites as evidence the teachings of Rabbi Hillel, Jesus of Nazareth, Confucius, the Indian Mahabharata, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca<sup>204</sup>). And reason resists evolutionary counterpressure in ways simple emotion cannot:

If we say, as Westermarck did, that the expansion of the sphere of altruism has been solely the result of an expansion of the *feeling* of benevolence, the existence of genuine, non-reciprocal altruism toward strangers remains mysterious. Evolution should have wiped out such non-rewarding traits as a broad unselfish feeling of benevolence . . . [But] the capacity to reason is not something that evolution is likely to eliminate.<sup>205</sup>

Given the reality of non-reciprocal altruism (Singer mentions voluntary donations to the British National Blood Transfusion Service as an example), the simplest explanation is

---

<sup>201</sup> Singer, 113.

<sup>202</sup> Singer, 135.

<sup>203</sup> Singer, 135.

<sup>204</sup> Singer, 137.

<sup>205</sup> Singer, 139.



that “it is not feeling, but reason that is chiefly responsible for it.”<sup>206</sup> For reasons to be specified below, I will call non-reciprocal altruistic behavior directed toward non-kin *wide-ranging* altruism. Hence Singer’s first thesis on reason, TOR1: reason explains the existence of wide-ranging altruism.

Reason, on Singer’s view, points the way to an objective point of view in which all interests are considered impartially. That completely impartial point of view can function as a rational foundation for ethics. (Call it Singer’s second thesis on reason, TOR2: reason can provide us with a foundation for ethics.) But while this objective standard is “unimpeachable” for the person who asks “What ought I to do?”, Singer also thinks we can be more accommodating in our answer to the question “What ought to be the ethical code of our society?”<sup>207</sup> That second question invites us to take into account human ethical ambivalence and advocate for societal norms that are less demanding than what abstract reason strictly as such requires. We need concrete rules that can guide our behavior towards the rational ideal. “The goal of maximizing the welfare of all may be better achieved by an ethic that accepts our inclinations and harnesses them so that, taken as a whole, the system works to everyone’s advantage.”<sup>208</sup> Moral sainthood is not a realistic ideal for everyone, Singer concedes, and so ethical rules other than the principle of the equal consideration of interests, though they “have no ultimate authority of their own,” might be necessary.<sup>209</sup>

In this way, Singer says, we come full circle on the question of the relevance of sociobiology to ethics. Sociobiology cannot provide ultimate ethical premises on its own.

---

<sup>206</sup> Singer, 140.

<sup>207</sup> Singer, 152-153.

<sup>208</sup> Singer, 157.

<sup>209</sup> Singer, 167.

Only reason can do that non-arbitrarily. The takeover bid fails. But the objective standard of reason is too demanding to function as an effective societal code of ethics. Without abandoning reason as the objective foundation of values then, the deliverances of biology (and history, anthropology, psychology, etc.) must be consulted in the crafting of workable moral standards for everyday living. That gives us rules for living that move us toward the ideal of increasing general welfare without subjecting us to “a morality unsuited to normal human beings.”<sup>210</sup> We can call this Singer’s thesis on progress, TOP: we should adopt ethical rules suited to human nature that maximize welfare.

*Singer’s Five Theses*

On my reading, Singer’s account centers on the five theses I’ve emphasized above. They are as follows.

Theses on Sociobiology:

TOS1 Sociobiology explains the evolutionary origins of altruism.

TOS2 Sociobiology cannot provide us with a foundation for ethics

Theses on Reason:

TOR1 Reason explains the existence of wide-ranging altruism.

TOR2 Reason can provide us with a foundation for ethics.

Thesis on Progress:

TOP We should adopt rules that maximize welfare.

I have no disagreement with Singer with respect to TOS1 and TOS2. I find TOP to be an attractive proposal, but I have little to say about it for now, save that it stands or falls on its own merits, apart from the other theses. I take it for granted that TOP in some sense

---

<sup>210</sup> Singer, 158.

captures a canonical, humanist ideal of progress. My critique, accordingly, focuses on TOR1 and TOR2. I will argue that the arguments for each fail. I return to the question of what consequences this has for Singer's attempt to ground his expansive, humanist moral vision in reason in my conclusion.

I will call Singer's argument for TOR1 the Rational Altruism Argument, and I will call Singer's argument for TOR2 the Rational Foundation Argument. I will critique each one in turn. Then I will offer my overall assessment of Singer's rationalist account.

### 3. The Rational Altruism Argument

#### *Beyond Biology?*

The British National Blood Transfusion Service receives donations from people who give blood voluntarily. There is no payment for donation, and no way for donors to receive payment from recipients of blood donation. This, and analogous cases, provides evidence for the existence of "genuine, non-reciprocal altruism," according to Singer.<sup>211</sup>

The apparently gratuitous nature of such altruistic behaviors is crucial for Singer's account. In his review of the standard evolutionary accounts of the evolution of altruism, kin selection and reciprocal altruism figure prominently. These predict that human beings will be inclined to behave altruistically toward biological relatives and toward those who can be expected to reciprocate. Insofar as we behave altruistically toward strangers however—specifically, strangers who can't be expected to reciprocate—the altruism of British blood donors, and those like them, appears to be something of a mystery.<sup>212</sup> There

---

<sup>211</sup> Singer, 133-134.

<sup>212</sup> One other prominent example of non-reciprocal self-sacrifice or altruism is the behavior of individuals when mobilized (especially in warfare) by religious or patriotic ideals. The standard evolutionary psychological explanation for this phenomenon is the possibility of group selection (a possibility

is an *explanatory gap* here, Singer argues, that standard sociobiological accounts do not bridge.

Singer contends that human emotion, considered on its own, cannot bridge the gap. He knows some have tried to explain the broadening of our ethical horizons in terms of an emotional expansion. Westermarck, who “pointed to the increasing size of our community—from the village to the nation, and now to the world as a whole—as a factor in the breakdown of narrower limits to our concerns and sympathies,” gets a hearing, for instance.<sup>213</sup> Singer concedes that emotions are probably a part of the story of the expanding circle. But a generalized feeling of benevolence, he says, without any further psychological scaffolding, would be unlikely to resist countervailing evolutionary pressure. By itself then, emotion can’t bridge the explanatory gap left by standard sociobiological accounts of altruism.

Only reason, Singer claims, can bridge the gap. Only reason can provide a genuine explanation for why the circle of moral concern has expanded, such that acts of “genuine, non-reciprocal altruism” occur today. This is because, first, reason has independent evolutionary value: natural selection would be unlikely to root it out, given its practical uses across a variety of domains. Second, on Singer’s account, “the ability to reason and the ability to see the reasons for a wider moral concern are essentially the same ability.”<sup>214</sup> Thus, given the explanatory gap left by standard sociobiological

---

recognized by Singer). The latent capacity for self-sacrificing group-centered behavior is likely to be triggered, on standard accounts, in the presence (real or imagined) of an outside threat, and to disappear when the threat is passed.

<sup>213</sup> Singer, 135. From Singer’s limited treatment, it’s not clear to me that Westermarck intended for the emphasis to be primarily on *emotion*. It may be, instead, that his emphasis is on population growth and *institutional* evolution, to which our emotions then *respond*. I find this to be a very promising type of account.

<sup>214</sup> Singer, 140.

accounts—given the unexplained occurrence of acts of wide-ranging (non-kin, non-reciprocal) altruism—it seems that reason is best suited to bridge that gap, to explain the existence of wide-ranging altruism. “[T]he persistence of genuine altruism would be inexplicable if it were based on feeling alone,” Singer says. Thus: “it is not feeling, but reason that is chiefly responsible for it.”<sup>215</sup>

We can schematize Singer’s argument, which I have called the Rational Altruism Argument, as follows.

- (1) Wide-ranging altruism exists.
- (2) Sociobiological accounts do not explain how we could have gone beyond kin and reciprocal altruism.
- (3) Emotion (alone) can’t explain this either.
- (4) But reason has independent evolutionary value.
- (5) The ability to reason and the ability to see the reasons for wider moral concern are essentially the same ability.
- (6) Therefore, [TOR1] reason explains the existence of wide-ranging altruism.

The critique that follows takes aim at theses (2) and (5). The accounts of sociobiologists have grown increasingly sophisticated, and wide-ranging altruism is now well accounted for in standard evolutionary psychological accounts. (2) might have been plausible in 1981, when *The Expanding Circle* was first published. But thirty years later, the claim of an explanatory gap is untenable.<sup>216</sup> The claim of (5), which I have lifted verbatim from the text, is also problematic. I focus first on what I take to be a straightforward reading of the claim, before attempting a more generous interpretation, grounded in the concrete

---

<sup>215</sup> Singer, 140.

<sup>216</sup> It’s a bit surprising to me that Singer says nothing about this in his 2011 afterword.

mechanisms Singer identifies as effecting progressive moral change in history. On the first reading, Singer's claim is simply false. On the second, it is much more plausible, but that plausibility comes at the cost of substantially diluting the force of the argument.

### *Indirect Reciprocity*

I have been referring to altruistic acts toward non-reciprocating strangers as acts of *wide-ranging* altruism. This is because the role of reciprocity, according to contemporary evolutionary psychological accounts, can be either direct or indirect. Direct reciprocity is standard reciprocal altruism: cooperation with non-kin emerges under conditions of mutual (sometimes delayed) benefit when organisms are capable of discriminating between cooperators and non-cooperators.<sup>217</sup> Whereas direct reciprocity involves two parties, *indirect* reciprocity involves at least three. A cooperates with B under the watchful eye of C, who is then disposed to cooperate with proven cooperator A. If indirect reciprocity can explain wide-ranging altruism, then it is misleading to call wide-ranging altruism “non-reciprocal.” Wide-ranging altruism may in fact be reciprocal, albeit indirectly. This is why I have chosen not to follow Singer on terminology.

We can think of indirect reciprocity as an outgrowth of direct reciprocity for social animals. As individual organisms cooperate, or fail to cooperate, with others, they develop a reputation as cooperators or non-cooperators (as “altruists” or “egoists”). Reputation, a kind of social status, then figures as currency in subsequent social exchange. A proven cooperator receives preferential treatment from conspecifics seeking a dependable cooperator. Richard Alexander explains:

Systems of indirect reciprocity . . . are social systems structured around the importance of status. The concept of status implies that an individual's privileges,

---

<sup>217</sup> See, for example, Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (Basic Books, 1984).

or its access to resources, are controlled in part by how others collectively think of him (hence, treat him) as a result of past interactions (including observations of interactions with others). Status can be determined by physical prowess, as in those nonhuman (animal) dominance hierarchies in which coalitions are absent, or (as in humans) by mental or social prowess. Mental and social prowess, in this sense, includes . . . effectiveness and reliability in reciprocity and cooperation.<sup>218</sup>

The anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar (famous for calculating “Dunbar’s number,” the supposed numerical limit of stable relationships that individual human beings can sustain—about 150) argues that we are, in an important sense, *gossiping* primates.<sup>219</sup> Although we can in principle use language to discuss any number of things, much of human conversation seems to revolve around keeping track of friends and allies, exchanging information about free riders, and engaging in “reputation management.”<sup>220</sup> To the extent that we are surrounded by incurable gossips, each of us has an incentive to appear altruistic. And one way to appear altruistic is of course to act altruistically, even (and especially) toward non-reciprocating strangers.

On Alexander’s account, the importance of reputation in the social life of primates such as ourselves can be expected to generate social *rules* emphasizing the importance of cooperation. “Rules,” he says, “are aspects of indirect reciprocity beneficial to those who propose and perpetuate them, not only because they force others to behave in ways explicitly beneficial to the proposers and perpetuators but because they also make the future more predictable so that plans can be carried out.”<sup>221</sup> Rule-governed systems of indirect reciprocity, on Alexander’s account, are *moral* systems. I suspect we might not want to call all such rules “moral” in the normative sense, but Alexander’s

---

<sup>218</sup> Richard D. Alexander, *The Biology of Moral Systems* (Aldine de Gruyter, 1987), 95.

<sup>219</sup> See Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*.

<sup>220</sup> Dunbar, 173.

<sup>221</sup> Alexander, *The Biology of Moral Systems*, 96.

broadly anthropological or descriptive conception of moral systems is in keeping with my own account of morality as a fundamental institution in chapter two. His suggestion about the significance of rules, likewise, echoes a point from chapter three: moral norms and ideals are formulated by particular individuals occupying particular social locations, and there often seems to be a connection between the content of those ideals and the social position occupied by their advocates.

The picture that emerges from Alexander's account is of human beings as calculating, genetically self-interested organisms. We are not "self-interested" in the sense of being psychological egoists—our conscious motivations are not exclusively egoistic. Rather, in keeping with the standard sociobiological picture, we (non-sociopaths) genuinely care about our kin and our friends. It also seems that we sometimes care about strangers. The psychological dispositions that underlie our care for all these others can be explained, in evolutionary terms, by the genetic payoff of care for offspring and other family, of cooperation with direct reciprocators, and of a good reputation.

It is important to remember that the social "calculations" that guide our interactions with others, on the sociobiological account, are not necessarily conscious. Alexander says, "I would not contend that we always carry out cost-benefit analyses on these issues deliberately or consciously. I do, however, contend that such analyses occur, sometimes consciously, sometimes not, and that we are evolved to be exceedingly accurate and quick at making them."<sup>222</sup> There may even be pressure for the evolutionary function of reputation-enhancing behavior *not* to be conscious. We pass most effectively as good altruists in social exchange, the thinking goes, when our conscious motivation is

---

<sup>222</sup> Alexander, 97.



sincere concern for others, rather than transparently Machiavellian calculation.<sup>223</sup> In any case, Alexander's contention that most of us are surprisingly adept at social calculation is experimentally well borne out.<sup>224</sup>

The theory of indirect reciprocity predicts that we are most likely to cooperate with strangers when such behavior can be expected to maintain or boost our reputation as cooperators. When we do so, our conscious intent need not be reputation management as such. This means that indirect reciprocity explains more than just intentionally targeted or “discriminate” beneficence. We don't just cooperate when the payoff is obvious. In fact, the existence of large, complex societies, Alexander argues,

fosters the appearance of tendencies to engage in *indiscriminate social investment* (or indiscriminate beneficence)—which I define as willingness to risk relatively small expenses in certain kinds of social donations to whomever may be needy—partly because of the prevalence of interested audiences and keenness of their observation, and the use of beneficent acts by others to identify individuals appropriate for later reciprocal interactions. In complex social systems with much reciprocity, being judged as attractive for reciprocal interactions may become an essential ingredient for success.<sup>225</sup>

---

<sup>223</sup> See Wright, *The Moral Animal*. So too Alexander: “our professed and even sincerely believed motivations may not at all reflect the evolutionary significance of our acts” (Alexander, 159). On Alexander's account, which I am endorsing, having a reputation as a cooperator can become essential for reproductive success in very social species. This evolutionary situation can be expected to forge individuals who are in some sense “designed” for not only cooperation, but with a knack for telling what will and what won't enhance their reputation as cooperators. Writers (such as Wright) who have worked to popularize this idea have sometimes been misunderstood as advocating for a Machiavellian hypothesis or some version of psychological egoism according to which our concern for others is never really sincere (the so-called “vener theory” of morality attacked by de Waal in *Primates and Philosophers* is supposed to represent Wright's position). But sincerity is arguably a function of *conscious* intent, and there is plenty of room in the mind, so to speak, beyond that which enters consciousness. The social calculations postulated by Alexander's theory of indirect reciprocity, that is, can be thought to occur *subconsciously* (at least, most of the time—some of the time, for some individuals, they may occur consciously). Further, the broad evolutionary brushstrokes of Alexander's account do not require us to assume *all* of us are *exquisitely* “fine-tuned” for personal status *maximization*. We are required only to see *most* of us as *usually* attuned (perhaps subconsciously) to our relative social status—this general psychological capacity being selected for in our evolutionary history because of its relevance to the reproductive success of our ancestors.

<sup>224</sup> See Dunbar's discussion of Leda Cosmides' “cheater detection module” study. Cosmides finds that a simple logical puzzle is difficult to solve when posed in abstract terms, but much easier to solve when posed in terms of a social contract involving possible rule breakers (Dunbar, 172-173).

<sup>225</sup> Alexander, 97, 100.

I am keen to add that there is no evolutionary mystery in the emergence of large, complex societies. So we should resist the temptation to think an evolutionarily odd faculty of impartial reason explains that particular piece of the puzzle as well. There is no evolutionary mystery in the fact of our being surrounded by strangers to whom we can be kind (or not).<sup>226</sup>

According to thesis (2) of what I have called Singer's Rational Altruism Argument, sociobiological accounts do not explain how we could have gone beyond kin and reciprocal altruism. This is the explanatory gap that Singer's account of reason is supposed to fill. I contend that Alexander's account is sufficient to show *there is no gap*. Wide-ranging altruism is well accounted for in contemporary evolutionary psychological accounts (even if, to be fair to Singer, such accounts have come a long way since 1981). Alexander himself takes up Singer's claim that British blood donors are "working refutations of the contention that altruism can only exist among kin, within small groups, or where it pays off by encouraging reciprocal altruism."<sup>227</sup> From a more up-to-date evolutionary perspective, he says, we might view blood donation as, "rather than unreciprocable altruism, a social investment with a very special and high likelihood of paying off handsomely. Who among us is not a little humble in the presence of someone who has casually noted that he just came back from 'giving blood'?"<sup>228</sup>

To sum up: I have argued, contra thesis (2), that there is no gap to fill in extant sociobiological accounts of altruism. In all likelihood, we have gone beyond simple kin and reciprocal altruism thanks to the power of indirect reciprocity. Indirect reciprocity is

---

<sup>226</sup> Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, gives a good evolutionary account of the emergence of civilizations.

<sup>227</sup> Singer, 134.

<sup>228</sup> Alexander, 157. The usual caveats about the lack of need for *conscious* calculation apply.

an outgrowth of direct reciprocity (standard reciprocal altruism) in social, gossiping primates. As genetically self-interested organisms, we have an interest in maintaining a reputation as good cooperators, and in proposing and perpetuating rules that serve us and bring stability and predictability to social life. In certain social contexts (especially large, complex societies), this may also provide an incentive to engage in (non-costly) indiscriminate beneficence. The social calculations that drive this behavior need not be conscious.

The Rational Altruism Argument proposes to identify and fill a gap in evolutionary theory. There is no gap. That being said, to say that evolutionary psychologists have developed models that bring clarity to the question of how wide-ranging altruism evolved is not to say that reason explains nothing, or that it has been causally epiphenomenal in our history. There may still be some sense in which reason explains wide-ranging altruism, even if Singer's published work on sociobiology is now out-of-date. But to pursue this possibility we need to get clear on what Singer takes reason to be. We can do this by scrutinizing thesis (5).

*Reason as a Psychological Capacity*

I contend that Singer's general account alternates between two distinct pictures of reason. According to the first, reason is a psychological capacity of ordinary human beings. According to the second, it is an *emergent* phenomenon—one that occurs when reasoning animals (“reasoning” in the simple, psychological sense) justify their conduct to each other. While Singer is at times quite clear about the distinction (as when he distinguishes between reasoning at the “collective level” and reasoning at the “individual

level”<sup>229</sup>), he is at other times very ambiguous. That ambiguity is at play in the Rational Altruism Argument. Accordingly, I propose to explore two readings of this claim—thesis (5)—that “the ability to reason and the ability to see the reasons for wider moral concern are essentially the same ability.”<sup>230</sup>

First then, consider the claim that immediately follows in the text. Singer says, “Just as any person who can reason adequately can, like Hobbes, follow Euclid’s proofs of the theorems of geometry, so can anyone capable of reasoning understand the objective point of view from which his or her interests are no more important than the like interests of anyone else.”<sup>231</sup> Here it seems as though Singer has a psychological capacity in mind. If one can “reason adequately,” one can follow Euclid’s proofs. Likewise, one can also “understand the objective point of view.”

