THE STRUCTURE OF MORAL REVOLUTIONS

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History, if viewed as more than a repository of anecdote and chronology, might reform the image of morality by which we are possessed. Although most of the important transitions in human moral reflections are beyond the reach of the historical record, consideration of some of the changes that (seem to) have occurred in moral practice during the past two and a half millennia can plausibly be taken to provide clues about what earlier transitions might have been like. Before we plunge into historical explorations, however, it’s worth pausing to formulate some issues on which reconstructions of moral change could bear.

The issues I have in mind concern the objectivity of morality. Objectivity is a tricky notion, of course, and I distinguish two main senses in which we’re interested in whether morality is objective. The first of these is truth-related. When the concept of objectivity is taken this way, the question is whether some moral claims are true or whether particular moral claims (for example, those central to our contemporary moral practice) are closer to the truth than others (such as those embodied in rival moral practices or in earlier versions of our own moral practice). The second is not explicitly committed to talk of moral truth. Instead it focuses on whether moral attitudes, expressed in dispositions to acquiesce in particular moral principles or in commitments to specific reactions to some circumstances, are formed or sustained in a way that’s taken to be privileged. The simplest version is thoroughly familiar, identifying the privileged way of holding moral attitudes with the activities of reason. Insofar as objectivity, so conceived, is a matter of true belief, it’s not that reason is likely to lead us to some independent moral truth, but rather that we can ascribe truth to those principles accepted by those who have used their reason aright.

I don’t think it’s hard to understand why reflections on human morality are tugged towards theses about objectivity. If no such notion is available, then it appears that certain cross-cultural comparisons can’t be defended; there’s an obvious attraction of views of morality that yield the resources for declaring that the practices of societies we find repellent (Nazism, the Khmer Rouge, the Taliban) are objectively wrong. Less frequently noted, but I think at least as powerful, is the thought that particular moral lineages (especially our own) make moral progress, that the moral practices of today are better than those of our ancestors (at least in some respects) and that we can strive to make further improvements.

Just as it has seemed to some scholars in recent decades that the close consideration of important episodes in the history of science undermines talk of scientific truth, or of the approximation of the truth in the course of the development of the sciences, and reveals that large scientific transitions are not actually made in conformity with the styles and canons of reason invoked by philosophers, so too a hard look at the history of morality – of moral practice, not moral philosophy – might demonstrate analogous theses. Even more fundamentally, it might instill a sense that no coherent notion of moral progress is available to us, that all we can find is an analogue of the Darwinian account of the evolution of life, a complex set of relationships that reveal only local adaptations without any more general upward trend. Yet there’s a more optimistic way in which to view the investigation. Perhaps the understanding of moral change might provide clues about the character of moral truth, or about the privileged processes that underlie moral attitudes; perhaps they might yield a general view of moral progress in terms of which we could capture the type of objectivity that matters to us.

Whether we start as optimists or pessimists – and it’s surely preferable to begin as agnostics – it’s not hard to pick out the historical episodes that are most pertinent. These will be occasions on which we can

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1 I’ve amended the famous opening sentence of Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions by substituting ‘morality’ for ‘science’. This reflects my main theme, to wit that moral philosophy needs the historicist revolution that Kuhn brought to the philosophy of science.

2 I’ll consider later whether this attraction survives scrutiny.
identify a moral innovation that seems not simply to articulate ideas that were already in place and that inspires the intuitive reaction that this marks a point of moral progress. There are obvious examples. One is the transition from the heroic code of the Ancient Greeks to the moral practice of the polis. A second, surely popular with many people, is the transformation of the values of the Greco-Roman empire under the impact of Christianity. A particular aspect of the moral change often credited to Christianity is the abolition of chattel slavery (more exactly the modification of slavery to serfdom and villeinage), and, because of the wealth of documentation, we might regard the abolition of slavery in North America as a specially good historical case. A more general theme in the history of moral practice is the inclusion within the protections of the moral sphere of people who had previously been viewed as outsiders, susceptible to whatever forms of exploitation seemed most profitable. Other general themes include shifts from punishing relatives of the culprits to punishing the culprits themselves (in the Law Codes of Babylon, for example, a “senior” who strikes and kills the daughter of another “senior” is punished by forfeiting the life of his daughter), mitigation of the kinds of things that can be done to others by way of punishment, and a developing account of the conditions that offenders have to satisfy to be vulnerable to punishment at all. In each of these areas of practice, there are several instances in which different moral lineages have made what we naturally take to be progressive transitions. To keep the list of historical cases manageably short, I’ll focus only on the three particular examples mentioned above (from the heroic code to the morality of the polis, the moral change effected by Christianity, the abolition of slavery in North America), and I’ll sometimes draw in an unsystematic way on the general theme of including outsiders within the scope of the moral practice.

I hope to have made a preliminary case for the sentence that began this section. But if we’re going to do the job of actually modifying our image of morality, we’ll need both the historical detail and a bit more philosophical clarification. The next section will aim to provide the latter, and to consider some claims about moral objectivity from the perspective provided by the ideas about the genealogy of morality in the predecessor of this essay.

II

What are the possibilities for a theory of moral objectivity, a theory that might be tested against the history of moral change? Start with the notion of moral truth, and focus first on the question of what view of truth should be adopted. The simplest suggestion is that truth here, as in the case of the sciences and everyday commonsense claims, should be conceived as correspondence to the world; the relation of correspondence I envisage is grounded in relations of reference and the generative procedure for identifying truth that we owe to Tarski. Can we use this notion of moral truth to understand the initial acquisition of moral attitudes and the subsequent improvement of those attitudes in the history of moral practice?

Focus on the most elementary kinds of moral judgment, such as “Hospitality is good” or “Slavery is unjust”. It’s not hard to frame conjectures about the ways in which people came to introduce terms like ‘hospitality’ and ‘slavery’ to mark out particular classes of actions. The difficulty comes with ‘good’ and ‘unjust’, and to resolve the difficulty we need a plausible story about how our ancestors might have detected some general feature of deeds that led them to classify them as ‘good’ or ‘unjust’, and how, armed with the capacity to use such terms, together with an existing body of moral practice, they might have had the ability to identify ways in which a modification of that practice would better accord with the extensions of the predicates. My outline of the origins of proto-morality and the translation of proto-morality into the practices we find at the dawn of recorded history isn’t encouraging. For the original endorsement of moral rules is a cultural mutation that succeeds because of its ability to promote greater social harmony, and the modifications are viewed as ways

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3 Although this idea has waned in popularity in recent decades, because of some superb historical scholarship. See, for example, M.I. Finley Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology (New York: Viking, 1980) and David Brion Davis The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture (Oxford University Press, 1966) Chapter 4.

4 Here I’m indebted to Edie Jeffrey, who suggested this to me several years ago.

5 The code of the Hebrew Bible is quite clear in issuing a license to deal with the native inhabitants of the promised land in one of two ways: either by killing everyone in a particular settlement, or by killing all except the virgin girls (who are recruited as slaves and concubines). See Joshua, Judges, and 1 Samuel (passim). Here again, there’s continuity with earlier Mesopotamian traditions.

6 Thus I adopt a variant of the program introduced by Hartry Field in “Tarski’s Theory of Truth”, although I don’t commit myself to any physicalist reduction of the notion of reference. For outline of the view I favor, see my essays “On the Explanatory Power of Correspondence Truth” and “Real Realism”, both of which aim to show that this view of correspondence doesn’t involve weighty metaphysics and is a natural extension of commonsense ideas.
of resolving further social difficulties or of fostering the cultural success of the group. Nothing in this suggests that the agents who initially propose the changes, or those who accept them, exercise any cognitive capacity to detect anything about the referents of ‘good’ or ‘unjust’.

Indeed, on my account, the primary mode of moral discourse is imperative. The great hominid advance is to formulate commands and to deploy those commands in the three contexts of deliberation, sanctioning, and socialization of the young. Presumably, the indicative form is a later development, one that comes about as a general way of discussing commands that are approved or disapproved. So, for example, ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ might initially figure as general terms covering the actions that a group actually prohibits. If the original view is that the moral code is unchangeable, then there’ll be no use for these terms except in application to the actions already forbidden. An important further step would be for a group to accept the possibility of adding further rules, or deleting or modifying some that it already has. Once that step is taken, there’s a reconception of the difficult moral notions that liberates them from simple equivalence with current practices. But the route to revised judgments about goodness, injustice or wrongness lies through judgments – either individual or collective – about the rules to be applied in the three contexts of deliberation, sanctioning and socialization, and I suggest that such judgments are made in response to problems that beset the current practice, either in the public milieu of attributing praise and blame or in the internal forum of deliberation. Existing practice may offer contradictory ways of conceptualizing a particular type of action; or it may generate psychological attitudes at odds with an accepted rule. If the amended practice resolves the tension, while maintaining the group’s cultural success, then later generations will endorse different judgments about goodness or injustice than those current among their ancestors. But I see no useful role here for the invocation of a capacity to detect more clearly the extension of a moral predicate.

One can try to fit the account of moral truth to an epistemology that will be sustained by the picture of moral change I’ve just sketched by providing a reductive account of the problematic moral notions. A natural way to attempt the reduction is to propose that ‘wrong’ applies to actions that are prohibited by rules in an ideal development of a moral practice, and to understand ideal development in terms of the factors I’ve taken to motivate moral change. Roughly one envisages iterated attempts to address the social problems and the internal tensions posed by the moral practice, and takes the limit practice of the resultant sequence. Any such approach faces obvious problems (which will be considered shortly) but my principal response to it at this stage is that it’s more naturally (and simply) formulated by views of objectivity that emphasize procedures, and that introduce truth only derivatively.

