

THE POSSIBILITY OF MORAL PROGRESS

By

DAVID CALEB CROSBY

A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree With Honors in
Philosophy

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

M A Y 2 0 1 6

Approved by:

Dr. Connie Rosati
Department of Philosophy

ABSTRACT: We tend to think that certain events in recent Western history can be viewed in some important sense as uncontroversially progressive. These include the abolition of slavery as a legally permissible institution, the rise of the Civil Rights movement, and a greater public concern for the well being of animals, among a host of others. We often think that these achievements of Western democracy are not merely social, but somehow importantly and deeply moral achievements which are reflected in our market and political institutions. The aim of this thesis is to vindicate our common-sense beliefs that there can be and that there *is* moral progress. By investigating moral theory, I aim to show how open-ended nature of reason, the faculty of reason, an objective conception of a person's interests (what is objectively good for a person), and contention, each contribute to the achievement of moral progress.

The Possibility of Moral Progress

David Crosby
University of Arizona

We tend to think that certain events in recent Western history can be viewed in some important sense as uncontroversially progressive. These include the abolition of slavery as a legally permissible institution, the rise of the Civil Rights movement, and a greater public concern for the well being of animals, among a host of others. We often think that these achievements of Western democracy are not merely social, but somehow importantly and deeply moral achievements which are reflected in our market and political institutions. The aim of this thesis is to vindicate our common-sense beliefs that there can be and that there *is* moral progress. By investigating moral theory, I aim to show how open-ended nature of reason, the faculty of reason, an objective conception of a person's interests (what is objectively good for a person), and contention, each contribute to the achievement of moral progress.

1. WHAT IS MORAL PROGRESS?

Prior to proceeding, we need some understanding of what is meant by “morality” in the first place. As Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell explain:

To begin to distinguish morality from other domains in which the open-ended normativity characteristic of reasoning exists, such as theoretical reasoning, we can say that morality—in the normative, not the descriptive sense, that is, morality properly conceived—is a matter of the conformity of individual actions, judgment, reasoning, motivation, and social arrangements to requirements derived from the fullest exercise of reasoning about *how we ought to live* (Buchanan and Powell, p. 37, 2015.)

Having provided us with the above definition, Buchanan and Powell proceed to identify ten different norms relative to which change would count as moral progress. The authors contend that there are essentially two important parts to claims of moral progress. (1) The descriptive part of the claim alleges that a particular event or state of affairs has come about in

the first place, and (2) the normative part of the claim alleges that a particular event or state of affairs is a morally better state of affairs, all things being equal. According to them, if a theory of moral progress includes an explanation for the items on the following list, that counts in favor of the theory. If a theory of moral progress cannot explain an item on the list (or worse, if one of the items on the list is not even considered internal to such a theory), then that counts against the theory.

- the abolition of slavery and grosser forms of racial segregation
- the extension of political participation rights to all adult citizens
- the increasing institutionalization of the equal rights of women
- better treatment of some non-human animals
- the abolition of extremely cruel punishments
- the spread of the rule of law
- the dramatic reduction of homicide rates since the Middle Ages
- the emergence of international norms prohibiting aggressive war, apartheid and colonialism, which have been shown to affect the behavior of states, and
- increased freedom from religious persecution and greater freedom of expression

For Buchanan and Powell, the most important starting place for inquiry into moral progress is to be able to assert claims that moral progress has occurred *somewhere*, even if it happens to be the case that we have good reasons to think that moral progress has not occurred *everywhere*. This we shall call ‘local moral progress.’ So it will not do for the critic of moral progress to opine ‘there is no moral progress, just look at all of the evil acts committed in the world during our time’, since what we require is the detection of instances of moral progress in at least some place in the world

The judgments are local because, taken individually or together, they do not imply that the world today at time T is morally better than the world as it was before these developments occurred at T-1, given the possibility of moral regressions elsewhere in the world or in the societies in which the putatively progressive changes occurred (Buchanan and Powell, p. 7, 2015.)

While Buchanan and Powell do not seem to commit themselves to a definition of ‘moral improvement’, I shall use the term to refer to changes in our moral norms as reflected in our public and private institutions, grounded in our recognition of morality reason-giving. Crucially,

as we shall see, this acknowledgment of morality as reason-giving may occur through both (1) explicit efforts made by agents to reason consistently about their practices and norms, as well as (2) through a non-deliberate process of arriving at the social practices that are most instrumentally rational and reliable in social environments. Some of the theories of moral progress surveyed in this thesis will emphasize (1), while others will emphasize (2). At any rate, it is essential that we understand that both are ways in which moral progress may occur, and observing this makes moral progress as a phenomenon more plausible than if we only meant either (1) or (2) in isolation from the other.

Let us now turn our attention to the ten norms that Buchanan and Powell take to undergird the instances of moral progress that we see. Along the way, I will consider objections that critics might raise with regard to the respective norms, and I will try to show examples of the norms applied to the real world where applicable and helpful.

2. BUCHANAN-POWELL TYPES OF MORAL PROGRESS, MORAL PROGRESS NORMS

1 Better Compliance with Valid Norms thanks to Non-Moral Social and Technological Developments

What does ‘better’ compliance with valid moral norms mean? Suppose that within a culture a certain moral practice has been codified, say, the practice of giving money to non-profit organizations. If we wish to know why there has been an increase in the total number of persons who follow the norm of giving to charity, we may very well discover that greater compliance can be traced to some fact about the technological advancements within a society. For example, the internet reduces the psychological and temporal costs of gathering information about various non-profit organizations. The authors stress that satisfying this norm alone will not count as moral progress, even if it would count for social progress. For example, if there is a drop in the

murder rate in a given area of a given time, this may not be due to greater respect of human beings for each other. So, while better compliance with valid norms will play an explanatory role, will not itself account for moral progress.

2 Better Moral Concepts

For Buchanan and Powell, another crucial type of moral progress occurs when a society obtains better moral concepts. We might consider the example of ‘sexual harassment’

This type also encompasses our coming to have valuable *new moral concepts*, which may not be replacements for or mere refinements of existing concepts: for example, the concept of sexual harassment, which allows victims to articulate the wrong done to them and which may enhance the capacity to mobilize forces for combating the wrong (Buchanan and Powell, 9, 2015.)

Unfortunately, the authors do not explain this in detail. However, the details do not seem particularly difficult to fill out. The term ‘sexual harassment’ arguably picks out a crucial feature which is distinctive of this kind of harassment as targeting a person as an object of sexual intimidation. To ascribe a sexual component to a general concept of ‘harassment’ is to permit features such as power to enter into the conceptual framework so that ‘sexual harassment’ is similar to (but not identical with) the general sense in which we use the term.

Importantly, social mobilization is made possible in virtue of the new shared concept which persons have which allows them to recognize why the sexual harassment is offensive to an individual who is the target of harassment, and why, by extension, it is socially offensive. The general point is that the discovery of new moral concepts allows us to articulate moral concerns in a more effective way than more generic concepts which fail to pick out the most salient moral features which the more specific terms denote.

3 More Expansive Conception of Virtues

Another norm of moral progress is a more expansive conception of virtue, where we come to hold that virtues incorporate a broader and richer context of human interactions, as

opposed to a narrow context. For example, the virtue of honor may be understood in quite a narrow way in some cultures, where the most “honorable” person in a given village is the person most ready to use violence to defend his family’s reputation when insulted. More expansive conceptions of ‘honor’ would focus less on how others see one’s family reputation, and more on one’s developing the sort of character worthy of being respected in the first place by following through on promises, contracts, and other obligations to which one binds himself. One would be seen as honorable because of the reputation he acquired for being trustworthy, not because of threats to use force against those who have insulted him.

It seems highly plausible to think that the more nuanced conceptions of virtues such as ‘honor’ can only be developed in suitable social environments where the rule of law is maintained, and where the State protects life, liberty, and property. The social trust that is fostered by well ordered political institutions seems central to moral progress and allows us to have interactions with other persons relatively free of intimidation, terror, and fear, so that we can develop business and personal relationships with other persons in a way which allows for to experience a richer and more nuanced conception of the virtues.

4 Better Moral Motivation

We should also expect to see that moral reasons become more action-guiding in the everyday lives of persons. Such is especially true with regards to sympathy. We should expect to see sympathy extended from our own in-group to those who are outside of our group, and indeed, even to persons with whom we do not necessarily have direct acquaintance. Such moral motivation should occupy a greater and greater part of the lives of individuals and communities above non-moral motivations for guiding our behavior. There is at least some reason to think that moral motivation has indeed improved.