The psychological reading of Singer’s claim runs into trouble because *understanding* here can take two forms. It might take the form of a conceptual grasp of the notion of a God’s-eye-view (a view from everywhere). Or it might take the form of *being drawn* to that point of view. If Singer only means that basic cognitive ability entails the capacity to understand the concept of an impartial standpoint, then he may be right. But such a fact is irrelevant to the success of the Rational Altruism Argument. The fact that most human beings can understand a particular idea doesn’t *explain* any phenomenon (wide-ranging altruism or otherwise) without an account of the practical *use* or *appeal* of that idea. And then it is not reason that explains wide-ranging altruism, but rather the circumstances that have provoked the use of reason.

---

<sup>229</sup> Singer, 147.

<sup>230</sup> Singer, 140.

<sup>231</sup> Singer, 140.

If, on the other hand, Singer means that basic cognitive ability entails being motivationally drawn to the impartial point of view, then the claim appears to be simply false. We non-sociopaths do by nature care for others beside ourselves. But the ability to reason *as such* need not (and, it seems, usually *does* not) put outward pressure on that existing moral concern.<sup>232</sup> Even in moral philosophy, the idea that complete impartiality is an ideal we should aim for is controversial.<sup>233</sup>

But Singer is aware that, while we may be rational animals, we are only *ambivalently* so. He says:

To revert to the example of altruism given earlier, while many people in Britain do give blood to strangers, far more—94 percent, to be precise—do not. Undoubtedly many of those who do not give blood reason as well as or better than some of those who do . . . These people are capable of following the line of reasoning that [leads] to altruism, yet they do not do so, or if they do, they disregard it in their actions.<sup>234</sup>

Should we conclude that reason is in fact powerless to expand our moral horizons? Singer argues for a negative answer. Reason, he claims, is not merely an instrumental faculty.

While reason can be used to satisfy our pre-existing desires more effectively, *it also generates desires and feelings of its own*.<sup>235</sup> Desires and feelings may be what moves us to act, but insofar as it is reason which gives us some of those desires and feelings, reason

---

<sup>232</sup> Singer identifies vocal advocates for expansive moral concern as “outstanding” moral thinkers (137). On a simple, psychological reading of the claim that the ability to reason is the same as the ability to see the reasons for wider moral concern, advocates for boundary-breaking moral concern are outstanding primarily in the sense that they *stand out*—they are unusual. This is precisely the *opposite* connection we might have expected if in fact the ability to reason did come hand-in-hand with an appreciation for ethical impartiality. The fact that this does not appear to be the case, the fact that moral progress is so *slow*, counts against this alleged connection.

<sup>233</sup> Bernard Williams is one well-known opponent of such a view. See the first essay in Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), and also Williams’ essay in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge University Press, 1973).

<sup>234</sup> Singer, 141.

<sup>235</sup> I read Singer as suggesting not that the use of reason in an individual generates reason-related feelings, but rather than all ordinary human beings sometimes experience feelings, regardless of whether they are *reasoning*, which have the effect of bending their behavior and beliefs in the direction of greater rationality.

is more than just a slave of the passions.<sup>236</sup> This is the sense in which reason moves us. Reason moves us beyond ourselves, Singer argues, in at least three ways.<sup>237</sup>

First, ordinary human beings find cognitive dissonance uncomfortable. On Leon Festinger's account, which Singer endorses, "Cognitive dissonance can be seen as an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction."<sup>238</sup> So considerations of *consistency* lead ordinary human beings to revise their beliefs or their behavior to minimize inconsistency (at least when the inconsistency is pointed out).<sup>239</sup> Second, Singer argues that the kind of hypocrisy that would be required of a person to espouse impartial moral ideals in public but to actually and intentionally live by selfish ideals in private would not be emotionally feasible for most of us. "[B]ecause we are social beings," he says, "reared and educated in a community and bound to the community by deep emotional ties, a life of systematic hypocrisy is likely to be uncomfortable."<sup>240</sup> Third and finally, Singer appeals to the paradox of hedonism. The idea here is that a self-centered life is for most of us ultimately unsatisfying, and that deeper fulfillment is found only when we invest in things (people, causes) outside of ourselves.<sup>241</sup> In these three concrete ways then, according to Singer, reason draws us outside of ourselves.

---

<sup>236</sup> "Human beings are not the perfectly rational creatures they would be if they strove for truth and consistency at all times. Nevertheless, if we can be motivated by a desire to eliminate inconsistency in our beliefs and actions, reason is no mere slave. We may use reason to enable us to satisfy our needs, but reason then develops its own motivating force" (Singer, 143).

<sup>237</sup> Singer, 142-147.

<sup>238</sup> Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford University Press, 1957), chap. 1; quoted in Singer, 143.

<sup>239</sup> To be clear, the work here is being done by and in relation to the *feeling* of discomfort, rather than the cognitive recognition of inconsistency merely as such.

<sup>240</sup> Singer, 144.

<sup>241</sup> If we find life more fulfilling when we are not focused solely on ourselves, this is perhaps unsurprising, given the nature of our *genetic* self-interest on sociobiological accounts. Finding satisfaction in some or all of having children, helping family, engaging in reciprocal relationships, and gaining a reputation is *precisely* what we might expect as good evolutionary psychologists.

These are the concrete psychological mechanisms by which ethical reason has a hold on us, according to Singer—ways in which reason *moves* us. The problem is that these mechanisms do not *by themselves* lead in the direction of universal concern. Consider for instance R. M. Hare’s famous character of the “fanatic,” the committed Nazi.<sup>242</sup> The Nazi ideal, I take it, involves a society “free” from Jews, gays, gypsies, and other “undesirables.” According to Singer’s own picture, reason must have a hold on the fanatic through the constraining power of consistency, the discomfort of hypocrisy, and the appeal of interests that transcend the self. But these three psychological forces are jointly insufficient to push the fanatic *away* from his ideals. Consistency, through the discomfort of cognitive dissonance, might lead him to conclude that, were he himself to turn out to be a Jew, he should be killed. That might be a hard pill to swallow, but fanatics have embraced stranger beliefs still.<sup>243</sup> The discomfort of hypocrisy might lead him to be very sincere in public about his beliefs and his ideals. And the appeal of self-transcending interests might lead him to devote himself more fully to the cause.<sup>244</sup> Absent certain social and perhaps emotional constraints on these psychological mechanisms, the expansion of our moral horizons is thus not guaranteed. I conclude that a simple, psychological interpretation of reason in thesis (5) is not promising.

---

<sup>242</sup> R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford University Press, 1963), 157-185.

<sup>243</sup> The psychological speculation here is a bit forced, I admit. I suspect the notion that one might “turn out” to be a Jew is much too silly from the fanatic’s perspective to gain any kind of psychological traction of the sort that might trigger cognitive dissonance.

<sup>244</sup> White supremacist Craig Cobb, for example, is very publicly racist and anti-Semitic. He is currently attempting to build a white nationalist community in Leith, North Dakota (see “Craig Cobb,” Wikipedia, accessed September 13, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craig\\_Cobb](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craig_Cobb)).

*The Social Activation of Reason*

Social constraints do in fact play an important role in Singer's account of reason. Although they sometimes fade into the background of his account, moral dialogue, education, and the increased likelihood of social uptake for broader moral categories all count as driving forces in the evolution of ethical reasoning, according to Singer.<sup>245</sup> So we should understand the significance of the aforementioned psychological mechanisms in dialogical relationship with these social pressures. That gives us what I call the *social activation* account of reason. On this account, impartial ethical reasoning is a *latent* psychological capability, actually instantiated in a few "outstanding" thinkers, and partially instantiated in the rest of us *under certain kinds of social pressure*.

The social activation account of reason makes good sense of many of Singer's comments (including the claim that advocates of universal moral concern are "outstanding" thinkers). He says, "Reasoning is inherently expansionist. It seeks universal application . . . Left to itself, reasoning will develop on a principle similar to biological evolution."<sup>246</sup> "Wherever there are rational, social beings, whether on earth or in some remote galaxy, we could expect their standards of conduct to tend toward impartiality, as ours have."<sup>247</sup> And, "Ethical reasoning, once begun, pushes against our initially limited ethical horizons, leading us always toward a more universal point of view."<sup>248</sup> It's not clear these claims make sense for a simple, psychological capacity. It is

---

<sup>245</sup> "There may be more moral discussion in a democracy, but there will be some in any community . . . The development of science and the spread of education are relatively recent, but the desire for knowledge on which both are based is not . . . that the wider valuations in the long run attract more support than the narrower is a general tendency" (Singer, 116-117).

<sup>246</sup> Singer, 99.

<sup>247</sup> Singer, 106.

<sup>248</sup> Singer, 119.



rather the many interactions of reasoning beings that makes (socially activated) ethical reasoning a force for progress. At least, that's the best sense I can make of Singer's account of ethical reasoning.<sup>249</sup>

Once the significance of social pressure is recognized however, the progressive potential of reason as such—of reason *by itself*—is called into question. The kinds of moral dialogue that lead to the expansion of our moral categories, after all, don't just happen. In fact, the overcoming of social distance between privileged and marginalized groups for the sake of genuine dialogue is *already* an important egalitarian moral achievement. In ordinary life, justificatory pressure is not evenly distributed.<sup>250</sup> As we saw in the case of the ethics of care, conversations can continue over millennia without including certain constituencies (for example, women). Once the previously marginalized are able to contribute to the conversation, the terms of that conversation can shift, moral categories can grow, and the circle can expand. But the preceding condition for that expansion is the achievement of genuine dialogue. The marginalized have to be seen by privileged discussants as deserving of address, worthy of inclusion. As Jesse Prinz suggests, moral reform or moral expansion may in general be very difficult unless the powerful are made to suffer.<sup>251</sup> The point is reminiscent of a central theme in much feminist work: power often comes with the possibility of ignoring, and even of silencing, marginal voices. For the conversation to change, there must at the very least be *pressure*

---

<sup>249</sup> The social activation account also brings Singer's understanding of reason much closer to that of the evolutionary psychologist. I suspect some differences still remain, but they would be much greater if the simple, psychological reading were correct.

<sup>250</sup> By "ordinary life" I just mean life in agricultural societies rather than in hunter-gatherer bands. The latter have a reputation for "egalitarianism," which I suppose entails a certain homogeneity of justificatory pressure. However, that egalitarianism of status holds primarily among adult *males*. The influence of adult females is not as frequently discussed (could this fact be related to the fact that Western discussants are usually male?).

<sup>251</sup> Prinz, *Emotional Construction*, 293.

to justify oneself to the relevant parties.<sup>252</sup> What form that pressure needs to take will of course vary from case to case. In brief then, social and political forces pertaining to the distribution of justificatory pressure play an important, *activating* role for the progressive potential of reason.<sup>253</sup>

I want to add to this discussion of socially activated reason a further contextual point about its progressive force. The expansion of the moral circle depends on, in addition to social and political factors, important ecological and technological constraints. European colonizers may have had larger moral horizons, in at least some ways, than Pacific islanders during the colonial period (ignoring for the moment the fact that indigenous peoples of foreign lands usually fell outside of those horizons, however expansive Europeans were with respect to other Europeans). Their nations of origin were certainly larger. *But they were not more rational* (whether individually or collectively). Of course, Singer is not committed to the claim that they were. But we need to give this insight full force: life on an island is not like life on a large continental landmass. Life on a large continental landmass makes possible the emergence of certain forms of trade, certain forms of material accumulation, and certain forms of political organization that are simply impossible on small islands (at least, absent globalization).<sup>254</sup> It would be a mistake, therefore, to criticize on grounds of *irrationality* (individual or collective) early inhabitants of some Polynesian island for fishing (Singer argues that the moral circle

---

<sup>252</sup> Otherwise, authoritative representations of human life (which inform the *norms* of human life) in fact capture the experience of only a small subset of human lives. See Lugones and Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You!"; hooks, *Feminist Theory* (esp. chap. 1); Walker, *Moral Understandings* (esp. chap. 3).

<sup>253</sup> The pressure here, as I envision it, is both the pressure of interpersonal accountability and the pressure of *truth*, or of which claims pass as true (and which not). If the empirical project is, as I claimed early on, an essentially collaborative project, then a more even distribution of justificatory pressure may commend itself not only on moral but also on *epistemic* grounds. See Solomon, *Social Empiricism*.

<sup>254</sup> See Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

should expand to include most non-human animals) or even for fighting with neighboring bands. The terrain may be such that this is the only form of life that works.<sup>255</sup> So there are ecological and probably also technological constraints to consider in any general account of moral expansion.

The Rational Altruism Argument proposes to explain the existence of wide-ranging altruism—the fact that we have gone beyond mere concern for kin and for reciprocators—by appealing to reason. My counter-argument has had two prongs: first, a critique of the claim that sociobiology leaves an explanatory gap. The theory of indirect reciprocity fills that gap with no remainder. Second, a critique of Singer’s picture of reason. Either reason is to be understood as a simple, psychological capacity, in which case it cannot meaningfully explain boundary-crossing moral expansion; or it is to be understood as *socially activated*. But if ethical reasoning depends for its progressive force on social and political factors—and I have argued that it does, as well as on ecological and technological factors—then Singer’s claim that the ability to reason is the same as the ability to see the reasons for wider moral concern (and *a fortiori* the idea that reason explains wide-ranging altruism) is much diluted. Rather: reasoning beings in certain ecological and technological contexts, in response to, or as activated by, certain distributions of justificatory pressure, sometimes expand their moral categories and institutions. For thesis (5), and thus also for TOR1, this is the death of a thousand qualifications.

---

<sup>255</sup> See Kitcher’s discussion of how our hominid ancestors would likely have lived in partitioned environments, in *The Ethical Project* (§9). I am suggesting that there may be an ecological lack of incentive to ever get beyond this point, perhaps even certain disincentives to expand.

It would be surprising if reason had *no* role to play in moral progress. But that is not what I have argued. What the arguments of this section show, I think, is that what progress has been made has been the result of a collaborative venture, so to speak, between genetically self-interested reasoning primates and the diverse social worlds they have created in diverse ecological contexts. In what follows, we consider the possibility of a more central role for reason in leading the way forward.

#### 4. The Rational Foundation Argument

##### *Why Reason?*

It is time to consider Singer's forward-looking claim about reason. According to Singer's second thesis on reason, TOR2, reason can provide us with a foundation for ethics. Singer is keen to avoid what he sees as the existentialist's dilemma: in the absence of a rational foundation for ultimate value choice, we're left with arbitrary leaps of faith to different and incompatible value systems. But if some moral systems are better than others, then there must be more to say than this. Reason, accordingly, appears in a salvific light. If it can determine a single foundation for ultimate value choice, we are not left with the existentialist's dilemma. We have a path forward, a way to choose between different, conflicting value claims.

The Rational Foundation Argument, which aims to establish TOR2, takes two forms. There is an early version, which features prominently in Singer's original account, and there is a later version, formulated briefly in Singer's 2011 afterword, after an explicit rejection of the early version. Here, for the sake of thoroughness, I want to examine both.

The first version—call it the *default utilitarianism* version—accepts John Mackie’s claim that the ideal of objective ethical truth is implausible, strange, or “queer,” and aims to vindicate an ethic of universal concern (preference utilitarianism) with an argument that shows it to be the only rational ethic for social animals. The second version—call it the *normative truth* version—instead rejects Mackie’s claim, and aims to show that we *do* in some cases have objective (desire- or preference-independent) reasons for action.

In both cases, Singer is motivated by the concern that, absent a rational foundation for ethics, all we’re left with is conflicting, genetically-driven and emotionally-based moral judgments that point in no specific direction at all. In what follows, I argue against the Rational Foundational Argument, in both its default utilitarianism and normative truth versions. But I am keen to add that, even without a single rational foundation, it may be the case that there is more to say for expansive, humanist moral ideals than Singer imagines. However, I must put off making that positive case (without a rational foundation, as Singer understands it) until the next chapter.

### *The Default Utilitarianism Version*

Here is Singer’s most succinct statement of the argument in its early form:

In making ethical decisions I am trying to make decisions which can be defended to others. This requires me to take a perspective from which my own interests count no more, simply because they are my own, than the similar interests of others. Any preference for my own interests must be justified in terms of some broader impartial principle. It might seem that this is compatible with all sorts of moral rules and principles, including some which pay little or no attention to the interests of others, as long as they pay equally little attention to my own interests. When we investigate these other moral rules or principles, however, we find that the grounds for recommending them are either that they will further the interests

of all, or simply that they are right in themselves. If the first of these grounds is offered, the principle of equal consideration of interests remains the ultimate basis of morality, and we are left with the task of working out how best to further the interests of all. On the other hand, the idea of moral laws existing independently of the interests and preferences of living beings is implausible, once we have more straightforward explanations of the origins of ethics. Without the notion of an independent moral reality to back them up, however, claims made on behalf of these moral rules or principles can be no more than expressions of personal preferences which, from the collective point of view, should receive no more weight than other preferences. Thus conflicts over differing moral ideals can be treated like any other conflict of preferences, that is, by assessing them impartially and doing what, on the whole satisfies most preferences.<sup>256</sup>

Ethical practice begins, on Singer's account, in an attempt to justify ourselves to each other. The fact that some preferences or values are *mine* is irrelevant to their justification in a social context. In principle then, ethical justification involves the adoption of general principles that can impartially govern a group of rational beings. So the central desideratum for a foundational moral principle is, according to Singer, a kind of generalizability. The principle of the equal consideration of interests, which stipulates that everyone's interests should be considered impartially (my preferences mattering no more than yours), thus appears suitable as an ethic for a group of rational, social beings.

To be vindicated as the *only* rational foundation for ethics, alternatives have to be considered. Singer begins with egoism. Can egoism be prescribed as a general principle of morality for a group of rational beings? On one interpretation, egoism can be justified (at least in the mind of some economists) because "the individual pursuit of self-interest leads to the greatest good of all."<sup>257</sup> While Singer does not believe this claim is true, he does believe it meets the criterion of impartiality. It instantiates the principle of the equal consideration of interests, in conjunction with certain problematic empirical premises.

---

<sup>256</sup> Singer, 109-110. This is Singer's summary of the argument that spans 100-111.

<sup>257</sup> Singer, 103.

Empirical questions aside then, this kind of egoism does not in fact constitute a genuine alternative to Singer's principle.

“A different defense of disinterested egoism,” Singer says, “would be the claim that it is right or reasonable for everyone to further his or her own interests, *irrespective of the consequences of this for others*.”<sup>258</sup> But how could such a potentially disastrous morality be justified to a group of rational beings? It could, on the one hand, be the expression of subjective preference. In that case, it fails to be impartial, and must merely be taken into account by the preference utilitarian's genuinely general stance. On the other hand, this kind of egoism could be asserted as right or correct simpliciter: the claim “that egoism is a true moral principle, irrespective of the consequences of adopting it.”<sup>259</sup> But Singer is skeptical of this idea of objective moral values, for reasons analogous to Mackie's. “Values are inherently practical,” he says. “How can there be something in the universe, existing entirely independently of us and of our aims, desires, and interests, which provides us with reasons for acting in certain ways?”<sup>260</sup> Once we have a more convincing story about the origins of ethics, this picture of moral values makes little sense. Egoism is thus not a viable alternative to the principle of the equal consideration of interests as a rational foundation for ethics.