Before we turn to such views, it’s worth considering briefly the possibility that the difficulties I’ve raised are artefacts of a particular account of truth, to wit the correspondence theory. Maybe we would have avoided trouble in discussing moral truth had we begun from some deflationary account, either one that suggests that a theory of truth is exhausted by the Tarski biconditionals or one that denies that there is anything to be said by way of a theory of truth. I don’t think this makes any substantial difference. Even for the deflationist, there are going to be correct statements about the ability of certain kinds of procedures to generate true beliefs in particular areas; so, for example, sensible deflationists think that looking around your environment is a good way of acquiring true beliefs about the objects in your vicinity and that casting horoscopes isn’t a good means of discovering true beliefs about the diseases that are afflicting particular people. Deflationists might even grant that there are more general things that can be said about the merits of procedures, that, in a suitably restrained sense of ‘about’, methods that have no causal connection with Xs are not likely to generate true beliefs about Xs. Unless the defender of moral truth pursues the reductive strategy of the last paragraph, this general claim about the fit between procedures and truths about a particular subject-matter will, at very least, provoke a mystery regarding the capacity of the kinds of processes I’ve taken to govern the evolution of moral practices to yield moral truths. Moreover, even if the general claim isn’t accepted, there’s surely a serious challenge about why

7 Strictly speaking, maintenance of cultural success may not be needed. It’s enough that the group’s ability to compete shouldn’t be lowered below that of the competition (where the competition is understood in terms of the transmission of items of culture, and only derivatively as a matter of reproductive success, happiness, or whatever). Notice that cultural selection can work quite differently from natural selection, in that a cultural novelty that infects the entire group in which it arises may form part of a modified practice that never competes with the unmodified practice; it’s as if a mutation affected a whole population in a single generation (and this, of course, is a result of the fact that the time-scale for cultural competition is long with respect to the time-scale for cultural spreading).

8 Here, of course, I state more loosely an epistemological principle invoked by Paul Benacerraf in his influential essay “Mathematical Truth”.


the process for moral emendation by response to tensions in public and private moral practice should be assimilated to the case of perceiving our environment rather than to that of using horoscopes to diagnose diseases.

My conclusions so far could be summed up by saying that objectivity in morality isn’t likely to resemble the objectivity of the sciences. If one thought that was the only objectivity there is, then the strategy for the moral objectivist would be clear, I think: attack my speculative account of the dynamic of moral change in human prehistory, arguing that it rests on little evidence and proposing that we can do better by studying some historical examples where more information is available. We’ll see later whether that strategy offers any comfort, but it’s important to reject the thought that objectivity must be understood in these terms. Mathematics provides another model.

Indeed, the arguments already canvassed can be imitated in the mathematical case. Start from the idea that mathematical claims are true, apply the Tarskian apparatus, and ask how the historical development of mathematics provides mathematicians with enhanced abilities to apprehend the entities that are the referents of mathematical terms. But, in this case, there’s a way out. Suppose that the starting points for mathematics – proto-arithmetic and proto-geometry – are unsystematic collections of claims about human activities of manipulating objects, either physically or in thought; at a later stage, these are systematized by generating idealized ways of describing our activities of manipulation and reordering, ways that abstract from our contingent limitations; so we arrive at full arithmetic and full geometry. Beyond that, mathematicians are given a license to articulate new languages that extend those they already use, languages that enable them to answer questions that have previously arisen, either in the earlier practice of mathematics or in using mathematics to describe parts of the physical world; sometimes these languages can be interpreted as offering further idealizations of human constructive activity; in the higher reaches of mathematics; however, such interpretations are often unavailable, and, in such instances, the languages, adopted because of their usefulness in continuing mathematics or in mathematical formulations in other sciences, are used to make uninterpreted statements whose “truth” resides simply in the fact that they play the useful role they do. I claim that this account is a correct way to think about issues of truth and objectivity in mathematics, but acceptance of my claim (sadly unlikely) isn’t necessary for present purposes. It’s enough if this offers a possible model for approaching issues of objectivity.

Let’s concentrate on the structure of the account. Mathematical statements count as “true” in three different ways: “ground-level” statements (proto-mathematics) are true in virtue of referring to actual human operations; “middle-tier” statements are not all strictly true in virtue of relations of reference to actual human operations, but they would be true if our practice was extended to transcend limits of time and energy; “top-tier” statements are true in virtue of occurring in a mathematical practice that would ideally extend the ground-level and the middle-tier. The notion of ideal extension invoked here should be understood in terms of adding languages that enable mathematicians to formulate answers to questions that have arisen earlier (answers that can be checked by methods already adopted) or to articulate mathematical accounts of natural phenomena (accounts that can be then checked by the methods of the appropriate sciences). Plainly much more needs to be said about this notion, but the general character of the account should be apparent. Top-tier “truth” is a notion that applies to statements in terms of their being generated in a privileged way, where the privilege is understood in terms of the facilitation of more basic kinds of truth. Effectively, higher mathematics is conceived as an instrument that helps us generate truths in those parts of mathematics that can be given a realist interpretation and in areas of science where a realist account of truth is also available.

It’s fairly clear that the account of objectivity just sketched won’t carry over immediately to the moral case (to cite just one difficulty, the analogs of the “ground-level” statements – proto-morality – don’t appear to

9  Here, once again, I reformulate Benacerraf’s dilemma in the context of an attempt to understand the actual historical development of mathematical knowledge.

10 I take this license to be issued in the late Renaissance when the status of mathematicians undergoes a decisive change. Instead of being viewed as irrelevant low-level contributors to inquiry (maybe good for the occasional court entertainment), they are seen as having the potential to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in serious ways through the further articulation of mathematical languages. This doesn’t happen all at once, and it’s striking how long it takes for pure mathematics to emerge as the sole activity of serious workers. (Fermat, the most obvious early “purist”, was a career lawyer and amateur mathematician – and even he was concerned with problems about minimum paths.)

11 Some of the things that need to be said appear in The Nature of Mathematical Knowledge and in my essay “Mathematical Progress”. But a lot more needs to be done.

12 At this point, my approach is close to that of Hilbert in “On the Infinite”, although it isn’t wedded to his apriorism about the elementary parts of mathematics.
be true in the Tarskian sense). But the general idea that moral “truth” might be understood in terms of a system of statements generated by ideal procedures does seem to be available. So let’s turn to this proceduralist approach to moral objectivity, both in a historicist form (reflecting the account outlined for mathematics) and in the ahistoricist versions prominent in the history of philosophy.

Start with the former. Let’s say that a moral rule, statement, principle (or other resource) is objective just in case that rule (or whatever) would occur in the ideal limit of the development of proto-morality according to a class of privileged procedures. What are the privileged procedures? Well, if the account is going to vindicate the actual course of human moral reflection and moral change, then they are going to have to include at least some of the kinds of transformations that have actually occurred in the evolution of morality – procedures of systematizing existing bodies of moral rules, responding to situations in which incompatible moral characterizations are available, and the like. To develop the account one must identify which of these procedures is to count. More fundamentally, it’ll be necessary to specify why these procedures are singled out, to make clear, that is, the nature of the privilege. In the mathematical case there’s a standard to which we can appeal; procedures are privileged insofar as they promote various identifiable goods, the correct answering of mathematical questions, true claims about natural phenomena. We’ll need a similar standard for the moral case, a feature that the privileged transformations tend to promote. In effect, we’ll need an account of moral progress.

But, although it’s necessary, an account of moral progress wouldn’t suffice. To make the envisaged approach work, we’ll also have to make sense of the idea of an ideal limit, indeed a limit attainable from any version of proto-morality (note that, unlike proto-mathematics, there’s no unique starting point for the moral lineages). In the mathematical case, the idea of a limit development of mathematical practice is less bothersome because of the way that apparently incompatible developments can be reconciled: we don’t have to quarrel about which geometry to include, but can admit them all. Unfortunately, it seems that moral convergence may be difficult. To give an example (to which I’ll return later), we can imagine two moral lineages, one committed early to equal treatment that aims to provide increased opportunities for different kinds of lives, the other intent on fostering a rich variety of possibilities for lives at the cost of initial inequalities that it subsequently strives to eradicate; it seems highly unlikely to me that there’s a single limit practice that would emerge from both under ideal development. I’ll suggest below that our search for moral objectivity may be simplified if we drop the baggage about limits that the procedural approach (as I’ve characterized it) introduces, and focus on the concept of moral progress.

At this point, a defender of a procedural view of moral objectivity may protest that these difficulties arise because I’ve encumbered the view with a commitment to embedding the procedures in the history of moral practice. I reply that there are two ways for the proceduralist to go: either the procedures in question can be carried out without any reliance on resources that the agent has adopted from society and historical tradition, or they are themselves dependent on items that the past has bequeathed. In the latter case, the procedural view must either explain how the history can be viewed as a successive revision of some initial state according to the privileged procedures (a project that returns us to the search for a notion of moral progress envisaged above) or else defend the idea that it doesn’t matter whether or not that kind of reconstruction can be given; but this is no more plausible than the thought that whatever moral practice has been bequeathed to us by history, insertion of this into the appropriate procedures will yield objective morality; anyone who thinks that tacitly believes, I maintain, that the input from history and society is really irrelevant, and that the requisite work can be done by the “pure procedures” alone.

Generations of Kantians (not to mention the great man himself) have struggled to give substance to the idea that there’s some procedure that will generate fundamental moral laws. The suggestions are more or less clear, more or less congruent with antecedently accepted moral claims about particular cases. But I think the vaunted independence from history and tradition is a myth. To expose the problem, imagine that you are invited to make substantial revisions in your moral practice by following a specified procedure. Your first thought, reasonable enough, would be that you were not entirely sure that you had followed the procedure correctly. (After all, specifications of the procedures aren’t usually noted for their crystal clarity.) If doubts on this score were cleared up, you would probably start to wonder if (and why) the deliverances of the procedure were to be preferred to your original commitments. (It’s in this sort of context that Moorean “open” questions become real.) The obvious thought is that

1) Of course, it won’t do to characterize moral progress as the acquisition of moral truth, for that would simply land us back in the complex of problems from which the procedural account is trying to escape.
philosophical proposals of this general kind are too uncertain to be relied on for matters of real importance. It’s reassuring, of course, that Kantian efforts typically don’t require substantial revision; they tend to reinforce at least some attitudes we already have. By imagining what your reaction would be if there were divergence, we understand how our moral claims are really grounded, and see that there’s no real escape from tradition, no genuine alternative to the historicism I’ve advocated. It’s no accident, I think, that sophisticated versions of procedural approaches view them as modifying a previous body of moral practice.

