Moral Progress Without Moral Realism

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Abstract: This paper argues that we can acknowledge the existence of moral truths and moral progress without being committed to moral realism. Rather than defending this claim through the more familiar route of the attempted analysis of the ontological commitments of moral claims, I show how moral belief change for the better shares certain features with theoretical progress in the natural sciences. Proponents of the better theory are able to convince their peers that it is formally and empirically superior to its rivals, and the better theory may be promoted to the status of the truth. Yet there is no 'decision-procedure' for ethics any more than there is for molecular biology. The betterness of true theories can be grasped through what I term 'undirectional narratives' of progress. And while there are true moral claims and perhaps numerous moral truths yet to be discovered, we should reject currently popular forms of moral realism with bivalence. Some moral claims lend themselves to the construction of fully reversible, bi-directional narratives and are likely neither true nor false.

Introduction

Moral progress implies, in the first instance, a change in circumstances for the better: progress occurs when, to quote Dale Jamieson, 'a subsequent state of affairs is [morally] better than a preceding one, or when right acts become increasingly prevalent.'[1] Usually, such improvements in circumstances are not only preceded but are also followed by improvements in the moral beliefs held by members of a population, or in their characters, or what might be called their moral personalities, for a change in circumstances for the morally better is likely to increase the number of persons in a population who recognize the new circumstances as morally better.

The notion of moral progress is central to moral epistemology. There is a widespread assumption that its very possibility furnishes the basis of a transcendental argument in favour of moral realism. Yet there has

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1 Jamieson (2002) p. 20.

been little or no direct discussion of whether the existence of moral progress actually gives realists a dialectical advantage. This is surprising because the relationship between the fact of scientific progress and the tenability of scientific realism has been vigorously debated, and because the analogies and disanalogies between knowledge of nature and knowledge of norms, between science and ethics, have received a good deal of attention.[2] In this paper, I take to heart Alan Gewirth's important point that it is methodologically curious to regard science normatively, but morals in a positivistic spirit.[3] I will assume that there has been moral progress in the same way that there has been scientific progress (though perhaps not artistic progress, or not as much) and argue that a viable notion of moral truth is better elicited from the dynamics of theory change than from the metaphysics of propositional content. A viable meta-ethical position cannot be derived from the philosophical analysis of *single* moral beliefs any more than a viable theory of science can be derived from considering the ontological commitments of the proposition that water is composed of two hydrogen molecules and one oxygen molecule.

The paper is laid out as follows. In Section 1, I briefly rationalise treating moral claims as theoretical conjectures that face the tribunal of reason and experience and that may be accepted or rejected accordingly. In Section 2, I discuss some pertinent similarities between moral and scientific beliefs. In Section 3, I introduce the notions of unidirectionality and bi-directionality in belief-pairs. In Section 4, I point to the role of exemplary narratives in characterising scientific progress. In Section 5, I argue that the epistemological notions of moral truth and moral progress can be uncoupled from the metaphysics of realism, as C.S. Peirce argued was the case for scientific truth and scientific progress, and I conclude with some suggestions for expressivists.

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2 See especially Gewirth (1960) and Kitcher (2003).

3 Roughly, a moral positivist regards any belief whatsoever about the permissibility of injury as fully moral, while a normative scientist regards only some beliefs about nature as fully scientific. See Gewirth (1960).

1. Moral Claims as Theoretical Conjectures

The term 'theory' in ethics is usually applied to an overarching general principle, such as the greatest happiness criterion of rightness employed by utilitarians, or Rawls' difference principle, or Kant's non-universalisability criterion for moral wrongness, taken together with their additional posits, such as hedonistic motivation or universal human dignity or free-will. Moral theories are seen as 'abstract structures that sort agents, actions or outcomes, into appropriate categories'—the categories of right and wrong, vicious and virtuous, permitted and forbidden and so on.[4] The moral feeling that typically accompanies the utterance 'That was a wicked thing to do!', the emotions of shame and moral admiration that accompany certain judgements, are so phenomenologically vivid that the temptation is strong to treat first-order moral claims as reports of immediate experience. Some philosophers propose that they express moral intuitions;[5] others treat them as the perceptual reports of qualified observers.[6] Yet there is good reason to treat first-order moral judgements as theoretical conjectures, analogous to 'Oxygen is the principle of combustion,' while recognizing that, in the concrete contexts in which moral thoughts are entertained or expressed, they may (but need not) have an emotional immediacy that may (though it need not) be lacking in discussions of chemistry and physics.

