

THE IDEA OF MORAL PROGRESS*

MICHELE M. MOODY-ADAMS

ABSTRACT: This paper shows that moral progress is a substantive and plausible idea. Moral progress in belief involves deepening our grasp of existing moral concepts, while moral progress in practices involves realizing deepened moral understandings in behavior or social institutions. Moral insights could not be assimilated or widely disseminated if they involved devising and applying totally new moral concepts. Thus, it is argued, moral failures of past societies cannot be explained by appeal to ignorance of new moral ideas, but must be understood as resulting from refusals to subject social practices to critical scrutiny. Moral philosophy is not the main vehicle for disseminating morally progressive insights, though it has an important role in processes that lead to moral progress. Yet we have grounds for cautious optimism, since progressive moral insights can be disseminated and can, sometimes, have constructive social effects.

Key words: semantic depth, moral concepts, moral progress, moral change, moral ignorance.

I want to defend a constructive account of the nature and sources of moral progress and a cautious optimism about its possibility. But any such view must acknowledge skepticism about the very idea of moral progress. Some critics will argue that we cannot know whether moral beliefs and practices are headed in the right direction until we know what the “destination” is, and that we cannot know what the destination is without proof of access to an objective standard of moral rightness.¹ Those who combine this claim with skepticism about moral objectivity, as many do, will insist that the idea of moral progress has no content.² Others will urge that even if we could establish the existence – and perhaps also the substance – of an independent standard against which to test relevant beliefs and practices, it would be difficult (if not

* A version of this paper was presented at a session of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. I thank Nicholas Sturgeon and David Wong for insightful comments and helpful criticism of that version.

¹ This discussion of forms of skepticism about the idea of moral progress draws on Bury’s discussion of skeptical approaches to the idea of human progress generally (Bury 1960).

² But see Richard Rorty’s discussion of moral progress, in “Solidarity or Objectivity,” (1991b), for an interesting contrast to this stance. Rorty combines skepticism about moral objectivity with optimism about the possibility of moral progress – he simply denies that the only way to understand progress is in terms of an antecedently fixed end.

impossible) to identify a single direction in which those beliefs and practices, on the whole, are clearly headed. On this view, even if the idea of moral progress has any content, it is unlikely to have any plausible uses.

I. Moral Progress Is Always Local

Yet we do not discern moral progress by reference to some fully specifiable destination toward which we can say that all beliefs and actions ought to be headed. Changes that are reasonably deemed to constitute moral progress occur locally, in relatively circumscribed domains of concern.³ Moral progress in belief, for instance, is progress in grasping what Mark Platts calls the “semantic depth” of particular moral concepts (1988, 287–88, 298–99). This involves coming to appreciate more fully the richness and the range of application of a particular moral concept (or a linked set of concepts), as well as understanding how some newly deepened account of a moral concept – some new moral conception – more adequately captures features of experience which the concept aims to pick out.

As Platts rightly urges, moral concepts pick out features of the world that are “of indefinite complexity in ways that transcend our practical understanding” (1988, 299). This means that no single conception of a complex moral idea, such as justice, can adequately capture its semantic depth.⁴ It also means that we cannot fully specify a “proper” destination for moral beliefs, not even for a single moral concept. Yet we have no reason to lament these facts or to assume that they warrant skepticism about moral objectivity. They are simply evidence of morality’s complexity. In view of that complexity, we must heed C. D. Broad’s advice not to expect any one account of morality to yield “the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” about morality ([1930], 1979, 1).⁵ We must also reject the notion that substantive moral progress requires convergence on some one moral theory or some one substantive moral view.

Moral progress in practices results when some newly deepened moral understanding is concretely realized in individual behavior or social institutions. In the treatment of women, for instance, moral progress has often been

³ The notion of “relatively circumscribed” is important here. No morally relevant domain of human concern is ever entirely distinct from all others.

⁴ I am sympathetic to Platts’s claim that our grasp of fundamental moral concepts “can and should improve without limit” (1988, 289). Yet I would substitute the notion of improving indefinitely for improving “without limit.”

⁵ Rationally defensible efforts to articulate moral truth may differ from one another, sometimes in quite significant ways. There will be a great deal of overlap in the content of defensible answers to the question of how we ought to lead our lives. Moreover, some answers will simply be indefensible in the whole, or in some of their defining elements. But moral objectivity simply does not require convergence on a single answer to the question of how to lead a life worth living. Indeed, given the unpredictable complexity of human experience, which demands that we continually reinterpret the terms of even familiar moral debates, convergence on a single account of morality would be the antithesis of progress. For fuller discussion of these concerns see Moody-Adams 1997b.

constituted by practices embodying deepened understandings of justice and related moral notions. Of course, even within a single moral domain, moral progress may be limited or incomplete. Moreover, moral progress within one domain may be accompanied by moral regression in some neighboring domain. But since moral progress is always local, we need not establish that beliefs and practices are all headed in a single direction in order to identify particular instances of moral progress.⁶ Understanding the local character of moral progress thus helps to clarify both the content and the plausible applications of the idea.

I have claimed that moral progress in belief is a matter of deepening our grasp of complex, already existent, moral ideas. Yet it has been urged that moral progress frequently requires the discovery or invention of fundamentally new moral ideas and that such accomplishments demand the special expertise of moral philosophers. Thus Michael Slote argues that on matters such as slavery and the treatment of women, for instance, “the development of moral thought and the realization of virtue” required fundamentally new moral ideas (1982). Slote further contends that, in views as varied as eighteenth-century utilitarianism and Rawls’s twentieth-century democratic egalitarianism, moral philosophy has been a reliable source of “totally new,” wholly “original” moral ideas which have furthered the development of moral thought (76).