If at this point the prospects are beginning to look bleak, it’s worth reminding ourselves of why we might want an adequate account of moral objectivity. I mentioned earlier that we’re tempted to invoke moral objectivity in two contexts: in response to cross-cultural and cross-temporal variations in moral practice. It’s evident that the notion of moral progress bears directly on the latter, for comparisons across time within a lineage are explicitly concerned with moral progress. We saw earlier that providing an analysis of moral progress would be a proper part of the proceduralist approach to moral objectivity. I want now to suggest that an analysis of this kind would yield everything we feel we need.

Consider the worrying examples of comparisons with other moral practices. We want to condemn the Nazi atrocities or the Taliban treatment of women. From the perspective of our own moral practice, we find the pertinent forms of behavior repugnant (or worse). Is this merely the perspective of a particular historical development? Maybe not. For there might be grounds to say of the other society that its own moral code offers a similar judgment of the behavior (German society was committed, perhaps, to moral rules, principles and ideals totally at odds with the persecution of the Jews, of homosexuals and of gypsies). To the extent, however, that we can discern in the other society a moral practice yielding a different judgment (for example, one that would condone the repulsive behavior), we can ask about the progressiveness of moving from our own moral practice to this alternative. If we have an analysis of moral progress that endorses this judgment, then we have grounds for asserting an asymmetry between our moral practice and the rival which approves the repugnant actions. (If, on the other hand, we have an analysis of moral progress that fails to characterize the envisaged development as regressive, we might well conclude that that analysis was inadequate.)

I’m not assuming that we’ll be able to articulate an adequate account of moral progress. Perhaps there’s no way to formulate a view of moral progress that will fit both with the historical development of moral practice and with our judgments about alternative moral codes. The point is that a satisfactory account of moral progress would answer our motives in talking of moral objectivity. Earlier, I claimed that any articulation of the procedural approach required us to understand moral progress; now I add that that understanding suffices for our needs. Discussions of moral objectivity in terms of moral “truth” or special procedures often appear artificial. When we switch to thinking of moral progress, then we can let the further concepts be introduced as we please; perhaps it will be worth thinking of moral truth as what emerges in the limit of moral progress, or of the special procedures as those that would yield the ideal limit of moral progress; but if those richer concepts introduce further difficulties (as with the notion of a limit), we can let them go and concentrate on the core notion of moral progress (or extend it only in ways that are conceptually unproblematic).

If this is correct, then we can turn to history with a single question. Can we make sense of the history of moral practice in terms of moral progress?

III

My first example begins with the style of ancient morality that Nietzsche made the foil for his critique of Christianity. In the famous passage about the “blond beast”, he characterizes figures celebrated in the great myths and poetry of the early civilizations whose recorded deeds express their devotion to an ideal of honor and greatness that cares nothing for the fetters that envious moralizers subsequently seek to impose. Prominent among his examples are the Homeric heroes.

14 I have in mind the kind of systematization envisaged by Rawls in his discussions of reflective equilibrium.

15 Others include the noble warriors from German and Norse traditions, as well as the Japanese nobility. Had he known of the Gilgamesh epic, Nietzsche might have mentioned its principal character (although here there may be complications that stem from the need for Gilgamesh to restrain himself with respect to his subjects).
Despite something like consensus on dating the Homeric epics to the late eighth century B.C.E., there’s considerable disagreement about the period they are supposed to depict. One interpretation is that the poems look back several centuries, perhaps to the collapse of Mycenaean civilization (around the twelfth century), and that they portray a period of scattered settlements founded around extended ruling families, settlements that came into frequent conflict with one another. For our purposes, it’s less relevant to ask if the events described have a historical basis than to consider whether the moral attitudes expressed are those of the people in some Homeric past. Even lacking historical sources that would document the moral views of Greek societies in the pertinent period, there are, I think, two reasons for confidence. First, it seems unlikely that the oral presentation of a clearly-defined moral perspective through many generations would not reflect either the actual outlook of the audience or an audience they could identify as part of their past. Second, as is clear from the continued development of ideals of honor in later moral discussions, many features of the code articulated in the poems are transmuted into other forms (athletic competition, standards for the appropriate expression of homosexual affection).

I intend to focus on only a small part of the heroic code and on its transformation during the period between Homer and Solon (early sixth century). The shift involved can be starkly characterized as the replacement of personal honor as the principal moral end with the idea of a contribution to the common good. As many authors have argued, the Homeric hero’s life in a situation of war was directed towards the acquisition of personal glory; the glory gained might be represented by trophies (that could then be given away in acts that simultaneously marked the hero’s generosity and his previous prowess). A second context in which heroic distinction might be sought was that of discussion among representatives of the extended households (where, of course, Nestor and Odysseus display their prowess). The poems also report other character traits (traits that are given more emphasis in later moral codes), such as mercy, magnanimity, and fair-dealing, but these are always secondary to the pursuit of honor.

The nature of the transition can best be understood by juxtaposing a passage from the Iliad with Thucydides’ later “account” of Pericles’ funeral oration. Hector responds to various pleas that he should not fight Achilles, most notably those of Priam and Hecuba, by declaring the priority of his own honor. He’s not insensitive to the idea that his death would spell disaster for his city (or more exactly for his family), but, in the end, that concern has to come second to the dishonor that would result from not accepting the challenge. By contrast, when we read Thucydides’ Pericles, the common good has an obvious primacy. He says of the fallen:

Some of them, no doubt, had their faults; but what we ought to remember is their gallant conduct against the enemy in defence of their native land. They have blotted out evil with good, and done more service to the commonwealth than they ever did harm in their private lives.

It’s important to recall that these words are meant to honor a group, not an individual, and they do so by highlighting the devotion of the group members to the good of the group.

Between the time recorded in the Iliad and the events commemorated by Pericles, the character of Greek warfare had undergone a profound change. Two hundred years before the Peloponnesian war, military actions had become dominated by the organization of armed troops – hoplites – into the phalanx. (Men bearing heavy armor and a large shield were arrayed shoulder to shoulder and marched forward together presenting their long spears.) Success in battle no longer depended on the strength, endurance and skill of an outstanding individual – an Achilles, a Hector – but on disciplined maintenance of one’s place in the line. In this context, the routine actions of the protagonists of the Iliad – Achilles’ refusal to participate, Hector’s rejection of the counsel of prudence, Diomedes’

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16 For archeological interpretation, I’ve relied on A.M. Snodgrass The Dark Age of Greece. After a cogent critique of overly ambitious attempts to link the poems to historical events, M.I. Finley provides what seems to me a judicious conclusion: there were many “Trojan Wars”; war was normal in the Mycenaean world (The World of Odysseus, 46).
17 See Walter Donlan The Aristocratic Ideal in Ancient Greece Chapters 4 and 5; Kenneth Dover Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle Chapter 4, and Greek Homosexuality especially Chapter II. For clear presentations of the central features of the heroic code, see Donlan Aristocratic Ideal Chapter 1, Finley World of Odysseus Chapter 5, and Joseph Bryant Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece Chapter 2.
19 Thucydides clearly warns his readers that he is reconstructing speeches by trying to combine the sense of what was said with the thrust of what it would have been appropriate to say (Peloponnesian War 47).
20 See Finley World of Odysseus 115-117. for an excellent discussion of this episode.
private treaty with his guest-relative Glaukus – appear selfish, irresponsible, capricious and quirky. The private relationships of the heroes give way to the concerns of the polis, made manifest in Solon’s legal code, where the breach of the law becomes the concern of all. The predominance of honor gives way to the virtues of moderation, self-discipline and loyalty.

I have written as though there were some society, either contemporaneous with or earlier than the poet (or poets) we know as Homer, within which everyone accepted the priority of honor over other considerations, and as though the community (or communities) descending from that society, the inhabitants of the poleis, adopted a moral code (or variant codes) in which honor was subordinated to the promotion of the common good. Not only do I have no evidence for that historical claim, but I think we have good reason to doubt it. Even in the relatively simple world of late Mycenaean civilization, there was plainly a division of roles between masters and slaves, men and women, farmers and soldiers, to name only the most salient categories. The Iliad and Odyssey depict the behavior of the local chieftains who oversee one cluster of extended families; we see very little of other members of the societies (one exception is Thersites, and it’s far from clear whether he is espousing a different code or failing to live up to a code that he actually adopts; Eumaeus and Euryclea, of course, are plainly revealed as partisans of the heroic code). It seems to me impossible to know what considerations were pre-eminent in the minds of those who served or tilled. Possibly many of them recognized the predominance of the search for honor as something that rightly guided the lives of beings superior to themselves, seeing the principles appropriate to their own roles as “second best”. But possibly the overwhelming majority of Greeks at any period governed their own decisions and instructed their children in quite different ways, so that any “official code” of heroic society would always have been at odds with a different moral practice, much more attuned to cooperation and the promotion of group welfare.

So I distinguish two views. On one view, Nietzsche was simply wrong; there never was a stage at which the moral practice of the whole group (or even a large majority of it) adopted the perspective of honor über alles; not only was there no moral revolution wrought by the Jews and Christians, there wasn’t even one in the development of classical Greek civilization; all that happened was a shift in power – driven probably by the transformation of military tactics – so that the practice that guided the lives of most members of a social group became the official practice, displacing the minority code of the erstwhile masters. On the alternative, the codes of all members reflect to some extent the ideal of searching for honor, even if, for a lowly individual, that ideal is something to which his (or her) life will inevitably fall short.

