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Three Metaphors Toward a Conception of Moral Change

Abstract

Contemporary moral philosophy is split between an inherently a-historical moral philosophy/theory on the one hand and a growing interest in moral history and the historicity of morality on the other. In between these, the very moments of moral change (and their implications for the possibility of moral realism and moral objectivity) are often left insufficiently attended to and under-theorized. Yet moral change is, arguably, one of the most striking features of present day moral frameworks, and thus one of the main things we need to attend to in moral philosophy. In this paper, I present an account of moral change through the use of three metaphors: the tipping point, the bargaining table and the strong rope. I suggest these as coordinates for the development of a full-blown, historically sensitive conception of morality.

1. Moral Histories and Objectivity

If you search for literature on "moral change" in present day philosophy, the overwhelming majority of texts will be about "moral progress", either of individuals or of societies. (E.g. Moody-Adams 1999, 2016). The other obvious sense of "moral change", that is, change of moral frameworks over time, is amply written about in histories of morality and histories of moral philosophy, but it is in these cases not *thematized as* "moral change." In mainstream moral theory moral change, in the latter sense, is an awkward topic because

it invites enquiries which may potentially undermine the very idea of a unified subject matter for the study of moral philosophy. Not to speak of what it does to the possibility of an, in some sense, objective morality. If moralities change – if the very concepts, grounding principles, metaphysical foundations, world views and ideas of personhood on which they build are subject to radical alteration over time – how can we propose any kind of a-historical analysis of the good and the right, or even, (as meta-ethicists do) of the concepts of morality? So, there is a tension right at the heart of moral philosophy. We have a lively and perhaps growing philosophical interest in the historicity of morality: in addition to Alasdair McIntyre's (1981), Charles Taylor's (1989) and Bernard Williams' (1993) widely read modern classics, there is an upsurge of thematic (philosophical) histories like Jerome B. Schneewind (1998) on autonomy or Mika Ojakangas (2013) on conscience, as well as Ian Hacking's (1995) work on the conditions of possibility of certain moral categories of our time. Yet we also have a staunchly a-historical take on the phenomena of morality in much of mainstream analytic normative and meta-ethics, as well as in the area of ethics after Wittgenstein.[1] In this broad context of moral thought, the nature of the change of moral frameworks over time falls between two stools, and is consequently under-theorized.[2]

The aim of this paper is to discuss three metaphorical points of orientation as groundwork for an account of moral change, which takes seriously our everyday sense of a given morality as something real, binding and non-optional. These are *the tipping point*, *the bargaining table* and *the strong rope*. I focalize the workings of moral change, from yesterday's moral order, through a present morality that we

[1] The claim that ethics after Wittgenstein is a-historical may seem to be disproved by the fact that I rely on both Wittgenstein and philosophers inspired by him to make my argument in this paper. However, although ethics after Wittgenstein offers a fertile starting point for exploring changes in our concepts, values and forms of life, this potential has often been thwarted by a common post-Wittgensteinian idea of philosophy as a *conceptual* endeavor, understood *in contrast to* historical or empirical inquiries.

[2] It should be noted that I am not here concerned with the moral change of individual people against a given moral framework – the question of how we can become morally better, assuming that we have a stable idea of what better would amount to. In this field, we have in recent years seen an upsurge of interest in questions of moral motivation and, especially with the birth of modern virtue ethics, in moral formation.

acknowledge as binding, to a future where many of the things we affirm today will be overturned.

After stating these claims and aims, I need however to retract a bit before moving on. It is clearly not the case that the discrepancy between universality and historical/cultural relativity of moral beliefs and practices has gone unnoticed in contemporary philosophy. For philosophers like Michele Moody-Adams (1997), and John Cook (1999) the crucial issue in this area has been to renegotiate the place for rationality and objectivity in moral thought, in light of challenges to the contrary. David Velleman (2015) and David B. Wong (2006) in their turn have argued for varieties of moral relativism that avoid facile anything-goes conceptions of the moral life. These and similar interventions deserve closer attention, and raise a range of interesting questions. I do not here seek to formulate a response to these discussions. The aim here is a more modest one, to articulate some points of orientation for thinking about the process of moral change as it occurs, when past moral agreements and disagreements evolve into future ones.