Cheshire Calhoun relies on Kuhnian terminology to defend a related claim. Calhoun argues that we must distinguish “normal moral contexts,” in which the rightness or wrongness of action is socially “transparent,” from “abnormal moral contexts,” which “arise at the frontiers of moral knowledge.” Abnormal moral contexts emerge, she continues, “when a subgroup of society (for instance, bio-ethicists or business ethicists) makes advances in moral knowledge faster than they can be disseminated to and assimilated by” the rest of us (1989, 396–98; cf. Isaacs 1997). Echoing Slote’s understanding of the conditions for progress in the treatment of women, Calhoun adds that feminist theorizing tends to give rise to abnormal moral contexts that are “particularly resistant to normalization” (1989, 397).

Yet as I argue in section 2, we cannot recognize that some new conception constitutes moral progress unless it can be made intelligible as a defensible development in moral thinking.⁷ New moral insights can be “assimilated” only if they can somehow be expressed in terms of familiar moral concepts. Moreover, only those insights which can be assimilated can serve as the foundation of moral progress in practices. If “ought” implies “can,” as I think it does, fundamentally new moral ideas – as distinct from new insights about

⁶ We do not need to establish a single “direction” for moral beliefs and practices even within a single domain.

⁷ Joseph Raz defends a similar stance in “Moral Change and Social Relativism” (1994, 144–52). But the account defended here, as I will show, differs from Raz’s account in rejecting the suggestion that fundamental moral concepts must always be understood to embody fundamental moral principles.

how to understand fundamental moral concepts – could never be realized in individual action or social institutions.⁸ I show in section 3 that newly deepened moral understandings can be widely “disseminated” only if engaged social critics and political actors can get others to confront and reject their shallow grasp of moral concepts, and then to contemplate ways of embodying some deeper understanding in everyday experience. I have a “not yet extinguished faith” – as one critic describes it – that moral philosophy can play an important role in the processes that stimulate moral progress.⁹ But that faith is rooted in philosophy’s capacity to inspire political actors and social critics who struggle to disseminate new moral understandings and to influence the practice of those persons who are able to translate new insights into social practice (Moody-Adams 1997b, 160–77). Finally, in section 4, I articulate some epistemological commitments of the claim that moral progress in belief is a matter of deepening our grasp of existing moral concepts and that it does not (indeed cannot) teach anything fundamentally new about morality. I thus extend and refine a longstanding conviction, defended elsewhere, that the principal barrier to moral progress in beliefs is not ignorance of a revolutionary new moral idea, but affected ignorance of what can, and should, already be known (Moody-Adams 1994a, 1997b, 1998).

II. The Assimilation of Moral Progress

The notion that moral philosophy is regularly a source of “totally new” moral ideas conflicts with the self-conceptions of its most important practitioners. With very few exceptions, moral philosophers claim to reformulate central elements of ordinary moral consciousness, in order to reveal its unstated regulative commitments.¹⁰ In *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, for instance, Bentham insists that the principle of utility is deeply rooted in the “natural constitution of the human frame” ([1789] 1948, 2). In response to complaints that the *Groundwork* offers no new moral principle, Kant wondered: “Who would want to introduce a new principle of morality and, as it were, be its inventor as though the world had hitherto been ignorant of what duty is or had been thoroughly wrong about it?” ([1785] 1964, 8n.). Still further, in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls insists that the difference principle best captures one of the “fixed points” of our considered convictions. He also claims that the principle expresses a “natural meaning” of fraternity and gives

⁸ In other words, even if it were possible to come up with “totally new” fundamental moral concepts, it would not be possible to assimilate them. Of course, I argue in this paper that it isn’t possible to come up with “totally new” fundamental moral concepts (See also Moody-Adams 1998; 1997b, 102–6, 190–201; 1994a.)

⁹ The description is in Posner 1998b, 1822.

¹⁰ I had long believed that Nietzsche was, perhaps, the most important exception. Yet my colleague Paul Eisenberg has suggested that even Nietzsche may have appealed to existing moral notions – for instance, the general rejection of unjustified resentment – to generate support for his “transvaluation” of all values.

content to the familiar idea of reciprocity (1971, 102, 105).¹¹ The self-conception that underwrites such claims rests on two important assumptions: first, that philosophical moral inquiry must be continuous with everyday moral inquiry, and second, that – even in philosophy – the most important component of constructive moral inquiry is the reinterpretation of existing moral ideas (Moody-Adams 1997b, 136–42, 146–60). Together, these assumptions amount to an implicit denial that philosophical moral inquiry could provide totally new moral ideas or make paradigm-shattering advances in moral knowledge.