We can find hints of a rival to the heroic code in the writings of Hesiod, perhaps a younger contemporary of Homer, who seems to oppose the predatory behavior of the heroes (or at least those of his contemporaries who aspire to emulate the heroes) by insisting on the priority of hard work and fair dealing. We can read Hesiod as articulating attitudes that were always present, but suppressed by the dominance of the rich aristocrats, or as part of a movement towards the perspectives of the polis, explicit in Solon and Thucydides’ Pericles. (This is not, of course, to suggest that those who participated in the early stages of the movement envisaged anything like the full flowering of the polis.)

The discussion of the last section raises two important questions about this episode: Can we see what we take to be moral advances as generated by cognitive achievements? Can we provide a systematic account of moral progress? To address these issues, I don’t think it matters what stance we take on the extent to which the heroic code once pervaded society. Either way, this episode will provide little comfort to those who want to view moral change as driven by new moral insights; and, either way, we’ll find the same consequences for the envisaged analysis of moral progress.

Suppose that the heroic code never permeated any Greek society, that it always coexisted with other ideals for different classes – perhaps the emphasis on discipline, hard work and fair dealing expressed by Hesiod was common among the small farmers of the seventh century. On this

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22 See Works and Days especially ll. 1-383. I don’t take a stand on whether Hesiod’s critique of his “fifth age” should be seen as an objection to the heroic code in any form, or whether he thinks that code has been perverted by his debased contemporaries. It’s clear, however, that his ideal of behavior in his times is very different from the aristocratic pursuit of honor. Like Nietzsche after him, Hesiod uses the image of the hawk – although to very different effect (ll. 202 ff.; compare ll. 320-335). Note that Hesiod also appeals to the idea of all-seeing gods, who will later administer punishments and rewards (ll. 267, 333-4).

23 It’s worth stressing at this stage that Hesiod doesn’t voice the concerns of the downtrodden peasantry, the household slaves, or those who sold their labor without any permanent connection with an oikos. Nor, in the transition to the polis do we find the full representation of the attitudes of free males (let alone slaves and females). As Bryant notes “The men of hoplite status … were something of an elite group, rarely comprising more than a third of the free adult male population” (Moral Codes 111). See also Donlan Aristocratic Ideal 74.
interpretation, the transition consisted in a victory for a viewpoint originally dominated by the power of the aristocrats, a victory achieved because the demands of warfare made it necessary to recruit the small farmers, to restrain the free pursuit of honor, and to articulate a code that gave precedence to self-discipline and action for the community good. (Plainly this is a skeletal account of a process in which political changes and the modifications of ideals reinforced one another.) But there’s no plausibility in the idea that this represents anything more than a clash between perspectives originally adopted because they reflect social biases about the merits of the available options (and, in Hesiod’s case, there’s evidence of a more personal interest in his recriminations against the brother who had deprived him of much of his inheritance), a clash that is settled because of the evolution of military technique.

Alternatively, imagine that the heroic code was originally accepted by all the members of post-Mycenaean society. Then the articulation of the Hesiodic virtues is a genuine novelty, but it’s not hard to see this as the expression of the resentment (and a Nietzschean term may be appropriate here) of those who feel themselves vulnerable and undervalued in a world to which they contribute the necessary means. Their opposition to the heroic code would only be reinforced by the need for their service in military action, and the importance of their participation would provide leverage for modifying the framework of ideals. As Walter Donlan notes: “On the one hand [the hoplite ‘revolution] made the small and middling farmer the bulwark of the polis’ security and diminished the traditional role of the warrior-élite; on the other hand, it fueled the feeling of worth and importance of the ordinary spearman in the ranks.” Thus on neither interpretation do I find any convincing role for cognitive processes or insights into moral facts; the moral code seems to be changed by socio-political negotiations in a highly specific environment, marked by a shift in military technology.

Turn now to the issue of moral progress. Many people would be inclined, I think, to view the transition from the heroic code to the community-centered morality of the polis as progressive. (Not Nietzsche, of course, and it’s worth keeping that in mind.) On what basis? I suspect that three related features are involved. First, there’s greater inclusion – some people who were doomed to fall short of the prior ideal are now counted as fully worthy. Although the expansion of the class of those taken to be worthy is far from complete, one might still take it to be a step in the right direction. Second, there’s a proliferation of roles, representing a broader vision of the ways in which human beings can live a worthwhile life. This proceeds in part from the third shift, to wit the increase in the available forms of cooperative activity (allowing for further developments in the division of roles). The intensification of cooperation also strikes us as morally progressive, in that it replaces the prior use of force (the triumph of the strongest) with social systems that strive for collectively valuable outcomes. These developments appear to reflect the original ways in which coalition-building and normative governance fashioned hominid and human society – they extend a line along which human society has previously been travelling.

I’ll have more to say below about the three features to which I’ve alluded – extension of the moral community, proliferation of ways of living, and intensification of cooperation – and we’ll have to see if there’s any grounding for the intuitive judgments that these represent moral progress. My point here is that if we view the heroic-code-to-polis-code transition as progressive, then these are the properties that underlie our judgment, and that it doesn’t matter which hypothesis about the initial prevalence of the heroic code we adopt. On one supposition, the episode is progressive because a new code appears (one that extends, proliferates, and intensifies); on its rival, the episode is progressive because an already existing (unofficial, marginalized) code with these features comes to displace the official code that lacked them. Either way, we have an instance of moral progress (pace Nietzsche), and some suggestions about what makes the transition progressive.

IV

Many writers have regarded Christianity as transforming the moral framework of the Greco-Roman world. Yet whatever plausibility accrues to the idea of a single “heroic code” shared in archaic Greek society that gives rise to a single community-oriented code among the poleis (and it

24 Donlan Aristocratic Ideal 74.

25 Nietzsche’s fascination with the behavior of heroes (individuals remarkably different from himself) is slightly puzzling, given the apparent monotony of the heroic life. The point can be brought home by an old cartoon showing a band of Vikings just arrived on a defenceless coast; they have been divided into three groups, and the captain assigns roles – “Right, you lot loot, you pillage …”; at which point the third group interjects with “Oh no! Not rape again!”
would be quite reasonable to complain that the discussions of the last section treated “the” polis as if it were Athens, or maybe Athens and, secondarily, Sparta), the notion of one moral practice shared across the Greco-Roman empire (for the three hundred plus years during which Christianity rose to dominance?) and the idea of a unique Christian moral code are both absurd. What scholars surely intend is that there were features of the moral attitudes of most (all?) social groups that identified themselves as part of a movement inspired by Jesus that were not present in most (all?) other groups that lived under the aegis of Rome, and that, after Constantine, these features came to be part of the moral practice of Romans, Goths, Franks, Byzantines and their descendants. What might these features be?

A natural thought is that the growth of Christian belief brings about attitudes and customs of greater compassion in the ancient world. The most appealing passages in the New Testament are those in which the followers of Jesus are enjoined to forgive their enemies and to love their fellows. The influence of those passages might be seen in the reform of Roman institutions that have struck modern commentators as brutal and brutalizing. An eminent Victorian put the point as follows:

No discussions, I conceive, can be more idle than whether slavery, or the slaughter of prisoners in war, or gladiatorial shows, or polygamy, are essentially wrong. They may be wrong now – they were not so once – and when an ancient countenanced by his example one or other of these, he was not committing a crime. The unchangeable proposition for which we contend is this – that benevolence is always a virtuous disposition – that the sensual part of our nature is always the lower part.

As in many discussions of Christian values, two themes are intertwined here, one that gives priority to love for others (including the downtrodden, the despised, and the “nonpersons” of a society) and the other that insists on the importance for an individual of developing the spiritual (nonphysical) part of the person.26

It’s quite plain that there’s no simple impact of Christianity on the ancient world, even with respect to the conduct of war, the abolition of slavery, the character of public spectacles or views about marriage. The decades and centuries after Constantine are marked by frequent acts of violence carried out by Christians and endorsed by their leaders (the savagery of the Crusades is prefigured in the quarrels about orthodoxy that erupted from the fourth century onwards); nor did Christianity play any straightforward role in the transition from chattel slavery to serfdom and villeinage. Nor can one reasonably insist that the priority of love and forgiveness is consistently upheld in the canonical Christian writings. Not only do they attribute to Jesus such dicta as “I came not to bring peace but a sword”, but they show the disciple who had been commanded to forgive others a very large number of times (490) bringing about the death of members of the movement who fail to contribute all their goods.

As historical scholarship of the past two centuries has made very clear, what we regard as the canonical Christian texts emerged from political struggles among various movements that took inspiration from the first century Jew we know as Jesus, so that the result is an inconsistent compromise that includes the documents important to those cultural lineages that were relatively successful and excludes many others. Some parts of the result formulate the perspective of an apocalyptic prophet who urges his followers to prepare the local parts of the world for an imminent end, while the rest formulate a number of different ideals for a moral community.

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26 W.E.H. Lecky History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne, Volume I 110. For Lecky’s advocacy of the idea of moral progress, see also Volume I 100-103, 147-150, Volume II 8-11, 73-75.

27 I don’t think this is simply an idiosyncrasy of Lecky’s – or of his archetypically Victorian perspective. It can also be found in such contemporary Christian ethicists as Stanley Hauerwas. See for example The Peaceable Kingdom and Christians Among the Virtues (co-authored with Charles Pinches).

28 For an insightful discussion of issues about slavery, see Finley Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology. Historians from Gibbon on have noted the savagery of the conflicts among early Christian sects. A lucid account of the Crusades is offered by Steven Runciman A History of the Crusades (three volumes); see especially, his narrative of the massacres that attended the “triumph of the cross” in Jerusalem I 286 ff. (It’s tempting to require that anyone who wants to use the word ‘crusade’ with a positive connotation should read this passage.)


