

**SOCIAL MOVEMENTS,
EXPERIMENTS IN LIVING,
AND MORAL PROGRESS:
CASE STUDIES FROM
BRITAIN'S ABOLITION OF
SLAVERY**

by

ELIZABETH ANDERSON



The Lindley Lecture
The University of Kansas
February 11, 2014

The E. H. Lindley Memorial Lectureship Fund was established in 1941 in memory of Ernest H. Lindley, Chancellor of the University of Kansas from 1920 to 1939. In February 1941 Mr. Roy Roberts, the chairman of the committee in charge, suggested in the *Graduate Magazine* that

the Chancellor should invite to the University for a lecture or a series of lectures, some outstanding national or world figure to speak on "Values of Living" -- just as the late Chancellor proposed to do in his courses "The Human Situation" and "Plan for Living."

In the following June Mr. Roberts circulated a letter on behalf of the Committee, proposing in somewhat broader terms that

The income from this fund should be spent in a quest of social betterment by bringing to the University each year outstanding world leaders for a lecture or series of lectures, yet with a design so broad in its outline that in the years to come, if it is deemed wise, this living memorial could take some more desirable form.

The fund was allowed to accumulate until 1954, when Professor Richard McKeon lectured on "Human Rights and International Relations." The next lecture was given in 1959 by Professor Everett C. Hughes, and has been published by the University of Kansas School of Law as part of his book *Student's Culture and Perspectives: Lectures on Medical and General Education*. The selection of lectures for the Lindley series has since been delegated to the Department of Philosophy.

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1. How Does Moral Progress Happen?

John Newton was a seaman and captain in the African slave trade in the mid-18th century. As a seaman, he raped female slaves carried on board. On one of his voyages, 28% of the slaves died. As a captain, he presided over the chaining and confinement of hundreds of slaves in suffocating, filthy, disease-ridden holds, where many died of dysentery in pools of diarrhea. He tortured slave boys with thumbscrews to extract information about a planned onboard insurrection. He sold some of his slaves to a planter in Antigua, who told him of his plan to work them to death and then buy new ones.²

In the course of his sailing career he often narrowly escaped death. Each time he survived, he felt that God had rescued him, and took this as a sign to lead a more Christian life. On one of his voyages, upon recovering from fever, he felt "delivered from the power and dominion of sin." Such experiences led him to give up swearing, and, as captain, to lead his crew in prayer services every day. But his sense of personal sin did not include his participation in the slave trade. Indeed, he claimed that there was no better calling "for promoting the life of God in the soul" than in voyages to Africa, and that he "never knew sweeter of more frequent hours of divine communion" than in his two last voyages to Guinea, where he spent his time in reverie with God as his despairing cargo was forced aboard his ship, shackled, and stuffed into the hold.³

After retiring from the slave trade, Newton became an ordained Anglican priest, most famous for writing the beloved hymn "Amazing Grace." In 1781, he delivered a sermon condemning England for a long list of sins, including a large national debt. He didn't mention slavery. He said nothing against slavery until writing *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, an influential eyewitness contribution to the growing abolitionist movement, more than 30 years after he left the trade.⁴ Only upon being persuaded by abolitionists of the importance of his testimony did it

dawn on him that he had done anything wrong. He wrote that he found it humiliating that he had engaged in such a cruel and unjust traffic, which “contradicts the feelings of humanity,” but confessed that at the time “he never had a scruple” about it.⁵

Today we look upon Newton’s moral obliviousness with uneasy wonder. Newton was no sociopath, incapable of any moral feelings. Indeed he was overcome with guilt over his habit of swearing. It is one thing, perhaps, to have only dim feelings about injustices far away, of which one reads only second-hand, and to which one has at most an indirect causal connection. But to *commit* and *command* the grossest cruelties, to see, hear, and *smell* its effects on one’s victims close at hand, and to be so lacking in moral feeling as to regard oneself as at the same time delivered from sin and in communion with God — how could that be?

Newton’s biography encapsulates, in compressed form, the stunning transformation of moral consciousness that swept across Europe and the Americas, and eventually the whole world, concerning the wrongfulness of slavery. Three hundred years ago, few people claimed that slavery was wrong. Starting about 250 years ago, various groups began to challenge the legitimacy of slavery. This led to a steady series of legal abolitions in the Americas, beginning with the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) in 1794, and completed with Brazil in 1888. Mauritania, the last remaining country to legally recognize slavery, abolished it in 1981. Although *de facto* slavery persists in many areas of the world, virtually no one is willing to publicly defend it. Slavery stands today as a paradigmatic moral wrong. The transformation of moral consciousness that underwrote the abolition of slavery represents perhaps the most profound instance of moral progress the world has ever seen.