For philosophical moral historians like MacIntyre or relativists like Velleman, moral change is closely intertwined with social and linguistic change, as well as changes in our implicit epistemologies. These again are intertwined with and partly dependent on changes in people's material conditions, and also on things like demography: our duties and allegiances depend on who we live among, and under what conditions. The moral horizon of the Greek city state (a persistent starting point for moral philosophers) seems in many ways to be intertwined with certain social, geographical, demographic and material conditions. Not in the sense that it would be "determined" by such features, but rather so that it is complexly formed in relation to such factors.

Along such lines, looking at material conditions and conceptual and evaluative frameworks, we can describe the internal logic of a given moral present: the relation of its values and norms and virtues to conditions of life. Although such perspectives are often highly illuminating and thought provoking, they have one disturbing feature. When focusing on moral change they cannot – unless attached to an epistemologically precarious a priori idea of moral

improvement over time – easily account for the sense of something real, firm and objective, at the center of morality; that which makes it, somehow, non-optional and binding. We could say that historical macro perspectives on moral change are inhospitable to the idea of binding moral claims.

MacIntyre and Taylor (arguably) deal with this challenge by presenting their historical narratives in such a way that their chosen history itself gives birth to something they consider particularly worthy, a kind of normative framework to answer to the normative (as opposed to descriptive or narrative) appetites of their readers. In MacIntyre's case, this is a kind of Thomism, in Taylor's case it is a certain conception of the human self, articulated in terms of inwardness, the cultivation of a private sphere and a strong commitment to work. These are not exactly "improvementalist" stories, for there is no "objective" standpoint implied in them, from which to assess the improvement, but rather moral histories built around the consciously moral affirmation of a given elaborately described framework.[3]

I have great sympathy for this approach, since it combines serious attention to moral change, with an equally serious attempt to reason about the good, in ways that help us think about our own moral predicament. It seems to me that both of these aspects are necessary to a well-rounded moral philosophy. The question, however, is how to describe the process of moral change in a way that helps us reconcile the facticity of change with the idea of moral reasoning as a search for knowledge and understanding. The metaphorical points of orientation here are to be conductive to reflective attention to the moral present, to how change comes about without threatening the integrity of moral reasoning.

2. The anatomy of moral change and the use of metaphors

For the purposes of the present discussion, we may note that moral change is a multifaceted phenomenon, escaping definitions in terms

[3] A closer look at how each of these thinkers negotiates the relationship between attention to historicity and the formulation of a normative view would be of exegetical as well as metaphilosophical interest. I will however not attempt it here. For discussion of this negotiation in Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, see Hämäläinen 2016.

of necessary and sufficient conditions. It includes change in what we call moral norms, i.e. norms concerning what (in Scanlon's 1998 catchphrase) *we owe to each other*. It also includes changes that have to do with what is thought of as a good human being, and more specifically, what is required of a good human being in his or her mastery of different roles: as the mother, the father, the child, the boss, the nurse, the priest. It includes changes in the range of virtues that people considered central. The boundaries of morality in this rough characterization are not sharply drawn but this is as it should be, because what I am after is an everyday, non-technical notion of morality and thus a non-technical notion of moral change. It may be disputed whether various aspects of, e.g., a professional code of conduct, or social role, are moral or "merely" prudential or cultural. There may also be considerable disagreement concerning which questions are moral, and how they are moral. If sexual behavior, for example, is a moral question, then what kind of question is it? Is it a question of sin, a question of equal rights, a question of risk? By moral framework, I do not mean a unitary set of shared beliefs. The moral framework of a certain place in time allows for disagreements and differences between people in a community, along a variety of parameters. Specific, distinctive disputes and problematizations should be regarded as a central part of any given moral framework. Our moral framework is known as much by its distinctive conflicts, as it is by its firmly held beliefs.

Moral change (that is, change in the moral system or framework against which we act, assess, and form ourselves as persons) often comes about without sudden and radical breaks or shifts. It would cause severe turmoil and confusion if the duties and allegiances and values that we have grown up with would suddenly, from one day to the other, be subverted on a large scale and replaced by others.[4] We should not dismiss the possibility that sudden shifts can occur, but in many cases of interest a closer look will reveal that a change has

[4] The Holocaust is sometimes described in such terms, as a rapid, if not overnight overthrowing of central moral inhibitions. But then again, anti-Semitism was not new in European culture, and similar subversions of morality are central to civil- and ethnic warfare everywhere. The sexual revolution of the 1960's can be reconstructed as moral revolution, but then again, as Doris Lessing dryly observes in her autobiography (2009), everyone, at least in her circles, was having sex in the 1950's too.