30 The literature on these topics is massive. I’ve benefited particularly from the following: Albert Schweitzer The Quest of the Historical Jesus, I.D. Crossan The Birth of Christianity, Elaine Pagels The Gospel of Mary, Rodney Stark The Rise of Christianity, Bart Ehrman Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium, Wayne Meeks The First Urban Christians, Meeks The Origins of Christian Morality, Ramsey MacMullen Christianizing the Roman Empire, Henry Chadwick The Early Church, Robert Wilken The Christians as the Romans Saw Them, and Robert Funk et.al. The Acts of Jesus. Also interesting, but much more controversial, is Robert Eisenman James, the Brother of Jesus.
Yet, in the spirit of the Victorian authority I quoted earlier, one might maintain that there’s a clear progressive shift introduced by Christianity, centered on adopting a new ideal of altruism as well as a distinctive view that the good life is a course of spiritual development. I’ll be relatively blunt with respect to the latter. Opposition between the physical and the spiritual is far from the exclusive province of Christianity; not only does it figure prominently in many non-Western traditions, but it was a commonplace in the Greco-Roman empire during the centuries when Christianity was taking shape, articulated by the Stoics (among others). Insofar as Christianity provided a novel form of the thesis of the priority of spiritual development (perhaps in terms of working toward spiritual union with the deity, or in mortifying the body), it’s tempting to deny that it was morally progressive; by the same token, if the emphasis on spiritual development appears an obvious advance on Greco-Roman attitudes, it’s because we understand it in terms of a hierarchy of “pleasures” that admits secular descriptions, many of which were provided by influential writers in the ancient world.

Focus, then, on the ideal of altruism, and ask what exactly the Christian doctrine commends. Recall the dimensions of altruism: intensity, extent, prevalence, and empathetic understanding. Even without taking into account further complexities, about whether preferences or interests of the other should serve as the source of adjustment of the altruist’s attitudes or about the enhanced desirability of those outcomes reached by processes in which each party attends to the preferences/interests of the other(s), there are different ways to formulate the ideal. But we can identify an extreme version, one that commends adopting the preferences of the other, with respect to every other and every context, and that demands complete accuracy about those preferences. I suggest that this extreme version is inconsistent, that its adoption in a community would lead to difficulties in cases where individuals’ initial preferences for indivisible goods are incompatible and to widespread “Alphonse-Gaston” situations in which both parties are moved by the wish to abnegate their desires in favor of the other. To make it viable, one requires a system of principles that explain when the needs of one individual are more urgent than those of another, and thus assign the roles of altruist and beneficiary. We can think of the appealing parts of the New Testament as articulating a part of this system, by pointing out how those often excluded from consideration – those beyond the range of altruistic dispositions – have needs that are extremely urgent. But it also has to be conceded that the articulation is both vague and incomplete: it’s one thing to suggest that the wretched are so needy that the rich should sell their possessions to help them, and quite another to sort out the conflicting potential demands on a group of people embedded in a web of social relationships.

The popular thesis that Christianity represents a moral advance is most plausible when conceiving the expansion of altruism as morally progressive. So construed, the transition can be viewed as extending a line marked out in the initial socialization of hominids and in the reinforcement of social dispositions through primitive rules for normative guidance. But the extension can be made in a number of different ways, and, in the history of morality many groups have conducted different experiments along these lines. Nor is the extension the exclusive province of Christianity. The injunction to love and forgiveness, even towards enemies, appears in Babylonian literature several centuries before Jesus, and the ancient world contained groups of non-Christians whose moral codes extended the altruism of the lineages in which they emerged. Instead of thinking of a definite Christian ideal, imperfectly realized by various Christian groups, we do better, I believe, to conceive of a general trend, for which Christianity provides a forceful expression, that has had many specific versions worked out in practice by the members of different communities.

The famous comment on one of the early Jesus movements – “See how these Christians love one another!” – might appear to contravene my conclusion. But the last words are significant. It’s been suggested that one of the factors that promoted the spread of Christianity was the response by believers during times of plague: the devout stayed with those of their number who were afflicted, with the result that their community had, and was seen to have, a higher rate of recovery. Whether or not Christians

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31 As Lecky notes, I 239-249, the Roman development of Stoicism also gave prominence to ideals of altruism and compassion. It’s not obvious to me how he reconciles his judgment with the thesis that Christianity represents an important moral progress.

32 I characterize the ideal in terms of preferences rather than interests because a Christian formulation in terms of interests would adopt a very special notion of the interests of individuals, one that doesn’t obviously translate into a judgment that the ideal would mark a direction of moral progress.

33 This idea was originally floated by W.S. McNeill in Plagues and Peoples, and has been amplified by Rodney Stark in The Rise of Christianity. Stark stresses that epidemics and plagues were recurrent in the ancient world, and that routine care (providing water, for example) would enhance the chances of recovery. This is only one aspect of a multifactorial
also cared for outsiders, it’s fairly clear that they viewed their efforts as being directed first towards the members of their own community. The criterion of urgency isn’t indifferent to the distinction between believer and pagan. On the interpretation I’m opposing, we’d have to ask if the community was conforming to the ideal expressed in the New Testament (or in the actual commandments issued by Jesus). On the view I favor, there’s no such specific ideal, and we should conceive of this aspect of Christianity as part of a more general cultural movement of expanding and reinforcing the altruistic dispositions of the members of various groups, a movement that antedates Christianity and that is developed in different ways, some of which may be admirable; one of the developments is found in the communities whose mutual love excited pagan admiration and whose moral practice gave priority to believers.

As with the transition from the heroic code to the practice of the *polis*, I see no place here for a cognitive achievement. At various stages in human history, the altruistic dispositions shaped by an existing moral code have surely been aroused by the unfortunate situation of people who were beyond the scope of moral practice, people who “didn’t matter”, and these occasions have sometimes led to formulations of a more expansive altruistic ideal. Many communities have elaborated moral practices that expand the norms for altruism in the groups from which they sprang, and, because they extend the line marked out in previous stages of hominid socialization, we’re inclined to regard them as morally progressive. Our second example thus confirms the tentative conclusion drawn from the first about the kinds of features we take to mark moral progress. I’ll scrutinize this conclusion below.

V

First, however, my third and final case. For over a century and a half, the “peculiar” institution of chattel slavery flourished in the New World, while being subject to critical discussion. Opposition to slavery intensified in Britain in the late eighteenth century and in America in the first half of the nineteenth, culminating in the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War. On the face of it, the replacement of a view that slavery is morally permissible by the denial of that claim marks a clear instance of progressive moral change. How was that change accomplished?

To address the question, we need to begin with the attempts to embed the institution within the moral codes of seventeenth and eighteenth century Northern Europeans, whether resident in the ancestral countries or dispersed among the colonies. The economic advantages of slavery for the slaveowners appeared clear (although there were ultimately attempts to show that the institution was economically problematic, there’s little doubt that most of those who owned slaves believed strongly that they would face ruin under emancipation), and there were many efforts at providing rationalizations. Apologists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries didn’t have to start from scratch, for they could draw on concepts and distinctions formulated centuries earlier by those who had sought to justify the ownership of human beings. One traditional line of defense was to draw a distinction between those members of the species who are permissible enslaved and those who are not – a line formulated in the Hebrew Bible in terms of the differences between the chosen people and those whom they capture in war, by Aristotle in terms of variants in individual nature, and by the medieval church through differentiating the faithful from the infidels. Christian apologists could add further appeals to the scriptures. The early books of the Old Testament make it apparent that the patriarchs had slaves (and that they had sexual relations with female slaves); the letter to Philemon (attributed to Paul) seems to endorse the institution of slavery (the letter concerns the return of a slave to his former master and mistress); further, they could interpret the particular people who constituted the slave population in North America (people of African descent) as the children of Ham (or, in some versions, Canaan) who had inherited a Biblical curse. Protestant Christianity also had the resources to make an important distinction among kinds of liberty, contrasting the liberty of the soul to attain to God’s grace with mere bodily liberty. As we’ll see, this line of thought (which has filiations to Stoic ideas about the relative...
importance of the inner life) could actually be developed into an argument that the slave-traders were doing their captives a favor.35

For the slaveowning cause constructed its own account of the trade. It began with the situation in Africa from which the slaves had been removed. That condition was viewed as a state of Hobbesian nature, dominated by internecine strife, bestial practices (including illicit sexuality), and utter ignorance. After transporting the unfortunate people across the Atlantic, kindly slaveowners provided them with food and shelter (as well as paternal affection) in exchange for their toil. Even more importantly, they were given the opportunity to be educated in the true religion, and thus to attain to spiritual salvation.

All this is rubbish, of course, but it’s impossible to appreciate how the ownership of slaves could have coexisted with an official acceptance of Christian doctrines without recognizing how often it was formulated. In 1700, Samuel Sewall, a judge who had been a participant in the Salem witch trials and who had later acknowledged his error, published a pamphlet proposing an analogy between the slavery of the colonies and the (unlawful) servitude of Joseph (sold, according to Genesis, by his brothers). The tract drew a response from John Saffin (1701) who addressed Sewall’s suggestion that “we may not do evil that good may come of it” by writing: “…it is no Evil thing to bring them out of their own Heathenish Country, where they may have the Knowledge of the True God, be Converted and Eternally saved…” Five years later, Cotton Mather wrote an enthusiastic descant on the theme of the opportunity provided the colonists by the presence of African slaves among them. Confident of the natural inferiority of the slaves, Mather wrote:

The State of your Negroses in the World, must be low, and mean, and abject; a State of servitude. No Great Things in this World, can be done for them. Something, then, let there be done, towards their welfare in the World to come…Every one of us shall give account of himself to God…

If, in the middle eighteenth century, the influence of the argument diminished, that was because the efforts of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel were so obviously unsuccessful. The slaves seemed to prefer to spend their Sundays dancing, trading and resting – and, as David Brion Davis notes, it’s understandable that they didn’t flock to a religion “which sanctioned their masters’ authority, which enjoined them to avoid idleness and to toil more diligently, and which promised to deprive them of their few pleasures and liberties.” The preferred explanation for the failures was that the slaves were incorrigible, so that the collapse of one line of proslavery argument, buttressed another.