Could more conventional moral rules play that role? The idea that some set of moral rules (such as a prohibition on lying, or a prescription to keep promises) can function as a moral foundation falls to the same argument as egoism. Such rules can be thought of as general guidelines for conduct with a kind of “dependent validity” insofar

---

<sup>258</sup> Singer, 104.

<sup>259</sup> Singer, 105.

<sup>260</sup> Singer, 107.

as they tend to maximize welfare, in which case the principle of the equal consideration of interests still reigns supreme.<sup>261</sup> If thought of as expressions of subjective preference, they do not meet the criterion of impartiality, and should merely be taken into account by the preference utilitarian. And if it is argued that they are right in and of themselves, they invite the charge of metaphysical “queerness.” Singer concludes that conventional moral rules cannot provide an alternative to the principle of the equal consideration of interests as a rational foundation for ethics.

From these considerations, Singer concludes that the principle of the equal consideration of interests is the *only* possible rational foundation for ethics. Alternative proposals for an impartial foundation that would commend themselves to a group of rational beings all fall prey to the charge that they are either expressions of subjective preference, in which case they cannot be impartially action guiding, or that they are asserted to be objectively valid, a notion that Singer, like Mackie, finds mystifying and unsatisfactory. If there are no objective values apart from human interests, then the only rational thing to do is to maximize the fulfillment of human preferences.

When he revisits this argument in 2011, Singer finds it unsuccessful. The problem lies with a claim at the heart of the principle of the equal consideration of interests: this idea that “our own interests are no more important than the interests of others.”<sup>262</sup> If it is *true* that our own interests are no more important than the interests of others, then Singer’s preference utilitarianism is effectively the default position for a rational ethics. But Singer diagnoses an ambiguity in the claim. It can be taken, he says, *descriptively*—in which case, the claim that my interests are no more important than the interests of

---

<sup>261</sup> Singer, 108.

<sup>262</sup> Singer, 111; see also 199.



others just means that we all have our own interests. But it can also be taken, and for the success of the original argument it *must* be taken, *normatively*—as an objective ethical truth. This is in direct contradiction to his endorsement of Mackie’s view, according to which objective ethical truths are metaphysically “queer.”

The proposal of the preference utilitarian needs to be treated like the proposals of the egoist and the conventionalist in Singer’s original argument. Thus the principle of the equal consideration of interests is either put forward as the personal ethical preference of the utilitarian, in which case it lacks the requisite general and impartial action guiding force, or it is put forward as objectively true and valid, in which case it too counts as metaphysically “queer.” Having adopted Mackie’s skepticism about objective values, Singer finds his own normative stance undercut. “The denial of objective truth in ethics thus leads not to preference utilitarianism as a kind of metaphysically unproblematic default position,” he says, “but to skepticism about the possibility of reaching any meaningful conclusions at all about what we ought to do.”<sup>263</sup>

#### *The Normative Truth Version*

The principle of the equal consideration of interests cannot be defended as an unproblematic default position, Singer concedes. If it is to be defended, it must be as an ethical truth. While he found such a notion odd in 1981, Singer is much more open to it in 2011. At the end of his new afterword then, he cautiously endorses Derek Parfit’s recent defense of objective normative truth.<sup>264</sup>

---

<sup>263</sup> Singer, 199-200.

<sup>264</sup> See Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, volumes I and II (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Parfit's defense of this notion involves the highly stylized example of a man with "Future Tuesday Indifference"—a condition that makes him indifferent to suffering pain on any future Tuesday. In fact, Parfit contends, the man has reason *not* to be indifferent to pain (on Tuesdays or any other day), and so his preference is intrinsically, objectively *irrational*.<sup>265</sup> Closer scrutiny of his thought experiment reveals Parfit's analysis to be deeply problematic however, and Singer prefers a different, and more realistic, thought experiment.<sup>266</sup> Singer's aim is still to get this notion of objective reasons for action off the ground. If there are objective reasons to act, regardless of all our other motivations, then the notion of objective normative truth is coherent and defensible (contra Mackie). The principle of the equal consideration of interests might thus be defended, not as having metaphysically default validity, but as an objective ethical truth.<sup>267</sup>

Here is Singer's scenario.

I am about to spend a month on a remote island where there are no dentists when I detect the early signs of a toothache coming on. On the basis of past experience, I believe that if I don't go to the dentist today I am very likely to suffer an agonizing toothache all next month, which will prevent me enjoying what will otherwise be a rare opportunity to relax and enjoy the natural beauty of the island. If I do go to the dentist today, I will suffer mild discomfort for less than an hour. My knowledge that I will suffer an agonizing toothache all next month if I do not go to the dentist gives me a reason to go to the dentist today. It would be irrational of me to ignore the pain I will suffer if I do not go.<sup>268</sup>

He goes on:

But note that nothing has been said about my present desires. Perhaps I am the kind of person who is more influenced by what will happen to me *now*, or in the next few hours, than what will happen to me tomorrow or next week. Hence right

---

<sup>265</sup> Parfit, *On What Matters*, volume I, 56. The analysis here is a somewhat condensed version of that which appears in Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 123-124.

<sup>266</sup> For the (in my estimation) decisive criticism of Parfit, see Sharon Street, "In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally Coherent Eccentrics and the Contingency of What Matters," *Philosophical Issues* 19 (2009): 273-298.

<sup>267</sup> Singer here is open to the possibility of the existence of axioms of reason or "rational intuitions" relevant to ethics. He is inspired by Henry Sidgwick (see Singer, 200-201).

<sup>268</sup> Singer, 203.

now, when I am standing in front of my dentist's office, what I most want is to avoid anything even slightly unpleasant today. Intellectually, I know that next week, when I am in agony and my island sojourn is being ruined, I will regret this decision, but at the moment that knowledge has no impact on my desires. The fact that next week's agony does not motivate me to take steps to prevent it, however, does not vitiate the claim that I have a reason to take such steps.<sup>269</sup>

According to Singer, the remote island vacationer with a sore tooth (let's call him Soren) believes that if he doesn't go to the dentist today, he will suffer an agonizing toothache all next month. It is this knowledge that he will suffer, Singer claims, that gives Soren a reason to go to the dentist. But "nothing has been said about [Soren's] present desires." Therefore, the judgment that Soren has a reason to go to the dentist does not depend on his present desires. He is after all the kind of person who is more influenced by present concerns than by future concerns. In other words, Soren is on Singer's account not *epistemically* deficient—intellectually, he knows he will suffer—he is *motivationally* deficient. The point, I take it, is that what Soren has reason to do is a function of what he knows to be the case, not of his desires. His desires are irrelevant.

Singer concludes that the notion of objective reasons for action is viable. This suggests to him the possibility of a rational foundation for ethics: "[I]f we can accept the idea of objective normative truths, we do have an alternative to reliance on everyday moral intuitions that, according to the best current scientific understanding, are emotionally based responses that proved adaptive at some time in our evolutionary history."<sup>270</sup> If all we had were evolutionarily designed emotional responses to physical and social stimuli, there would be no principled basis for adjudicating between norms. But "The existence of objective moral truths allows us to hope that we may be able to

---

<sup>269</sup> Singer, 203.

<sup>270</sup> Singer, 204.

distinguish these intuitive responses from the reasons for action that all rational sentient beings would have, even rational sentient beings who had evolved in circumstances very different from our own.”<sup>271</sup>

I am not convinced that Singer’s thought experiment succeeds in establishing the viability of a notion of objective reasons for action. We should distinguish between (1) the claim that one’s reasons are independent of one’s *present* desires, and (2) the claim that one’s reasons are independent of *all* of one’s desires.<sup>272</sup> We can grant Singer’s claim that Soren does not presently have a desire to avoid future agony, or that it is significantly weaker than his other present desire not to go to the dentist. But this only establishes (1). Plausibly however, if Soren does have a reason to go to the dentist, it is because he will at some point desire not to suffer, or to enjoy his vacation, and because these desires are in some sense more important to him than the more fleeting desire not to go to the dentist. Thus, it is arguably this configuration of Soren’s desiderative economy that provides grounds for a charge of irrationality. In his cooler moments (if he is like most human beings), he recognizes that he values an agony-free month on the island *more* than not going to the dentist’s, but he lets his more immediate desires get the best of him. This is why he is irrational.<sup>273</sup>

If this account of Soren’s irrationality is correct, then Singer’s scenario does not establish the truth of (2). It is not the case that Soren has reasons that float free of *all* of his desires. They are rather a function of his deeper and more abiding desires. It is not Soren’s *belief* that he will suffer next month that gives him a reason to go to the dentist

---

<sup>271</sup> Singer, 204.

<sup>272</sup> By “desires” here, I mean specifically *non-rational* desires (excluding, that is, those desires given to us by reason, on Singer’s account).

<sup>273</sup> We can also say he is imprudent, and incontinent.

after all. It is rather his characteristically human aversion to suffering. In ordinary cases, being in pain centrally involves the desire not to be in pain. So Soren is irrational because, *in spite of* his (latent) dislike of suffering, his belief that he will suffer has no present effect on his behavior. Absent that dislike however, there would be no necessary connection between Soren's belief and his reason to go to the dentist.<sup>274</sup>

Singer's character is in some sense irrational. But whereas Singer accounts for that irrationality in terms of his having *objective* reasons for action (which he ignores), I contend that he is irrational because of tensions *internal* to his desiderative economy. In his cooler moments, Soren values an agony-free month of island vacationing more than not going to the dentist; but, in the moment, his more fleeting aversion to sitting in the dentist's chair gets the best of him. If Soren weren't an ordinary human being, if he were an enlightened Buddhist monk, say, or an alien visitor with some strange psychology, and if for that reason he really didn't want to not be in pain, he would indeed be very *different* from the rest of us, but that wouldn't be enough to make him *irrational*.<sup>275</sup> I conclude that Singer has failed to establish the viability of a notion of objective reasons for action or objective rationality, where "objective" means, roughly, desire- or preference-independent.<sup>276</sup>

---

<sup>274</sup> A being could in principle be rational, sentient, and social without *necessarily, always* being averse to all pain (though as a matter of contingent fact, most of us usually are). See Street, "In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference," for examples.

<sup>275</sup> See Street's discussion of "Indy" in "In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference."

<sup>276</sup> Given Singer's claim that reason has given us certain kinds of desires (e.g. to avoid inconsistency between beliefs), we should, more precisely, read "objective" as independent of desires and preferences *not given to us by reason*. The argument goes through just the same with this qualification.

*Reasons for Whom?*

Singer rejects the default utilitarianism version of the Rational Foundation Argument because the principle of the equal consideration of interests, if it cannot be an ethical truth, can only be a subjective preference. Thus he updates the Rational Foundation Argument in 2011 with a defense of normative truth. I have argued, however, that that defense fails. Is there anything else to be said for or about the principle of the equal consideration of interests as a foundation for ethics?

If it does hinge on this notion of objective ethical truth, then strictly speaking, Singer is right: the principle of the equal consideration of interests is incompatible with skepticism about objective values. Is a more modest defense of the principle of the equal consideration of interests possible on *prudential* grounds? The idea would be to propose the principle of the equal consideration of interests not as an objective ethical truth, but just as a useful idea. In the case of a community of equals, such a proposal may well gain widespread or total assent. But little follows from this. What happens when the conditions of equal power and voice break down?

On my view the default utilitarianism version of the Rational Foundation Argument fails not because it fails to answer the question of what ethic a community of rational, social (and presumed equal) beings should adopt, but because that is the wrong question. It is the wrong question because we are not that community. If reason is to provide a moral path forward for *us*, it must explain how *its* reasons connect with *our* reasons—the reasons we have in a world of difference.

If *all* we are is rational, social animals, then the claim that the principle of the equal consideration of interests is the only rational approach to ethics is quite plausible,

in my estimation. The hypothetical, bare-bones value choice scenario makes alternative proposals look silly. But of course, we are much *more* than just rational and social (and a bit less impartially rational, I'm inclined to say). In the actual world, different individuals, different groups, have differential access to power and cultural voice (differences of power often “justified” in terms of differences of sex, gender, race, class, ability, and so forth). Because of these differences, those with the greatest interest in a more impartial ethic often have the least power to implement it, and those with the greatest power to implement it have the least interest in doing so. Under conditions of difference of power or cultural voice, that is, the justificatory pressure that generates expansion lapses. Singer has nothing to say about this—he pictures all moral dialogue as egalitarian moral dialogue.

According to both Parfit and Singer (in 2011), we can and should distinguish between whether we have *normative reasons* to do something and whether we are *psychologically motivated* to do something.<sup>277</sup> The defense of normative truth is a separate matter, on their view, from the question of whether people will be moved to act in accordance with the truth. I concede that the issue of psychological motivation is a complex one, especially if the focus is on particular individuals. But I want to resist the idea that normative theorizing is especially fruitful when done in complete abstraction from the things that in fact move us. Singer asks: “If we gain acceptance of the claim that there are objective reasons for action only by granting that even those who fully acknowledge the existence of a reason for doing something will not necessarily be motivated by it, have we won only a Pyrrhic victory?”<sup>278</sup> Singer skirts around a

---

<sup>277</sup> Singer, 202.

<sup>278</sup> Singer, 204.

straightforward answer, but on my view, the answer is a simple *yes*. If reason is to provide a path forward for us, its reasons must connect with *our* reasons, and not only with the reasons we would have if we were the perfectly equal, rational, and impartial actors of our idealizations.<sup>279</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Singer's account of evolution, ethics, and moral progress in *The Expanding Circle* can be summed up, I have claimed, in five central theses. The first theses, on sociobiology, state that sociobiology, or what we would now call evolutionary psychology, explains the evolutionary origins of altruism, but that it cannot provide us with a foundation for ethics. I know of no reason to resist Singer on either point. Singer's fifth thesis, on progress, states that we should adopt rules that maximize welfare. This expansive, humanist moral ideal is in my view very attractive. But its merits are not closely tied to Singer's theses on reason. Accordingly, I have focused a critical eye solely on Singer's theses on reason.

Singer's first and backward-looking thesis on reason claims that reason explains the existence of wide-ranging altruism. His argument to that conclusion assumes, first, that standard sociobiological accounts leave an explanatory gap that must be filled, and second, that the ability to reason is the same as the ability to see the reasons for wider moral concern. I have argued that Singer is wrong on both counts.

---

<sup>279</sup> By following Parfit in divorcing the normative from the psychological, Singer substantially weakens his account in my view. Singer's account of how reason has a motivational hold on us plays an important part in making his view initially plausible. If he really does think questions of psychological motivation can be completely bracketed, then whatever victory he hopes to have *will* in fact be Pyrrhic, I think.



Singer's second and forward-looking thesis on reason claims that reason can provide us with a foundation for ethics. The first version of his argument for that claim presents preference utilitarianism as a metaphysically unproblematic default position for any set of rational and social beings in search of a group ethic. Having realized the tension between this approach and his adoption of Mackie's skepticism about objective values or objective ethical truth, Singer disavows the argument in its original form in his 2011 afterword. In its stead comes a defense of objective normative truth. That defense fails as well however, because it overlooks the significance of subjective desire or preference in its account of "objective" irrationality.

For Singer, the significance of both the backward-looking and forward-looking claims is that, together, they paint a compelling picture. Evolution, according to this picture, has only taken us so far. It has given us a concern for kin, for our own small group, and for potential reciprocators. Having become reasoning beings along the way however, reason has taken up the slack, pushing on the arbitrary boundaries of our affections. The result has been a slow and steady climb to an increasingly universal point of view, in which everyone's interests (even, at the extreme, those of non-human animals) are taken into consideration. We can continue to make progress if we get on board, according to this picture. If we adopt a humanist ethic of universal concern, we are not making an arbitrary choice of ultimate values. Rather, we are in some sense fulfilling the movement of reason in history.

I have argued that Singer's picture of the role of reason in moral progress is flawed. In its stead, I have offered a picture that is more in keeping with current evolutionary understanding. On this picture, we are genetically self-interested, socially

calculating, gossiping primates, characterized by various differences of social status and thus social power, who inhabit diverse social, technological, and ecological niches. Under certain conditions, our moral categories and institutions expand. While some internal, psychological constraints do play a part in this process, the main impetus for moral change is social: we expand our categories and institutions when existing categories and institutions come under new forms of justificatory pressure. In all but the most unusual circumstances, this pressure is uneven—a point Singer repeatedly misses. And yet, when by virtue of ecological change, technological innovation, or political agitation, justificatory pressures shift, the result *can* be an expanding circle of moral concern. For those of us with broad, humanist moral ideals then, we do well to keep an eye on all of these factors.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## THE CASE FOR UTOPIA

## 1. Introduction

In this final chapter, I examine Philip Kitcher's recent arguments in favor of expansive moral ideals. Kitcher's account, "pragmatic naturalism," pictures ethics as an evolving practice that is as old as human life itself. Ethics is a social technology, he argues, initially aimed at relieving social tension caused by failures of altruism. This "ethical project" has evolved, and its functions have proliferated, sometimes generating functional conflict. These conflicts can be overcome, Kitcher argues, if we reinstate the original function of ethics—remediating altruism failures—as primary. This doesn't mean undoing the progress inherent in the development of richer and more sophisticated conceptions of the good life (the kinds of lives historically available to very few people). It means rather that the ideal for us should be to make such rich and fulfilling lives available to all. Observing that this is the ethical ideal likely to emerge from an imagined global conversation under ideal epistemic and affective conditions gives it a normative force, Kitcher claims, that none of its rivals have.

Kitcher's account is worth analyzing for two reasons. First, Kitcher's pragmatic naturalism offers a functionalist framework for making sense of ethical progress. This framework allows us to speak intelligibly about *objective* progress in ethics, on analogy with objective technological progress. Second, Kitcher's account is explicitly social. Ethical progress on his account is not the accumulation of ethical truth, but rather the more successful discharging of ethical functions—an essentially social achievement.

On both counts, however, Kitcher's pragmatic naturalism faces difficulties. After providing a more detailed overview of his views, I will argue, first, that functionalism cannot provide the modest objectivity Kitcher wants for his account of progress. This is because his account of the original function of ethics is inadequate, and because his account of the problem background to which ethics is a response is untenable. Second, I will argue that Kitcher's ethical ideal is *insufficiently* social. His proposed vision of the good itself is too robust and his ethical method too weak. In this respect, I will argue, he repeats Singer's mistake of leaving expansive ideals disconnected from the real world.

Kitcher's ethical functionalism, I will argue, cannot be salvaged. With it, we must give up on the idea of a distinctly ethical or moral axis of progress. However, I will argue that the shortcomings in Kitcher's ethical ideal can and should be corrected. Doing so involves thinning out the Utopian ethical vision and strengthening Kitcher's ethical method. The imagined global conversation, I will argue, needs to *actually* happen. The case for expansive humanist moral ideals, in other words, needs to be forcefully made through political action. Although humanist ideals cannot claim for themselves a strong kind of objectivity, the charge that political action reduces humanist work to simple plays of power can be turned back.