Any account of a moral concept's regulative commitments may generate claims about its semantic depth which, if followed, would have profound consequences for everyday practice. Utilitarianism is a frequent source of such claims. For instance, Peter Singer's understanding of the scope of the duty to aid – if widely accepted – would drastically change the nature of existence in contemporary consumer societies. But Singer (1979) relies on assumptions about the regulative commitments of existing moral concepts and explicitly appeals to familiar elements of ordinary moral consciousness. He expects agreement on the notion that we have a duty to respond to suffering and that this duty can have overriding moral significance. Moreover, he expects his readers to agree that alleviating the suffering of a drowning child is morally more significant than keeping one's suit clean or being on time for a routine appointment. Of course, Singer also believes that well-off inhabitants of wealthy societies typically have an inadequate grasp of the duty to respond to suffering – one which allows them to deny morally relevant similarities between the suffering of a nearby child and the suffering of a child who simply happens to be distanced by geography, culture, or political membership. Yet the idea that we have a basic duty to respond to suffering was not “totally new,” or in any way “original,” with utilitarianism. Thus Mill could reasonably claim that utilitarianism reveals the regulative commitments of the Judeo-Christian tradition which helped define conventional morality in nineteenth-century England. “To do as you would be done by” and “to love your neighbor as yourself,” Mill argued, constitute the “ideal perfection of utilitarian morality” (1979, 17).

Such claims implicitly recognize that the position of the person trying to assimilate a new moral insight is a lot like that of an explorer or anthropologist trying to make sense of a cross-cultural confrontation with unfamiliar moral practices. Even in the most serious cross-cultural moral disagreement there is always substantial agreement about the basic concepts that ought to shape any reflection properly deemed moral. Cross-cultural moral disagreement is possible only because “fundamental” moral disagreement across

¹¹ Slote is not alone in ignoring Rawls's own characterizations of his method. Walzer, for instance, insists that the difference principle is the result of an elaborate process of invention *de novo* (1987, 12–13).

cultures is not.¹² Moreover, the careful analysis of specific cases of disagreement consistently bears out this observation (Moody-Adams 1997b, 29–60, 74–106). What the methodology of moral interpretation teaches, in such cases, is that a judgment or belief counts as moral only if it fits into a pattern of beliefs and judgments that in fundamental respects resembles one's own (Cooper 1978; French 1992; Moody-Adams 1997b). But the same constraint on moral interpretation is at work when we confront some new moral insight – even when that insight comes from sources that are culturally “close to home.” We can contemplate a new moral insight as a moral insight, and attempt to assimilate it in everyday moral thinking, only if it fits into a complex pattern of belief and judgment that to a large extent resembles the current one.

My account of the intelligibility of moral progress must be distinguished from a superficially similar view defended by Joseph Raz. Raz attempts to show that a change in moral thinking can be intelligible only if some unchanging normative principle explains the change. He defends this claim as part of an attempt – with which I am otherwise sympathetic – to challenge social relativism about morality (1994, 148). Yet Raz's challenge presupposes that principles are the fundamental elements of moral understanding. On my view, in contrast, what is fundamental to moral understanding are complex concepts such as justice, compassion, or righteousness. Ideals or principles may be advanced as reasonable interpretations of such concepts. Given the nature of human understanding, fundamental moral concepts could not be fully applicable in everyday practice unless they were frequently interpreted in this way. But no single conception of a complex fundamental moral notion can adequately capture its semantic depth. This means that no ideal or principle offered as an interpretation of a fundamental moral concept – say, the concept of justice – could ever serve as an unchanging guide for discerning moral progress in belief. The Enlightenment ideal of equality, for instance, was an important attempt to deepen the understanding of justice.¹³ But the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have shown, I think, that the ideal of equality cannot by itself capture the richness and complexity of justice.¹⁴

Yet while there are no unchanging moral principles to guide the evaluation of moral interpretations, there are some fairly common signs of moral progress. Moreover, the predictive value of these signs is dependable across a broad range of social practices and in quite varied cultural and historical

¹² This claim distinguishes the critical pluralism I defend here, and elsewhere (1994b) from the pluralism defended by David Wong, for instance, in Wong 1992.

¹³ Accompanying developments in the language of rights – developments which eventually linked the idea of rights to ordinary persons – were an equally important part of the process of deepening our grasp of the concept of justice.

¹⁴ Rawls's attempt to deepen our understanding of justice – with an interpretation combining the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity – is a monumental attempt to distill the lessons of that history. Even those who would challenge the details of Rawls's interpretation ought to recognize that it provides invaluable lessons about the nature of moral thinking and about plausible methods of constructive moral inquiry.

circumstances. For instance, if we can predict that some institution or practice can be preserved without extreme violence and with a minimal amount of coercion, we can often conclude that an interpretation which recommends it constitutes moral progress.

But the absence of extreme coercion and excessive violence in social practices is not an unimpeachable guide to moral progress. A set of social practices might persist without them because all of its critics have been forcibly eliminated; such practices would not thereby become instances of moral progress. Still further, coercion and violence may be unavoidable when we seek to create, or to recreate, institutions which embody an appropriately deep grasp of fundamental moral concepts. Indeed there are circumstances – for instance, the American Civil War or the Allied effort in World War II – in which extremes of coercion and violence may constitute part of the regrettable, but morally necessary, conditions for responding properly to an indefensibly shallow moral conception, or to a profoundly terrifying moral regression.¹⁵

In this context, the emergence of an international culture of human rights in the aftermath of World War II proves to be one of the great, but fortunate, ironies of history. For that culture embodies an important attempt to formally recognize the link between minimizing coercion and socially sanctioned violence and encouraging moral progress in human practices. Like any culture, the culture of human rights is not a seamless web. There is frequent disagreement about what constitutes conformity to its central norms, there is something less than universal agreement about the value of conformity, and conformity may be spotty even where there is widespread agreement about what conformity to the norms really requires. Yet the tendency of human-rights doctrine is to support institutions which minimize social coercion and stigmatize state-sanctioned violence. Thus the fact of broad international agreement on the doctrine is grounds for cautious optimism about the possibilities for moral progress.