The distinction between observation-statements and theory-statements is familiar from the general philosophy of science, where theoretical claims are said to refer to entities and processes that are not directly evident to the senses, that could not be perceived to exist or to occur by an observer unequipped with special instruments, including optical, measuring, and sampling devices, or by employing criteria that do not belong to our folkways. At the same time, the distinction does not allow for ready sorting of individual statements into one category or the

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4 Jamieson (1993), pp. 476-487; quotation on p. 477.
5 See Dancy (1993).
6 For an explicitly 'phenomenological' approach, see McDowell (1988).

other.[7] (Consider the difficulty of deciding whether 'Cats are mammals' or 'The sun is hotter than any fire on earth' is theory or observation.) But the difficulty of applying the distinction everywhere and anywhere will not affect my argument, insofar as I intend only to develop certain analogies between value-claims and the sorts of claims to be met with in theoretical expositions in the natural sciences.

To believe that oxygen is the principle of combustion is to hold a nexus of logically-ordered beliefs about chemical entities; or at least to be following or imitating some causally-related source that does hold such a nexus; the statement is interpretable only within a wider theory of chemistry. Similarly, the belief expressed by the claim 'Capital punishment is wrong' serves as a kind of proxy for a nexus of connected beliefs regarding punishment, criminality, and killing and their causal relationships. The conjecture that capital punishment is wrong has several rivals to contend with: the conjecture that capital punishment is morally permissible as well as the conjecture that it is obligatory for certain crimes. These theoretical conjectures too stand proxy for entire sets of beliefs about the awfulness of certain crimes, about desert, deterrence, and other matters. My conjecture that torturing cats is wrong is dependent on my beliefs about what actually happens when a cat is being tortured, and it is in competition with the rival conjecture that torturing cats is plain good fun because cats are insensate machines, or because the feelings of cats do not matter. It is the isolated moral statement that is considered truth-apt, but behind it is a theory about the way the world is and what ought to happen in it.

The process of theory-change in natural science can be studied from many angles, sociologically, as well as in terms of the cognitive processes of inquirers; as involving the exercise of group rationality or personal breakthroughs.[8] In order to replace its predecessor, a theory need not fit

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7 The distinction is complicated by the existence of a potential third category, that of the 'data'—observations are expressed in technical language that contributes to the confirmation of theories that explain the phenomena. See Bogen and Woodward (1988).
8 Kuhn (1970); also Laudan (1977).

the available data better in every respect, but it must do so in some respects in order to be selected, and it must enhance capabilities, allowing for prediction, or control, or even techniques of manufacture, that were not possible, or that were not as easy or successful, with the old theory. This enhancement of our powers, the 'success of science' is sometimes taken as an argument for scientific realism—for an unyielding reality is what makes our predictions and plans succeed or fail,[9] and how should we explain our practical successes if we have no cognitive access to reality? But the existence of scientific facts independent of human cognition does not explain why the 'success of science' in enabling us to predict the course of the world and to change it is not a miracle. Rather, as Van Fraassen points out, *we* select the theories we can use to good effect from amongst their less successful rivals.[10] The usefulness of a full scientific theory—one composed of multiple claims referring to normally invisible entities and processes—in enabling us to predict, explain, and alter nature may become as familiar and evident as the usefulness of a theory of everyday middle-sized objects—for example, our theory of the parts of a car and how to drive it to fulfil our chosen purposes. In such cases, we typically cannot help but believe that our theory 'corresponds to' or 'describes' a reality independent of human cognition. Scientific practice can be said to aim at 'describing the real structure of the world we live in'[11] insofar as it aims at delivering this state of confidence and conviction to us. But whether a theory is taken as a set of sentences or as a collection of 'thoughts,' it is difficult to see how it can match the reality of, or constitute the uniquely true description of, the way things are with a car or an atom, or any other real thing, or collection of, or system of, real things.[12]

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9 Ramsey (1978).
10 Van Fraassen (1980), pp. 39-40.
11 The phrase is Godfrey-Smith's (2003), p. 174. Godfrey-Smith rejects the notion of a picturing relation between a theory and the world, but he remains committed to retaining the notion of theories as potentially accurate representations (Ibid., pp.188-9).
12 As Frege recognized, neither a thought nor a sentence can be a match for a segment of reality, and Frege unlike Russell and Moore was never inclined to regard 'facts' as entities belonging to the world. See Dummett (1993), pp. 153-4.