In concluding, I will, in a very preliminary way, discuss two ways in which humanists might speak meaningfully of progress in our moralities—two axes of progress, as it were. What matters most in an account of progress, I will suggest, is primarily to capture the possibility of progress for us, here and now. If, at the end of the day, naturalists cannot provide a single "moral" spectrum against which to chart all moral change, that is, on my view, no great loss.

## 2. Pragmatic Naturalism

### *The Ethical Project*

Kitcher's view, *pragmatic naturalism*, pictures ethics as a social practice with a history—one that spans most of our history as a species.<sup>280</sup> As its name indicates, pragmatic naturalism is inspired, first, by pragmatism, in its attempt to connect philosophy with human life, and in its “Deweyan picture of ethics as growing out of the human social situation.”<sup>281</sup> Further, its account of ethical truth is inspired by William James' approach to truth (James famously quipped that “truth happens to an idea”; Kitcher thinks truth can “happen” to ethical ideas under certain conditions).<sup>282</sup> Second, pragmatic naturalism is naturalistic, insofar as no mysterious entities are invoked in the explanation of ethics. “Naturalists intend that no more things be dreamt of in their philosophies than there are in heaven and earth,” Kitcher says.<sup>283</sup> His aim is to provide a compelling picture of ethics that can simultaneously connect the present to the past, dispelling any sense of mystery in our ethical practice, and reinvigorate expansive moral aspirations, without any sleight of hand. As he puts it: “The aim is to use history—in the ways, and to the extent, we can reconstruct it—to liberate discussions of ethics from the confining pictures that prompt a sense of mystery.”<sup>284</sup>

---

<sup>280</sup> Kitcher speaks of “ethics,” “ethical practice,” and “ethical progress.” The language of the “moral” or of “morality” doesn't really make an appearance in the book. In this expository section then, I'll follow his language. My own preferred idioms will reappear in subsequent sections.

<sup>281</sup> Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*, 3.

<sup>282</sup> Kitcher, §38. Kitcher's account of ethical truth is not essential to his pragmatic naturalism, so I don't mention it further in what follows.

<sup>283</sup> Kitcher, 3 (an inversion of Hamlet borrowed from Nelson Goodman; cf. fn. 6).

<sup>284</sup> Kitcher, 13.

Kitcher thus begins with the past: specifically, with the social situation of our hominid ancestors. Our ancestors, on Kitcher's account, had limited altruistic dispositions. Like contemporary chimpanzees, they were altruistic enough to live together, but the limits of their altruism often led to social friction and violence, requiring cumbersome bouts of peacemaking and reassurance.<sup>285</sup> However: "A look at their descendants some quarter of a million generations later discloses that the limits have been transcended."<sup>286</sup> If the tense social situation of our ancestors is regarded as a problem, then the problem has effectively been solved. This is not to say no further tensions exist today. Something has happened, however, that enables us to live together in much larger groups than the bands of our ancestors, and to do so with very little conflict, relatively speaking.

The innovation that explains the transition from the life of our hominid ancestors to modern human living, Kitcher claims, is a "capacity for normative guidance." Normative guidance replaces "The cumbersome peacemaking of our original hominids" with a device "preempting rupture rather than reacting to it."<sup>287</sup> It is not necessary to suppose that a single psychological change accounts for the jump. Kitcher prefers a liberal understanding of normative guidance. Through the use of language, our ancestors acquired the capability to understand and obey commands, in some form or other, and they learned to substitute basic forms of behavioral altruism for the altruism failures that had preceded.

---

<sup>285</sup> Kitcher, §10. Kitcher derives this picture of the social life of our ancestors primarily from findings in game theory and primatology. None of his core claims in this area are particularly controversial, to the best of my knowledge.

<sup>286</sup> Kitcher, 68.

<sup>287</sup> Kitcher, 69.

Kitcher's idea of an altruism failure is relatively simple. A behaves altruistically toward B when A, while acting, takes B's desires into account. Conversely, A *fails* to behave altruistically toward B when A does not take B's desires into account. Insofar as social living requires a mutual accommodation of desires, such altruism failures produce social tension. If A can be made to behave altruistically toward B, to be responsive to B's desires or to accommodate them in some way, then this solves the problem of altruism failure. We do not even need to suppose that A's motivation for behaving altruistically is a concern for B or for B's desires. Proxies (e.g. fear of punishment by C) can achieve the same end result.<sup>288</sup> Perhaps in tandem with practices of punishment, we may suppose that there emerged in the psychological lives of our ancestors an internalized sense of what is and is not allowed, or what we would call conscience.<sup>289</sup>

Central to Kitcher's picture of the emergence of ethics is the idea that, from its very inception, normative guidance was *socially embedded*.<sup>290</sup> What this means is that the content of the behavioral and educational codes that came to govern the lives of our ancestors was always a joint product of the adult members of the band, produced in and through group discussion. Kitcher adduces three lines of evidence for this strong claim: first, anthropological studies of contemporary hunter-gatherer bands reveal this kind of egalitarianism at work in their societies; second, insofar as normative guidance *solves* the problem of social tension, it must actually solve the problem of social tension, and not just displace it; third, it is likely that our ancestors lived in ecological contexts that generated egalitarian pressures. For instance, Kitcher argues that the evolution of

---

<sup>288</sup> I am jumping over Kitcher's very detailed and informative discussion of the varieties and origins of altruism in §§3-7.

<sup>289</sup> Kitcher, §§12-13.

<sup>290</sup> Kitcher, §14.

hominid sociality depended on our ancestors' ability to band together in coalitions. The resulting race to form coalitions (to pool resources and therefore gain an evolutionary advantage) would have terminated, according to game theoretical models, in "a situation in which the habitat is partitioned into territories controlled by sizable coalitions, occasionally with a floating population of individuals who live in the fringes."<sup>291</sup> Given the competitive pressure from neighboring bands in such situations, the cooperation of every individual would be needed for group survival. Our ancestors' practice of deliberating together and articulating codes of conduct by which to live their lives—a practice to which we are heirs—is what Kitcher calls *the ethical project*.

From the early ventures in norm-governed social living of our ancestors, new codes have evolved (primarily through cultural forms of selection) as norms and ideals have been passed down and renegotiated from generation to generation. Hence, the ethical project is one we are still involved in today. While the historical record is too sparse to reconstruct with any certainty the actual course of events between the emergence of ethical project and its contemporary form, we can nevertheless tell a plausible "how possibly" story about that development. That story, on Kitcher's retelling, emphasizes the transition from a relative egalitarianism to a mild division of labor. "Deliberations about how to share scarce resources surely acknowledged the basic desires of all members of the band," he says, "and *endorsed* those desires, in the sense of preferring everyone's desires to be satisfied provided there is enough to go around. Attitudes of endorsement create pressure to transform conditions of scarcity into a state

---

<sup>291</sup> Kitcher, 63. See also the computer simulations of Herbert Roseman, "Altruism, Evolution, and Optional Games" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2008).



of greater abundance.”<sup>292</sup> The resulting division of labor, in Kitcher’s “how possibly” reconstruction, generates a surplus of goods, which can be used in times of scarcity for survival, or in times of abundance for trade.<sup>293</sup> Success with this social arrangement generates pressure for individuals in the band to develop their talents—an injunction that might be formulated explicitly in the group’s ethical code. Those who perform especially difficult or demanding socially necessary jobs are rewarded with social approbation (and perhaps also, it is imagined, the approbation of the ancestors, the gods, or more generally of the “unseen enforcer” of the ethical code<sup>294</sup>). New conceptions of the good life and of excellence emerge. Institutions such as private property are developed, perhaps beginning with the specialized tools required by specialists in their given roles. New psychological capabilities are brought to bear on ethical living—not only fear of (visible or invisible) enforcers of the rules, but desires for social recognition, pride, reverence and awe, and so forth. And thus the familiar apparatus of recognizable and more modern moralities is born.

The aim of providing this kind of story, Kitcher says, is not to give us historical knowledge. It is rather to dispel the sense that no ordinary processes could have gotten us from the starting point of our ancestors (a starting point we *do* have some historical certainty about, according to Kitcher) to our current situation. And by Kitcher’s judgment, the story we can tell plausibly explains how it is possible to get from there to here.<sup>295</sup>

---

<sup>292</sup> Kitcher, 122.

<sup>293</sup> Kitcher, §19.

<sup>294</sup> The unseen enforcer is on Kitcher’s account an innovation in the evolution of the ethical project which was probably culturally “selected” for because of its ability to increase compliance to ethical injunctions. This explains why all extant ethical traditions are religiously entangled (§17).

<sup>295</sup> Kitcher, §§19-21.

However, the very fact of telling a naturalistic story about the cultural evolution of the ethical project poses a problem. There are episodes in both recent and not so recent history that we are inclined to view as *progressive*. Kitcher's examples of recent progress include the achievements of feminism, the abolition of chattel slavery, and what he calls "the withering of vice" (i.e. the relative normalization of homosexual desire).<sup>296</sup> It is hard to resist the judgment, Kitcher argues, that these stories are not stories of mere change—that they are instead stories of progress. Thus, he says, we need a framework for making good naturalistic sense of this idea of progress.

*Functions, Ethics, and Progress*

Kitcher proposes a *functionalist* framework for rendering these and other claims of ethical progress intelligible. His account begins with two clear cases of meaningful function-talk: first, there is the artifactual case, in which an entity has some function as a result of the desires of its designer (and the parts of the artifact each have the function of contributing to that overall function); second, there is the biological case, in which an organism's parts, traits, or organs have the function of helping the organism survive and reproduce—i.e. respond effectively to the most general Darwinian pressures (and likewise at smaller levels, parts of cells and organs and so forth have the function of contributing to large scale functioning that discharges the more general Darwinian function).<sup>297</sup> In both cases, according to Kitcher, we can speak of the "problem background" to which a function is a response.<sup>298</sup> In the artifactual case, the problem

---

<sup>296</sup> Kitcher, §§24-26.

<sup>297</sup> Here Kitcher is drawing on his earlier work in Philip Kitcher, "Function and Design," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 18 (1993): 379-397.

<sup>298</sup> Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*, §34.

background is constituted by the desires a designer wishes to fulfill with some piece of technology, and in the biological case, it is constituted by Darwinian selection pressures for a given organism in a given environment.

We can begin to understand the concept of *ethical* functions, according to Kitcher, by seeing the technological and biological cases as two extremes of a continuum that admits of intermediate cases. Kitcher explains:

Between clear-headed recognition of problem structures [in the artifactual cases] and the biological cases, in which no cognitive subject who sees the problems and designs the solutions is present, stand intermediate cases. On occasion, people recognize difficulties—they know not all is well—even though they cannot frame the troubles exactly. You feel twinges of discomfort and sometimes pain when you perform particular motions; your doctor formulates the problem precisely and prescribes a supportive device or a program of exercises.<sup>299</sup>

Against this background understanding of functions, Kitcher proposes that social embedded normative guidance (the development of which marked our species' first steps in the ethical project) be understood as a *social technology* responding to the problem background of—and thus having the original function of responding to—recurring altruism failures.<sup>300</sup>

Regarding our (unintentionally) pioneering ancestors, Kitcher says,

None of them had a clear understanding of that problem background. Moved by a sense of the fragilities and tensions of their social life, they first guided their behavior by regularities to help them avoid trouble and later discussed with one another rules to govern conduct, to be applied in increasingly explicit systems of punishment. Crucially, the problems arise not for a single individual, but for the social group . . . Each of them feels the difficulties the circumstances of their shared life impose, the frequent tensions, the long episodes of peacemaking. *The problems are felt by all*. Ethical codes serve the function of solving the original difficulties, dimly understood by these ancestors.<sup>301</sup>

---

<sup>299</sup> Kitcher, 221.

<sup>300</sup> Kitcher, 221 ff.

<sup>301</sup> Kitcher, 221. The emphasis is his.

Thus the social tensions that characterize chimpanzee-hominid life can be conceived as symptoms of an underlying social problem: altruism failure. The ethical project initially emerged as a (partial) solution to that problem. It had to take the form it took—socially embedded normative guidance—because, under the social and ecological conditions faced by our ancestors, alternative responses to the felt social tensions, such as dictatorial rule, would not have actually solved the underlying problem. “To use an obvious analogy,” Kitcher says, a dictatorial solution “palliates the symptoms without attending to the underlying cause, as if the doctor were to offer to cure your aching knee by amputating your leg.”<sup>302</sup>

This functionalist framework allows Kitcher to provide a simple account of progress. Just as, in the technological case, progress consists in growing effectiveness or efficiency in discharging the relevant functions—a process Kitcher calls *functional refinement*—so also, in the ethical case, progress can be understood in the refinement of ethical codes that permits a more effective response to the problem of recurring altruism failures that cause social tension.<sup>303</sup> The ethical project “began in small, egalitarian societies, in which people with limited tendencies to psychological altruism lived together. Feeling the tensions of their social lives, they had no successful options except to address the (unrecognized) cause—and ethics was born with the function of remedying altruism failures.”<sup>304</sup> Our ancestors began to make ethical progress when they found ways of discharging this function more effectively. Advances in techniques of socialization, the development and refinement of systems of punishment, and expansions of the moral

---

<sup>302</sup> Kitcher, 225.

<sup>303</sup> Kitcher, 221-225.

<sup>304</sup> Kitcher, 229.

circle, effected either by attending to the marginalized within a society or by forming new bonds with another society all served to enhance social harmony in some way, decreasing conflict by resolving altruism failures.<sup>305</sup> “Major instances of ethical progress can thus be seen in terms of functional refinement, where the function in question is that identified as the original function of ethics.”<sup>306</sup>

However, the process of solving an initial problem can give rise to new problems. The invention of the automobile solves one kind of problem, related to a population’s transportation needs, but many new problems are generated along the way—how to regulate traffic, balance speed and safety, build and repair infrastructure, etc. This is functional *generation*, and it exists in the ethical case as well, Kitcher says. Social tensions might initially be decreased and basic needs met through a mild division of labor, and this might then generate new problems relative to the desires and aspirations of, and demands on, skilled laborers (for example). So the ethical project evolves not only through functional refinement but also functional generation. Just as the development of the automobile solves one problem and creates many more, so too new ethical functions are generated as we continue to address the problems posed by social living.<sup>307</sup>

Functional generation is important for Kitcher’s account because it raises the possibility of functional *conflict*—the case in which fulfillment of generated functions comes at the cost of fulfilling other generated functions, or of fulfilling the original function. Functional refinement helps make sense of a notion of *local* progress, but

---

<sup>305</sup> Kitcher, 230-237.

<sup>306</sup> Kitcher, 237.

<sup>307</sup> Kitcher, 237-240.

functional generation and functional conflict explain why it can be hard to speak meaningfully of *global* progress. Kitcher elaborates:

In the transition to hierarchical societies with pronounced division of labor and of status, fulfillment of the generated functions (supplying enough to satisfy the previously endorsed desires of all) is obtained at the cost of compromising the satisfaction of the original function . . . The societies who emerge from these changes have the choice of whether to take steps to improve the fulfillment of the original function at cost to the solutions they have achieved with respect to the generated problems.<sup>308</sup>

According to Kitcher’s “how possibly” story of the evolution of ethics, divisions of labor (and, subsequently, status) initially fostered relative social harmony by making it possible to consistently meet everyone’s basic needs—thus solving the problem of altruism failures manifest in social tension. But this solution in turn generates new desires and new conceptions of the good life for individuals occupying particular social roles. Thus there emerges a tension between the problem of satisfying these newer, higher order desires and *continuing* to solve the problem of altruism failure.

In and of itself then, the functionalist framework only suffices to make talk of ethical progress intelligible. It is insufficient, by itself, to pronounce definitively on what counts as progress *for us* (here, now), given the generated functions of ethics—in particular those that conflict with the original function. In addition to the functionalist framework then, we need an account of how to solve the problem of functional conflict. That is what Kitcher offers with his discussion of ethical method.

---

<sup>308</sup> Kitcher, 241.

## *Utopia*

On Kitcher's view, we face today a scaled up version of the predicament of our ancestors. This is true insofar as our global civilization is marked by failures of altruism.<sup>309</sup> Further, "All members of our species face the common problem of avoiding (further) environmental changes that would dramatically disrupt human lives."<sup>310</sup> It might be thought that the globally privileged and powerful can insulate themselves from these changes, but "It is overwhelmingly improbable that the insulation can be maintained for long, given the technological possibilities for violent retaliation now increasingly available to the poor and oppressed (or to those who claim to represent them)."<sup>311</sup> Thus we face today on a global scale a problem analogous to the problem faced by our hunter-gatherer ancestors: that of remedying altruism failures causing social tensions that none can escape.

Kitcher's positive proposal accordingly puts the priority on remedying altruism failures—the original function of ethics. He says:

Consider an imaginary social state: Utopia. In this state, each member of the human population has a serious chance of living a good life, a life in which the person can recognize a number of different possibilities for living, can make a free choice of a project informed by that recognition, and realize a significant number of the plans, intentions, and desires central to that project; moreover the chances of living such lives are equal across the population . . . Pragmatic naturalism's proposal: Once a particular stage of technological development has been reached, a world counts as good to the extent actualizing it would lead us toward Utopia.<sup>312</sup>

---

<sup>309</sup> "Wherever there is a failure to respond to the desires of another person, with respect to whom there is the potential for interaction, *we have a contemporary analog of the problem that underlies the original function of ethics*" (Kitcher, 304, his emphasis).

<sup>310</sup> Kitcher, 305.

<sup>311</sup> Kitcher, 311.

<sup>312</sup> Kitcher, 316-317.

Utopia, then, is Kitcher's solution to the problem of functional conflict (not in general, but *our* problem of functional conflict, here and now). And although Utopia is an ideal, it is not beyond the realm of possibility for us at this point of human development, according to Kitcher.<sup>313</sup> The sophisticated conceptions of the good life that first emerged in inegalitarian societies do represent some kind of progress, but in Kitcher's Utopian vision, these generated functions of ethics are made to serve the original function.<sup>314</sup>

Kitcher calls the conditions under which the ethical project first began, which involved conversations of all adult members of a particular band discussing their shared desires and needs, conditions of *mutual engagement*. "Because of their existing dispositions to psychological altruism, limited though these were" he says, "because of the pressures on the group and the perceived need for joint action, the original ethicists were forced into mutual engagement with people who lived beside them every day."<sup>315</sup> This form of interaction was effective at generating ethical solutions to their shared social problems.

Because he pictures our current predicament as a scaled up version of the predicament of our ancestors, Kitcher suggests that an ethical method suited to resolving functional conflict today should replicate these conditions of mutual engagement. It is no longer possible, given the size of the global human population, to stage an *actual* global conversation. But an imagined conversation under the right conditions can stand in for the actual conversations of our ancestors.<sup>316</sup>

---

<sup>313</sup> Kitcher, §§ 48-49.

<sup>314</sup> Kitcher, 317.

<sup>315</sup> Kitcher, 340.

<sup>316</sup> Kitcher, 341. Kitcher occasionally suggests the global dialogue might *actually* be made to occur, but the idea is left undeveloped, and it doesn't figure in his use of the method to turn back skeptical arguments.