Consider the many non-profit organizations which spend a great deal of money on

advertisements which appeal to the compassion of persons in visually representing those persons in great need. Often those persons depicted are removed from ourselves in terms of geographical location and life experience. It would be very difficult to explain why these organizations continue to invest in advertisements like these if the advertisements do not activate in suitably sensitive persons a sense of compassion when they see these kinds of images, which in turn provokes their response of giving to the organizations under consideration.

5 Better Moral Reasoning

What we should expect to see in this regard is a greater attention given to understanding relevant moral distinctions. Let us take the case of our (modern) moral concept of rape as a case which suggests that our modern concept is grounded in better moral reasoning than the concepts of rape which persons held who lived in antiquity or the middle ages. This is because the grounding reason cited for the wrongness of rape was not the physical and psychological harm done to the woman who was a victim in a given case, but rather the focus was on where the woman's husband or father stood in the social strata. Steven Pinker notes a dramatic cultural shift in modernity regarding rape.

Very gradually, the West has come to take rape seriously, and to criminalize and highly discourage it on the grounds that it is morally wrong. Pinker thinks that the moral revolution which has taken place goes deep into Western culture. Not only are prohibitions against rape formalized in legal codes (with the attendant heavy penalties of prison sentences for rapists if convicted.) Additionally, we can note that the popular culture is decidedly anti-rape. For example, the television series *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* depicts the victims of rape with sympathy, such that rapists, no matter their social status, are depicted as having committed a great wrong against the woman *herself*. More substantial still from the perspective of nonlinear moral progress, is the fall of the rates of rape in the United States, which began

declining in the 1970s and has steadily declined faster than the rates of murder. Pinker identifies statistics from the FBI's Uniform Crime Rates and National Crime Victimization survey:

Figure 7-10 plots out the surveyed annual rate of rape over the past four decades. It shows that in thirty-five years the rate has fallen to an astonishing 80 percent, from 100,000 people over the age of 12 in 1973 to 50 per 100,000 people in 2008. In fact, the decline may be even greater than that, because women have almost certainly been more willing to report being raped in recent years, when rape has been recognized as a serious crime, than they were in earlier years, when rape was often hidden and trivialized (Pinker, p. 402. 2011.)

Quite simply, I think a moral explanation for the decline of rape is that we have a better understanding of what rape is; namely, a violation of the autonomy of a person, and that our having a better concept of rape allows us to articulate reasons for defending the autonomy of the wronged victim. On that note, more evidence that our concept of rape has improved is that we no longer regard the term as applying solely to women, but also to men.

6 Proper Demoralization

For Buchanan, one norm of moral progress that is quite often overlooked is proper demoralization. These are cases in which, for good reasons, people come to regard as morally permissible behaviors they previously thought were morally wrong. Such proper demoralization is crucial because there are both material and psychological costs incurred by given individuals when either the individuals themselves or the societies in which they live improperly moralize a certain class of behaviors. In Middle Eastern countries, prohibitions on the lending of money tend to make persons in those societies materially worse off than they would be otherwise.

A society refrains from profit-seeking or from lending money at interest on the grounds that these vital economic behaviors are immoral; the result may be the perpetuation of a state of economic underdevelopment, with disastrous consequences for human welfare and liberty (Buchanan, p. 5, 2015.)

Buchanan's definition of 'proper demoralization' is very nicely put, in part because of its flexibility in allowing (under the rubric of proper demoralization) those classes of behaviors

which were mistakenly thought to be morally impermissible, and which, when we revisit them, we can class as ‘morally good’ or ‘morally neutral.’ To say that some behavior is ‘morally neutral’ is just to say that there is no moral reason to condemn that behavior just in virtue of itself. The very recognition that we have no moral reason to condemn, say the smoking of marijuana, allows us to say that moral progress has occurred.

7 Proper Moralization

Buchanan and Powell note that we can see the development of proper moralization, and such certainly counts as a norm indicating moral progress. Proper moralization pertains to cases in which, for good reasons, people come to regard as morally impermissible behaviors they previously thought were permissible. Here, defender of moral progress might point to Steven Pinker’s comparative international research of laws on violence against women:

Laws on violence against women show a lag from the legal reforms of Western democracies. Sub-Saharan Africa and South and Southwest Asia are host to systemic atrocities against women that are rare or unheard of in the 21st century West, including infanticide, genital mutilation, trafficking in child prostitutes and sex slaves, honor killings, attacks on disobedient or under-dowried wives with acid-burning kerosene, and mass rapes during wars, riots, and genocide (Pinker, p. 413, 2011.)

To be sure, there seems to be a strong correlation between the treatment that women receive in the democratic countries and the fact that those countries do in fact have democratic institutions. All the same, we need an explanation for why at least some democratic countries have more domestic violence against women than others. For example, says Pinker, Korea and Japan are affluent democracies, but have more domestic violence against women than some Latin American countries that are far less developed.

What, then, in addition to the presence of democracy, explains less domestic violence against women in democratic countries such as the United States, versus the comparatively greater domestic violence against women in democratic countries like Japan and South Korea?

Here Pinker considers the thesis advanced by Archer, who proposed the following:

Archer found that countries in which women are better represented in government and the professions, and in which they earn a larger proportion of earned income, are less likely to have women at the receiving end of spousal abuse. Also cultures that are classified as more individualistic, where people feel they are individuals with the right to pursue their goals, have relatively less domestic violence against women than cultures classified as *collectivist*, where people feel they are part of a community *whose interests take precedence over their own* [my italics.] These correlations don't prove causation, but they are consistent with the suggestion that the decline against women in the West has been pushed along by a humanist mindset that elevates the rights of individual people over the traditions of the community, and that increasingly embraces the vantage point of women (Pinker, 414, 2011.)

Given that we have seen that countries that are more individualistic have less domestic violence than countries that are more collectivistic, this suggests that democracy (in some mild form) may be a necessary but certainly not a sufficient condition for reducing domestic violence against women. Pinker observes the humanist mindset elevates rights of individual people over the implicit biases which may very well ground the basis for at least some of these traditions within a community.

8 Better understanding of Moral Standing and Moral Status

Buchanan and Powell also contend that there has been a steady improvement in the nuances of classifications for moral standing, and that such reflects a *prima facie* tendency towards moral progress. By 'moral standing' the authors mean that we appropriately recognize those persons and even animals that are proper objects of moral concern. The kinds of nuances under consideration pertain to certain facts about beings that are sentient and can feel pain. In this sense, certain non-human animals have moral standing, perhaps in virtue their being sentient and capable of self-movement (though the precise reasons that ground the moral standing of these non-human animals is not here relevant for our concerns.)

On the other hand, 'moral status' pertains to the proper level of moral consideration that we discover non-human animals beings warrant, given that they have moral standing at all in

the first place. A rock has no moral standing at all, and therefore no moral status, for it is an inanimate object that has no sentience or rational capacities—that is, no *prima facie* nor overriding interest in not being kicked, thrown in a lake, etc.

However, there is, perhaps, an even more robust case to be made for a basis of the proper recognition of *moral status* when we consider the Civil Rights movement, especially in terms of the radical change in public opinion regarding racist policies and legislation, and in the institutional changes in political and market institutions. Racism in the United States was much more socially acceptable in 1955 than in 1969. What, other than sociological and economic factors, might account for this shift that most persons living in the United States today take to be a decidedly progressive change in public opinion?

When one considers what motivated millions of whites to march on Washington D.C. with blacks, it seems quite plausible to say that the whites who marched with the blacks realized *and were motivated by* an important ethical constraint on decision-making via an impartiality requirement that the white racists who protested the march did not realize. Namely, that policies and legislation can be publically supported and publically affirmed only when the kinds of policies and legislation that are crafted by the State can be justified on the grounds that we can imagine living the lives of any persons who are affected by such legislation. Conversely, policies that we cannot imagine living our lives under but which we impose onto others cannot be justified. “Whites Only” drinking fountains do not satisfy a requirement that policies and legislation be framed in such a way that we can imagine living the lives of all persons affected by it; neither, for that matter, do legal prohibitions restricting legal access to job opportunities on the basis of the color of one’s skin or one’s gender.

We can really only explain the acceptance of an impartiality requirement in terms of the

desire by agents to have moral norms that can be followed (that is, norms which accord with the consistency requirements that reason places on such moral norms that can in principle be followed in the first place) The appeals made to the inherent moral equality of persons during the debate over the Civil Rights Act (CRA), as well as the institutional shift in decidedly anti-racist public policy justified in terms of such normative values, strongly suggests that we can appeal to the Civil Rights movement as picking out a key feature of moral progress to ground institutional changes. Namely: an appeal to lawmakers and voters to hold to consistent legal reasoning that can be publically justified on the grounds that lawmakers and voters can truly imagine themselves living the lives of those who are governed by the policies and legislation that lawmakers and voters enact.