The need for cautious optimism is underscored by the extraordinary complexity of constructive moral inquiry. A central task of such inquiry, as I understand it, is to show us when and how we must sometimes enlarge the class of things – entities, actions, institutions, or states of affairs – to which some fundamental moral concept applies. As Singer's arguments suggest, this usually requires getting us to confront important similarities between characteristics of items already included under the concept and characteristics of others not yet so included. But this is frequently no simple matter.

Any subject of moral judgment is always embedded within what Karl Duncker described as a "concrete pattern of situational meanings" (1939, 43). Moreover, any pattern of situational meanings will be a complex set of factual

¹⁵ I follow Michael Stocker in believing that it is sometimes rational to regret doing something that morally speaking ought to be done. See Stocker 1990, 110–23; cf. Moody-Adams 1997a, 121–30.

beliefs about, and affective associations concerning, some action, entity, institution, or state of affairs. Any phenomenon – for instance, an action such as the killing of aged parents – will be the subject of moral evaluation only as it is embedded in a particular pattern of situational meanings. A people who believe that killing one's aged parents is the only way to ensure the parents' entry into a promised heaven will evaluate the action differently, as Duncker points out, from those for whom the intentional killing of aged parents is a malicious attack on the sanctity of human life. As a rule, then, moral inquiry can change our moral understandings, and constructively enlarge our grasp of moral concepts, only if it can alter some of the constituent beliefs and affective associations that structure important patterns of situational meanings.

But effecting change in situational meanings, and encouraging new understandings of fundamental moral concepts, may require one or more of several argumentative strategies. First, it may involve pointing out the underappreciated relevance of empirical facts. Singer reminds us, for example, that advances in the technology of communication and travel require us to rethink the notion of who is in proximity to us. But second, a moral critic seeking to change the situational meaning of some phenomenon may need to articulate and analyze problematic emotions that are unreasonably generated by some action, person, or thing in question. It is thus that an argument about the morality of practices governing AIDS victims might try to dispel irrational fears about the transmission of the disease. Third, we are sometimes convinced to see some phenomenon in a new light when we are compelled to confront important inconsistencies in beliefs and practices regarding it. A critic of contemporary American legal practices, for instance, might challenge the morality of allowing harsher sentences for the sale and possession of crack cocaine than for the sale and possession of other forms of cocaine. Fourth, bringing about a change in situational meanings may require supplying a new metaphor, or some other imaginative structure, in an attempt to reshape our conception of a particular phenomenon. In this regard, Singer's defense of the sharing ethic might have more influence were it linked with some reimagining of human life compelling enough to counter Hardin's image of wealthy countries as lifeboats already filled to carrying capacity. Finally, because the patterns of situational meanings most resistant to change are those concerning the self, one of the most important tasks of constructive moral inquiry is to try to break down the common human resistance to self-scrutiny (Moody-Adams 1990, 1994a, 1997b). New moral understandings can be widely disseminated only if we can be made to confront and to reject some shallow grasp of a particular moral concept.

III. The Dissemination of Progressive Moral Beliefs

I have maintained that in spite of these difficulties, moral progress sometimes occurs. I have also claimed that moral philosophy is not the principal vehicle through which morally progressive insights are broadly disseminated. Critics

who share the conception of moral expertise defended by Slote and Calhoun will wonder exactly how, on my view, the broad dissemination of moral insight occurs. My answer is that only socially and politically engaged moral inquirers – which moral philosophy rarely produces – can effectively disseminate new moral insights in ways that are likely to produce moral progress in social practices (See Moody-Adams 1994a; 1997b, 196–204; cf. 1997b, 184–86). Thus I second Michael Walzer’s contention that moral progress in social institutions results from “workmanlike” social criticism and political struggle, not from “paradigm-shattering” philosophical speculation (1987, 27).

Engaged moral inquirers have four essential characteristics. First, they must have a committed personal engagement with the everyday consequences of the moral arguments they advance. This engagement often develops in response to the personal experience of hardships traceable to the moral shallowness of some current practice. But it may sometimes result from moral outrage at the hardships suffered by others. Second, engaged moral inquirers must be willing to assume great personal risk in order to advance the causes they advocate. Such willingness is typically an unavoidable consequence of the seriousness of their engagement with the cause. But, as I argue more fully below, advocacy can be genuinely moral only if the advocate attempts to minimize its risks to others – especially to unwitting or innocent others. That is, deliberately exposing others to risks of great harm can be moral only as an extraordinary measure of last resort. Thus, the third characteristic of the engaged moral inquirer is a commitment to the idea that the deliberate exposure of others to risk is allowable only as a morally necessary – though regrettable – means for combating dangerously shallow or regressive practices.¹⁶ Fourth, engaged moral inquirers must be willing to rely on methods not typically recognized by philosophers as methods of rational persuasion – including offering their own lives and practice as moral examples and relying on nonviolent public protests and demonstrations.