been in the air for some time; that the ground has been prepared for it through other changes which may not seem to have had immediate moral import. Many helpful examples of moral change can presently be derived from the realm of gender relations and sexuality, since these represent an area of our lives which (at least in the western, relatively affluent world) has recently gone through considerable changes. Homosexuality did not alter over night from being a vice or pathology into a mode of being that calls for recognition in family law. This took both political struggle and various mutually supportive changes in our view of the individual, gender, sexuality and society, and the changes that have come about are still precarious in many quarters. The predominant "duty-profile" of the western middle-class woman did not suddenly alter from that of the cookie-baking homemaker to the career woman caught up in dilemmas surrounding the "reconciliation between family and work". Noticeable alterations on a large scale often take a generation or two, or more, and are complexly related to other changes in our life world.

My present journey into the domain between historicity and universality is made by means of metaphors. Metaphors are a central though not uncontroversial aspect of any human inquiry into areas of understanding where we lack settled ways of thinking and talking. In philosophy they are essential: the platonic cave, the body politic, Rawls's veil of ignorance, Smith's invisible hand, Wittgenstein's language games. As Iris Murdoch (2001: 75) puts it: "Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition: metaphors of space, metaphors of movement, metaphors of vision."

Some metaphors are fundamental for our mode of awareness: the future as lying before us and the past as behind (an order which is not culturally invariant). Other metaphors, like those above, are not present in our everyday modes of awareness, but may be essential, irreducible ways of communicating a certain idea or content. The metaphors of this paper are all second hand, in the sense that they have been used by other people in the same or closely related ways. I do not mean to claim that they are essential, but merely to suggest them as useful. What is special about my use of them here is that I put them to work together for the purpose of a

picture of moral change compatible with the everyday notion of morality as in some sense objective, real, demanding, binding. We note at the outset that the metaphors I make use of are a mixed bag and do not, taken together, constitute a coherent metaphorical universe. They work together by illuminating, each in its own way, aspects of a given (unitary) account of morality and moral change. Metaphors like these are heuristic tools that are to be evaluated according to what they are able to do for us, rather than according to what kind of aesthetic arrangement they produce together.

3. The tipping point

Pär Segerdahl (2014) uses an analogy that may help us think about the nature of moral change as something successive and happening, as it were, from the inside. He adopts the notion of a "tipping point" from a study of the microbial flora of chicken:

> [A] certain microbe, Campylobacter, is typically present in the microbial flora of farmed chickens. This bacterium does not become a health threat until there is a balance shift in the chickens' intense relations with their farm circumstances. Campylobacter "infection" in chickens does not necessarily occur from outside, since the microbe always is present, but through balance shifts at what the authors call "tipping points". (Segerdahl 2014: 14)

This image reconfigures the usual way of looking at disease, which is in terms of an infection from the outside. The difference here is not the introduction of something alien, but rather a reconfiguration of what was already there: a change of proportions and thus of balance. What catches Segerdahl's interest here is precisely the idea of a "tipping point", which he transfers to the context of moral change, trying it on the exemplary case of sex disambiguation surgery.

This metaphor of a "tipping point" is one of those contagious coinages that seem to fit so many objects that it should be used with caution. It was adopted from physics and coined in the social sciences by Morton Grodzins (1958) in his studies on the phenomenon of "white flight" from American neighborhoods in the

1950s, and was popularized by the journalist Malcom Gladwell in his book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things can Make a Big Difference* (2000). Yet Segerdahl's use of it does in fact manage to do something that is not obvious from these other uses of the metaphor. He manages to use it for putting words into that void between moral histories and the affirmation of given frameworks.

Let us look closer at the use of the metaphor. Segerdahl's own example arises from the discussion on sex disambiguation surgery of children who are born with ambiguous sex. In present circumstances, he suggests, it may be a central issue for the welfare of a child that it is either a boy or a girl. Under present social and legal circumstances, it may be difficult not to belong, definitely, to one or the other category. Thus, corrective surgery can be seen as necessary to the welfare of the child. If we live "in balance" with current circumstances (that is, if we are not aware of any weighty reason to challenge them and no other way of perceiving the issue calls seriously upon our attention) we may see surgery as a "blessing", a chance to correct a lamentable situation. But what if there is a balance shift? As Segerdahl (2014: 15) puts it:

> if present circumstances are experienced as troublesome and possible to change – must we legally be male or female? – a tipping point may occur where the helpful correction of a bodily deformation can start to look like […] genital mutilation performed to adapt newborns to our culture's heterosexual norms and dualistic beliefs.