Thus Kitcher proposes that the “Ideal conversation,” which is to generate a workable picture of progress, “consists in attempts to show that proposals that participants desire to implement as ways of responding to functional conflict either accord or fail to accord either with ethical functions all participants recognize or with their shared understanding of the need to respond to the wishes of all.”<sup>317</sup> This in turn requires that participants in the conversation meet affective and epistemic requirements that make the imagined conversation fruitful. Participants must not rely on false beliefs about the natural world, or on false or incomplete beliefs about the wishes of others, and they must know the consequences for everyone of proposed institutional changes.<sup>318</sup> Furthermore, the desires of conversationalists must be responsive to the desires of all other conversationalists, such that no “contaminated” desires—desires that, to be fulfilled, require that the like desires of others be thwarted—make their way into conversationalists’ proposals.<sup>319</sup>

The method of pragmatic naturalism therefore recommends scrutinizing proposed standards of progress in light of the ideal conversation. The proposed method, Kitcher argues—a global conversation, conducted under ideal epistemic and affective conditions, and involving all cognitively competent human adults, each being given an equal voice—is likely to produce something very much like Utopia.<sup>320</sup> Starkly non-Utopian proposals,

---

<sup>317</sup> Kitcher, 348.

<sup>318</sup> See Kitcher, 344-354.

<sup>319</sup> Kitcher’s discussion of the types of desires allowed in the ideal conversation is a bit more complex, but this is the gist of it. See 346-348.

<sup>320</sup> Insofar as we do not know what it would be like to live under certain social arrangements, and insofar as different groups might choose to prioritize different functions differently, Kitcher’s method recommends experiments in living to settle factual questions about the consequences of living under certain systems, and it can accommodate a degree of pluralism (Kitcher, §55).

he argues, can be shown to fall afoul of conditions of mutual engagement. They are either grounded in false beliefs, or simply fail to take into account the wishes of all.<sup>321</sup>

Kitcher's method for justifying "revolutionary" ethical change (change that resolves functional conflict) is egalitarian. While this might be imagined to make the method viciously circular—assuming the very same equality that is supposed to be *produced* by the method—in fact, the types of equality that characterize the method (imagined global dialogue), on the one hand, and the progressive proposal (Utopia), on the other, are different. It is at least possible, Kitcher says, that a conversation undertaken under conditions of discursive equality *not* produce an egalitarian vision of the good. As a matter of fact, he thinks, the method *does* produce an egalitarian vision of the good (namely, Utopia). But it doesn't do so as a matter of logical necessity. This shows that Kitcher's pair of proposals—Utopia, and its justifying method—achieves an important form of *coherence*. And this, Kitcher argues, is enough to distinguish pragmatic naturalism's understanding of progress from that of its rivals.<sup>322</sup>

### 3. Against Functionalism

#### *The Original Function of Ethics*

In this section and the next, I take aim both at Kitcher's functionalism and at his normative proposals. The case against functionalism is decisive, in my estimation, for the reasons I lay out below. I will be more conciliatory in my remarks on Utopia and global discourse. But I begin with a two-pronged critique of functionalism. I contend, first, that

---

<sup>321</sup> See the discussion of the Nietzschean challenger (Kitcher, §56).

<sup>322</sup> Kitcher, 341-342. Kitcher's point here is hard to understand clearly. I understand it most fundamentally as a critique of alternatives: non-Utopian ideals are unlikely to gain traction in the conversation Kitcher imagines. Whether or how this point is normatively significant is a question to which I return below.

Kitcher's account of the original function of ethics is deeply problematic, and second, that his account of the problem background to which ethics is a response is untenable.

Kitcher's talk of ethical functions, functional generation, and functional conflict only does what he needs it to on an assumption of *functional persistence* for the original function of ethics. It is because the original function of remedying altruism failures persists that there is now a problem calling for a collectively reasoned solution (because that original function conflicts with generated functions). Let us grant that the original function of ethics is in some sense still with us. Even so, I submit, it is not clear that the result can be in line with Kitcher's intentions. This is because his account of the original function of ethics is arguably incorrect. I offer three reasons to be skeptical.

The first is that the account is speculative. While Kitcher concedes that connecting the ethical project from its inception to its present day incarnations is a matter amenable only to "how possibly" explanations, he also insists that we can be pretty sure about how the ethical project got started. Remedying altruism failures is how ethics *actually* got started, according to Kitcher. But, as Ron Mallon notes, there are alternative accounts of the origins of ethics in the literature: normative guidance might have grown "out of selection for ways of regulating eating together so as not to disgust those with whom we eat" (a position argued for by Leon Kass<sup>323</sup>), or from the practice of "regulating our conspecifics to avoid 'poisons and parasites' (benefiting ourselves via herd immunity)" (the position of Daniel Kelly<sup>324</sup>). "Or perhaps," Mallon says, "we came to endorse and debate third-party norms only as a mere byproduct of first-person aversions to action types" (a view he associates with Debra Lieberman, John Tooby, and Leda

---

<sup>323</sup> Leon Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (Free Press, 1994).

<sup>324</sup> Daniel Kelly, *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust* (MIT Press, 2011).

Cosmides<sup>325</sup>). Mallon concludes: “The point is that reconstructing the actual natural history of humanity is a quite difficult affair, and that it seems that large parts of Kitcher’s discussion are hostage to the truth of a particular empirical thesis about it.”<sup>326</sup> This is odd, since what’s at stake is an objective account of ethical progress.

Second, although this is in a way an extension of the previous point, Kitcher is careful to paint the invention of the “unseen enforcer” as a *distortion* of the ethical project, one that emerges some time after its inception. Today, he says, we should simply undo the distortion.<sup>327</sup> If “distortions” are so easy to undo (relatively speaking), this already casts a shadow on the assumption of functional persistence. But the deeper point is that Kitcher may be wrong. It could be that ethics is “religiously entangled” not only because “the very specific link between unseen powers and ethical conduct bestows significant advantages in *cultural* competition,”<sup>328</sup> but also because the gods were already there at the beginning, so to speak. On Julian Jaynes’ account, what Kitcher calls “normative guidance” was, from the very beginning, a rather literal case of divine command.<sup>329</sup> Jaynes argues that our ancestors had “bicameral” minds, in which the right hemisphere of the brain sometimes gave behavioral guidance perceived by the left hemisphere as coming from “outside.” If something like this is true, then the original function of ethics is to do what the gods say—hardly a function to which we feel bound today. Even more problematically, Jaynes argues that, for a variety of reasons, we no are

---

<sup>325</sup> Debra Lieberman, John Tooby, and Leda Cosmides, “Does Morality Have a Biological Basis? An Empirical Test of the Factors Governing Moral Sentiments Regarding Incest,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society* 270 (2003): 819-826.

<sup>326</sup> Ron Mallon, “Review of Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/31102-the-ethical-project/>.

<sup>327</sup> Kitcher, §27. See also 368.

<sup>328</sup> Kitcher, 115, my emphasis.

<sup>329</sup> Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Houghton Mifflin, 1976).

longer able to hear the gods: the bicameral mind has “broken down,” and now our brain hemispheres are generally more integrated. Modern subjectivity has emerged precisely as a response to the silence of the gods. On a Jaynesian account, that is, fulfilling the original function is no longer even possible.

Third and finally, even if we set aside rival hypotheses about the origin of ethics and the sources of its religious entanglements, Kitcher’s account of the original function of ethics is problematic *on its own terms*. Remedying altruism failures, for Kitcher, is the *original* function of ethics—it was the function of our ancestors’ first ventures in socially embedded normative guidance—and it is to be the *primary* function of ethics for us today—the benchmark for ethical progress. If the original function of ethics were something radically different from remedying altruism failures, then Kitcher’s proposal for today couldn’t go through, as I have just suggested. But now notice that, according to Kitcher’s “how possibly” reconstruction, our ancestors inhabited partitioned environments and competed with neighboring bands.<sup>330</sup> This means that “remedying altruism failures” *simpliciter* could not have been the original function of ethics. Rather, the original function of ethics (by Kitcher’s own account) must have been to remedy, not *all* altruism failures, but rather *in-group* altruism failures. Out-group enmity, that is, was just as much a part of the original function of ethics as in-group amity, being its precondition.

Kitcher borrows from Singer the idea that the development of peaceful relations between previously hostile bands counts as progress. Expanding the circle of moral concern, he says, addresses “classes of previously occurring altruism failures (in

---

<sup>330</sup> Kitcher, §9.

aggressive interactions among neighboring bands).”<sup>331</sup> By identifying “remedying altruism failures” as the original function of ethics, Kitcher is able to fold such sociomoral transformations neatly into his functionalist scheme, and to make a powerful case for its ongoing relevance today. I contend, however, that the transformation of hostile relations *between* bands cannot simply be painted as one more “refinement” of the original function of ethics. If we take Kitcher’s model seriously, the forging of inter-band harmony is not a more thorough fulfillment of the *original* function of ethics but is rather a departure from that original function. It remedies certain failures of altruism, but not those that were relevant at the dawn of ethics. In fact, it “remedies” those failures of altruism that were essential to the initial development of ethics and without which the ethical project would never have been born. If we follow Kitcher and Singer in viewing the forging of peace across group boundaries as an important kind of progress, then, by the same token, we necessarily reject the original function of ethics as binding for us, and as a measure of ethical progress, today.

Thus I conclude that, even if we were to grant Kitcher’s assumption of functional persistence for the original function of ethics, the result would not be directly relevant to an account of ethical progress for us today. The original function of ethics may not be what Kitcher thinks it is, and there are grounds even within his own account for resisting its characterization as the unqualified remedying of altruism failures.<sup>332</sup> Insofar as Kitcher’s account of the original function of ethics serves to anchor the technological

---

<sup>331</sup> Kitcher, 237.

<sup>332</sup> For Kitcher, the original function of ethics is the remedying of altruism failures (full stop). Although in his original discussion, this is clearly *in-group* altruism failures, that important qualification of scope doesn’t make it into his recurring characterization of the “original function.”

metaphor by which he thinks talk of ethical progress can be made intelligible, this is quite the difficulty. Further difficulties lie ahead.

*Functions, Problems, and Personal Ends*

Ethical functionalism is Kitcher's way of giving his account of progress a measure of objectivity. Kitcher finds subjectivist accounts of progress inadequate—a point I revisit below—and talk of functional generation and functional conflict is intended to overcome those inadequacies. In fact, however, ethical functionalism fails to secure even the modest objectivity Kitcher's account needs. The argument for this claim is what occupies me in this section.

We can begin with some criticisms of functionalism made by William FitzPatrick.<sup>333</sup> On FitzPatrick's analysis, Kitcher's remarks about the role of socially embedded normative guidance in the lives of our ancestors are best read in a biological light. Group harmony and cooperation, the ends served by socially embedded normative guidance, can be seen as serving the biological, Darwinian end of increasing reproductive output. It may be the case that this social technology was developed in response to psychological discomfort. But insofar as that discomfort is itself the expression of naturally selected emotions, the technology that remedies altruism failures serves biological ends and has a biological function, FitzPatrick argues. "This biological function," he says, "is a matter of the contingent instrumental role that remedying

---

<sup>333</sup> William J. FitzPatrick, "Review of Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*," *Ethics* 123, no. 1 (2012): 167-174. FitzPatrick's account of biological functions is best understood against the backdrop of his detailed and trenchant critique of Philippa Foot's Aristotelian functionalism in *Teleology and the Norms of Nature*.

altruism failures through normative guidance played ultimately in enhancing reproductive output, which is why the whole business presumably evolved.”<sup>334</sup>

What this means, FitzPatrick argues, is that remedying altruism failures “has no more intrinsic (or noninstrumental) significance within this framework than the monopolization of mating privileges by a dominant male elephant seal has in the biological functional story of seal behavior.”<sup>335</sup> It may be the case that socially embedded normative guidance increased social harmony for our ancestors, but it’s not clear why this should have any bearing on our understanding of ethical progress today. FitzPatrick presses the point: “nothing in this functional story yet supports treating the remedying of altruism failures as a worthy goal in its own right for us as rational agents, demanding our attention and providing a standard of ethical progress for us.”<sup>336</sup> The fact that ecologically and socially forced egalitarian conversations leading to roughly egalitarian codes of conduct marked the start of an “ethical project” and helped our ancestors survive has no obvious ethical bearing on our own (very different) lives. If ethical functions are ultimately oriented toward the discharging of merely Darwinian ends, FitzPatrick concludes, then Kitcher’s framework fails to make sense of genuine ethical progress.

As best I can tell, however, Kitcher has seen this problem with merely biological functions. He *rejects* a biological account of functions and functional progress, saying: “progressive transitions are not to be identified with those promoting Darwinian or cultural success.”<sup>337</sup> It is to his credit then, that FitzPatrick considers an alternative reading of Kitcher’s account. The functions Kitcher has in mind might be artificial, or, as

---

<sup>334</sup> FitzPatrick, “Review,” 170.

<sup>335</sup> FitzPatrick, 170.

<sup>336</sup> FitzPatrick, 170.

<sup>337</sup> Kitcher, 213.



I shall say, artifactual—on analogy with the functions of artifacts made by human designers. Given the centrality of Kitcher’s technological metaphor, we are perhaps closer to his intent with such a reading.

“But to move to the framework of artifacts and their psychologically imposed functions,” FitzPatrick says, “gets us no closer to objective, authoritative standards for progress.”<sup>338</sup> This is because, in an artifactual framework, the purpose of an artifact is to function as its designer intends. An artifact’s function is contingent upon the *desires* of its designer. This is a problem in the ethical case because whether or not we care about the remedying of altruism failures will simply be a contingent fact about our desires. And if ethical functions depend only on the varying nature of our personal ends, then it is no criticism of these ends that they undermine the “original function” of ethics. We are not bound by the ends of artifact designers in our own use of their artifacts. We can repurpose them as we see fit, giving them new purposes that suit *our* desires.<sup>339</sup> On an artifactual reading then, Utopia ends up being simply Kitcher’s personal preference—hardly an objective measure for ethical progress.

Does FitzPatrick’s analysis miss the point? Kitcher explicitly positions ethical functions as, in some sense, *intermediate* to biological and artifactual functions.

“Between clear-headed recognition of problem structures,” he says, “and the biological cases . . . stand intermediate cases.”<sup>340</sup> Here Kitcher seems to be resisting any easy assimilation of the ethical case to either the biological or the artifactual cases. The

---

<sup>338</sup> FitzPatrick, 172.

<sup>339</sup> This “repurposing” might be more difficult in the case of a *social* artifact than in that of a private, individually created artifact. But just as we (“we” being some group) can (acting jointly) repurpose or extend inherited words and vocabularies (e.g. by developing new slang for new activities), so also, it seems, we could simply repurpose *ethical* words, vocabularies, attitudes, etc. to serve a very wide variety of ends (some not so “ethical” in the Utopian sense).

<sup>340</sup> Kitcher, 221.

question is whether Kitcher's account of function actually has the resources to resist one of these two readings. What sense can we make of *intermediate* ends to ground ethical functional talk?

The problem background in the ethical case, on Kitcher's analysis, is not clearly discerned. Our ancestors were moved by a sense of social tension, but they only dimly understood the problems they faced. That is how Kitcher explicates his intermediacy thesis, as I shall call it. "On occasion," he says, "people recognize difficulties—they know not all is well—even though they cannot frame the troubles exactly. You feel twinges of discomfort and sometimes pain when you perform particular motions; your doctor formulates the problem precisely and prescribes a supportive device or a program of exercises."<sup>341</sup> This is a medical analogy. But who is the patient? The problems faced by our ancestors were problems they faced *as a group*. This is a recurring theme of Kitcher's pragmatic naturalism. The group-based perspective is Kitcher's answer to the charge of subjectivism. The problems faced by our ancestors, he says, "can be regarded as *objective* features of the social situation" to which our ancestors responded. "Desires for relief are in no way idiosyncratic—they would be felt by virtually all members of our species."<sup>342</sup>

This is the crux of the matter: Kitcher tries to get ethical functionalism off the ground with a medical analogy (shoulder pain) in which the patient is a social group. This is the argumentative burden of the intermediacy thesis. The patient (the group) has a problem (namely, the physiological cause of the shoulder pain, or socially, altruism failures), and the doctor can prescribe a solution (exercises responsive to the underlying

---

<sup>341</sup> Kitcher, 221.

<sup>342</sup> Kitcher, 251.

cause of the shoulder pain, or socially, the forms of normative guidance stumbled upon by our ancestors). Ethical functionalism fails to get off the ground precisely here, and for one simple reason: there are no medical problems that are not problems *for someone*. The intermediacy thesis aims to separate problems (as objective features of the social situation) from personal psychological ends (which are regarded as subjective and “idiosyncratic”). But the separation fails, as I shall presently explain.

According to Kitcher, a community that experiences social tension is like an individual who experiences shoulder pain. The individual can tell something is wrong, that there is a problem, but needs help to figure out exactly what that is. So too, the community can tell something is wrong, that there is a problem, but it can only stumble along until it fortuitously hits upon a workable solution. Retrospectively, we can play for our ancestors’ communities the doctor’s diagnostic role.

The analogy only works, I contend, because Kitcher has unwittingly assumed that shoulders have a proper function.<sup>343</sup> This assumption in turn completely infects the understanding of group function upon which his ethical functionalism is built. It is possible, of course, to speak of function in a biological sense—both for shoulders and for communities. To the extent that unimpaired strength and range of motion (say) are necessary for activities relevant to survival and reproduction (via hunting and gathering, perhaps), we can speak of the “proper” biological function of shoulder muscles and joints. Likewise, to the extent that a measure of social cohesiveness is necessary for activities relevant to survival and reproduction (in the context of group selection via inter-band conflict, say), we can speak of the “proper” biological function of a social

---

<sup>343</sup> That is, Kitcher *claims* his ethical account of function is “intermediate” to the biological and artifactual cases. But in fact his account is covertly grounded in (bad) biology.

group as a whole (in a particular ecological context). But we have already seen that this is not the framework within which Kitcher wants to utilize talk of functions. And this is damning, for *there is no proper function of shoulders, and, a fortiori, of social groups, outside of a biological framework.*

I propose an alternative account of the “problem” of shoulder pain. The problem faced by the person with shoulder pain, I submit, *is the shoulder pain.* It has an underlying physiological cause, we can grant. But the problem itself is the pain, or perhaps the limitations it imposes on the person’s regular activities. That is, the problem is a problem *relative to that person’s desires and ends.* The underlying physiological cause of the shoulder pain can be considered a problem, but only in a secondary sense, as the actual or potential cause of further pain. Palliating the present symptoms of their underlying physiological cause can be said not to solve “the problem.” But this isn’t because the physiological condition itself is a problem apart from its relation to the person’s desires and ends. Rather, the physiological condition must thwart, or have the real potential to thwart, the person’s fulfillment of their desires. In such cases, the problem (and it is the problem of pain—both present and future) can be solved most effectively by addressing the underlying cause.<sup>344</sup>

There are many medical “problems” (or rather, abnormalities) that are not really problems, because they are not problems for the persons who have them. An inguinal hernia, for example, is a protrusion of intestinal matter beyond the intestinal wall (more common in males because of the greater space left in the abdominal wall by the descent

---

<sup>344</sup> “The evolution of ethical practice,” Kitcher recognizes, “can give rise to codes whose shortcomings and burdens are felt by only a few” (240). In this case, the privileged *have* a problem, according to Kitcher, but it is *invisible* to them: “People need not always be aware of their problems,” he says (240). This is the point that doesn’t seem quite right to me, at least, not as Kitcher frames it.

of the testes). The hernia can *become* a problem if the intestines themselves become trapped outside the abdominal wall. But this is only because such a condition causes a variety of unpleasant symptoms for the person with the hernia. Such complications are uncommon however, and contemporary medical practice involves simply keeping an eye on the hernia. Reparative procedures frequently have more painful side effects than the hernia itself, which is in most cases painless.<sup>345</sup>

The point is this: with the exception of problem structures imposed by Darwinian selection, which both Kitcher and FitzPatrick see as irrelevant to ethics, a problem is a problem *for someone*. Non-biological functions serve needs and desires. Thus Kitcher's medical analogy is inappropriate. Outside of a context in which we can speak of group selection, and thus of the *biological* function of in-group pro-social behavior, it is illegitimate to simply take for granted a group-wide perspective. We can speak of impaired shoulder function in an individual's case, in a non-biological sense, only relative to that individual's desires and ends. To speak legitimately of non-biological *group* function then, we must rely on the contingently overlapping desires and ends of the individual members of that group. It is only to the extent that individuals in the group care about the group's functioning *in a particular way*, that is, according to their shared desires *for* the group, that we may speak of that group's function non-biologically. It is only relative to the overlapping or shared ends of individuals that *the group* to which they belong can be said to have a problem. In cases in which individuals in a group do *not* have shared desires for the group, there are no grounds for talk of "the group's" problems.