A scientific theory is deemed true or held for true when and only when further significant theoretical progress in a given domain is deemed overwhelmingly unlikely. In this regard, truth is always a hostage to fortune. Accordingly, while future upsets are possible, because we never reach the end of inquiry, most of the vast number of propositions to be found in textbooks of natural science can be agreed to be simply and uncontroversially, though theoretically, true, and to be known to some human beings. One should accept these claims and perhaps believe them. Even if the epistemic agent who knows that there are electrons cannot spell out the features of the atomic theory of matter in detail, she knows that there are experts who can, and the epistemic status of her claim is related to the causal chain of transmissions that resulted in her belief.

2. What Makes a Moral Conjecture Epistemically Acceptable?

Consider the application of these familiar points to the problem of moral knowledge. If the parallel with theories in natural science were to hold, the true moral conjectures would be the ones we have selected, through a determinate process of inquiry, for their puzzle-solving ability, their empirical adequacy, and for the enhancement of our capabilities—prediction, control, manufacture—that they offer. Some selected theories would then pass into the realm of dogma, assumed in the construction and improvement of laws and institutions, globally disseminated from the locale of their first discovery, and taught to the young as moral truths ineligible for revision. But this suggestion seems deeply problematic. There are no readily-identifiable expert communities who possess and disseminate moral information. Even widely accepted moral claims like 'Capital punishment is wrong' and 'Torturing cats is reprehensible' do not appear to solve any puzzles. Nor do they appear to enhance capabilities, allowing for prediction and control, or enhancing our manufacturing capacities; rather, moral progress typically mandates certain sacrifices and adjustments, and this

perhaps explains why moral truths are not eagerly taken up.[13]

Yet moral dilemmas are puzzling, sometimes deeply puzzling, and moral confusion puts moral agents into an answer-seeking mode. Moral inquiry, as Peirce recognized of inquiry generally, presupposes an initial state of puzzlement that is replaced when the inquiry is successful by a sense of conviction and clarity: 'The sole object of inquiry is the settlement of opinion.'[14] Moral inquiry in particular presupposes considerations pulling the inquirer or inquirers in opposing directions; it begins in a context of what H.P. Grice in turn called doubt-or-denial.[15] 'Doubt,' according to Peirce, ' is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief, while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else.'[16] The inquirer faces a situation or event, the moral status of which is in question, or she confronts a person whose character and intentions present themselves in an ambiguous light. She must decide how to act, or merely what to think. In deliberating, she tries to meet objections whose force she is disposed to concede, or which are at least recognized as potential obstacles to belief. Further, every moral claim confronts a data-set, a set of facts about experiences, about habits and customary practices, and about causal consequences, that partially determines its acceptability. An epistemic agent comes to accept *P*, where *P* is some well-formed proposition of morality, because he incorporates new information into his representation of the world, or because he comes to attend to features of the world he did not notice or consider significant earlier, and because his preferences change as a result. While his having a better moral theory does not enable the agent to predict the future, or control the

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13 The very difficulty of fitting the pursuit of moral knowledge into available frameworks of inquiry seems to moral realists only to confirm their sacred status. Thus Nagel (1979), Fn 5 pp. 113-4: 'To assume that only what has to be included in the best explanatory picture of the world is real, is to assume that there are no irreducibly normative truths.'
14 Peirce (1992), I: 114-5.
15 Grice (1961).
16 Peirce (1992) I: 114.

behaviour of others, it does enhance his capabilities in the sense I will now try to explain.

Existing accounts of moral progress in the philosophical literature cite, as marks of belief change for the better, the shift from subjective to more objective perspectives, or from indifference to greater empathy with others, or both. Macklin,[17] for example, proposes that moral progress implies the application of either the 'principle of humanity' or 'the principle of humaneness'. The first mandates less differentiation between people based on sex, race, wealth and other natural and social attributes and recognizes a common core of human rights and privileges. The second prohibits the infliction of excessive pain on others and is exemplified in the rejection of war and conquest, circuses, torture, and public hangings, as well as in all the small modifications to the law that ease the mental sufferings of individuals. Jamieson[18] adds respect for nature, which extends both the notion of rights and that of prohibitions to the nonhuman world. But what links these alleged markers of progress? Philip Kitcher suggests that the function of morality is 'the enhancement of social cohesion via the amplification of psychologically altruistic dispositions,' together with the expansion of possible social roles for individuals to adopt.[19] The chief difficulty with this characterization is that its second clause seems to have been added as an afterthought, on the grounds that social cohesion may well be served by rigid assignation to social roles in ways that come to be recognized as immoral. Yet while the expansion of social roles may be a criterion of moral progress and a worthy moral aim, it is difficult to see that it is the *function* of morality.