Many contemporary moral philosophers will agree with emotivists like Stevenson, who claims in *Ethics and Language* that nonviolent civil disobedience and reliance on personal example are forms of “non-rational persuasion” (1944). But it is far from clear that the evidence justifies this stance. Many of us are familiar with Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in which King argues that participants in the civil rights movement sought, by their protest, to create a “tension in the mind” – an intellectual “crisis” – through which segregationists might be compelled to acknowledge inconsistencies between the liberal democratic ideal of equality and the reality of legally sanctioned segregation and discrimination (1964, 79). Less familiar is the fact that segregationists sometimes complained of “violence”

¹⁶ The failure to understand the category of actions that are morally necessary, but regrettable, is the source of many serious misunderstandings of the nature of moral conflict. See Moody-Adams 1997b, 121–30.

allegedly wrought by nonviolent protests embodying these goals.¹⁷ How should we understand such complaints, since there is ample evidence that the only violence involved was the violence too frequently directed against the protesters? In my view, these false reports of violence are best explained as unreflective reactions to the experience of being required to confront something from which one has spent a lifetime averting one's glance (Moody-Adams 1994a, 298–303). More precisely, the “violence” which some Southern whites claimed to find in nonviolent protest was simply the experience of being rationally compelled to confront the inconsistency between segregation and the ideals of American political morality.

But nonviolent direct action is only one of a vast array of methods at our disposal to express, reveal, or reiterate the failure of some pattern of situational meanings, and existing moral understandings, to survive rational scrutiny. A work of art, for instance, may reiterate the relevance of underappreciated facts – much as Picasso's *Guernica* reiterated the horrors of war and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reiterated the shameful of slavery. A memoir or an ethnography may confirm the irrationality of certain emotions and affective associations – much as nineteenth-century slave narratives confirmed the irrationality of the notion that slavery might be an expression of “concern” for the slaves. First-person social experience may force us to confront inconsistencies in belief and practice that we would otherwise ignore or deny. A retired military officer whose daughter is sexually harassed as she completes an officers' training program may be forced, for the first time, to admit the inconsistency between democratic principles and sexual discrimination. The tendency of such experiences to deepen moral understanding informs the growing trend toward “service learning” in secondary and postsecondary education. As we should expect – if my view is right – none of these methods will teach fundamentally new moral concepts. But they provide unmatched opportunities for experience and rational reflection which help us articulate the requirements for a sufficiently deep appreciation of the meaning of our existing moral concepts. In the end, they may be rationally compelling intimations of a moral truth that transcends human experience – though one need not have such Platonic sensibilities to recognize the value of the many methods of argument available to the engaged moral inquirer.

I have offered a list of quite varied methods for revealing the shortcomings of situational meanings and existing moral understandings. Many philosophers will want to resist my claims about the rationality of these methods – methods which generally do more to show than to say what is deficient about situational meanings and moral understandings. But this is precisely why, in my view, philosophy is unlikely to produce many engaged moral inquirers, or to have much direct influence in broadly disseminating the insights most likely to produce moral progress.

¹⁷ Such encounters are depicted in the 1960 sit-ins at lunch counters in Louisiana, in the documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, Part I.

Being a moral philosopher is not intrinsically incompatible with being an engaged moral inquirer. If we are to believe Plato's account – as I do – Socrates may be one of the purest examples of such an inquirer. Moreover, the theoretical underpinnings of the American civil rights movement owe as much to the Platonic Socrates as to Gandhi's views or to the Judeo-Christian religious commitments of many of its participants. Still further, utilitarians such as Bentham and Mill might well qualify as perfect examples of moral philosophers who were also engaged moral inquirers. But it seems clear that contemporary academic moral philosophy is unlikely to produce many engaged moral inquirers. Even when its practitioners display the appropriate levels of personal engagement, and a willingness to assume personal risk, they are typically bound by too narrow a conception of the methods of rational persuasion, and indeed of rationality itself.

Thus my notion of the engaged moral inquirer must not be confused with Richard Posner's concept of the "moral entrepreneur," defended as part of his recent attack on "card-carrying academic moralists" (1998b, 1822–33). In "The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory," Posner argues that contemporary academic moral philosophy lacks the "intellectual vitality" and the "emotional power" to have any influence in the processes which produce genuine changes in moral belief and practice (1998a, 1691, cf. 1638). Such changes, he claims, are always the work of "moral entrepreneurs," who understand the challenge of "selling" their view and who meet that challenge by mixing appeals to self-interest with emotional appeals that "bypass our rational calculating faculty." Indeed he claims that the most influential moral entrepreneurs are those with a mastery of techniques of nonrational persuasion that are not part of the "normal equipment of scholars" (1998a, 1667). Posner acknowledges that the moral entrepreneurs make arguments. Yet he insists that the influence of the moral entrepreneurs is never a function of the quality of their arguments, but of their skill at nonrational or irrational persuasion (1998a, 1667).

There is an unexpected element of truth in Posner's concept of the moral entrepreneur, for it rightly suggests a link between moral advocacy and risk. Just as the entrepreneur in business (ideally) assumes a series of risks in order to sell a particular product or service, the engaged moral inquirer assumes extraordinary personal risk in order to carry out her advocacy. Civil rights workers who were murdered for advocating racial equality in the American south, like Chinese students killed for their advocacy of democracy in Tiananmen Square, were not performing some postmodern experiment in performativity or trying out some Rortean redescription. They were risking their lives in order to promote moral progress (Moody-Adams 1994b, 1997b).