The change does not here come, as it were, from the outside. We are not overcome by a different normative order, a different system of value; just reconsidering the role of the binary system of sex. (The binary system is not in any simple sense a biological given. If it were, we would not have the "problem" of babies born with "ambiguous" anatomy.) This is a case where something previously taken as given presents itself as something potentially optional, with surprisingly far reaching moral consequences: "What previously was perceived as 'helping' may suddenly, at moral tipping points, look like 'mutilating.' What previously was 'reality' may turn into 'culture' and into 'norms and beliefs'." (ibid.)

What changes at the "tipping point" is not primarily our evaluation, but rather the way we would describe the matter at hand:

what is given, hard, factual, and what is negotiable, malleable, or relative? The alteration that brings this about is not the change of a moral norm or general moral judgment. It is a relatively small change in our perception and conceptualization of things. A conceptual space opens up for sexual ambiguity on the biological level. It is not even a radically new issue, because although the binary system of sex is fundamental in western understanding, we do have various intermediary figures in terms of sexual orientation and identity, as well as the mythical category of the hermaphrodite. This space, as opened up in current debates over gender, is in many respects the product of a discomfort with given categories. Feminism, queer theory, egalitarianism, and a roughly social liberal concern for the autonomy and singularity of persons are among the theoretical and ideological materials that are in motion here. The motor of change is not the introduction of new norms from the outside, but rather the re-configuration of present elements. Helping becomes mutilation – a duty to interfere becomes a duty to let be.

This image of a tipping point is relevant for our understanding of moral change, but it is, as Segerdahl suggests, also and more fundamentally in this context, a way of reviewing the age-old quarrel between relativism and objectivism. As Segerdahl (2014: 15-16) puts it:

> We habitually view opposed moralities as distinct, simply distinct. You have one view on the matter; I have another. When I heard about tipping points, it struck me that opposed moral views often are dynamically connected: *one view becomes the other at the tipping point*.

The opposing parties, apparently ideologically miles apart, may actually be much closer to each other than they think: the very same elements of a moral framework (respect for persons, concern for the happiness of the child, cautions against unnecessary medical interference) may be in place in their conceptual apparatuses, value systems and world views. Past the tipping point, the rest of the considerations which contribute to the reconsideration of sex disambiguation surgery are pretty much there as they were before, but emerge in a novel way. We do not think of heart surgery as an infringement on the bodily integrity of a child, because we know that the child needs a functioning heart. But when we come to see sex

beyond the binary system as a possibility, the "corrective" surgery will appear to some to be a major infringement on the bodily integrity of a person who is too young to give his consent.

Segerdahl (ibid.) thus suggests that:

> Thinking in terms of tipping points can negotiate some sort of peace between standpoints that otherwise are exaggerated as if they belonged to opposed metaphysics. Someone who speaks of male and female as realities is not necessarily in the grips of the metaphysics of substance, as the gender theorist Judith Butler supposes, but may speak from the point of view of being in untroubled balance with present circumstances. Someone who speaks of male and female as produced by norms is not necessarily in the grips of relativistic anti-metaphysical doctrines, as realist philosophers would suppose, but may speak at a tipping point where the balance with present circumstances shifted and became troubled.

This is a striking, though local, reconfiguration of the relationship between "constructivism" and "objectivism". The "objectivist" here is the one who is at peace with the current framework while the "constructivist" is someone who has come to see the current as non-necessary and as in some sense optional, negotiable and potentially problematic. What looks like a (value neutral, theoretical) difference in ontology and epistemology may here rather – or more fundamentally – be a difference in evaluative and epistemic positioning toward the current status quo. Epistemology and ontology thus do not here necessarily constitute the "fundamental level" of difference between "objectivists" and "constructivists" – the decisive difference is the relation to the status quo, which is a conceptual but also political issue.[5]

As Segerdahl points out, this analysis is not aimed to make the disagreements look less real or less dividing. Reconciliation is not necessarily close at hand: the analysis "only avoids certain intellectualist exaggerations and purifications" of the conflict (2014: 16). We may say, in Stanley Cavell's (1969) turn of phrase, that a

[5] By objectivism I mean here the idea that certain facts are validated by how things are in the world, by constructivism that they are in some sense made so by humans, in ways that can be unmade through conscious efforts. This is a rather casual way of using the distinction, which does not rule out the possibility of facts that are both "made" and "how things are".

purification of the dispute into an abstract issue of objectivity-relativity is a "deflection" from the real-life dispute. Through philosophical abstraction, we are moved further away from, rather than closer towards, a philosophical and practical solution.