An alternative proposal which links the two desiderata is that the function of morality is to reduce the harm that is perpetrated in the world through advantage taking by the powerful. Advantage-taking by the powerful is by definition injurious to the weak and frequently

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17 Macklin (1977).
18 Jamieson (2002) pp. 226 ff.
19 Kitcher (2006) p. 178.

involves restrictions on social roles. Moral progress, accordingly, implies the solution of problems that are outstanding in conflicted dyadic relationships, including social relationships between groups of people, and between individuals. To make moral progress is to increase one's capability to live harmlessly and innocently in the world, as well as to promote productive co-operation and to reduce the number of retaliatory and punitive episodes experienced by oneself and by others.

3. Unidrectional and Bi-directional Belief Pairs

Compare the following examples of scientific theory change:

> 1a) M used to subscribe to the phlogiston theory of combustion, but now she has come to favour the oxygen theory.

> 1b) M used to subscribe to the oxygen theory of combustion, but now she has come to favour the phlogiston account.

1a) is a story of epistemological progress, 1b) of deterioration. Even if M in 1b) can produce reasons that, in her own mind, make phlogiston seem the better theory, and even if there are reasons that, in her own mind, raise doubts about the oxygen theory, she has regressed. M will also have made progress if she had no views about combustion before, but she now believes in the oxygen theory. This will be so, I submit, even if M only believes in the oxygen theory because she saw, out of the corner of her eye and inattentively, something about it on TV. In case the oxygen theory has been deemed true by the inquirers whose role it is to investigate combustion, even a causal chain like this one relating M to the historical process by which scientific commitments shifted earlier is sufficient for its truth to be communicated to her. Watching TV is not a method of discovery in the natural sciences, but there is an epistemological schema for learning about discoveries in natural science from watching television.

The following stories about belief change are analogous:

> 2a) M used to hold that slave labour was sometimes necessary for a society, but now she holds that no one should own slaves.

   2b) M used to hold that no one should own slaves, but now she holds
        that slave labour is sometimes necessary for a society.

Again, even if M acquired her view that no one should own slaves
through a somewhat inattentively watched TV program, her epistemic
state is still better than it was, because it is already known that that is *true*,
and the right kind of causal chain exists.

We believe that if you now judge phlogiston to exist and to explain
combustion, and slavery to be morally acceptable, you ought to be in a
different epistemic state. But what process of confirmation established
these truths? It does not seem helpful merely to say that beliefs about the
principle of combustion were brought into harmony with the data, or
that oxygen came to be perceived as added in combustion rather than
phlogiston as given off. Nor is it illuminating to say that people's
formerly conflicting moral beliefs about the use and abuse of persons
were brought into reflective equilibrium, or that they came to perceive
the property of wrongness in slavery that supervenes on its natural
properties. We can however describe a historically-specific process of
argumentation and appeal to experience that fostered belief-change in
each case. Retrospectively, we can understand this process as a rational
one. But we cannot specify in advance a set of rules that will generate
superior successor theories from existing theories or validate the existing
theories. If we could do so, we would not need the rich and cumbersome
apparatus of the scientific establishment. And if we could settle existing
moral controversies in any era in which they arose simply by applying a
formula, we would not need the equally rich and cumbersome apparatus
of historical experience and social communication.[20]

New data, in the moral case about people's experiences, appear to be
a necessary precondition of progress. The new conjectures are more
empirically adequate than the old, both in the sense of being more

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[20] Homespun moral truths like 'It's bad for big brother to twist little brother's arm' do not
undergo debate, historical testing, and validation. Nevertheless, if true, the claim is the
terminus of an irreversible belief pair, acquired —in the best case—quickly, and in early
childhood.