If so, this would indicate the sort of moral progress explanations that we are after, for appeal to consistent legal reasoning can itself be traced in an explanatory way to the recognition of persons to hold consistent moral norms that serve as the basis for the consistent legal norms. Such a consistency constraint on moral and legal reasoning might be ridding ourselves of arbitrary considerations based on features such as a person's skin color or gender; such cannot be used as reasons that justify not extending equal moral status to our fellow human beings *qua* human beings who are moral agents. That is, it would indicate the kinds of explanations that can be given in terms of an expansion of the moral circle of persons whom we regard to have equal moral status, based on a requirement of impartially justified moral norms.

9 The Rejection of a Strategic Conception of Morality

According to Buchanan and Powell, the dominant evolutionary views of morality hold that morality is nothing more than a strategic rational bargain in which the moral status of persons is based on (1) what she or she can contribute to the group and (2) whether or not she poses a threat to the group's survival. Thus, on this view, the moral practices that developed

among our ancestors were grounded in the norm of strategic morality.

Note that one does not have to deny that this strategic conception of morality may have existed in human societies thousands of years ago, or that it explains the moral practices in some locales in the world. One may even perhaps consider that a *part* of morality may consist in a rational bargaining. However, it should be reasonably evident that this narrow conception of morality is unable to account for certain social movements such as the children's right movement, the animal rights movement, and the right-to-life movement, among others.

What might explain the rise of such 'rights' movements? Well, according to Buchanan and Powell, what we tend to see beginning in the Enlightenment is the ascendancy of a 'subject-based morality,' in which the moral status of persons is not based on the capacity to harm or benefit the cooperative social efforts of the group, but is rather based on some criterion/criteria of practical rationality and/or sentience that grounds the moral reasons that constrain what the group can do to enhance itself.

Most notably, the strategic conception of morality does not (and seemingly cannot) account for the right-to-life (pro-life) movement. The rise of the pro-life movement is not discussed by Buchanan and Powell, but it is highly relevant as empirical support for the norm of the rejection of the strategic conception of morality. Consider the discourse of the abortion debate as it is carried out today, which is grounded in some conception of rights which individuals are taken to have, rather than in some conception of rational bargaining (certainly no one will maintain that fetuses are engaging in any bargaining!) Those who are in favor of abortion on moral grounds purport to defend the right of a woman to the autonomy of her body. Meanwhile, those who are opposed to abortion on moral grounds also purport to defend the right of the unborn child to be born if such is medically feasible.

Whatever stand one takes with regard to the abortion debate, it is notable that the discourse on both sides pertains to the rights that individuals are taken to have, whether the child's right to live outweighs mother's right to autonomy over her own body, as well as whether the fetus is or is not a person in the sense of moral standing, and at what stage of development. Such concerns reflect a subject-centered approach to this moral issue. So too, the anti-abortion advocate does not ground her argument for the moral wrongness of abortion on the grounds on the strategic benefits of stopping abortion (even if there are any such benefits which might be gained). That is, she does not appeal to interests that she has and that we have, but rather to duties that she takes herself and us to have. Indeed, she may invest a great deal of wealth to defend the anti-abortion cause, with no expectations of receiving any material benefits from it, and even at great material sacrifice to herself.

10 The Recognition of Morality as Reason-Giving

Buchanan and Powell notes that morality itself gives us reasons to comply with legitimate moral norms. Here I think it is helpful to appeal to the distinction made by John Rawls between 'rational' versus 'reasonable.' While one can have rationality without morality, 'reasonableness' is intrinsically tied to the moral values which persons share with one another (at least in the ordinary cases in which the persons under consideration are not amoralists.) With regard to reasonability, Rawls holds that persons are reasonable when they can agree on terms of social cooperation as equals.

Meanwhile, what we call 'rational' pertains strictly to the suitability of the quality of agent's deliberation, given her ends. To say that someone is 'rational' is then to make an evaluative claim as to her ability to pursue the most efficient, most coherent, and most complimentary means to achieving her ends. In contrast, an agent is reasonable when she is willing to give decisive weight to fair social cooperation over her own self interests. As Rawls

says: “merely rational agents lack a sense of justice and fail to recognize the validity of the independent claims of others” (Rawls, p. 52, 1992, 1996.)

In the case of rules of just warfare, we recognize that war is very costly in terms of human lives, and that we only engage in war when great moral goods are at stake where such goods cannot be secured by diplomacy. Wars ought not be fought in order to invade another country with the intention of plundering the individual citizens of that country of their wealth, or subjecting those citizens to unjust rule. Thus, it may be (in the Rawlsian sense) rational to invade another country if one’s own country is sufficiently strong in terms of military resources and weapons. Yet this course of action would not be a reasonable course of action in our sense, given the above. With this in mind, we can explain UN rules of warfare, and our attempted compliance with such rules. When we wage war, then, we do so with the goal of maintaining our liberties, and of ensuring that the mechanisms of fair social cooperation remain protected and intact.

2. BUCHANAN AND POWELL’S MECHANISM OF MORAL PROGRESS

For Buchanan and Powell, a robust account of ‘moral *progress*’ will take into account such facts including the frailty of human life, our very limited epistemic powers, and our psychological needs for love, friendship, and society. On this view, morality is not merely a matter of abstract reasoning; it is also a matter of being emotionally and perceptually attuned to certain facts about human beings’ interactions with each other that help us explain why we form moral norms in the first place, and why we reevaluate moral norms in light of these facts about ourselves and the conditions of our interactions with others.

Sound reasoning about how to live accommodates all of these facts and in doing so becomes properly constrained and focused, but without losing the capacity to continue to question its own products. Indeed, a proper recognition of these facts about our predicament, and in particular of our limited epistemic powers, which includes defects in reasoning, requires that our moral thinking be open-ended and subject to revision... Given this concept of morality, we can only define moral progress, at the highest level of

generality, as increasingly adequate conformity to all the demands of morality, on the understanding that morality is open-ended by virtue of its essentially involving reasoning (Buchanan-Powell, 2015, pp. 38-39.)

These above considerations lead to their view of ‘open-ended normativity.’ That is, how we ought to live turns out to depend on facts about the kinds of beings that we are, for these facts specify the conditions under which we live and interact with our fellows.

The capacity to make explicit the norms one has hitherto been following and subject them to rational criticism and revision. One way this happens is when critical reflection leads to the recognition that existing norms are being applied inconsistently or are arbitrarily restricted in their scope, which in turn provides reasons to revise them (Buchanan and Powell, p. 12, Unpublished, 2015.)

Open-ended normativity thus states that our moral judgments are reliable if three conditions obtain. (1) Our moral judgments are formed under the sort of epistemic conditions that inform us about the relevant non-moral facts. This is a necessary starting place for the possibility of reliable moral judgments, and to see why we can consider how mistakes about non-moral facts hinders or even prevent us from forming reliable moral judgments. If Ted is intoxicated while driving down a dark road, his perceptual and cognitive faculties are unreliable. This unreliable epistemic condition then negatively affects his ability to form reliable moral judgments. If he does not see that there is a pedestrian in the middle of the road, he will not form a moral judgment that he should apply the brakes of the vehicle to avoid hitting the pedestrian. A necessary (but not sufficient) condition for open-ended normativity is that agents be in sufficiently suitable epistemic conditions to form reliable moral judgments.

(2) Reliable moral judgments accurately pick out the facts pertaining to the consequences of complying with given moral norms. That is to say, there must some non-arbitrary way that we can map on the facts pertaining to the consequences of moral norms to the moral norms themselves. This presents a challenge. Especially given globalization, the complex interactions

of individuals and countries makes it difficult to determine whether good or bad consequences in society are the result of moral norm X or moral norm Y. Oftentimes there are ‘remoter effects’ in moral norms where the good or bad consequences of a moral norm may take months or perhaps even decades to trace back to their original source in the given moral norm (if indeed such is feasible in the first place.)

Making moral sense of complex social interactions adds to the difficulties of forming reliable moral judgments. As an example, consider a hypothetical state which implements a policy restricting the content of the speech of its citizens (as opposed to merely time-place-manner restrictions on the context of their speech which are widespread across free societies and not seemingly morally objectionable.) The failure of such a policy, perhaps in the form of mass violations of the rules of the policy, can be explained in terms of ignorance of or intentional discounting of the psychological fact that humans are social beings who wish to express ideas, and share ideas with each other. Such a moral judgment will be reliable in virtue of its recognition of the relevant psychological fact of human sociability.

Moreover, such explanations could be tested because we could compare moral norms in societies where freedom of speech was a moral value and with the moral norms in societies where freedom of speech was not valued. We would, on an open-ended normativity prediction, observe that the value of sociability was realized to a greater extent in the societies where freedom of speech was valued than societies in which it was not valued. That is, persons would realize the expression and exchange of ideas more so in the former than the latter.