---

<sup>345</sup> "Inguinal hernia," Wikipedia, accessed October 16, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inguinal\\_hernia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inguinal_hernia).

To sum up: functionalism is supposed to give Kitcher's account of progress a degree of objectivity, distinguishing it from merely subjective accounts. But if ethical functions serve biological ends, then the account is not really one of ethical progress. If ethical functions serve personal ends (e.g. desire fulfillment), then what we have instead of "functional conflict" is just desiderative conflict—different people wanting different things—and a notion of objective progress is still out of reach. Kitcher struggles to find a different way of talking about function. But the metaphor that is supposed to get this new, ethical functionalism off the ground is a hasty medical metaphor that imports an unrecognized assumption of proper function, which is inappropriate outside of a Darwinian framework, and applies it to human groups considered as a whole. I have argued that there are no (non-biological) medical problems that are not problems for someone (i.e. relative to that person's desires or personal ends). In the social case then, there is no room for talk about an ethical function that exists apart from the desires of the individuals that make up the group.<sup>346</sup>

It may of course be the case that our ancestors were forced together to survive, that their desires for social harmony therefore overlapped substantially, and that the most effective solutions addressed the most common altruism failures in the group. What we have here is just a historical fact (assuming it is a fact). But we are not bound by history.

---

<sup>346</sup> There is a way to speak of social functions apart from the personal ends of particular individuals. For example, Cheshire Calhoun argues that male discourse in the history of philosophical ethics has had pernicious nonlogical implications (see "Justice, Care, and Gender Bias"). Without explicitly claiming that women are inferior moral agents, the tradition has painted them as such (or, more to the point, not painted them at all), and can thus be seen as functioning to reinforce patriarchal ideology. A similar point could be made in Marxist terms: capitalist ideology may function to mask, precisely by not being about, the economic substrate of capitalist societies. Kitcher's intermediacy thesis could be read as identifying this possibility of unrecognized social functioning. But this is a *descriptive* sense of social function, and it won't have any normative upshot without further normative premises (by itself it could describe, but never condemn or identify as a *problem*, altruism failure). So even with this kind of social function talk, there's no objective measure of ethical progress.

And our desires have manifestly evolved. Today, human desires, and therefore human problems, differ. We can certainly speak of global altruism failures in some sense. But we should not pretend that these altruism failures are equally a problem for everyone.

Because he thinks we can speak of problems apart from the contingently overlapping desires or personal ends of individuals, Kitcher thinks functionalism can provide a modest kind of objectivity for his notion of ethical progress. In fact, however, he simply takes for granted a humanity-wide perspective, from which failures of altruism count as a problem for the human group as a whole. But, because there are no non-biological group functions apart from shared ends, this is simply to beg the question.

#### 4. Defending Utopia

##### *Dealing with Skeptics*

I have argued that Kitcher's ethical functionalism relies on two indefensible assumptions: first, that the original function of ethics is still with us and relevant to us today. I have given several reasons for thinking that it cannot have the relevance Kitcher imagines. Second, that there are non-biological grounds for speaking of the problems faced by a group as a whole. I have argued that this is only true when individuals in that group have shared desires for the group. Insofar as human individuals and human communities today do not share the same desires or the same visions for their communities or for the global community, it is therefore inappropriate to speak of the problems "we" all share. Our desires are different and therefore our problems are different. For these reasons, I do not think Kitcher's functionalism can be saved.

I turn in what follows to Kitcher's vision of the good and to his ethical method. There are problems here too, but my assessment in this case is not completely negative. I begin with Kitcher's response to his skeptical detractors. This leads to the first of Kitcher's problems of power, as I shall call them. I identify a second in the following section, before suggesting a rectification.

On Kitcher's account, the ethical project liberated our ancestors from their tense and uneasy social life. Thus, complete moral skepticism is not something that can be seriously entertained.<sup>347</sup> The alternative to an ethical (in some sense) form of life would either be a return to the tense and unenviable condition of our ancestors, or a jump to something completely new and unknown.<sup>348</sup> "Although one may challenge parts of the ethical practices we have inherited," Kitcher says, "there is no escaping the ethical project."<sup>349</sup>

Three skeptical characters from the history of Western ethical thought are given a hearing in the lead up to this conclusion. First up is Plato's Thrasymachus.<sup>350</sup> The claims of justice, according to Thrasymachus, are merely impositions of the powerful upon the weaker, designed to advance their interests. To this, Kitcher responds that many ethical codes do in fact bear the marks of power—this is Thrasymachus' insight. But "*Functional* ethical practice," he says, "is not a tool for asserting the will of the strong and mighty, but rather grounded in attempts to take into account the desires of all members of a society. The original function of remedying altruism failures acknowledges

---

<sup>347</sup> See also my argument in chapter one about the social and political dangers of complete skepticism.

<sup>348</sup> "Skepticism is, in the end, nothing more than an invitation to jump into unknown, and potentially dangerous, waters" (Kitcher, 280).

<sup>349</sup> Kitcher, 279.

<sup>350</sup> From Plato, *Republic*, book I.



the wishes and aspirations of all.”<sup>351</sup> Kitcher concludes that Thrasymachus is wrong to reject the ethical project as a whole, but that he can be enlisted as an ally “and invited to continue in the evolving project of ethics by responding to places at which it is *dysfunctional*.”<sup>352</sup>

Next, Kitcher gives a hearing to Hume’s “sensible knave.”<sup>353</sup> Knave is a free rider. He does not want to convert others to his viewpoint, but is content to advance his own interests by taking advantage of others where he can do so undetected. The pragmatic naturalist, according to Kitcher, cannot *silence* Knave—there is no guaranteed conversion in the offing. But the pragmatic naturalist can point out ways in which Knave’s life has been made possible by the ethical project, and that Knave might experience psychological discomfort as a result of his exploitation of others. That is, the pragmatic naturalist can give a *diagnosis* of what Knave is doing, even if that diagnosis is ineffective in conversation. Given that a complete silencing of Knave is unlikely, Kitcher focuses on practical tactics: “Some real-life knavery results from inadequate education,” he says, “some requires sterner measures.”<sup>354</sup>

Finally, Kitcher considers the Nietzschean free spirit.<sup>355</sup> Free spirit, according to Kitcher, isn’t trying to convince *everyone* that ethics is oppression (unlike Thrasymachus). And unlike Knave, free spirit isn’t trying to advance only his solitary ends. Rather, free spirit aims to convince *his peers* (whoever they might be) that they are

---

<sup>351</sup> Kitcher, 274, his emphasis.

<sup>352</sup> Kitcher, 274, his emphasis. The question begging nature of Kitcher’s functionalist framework is apparent, I think, when he claims: “The original function of remedying altruism failures acknowledges the wishes and aspirations of all.” As I argue above, the original function of ethics does *not* acknowledge the wishes and aspirations of *all*, but only the wishes and aspirations of those *within* the group. The context for the emergence of the ethical project is one of inter-group conflict and competition.

<sup>353</sup> From David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Hackett, 1983), 81.

<sup>354</sup> Kitcher, 278.

<sup>355</sup> See Kitcher, 276-278.

oppressed. Depending on the target audience, there may be something to free spirit's claim, according to Kitcher. If so, he may be a moral reformer, advocating for more "functional" norms, and attempting to produce functional refinement, or to undo earlier distortions of the ethical project.<sup>356</sup> In this case, he is someone we can have a conversation with. If his critique aims at something else however, then we are left wanting more. What, precisely, does free spirit have in mind? Kitcher says,

We do know something of social life outside the tradition of ethical practice, for a life of this sort is the lot of our evolutionary cousins, the chimpanzees. Given the psychological dispositions free spirit has acquired, this cannot be a serious possibility for him. Can he offer another? . . . Until we are given some description of an alternative—or until the *Übermensch* actually arrives—our choices are confined to the human, the ethically guided, life and the social state of the chimpanzees, a state transcended by our first human ancestors.<sup>357</sup>

So Kitcher's strategy in dealing with skeptics is relatively simple. It involves emphasizing the centrality of ethics to human life. If a skeptic's critique is too general, then we are owed an alternative to the ethically guided life that is not simply the tense social state from which ethics liberated us. If a critique targets particular norms and values, then there is a conversation to be had about whether these discharge the recognized ethical functions properly, or about better ways to rank ethical functions.<sup>358</sup>

It is against this background, I think, that we can understand Kitcher's claim of coherence for his normative and methodological proposals. Kitcher's point is not really, as FitzPatrick claims, "a variant of a Kantian approach [...] with an undefended assumption of the normative force of coherence considerations."<sup>359</sup> The point is rather

---

<sup>356</sup> From my own non-functionalist, humanist perspective, I would rather emphasize the endorsability and depth of the relevant human desires.

<sup>357</sup> Kitcher, 278.

<sup>358</sup> Knave, of course, doesn't offer a (verbal) *critique* of ethics. So Kitcher's response there rightly emphasizes both education and a discerning enforcement of the rules.

<sup>359</sup> FitzPatrick, 173.

that supposed “alternatives” to pragmatic naturalism’s vision of the good and ethical method *aren’t really alternatives*. Or as he puts it elsewhere, radical challenges to pragmatic naturalism cannot “be developed as a coherent package, *one that has a serious claim to conversational attention*.”<sup>360</sup>

This final way of putting it, I think, draws out both the strength and the limitations of Kitcher’s ethical method. Kitcher’s judgment is that, in a global conversation conducted under ideal epistemic and affective conditions, visions of the good that depart substantially from Utopia, or something like it, cannot get off the ground. They fall afoul of the stipulated criteria, falling either into falsehood or manifesting a premature closing off of empathy. The point is reminiscent of one made in the previous chapter: a discursive community of equals may well end up with something very much like the most celebrated egalitarian and humanist ideals. But this means the same critical question applies: what follows from this fact (assuming it is a fact) in a world of radical difference and inequality?

Utopia, with its robust egalitarianism, represents a challenge to existing political and economic structures. For this reason, it is unclear how it is supposed to gain any kind of real social and political traction. When Kitcher mentions in passing the possibility that a privileged few might insulate themselves from the problems of others, he says: “Even if the comfortable few assume their security can be preserved in the long term, *the thought of an imaginary conversation*, in which they must discuss respecifying the good, on equal terms with the many who live in want, should concentrate their attention.”<sup>361</sup> This I find

---

<sup>360</sup> Kitcher, *Science in a Democratic Society*, 58, my emphasis.

<sup>361</sup> Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*, 311, my emphasis.

completely implausible. Rather: the thought of an imaginary conversation is likely to be utterly powerless.

Some among the privileged and comfortable might find such a thought troubling in light of their self-image. Seeing themselves as generous and compassionate, they may appease their conscience by donating to charity. Or, seeing themselves as deserving of their good fortune, they may spin meritocratic myths.<sup>362</sup> Others may simply laugh at such an unusual thought. More fundamentally, however, the thought would first have to come to them. The comfortably privileged and insulated would have to feel the *pressure* to imagine the justifications they might give for their comfort and privilege. And if they are truly comfortable, privileged, and insulated, I have a hard time seeing that pressure as anything but fleeting, and easily set aside. Given the kind of conversation Kitcher finds ideal—with its strict epistemic constraint (no rationalizations, no falsehoods) and its expansive affective conditions (in which the desires of all are accommodated and balanced)—the pressure faced by our hypothetical elite would have to be formidable indeed. If the globally powerful are in fact (knowingly or unknowingly) versions of Knave, who will bring them to account? Thus it appears that Kitcher’s ideal, however appealing (to some of us at least), is relatively toothless—relatively *powerless*—given the ideality of its justifying method.

### *Justifying Utopia to Whom?*

The ideality of Kitcher’s method also has a sinister side. Call it Kitcher’s second problem of power. There is a potentially pernicious inconsistency in Kitcher’s

---

<sup>362</sup> See, for a rather stunning example, Gregory N. Mankiw, “Defending the One Percent,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27, no. 3 (2013): 21-34.

understanding of justification. For, on the one hand, Kitcher repeatedly rejects the notion of ethical expertise, insisting that the only authority of ethics is that which emerges from conversation.<sup>363</sup> But, on the other hand, he also makes the conditions of his imagined global conversation highly counterfactual. Thus there is a tension between his claim that ethical codes are negotiated by human beings in conversation (that moral justification is something we do amongst ourselves, as I would put it) and that Utopia is “justified” in some sense by an *ideal* conversation from which most human beings on the planet are in principle barred.

The problem emerges if we imagine the Utopian ideal actually gaining some form of political traction. Kitcher’s imaginary conversation is secular, and so it is probably no surprise that Kitcher’s Utopia is a secular Utopia (communing with God or achieving enlightenment do not figure in his list of praiseworthy life goals). But of course, even with the weakening of institutionalized religion in the West, some form of religious belief and practice plays a central role in the lives of much of the global population. Notice the resulting tension in what Kitcher says about religion.

Religion *is* central to the lives of many people, and, for them, to remove it from the ethical forum can be felt as disenfranchisement. A mutually engaged secularism should take seriously the psychological and social needs religion, and religious community, satisfies, recognizing and responding to the desires and aspirations out of which religious commitment grows. Especially for the world’s poor, for whom basic material needs are not met and for whom it is difficult to think in terms of a freely chosen structure for their lives, religion can provide both consolation and framework. The conception of the good [Utopia] is intended to recognize and respond to the predicaments of the poor, including the desires that have made the world’s religions so attractive. This egalitarian conception is a deeper embodiment of mutual engagement.<sup>364</sup>

---

<sup>363</sup> “Ethics,” Kitcher says, “is something people work out together, and, in the end, the only authority is that of their conversation” (410).

<sup>364</sup> Kitcher, 373.

The paradox then, is this: Kitcher seeks “mutual engagement” to give normative force to his vision of the good, but the desires of much of the world’s population are distorted, on his account, by religious falsehoods. Thus “we” must work for a world in which the needs and desires *beneath* these religious expressions are met. The mutual engagement here is—it *has* to be—purely hypothetical. We (secular philosophers? the educated elite?) *imagine* a conversation with counterfactual others (e.g. the world’s poor, “freed” from religion and unmet basic needs), and this imagined conversation gives normative force to a Utopian vision. If Utopia were to gain traction in the centers of power, we could witness the paradox of an ideal, the theoretical legitimacy of which is explicitly wedded to conversation, being implemented *in the absence of such conversation*.

However much we might like Utopia, there is something troubling with this theoretical structure. Alison Jaggar’s remarks strike me as apt:

Any method of moral reasoning that requires moral agents to think from others’ perspectives is impossible in principle, because individuals’ perceptions, values, and modes of reasoning, their understanding of their own and others’ needs and interests, even their constructions of moral situations, vary both individually and systematically according to their particular social experiences and locations. Although such thought experiments may have rough-and-ready heuristic value, they cannot enable anyone, not even a philosopher, to attain a universal moral standpoint that entirely transcends the particularities of his or her socially located perspective. Pretensions to think from all perspectives are no more than disingenuous rhetorical devices that philosophers utilize to claim unwarranted false authority for their own opinions.<sup>365</sup>

We might interpret Kitcher’s method as a set of guidelines by which *secular, humanist philosophers* might guide our contributions to a global conversation about ethics. In that case, there seems to be no problem. But the method seems intended to be more than that—it seems intended as a justification of Utopia *in general*, for everyone (as if a moral

---

<sup>365</sup> Jaggar, “Ethics Naturalized,” 462.

ideal could be “justified” simpliciter). Kitcher claims moral force for Utopia on the basis of needs and desires that are stipulated to *underlie* religious belief and practice among the world’s vast, non-secular population. Thus, his account simultaneously (1) ties the moral force of ethical codes to their production under conditions of mutual engagement, and (2) excludes from the discourse all needs and desires that stem from religious practice. This internal incoherence is politically dangerous. If, by the workings of Kitcher’s imagination, Utopia is “justified,” then it can and probably should be implemented without consulting the religiously deluded (for “we” know what they want better than they do). The collaborative spirit of Kitcher’s pragmatic naturalism is thereby lost, and, if he happens to be wrong about what religious folk the world over “really” want, then his Utopia might well be their Dystopia.

*Power, Politics, and Bullying*

Both problems of power—the problem of the powerlessness of the Utopian ideal on the one hand, and the problem of its highly counterfactual (and therefore politically pernicious) justifying conditions on the other—result from Kitcher’s Utopia-first, method-later approach. One of the important lessons to be extracted from historical evolutions in moral thought, on my view, including that arc I traced in chapter three, is one of caution. We don’t know what others want or need until we see them, until we speak with them, until we listen to them. And often this is difficult work. While we may not be able to do without *some* working understanding of what most human beings want from life, it is better to make this working picture a *thin* one.

With respect to method, an imagined conversation will not do. Kitcher’s methodological proposal needs to be transformed into a normative proposal for

humanists: let us make the global conversation happen, and let us work for the epistemic and affective conditions that will expand our sympathies and our institutions.<sup>366</sup>

Technology, trade, and the risk of global ecological collapse may well have the effect of forcing some conversation, as Kitcher notes. But that is not enough. These pressures may only generate palliative measures from the globally privileged and powerful. A medical analogy: if the underlying causes of certain unpleasant symptoms can simply be *managed*, extensive surgery might be unnecessary. It is only if the underlying condition causes sustained discomfort that the patient has the incentive to address its root cause. The patient must be forced to attend to the symptoms of his pain. So too, globally, the privileged and powerful are unlikely to alleviate the misery of the masses unless they are made to feel their pain—unless the problems of the poor, the disenfranchised, and the displaced somehow become *their* problems.<sup>367</sup>

In his historical overview, Kitcher clearly sees this point. “The evolution of ethical practice,” he says, “can give rise to codes whose shortcomings and burdens are felt by only a few. When that occurs, the first task of would-be reformers is to make the problem apparent to all members of the society.” This can be done, he says, “through the exerting of pressure from people whose voices have not previously been heard.”<sup>368</sup> But this insight into the political antecedents of moral dialogue on terms of rough equality drops out in the discussion of ethical method. Let us revive the insight. Kitcher’s method,

---

<sup>366</sup> I do not suppose that the “ideal” must necessarily involve a conversation among equal *individuals*. As Alison Jaggar argues, provisionally *closed* communities of discourse may be an essential ingredient in the development of the kind of self- and group-consciousness that makes broader conversation fruitful for all parties. See Alison M. Jaggar, “Globalizing Feminist Ethics” in Narayan and Harding (eds.), *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World* (Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>367</sup> See above, chapter four, 128-129.