How, then, should this discussion be cashed out for the purposes of understanding moral change over time? When trying to put changes in moral beliefs or frameworks into words, there often seems to be something ineffable or something plainly random about these changes: suddenly some people no longer think that marriage is for life; suddenly some people begin to think that you do not need to be either a boy or a girl. What would be necessary for a more substantial account is an understanding of how and why the world is inhabited differently by those who come to have different norms and views – what pushes them over the tipping point. Equally necessary is an understanding of what the parties probably have in common. In the case of sex disambiguation, both parties are likely to share a commitment to the unique worth of the happiness of individual persons. Sex disambiguation or letting be are both done in our day in the name of the child's best interest, and any accusation of letting other considerations override this is taken very seriously. Rather than staring at the point of disagreement we may be helped by mapping agreement as well as disagreement in the contestants' moral and epistemic frameworks overall.

4. The Cultural Bargaining Table

The imagery of moral tipping points can be used to illuminate how a small change in how we conceive or conceptualize something in the world may have significant implications concerning our duties, what is seen as beneficial, what is obligatory and what is to be prohibited. Yet the metaphor may leave us with a sense of mystification over the "point" of change: is there no more to be said about this? Certainly, people on both sides of a tipping point do engage in meaningful debates with each other, agreeing and disagreeing in various ways over both facts and values that bear on the matter at hand. We often hover over these tipping points, seeing a matter of contest as it were from both sides. Thinking of the change (e.g. over sex disambiguation) as a complete paradigm shift

(within the individual or in a society) is in many cases not true to the facts. A consideration of the pros and cons may leave us bewildered, equally capable of seeing the operation as "helping" and as "violating", at least until a more or less stable collective interpretation of the matter is achieved.

In order to come to terms with our difficulties, we turn to each other, voice our opinions and discuss. There are various locations where such discussions take place. They are certainly not always conversations between equal participants, nor are they always verbal. On any issue of moral weight, a number of "authorities" will have their say: clergy, parents, teachers, psychologists, legal scholars, politicians, journalists and social scientist. A parent of an "ambiguous" child may consult the doctor, but also talk to an ethical consultant, his parish minister, his older sister and a childhood friend who happens to be a surgeon. Heated letters may be published in the newspapers and articles will circulate through social media, venting normative and "factual" standpoints of various sorts. In addition to this explicit venting, the negotiation also goes on in practice, through the way people treat each other or assert their case through practical choices.

A useful image for describing this is the metaphor of a *cultural bargaining table*, as used by the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild. This may be a trite metaphor in the social sciences, but it has work to do in moral philosophy as well. We should note at the outset that the relevant sense of bargaining here is not the one we find in the philosophical social contract tradition, where the philosophers or imagined founders of a society bargain over the just order. What I am after here is the range of continuous social renegotiations of good, deficient, bad and evil that go on in people's social and cultural environments, in media, in everyday conversations, in narratives, in people's choices and how they are legitimated.[6]

Hochschild uses this metaphor when discussing a selection of self-help books for women from the 1970's and 1980's, but the pattern of disagreement and negotiation revealed here is importantly related to disagreement over sex disambiguation. Hochschild

[66] One philosopher who has written insightfully about morality in terms of such ongoing negotiations is Margaret Urban Walker (1998).

investigates the contents and dialectics of women's advice literature, as a place where cultural change can be seen. This change is also moral change, since it is centrally about the duties of women, and of how they should conduct their relations to other people. As she puts it:

> [B]eliefs and practices are the stuff of cultural collective bargaining. Advice books tell us what modernizing women and their allies and traditional men and their allies bring to the cultural bargaining table. In this view some customers are tools in the hands of those who uphold patriarchy. Other customers are tools in the hands of those pressing for equality. Some are useful to both or neither. (Hochschild 2003: 72)

Advice books are (lightly) covert pieces of moral and ideological debate. In this respect, they resemble voices in debates over the "helpfulness" of sex disambiguation. Such pieces are never just about voicing opinions or stating facts: they are articulations of a complex and often implicit conceptual and evaluative point of view – partly alike and partly different from those of their opponents. They also come from somewhere, and are – whether they want it or not, and whether they are aware of it or not – going somewhere. To the cultural bargaining table they bring not only a single, isolated opinion, but rather a whole outlook.