(3) The belief-formation process combats biases and prejudices so as to ensure that only accurate information is taken into account in the formation of the moral judgments. That is, on open-ended normativity, the belief-formation process contains checks for biases and prejudices

in our beliefs, and filters them out from our best moral judgments. Such a belief-formation process is highly sensitive to factual information about the way the world is and facts we discover about ourselves that affect our interactions with each other.

I want to consider two hypothetical tribes that inhabit two islands, and how their limited information about each other produces biases and prejudices which are unwarranted. Tribe *A* inhabits Island *A*, and Tribe *B* inhabits Island *B*. Travel from Island *A* to Island *B* and from Island *B* to Island *A* is, let us say, prohibitive, because the technological capabilities of Tribe *A* and Tribe *B* might be quite limited. Given their very limited interactions with each other, there will only be a few visitors traveling from one island to the other. Now, suppose that these early interactions have been negative because visits have been mostly conducted by political diplomats rather than merchants, operating under incentives of fear and suspicion. Under such epistemic conditions of this very limited information, it is hardly surprising if Tribes *A* and *B* distrust each other, given their limited interactions.

Now, suppose that as the years pass, Tribes *A* and *B* develop the technological ability (they build faster, more reliable boats, perhaps?) to make frequent commercial trips from Island *A* to Island *B*, and from Island *B* to Island *A*. These increased interactions for mutual benefit via market exchanges gradually expand the epistemic scope of all of the parties involved regarding each other. Given a wider scope of continuous interactions, the majority of Tribe *A* comes to realize, even if not explicitly, that the people of Tribe *B* are much more reasonable and cooperative than they had originally supposed, and the people of Tribe *B* comes to a roughly similar view of the people of Tribe *A*. Consequently, both Tribe *A* and Tribe *B* come to regard each other as having moral standing.

The kind of information crucial to making substantively reliable moral judgments is based

on the most accurate non-moral factual information that can be obtained. Along the way, moral judgments that were made under skewed and inferior epistemic conditions (e.g., the mistaken impressions tribes *A* and *B* formed of each other while travel was not widespread) are re-assessed and then discarded as unreliable. Those moral judgments emerging from the belief forming process those that are most reliable, given a reliable specification of the non-moral factual information (in this case, tribes *A* and *B* discover that each is much more reasonable and cooperative than they both first supposed, based on facts about widespread travel and nuanced interactions with each other.)

What are the advantages of open-ended normativity explanations? One advantage of the approach is that we can focus on facts yet still retain the ability to question and revise the products of our finest reasoning about morality. Moreover, the kinds of moral judgments that we make must “rely on the best available understanding of moral norms, concepts, and virtues” (Buchanan and Powell, p. 39, 2015.) On this view, we have two assumptions that guide our moral inquiry. The first is that *reason is self-reflective and capable of revisions*, and the second is that *reason has the capacity to improve its products by devising strategies for protecting against its own failures*.

Where we previously committed ourselves to certain moral judgments or moral practices without condition and as deep convictions, on open-ended normativity, we examine whether a particular moral practice seems inconsistent with some deeper moral beliefs that we have that we take to be quite reliable. Moral beliefs that count as ‘reliable’ in this sense will be the sorts of beliefs that are grounded in self-reflective procedures that take into account the fallibility of our judgments generally. A less reliable moral judgment will be based on mere conjecture and postulation where there is no evidence to sustain a moral judgment, or even a

moral practice. Consider, for example, the case of slave owners who believed without any good evidence that blacks were somehow less intelligent than whites. This sort of very unreliable belief is subject to empirical investigation rather than unexamined self-congratulatory assumptions about the abilities of whites. Thus, when our judgments are arrived at via this reliabilist scheme of open-ended normativity, we ought to have weighted confidence in that particular judgment.

This is all plausible enough. But it is important to consider a possible concern which a critic of moral progress might raise both to the idea of moral progress in general, and to Buchanan and Powell's open-ended normativity mechanism of moral progress. The sort of critic I have in mind here might be a moral skeptic who thinks that all supposedly moral explanations for social improvements are reducible to economic explanations on a *homo economicus* model, which purports to give explanations rooted in an analysis of the incentives and disincentives of economic actors based on cost/benefit analysis. Moral explanations, she might allege, arise from sentimental after-the-fact considerations to put a romantic gloss on what can otherwise be described as a straightforward interplay of incentives and disincentives which economic actors take into account when they engage in social interactions. The upshot is that what we call 'moral' progress is merely a misleading way of referring to the increased in the standard of living which allows us to ascribe intentionalistic explanations for changes in social norms. In fact, though, the shape of current society with its current social norms is simply the outcome of technological innovation and greater economic efficiency which have altered social practices.

Intentionalistic explanations thus play a role in the individual choices of economic actors based on their respective incentives and disincentives, but certainly not in terms of the outcomes of social norms. Social norms evolve in a non-deliberate, non-cognitive way. We are essentially shaped by the norms of our society, rather than us shaping the norms of our society through

deliberate action. Thus, slavery was made illegal in Britain in 1802 not because of anyone's deliberate intentions and cognitive persuasion that slavery was morally wrong, but because slavery had essentially outlived its economic usefulness to the British Empire. For this was a time when the division of labor was expanding, and with it a corresponding rise in literacy among the population. While owning slaves may have been less costly to slave owners than paying wages to workers, nonetheless these slave-owners were unable to compete with free labor in the long run because free laborers had greater incentives to specialize in particular industries to earn higher wages, given the high demand for specialization. Thus we can give an explanation which effectively reduces to incentives and disincentives which shape the structure of social norms.

There are at least two responses which can be made to this objection. The first is that this sweeping indictment of moral progress only effectively applies to those theories of moral progress which fail to take into account the explanatory role of individuals' incentives and disincentives in shaping social norms. Open-ended normativity explanations, far from denying the reality that we are beings which are subject to incentives and disincentives, merely asserts that knowledge of certain relevant facts about ourselves has an explanatory role in the formation of our beliefs, our actions, and ultimately the institutions and norms of our society. When we attain knowledge of certain facts, such *can* give us proper incentives to give greater weight to moral reasons and less weight to arbitrary and unreliable judgments. If we find that our current decision-procedures have been hitherto based on unreliable judgments (e.g., animals are not conscious of pain anyway, so we may perform whatever experiments on them that we wish), finding out that we were mistaken about the non-moral facts can itself provide us with incentive to correct for those errors and attain more reliable judgments of relevant non-moral facts.

Secondly, on open-ended normativity, we have incentives to not have false beliefs that are also potentially hazardous to ourselves. For example, the false belief held by some white slave owners that the black slaves under their charge were not fully human provided an incentive for those white slave masters to view those slaves as not having the same moral status as themselves. But this false belief also carried with it a hazardous miscalculation that slave behavior and motivation was as primitive as any of the farm animals on a plantation. If the slaves were not human, then not only could they be treated as non-human animals, but additionally, their psychology was not human either; thus they would not have nuanced emotions like guilt, shame, resentment, pride, and love. This false belief proved to be a hazardous miscalculation because there were slave rebellions among slave owning households—there was backlash and reprisal. As it turned out, the black slaves *did in fact* have the same sophisticated and nuanced psychological processes as the white slave owners; and such emotions as resentment and pride were sufficient for those slaves to rebel, to flee from their masters, and to seek freedom.

The above illustrates that the very desire that we possess to not have false beliefs that are hazardous to us can serve to provide us with an incentive to change those false beliefs. In the case of slavery, a moral explanation for putting end to slavery as a legal institution (that is, to recognize the equal moral status of black slaves), is thus compatible with but not reducible to, the economic explanation (that is, of acting on the basis of incentives which we have.) In this case, as in many others, open-ended normativity is highly relevant to why Western peoples turned against slavery. Namely, they had strong incentive to do so which coincided with their discovery of relevant non-moral facts about blacks having the same nuanced emotions which they had previously been ignorant, but which came to light during the abolition movement; in turn, this incentive can be explained by the desire of the British to rid themselves of false beliefs which

were hazardous to their well being.

Recall earlier that we made two observations regarding how moral progress might come about. (1) explicit efforts made by agents to reason consistently about their practices and norms, as well as (2) a non-deliberate process of arriving at the social practices which are most instrumentally rational and reliable, given our interactions in social environments. It seems that the abolition of slavery in England in 1802 does not clash with the sort of incentives/disincentives considerations that our moral progress critic wished to give for the abolition of slavery, because (2) is consistent with the kind of explanation which the *homo economicus* analyst would give (it is just not reducible to the *homo economicus* theory itself.)