<sup>368</sup> Kitcher, 240.



I propose, must be made normative. Humanist ideals must gain traction through political agitation.

What does this mean concretely? Here we can draw some inspiration from Kitcher himself. Whereas in *The Ethical Project* the method that justifies Utopia is an *imagined* conversation,<sup>369</sup> in *Science in a Democratic Society*, Kitcher argues that we should “replicate, to the extent that we can, a conversation that proceeds through mutual engagement with all the potentially affected parties.”<sup>370</sup> There what he has in mind is the democratic determination of scientific ends. Well-ordered science, he suggests, should pursue democratically determined goals. Concretely, Kitcher recommends the compilation of an “atlas of scientific significance” (to inform the public of areas in which scientists feel, on the basis of their expertise, that more research is warranted), the building of an “index of human needs” (to inform the public, and scientists, of basic human needs and desires that are going unmet, perhaps somewhere out of sight), and constant work on the part of both citizens and scientists to be scientifically literate and to view “popularization” as part and parcel of their job descriptions, respectively.<sup>371</sup>

For our purposes, we can sidestep the bit about the reconciliation of scientific expertise with democratic ideals and focus on this idea of an index of human needs. On Kitcher’s account, the index “would be built up by systematically exploring human problems *as they are perceived by the people who encounter them.*”<sup>372</sup> Whether we take

---

<sup>369</sup> While the bulk of Kitcher’s discussion of method in *The Ethical Project* assumes an *imagined* conversation, there are hints that Kitcher sees the need for *actual* conversation. “Any rehearsal of an ideal conversation,” he says, “must appeal to psychological assumptions about human reactions, and these can be falsified by actual reactions to the line of reasoning people are supposed to adopt” (365). And later, Kitcher says his method emphasizes “conversation, simulated or perhaps real” (369).

<sup>370</sup> Kitcher, *Science in a Democratic Society*, 133.

<sup>371</sup> Kitcher, *Science*, 127-130.

<sup>372</sup> Kitcher, 129, my emphasis. He adds: “Ideally, the investigations would proceed by striving to isolate deep desires, real interests that might sometimes be masked by distorting ignorance, so that here, too, there

the idea of this index metaphorically or literally (perhaps on analogy with the impressive, constantly evolving repository of human knowledge that is Wikipedia), the basic idea seems to be that people's needs and desires—as they themselves experience them—should be publicly known and, as much as possible, accommodated. We (humanists) should work for the accurate representation of people's interests in the institutions that shape their lives, in other words. That is what it means to say the ethical conversation needs to *actually* happen. Very generally, this entails the transformation of our social, political, and economic institutions, both locally and globally, in the direction of greater democratic participation (or at least the possibility of such participation) and in the direction of better representation.<sup>373</sup>

Richard Joyce, our sparring partner from chapter two, is skeptical that moral institutions can be made transparent. If we acknowledge the human or “institutional” nature of morality, he says, “The worry is that this makes morality out to be, at bottom, a species of whining combined with bullying along with a touch of rhetorical obscurantism.”<sup>374</sup> I gave my reasons for rejecting Joyce's version of skepticism in chapter two. I bring up his concern here simply because, having claimed that humanist ideals must be given political teeth, I have opened myself up to the charge of being a humanist bully. It is as though I had confessed that humanism doesn't have sufficient theoretical appeal, and that therefore political means must be employed to further the cause. Only those who have *lost* the moral argument have to resort to politics, the thinking might go. I

---

would be efforts at tutoring to clear away common misapprehensions and problems of unidentifiable oppression. Imperfect though such efforts would be, even rough approximations would enable research to be guided in ways that no longer leave out large segments of our species.”

<sup>373</sup> Much more could and should be said. Yet I hope to have said enough to give a sense of the direction in which I think humanists should take Kitcher's work (see the caveat in note 364 above).

<sup>374</sup> Joyce, “Enough with the Errors,” 14.

offer three thoughts by way of rebuttal.

First, the objection assumes a roughly Platonic model of morality, where morality “itself” is something objective, transcendent, and ideal. The messy social and political workings of power can thus only be *corrupting* influences on morality. I rejected this picture in chapter two. On a social view, morality is the fabric of our relationships, a fundamental institution that gives its particular texture to our form of life. Insofar as our social lives are already shot through with power, and insofar as moral practices themselves are also practices of power (e.g. practices of accountability, of punishment, of status allocation, etc.), there is nothing necessarily antithetical between social and political action and the pursuit of moral ends.<sup>375</sup>

Second, the objection assumes an unrealistic model of moral motivation. We are not consistently moved merely by even attractive moral ideals. We are motivationally complex, and—as we saw in the previous chapter—some moral ideals are only adopted or put into effect under certain kinds of social justificatory pressure. If, as is evidently the case, moral progress has in the past been made in part through social and political action, putting pressure on those in positions of power, it would be odd to forego social and political action in the pursuit of further progress.

Third and finally, it is important to consider the direction and nature of the pressure for which I am advocating. Humanists, as I am presently picturing them, are those who bring whatever form of justificatory pressure they can to bear upon those in

---

<sup>375</sup> See Margaret Urban Walker, “Seeing Power in Morality: A Proposal for Feminist Naturalism in Ethics” in *Feminists Doing Ethics*, ed. Peggy DesAutels and Joanne Waugh (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001). “It is a heavy irony,” Walker notes, “that interrogating the ways that power (inevitably) constructs morality so often prompts the charge that one is ‘reducing morality to ideology’. In fact, exactly the reverse is true” (13).

the centers of power—on those who directly or indirectly influence the social, political, and economic structures of our societies—and who do so on behalf of the marginalized, the ignored, and the forgotten. The direction of this pressure—from the margins to the center—is crucial. A bully abuses power to exploit or harass the weak. But standing up to a bully is not (usually) bullying. The humanist activism I am recommending is thus not a matter of making demands on people to whom we are unrelated, nor is it a matter of oppressing anyone. It is rather a *response* to pressure, a response to pressures already at work in an existing relationship. In other words, the humanist demand for a justifying account of that relationship is a form of *counter*-pressure.

Further, we can distinguish between *mere* counter-pressure (of which terrorist tactics might be an example) and *humanizing* counter-pressure. Mere counter-pressure meets pressure with pressure, force with force, and violence with violence. Such games of power are merely games of power. If this is all social and political action could be, then “morality” on a social view would only ever be bullying and counter-bullying. But humanizing counter-pressure leans on the values of truthfulness and transparency to demand an account, a justification, of a relationship, the nature of which is in question. Often enough, these are values those in power at least claim to honor. It is difficult to command the respect and trust of others if one is “out” as a liar and an obfuscator. I say a bit more about this below.

By suggesting that Kitcher’s ethical method needs to be transformed into a normative proposal for humanists, I am suggesting a humanizing form of counter-pressure. Working for genuine dialogue, even when this work requires political mobilization, agitation, consciousness-raising, and other forms of social action, paves the

way for social illumination. It is not *just* an exercise of power. It is an exercise of power that sheds light on existing power structures, mobilizing ideals of truthful communication in the service of transparency. I see no meaningful way to call this bullying.

## 5. Moral Progress

### *Axes of Progress*

My arguments in both this chapter and the previous chapter have been largely negative. Singer thinks reason, understood in a particular way, can determine a progressive trajectory for all human moralities. I've argued that his arguments fail. Kitcher's account is a bit subtler. And yet, by viewing the remedying of altruism failures as the fountainhead of all ethical functioning, by proposing to make this "original function" of ethics the master function, so to speak, Kitcher can be seen as looking for a dominant and distinctly ethical trajectory in the evolution of moral thought and practice as well. Ultimately however, his account simply begs the question from something like a humanist standpoint.

I do not see much hope for these types of accounts of moral progress. This does not mean, however, that progressive moral visions as such have no home in a naturalistic picture of the world. Rather, I think moral philosophers can work to identify the *many* ways in which our moralities (understood in light of the social view articulated in chapter two) can be said to progress. The thought that must be set aside, I submit, is that there is a distinctly ethical or moral axis of progress along which all progress in our moralities can be charted. In other words, we must substitute the idea of progress *in our moralities* for the idea of *moral progress*—progress along some distinctly moral axis. Human beings

and human societies have various, sometimes divergent, sometimes overlapping, needs and desires, and morality is the fabric of the relationships that are formed in the course of navigating the related difficulties in a shared form of life under particular social conditions and in particular material ecologies. I suspect then that there is no *single* end, and probably no *dominant* end, served by any and all moral systems.

The plural ends of our moralities do not vacate talk of progress of all meaning, however. As Jesse Prinz argues, there may be several values (not necessarily “moral” values) embedded in our evaluative webs against which progress *in* our moralities can be measured. Normative proposals might be progressive, according to Prinz, by making our moral norms more consistent, more attuned to human well-being, easier to follow, less susceptible to genealogical undermining, and so on.<sup>376</sup> We can say that these represent *many* axes of progress in our moralities.

It is against this background that I offer some tentative reflections, in closing, on *some* of the ways in which humanists might argue for *their* picture of progress. Let me stipulate that both Singer and Kitcher can be read as attempting to give a *strong* defense of humanist ideals. A strong defense of such ideals sees them as woven, if not into the fabric of reality, then at least into the fabric of practical reason (for Singer) or into the history of ethical practice (for Kitcher). That is, you start outside of humanist commitments and argue your way in, as it were. What follows is a *weak* defense of humanist ideals. I begin *within* a humanist outlook and aim simply to make connections with values that are perhaps more broadly shared. My aim is not to vindicate humanist ideals once and for all, but rather to illustrate ways in which humanists might speak

---

<sup>376</sup> Prinz, chap. 8.

meaningfully of moral progress (understood as progress in our moralities) in ways that resonate broadly. I point to two axes of progress: first, the wider fulfillment of endorsable human desires; second, the achievement of sociomoral transparency, which dovetails with liberal values of self-determination.

*Progress and Human Desire*

Ethical functionalism is Kitcher's solution to the unsatisfactory nature of subjective measures of ethical progress. But the subjectivism Kitcher is quick to reject in fact holds more promise for talk of progress, I think, than he imagines (subject to the qualifications above). A subjective *foundation* for talk of progress won't give us the "normatively authoritative, objective standard" that FitzPatrick, like Kitcher, is looking for.<sup>377</sup> But there is something that subjectivism gets right—namely, the need to connect our understanding of moral progress to the needs and desires of individual human beings. Here I want, first, to briefly outline Kitcher's critique of subjectivist accounts of progress, and second, to give a critique of Kitcher's critique. I concede that we can't start from individual desires and get to expansive, humanistic ideals. But making the connection in the opposite direction nevertheless gives humanists something significant to say.

The possibility of a subjectivist account of progress emerges, in Kitcher's development of pragmatic naturalism, just after the discussion of the emergence and eventual abolition of chattel slavery. An intuitive (but ultimately mistaken, in Kitcher's view) understanding of progress in this context looks to the fact that, "When they contemplate the world *before* the reintroduction of slavery and the world after slavery

---

<sup>377</sup> FitzPatrick, 173.

returned, [people today] prefer the earlier state to the later (in this respect, at least).<sup>378</sup>

This gives us a criterion for progress grounded in such preferences: “a change in an ethical code is progressive just in case those who live after the change prefer life in the later world to life in the earlier one.”<sup>379</sup>

What is wrong with this account? The expressions of preference that are supposed to ground the progressiveness of an ethical transition are too *contingent*, Kitcher thinks, to do the work required of them. “Were the individuals who make these judgments to be placed within a rival tradition,” Kitcher says, it is possible that they would “endorse incompatible judgments of progressiveness.”<sup>380</sup> Given the possibility of conflicting judgments, ethical changes in contrary directions might equally count as “progressive.” Clearly then, this would not be an ordinary conception of progress.<sup>381</sup>

The shortcomings of Kitcher’s critique can be seen clearly, I submit, by focusing on *whose* preferences serve as the standard for the progressiveness of moral change. For instance, Kitcher seems to suggest that people can just as easily prefer the transition *into* slavery as they can the transition *out* of slavery. But this claim is completely implausible if the people we have in mind are *those who are to be enslaved*. At the very least, we can offer two confident judgments: the transition into slavery is regressive for those who are enslaved, and the transition out of slavery is progressive for those who are enslaved. The institutional constraints that sustained chattel slavery in the West would have been

---

<sup>378</sup> Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*, 175.

<sup>379</sup> Kitcher, 175.

<sup>380</sup> Kitcher, 175.

<sup>381</sup> It does no good, Kitcher argues, to stipulate some arbitrary timeframe during which judgments of progressiveness endure. For whether or not such judgments endure is likewise a matter of historical contingency. On such an account, talk of enduring *regressive* ethical transitions would be ruled out, for, if preference for a transition endures, it would by definition be *progressive*. Thus, subjective accounts which connect preference for a transition to the actual progressiveness of that transition are, according to Kitcher, unsatisfactory (Kitcher, 176-178).



completely unnecessary if the enslaved had been fully reconciled to their enslavement. It is fair to assume, therefore, that they were not. (And if the preferences of those not directly affected by slavery are so malleable as to prefer either slavery or its absence, why not ground a judgment of progressiveness in the much less flexible desires of those it affects directly?)

Admittedly, Kitcher is right that a subjectivist account of progress cannot *by itself* tell us whose preferences to privilege in case of a conflict. Third parties unaffected by slavery might be indifferent or malleable in their preferences about slavery. I have argued that the enslaved are not plausibly regarded as indifferent or malleable. From their point of view, the transition away from slavery is unequivocally progressive. But I have not yet mentioned the perspective of the slaveholder. If the slaveholder has a strong preference for slavery, is this sufficient to call the transition away from slavery regressive? And if so, then doesn't subjectivism leave us with conflicting and irreconcilable preferences, and thus no workable understanding of progress? Strictly speaking, yes. But that is not the end of the story.

Humanism, as I understand it, is the type of moral view according to which all human beings matter. Humanism counts as an expansive moral outlook insofar as it refuses to place certain categories of human beings beyond the sphere of moral concern. For my purposes here, what matters is just that humanism be understood as taking sides in the aforementioned conflict of preference between slaveholders and the enslaved. Humanism sides with the enslaved. In this conflict, humanism gives greater weight to considerations of self-determination and freedom from intentionally administered

suffering than to the economic considerations that presumably motivate a slaveholder to prefer the system of chattel slavery to its economic alternatives.

If we begin with the subjective preferences of different human beings, we cannot climb our way up to the humanist view. But if we start with the humanist view, we have a workable story to tell about the subjective preferences of different human beings. First of all, the desires of the enslaved are in Kitcher's terminology *endorsable*. That is, it is in principle possible (the humanist stipulates) to create a world in which all human beings are free from such undeserved and unwanted coercion. The desires of slaveholders, however, are *contaminated*. It is impossible to create a world in which all human beings are slaveholders. For a humanist, this is reason enough to be wary of the slaveholder's preference.

Second, if the desires of slaveholders were as a matter of psychological fact both deep and inflexible, the transition out of slavery could still be progressive, but it would also be tragic, at least for the slaveholders. Humanists cannot by fiat rule out the possibility that some conflicts of interest might be irreconcilable. In the case of chattel slavery, however, it appears that the desires of slaveholders fulfilled by slavery were not in fact all that deep or all that inflexible. Slavery as a fundamental institution, in the terminology of chapter two, did not simply serve the *basic* needs of slaveholders, and it certainly thwarted the basic needs of the enslaved. To judge by the basic-ness of the needs served, the abolition of slavery was unequivocal progress. In cases of putative conflict, then, humanism seeks a principled ranking of some desires as more basic than others. In the case of slavery, this ranking is easy enough to make.

Humanism, I am suggesting, commends itself because it takes into account the desires of all human beings. To that end, it distinguishes between desires that are endorsable and those that are contaminated, following Kitcher. And in cases of conflict, it ranks desires by their relative depth and flexibility. Desires that are deep and inflexible it is content to call *needs*.<sup>382</sup> Again, the point is not to *ground* a humanist outlook in the desires of individuals, but rather to illustrate ways in which humanists can connect their moral outlook to the deep desires of everyone. On these grounds, humanism *commends* itself to those who value the fulfillment of their basic needs and of the basic needs of others.<sup>383</sup> Humanists view the fulfillment of human desires, and in particular those desires that are deep and endorsable, as an axis of progress.<sup>384</sup>

#### *Truthfulness and Transparency*

Truthfulness breeds trust, and trust sustains and nurtures life-giving human relationships. Conversely, a lack of truthfulness destroys trust, and thereby destroys

---

<sup>382</sup> For all of Kitcher's worries about the contingency of our desires and the arbitrariness of subjective measures of progress then, the perspective just outlined is in substantial agreement with him, at least when he says: "The demands leading to ethics are not arbitrary or conventional; they grow out of human needs. To what higher—or less contingent—standard could one appeal to ground the authority of ethics?" (Kitcher, 269).

<sup>383</sup> Is this way of putting it too weak? The way I've articulated the humanist perspective makes it sound like humanism can only commend itself to humanists. In fact, however, insofar as our value commitments are often inchoate and can be drawn out and solidified through conscious formulation, this is not as circular as it sounds. But it is, I suppose, a bit circular. It might describe the appeal of humanism for *proto*-humanists, but very probably no one else. Humanists can hardly expect to convert the world if all they do is talk in circles about their moral commitments. I'm actually somewhat hopeful that the public rehearsal of humanist commitments might not be completely devoid of conversational power. But the relative powerlessness of a mere rehearsal of humanist views is one of the reasons I think the humanist vision needs to be given social and political teeth. Humanists give their moral commitments power by working for humanizing moral dialogue, humanizing counter-pressure in those local and global relationships that operate outside the light of mutual, genuinely shared understandings.

<sup>384</sup> To belabor the point just a bit: I take it not everyone explicitly has humanist ideals; but the humanist line of reasoning *against* slavery that I have just, very briefly, articulated is one which, I think, will have broad appeal *outside* the narrow confines of explicitly held humanist commitments.

human relationships.<sup>385</sup> Bernard Williams helpfully distinguishes between what he calls the two virtues of truth: *sincerity*, on the one hand, and *accuracy*, on the other.<sup>386</sup> We may speak of a person's sincerity when she has no intent to deceive. A person's accuracy has to do with his sense of reality. A conspiracy theorist, for example, can be sincere without succeeding at being truthful if his epistemic standards are off. The truthfulness that breeds trust combines both sincerity and accuracy. And chronic failures of either sincerity or accuracy destroy trust.

Humanist political action aims to shed light on existing social relationships. By pressuring the privileged and powerful to give an account of their relationship with the marginalized, by airing that conversation, humanists aim to reveal possible breaches in either sincerity or accuracy on the part of the privileged. When the rich and powerful are revealed as liars and crooks, or when they are revealed as factually misinformed—in ways pertinent to their relative standing in society, of course—these revelations are deeply embarrassing and morally destabilizing. As I argued in chapter three, this destabilization can, given the right sorts of political pressure, make possible a transition to a more stable and more *transparent* social ordering—to a sociomoral order less likely to embarrass its members in light of the truth about how it works.

I have already argued that humanist ethical method with teeth, the commitment to make something approximating Kitcher's global dialogue under ideal epistemic and affective conditions *actually* happen, cannot be reduced to simple "bullying." The foregoing serves to deepen this point. Given the foundational role of truthfulness in

---

<sup>385</sup> This is one of the major themes in Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (Vintage, 1989). See also Sam Harris, *Lying* (Four Elephants Press, 2013)—I am grateful to Brian McEwen Frichette for pointing me to Harris' book, which also led me to Bok.