consistent with observation and also in the sense of enhancing capability: banning slavery is an effective way to prevent certain harms and to open up opportunities. There are however two major difficulties with supposing that moral progress and scientific progress are strictly analogous. First, in the phlogiston-oxygen case, there was an interval in which suspended judgement ought to have been the position adopted by an epistemic agent for lack of evidence and arguments. Before the late 18th Century, acceptance of the oxygen theory would have been impossible or just a lucky guess. Only after some time t does suspended judgement become epistemologically impermissible, and only near that point is scientific knowledge possible. Accordingly, to accuse persons in the early 18th Century of having been scientifically blind in accepting phlogiston seems unduly harsh. The slavery case seems, however, to be different. It is more difficult to say when it was first recognized that slavery was morally unacceptable, or who the main discoverers of this moral truth were, than it is to say when oxygen was first recognized as providing the correct account of combustion and by whom. Further, we readily accuse the ancients of moral blindness; it might seem doubtful that suspended judgement about slavery or the rights of women could ever have been the best epistemic state to be in.

These points do not, however, discredit the analogy. In ancient science, the phenomena of combustion and respiration were not seen as deeply puzzling, and there was no context of doubt-and-denial to provoke inquiry aimed at the settlement of opinion. In early modern times, they were seen as puzzling, and competing theories were developed to explain them. However, because inquirers lacked instruments and mathematical techniques, and because they did not know what experiments to do, or what equations to solve, there was nothing it was better to believe—no theory it was better to accept. Theory-persistence in certain episodes in the history of science, where data were available and inquirers ignored them, appears to us irrational, and personal and political explanations assume prominence in accounts

of why they refused to accept the true view.[21] A parallel situation obtains in moral inquiry; accusations of moral blindness can be well-founded but presuppose the possibility of knowledge. Whether some of Aristotle's philosophical contemporaries *knew*, as opposed to merely believed, that slavery was morally unacceptable, and whether Aristotle himself had access to sufficient data to accept the better theory but ignored it to preserve his sense of class privilege are historical questions that lie beyond the scope of this paper.

4. The Role of Exemplary Narratives

The notion of the 'exemplary narrative' is usefully recruited at this point to help explain how theory-change occurs and is subsequently justified. The 'exemplar,' in Thomas Kuhn's scheme, is a model instance of a scientific discovery to be analyzed, understood, and internalized by a learner.[22] An 'exemplary narrative' is a story which, in the terms of one set of expositors, 'provide[s] opportunities to explore the range of possible actions within a complex set of circumstances, illuminating general historical conditions by showing how individuals find their way through the contingencies of their own situated lives rather than by deriving their actions from preexisting structures.'[23] In the historiography of science, such exemplary narratives recount epistemic agents' engagement with suggestive and decisive experiments, their efforts to solve puzzles and equations, and the social factors facilitating or impeding the evolution of their beliefs. These narratives have a parallel in social history, where it is shown how practices such as criminal

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21 Bloor (1991) maintains that this is a methodological error; personal and political explanations for belief change and belief-persistence ought not to discriminate between true and false. However, when the data seems to permit a conclusion to be drawn, and it is drawn, a political account of why it is drawn is explanatorily superfluous, while it is necessary if the conclusion is not drawn.

22 Kuhn, (1970 Postscript).

23 Cited from the prospectus of a workshop on model systems, cases and exemplary narratives organized at Princeton University in 1999-2001; see the resulting volume by Creager, Lunbeck, and Wise (2007), pp. 13-4.

justice, the organisation of labour, voting rights, the selection of candidates for honours and offices, and taxation were morally improved as societies grappled with the problems they faced.

Individuals are also the subject of exemplary narratives. Biographies and autobiographies recount stories of sacrifice and devotion, and gossip provides explanatory accounts of character change in focal individuals. Fiction is an equally important, perhaps the most important, source of exemplary moral narratives. Some typical narratives of individual moral progress in fiction include the following:

> A person repents of his crimes and accepts punishment for them. (*Crime and Punishment*).

> A person withdraws an emotional claim in order to allow another to get on with his life. (*Daniel Deronda*).

For each such progressive narrative, a regressive narrative could be constructed that described belief-change in the opposite direction: away from fundamental decency, towards criminality, selfishness, self-destruction, or unjustified interference. It would be clear, however, that the story was one of decline. Some belief—pairs, however, lend themselves to bi-directional narratives of progress, for example:

> 3a) N used to believe lying was always wrong, but now he has come to believe that it is sometimes permitted to lie.

> 3b) N used to believe that one is sometimes permitted to lie, but now he has come to believe that lying is always wrong.