However, this is not to say deny (1). The history of the abolition movement is replete with explicit arguments giving moral reasons for abolishing slavery, such as natural rights arguments that all persons owned their own bodies and could not therefore be lawfully owned by other persons, as well as theological arguments that slavery was an affront against God. So the point is not all to take away from the explanatory power of (1). Even so, holding out (2) as a good explanation is a promising way to defuse the objection from the moral progress critic. We shall not, I expect, get the critic to take seriously moral motivation for the abolition of slavery. But the critic is forced to recognize that (2) takes on board her considerations of incentives and disincentives, and thus has an explanatory role for social reform by appealing to a change in the incentive structure that the British had, given their instrumental rationality.

4. PETER SINGER'S ACCOUNT OF THE MECHANISM OF MORAL PROGRESS: EXPANDING THE MORAL CIRCLE VIA REASONING

Peter Singer offers an account of moral progress in which the mechanism for moral advancement is the faculty of reason itself. According to Singer, reason is analogous to an escalator. Reason is autonomous, in the sense that once we have committed ourselves to trying to

live rationally, we do not know beforehand how consistently applying reasoning may require us to alter certain moral judgments and moral practices.

If we do not understand stand what an escalator is, we might get on it intending to go a few meters, only to find that once we are on, it is difficult to avoid going all the way to the end. Similarly, once reasoning has got started it is hard to tell where it will stop. 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, 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 (Singer, pp. 113-114, 1981, 2011.)

We can detect three stages of moral progress, all of which serve to advance our understanding of the moral standing of both humans and non-humans. The first stage is forming customs, and reasoning about which types of behavior do/do not cohere with our customs.

For the idea of custom implies the capacity to see beyond particular events, to group what happens here and now with what happened some time ago. This is a capacity which, though probably not limited exclusively to human beings, is certainly more highly developed in humans than in other animals. The readiness with which we can bring particular events under a general rule may be the most important difference between human and animal ethics (Singer, 1985, 2011, pp. 95.)

The central idea here is that we exercise our reason when we demand an excuse or a justification from others for not complying with the norms of our culture. Even if we ourselves do not explicitly give reasons our own norms, we oftentimes make great efforts to ensure to that our political and social institutions contain policies for enforcing the norms.

In the second stage, customs of morality are themselves questioned on the basis of reason. Reason, that is, challenges, the “this is the way we’ve always done things” mentality which is common across our moral customs. For example, fifth century BC Athenian society was willing to tolerate Socrates’ questioning of their moral customs only to a point.

“The unexamined life is not worth living,” Socrates told those about to vote on his sentence...Reaching this stage requires no mere continuation of previous trends, but a leap into the unknown. It is impossible to predict at what point in the development of a system of customary morality a Socratic questioner will appear, although, as already suggested, the ability to take an outsider’s perspective on one's own society may have

something to do with it. 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 (Singer, pp. 97-98, 1981, 2011.)

This leads us to the third and final stage of moral progress on our reason-as-escalator account: namely, the rational settlement of ethical disputes based on the rational requirement of impartial assessment of ethical claims. This starts at the level of individual persons recognizing that their individual interests do not outweigh the interests of other individuals, and that the concept of justice picks out in our feature of our discourse. The principle of impartial consideration is then extended throughout a given culture, and then gradually across cultures.

Reasoning is not limited to the negative of rejecting custom as the basis of ethical authority. 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 (Singer, pp. 100, 1981, 2011.)

According to Singer, we first imagine ourselves living the lives of all those persons who are affected by our actions, and then we ask ourselves what decision we ought to make. Of course, the attentive reader will have realized that our use of the term 'impartial consideration for the interests of others' needs some qualification in scope. In particular, we need to know how (if at all) the impartiality requirement could serve as part of a mechanism for moral progress rather than simply regulating the content of moral norms. In order that impartiality could fulfill such an explanatory role as a mechanism for moral progress, it must be the case that impartiality could explain not only constraints on the actions of persons within a particular culture, *but could be extended to persons of other cultures based on the application of the impartiality principle.* Presumably the moral codes of various cultures contain prohibitions against certain actions if performed on the members of the group which would be morally permissible according that culture if performed on a stranger. For instance, in Singer's own example:

Tribal moralities often take exactly this form. Obligations are limited to members of the tribe; strangers have very limited rights, or no rights at all. Killing a member of the tribe is wrong and will be punished, but killing a member of another tribe whose path you happen to cross is laudable...The ancient Assyrian kings boastfully recorded in stone how they had tortured their non-Assyrian enemies and covered the valleys and mountains with their corpses. In modern times Europeans have stopped treating each other in this way, but less than two hundred years ago some still regarded Africans as outside the bounds of ethics, and therefore a resource which should be harvested and put to useful work. Similarly Australian aborigines were, to many early settlers from England, a kind of pest, to be hunted and killed whenever they proved troublesome (Singer, pp. 111, 112, 113, 1981, 2011.)

Singer's example highlights the requirement that our moral norms be susceptible to critique if they yield inconsistent verdicts. The most basic motivation to develop moral systems that yield consistent verdicts comes from the sheer practical difficulties that arise in the absence of such consistent verdicts. Without an impartiality requirement to ground moral norms, one cannot appeal to constraints of reason when attempting get other persons to follow the moral norms. Any attempt to establish a baseline of rational agreement to follow inconsistent norms fails because persons can always provide legitimate reasons against following arbitrary norms.

One way of arriving at such a decision—an idea first suggested by the American philosopher C. I. Lewis and recently revived by R. M. Hare, professor of moral philosophy at the University of Oxford, is to imagine myself living the lives of all affected by my decision, and then ask what decision I prefer (Singer, 101 1981, 2011.)

Notice that this kind of definition is neutral as between consequentialism and non-consequentialism, and so it is possible to view moral progress in such terms whether one is a consequentialist or a non-consequentialist. For instance, it is perfectly consistent for a non-consequentialist to hold an impartiality requirement which is a positive duty of agents to giving equal consideration to the interests of individual persons regardless of whether or not discharging out duties promotes utility or the happiness of the majority of persons in a group or in a society.

With this potential misunderstanding about impartiality effectively dealt with, we can see the explanatory power of an impartiality requirement allows us to expand the moral circle. That

is because once we realize and become motivated by the fact that we cannot reconcile and endorse as reasonable those norms that impose legal prohibitions on other persons that we could not reasonably see as applying to ourselves if we were living the lives of these persons, we see ourselves as rationally required to adhere to impartial consideration of others.

At this point, consistent reasoners are then faced with a choice: either give up the moral norms that they already apply to themselves (if they endorse these norms as reasonable then such a course of action will be very costly), or live with the gross theoretical mess and practical consequences of failing to apply the norms that would, by their reasoning, require them to remove arbitrary barriers to moral standing. Which choice reasoners will make is an empirical question. But recent historical evidence, such the success of the animal rights movement and the disabled-persons movement, strongly suggests that when faced with this choice, we have tended to remove the arbitrary norms, apply valid moral norms which we ourselves adhere to and assess each other by, and thus move toward an expansion of the moral circle.

Now it seems that a critic of moral progress may deny that there is any good reason to think that the faculty of reason actually leads to moral progress. Reason, the critic would allege, is abstract and disconnected from the true source of our moral attitudes, which is the emotions. Reason, after all, is the method one uses to arrive at true propositions, and to transition from one true proposition to the next. However, reason cannot cause someone to care about propositions (whether ethical or non-ethical.)

The strength of the critic's objection is that it rightly demonstrates the limits of Singer's theory of moral progress as an escalator of reason in which the moral circle is expanded. But it seems that what the critic wants is an account of moral motivation, which Singer does not focus on when establishing his theory of moral progress. Rather than dismissing his theory, however,

we ought instead to consider whether reason does have an explanatory role in moral progress. Notably, we ought to see what internal features of reason might provide a link between moral knowledge and moral motivation. Consider first that it is vital to ensure that we have some working conception of what is meant by ‘reason’ in the first place. If the critic is using the term ‘reason’ to demarcate a particular intellectual, religious, or philosophical approach to moral motivation, this is not the sense of ‘reason’ with which we are concerned.

Rather, what is meant by ‘reason’ is much more prosaic; namely, the human motivational system. Most of us probably do not reason to true propositions because we think that it is so much fun, or somehow rewarding for its own sake (no doubt, a few may do this.) Rather, we reason to true propositions because in many instances it is more advantageous to have reliable beliefs than unreliable beliefs about ourselves and the world we live in, and true propositions are as reliable beliefs as we can get. We care about having reliable beliefs when we interact with other persons.