Saffin’s response to Sewall already claimed that Africans and Europeans were distinguished in moral and intellectual temperament: his tract closes with a piece of doggerel that attributes innate traits (cowardice, cruelty, libidinousness etc.) to the black races. In Christian versions, this survived into the nineteenth century. As late as 1852, Mary Eastman could write a response to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, in which she assembled all the main parts of the “difference” argument: Africans are descendants of Ham, cursed by God, with traits of character that require discipline and firm checks by wiser (and benevolent) people of European ancestry, no more appropriate bearers of freedom and self-government than wayward children. One might think of this as an artefact of the commitment to literalist Christianity, an argument that would never survive in Enlightenment circles, but that would be a mistake. Certainly, the most insightful early critic of slavery, Montesquieu, often punctured the appeal to innate differences, famously remarking that Africans can’t be humans because if they were it would follow that (Europeans) aren’t Christians, but his ironies were often unappreciated. But, just as themes in ancient Stoicism (and in early Christianity) had provided material for distinguishing the freedom that matters from the freedom that doesn’t, subordinating the plight of the slave to the general condition of unenlightened/unredeemed humanity, so too, some of the most incisive enlightenment writings about

35 In The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture, Davis provides an illuminating account of all these apologist strategies and their relationship to ancient and medieval thought. 36 Saffin “A Brief Candid Answer to a Late Printed Sheet Entitled The Selling of Joseph”, in M. Lowance (ed) Against Slavery: An Abolitionist Reader, 16. 37 Mather “The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity”, in Against Slavery, 19.
freedom bypassed the issue of the relative lack of freedom of the slave in concentrating on the lack of liberty of all mankind. The speculative anthropology of the eighteenth century, fuelled by dissections of chimpanzees and humans of various races, inspired Voltaire, Hume, Buffon, and many of their intellectual descendants to advocate claims of African inferiority. Adam Smith was a rare dissenting voice, but he was soundly rebuked by the Virginian, Arthur Lee, who drew on his extensive experience of black slaves to set Smith straight.

General considerations about racial hierarchy were coupled with claims about the behavior of Africans, both in their native countries and in their state of servitude (and it’s overwhelmingly probable that the latter played a more important role in spreading the idea of innate African inferiority). Although there was a body of literary attempts to depict the nobility of enslaved Africans (Aphra Behn’s Orinooko is a prominent representative), this was countered by a much larger volume of writings from the people (slaveowners) who claimed to know the subject best. Achievements of individual slaves were systematically undervalued. Expressions of a conviction that black people are doomed to lesser accomplishments (and that they are unpleasing, if not disgusting) are found in the words of two of America’s most high-minded presidents. Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia contains the following passage:

> Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and the scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or lesser suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenance, that immovable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of them as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the back women over those of his own species.

Jefferson goes on to cite various aspects of the character and accomplishments of the slaves he knew: their passions are transient and instinctual, they have little power of reason, little imagination, virtually no artistic skill; Jefferson allows that their moral lapses (lying, stealing, and so forth) can sometimes be traced to the difficulties of their situation, but even virtues are transmuted into defects – thus the courage of African blacks is seen as absence of forethought. Although he concludes that “[t]he opinion that they are inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination, must be hazarded with great diffidence”, there’s little doubt from the preceding catalog that Jefferson not only hazards it but has so little diffidence that he actually believes the various constituent claims. Decades later, in his debate with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln was still able to talk of a “physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.”

The transition from a moral practice that permits slavery – either as unproblematic or as problematic but, on balance, acceptable – to one that identifies it as a patent moral wrong surely looks progressive. How was it accomplished? In this instance, we can identify a collection of counterarguments that systematically dismantle the justificatory attempts I’ve briefly reviewed. Some of those arguments dissect the evidence for maintaining that black Africans have inherited some Biblical curse; others point out that there are other ways of bringing the African soul to grace than subjecting the African body to the middle passage, the slave auction, unremitting toil, sexual abuse and the lash; yet others display the accomplishments of individual slaves, or ex-slaves, who show by their words and works that theses of innate racial difference are unfounded; the writings and speeches of Frederick Douglass are notable examples of this last strategy. The overall abolitionist campaign consisted in destroying

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42 See, for example, Rousseau; maybe the same applies to Kant.

43 Notes on the State of Virginia. It’s interesting to ask how the man who wrote these words conceptualized his own relationship with Sally Hemmings.

44 Cited in the “General Introduction”, to Against Slavery, xxiv. Perhaps, as the editor notes (xxv), Lincoln was simply bowing to political pressure.

45 See, for example, “The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered”, and “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”. In his “General Introduction” to Against Slavery, Mason Lowance tells an interesting story of one of Douglass’ presentations: “Once during the opening moments of a lecture in London, an audience expressed hostile disbelief in his past as
all the devices that could be deployed to avoid applying to people of African descent the same attitudes and principles that were routinely accepted as governing peaceful interactions among the civilized – tearing down, in short, the distortions that allowed Europeans to view Africans as utensils rather than people.

The examples just given make up the negative side of the campaign, the attack on the artificial distinctions to which advocates of slavery would resort. There was also a positive side. A few courageous visitors to the parts of the African interior from which the slaves were drawn were surprised to discover communities with different customs, but with stable social relations and, above all, familiar human needs and feelings. As more was discovered about the means of recruiting slaves and about the character of the transatlantic voyages, many of the claims about the benefits conferred by enslavement were revealed as the farrago of nonsense they were. But the most important source of a conviction that black Africans could not be excluded from full membership in the moral community was the confrontation with their condition, a confrontation that sometimes aroused those empathetic dispositions that were emphatically not reinforced by the practice of condoning slavery. Audiences would later respond to the eloquence of Douglass and others, black and white, who catalogued the sufferings of the slaves, but a century earlier there were already those who saw the natural conditions and were disposed to sympathize with victims who were, officially, nonpersons.

Although they didn’t consistently condemn slavery, the American Quakers were often more concerned with the problem and sometimes moved to argue for abolition of the institution. John Woolman’s Journal tells us how he reached the position advanced in his Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes (first published in 1754), in which he defends the claim that “Negroes are our Fellow Creatures”, by linking their condition to that experienced by those who excited Jesus’ sympathy. As I read Woolman (and others who became passionate abolitionists), their mature altruistic dispositions, products of forms of socialization that were by no means intended to elicit sympathy for black slaves, were aroused by their observations of the actions and sufferings of Africans they encountered, and that arousal led them to protest the practice of excluding these people from the scope of the principles and the emotional responses that governed interactions among Americans of European descent.

This moral revolution (if it merits that title) conforms to patterns we’ve seen before. Once again, there’s expansion of the class of people to be covered by the protections of moral practice, expansions of the altruistic dispositions. Those who come to see that reform is needed do so as result of two types of processes. First, there are genuine cognitive accomplishments, consisting in the recognition of previously masked facts; people learn that there’s no evidence for the view that the African lineage is cursed, that the conditions in “savage Africa” aren’t ameliorated by shackling and confining human beings, separating them from their kin, beating and raping them; they come to see that slaves (and ex-slaves) with little opportunity and virtually no motivation can do remarkable things. Second is the growing awareness that the altruistic dispositions shaped in the prevailing moral practice are confined from any extension to black Africans only because the pertinent people are kept out of sight, portrayed from a distance as brutish and incapable of “superior” feelings. The growth of that awareness is unsteady and incomplete, even in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (witness Jefferson, and perhaps Lincoln), but it’s clear that the violation of felt sympathies played an important role in the decisions of some who campaigned most fiercely for abolishing slavery. John Woolman may have been one of the first, but he was followed by many others.

VI

I’ve reviewed three examples of transitions in moral practice that seem to me to be important (although I don’t insist on the label ‘moral revolutions’): much more could and probably should be said about each of them. I hope, however, that my preliminary analyses show that there’s little plausibility in the idea that moral advances come about because some participants acquire a new piece of moral knowledge; insofar as cognitive gains figure significantly, as they do in my last example, they do so because they combine with an antecedently accepted part of moral practice. Thus, to reduce the change to a simple schema, we might say that there’s an existing commitment to accept rules taken to govern real people (“Don’t

a chattel slave because his oratory and elocution were so powerful. (It was well known that slaves were held in illiteracy and ignorance as a means of control.) Without speaking another word, Douglass promptly stripped off his shirt and turned his flayed back to the incredulous audience to show the scars of his floggings.” (Against Slavery xxx).

46 Excerpts from Some Considerations appear in Against Slavery 22-24; references to Woolman’s Journal to come.
separate real people from their kin!” and so forth), and such rules are taken to apply only to a certain set because human beings outside the set aren’t real people; the denial that such individuals are real people is taken to rest on particular claims about them, and the cognitive accomplishment lies in showing that those claims are false. That cognitive accomplishment is supplemented by the arousal in some of dispositions appropriate to treating as real people the individuals who officially aren’t; such people find themselves in serious tension – emotional tension with the prevailing moral practice.

I’ll say no more about the question of whether philosophers who want to make sense of moral cognition can find comfort in the historical evolution of morality. In what follows I want to concentrate on the issue left dangling at the end of section II. Can we find an account of moral progress that fits these examples? A dominant pattern in each of the episodes I’ve treated is the expansion of altruism; in the terms of the last paragraph, moral progress might be taken to consist in including in the class of real people human beings who had previously been excluded. That can hardly serve us as a complete account of moral progress, however. To cite an obvious, if historically implausible, counterexample, we can imagine a group whose rules for interaction favored behavior that we’d describe as cruel and brutish; it would hardly serve as an example of moral progress to permit their savage practices to encompass outsiders.

But, of course, I’ve been assuming throughout that the system of norms prevalent within a group is aimed at ensuring social harmony and promoting cooperative ventures. With respect to my first example, I suggested that part of the progress involved in the transition to the morality of the polis consisted in an intensification of cooperation – an increase in the number of kinds of cooperative ventures that become possible. Although it’s less obvious in my last case, it does seem that here too the scope of cooperation is augmented. We can resist the counterexample, then, on the grounds that what matters is an expansion of the class of real people that increases (or, at least, doesn’t decrease) the scope of cooperation.