A significant difference comes to the fore if we look at this "bargaining" in terms of the objectivism-constructivism conflict. Hochschild describes a disagreement over the proper role and conduct of women in late 20th century relationship literature. But hardly anybody who took part in these debates thought that there is some plain objective fact about women that would relegate them to a submissive role in relation to their partners, or to a life in the private sphere, while men take care of the public life of work and politics. All participants were thus in a sense beyond a tipping point – the patriarchal "facts" about women that had some viability up to the 1960's had been overthrown, and even "conservative" authors knew that they were negotiating ideals in a realm where there were no plain facts about gender difference to build on.

Initially this may seem to constitute a major difference between the present case and the case of sex disambiguation, but this is partly

illusory. Patriarchal views on relations between the sexes in fact correspond to a position on sex disambiguation, which did not come to the fore in Segerdahl's discussion. It is the position of those who, through the influence of critique, have come to see that the binary system of sex is not an absolute fact of the world (metaphysically, biologically), but who nonetheless maintain that it is beneficial and should be upheld in the lives of sexually ambiguous children, through early disambiguating surgery. The question has been posed and a conservative answer has been given, but the conservative answer cannot undo the rupture of the asking. The binary system has been relativized; it has become an object of negotiation. Yet the debate goes on, as it were, beyond the "ontological" tipping point. "Everybody" knows that womanliness and women's roles in intimate relationships are negotiable, rather than "natural" givens. But there are other kinds of tipping points – for example political or aesthetic – that may nudge our collective, normative understanding of these matters in novel directions.

For Hochschild, a sociologist of emotion and intimate life, the moral nature of such bargainings is obvious. But insofar as some may not see the woman's comportment according to conservative or modern patterns as a moral issue at all but rather, perhaps, an aesthetic one, we may take another example here: marriage. Views on the moral bindingness of marriage may have changed due to a broad variety of alterations: an increased cultural emphasis on sexual and romantic self-realization which leads to a de-valuation of institutional, familial and habitual bonds; the increased economic independence of women; an economic order where the mobility of the workforce is emphasized and encouraged, especially from youth to younger middle age; the existence of reasonable social and legal arrangements for the shared care and responsibility for children after a divorce; a general cultural devaluation of dependency and high valuation of the individual search for happiness. This list could be continued. There is a number of conditions, some plainly factual, some evaluative – some of them material and some "social" – that nudge our conception of marriage in a direction where divorce can be given a positive valence previously inconceivable, and marriage

itself becomes in crucial respects a novel kind of bond, giving rise to a different range of duties. But where is the tipping point here?

It may be so that the crucial tipping point is behind us – that marriage as a moral bond has altered fundamentally in the western world, becoming instrumental to the (subjectively conceived) happiness of the married parties, where it previously was a constitutive moral bond overriding the parties claim to self-fulfillment. If this is the case, it is a significant moral change insofar as it alters the duties that have bearing on married people, and also alters the conceivable patterns of assessment of a possible divorce.

But what should we make of this? Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) famously suggested that modern morality is in state of disorder because its language of command and obligation has lost its grounding in a theistic worldview: we have commands without anyone commanding, and thus we have lost our ability to ground our moral views in a meaningful way. Peter Winch's (1987) acute observation in response to this was that if our moral language has lost a certain kind of framework that used to give it meaning, it does not imply that it has *no* meaning *now*. The task of the philosopher, who notes a rupture in the role of an important word or concept, or in a cultural or moral category, should thus not be to declare the category obsolete, but to inquire into what kind of meaning it has now, if any.

4. The strong rope

It can be argued that moral disagreements and moral confusion are constants in human societies, but not every society has the same disagreements or the same areas of confusion. With Segerdahl and Hochschild we may note that some of the moral disagreements in our present societies are indicative of moral change. Different concepts, values, ideas, theories and frameworks have different life spans – some are more persistent and long-lived than others. We may be on the verge of viewing sex disambiguation surgery as an evil and ambiguous sex/gender as acceptable. It may also be that we are beginning to see differentiated gender roles in the family as morally problematic, especially insofar as they (in practice) assign markedly divergent duties to men and women. The general fuss around

feminism and gender issues over the past decades is a sign of fervent moral renegotiation that moral philosophy may surely help us through, but not settle for us.