As individuals, we tend to be concerned about the well being of our families, friends, and ourselves in the paradigm cases. In order to get other persons who are strangers to us to recognize our interests in not being murdered, raped, or stolen from, we appeal to the same interests they have to not be murdered, raped, or stolen from. Appeals to strangers not to harm us based on claims rooted in religious authority will only tend to be effective insofar as we live in a community with persons who either share that religion (and are thus guided by those same commitments like ourselves), or with persons who have at least internalized those religious commitments as moral norms to follow as their own. Similar problems obtain when appealing to clan membership, tribal affiliation, or other criteria which is by nature grounded in the exclusivity of social status or geographical location.

Meanwhile, appeals to persons not to harm us based solely threats of violence, coercion,

and retribution are likewise predictably ineffective as long term solutions to secure our well being and that of our friends and loved ones, as both Hobbes and modern game theory demonstrate. History books are full of accounts of strong men and strong regimes, held together by threats, intimidation, and force. Eventually they were unable to sustain themselves—collapsing either under internal systemic problems of distrust and backstabbing, or from the force exerted by stronger, yet fiercer regimes. This holds true both individually and collectively.

What remains to secure our long term interests of not being murdered, raped, or stolen from? The only feature left which can be considered is that which all neurologically normal adults have in common: the simple but powerful observation that violence is undesirable all things considered *if* there is a way for us to live at peace with one another and minimize the overall risks of costly conflicts. This is not a mere platitude; for what is being given is a link between motivation and moral reasoning. Most of us genuinely care about costs and benefits. Even if we do not state it in these terms, violence requires high costs for all parties concerned, for aggressors and victims. Even when the costs do not directly mean our own life and limb, they can include heavy psychological costs of the injury or death of family members and friends.

A theory of moral progress via the expansion of the moral circle such as that given by Singer can therefore be defended on the grounds that we can appeal to the faculty of reason precisely because we all have reason to try to secure what we already care about. If such is the case, then it makes a great deal of sense that the human rights movement has come about. That we have not seen widespread instances of human rights in human history can be explained by the observation that we have finally internalized many of the norms which Buchanan and Powell mentioned in their own account of moral progress, but only as recently as the Enlightenment.

5. PETER RAILTON'S OBJECTIVE GOOD WANTS/INTERESTS FEEDBACK MECHANISM

Peter Railton offers a rough sketch of what thinks would comprise the mechanisms of moral progress. We first start with the uncontroversial observation that as individuals we are imperfect reasoners. Our best attempts of deliberation are still very limited. Given these limitations of deliberation, cognitive scientists have been interested in how so many of our beliefs and practices can be more or less instrumentally rational.

The mechanism is simple. Patterns of belief and behavior that do not exhibit much instrumental rationality will tend to be to some degree self-defeating, an incentive to change them, whereas patterns that exhibit greater instrumental rationality will tend to be to some degree rewarding (Railton, p. 19, 2007.)

That is, we come to acquire a number of more or less instrumentally rational practices and beliefs in large part because the instrumentally rational practices themselves yield rewards and the irrational practices are self-defeating. It is through our experiences of acting that we learn which practices are more or less rewarding, and notably unlike Singer, the strategies adopted need not be (and in many cases are not) the result of an explicit reasoning process.

Of course, thus far I have only reported Railton's view that we can and often do adopt unconscious strategies and unconscious behaviors which are instrumentally rational and yield us rewards for adopting them. I have not yet explained Railton's view of what connection such strategies might have with moral progress. Before I try to show the connection between Railton's considerations of instrumental rationality and his account of moral progress, we need to consider three more important pieces of the explanatory puzzle: namely, (1) his conception of objective interests, (2) the 'wants/interests feedback mechanism,' and (3) the concept of social rationality.

According to Railton, we make a distinction between "objective" and "subjective" interests. Subjective interests act upon us in the sense that they produce in us positive attitudes or inclinations, even though these attitudes may not necessarily be conscious. If I have a subjective

interest in, say, a drinking a caramel macchiato, then, under certain appropriate circumstances (such as when I have a craving for something sweet) perceiving of a caramel macchiato will excite in me a certain gustatory reaction; that is, I will want to drink a caramel macchiato. On the other hand, objective interests also act upon us, and are grounded in facts about our physical constitution, about what subjective interests which we have are actually good for us, all things considered. For example, we have an objective interest in not consuming gasoline, whereas we do have an objective interest in drinking water, and both of these objective interests which count for and against the above courses of action arise in virtue of certain facts about our physiology.

There is often a mismatch between our subjective and objective interests. If we were in a kind of ideal epistemic position, (that is, if we had full information of all of the relevant facts about what is intrinsically good for ourselves, and if we were fully rational), then from such an ideal vantage point we would want our actual selves to want what is objectively good for us.

Railton considers a thought experiment to illustrate the above point. An American named Lonnie travels to a foreign country and finds himself sick with malaise. He desires something familiar; namely, a glass of milk. Though he desires the milk in the subject sense outlined above, the milk is nonetheless not desirable for him in our objective sense. For we can imagine an idealized version of Lonnie called Lonnie+ who has full cognitive powers and full information about Lonnie's physiology and history; moreover, Lonnie+ knows that if Lonnie drinks the glass of milk that such will worsen Lonnie's stomachache and his dehydration, and that what Lonnie+ really needs for the improvement of his physical condition is clear liquid. Lonnie+ knows that given that Lonnie and Lonnie+ do not want to suffer these digestive problems, that if Lonnie+ were in Lonnie's place, he would want to drink the clear liquid instead of the milk.

Given the reality of the mismatch between our subjective and objective interests, one

might be inclined to be pessimistic, and wonder how our subjective interests ever come to be aligned properly with our objective interests. But as Railton explains, things are not so bleak:

In virtue of the correlation to be expected between acting upon motives that congrue with one's interests and achieving a degree of satisfaction or avoiding a degree of distress, one's objective interests may also play a role in the evolution of one's desires. Consider what I will call the wants/interests mechanism, which permits individuals to achieve self-conscious and un-conscious learning about their interests through experience. In the simplest of cases, trial and error leads to the selective retention of wants that are satisfiable and lead to satisfactory results for the agent (Railton, 14, 2007.)

How might Railton's wants/interest feedback mechanism apply to Lonnie's case? As Railton explains, we can extend the thought experiment, and imagine a counter-factual scenario in which Lonnie succumbs to his desire to drink the milk. Still in the grip of malaise, and still seeking something familiar, he sees 7-Up in a convenience store. He drinks it and enjoys it so much that he buys another bottle. "Over time, as Lonnie travels more and suffers similar malaise, he regularly drinks clearish liquids and regularly feels better, eventually developing an actual desire for such liquids—and an aversion to other liquids, such as milk, in such circumstances" (Railton, p. 14, 2007.)

According to Railton, the example shows how one's objective interests may also play an important role in the *evolution of one's desires* via a "wants/interests" mechanism. What is particularly interesting about the wants/interests mechanism is that it operates not only consciously, but also unconsciously or subconsciously. One relevant feature about us as humans is that that we are creatures motivated primarily by wants, not instincts. This explains why we can conform to some important extent our wants to our essential interests.

This brings us to Railton's conception of social rationality. According to Railton, this is a certain kind of rationality which arises not from the point of view of any one individual, but rather, from an impartial and objective view of facts about individuals and their social

environments which should matter to those individuals given those facts about them.

We may say that moral evaluation is not subjective or arbitrary, and that good, general grounds are available for following moral 'oughts,' namely, that moral conduct is rational from an impartial point of view...We should ask how we might change the ways we live so that moral conduct would regularly be more rational given the ends which we actually have (Railton, pp. 31, 32, 2007.)

The upshot is that the justification for morality is not grounded in arbitrary judgment, or in personal desires. Rather, has its grounding in how we ought to conduct ourselves in relation to each other given that we rational agents capable of our own and each other's objective interests. If we were fully informed and fully rational, we would never lose sight of this; but although we are not fully informed and fully rational, this does not excuse us from moral requirements, which are requirements of instrumental rationality, given that we aim to be instrumentally rational.

Just as in the case of the individual, a group of individuals who constitute a society may very well fail to align their wants to their objective interests. In extreme scenarios, the majority of members of a society may significantly discount the objective interests of some or all of its individual members. This does not itself entail civil war or general social unrest. After all, supposing that most or all of the members of a particular society fail to realize that their objective interests are not being met because their own individual wants do not line up with their individual objective interests, then this sort of moral failing may not be apparent to the majority, or indeed, to anyone at all. The relevant point is just that in a social system in which the objective interests of a particular group are significantly discounted, such a social system will tend to be very susceptible to "dissatisfaction and unrest" (Railton, p. 22, 2007.)

For Railton, if a society departs (especially it radically departs) from what is objectively good for its individual members, then certain signs of social failure may begin to manifest themselves long before persons in the society come to regard the society as unjust. How so?