Yet Posner's conception remains deeply problematic, because it is rooted in a fundamentally implausible skepticism about morality and moral progress. Posner believes that any committed advocacy of social change can be characterized as moral advocacy, and thus he never acknowledges the plausibility of the idea of moral progress as something distinct from social change. In keeping

with this skepticism, Posner classifies Hitler as a moral entrepreneur – one who sought to narrow the bounds of altruism, he claims, in contrast to figures like Bentham or Jesus who sought to expand them (1998a, 1667). But the engaged moral inquirer, as I have argued, seeks to minimize deliberate risks to others – and believes that extreme coercion and state-sanctioned violence are justified only as regrettable last resorts. Few eras in human history have involved more coercion and violence, and more deliberate exposure of others to death and other grave personal harm, than the era of Nazism. Thus, on any plausible understanding of the notion, no one whose advocacy supported or furthered the aims of that era can properly be deemed a moral advocate.

Philosophers who make normative moral claims can indeed be moral advocates – though their moral advocacy will never be the main engine of moral progress. Further, even the advocacy of engaged moral inquirers seldom directly brings about moral progress in social practices. The task of embodying some new moral insight in social practices involves the slow and steady work of persons (unlike most philosophers and even most engaged moral advocates) whose actions can directly reshape social practices and institutions. Political leaders and policymakers; educators, parents, and religious leaders; doctors and hospital administrators; lawyers and judges – these are the sorts of people who must work to reshape everyday social life in accordance with a newly deepened grasp of some fundamental moral concept. Engaged moral inquirers sometimes function well in these roles, but the painstaking work of trying to reshape everyday social life tends to be incompatible with the engagement, and the tolerance of personal risk, required to constitute an effective moral advocate. This means that engaged moral inquirers who undertake this work must frequently divorce their activities as moral advocates from their efforts to reshape everyday life. Sometimes they must simply give up, altogether, their activities as advocates.

Those who are well placed to reshape social life must usually rely on the method of trial and error in carrying out various morally progressive social experiments. But social experiments may be incomplete, and their results in one domain may be improperly linked to relevant results in another.¹⁸ Still further, social experiments undertaken in the name of progress may go wrong – sometimes even producing results antithetical to the progressive moral insights which initially underwrote them.¹⁹ The complexity of social experiments undertaken in the name of moral progress thus provides further reasons for adopting a cautious optimism about the possibility of moral progress.

Yet advocacy conducted within the conventional bounds of contemporary moral philosophy may nonetheless be quite effective in giving shape to the

¹⁸ The reason some women seem to feel “betrayed” by the feminist movement, for instance, seems to be a function of the gap between changes in attitudes about women’s roles and changes in social institutions sufficient to allow women to comfortably assume new roles (Moody-Adams 1997a).

¹⁹ Some analysts of the American civil rights movement would suggest just such an account of its aftermath.

right kinds of social experiments. Moreover, as Martha Nussbaum has recently suggested, there are several routes by which philosophers may influence social practice – from political activity to service on hospital ethics boards, as well as in advisory and consulting roles in various government agencies (1998, 1792). But philosophical moral advocacy is also important for its capacity to inspire engaged moral inquirers, and the American civil rights movement is just one recent example of how important this inspiration can be. Posner's dismissive attack on the intellectual vitality of moral philosophy is simply inconsistent with the facts of philosophy's obvious – though admittedly complex – influence in the moral dimensions of human life.

IV. Moral Progress and Moral Ignorance

I have claimed that the main engine of moral progress is the advocacy of engaged moral inquirers – mainly because of the richness and complexity of their conceptions of rationality and rational persuasion. I have also described five argumentative strategies available to the engaged moral inquirer seeking to change the situational meanings of particular phenomena and to deepen our grasp of the meaning of moral concepts. It may be wondered about the compatibility of this account with arguments I have made elsewhere that the main obstacle to moral progress in social practices is the tendency to widespread affected ignorance of what can and should already be known.

But I have always maintained that one cannot assimilate a newly deepened grasp of a moral concept unless one is first willing to see oneself and one's place in the world in a new light (Moody-Adams 1990, 1994a, 1997b). Thus, in describing the five argumentative strategies available to the engaged moral inquirer, I note that none of the first four can be effective without the fifth. That is, the first four strategies will not work unless the moral inquirer is able to break down her audience's resistance to self-scrutiny. Such efforts can be successful, moreover, only if the arguments of others can get us to admit that some unscrutinized element of our practice or belief is not quite as immune to criticism as we hope to claim. We frequently avoid self-scrutiny because we expect it to yield insights that we are not prepared to obey. Yet the moral importance of self-scrutiny is the one aspect of moral truth, in my view, that is clearly accessible to all. Moreover, it is accessible as soon as we become capable of sustained self-reflection, and whatever the level of sophistication in our grasp of other moral notions.²⁰

It is true that the efforts of the engaged moral inquirer are often indispensable to our attempts to give direction and constructive comment to our moral inquiry. But we do not need engaged moral inquirers to tell us the things we

²⁰ Anyone who learns a natural human language learns how to say “no” and thus how to consider that things might be other than they are. Further, anyone who learns how to affirm or deny a particular self-conception – to say “yes, this is who I am,” or “no, that's not the sort of person I am” – learns how to engage in self-scrutiny.

most need to know in order to be moral. We already know that for any being capable of critical scrutiny, the life worth living must be an examined life – even though we frequently find ways to ignore this central element of moral truth (Moody-Adams 1994a, 1997b). Moreover, the practice of ordinary persons bears out the truth of this view. For example, when we attempt to teach our children to be moral, we count on them to learn how to examine their conduct. Given the unpredictable complexity of human life, and the fact that moral situations are rarely exactly reproduced, unless children learn to be sufficiently self-critical, they will eventually be unable to follow the right examples, or to appreciate and conform to the right rules, or both. Thus parents or caretakers who fail to encourage self-examination – as some, unfortunately, do – will simply fail as moral educators.