As Segerdahl's discussion indicated, it is often wrong to think of a new moral order as coming from the outside. When looking at concrete cases of moral change we may often see that what is happening is not due to outside influence, but due to a reconfiguration of values and ideas already present. (In feminism we see the enlightenment ethos of the equal worth and moral standing of each person trumping the hierarchical social order of patriarchy.) Yet, sometimes new pieces of belief or knowledge or faith are introduced and old ones fall away. Change and reconfiguration are, in this view, normal aspects of morality and value systems, and should not be treated as anomalies.[7]

But what are the consequences of change for our habitual sense that morality is a realm of learning rather than one of invention – of figuring out how things are rather than choosing whatever suits best? It seems essential that we find an apt image for this process of renewal: one that catches, on the one hand, the possibility and actuality of change, and on the other hand, the firmness, the resilience of moral "reality" that we experience in day to day living.

A useful metaphor for this combination of change and resilience – that of *the strong thread* – is found in Wittgenstein's discussion of family resemblances. Here he is talking about the concept of "number", but his remarks are equally applicable to the concept of "morality", and useful for present purposes:

> Why do we call something a number? Well perhaps because it has a – direct – relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the

[7] I would be tempted to say that successive change is an aspect of belief systems of any kind, with the reservation that change in science probably often is seen as proceeding through marked and dateable ruptures. See e.g. Thomas Kuhn (1962), and Michel Foucault (2002).

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> thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres. (Wittgenstein 1958: § 67)

It can be helpful to think of morality in terms of Wittgenstein's metaphor of the fibers of a thread. What keeps a thread together and what makes it strong is not any single fiber that runs through it all the way, but rather the multitude of shorter fibers which are intertwined. When a single fiber ends it does not threaten the strength and resilience of the thread, because innumerable other fibers are there to keep it together. The "thread structure" of morality ensures that moral change, when localized and partial, does not destroy the sense of morality as something real and non-optional. We have, for example, in the past hundred years lost female chastity, hierarchy and submissiveness as central points of moral orientation in the western world, and they have been slowly replaced by ideals of mutual respect and equality. Our real life conduct of course does not always live up to our ideals, but it would sound odd today to suggest that this change of ideals was an irreparable loss of morality.

Considering the great plurality of factors that influence the moral life of a human community, factors which may change or remain the same, we may be prompted to think of a thick rope rather than a thread. The function is the same: strength is not gained through a single fiber running through, but multiplicity of overlapping fibers. Even points of fervent renegotiation, points where several fibers come to an end and are successively replaced by others, do not significantly weaken the rope as a whole, because there is so many other fibers that go on.

Morality as a rope is a real presence, a malleable constant which keeps human communities together and alive. At any point in time it is also a communal object of inquiry. If we are to judge, in modern terms, whether morality should be conceived as a realm of "knowledge or fact" or a realm of "opinion or preference", a strong reason to think of it as a realm of knowledge is that moral life cannot be adequately represented without reference to such things as "learning", "finding out", "discovering one's mistake". In this

respect the modern fact/value dichotomy, which present anti-realisms and non-cognitivisms rely on, may just be inapt to capture the specific nature of the moral realm and the realm of values.[8] Yet, the realist imaginary of the good and the right as eternal forms, unchanging and unresponsive to changes in our modes of life, may be equally inapt to describe what is at stake, pressing us, among other things, to think of moral change as a mere superficial change of social conventions.

5. The long fiber: the human good?

But isn't there at the center of this rope a fiber that runs through it all the way? Something defining, without which we could not conceive of morality? In the end, is it not about human beings living together, negotiating communal life in terms of some good? We may say so, but exactly what good would that be? If we want to ask this question there seems to be one answer, one ideal object that prompts for recognition. We could call it "the good of human beings" or "the human good".

Secular morality is very much concerned with the human good and the same could be said about most religious moralities of our time. Kantians, utilitarians, and virtue ethicists are all centrally concerned with the human good too.

What we gain, by inserting "the human good" as a continuous fiber running through the rope, is a somewhat more specific indication of what can be morally relevant – it has to do with the good of human beings, it has to be fittingly appended to this idea. We can gratify our sense that something clearly at odds with the human good – extinction, for example – could not be propagated through any system of values and beliefs that we would count as a legitimate outgrowth of morality. We can play, in science fiction, with the idea that an anti-human morality could evolve: a human-machine culture/morality could be born out of a human culture, a machine culture/morality could be born out of the human-machine culture, and eventually the machine culture could turn against

[8] This, roughly, has been the view of Murdoch (2001), Anscombe (1958), Taylor (1989), MacIntyre (1982), Williams (1993) and John McDowell (1998), to name a few.

humans. By placing the human good as a central fiber at the heart of the metaphorical rope of morality, we may affirm that no such anti-human machine culture/morality would qualify as a morality in our sense. For some a move like this may seem necessary, for others like a futile exercise with sci-fi hypotheticals. I would rather be concerned with the problems involved in this addition of a continuous fiber (since what would be gained is quite obvious).