Well, if the majority of persons living in an unjust society have false beliefs that their society is just, then they may go on believing this. For instance, it might be that individuals and groups of individuals in that particular society have not been exposed to alternative regime schemes which grant higher priority to their objective interests than the regime that they are actually living in. Consequently, false beliefs such as those described above may provide political stability to the regime under certain kinds of social conditions.

An individual whose wants do not reflect his interests or who fails to be instrumentally rational may, I argued, experience feedback of a kind that promotes learning about his good and development of more rational strategies. Similarly, the discontent produced by departures from social rationality may produce feedback that, on a social level, promotes the development of norms that better approximate social rationality. The potential for unrest that exists when the interests of a group are discounted is potential for pressure from that group—and its allies—to accord fuller recognition to their interests in social decision-making...Striking historical examples of the mobilization of excluded groups to promote greater representation of their interests include the rebellions against the system of feudal estates, and more recent social movements against restrictions on religious practices, on suffrage and other rights, and on collective bargaining...When the interests of certain groups are discounted, there will be a potential for unrest that may manifest itself in various ways—alienation, loss of morale, decline in effectiveness of authority, and so on (Railton, p. 24, 2007.)

Railton is not asserting in the above paragraph a law-like relation in which a certain combination of social forces and events that constitute the wants/interests feedback mechanism somehow lead inexorably to moral progress. On the contrary, the whole affair is radically contingent on a number of social factors so dynamic that they could not be effectively captured by any such law-like relation. His aim is simply to show that there is an explanatory role the feedback mechanism plays in the advancement of social rationality.

Here we must anticipate a potential objection by a critic, who might assert that Railton's feedback mechanism is explanatorily impotent since she can find counter-examples where the wants/interests mechanism worked against the objective interests of an excluded group. The critic might point to the Holocaust beginning in the mid 1930s as a case in which the objective

interests of the Jews were disregarded altogether by the National Socialist regime, and were actively repressed by them. Contrary to what we might predict using the Railtonian wants/interests feedback mechanism, the regime did not suffer instability during the 30s; the National Socialist party enjoyed a fairly cohesive regime directed by Hitler.

My reply to the critic is that whether or not the objective interests of the excluded group are in fact advanced via the feedback mechanism is an appropriately empirical question, where the answer given will differ depending on the nuances of the case under consideration. In the case of the National Socialists in the 1930s, it is notable that the regime enjoyed stability because it silenced any opposition. The Nazi Party confiscated or heavily restricted legal access to the resources required for persons to defend their objective interests, such as firearms, transportation, and a free press, among others. Yet note that all of this can be explained after all by a Railtonian account, contrary to our critic. For a number of complex economic, sociological, and historical factors come into play when assessing regime and social stability within a given society. Presumably a society which is fundamentally unjust can be prosperous for a time, and such may tend to mask the symptoms of the disease, as it were. So it seems that the critic has not actually offered a counter-example to Railton's wants/interests feedback mechanism. Indeed, according to Railton, one does not even need to embrace a theory of moral progress in the first place to see the explanatory power of the feedback mechanism. It is just that we can, at the very least, apply what we know of individual rationality to the case of social rationality.

There is more to the reply. We say further that the feedback mechanism offers us a qualified explanation of moral learning because the social systems within the feedback mechanism indirectly demonstrate the consequences of failure to recognize objective interests, given certain specified conditions under which persons become sufficiently miserable thanks to

the failure to recognize (or inability to achieve) what is objectively good for them. In the individual case, the process of learning to align wants with objective interests is more straightforward insofar as it is difficult for an individual to shield himself from the consequences of irrationality, whereas in the social case, such information might be obscured by economic and social conditions of material prosperity, disguising the potential for unrest. What Railton's account offers is a way in which moral explanations serve a role in social phenomena.

6. ELIZABETH ANDERSON'S CONTRACTARIAN CONTENTION MECHANISM

Anderson attempts to reconcile individual and social intuitions about morality by offering what she refers to as a naturalized account of moral epistemology. Simply put, she is chiefly interested in the question 'how do we engage in moral inquiry?' She first notes that we ought to be careful what weight we ascribe to our moral intuitions. After all, many of the intuitions which were thought to be moral have turned out to be radically mistaken. For example, in the 1700s most Americans, Europeans, and non-western cultures saw nothing morally objectionable about the institution of slavery. Such had been defended by ancient Western philosophers as a perfectly natural institution, and even during the eighteenth century, a large number of people (aside from a handful of Quakers) tended to support slavery as a morally permissible institution.

In response to this understandable concern of critics about the unreliability of our moral intuitions, Anderson says that we can nonetheless improve upon the content of the moral intuitions that we have. Her project requires determine what human beings owe to each to other: in embarking on such a project, we need to try to discover (1) the interpersonal claims which we can and cannot make on each other, (2) the principles of justice as understood in the context of contractarian ethical analysis.

We should start with the contractarian intuition that free and rational people ought to

devise rules of justice by which to determine the claims which they can make on each other, as well as the limits of those claims. The second step of Anderson's project is to consider how ordinary people engage in moral inquiry. She says that the advantage of this approach is that it allows us to expand the circle of moral enquirers beyond the privileged philosophers themselves who often lead very different lifestyles and do not share many of the common struggles of ordinary persons.

In sociology, 'contention' pertains to the way that people adjudicate interpersonal claims regarding the obligation which *X* owes to *Y*, or visa a versa. For example, one form of contention she mentions occurs when a person or persons make moral arguments. In some sense, moral argumentation is sometimes mistakenly regarded as being the only way that we make morally justified claims. However, Anderson holds that it is a mistake to take this exclusive view. According to her, there are more social ways of making moral claims which include such activities as launching petitions, protesting in the streets, litigating claims in court, meeting in forums and town halls to determine the grounds of obligation, among others. All of the above are examples of contention at work, for they are all instances in which persons contest current moral norms in a given society which govern our interpersonal relationships, and to press a case for altering those norms (or abolishing those norms if they are unjust.)

For Anderson, if we move from Moral Intuition *A* about some state of affairs to Intuition *B* regarding that state of affairs, we need a way to determine which of the two intuitions is actually morally progressive in terms of moral learning. But how can we tell which is the better of the two in a given instance? According to her, there are two ways to accomplish this. First, we ought to consider which intuition as between *A* and *B* actually survives procedural tests which screen for cognitive biases which might be present in *A* or *B*. Such a cognitive bias in *A*, for

example, might be responsible for us thinking that a particular social practice such as slavery is morally permissible when upon closer examination, we see that what drives this intuition is an implicit cognitive biases (viz., “this is how we have always done things”) which fail to take into consideration relevant facts about other persons and their legitimate interpersonal claims on us.

If we have shifted from *A* to *B* because we have shifted the circumstances from being highly biased [in *A*] to circumstances where we are less inclined to be biased [in *B*] because we are in social circumstances in which those biases are blocked or counteracted, then that could give us reason to be more confident in *B* than in *A* (Anderson, 2013.)

Essentially, by considering the above procedure, we can see how new evidence exposes contradictions between our moral principles and our social practices, so that if we claim to adhere to a given moral principle and then come to find that certain individual or social practices violate the principle. Suppose that *B* holds that we ought to bring our practices in line with the moral principles such as recognizing other persons’ legitimate interpersonal claims. Now suppose that *A* holds that we should not worry about the inconsistency between *A* and the moral principle, for, after all, that is the way we have always done things and so it would be psychologically costly to change now. In that case, *B* will be a better intuition than *A*, since the procedure detected the presence of a cognitive bias which forms the basis for the allegedly morally permissible social practice of slavery in *A*, while the procedure detects that in *B* there is no such cognitive bias, and that *B* proposes we rid ourselves of the practice of slavery.

The second way by which we may test our intuitions in a principled way is to submit the intuitions to examination from the point of view of our considered moral experience. Here, the goal is to see whether we can feasibly live by and have our actions guided by one or more of the competing intuitions which we have. It is possible that we will discover we have two intuitions which pull in different and perhaps even opposite directions. One relevant question here is whether it is possible to formulate a Principle *A* from Intuition *A* (or alternatively, a Principle *B*

from Intuition *B*) for making consistent ethical decisions. If an intuition fails to allow for consistent decision-making, or if the principle adopted causes additional problems when adopted by a person or society, then such counts against that particular intuition.

On the other hand, it may turn out that we actually *can* formulate a moral principle based on a particular intuition under consideration. If so, then the principle which is governed by this intuition will enable us to become more sensitive to the presence of moral problems, and to overcome the cognitive biases which previously hindered the scope of our moral evaluation.