N's belief change in 3a) to 'It is permitted sometimes to lie' can be explained through an exemplary narrative in which N comes to be more sensitive to other people's feelings, and better able to understand complex social situations in which truth-telling is pointlessly destructive of human welfare. His belief change in 3b) to 'Lying is always wrong' can also be explained through an exemplary narrative in which he comes to realize that others are hurt by opportunistic lying.

Pacifism and just-war theory also lend themselves to the construction of bi-directional narratives. Some day in the distant future, the precise conditions (if there are any) under which human beings are morally permitted to kill each other may be established. However, this may never happen. It may be the case that, as long as there are human beings, there will be no settled opinion about killing, however committed and passionate individuals are in holding and arguing for their views, and belief-change in either direction from the pacifist conjecture to the just war conjecture can be made out to be equally plausible.

5. Truth and Progress without Realism

One need not be a scientific realist to believe that many widely-held beliefs about natural entities, for example, that there are ghosts, and that powdered rhinoceros horn is an aphrodisiac, are incorrect, and that many new truths about nature will be discovered in the future. Nor need one be a moral realist to believe that many widely held moral beliefs, such as the unacceptability of homosexuality, are false and that some new moral truths will be discovered in the future. Further, at least some tenets associated with moral realism are highly questionable.

Russ Schafer-Landau, the leading contemporary proponent of moral realism, claims first, that there exist moral truths that obtain independently of any preferred perspective;[24] and second, that '[m]oral judgements … when true, are so independently of what any human being, anywhere, in any circumstances whatever, thinks of them.'[25] Third, according to Shafer-Landau, they are true in virtue of the existence of moral facts corresponding to them, not 'by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective.'[26] Fourth, there are moral truths that will never be known, since 'the various epistemic liabilities we carry around with us will almost certainly

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24 Shafer-Landau (2003) p.15.
25 Ibid., p. 2.
26 Ibid., p. 15.

prevent us from ever knowing the whole moral truth.'[27] And finally, fifth, in any moral disagreement, at least one party holds a false belief.[28]

Each of these propositions is doubtful on the dynamic account of the generation of moral truth I have sketched above. For, first, there is a preferred perspective for morality; it is what Stephen Darwall refers to as the 'second-person standpoint.'[29] There would be scientific truths, and even solutions to social co-ordination problems, but no moral truths if there existed a race of beings who inhabited a physically complex world to which they had epistemic access, but whose environment contained no beings who were liable to injury through moral harm and who accordingly resented such injuries.[30] Second, if scientific and moral truths are, as I have argued, ratified conjectures, there are no theoretical truths known to no one. Once the relevant conjectures have been ratified, we can truly claim that it was 'always true' that the earth went round the sun and that the infanticidal prerogatives of Roman fathers were morally wrong. We can even claim, in the counterfactual mode, that they would have been true even if the earth had been annihilated by an asteroid before anyone came to know them. Further, epistemic agents may hold true moral beliefs that they do not know to be true—because they are unable to assist in their ratification and lack the right kind of causal connection to the actual ratifiers. Such unsubstantiated beliefs can nevertheless be good for them to hold, and it can be a good thing that they hold them, insofar as moral beliefs generate morally appropriate as well as inappropriate actions. Fourth, it seems arbitrary to claim that some limiting features of our minds will forever prevent us knowing 'the whole moral truth.' There are no obstacles to moral knowledge presented by limitations of scale or distance of the sort that might make the completion of scientific knowledge of micro-entities or of the cosmos

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27 Ibid., p. 17.
28 Ibid., p. 27
29 Darwall (2006).
30 Gibbard (1992). To be sure, these intellectual beings could work out a theory of what would be morally true were there vulnerable and resentful creatures such as ourselves. This, however, would constitute ratification from within a hypothetical perspective.

impossible. At the same time, the likelihood of ongoing social and technological change suggests that novel moral problems will continue to arise, remaining unsolved, perhaps for generations. Fifth, in some moral disputes, through no fault of the human mind, neither party holds a true or a false belief. This point deserves some emphasis: A hallmark of moral realism is its commitment to bivalence. That is, every well-formed moral claim is either true or false, which implies that, in any sensible moral dispute, whether either knows it or not, one and at most one party has a true belief.[31] In some disputes this is clearly the case. But sometimes disputing parties both fail to know whether *P*, and neither is at risk of performing morally inappropriate actions, actions that will be condemned by a more knowledgeable posterity, because there is no fact of the matter where *P* is concerned. Pacifism and vegetarianism may represent moral commitments that, unlike abolitionism, will never be elevated to the status of truths, lending themselves only to bi-directional narratives of belief change.[32] Questions of loyalty and fidelity in human relations are also the subject of deep moral ambivalence and may be undecidable. Provided we are willing to give a few hostages to fortune, to be condemned by future generations, this ambivalence provides a basis for tolerance, for the sorts of experiments in living that may in the long run increase moral knowledge.[33]