This is still, I believe, insufficient. For it misses an important feature of the first example, one that is again present, albeit less obvious, in the final case. Moral changes sometimes proliferate possibilities – that is, they allow for novel ideas about what kinds of lives are worthwhile. Insofar as the abolitionist movement recognized black Africans as people with a culture of their own, it expanded the range of alternatives available to humans generally. The thought that moral progress should proliferate possibilities (or at least not narrow them) suggests a more adequate judgment about the second example. Christianity appears as a progressive force when we focus on its expansion of altruism, but its narrowing of the range of worthwhile lives compromises the verdict. We can accommodate both Nietzsche’s insights and his oversights by claiming that, in some respects, the pagan-Christian transition was morally progressive and that, in other respects, it was not.

My third example reveals another aspect of moral progress, to wit the transformation of moral practice in the light of more accurate factual information. It would be an error, I believe, to underrate the importance of findings about the horrors of the middle passage or of critiques of the claim that religious texts ascribe a particular ancestry to black Africans. As I’ve argued previously, the moral codes of the ancient world – and virtually all of those descending from them – intertwine rules, principles, and ideals about social interactions with lore about an allegedly nonphysical realm. Apologists for slavery drew on shared beliefs about the dictates of the deity to defend the view that black Africans were marked by an important difference, and, on this basis, they limited principles that would otherwise have come into play in the treatment of slaves. One aspect of the moral progress exemplified in the abolition movement consisted in debunking the claim of a stigma. More generally, progressive shifts in moral practices often take place because of the exposure of myths and superstitions, so that practices previously adopted appear arbitrary and groundless. Hence I regard secularization as a progressive movement in the history of morality, one that is still incomplete. (I’ll consider a possible objection to this below.)

This point is made by Du Bois (Souls of Black Folk), who emphasizes the mutual contributions of white and black Americans to one another’s cultures; the same theme has been developed more recently by Anthony Appiah (in his contribution to Color Conscious).

Consider, for example, the recent debate over stem cell research. It’s tempting to say that resistance to creating cell lines results from religious views that can’t survive confrontation with elementary facts about early development. We know a lot about the mechanics of fertilization, and a fair bit about the structures present in blastocysts (clusters of cells at a stage well before gastrulation, when the pattern for neural development is first laid down). That knowledge is enough to raise serious difficulties for those who think that an episode of “ensoulment” occurs prior to the time at which the stem cells would be harvested. Even if one were to retain some religious hypothesis, it’s hard to see how that hypothesis can yield the distinction on which opponents of the research rely.
Let's try to formulate a more precise account of moral progress. I'll distinguish four kinds of transitions. First, the expansion of altruism occurs when the practice enlarges the class of those taken to be real people, that is when those assigned this status by the later practice properly include those so characterized by the earlier practice. Here it's important to specify what's meant by including individuals as real people; the inclusion must be embodied in empathetic responses to their predicaments and in altruistic interactions with respect to them; hence they must be conceived as subjects of preferences and interests, bearers of psychological states. It doesn't follow from my account of the expansion of altruism that a shift to include plants, inanimate objects and artifacts as real people would be morally progressive (although some other clause in the account of moral progress might generate that result in some cases).

Second, the proliferation of possibilities occurs when the people of a successor moral practice have available to them as genuine possibilities lives which they and members of their community identify as worthwhile, beyond those so characterized in the prior practice. The cases I have in mind are those in which an identity which members of the earlier population could have assumed was socially discouraged (even repressed), and in which this identity comes to be tolerated (or approved) in the later population. We can think here of the roles of the farmer and the craftsman in the ancient world, of women and of people with same-sex preference in more recent times. As with the expansion of altruism, there's an obvious danger that the proposal will include too much; perhaps it will see moral progress in cases where "trivial" identities (becoming the first person to count all the grains of sand on a particular beach) are allowed. I've attempted to block this threat by insisting that the identities in question must be genuine possibilities for individuals that others in their community can support; I envisage that support as consisting in attitudes of the form "That identity is not one I could assume, but I see its value for others", and I take it that such support is available in the paradigm instances but that it would not be available for those trivial identities of the Guinness-book-of-records-aspirant type. (I am not sure whether this succeeds.)

Third, intensification of cooperation occurs when the modification of a moral practice allows (or encourages) a broader class of cooperative interactions than those permitted (commended) by its predecessor. I suppose that some changes in moral practice introduce rules, ideals, roles or forms of socialization that increase the range of contexts in which people respond to the preferences and interests of others (and also perhaps increase the intensity of the altruistic response), and that the psychological changes are expressed in cooperative interactions that would not previously have been undertaken. It seems likely that expansion of altruism will typically be accompanied by intensification of cooperation, and that instances in which that doesn't hold will be traceable to previous pathologies of the practice. (As in my imaginary example of the extension of savagery to individuals who are newly counted as real people.)

Last, as already mentioned, the acquisition of a new item of factual knowledge can lead to the extension of moral principles, to the inculcation of altruistic dispositions towards a broader class of people, or to the abandonment of restrictions previously taken to apply to human actions.

Let's now say that a transition in moral practice is progressive just in case it instantiates one of these process-types – expansion of altruism, proliferation of possibilities, intensification of cooperation, increase in factual knowledge – and doesn’t simultaneously reverse any of the others. In other words, progress consists in doing better with respect to at least one of the criteria I’ve outlined without doing worse on any. In mixed instances, and I offered the example of the acceptance of Christianity, we can speak of progress with respect to an aspect of moral practice. I shan’t try to sort out whether there are cases of moral progress tout court in which progress with respect to one aspect is traded against regress with respect to another.

This is surely not a complete account of moral progress, not only because it avoids the hard question of whether trading is ever permissible, but also because my list of the modes of moral progress is incomplete. I’ve elicited four types from a small sample of cases, and it’s almost certain that a wider inventory – not to mention a deeper examination of my paradigms –

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49 I resist the idea of simply making comparisons of cardinality, since it seems to me that the right thing to say about such cases would be that the transition is progressive in some respects but not in others. The idea of an “expanding circle” of moral agents has been quite popular. It’s at the core of the view developed by Peter Singer in an important study of the evolution of morality (The Expanding Circle). Ironically, it was also articulated by W.E.H. Lecky: “At one time the benevolent affections embrace merely the family, soon the circle expanding includes first a class, then a nation, then a coalition of nations, then all humanity, and finally, its influence is felt in the dealings of man with the animal world.” (History of European Morals I 100-101.)

50 Although I’ll look briefly below at a case in which I think it’s very hard to defend the possibility of trading.
would expose other ways in which moral practices may progress. (I don’t see, for example, how the apparent progress in our ways of punishing people falls under the account so far given.) The view I’ve offered should thus be taken as an incomplete theory of moral progress. Whether or not its worth completing will depend on the possibility of answering some important questions, and I’ll end with a consideration of these.

There are at least three obvious worries. One is that this approach to moral progress simply won’t support the kinds of judgments we want to make about the deficiencies (and achievements) of some moral practices. A second is that it portrays moral change as blind, thus failing to identify the ways in which moral reflection (and moral philosophy in particular) is able to proceed; we’re left with little advice about how to go on. The third, and most challenging, concern is that any concept of moral progress generated from historical study simply embodies the perspectives and prejudices of the historians, consequently falling far short of what we’d expect from any genuinely objective notion. I’ll take up these issues in turn.

Earlier, I proposed that a concept of moral progress would enable us to compare moral practices, to say, for example, that the Nazi attitudes towards the Jews were not just different but objectively wrong. The hard case would seem to be that in which the Nazis aren’t viewed as lapsing from a shared code, but promulgating different rules, principles and ideals. To apply the account I’ve sketched, we need to take a stand on how that code works. Although I think the comparison could be carried out by focusing on Nazi ideals and the contraction (as opposed to proliferation) of possibilities, I’ll consider issues about altruism and cooperation. The Nazi code inhibits certain sympathetic reactions towards some human beings (Jews, gypsies, homosexuals) and restricts principles that would normally be taken to govern what can be done to these people. If reconstructions of this kind are correct, then there’s no difficulty in saying why their moral practice is inferior; against a shared background of moral assumptions, they derive hideous views by applying false factual premises. (One way to see Nazism as a historical movement is to suppose that its anti-Semitic attitudes emerge from a moral code, one that is retained by the opponents of Nazism, through the spread of false information about the actions of Jews in the historical and recent past.) Alternatively, we might think of the Nazis as introducing rules, principles, ideals and so forth, not on the basis of any factual mistake, but because of a sequence of socio-psychological changes that inhibit the sympathetic dispositions found in people who aren’t militantly anti-Semitic. But, of course, the transition from a moral practice like ours to one in which the Nazi attitude towards Jews was expressed would contract the scope of altruism (and weaken cooperation), and since that transition wouldn’t be offset by any gain in other modes of progress, it would count as regressive. Thus we seem to be able to support the judgment that the Nazi code is objectively inferior.

Too cheap. One might legitimately point out that if you make up the criteria of progress to favor the expansion of altruism, then movements like Nazism (or the Khmer Rouge, or the Taliban) are going to be branded as regressive with respect to our own moral practice. The sting of the relativist challenge lies in the thought that other lineages could introduce their own conception of moral progress, apply it to the case under dispute, and see their practice as progressive with respect to ours. The objector speaks: You made up a notion of moral progress by analyzing historical cases and using the ethical standards of your current practice, and it should therefore be no surprise that you get the judgment that your practice is superior to its rivals; garbage in, garbage out. The third question to be faced is precisely this, and we’ll take it up shortly. Before doing so, however, it’s useful to note that the account does generate some of the conclusions we want, so that if its objectivity can be sustained, we would have a basis for going beyond the view that Nazism is merely a different moral practice.