Consider Anderson's historical example of Condorcet in order to see how our moral intuitions have improved over time by way of this process of contention. Anderson notes a tension internal to Condorcet's moral view pertaining to his gradualist abolitionist view of slavery, which seemed in conflict with his radical view of the emancipation of women. Seen from our current epistemic vantage point (and given our greater factual knowledge about science, history, and psychology), we are in a good position to recognize the internal conflict as one which arose from inconsistent beliefs based on very limited experiences. Condorcet argued that women ought to have the same legal rights as men because both they and men have the capacity for rational inquiry and moral deliberation, but at the same time he argued that abolition of slavery in the French colony of San Doming should be gradual because the slaves in San Doming were not yet ready for self-governance.

If we think that the two positions are inconsistent says Anderson, it is because the epistemic conditions for moral reflection for Condorcet were different in both cases. On the one hand Condorcet's moral intuitions about women's rights were quite nuanced and sophisticated. This may have been due largely to the fact that his wife Sophie was an intellectual and a translator of academic works.

Condorcet's intimate relations with someone he could regard as an intellectual equal probably made him more responsive to the moral claims which Sophie advanced in favor of women's rights" (Anderson, 2013.)

That is, Condorcet's intuitions with regard to women's rights in this case were informed by his nuanced experiences, given the deep intellectual relationship he had with Sophie. On the other hand, there is no historical evidence that Condorcet ever went to San Doming to visit the slaves whose gradual abolition he argued for. He never interacted with them, and so he thought about them in a more abstract way, even though he did care enough about them to argue for gradual abolition of slavery in the colony. Consequently, his position on abolitionism was informed by weaker, less experience-based intuitions and more abstract moral thought.

All this talk about intuitions may have a particular sort of critic very suspicious at this point. He may remark that while the ideal of contention is certainly laudable, and while it does seem that it could be a good way to adjudicate interpersonal claims, the problem is that status of contention seems hostage to whatever results might come of the debate about the reliability of intuitions in epistemology. The worry would be something like this: Anderson proposes that we look to intuitions which are consistent with already held moral principles. But moral principles are themselves simply entrenched moral intuitions. In order to prevent contention from being circular, there must be some way to distinguish the strength of competing moral intuitions, so as to determine the moral principles appropriate for contention.

Anderson proposes that we weigh competing intuitions by applying a procedure which screens out cognitive biases that may be the basis for one or the other intuition upon further examination. The problem is that some heavily flawed intuitions may nonetheless pass the screening procedure simply because they are intuitions held by agents that, while certainly wildly inaccurate, are not rooted in any cognitive bias, but simply a lack of knowledge of the relevant

facts. So what can be done about intuitions which are simply not reliable, even after we've screened for cognitive bias? If the answer is that there is no further procedure, then we are stuck with the problem of what may appear to us as two equally reliable intuitions yielding conflicting results. This is a problem for the advocate of moral progress—for we would not know whether we would be progressing or regressing by following a given intuition.

The problem with the objection seems to be that the critic simply assumes that there is no way to test competing intuitions apart from resorting to talk of strongly held moral principles on the basis of which we filter out or accept a given intuition. If this were as far back as moral inquiry reached, the process would indeed seemingly be circular. However, in order to test between two equally plausible moral intuitions we must remember one of the themes of this thesis, which is that moral reasoning occurs against a backdrop of real world experience. Here, we might appeal to a theorist of scientific realism to see what sort of defense can be given for moral intuitions, and ultimately, for the contention Anderson speaks that is based on moral intuitions. Richard Boyd was written at length on how scientific realism may be very useful to us in establishing a reliable basis for assessing competing moral intuitions:

It is commonplace in the history of science that major advances often depend on appropriate social conditions, technological advances, and prior scientific discoveries. Thus for example, much of eighteenth-century physics and chemistry was only possible because there had developed (a) social conditions in which work in the physical sciences was economically supported, (b) a technology sufficiently advanced to make the relevant instrumentation possible, and (c) the theoretical legacy of seventeenth-century Newtonian physics and corpuscular chemistry. Via somewhat different mechanisms the same sort of dependence obtains in the growth of our knowledge of the good. Knowledge of fundamental human goods and their homeostasis represents basic knowledge about human psychological and social potential. Much of this knowledge is experimental knowledge and the relevant experiments are political and social experiments whose occurrence and whose interpretation depends on both 'external' factors and upon the current state of our moral understanding...[For instance] Only after the insights gained from the first democratic experiments were in hand, were we equipped to see the depth of the moral peculiarity of slavery...

It is also true of moral knowledge, as it is in case of knowledge in other ‘special sciences,’ that improvement of knowledge may depend upon theoretical advances in related disciplines. It is hard, for example to see how deeper understanding in human history and economic theory could fail to add to our understanding of human potential and of the mechanisms underlying the homeostatic unity of the good (Boyd in Sayre-McCord, pp. 204-205, 1988.)

What sort of human goods constitute the homeostatic cluster properties? According to Boyd, they are broadly physical, medical, social, and psychological goods, and include the need for love and friendship, the need to engage in cooperative efforts, the need to exercise control over one’s life, the need for intellectual and artistic appreciation and expression. Nor would this potentially exhaust the list; it is merely an attempt to capture those human goods which we would *prima facie* tend to find uncontroversial. That we value these human goods is just a fact about the kinds of beings that we are, regardless of the metaphysical disputes about the details pertaining to the proper ranking of a list of such values.

Now when it comes to assessing the reliability of moral intuitions beyond the level screening for cognitive biases, we could use property cluster theory to make our selection, for the most reliable intuitions will be those that prioritize the above cluster of human goods, and recommend them as the basis for moral principle which will ground contention. When we adjudicate interpersonal claims, we ought to take quite seriously the cluster of human goods, and prioritize them over, say a status quo social order that denies the recognition of human goods qua human goods for all persons regardless of race or social standing.

Just as the growth of scientific knowledge depends on the social conditions that make that knowledge possible, so too, moral learning depends at least partially on our sensitivity to learning in general, and it also depends on the extent to which our social environments contain the requisite resources for us to engage in learning. Such resources would be technological, financial, scientific. The more resources that a person who is suitably sensitive to moral

learning has, the better she can in principle develop these capacities for such learning. Perhaps in one sense it is odd to say that the Internet can be a tool for moral learning (it certainly is not exclusively such.) But the Internet certainly does provide us with epistemic access to a wide range of empirical facts, debates about morality and law, and other information from across the globe. Such information translates the experiences of persons in locales far removed from our own so that we can take those experiences into account when engaging in moral inquiry—in a way which would be much more difficult without the experiences conveyed by the information to hear, read, see by way of the Internet.

More importantly still for our purposes, such information can help us to make moral decisions which are informed of the relevant non-moral facts, whether we find ourselves living in London or Hong-Kong. These are resources which very philosophically gifted persons such as Epictetus, Confucius, and Plato did not have at their disposal. To the extent that there is good reason to think that our moral intuitions be might at least somewhat more reliable than theirs, it seems that better epistemic access to important non-moral facts about ourselves and the world provides us with an explanation for why that might be. The underling point is that we have better opportunities to achieve moral clarity in cases where our moral intuitions are more nuanced in virtue of our having more nuanced experience, and conversely, we have less of an opportunity to form clear moral intuitions when we have an overall lack of moral experience.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have attempted to survey some of the recent literature in theories of moral progress. I have selected what I take to be the strongest arguments for moral progress which have been offered by these theorists, and have attempted to field objections along the way by those who might be very skeptical of the very idea of moral progress. It seems that with regard to the

common-sense belief that there has been moral progress, such is not after all an unreliable belief—for it can be defended by empirical evidence via radical changes in political and private institutions. What I have tried to show is that the faculty of reason, an objective conception of person’s interests (what is objectively good for a person,) and content comprise a coherent conception of moral progress.

References

-
- Anderson, Elizabeth. “The Social Epistemology of Morality: Learning from the Forgotten History of the Abolition of Slavery.” Harvard University public lecture (April 4, 2013.)
- Boyd, Richard. “How to be a Moral Realist.” In *Essays on Moral Realism*. Ed. by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord. Cornell University Press (1988.)
- Buchanan, Allen and Powell, Russell. “Toward a Naturalistic Theory of Moral Progress.” (Unpublished manuscript, 2015.)
- Buchanan, Allen and Powell, Russell. “What is Moral Progress?” (Unpublished manuscript, September 2015.)
- Buchanan, Allen. “Liberty, Progress, and Demoralization.” (2016.)
- Pinker, Steven. *The Angels of our Better Nature: Why Violence has Declined*. Penguin Books (2011.)
- Railton, Peter. “Moral Realism” in *Norms, Facts, Values*, ed. Peter Railton. Cambridge University Press, (2007.)
- Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*. Columbia University Press, revised ed., (1992, 1996.)
- Singer, Peter. *Expanding the Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress*. Princeton University Press, revised ed., (1981, 2011.)