<sup>386</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

almost every kind of human relationship, even the globally privileged and powerful are likely to at least pay lip service, and even perhaps to genuinely and publicly endorse, the value of truthfulness. Machiavelli's infamous prince, though he lies, knows that he must maintain the *appearance* of truthfulness.<sup>387</sup> This means that humanists fight not only for their vision of their good, but also and especially for truthfulness in human relationships. In this regard, I believe, humanist ideals are likely to commend themselves very broadly. In their efforts to create political counter-pressure from the margins of society, humanists rely on values of truthfulness and transparency that are already acknowledged (even if only duplicitously, in the worst cases) in the centers of power. Thus, humanists believe that the truth will serve their cause—that, in an important sense, *the truth is on their side*.<sup>388</sup>

Here then is another axis of progress, according to the humanist: there is progress in our moralities when they become more transparent, when the understandings that justify existing relationships, existing distributions of power and distributions of responsibility and accountability, are truthful, both in the sense that those in the relationship are sincere with one another about that relationship, and in the sense that no falsehoods enter into the justification of the relationship.

Further, the value of truthfulness in this case intersects with Enlightenment ideals of freedom and self-determination. As Williams puts it,

the interest of the disadvantaged lies in an aspiration to the most basic sense of freedom, that of not being . . . in the unrecognized power of another, and the

---

<sup>387</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>388</sup> Specifically, the truth that will emerge as a result of humanizing counter-pressure, the truth about the motivations and rationalizations of the privileged and powerful. Humanists believe that, under pressure, the privileged will be unable to give good grounds for their privilege, that their justifications will be unmasked as rationalizations and obfuscations.

pursuit of truth in this area is concentrated into the aim of destroying representations that have the effect of keeping people in such a situation.<sup>389</sup>

Insofar as we value self-determination and freedom from unrecognized authority, and insofar as we value truthfulness in our relationships, both formal and informal, I judge that humanist commitments are likely to have a deep resonance.

## 6. Conclusion

Kitcher's pragmatic naturalism attempts to provide a naturalistic account of ethics that also includes an objective understanding of ethical progress. I have argued that the functionalism by which Kitcher hopes to secure a measure of objectivity for his account is untenable. His account of the "original function" of ethics is problematic, and his account of the problem background to which socially embedded normative guidance is a response imports an unrecognized assumption of the proper function of the group as a whole. At key points then, Kitcher's account of progress simply begs the question.

While Kitcher's normative proposal also faces important problems—problems of power—I have argued that a bit of tinkering can make things right. The heart of my suggestion is to view Kitcher's ethical method as a normative proposal of its own. Humanists should take it upon themselves to make global dialogue happen, to put justificatory pressure on the globally privileged and powerful. The claim that giving moral ideals political teeth constitutes a debasement of those ideals is wrong-headed. Morality, as the social phenomenon that it is, is already shot through with power. The mere exercise of power does not disqualify a moral ideal. And I have suggested that

---

<sup>389</sup> Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 231.

humanist social action leans upon the independently recognized values of truthfulness and transparency in human relationships.

Kitcher, like Singer, can be read as attempting to identify a distinctly moral axis of progress. I have suggested that this goal is unattainable, and should be set aside. Moral progress should be (re)conceived as progress *in our moralities*. The axes by which progress can be measured may be various. I have suggested, in a very preliminary way, two general axes of progress that might be emphasized (among others, no doubt) by humanists. First, progress in the fulfillment of deep and endorsable human desires plausibly counts as progress (giving us a fairly straightforward account of the progressiveness of the transition out of slavery). Second, progress in the achievement of sociomoral transparency plausibly counts as progress too—in resonance not only with the value of truthfulness but also with those values of freedom and self-determination that are part of our Enlightenment heritage.

Kitcher hesitates to render a final verdict on the question of *global* progress. It's not unequivocally clear, by his lights, that the very large transition from the (more or less) egalitarian lifestyle of our hunter-gatherer ancestors to the lifestyle(s) of our more stratified "civilizations" can be considered progressive. But "The lack of a concept of global progress," he says, "does not make a difference in the situations where a notion of ethical progress is most needed."<sup>390</sup> We need the concept of progress, on Kitcher's account, to inform "our deliberations about what further modifications to make."<sup>391</sup> On this point, I am in agreement: the desire for an account of moral progress is not first and foremost the desire for a linear scale upon which to peg every moral transition in every

---

<sup>390</sup> Kitcher, 244.

<sup>391</sup> Kitcher, 244.

human culture throughout history. Rather, it is first and foremost the desire for a sense of possibility, an expression of the desire for progress here and now. By pointing to more than one way in which we might speak of genuine improvements in our moralities, I hope at least to have shown that *this* is not a vain hope, nor an empty desire.



## CONCLUSION

In chapter one, I asked my framing question: is the knowledge we get from the sciences dangerous? Does it undermine our ability to take morality seriously, that is, does it undermine moral living? The answer for which I have argued in this dissertation is: *not necessarily*.

We can reconcile a scientific understanding of ourselves, which is to say, a naturalistic and evolutionary understanding of ourselves, with moral living, I have claimed, by adopting what I call a social view of morality. According to the social view, which I developed in chapters two and three, morality is a social phenomenon. I have argued that we can capture the pervasiveness of morality, both across the globe and within our lives, by seeing morality as a fundamental institution—one that gives our social form of life its structure. Moral authority, on this account, is just the inescapability of that social form of life, the material inescapability of normative space for social animals such as us. *We* give morality its authority by living under, promulgating, and enforcing its norms.

Furthermore, I have shown that the social view is not crudely relativistic because it allows for the possibility of critique. I captured this possibility in my account by viewing moral justification as a social phenomenon—as something we do amongst ourselves, as we interpret, extend, reinterpret, or reject inherited moral norms and ideals. However, and by the same token, I have rejected the idea that moral norms or ideals can be justified *simpliciter*. The resulting picture of morality is dynamic. Moralities co-evolve in lockstep with our forms of life, on my account, as we struggle to find and define better ways of getting along together, since, for the most part, we must.

In this respect then, the social view provides a *compatibilist* account of the relationship between moral living and naturalism. Moral life can, in principle, be lived transparently, even if that transparency is an achievement that must be indefinitely sustained, lest it be lost. But my account is also a *critical* compatibilist account. It does not simply christen all extant moral norms (“moral” in the descriptive or anthropological sense) as *moral* (in the normative sense).

Because it pictures moral norms and ideals as tools we use to get along together, the social view naturally leads to questions about how well the tools are working, who made the tools, and why, and so forth. Bringing an understanding of morality as a social tool *into* the social processes that constitute moral justification, in other words, is transformative. Once we come to see moral norms and ideals as products of fellow human beings with whom we may or may not share a culture or a social location, we are compelled to understand the social processes by which these norms and ideals have become authoritative for us. As I suggested in chapter three, sometimes the ideals hold up under scrutiny, but often, they do not. And in the critical space opened up by such exercises in transparency, I have claimed, lies the possibility of a transition to more transparent, more reflectively sustainable, and perhaps even more stable, sociomoral structurings.

I have also tackled the question of moral progress. As I argued in chapters four and five, the prospects for a strong defense of humanist commitments seem to me quite dim. We cannot, it appears, work our way into humanist commitments from the outside, so to speak.

But this does not mean expansive moral ideals are incompatible with a naturalistic

understanding of morality. I have argued that we can substitute the idea of progress *in* our moralities for the more traditional idea of moral progress, understood as progress along some distinctly “moral” axis. The result is that we can speak of *several* axes of progress, of various ways in which our moralities can be said to improve.

Against this background, I have offered some remarks that might count toward a *weak* defense of humanist ideals. The humanist, I have claimed, has an intelligible story to tell about the progressiveness of transitions such as the end of chattel slavery (related to the importance of deep and endorsable human desires), and about the desirability of sociomoral transparency, of truthfulness in our shared understandings. The humanist, in other words, can speak meaningfully of progress in ways that are likely to resonate even beyond humanist circles.

Thus, I hope to have shown that the examined life and the moral life (even when it is understood to encompass expansive moral ideals) need not part ways. It may be that, in particular social and political contexts, their reconciliation requires much work. But there is no need to preemptively lose all hope.

I have developed my critical compatibilist account in response to the possibility that scientific knowledge might be morally dangerous—dangerous, that is, to ordinary moral living. But throughout, and especially in chapters three and five, I have suggested a rather different way in which knowledge might be dangerous. I have suggested that the privileged and powerful often maintain their power and privilege through distance, opacity, and obfuscation. For those of us on the outskirts of society then, or for those of us who stand (or try to stand) in solidarity with the marginalized, there is hope in the truth. There is hope that shedding light on how inherited norms and ideals have *actually*

been made, and on how inherited norms and ideals *actually* work, will destroy the air of legitimacy that surrounds oppressive moral understandings. There is hope, in our counter-pressure against those who would control us without looking us in the eyes, without *seeing* us, or those we love, that the truth will be on our side. For those who occupy the centers of power then, there may still be some forms of knowledge that are dangerous. For those of us with humanist sympathies, that knowledge is ours to employ. I hope we are up to the task (a task which is necessarily social and political) of making it truly dangerous.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Robert. *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Alexander, R. D. *The Biology of Moral Systems*. Aldine de Gruyter, 1987.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1-16.
- Aubrey, John. *Brief Lives, Volume 1*. Oxford University Press, 1898.
- Axelrod, Robert. *The Evolution of Cooperation*. Basic Books, 1984.
- Bloom, Paul. *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human*. Basic Books, 2004.
- Bok, Sissela. *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. Vintage, 1989.
- Boyer, Pascal. *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. Basic Books, 2001.
- Brink, David O. *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Brink, David. "Kantian Rationalism: Inescapability, Authority, and Supremacy." In *Ethics and Practical Reason*, edited by Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Calhoun, Cheshire. "Justice, Care, Gender Bias." *Journal of Philosophy* 85, no. 9 (1988): 451-463.
- Campbell, Richmond. "Can Biology Make Ethics Objective?" *Biology and Philosophy* 11 (1996): 21-31.
- Cartwright, Nancy. *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Chalmers, David. *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Granada, 1981.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*. W. W. Norton, 1996.

- Dawkins, Richard. *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*. Houghton Mifflin, 1998.
- De Waal, Frans. *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*. Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Dennett, Daniel C. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. Touchstone, 1996.
- Dewey, John. "Ethics and Evolution." *The Monist* 8, no. 3 (1898): 321-341.
- Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. W. W. Norton, 1997.
- Dunbar, Robin. *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*. Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Eagleman, David. *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain*. Vintage, 2012.
- Festinger, Leon. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press, 1957.
- Finlay, Stephen. "The Error in the Error Theory." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 3 (2008): 347-369.
- Finlay, Stephen. "Errors upon Errors: A Reply to Joyce." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89 (2011): 535-547.
- FitzPatrick, William J. *Teleology and the Norms of Nature*. Garland, 2000.
- FitzPatrick, William J. "Review of Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*." *Ethics* 123, no. 1 (2012): 167-174.
- Flanagan, Owen. *Self-Expressions: Mind, Morals, and the Meaning of Life*. Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Flanagan, Owen, Hagop Sarkissian, and David Wong. "What Is the Nature of Morality? A Response to Casebeer, Railton, and Ruse." In Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Psychology*.
- Foot, Philippa. *Natural Goodness*. Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Foot, Philippa. *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*. Clarendon Press, 2002.
- Frankfurt, Harry G. *The Reasons of Love*. Princeton University Press, 2004.

- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W. W. Norton, 1963.
- Garner, Richard. "Abolishing Morality." In *A World without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Error Theory*, edited by Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin. Springer, 2010.
- Gilligan, Carol. "Moral Orientation and Moral Development." In *Women and Moral Theory*, edited by Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers. Rowman & Littlefield, 1987.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Greene, Brian. *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality*. Vintage, 2005.
- Haidt, Jonathan. "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment." *Psychological Review* 108 (2001): 814-834.
- Haidt, Jonathan, and Craig Joseph. "Intuitive Ethics: How Innately Prepared Intuitions Generate Culturally Variable Virtues." *Daedalus* 133 (2004): 55-66.
- Hamilton, William. "The Genetical Evolution of Social Behavior." *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7 (1964): 1-52.
- Hare, R. M. *Freedom and Reason*. Oxford University Press, 1963.
- Harris, Sam. *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. Free Press, 2010.
- Harris, Sam. *Lying*. Four Elephants Press, 2013.
- Held, Virginia. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, second edition. South End Press, 2000.
- Hume, David. *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Hackett, 1983.
- Jaggar, Alison M. "Ethics Naturalized: Feminism's Contribution to Moral Epistemology." *Metaphilosophy* 31, no. 5 (2000): 452-468.
- Jaggar, Alison M. "Globalizing Feminist Ethics." In *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World*, edited by Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding. Indiana University Press, 2000.

- Jaggar, Alison M. and Theresa W. Tobin. "Situating Moral Justification: Rethinking the Mission of Moral Epistemology." *Metaphilosophy* 44, no. 4 (2013): 383-408.
- Jaynes, Julian. *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Houghton Mifflin, 1976.
- Joyce, Richard. *The Evolution of Morality*. MIT Press, 2006.
- Joyce, Richard. "Morality, Schmorality." In *Morality and Self-Interest*, edited by Paul Bloomfield. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Joyce, Richard. "The Error in 'The Error in the Error Theory'." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89 (2011): 519-534.
- Joyce, Richard. "Enough with the Errors! A Final Reply to Finlay." Richard Joyce's Online Papers. Accessed August 25, 2012.  
[http://www.victoria.ac.nz/staff/richard\\_joyce/onlinepapers.html](http://www.victoria.ac.nz/staff/richard_joyce/onlinepapers.html).
- Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Kass, Leon. *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature*. Free Press, 1994.
- Kaufman, Gordon D. *Jesus and Creativity*. Fortress Press, 2006.
- Kelly, Daniel. *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*. MIT Press, 2011.
- Kitcher, Philip. "Function and Design." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 18 (1993): 379-397.
- Kitcher, Philip. *The Ethical Project*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Kitcher, Philip. *Science in a Democratic Society*. Prometheus, 2011.
- Kohlberg, Lawrence. *Essays on Moral Development, Volume 1: The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice*. Harper & Row, 1981.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, third edition. University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Lamont, Corliss. *The Illusion of Immortality*, fifth edition. Continuum, 1990.
- Lieberman, Debra. "Moral Sentiments Relating to Incest: Discerning Adaptations from By-products." In Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Psychology*.



- Lieberman, Debra, John Tooby, and Leda Cosmides. "Does Morality Have a Biological Basis? An Empirical Test of the Factors Governing Moral Sentiments Regarding Incest." *Proceedings of the Royal Society* 270 (2003): 819-826.
- Lugones, Maria, and Elizabeth Spelman. "Have We Got A Theory For You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for 'the Woman's Voice'." *Hypatia: A Special Issue of Women's Studies International Forum* 6 (1983): 573-581.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*. Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Mackie, J. L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Penguin, 1990.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, third edition. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.
- Mallon, Ron. "Review of Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. Accessed November 25, 2013.  
<http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/31102-the-ethical-project/>.
- Mankiw, Gregory N. "Defending the One Percent." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27, no. 3 (2013): 21-34.
- Mavrodes, George I. "Religion and the Queerness of Morality." In *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Robert Audi and William Wainwright. Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Mealy, Linda. "The Sociobiology of Sociopathy: An Integrated Evolutionary Model." *Brain and Behavioral Sciences* 18, no. 3 (1995): 523-599.
- New American Standard Bible*. The Lockman Foundation. 1995.
- Nichols, Shaun. *Sentimental Rules: On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgment*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Noddings, Nel. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, second edition. University of California Press, 2003.
- Noddings, Nel. *The Maternal Factor: Two Paths to Morality*. University of California Press, 2010.
- Paley, William. *Natural Theology*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Parfit, Derek. *On What Matters, Volumes I and II*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

- Pinker, Steven. *How the Mind Works*. W. W. Norton, 1997.
- Plato. *Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper. Hackett, 1997.
- Pojman, Louis P. *How Should We Live? An Introduction to Ethics*. Wadsworth, 2005.
- Prinz, Jesse. *The Emotional Construction of Morals*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Roseman, Herbert. "Altruism, Evolution, and Optional Games." PhD diss. Columbia University, 2008.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile or On Education*. Translated by Allan Bloom. Basic Books, 1979.
- Ruddick, Sara. "Maternal Thinking." *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1980): 342-367.
- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Beacon Press, 1989.
- Ruse, Michael. "Response to Duke Naturalists." In Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Psychology*.
- Shoemaker, David. "Moral Address, Moral Responsibility, and the Boundaries of the Moral Community." *Ethics* 118, no. 1 (2007): 70-108.
- Singer, Peter. *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress*, second edition. Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter, ed. *Moral Psychology, Volume 1: The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness*. MIT Press, 2007.
- Smart, J. J. C., and Bernard Williams. *Utilitarianism: For and Against*. Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- Solomon, Miriam. *Social Empiricism*. MIT Press, 2001.
- Spelman, Elizabeth V. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Beacon Press, 1988.
- Stack, Carol B. "Different Voices, Different Visions: Gender, Culture, and Moral Reasoning." In *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*, edited by Faye Ginsburg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. Beacon Press, 1990.
- Stout, Martha. *The Sociopath Next Door*. Broadway, 2005.

- Street, Sharon. "In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally Coherent Eccentrics and the Contingency of What Matters." *Philosophical Issues* 19 (2009): 273-298.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Tobin, Theresa W. and Alison M. Jaggar. "Naturalizing Moral Justification: Rethinking the Method of Moral Epistemology." *Metaphilosophy* 44, no. 4 (2013): 409-439.
- Tong, Rosemarie. *Feminine and Feminist Ethics*. Wadsworth, 1993.
- Trivers, Robert L. "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism." *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46 (1971): 35-57.
- Tronto, Joan C. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. Routledge, 1993.
- Turiel, Elliot. *The Development of Social Knowledge: Morality and Convention*. Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Turiel, Elliot, et al. "Morality: Its Structure, Functions, and Vagaries." In *The Emergence of Morality in Young Children*, edited by Jerome Kagan and Sharon Lamb. University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Walker, Margaret Urban. "Feminist Skepticism, Authority, and Transparency." In *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons. Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Walker, Margaret Urban. "Seeing Power in Morality: A Proposal for Feminist Naturalism in Ethics." In *Feminists Doing Ethics*, edited by Peggy DesAutels and Joanne Waugh. Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.
- Walker, Margaret Urban. *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*, second edition. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Wikipedia. "Craig Cobb." Accessed September 13, 2013.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craig\\_Cobb](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craig_Cobb).
- Wikipedia. "Inguinal hernia." Accessed October 16, 2013.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inguinal\\_hernia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inguinal_hernia).
- Wikipedia. "Ted Bundy." Accessed January 10, 2013.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted\\_Bundy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted_Bundy).
- Williams, Bernard. *Moral Luck*. Cambridge University Press, 1981.

- Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Williams, Bernard. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Wilson, E. O. *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. Harvard University Press, 1975.
- Wright, Robert. *The Moral Animal: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*. Pantheon, 1994.
- Wright, Robert. *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*. Pantheon, 2000.
- Zimmer, Carl. *Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea*. Harper, 2002.