A commitment to the examined life is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition of the life worth living. Moreover, an indefinite number of more specific moral commitments are embedded in the ideal of the examined life. One task of constructive moral inquiry is to try to articulate some of these commitments. Still further, since the whole truth about morality is complex, reasonable and defensible efforts to articulate that truth may differ in important and serious dimensions. In particular, not all defensible answers to the question about how to lead a human life worth living will give precisely the same emphasis to self-scrutiny. Yet the ideal of the examined life is essential to a proper grasp of the moral concept of righteousness – a concept which, along with justice and compassion, is surely among the fundamental moral concepts. The practices of human beings – in every culture and in every era – consistently reveal the morally foundational role of self-examination (Moody-Adams 1997b).

All human beings have at their disposal important nonmoral knowledge that underscores the moral importance of self-scrutiny. Some of the most important nonmoral knowledge, in this regard, is the knowledge of human fallibility – particularly knowledge of the possibility that any human practice could always be wrong. Even if we were to concede the possibility that some person claiming divine (and infallible) inspiration might be correct in doing so, it would still be an inescapable fact that the content of any such inspiration must be interpreted if it is to be applied in human life. Further, any humanly generated interpretation – even of a presumably infallible inspiration – may always be morally wrong – or may be applied in a morally condemnable fashion. This is why human beings have compelling reasons to be cautious about the kinds of practices and institutions they support. Practices which deliberately main, kill, or drastically limit the central freedoms of other persons are especially dangerous. Indeed this is why social changes which minimize or eliminate extremely coercive or violent practices are so frequently instances of moral progress: such changes embody a clear appreciation of the moral weight of self-examination and its moral and, ultimately, political implications.

The link between the capacity for self-scrutiny and the possibility of moral

education is a close one – so close, in fact, that it is far too easily taken for granted. When this happens, we may come to believe that it is possible to lead moral lives by rejecting self-scrutiny and eschewing any associated critical reflection on ongoing social practices and our participation in those practices. Thus in *Rationalism in Politics*, Michael Oakshott contends that once a society has developed sufficiently complex moral habits, we can only endanger historically established social equilibrium by encouraging critical scrutiny of our practices and of our places in those practices (1991). Yet such claims virtually provide a recipe for self-righteousness and complacency. As such, they are frequently a source of moral shallowness and morally regressive practices and beliefs.

When we relinquish self-righteousness long enough to consider the possible shortcomings of our practices, the insights of an engaged moral inquirer may be indispensable to defensibly reinterpreting the relevant moral concepts. Sometimes they may, primarily, yield a deeper understanding of why (and how) a current interpretation is, in fact, morally sufficient. Yet the engaged inquirer's assistance will not be a matter of inventing or discovering fundamentally new moral concepts or categories. This is why Bernard Williams was right to maintain, as he did in *Shame and Necessity*, that the ancient Greeks didn't need any new moral ideas – certainly not the Enlightenment ideal of equality, for instance – to be able to recognize and condemn the moral wrong of ancient slavery (1993, 124, 137).²¹ Still further, for all the alleged radicalism of Catherine MacKinnon's feminism, by her own account, her scrutiny of contemporary legal and social practices concerning women is an attempt to show that "women are human beings in truth but not in social reality" (1987; cf. Moody-Adams 1994b, 217–18). This should not surprise us. Morally constructive feminism is not a matter of producing "new moral categories" to attempt to break the conceptual bounds of "normal moral contexts," as Calhoun has claimed.²² Instead, it involves reiterating the very simple point that women ought to be included within the scope of existing moral categories which have been wrongly interpreted to exclude them.

Of course, people do not always willingly relinquish self-righteousness. They frequently resist critical scrutiny of social practices – and their roles in sustaining them – because they fear that such scrutiny may issue in moral claims they are not prepared to accept. But, again, the solution to this problem is not a (futile) search for totally "new" moral ideas. Instead, we must encourage the development of moral "gadflies." Moral gadflies are those persons and groups who are willing to work, sometimes at great personal risk, to generate intellectual crises in our understanding of morality – crises that

²¹ I am far less sympathetic, however, with Williams's claims about why they didn't actually condemn slavery. See Williams 1993, 112–28; cf. Moody-Adams 1997b, 85–93.

²² Thus I reject Rorty's analysis of MacKinnon's views in Rorty 1991a. My account of morally constructive feminism helps explain how feminist moral commitments can be embedded in the practice even of women who claim not to be feminists. For further discussion of this point, see Moody-Adams 1997a.

can be resolved only by serious self-scrutiny and, ultimately, by genuine social change. Yet when the efforts of these moral gadflies are unsuccessful, the effort to realize moral progress in social practices may sometimes demand a judicious reliance on morally necessary – though regrettable – forms of organized coercion. Neither the engaged moral inquirer, nor the society concerned to assimilate her insights, can afford to forget this.