Conclusions

Summarizing, moral truths are the possible endpoints of progressive episodes of theory-change, the termini of unidirectionally-related belief-pairs, and to believe that it will someday be known whether *P*, where *P* is some currently controversial moral proposition, is to be committed to

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31 Shafer-Landau (2003) p. 27.
32 Wilson (2001).
33 Williams (1973) pp. 98ff. Williams argues that in moral dilemmas both options may force an immoral action on an agent. Moral indeterminacy reciprocally implies that two agents with opposing moral views may neither one be doing anything wrong. On moral claims as 'evidence-transcendent', see Wright (1992) p. 140 ff. and Dummett's earlier exploration of truth-value gaps in Dummett (1959).

the proposition that either a narrative will someday exist that can represent *-P* to *P* irreversibly as progress, or else a narrative will exist that can represent *P* to *-P* irreversibly as progress. Truth, as Peirce first proposed, is opinion that is the outcome of certain definite procedures and that has survived certain definite tests. However, as Peirce himself remarked, inquiry cannot *aim* at truth, but only at the dissipation of puzzlement, the resolution of conflict, and the settlement of opinion. Novel moral commitments are adopted, or traditional beliefs maintained, either by individuals or by larger social groups, because they are perceived as consistent with new and old data, and because they are seen as enhancing or maintaining moral capability, the capability to reduce, eliminate or compensate for harm. These commitments are then deemed to correspond to moral facts, which are envisioned as existing independently of the perceptions, beliefs, and preferences of human beings and as having always existed, awaiting discovery. Traditional moral beliefs, like outdated scientific beliefs, may be long retained by a moral community despite anomalous experience—protest, the expression of grievances, the detection of inconsistencies—until a new and powerful conceptual instrument—such a theory of rights, or the utility-criterion—appears to call decisively for their rejection.

In closing let me observe that by relating the notion of moral truth to the notion of progress as unidirectional theory change, we can accommodate what is right about expressivism, while excising its less appealing implications. Expressivists claim that moral utterances express positive or negative attitudes directed towards actions, events, situations and persons, rather than asserting the speaker's beliefs, and as such are not truth-apt. At the same time, they are compelled to recognize that some attitude-sets are not merely preferred to others but actually preferable.[34] This leads to the accusation that they concede some form of moral objectivity but cannot ground it in their semantics.

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34 As Blackburn (1998, pp. 101-2) suggests, in what is effectively a discussion of theory-change; see also Blackburn 1991.

This deficiency can be repaired by recognizing that having a positive moral attitude towards a possible condition of the world—one in which there are no slaves, for example—and towards a possible condition of the world in which this attitude is universally or at least forcefully present—is equivalent to having the moral belief that slavery is wrong.[35] Some, but not all, attitude-sets can be rank-ordered: your attitude and my attitude towards boiled tripe for supper, though different, may be normatively on a par, as need not be the case with our attitudes towards what constitutes a valid inference in informal logic. If the expressivist maintains that moral attitudes, including attitudes towards attitudes, are all normatively on a par, like some tastes and preferences, he seems to face the objection that, in addition to showing an abhorrent deference to torturers and fascists, he has asserted a value judgement that he holds at the same time to be no better than the contrary value judgement. But he need not go down either road. The conjectural account of moral knowledge I have sketched here can accommodate his doubts about the existence of moral facts unconditioned by our moral purposes, unrelated to our preferences and states of background knowledge, obtaining in all possible worlds yet sometimes cognitively inaccessible. It can preserve the intuition that we hold moral beliefs, that they are sometimes true, and that there is accordingly moral progress in the world.[36]

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35 A related point about the convertibility of beliefs and preferences was made earlier by Nagel (1979, p. 114). 'The impersonal badness of pain' is equivalent to a rational preference for pain to stop.
36 The author is very grateful to Jonathan Adler, Alexander Rueger, and an anonymous referee for the journal for their helpful comments. They do not necessarily agree with the author's position.

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