The first problem has to do with the capaciousness of this notion: The human good is such a loose and baggy idea! It stretches in so many directions and can contain so many different things that it does not necessarily add to our image of the resilience of morality. Is it one thread or many? If it is many, how many?

Secondly, it is also a rather theoretical notion, a kind of abstract shorthand for the infinite number of things that can be good for humans. These kinds of abstractions do not necessarily have any role to play in real life morality. Why then should it be a guaranteed, constant presence in our metaphorical rope?

Thirdly, it may be practically redundant: even if we do not postulate it as a/the central, omnipresent fiber, we are not likely to overlook the perspective of "the good human life" in any viable analysis of present or possible moralities. In this very abstract, unsubstantiated form the human good is not something we need to be reminded of, as we may need to be reminded of the importance of individual more specific goods, such as charity (in a moral view concerned with justice) or equality (in a moral view concerned with subjectively experienced well-being) or living in balance with our environment (in an ethico-political framework concerned with human excellence and the transcendence of nature).

We should also think about what kind of epistemic limitations this postulation of a central thread may induce. The idea of the human good, the good of man, the good of human beings, seems to be a constant of our philosophical tradition, from Aristotle and on. Yet it may not be the most helpful concept for understanding the theistic moral frameworks of the Middle Ages. It is not obvious that a moral system built around an idea of God can be properly represented as just another way of organizing a system of belief around "the good of man". We should at least be able to look and

see what role this notion or similar notions may have had. Perhaps it was not important; perhaps it was important, not as an end or a central concern, but rather as a means to the perfection of the glory of God. There is no conceptual impossibility to the claim that morality at some periods in history is not best explicated or understood through a notion of human good.

6. Conclusions

What did we gain through this series of metaphors?

The tipping point is an image of the anatomy of moral change, not of how it necessarily is, but how it often is. Moral change does not proceed through blind leaps between Foucauldian epistemes, or sudden shifts of paradigm, but (often) through traceable alterations that occur for a variety of reasons. The metaphor suggests how we could think of moral change as a change of balance within a framework of understanding, rather than an ad hoc introduction of alien elements.

The bargaining table illuminates the fact that moral change is not merely something that happens, but also something that we do, work for, achieve. A lot of politics and moral negotiation have gone, e.g., into the changes in women's position or the perception of homosexuality in western societies. But moral bargaining (in the real world, outside the philosopher's study) is never a random quarrel or even "rational dispute" between abstract disembodied positions, but rather a practical negotiation within a lived, inhabited world. "Positions" in real life bargaining are not abstract systems of belief, but rather (embodied, material and social) human situations. We need to know who is bargaining and about what, and how.

Finally, *the strong rope* gives an image of how morality as a whole can be a realm of knowledge – a firm, real presence in our lives, although consisting of a variety of disparate elements and undergoing constant change.

If this metaphorical path leads towards some specific moral philosophical inquiry, it would be the kind of inquiry which takes seriously the real tipping points and real bargainings of our time as well as of our past. Moreover, it is an inquiry which does not in the

facticity of change find an excuse for endorsing a facile relativism. We are, each of us, immersed in a morality and a realm of value, which are not of our own making. This immersion is what should interest us: its complexities, its contingencies, its persistence as well as its curious claim to universality.

I noted at the outset that the region between historicity and normativity in ethics is under-theorized. By this I meant that we lack fruitful and sufficiently stable ways of mediating between historicity/change on the one hand and the claim to objectivity/universality/reality on the other. But in the realm of philosophy, theorizing does not have to be the kind of step by step hierarchical reasoning that analytic philosophy gives pride of place to, where a successful argument is to be like a watertight vessel, absolutely dry on the inside. What we should be looking for, as philosophers, are the phenomena of our enquiry coming to life through our words. From the abstraction of philosophy (in which I, too, have moved in this discussion) we should reach, constantly, toward the plural, ordinary, humdrum realities of life, and the imageries that may make those realities more tangible for us. The metaphors of this paper aim at creating a position from which we can see change as well as persistence in our moral lives, a place where we need not bracket historicity to learn about the universality of morality, or vice versa, a place where the strange firmness and resilience of morality can be seen to coexist with change and malleability.

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