Finally, we should reject the poorly substantiated idea that socially widespread failures to develop sufficiently deep moral understandings “must” be explained by some sort of culturally or historically generated “inability” to see what morality required (Moody-Adams 1994a, 1997b).²³ What we must do in order to understand socially widespread moral failures is simply to acknowledge that there is frequently a dearth of incentives to scrutinize social practices.²⁴ We must also admit the obvious fact that significant moral progress in human practices commonly has less to do with desires to promote the realization of progressive moral insights than with considerations of social expediency and enlightened self-interest (Asch 1952, 380; cf. Moody-Adams 1997b, 96). But this suggests that it is possible to provide incentives to accept morally progressive practices without first deepening moral understandings. Moreover, when this possibility is realized in practice, the pace of moral progress in practices will sometimes outstrip the pace of moral progress in beliefs.²⁵ But this is not a reason for moral pessimism. On the contrary – given how easy it is to ignore the moral demands of self-scrutiny – the fact that progress in individual beliefs may be a consequence of prior progress in social practices is the most compelling reason we have to be optimistic about the possibility of moral progress.

Department of Philosophy
Sycamore 026
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47408
USA
mmoodyad@indiana.edu

²³ This is a widespread view. One of the most intriguing formulations, defended by a stalwart moral realist, is defended by Nicholas Sturgeon in his “Moral Explanations” (1988).

²⁴ This phenomenon is especially important. In some instances, even blameworthy ignorance can be forgivable if, say, one’s social circumstances provide extremely limited opportunities for reflection and debate (on this, see Moody-Adams 1991). Moreover, there are always degrees of responsibility for the collective moral failures of an entire society. Aristotle had more opportunities for debate and reflection than the average free Greek; thus, his support of slavery is more condemnable than that of the average free Greek. Similarly, Jefferson had more opportunities for debate and reflection about the morality of keeping slaves, and about the moral and intellectual worth of people of African descent, than many of his compatriots. Jefferson’s willingness to keep slaves, and to derogate their abilities and worth, was thus more condemnable than the same tendencies in his compatriots.

²⁵ This is especially true, I would argue, in contemporary American race relations and in gender relations as well.

References

- Asch, Solomon. (1952). *Social Psychology*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Bentham, Jeremy. ([1789] 1948). *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*. New York: Hafner Press.
- Broad, C. D. ([1930] 1979). *Five Types of Ethical Theory*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bury, J. B. (1960). *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth*. New York: Dover.
- Calhoun, Cheshire. (1989). "Responsibility and Reproach." *Ethics*, 99, 389–406.
- Cooper, David. (1978). "Moral Relativism." In *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 3, *Studies in Ethical Theory*, edited by Peter French, Theodore Uehling, and Howard Wettstein. Morris: University of Minnesota Press.
- Duncker, Karl. (1939). "Ethical Relativity?" *Mind*, 48, 39–57.
- French, Peter. (1992). *Responsibility Matters*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.
- Isaacs, Tracy. (1997). "Cultural Context and Moral Responsibility." *Ethics*, 107, 670–84.
- Kant, Immanuel. ([1785] 1964). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by H. J. Paton. New York: Harper and Row.
- King, Martin Luther. (1964). "Letter from Birmingham Jail." In *Why We Can't Wait*. New York: New American Library.
- MacKinnon, Catherine. (1987). "Not by Law Alone." In *Feminism Unmodified*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mill, John Stuart. (1979). *Utilitarianism*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett.
- Moody-Adams, Michele. (1990). "On the Alleged Methodological Infirmity of Ethics." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 27, 225–35.
- . (1991). "On the Old Saw That Character Is Destiny." In *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology*, edited by Owen Flanagan and A. O. Rorty. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.
- . (1994a). "Culture, Responsibility and Affected Ignorance." *Ethics*, 104, 291–309.
- . (1994b). "Theory, Practice, and the Contingency of Rorty's Irony." *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 25, 209–27.
- . (1997a). "Feminism by Any Other Name." In *Feminism and Families*, edited by Hilde Nelson. London: Routledge.
- . (1997b). *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- . (1998). "The Virtues of Nussbaum's Essentialism." *Metaphilosophy*, 29, no. 4 (October): 263–72.
- Nussbaum, Martha. (1998). "Still Worthy of Praise." *Harvard Law Review*, 111, no. 7 (May): 1776–95.
- Oakeshott, Michael. (1991). "The Tower of Babel." In *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Expanded edition, Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Press.

- Platts, Mark. (1988). "Moral Reality." In *Essays on Moral Realism*, edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Posner, Richard. (1998a). "The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory." *Harvard Law Review*, 111, no. 7 (May): 1638–1709.
- . (1998b). "Reply to Critics of 'The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory.'" *Harvard Law Review*, 111, no. 7 (May): 1796–1823.
- Rawls, John. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Raz, Joseph. (1994). "Moral Change and Social Relativism." In *Cultural Pluralism and Moral Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. (1991a). "Feminism and Pragmatism." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 30, no. 2: 231–66.
- . (1991b). "Solidarity or Objectivity." In *Philosophical Papers, Vol. I: Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Singer, Peter. (1979). *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Slote, Michael. (1982). "Is Virtue Possible?" *Analysis*, 42, 70–76.
- Stevenson, C. L. (1944). *Ethics and Language*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Stocker, Michael. (1990). *Plural and Conflicting Values*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sturgeon, Nicholas. (1988). "Moral Explanations." In *Essays in Moral Realism*, edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Walzer, Michael. (1987). *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. (1993). *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wong, David B. (1992). "Coping with Moral Conflict and Ambiguity." *Ethics*, 102, 763–84.