The objector notwithstanding, it’s not inevitable that comparisons will always favor the home lineage (the lineage from which the notion of progress was generated) over its rivals. I pointed out above that I wouldn’t try to address the difficulties of trading some aspects of moral progress against others. One reason for that is a reluctance to find comparisons tout court in all cases. Without engaging in historical or anthropological detail,
we can imagine two lineages, one roughly congruent with our own, the other with that of people in distant regions of our world. The former begins from a state in which there’s pronounced division of roles, accompanied by differences in status; the divisions lead to accumulation of surplus resources, to a pronounced proliferation of ways in which people can lead their lives; as time goes on, more and more of these come to be held worthy, and there is a serious attempt to reduce inequalities; cooperation increases and altruism expands, but no practice in the lineage ever frees itself from competition, status differences and inequality. By contrast, the rival lineage emphasizes, from the beginning, the maintenance and intensification of cooperation; the result is a certain inefficiency; surpluses are much smaller, roles are not finely divided; with time, there is some proliferation of possibilities, but this is always constrained by the emphasis on cooperation and the preservation of equality; the end state is one in which the possible forms of worthwhile life are much fewer, but the pervasiveness of altruism much larger, than in the first lineage. Now we’re asked to choose whether we want to continue in one lineage or switch to the other: which direction of change would be progressive? On my account, neither. And that, I believe, is how it should be. For I think my different modes of moral progress point to a genuine incommensurability of practices. Nor should we think that the example can be treated by conceiving of both lineages as converging on some practice that will be progressive for both. If the environmental contingencies don’t allow for proliferation in a context of equality and cooperation – as I suspect they actually don’t – then it could easily be the case that both lineages continue to evolve progressively in such a way that contemporaneous practices are never comparable in terms of progress. (The moral-political dilemma sketched here plainly has connections to issues for western societies, and the most general forms of the question involved may simply have no answers.)

I turn now to the second worry. My treatment of three historical episodes has plainly emphasized such things as emotional responses and power struggles among groups. It thus seems to deny a role to moral reasoning, and perhaps to underestimate the impact of philosophy on the evolution of morality. Although I believe that philosophers are inclined to overestimate the ways in which the suggestions of academic moral philosophy change the moral practice of a society, and prone to slight the dependence of academic moral philosophy on the ambient societal practice, it would be wrong to overlook the possibility that changes may result from moral reasoning. As I see it, the work of moral philosophy is continuous with that of the popular moralist, the historian, the dramatist, poet and novelist, the theologian, and the reflective commentator. In different ways, each of these responds to the existing moral practice of a community, seeking to clarify its features, to probe its limits, to expose its difficulties, and, perhaps both to present it in a systematic way and to introduce progressive modifications of it. The work of systematization is particularly prominent in the history of moral philosophy, but it’s important to see that that work may be part of an effort at moral reform. Operating with an inchoate notion of moral progress, the systematizing philosophers reshape the moral practices they inherit. Whether they have more impact on the evolution of morality than others – religious scholars, say, or dramatists – is a matter for historical exploration.

Reason, impure reason plays its part in the evolution of moral practice. The typical devices that emerge from philosophical discussion – catalogues of virtues and their relationships, claims about the good life, tests for judging moral rules by understanding how they might be universalized, prescriptions for identifying well-being and counting consequences – resources that are sometimes (perhaps almost always) viewed as a priori principles, fall into place on my view as heuristics in the systematizing activity that leads to moral progress. These are, if you like, useful things to think about when reconstructing and modifying the moral practice you have inherited. So, for example, in the work of Rawls, a fundamentally Kantian suggestion for articulating the idea of the equality of persons is put to work in a framework that draws, in an abstract way, from the unsystematized moral practice of post-war America. The framework I’ve sketched can even give a sense to the notion of moral knowledge, conceiving it as the adoption of attitudes that are progressive with respect to prior practice on the basis of procedures that are reliable in having a high chance of generating progressive change. It would be comforting to think that the methods and heuristics devised by moral philosophers satisfy this standard of reliability, but that is a thesis that needs testing against the record of moral change.

I come now to the last and most important question about my approach to moral progress. In applying the label ‘progress’ to pick out features that seem to co-occur in episodes of moral change we (early twenty-first century citizens of more-or-less liberal democracies) happen to like, can I avoid begging the question, introducing terminology that seems to indicate an objective standard when all that has been done is to record the prejudices of a group and a time? I’ll consider two ways of posing the problem. One is Moorean in spirit; it concedes that we can characterize
some changes in the history of moral practice as sharing the features I’ve noted, and asks why we should want to continue in this way. The second, already prefigured in the discussion of Nazism above, inquires whether other lineages could, with equal justice, generate a different conception of moral progress and see their own history in its terms.

At several points in earlier sections I’ve suggested that certain transitions in moral practice extend a line that was begun in our initial steps towards socialization. We were able to become social because we developed altruistic dispositions, and we were able to transcend the fragile sociality of chimpanzees and hominids by introducing a system of normative guidance; the norms introduced bolstered our altruistic tendencies and avoided the conflicts and violence that would previously have erupted. The further evolution of these norms adjusted them to changing circumstances, particularly encounters with a broader class of people and increased division of roles. To succeed in this cultural evolution the norms adopted had to fulfil the functions served by protomorality (indeed to serve them better). Those functions were both public and private. The moral code is to allow for stable social interaction, and to be a basis for individual deliberation, governing the internal mêlée of competing desires. My claim for the account of moral progress I’ve offered is that the first three features I single out (expansion of altruism, proliferation of possibilities, and intensification of cooperation) are geared to discharging these functions; I defend the fourth mode of progress, eradication of false beliefs, differently, ... sphere as it is in inquiry generally. I’ll consider below whether there’s a possible tension between these two styles of defense.

When the Moorean asks why we should want to make moral progress in my sense, the beginning of an answer is to note that some things aren’t options for us. We’re evolved animals with dispositions to sociality, and transitions to states in which those dispositions are thwarted are impossible for us. Further, we can only go on from where we are, from the normative state in which we find ourselves and with the specific development of our altruistic dispositions achieved by our socialization. It would be consoling to think that any commitment to preserving the possibility of social life as the conditions of our lives change must endorse a unique set of features as marking moral progress. In my judgment, however, that claim is too ambitious. It’s true that some conceptions of moral progress will be eliminated, but there’s no reason to think that only one will be left standing. (In the terms of my metaphor, it’s not obvious that there’s a unique way of continuing the original line.) So the reply to the Moorean comes in two parts. First, we appeal to the generic features of our social nature to claim that only some notions of moral progress are possible for us, in that they preserve the functions of the system of normative guidance. Second, we argue that the notion of moral progress is among the permissible ones, and that it is best suited to the normative state and the psychological dispositions we have inherited. We concede that other lineages might adopt different conceptions, and that those conceptions might be appropriate for leading them on from where they are, claiming only that our own notion is in the privileged class (at the first stage) and that it’s appropriate for us.

The character of this reply will become clearer by focusing on the second version of the challenge. Let’s imagine a group whose practices we find repellent, attempting to fashion a notion of moral progress that will support their own code. The first step in making a comparison must be to equalize the situation in terms of nonmoral truth: thus, if there are facts recognized by one practice but not by the other, then these must be recorded in both practices. Our question, then, is whether each of the cleaned up practices can generate a notion of moral progress that sees itself as part of a progressive sequence. In cases where there’s a common ancestral practice – as with the Nazi/anti-Nazi comparison – we should ask if each line of descent from the common ancestor can be viewed as a progressive change.

In many instances, I think that the answer is negative. Consider a cleaned-up Nazism, where racial theories about behavioral differences are clearly rejected as false. Inhibition of altruistic tendencies towards Jews is then only sustainable, I suggest, if the environment drastically restricts the contexts in which Aryans and Jews encounter one another – otherwise, those who are taught the code will find themselves, Woolman-like, perturbed by the conflict between what is allowed and their own sympathies. Similarly, the social stability can only be maintained by an asymmetry in power, and the use, or threat, of force. Hence, in making a transition from the ancestral code (assumed not to be anti-Semitic), one moves from a situation in which various foreseeable environmental contingencies can be addressed by the code, both in terms of resolving the internal psychological conflicts and in terms of maintaining a stable social state, to one in which those environmental contingencies cannot be so treated. In terms of the functional criterion, then, we can’t view the change as progressive, and, as the example shows, the same will hold in any case.
where the social interactants include people, who cannot rightly be distinguished from those initially counted as real people, with respect to whom altruistic dispositions are inhibited. We thus have the outline of an argument for the thesis that the expansion of altruism is part of any conception of moral progress that honors the functional criteria.

Even if the argument can be elaborated more carefully (of which I’m not sure), it doesn’t rule out the possibility of pluralism. It might turn out that expansion of altruism is the core of alternative conceptions of moral progress, and that these can be used in self defense by groups with different moral practices. Pluralism isn’t necessarily bothersome. The notion of moral progress can do the requisite work if it enables us to distinguish the codes we want to condemn; some moral differences may be tolerable.

I close by looking briefly at a worry to which I’ve already alluded. The correctness of factual beliefs plays an important role in my story – one way to make moral progress is to get the facts right and adjust our principles accordingly. So, I’ve said, one important way to go on from where we are, is to seek out and eliminate those parts of our moral practice that are based on myths and superstitions (as when we come to tolerate previously forbidden sexual practices by abandoning the idea that these actions are banned by divine command); fully secularizing our morality would mark, I believe, an important further progressive shift. But one might claim that the acquisition of true belief can run counter to the functional criterion. Consider the role that the myth of an all-seeing deity has played in many moral systems. Peoples from diverse cultures have explained their need to conform to the rules by suggesting that to do otherwise would court divine retribution. Without this superhuman enforcement system, would the functions of normative guidance be discharged? Some (for example, Dostoyevsky’s Ivan) have wondered. Their thought can be put as a psychological hypothesis: religious false consciousness is a necessary part of any workable system of normative guidance. If that hypothesis is correct, then a transition in which error was corrected (people came to recognize that there is no such deity) would satisfy one of my tests but fail the other, for the functional criteria would be violated.

We do not know, of course, if that hypothesis is right. What we do know is that factual errors have often interfered with moral progress (think of the example of human slavery). So, without a guarantee, we move on, correcting factual mistakes where we find them. In doing so, we