Historians have much to teach us about how this remarkable transformation of worldwide moral consciousness came about. I am interested in two related normative questions. First, how do we know that this transformation amounts to a case of moral progress? Of course, when we judge matters by the lights of our current moral beliefs it appears to be so. I am interested in how we can know we have improved our morals in a non-question-begging way. Second, can we draw from this case study any general lessons on how to improve our morals?

I limit the scope of my inquiry to a particular domain of morality, concerning what human beings owe to each other. I set aside questions about the good life generally, to focus on the narrower question of moral right and wrong. I also set aside any notions of freefloating sin or wrongdoing unconnected to duties toward other human beings — for example, ideas about duties to self or to God. Henceforth, when I speak of morality, I am concerned with duties directed toward other people.

My interest is in the moral practices of social groups, more or less consciously supported by shared moral beliefs. In all ages there have been individuals who have questioned the morality of slavery. My concern is not to explain individual moral change, or change in beliefs alone, but rather how groups can improve their moral practices and supporting beliefs in tandem. My approach is also naturalistic. I am interested in identifying real practices of moral improvement, in how groups actually manage to improve their practices.

2. Pragmatism, Morality, and Moral Progress

I propose to investigate the question of moral progress from a pragmatist perspective, taking John Dewey's moral theory as a starting point. Dewey offered a naturalistic account of the place of morality in human societies. He began by considering our pervasive interdependence. Humans are social beings, who cannot survive or achieve their ends without assistance from, and cooperation and coordination with, others. The need for assistance, cooperation, and coordination is so constant that it cannot be secured by *ad hoc* arrangements. People institute rules of conduct — embodied in conventions, customs, norms, and laws — to secure regular assistance, cooperation, and coordination from each other.⁶ Conventions, customs, and nonmoral norms are sustained by mutual expectations of conditional conformity — shared understandings of most people's disposition to conform to the rules on condition that others do, too. People may also apply sanctions to nonconformists, and some of the motivation to comply may be to avoid expected sanctions.

Moral norms, like social norms and conventions, are largely sustained through shared expectations of conditional conformity, backed up by expectations of sanction. We must distinguish here the motive to conform from the content of moral demands. The content of moral demands, unlike the content of commitments to social norms, is not typically conditional on others' conformity. The fact that others are killing, lying, and stealing does not give anyone else permission to do the same. However, few people will comply with moral demands out of pure moral conscience alone, if others reject those demands. If only hypocrites demand compliance, people will tend to judge the purported moral demands to be fraudulent and lacking real authority. As with social norms, most people go along with moral norms because they expect others to expect them to comply, and they expect others to comply themselves. Deliberate sanctions may also elicit conformity to moral norms, but mostly for those at the margins of compliance. If people only conform to a norm out of fear of sanctions,

and not out of general expectations of acceptance and approval of it within the group, the norm will lack legitimacy and tend to lose its grip over time.

There is not a sharp distinction between moral and social norms, but moral norms are more likely to have four features. First, they purport to carry the force of authoritative command, and are typically expressed in the form of demands or orders to comply, as opposed to weaker sorts of claims such as requests, supplications, and expectations. Second, conformity with moral norms may be *exacted* from people. Failure to comply is liable to lead to coercion, condemnation, blame and punishment, above and beyond other sorts of social sanction, as of disapproval or nonmoral penalties (as when a fouled basketball player gets a free throw as a penalty on the fouling team). Third, the authority of moral commands does not depend on any immediate or direct good that the person addressed happens to want.⁷ Finally, shared moral expectations are colored by shared emotional dispositions. Within the group accepting the moral norm, members approve of conformity, are angry at violators, resent the violation if they are injured by it, and feel shame or guilt at violating the moral norm themselves.

The scope of the authority of any given moral norm is not fully determined in advance. Hence people may issue conflicting moral claims on each other even in cases where they agree on all of the relevant facts. One person's claim of need may conflict with another's claim of desert. Or a person may claim an excuse or justification for breaking a promise by appealing to an unanticipated vital personal interest — for example, she broke a lunch date because she was suddenly called for a job interview. People may then appeal to higher-order moral principles, such as the Golden Rule, to adjudicate their conflicting claims. From a pragmatist point of view, the basic function of higher-order moral principles is to adjudicate conflicting moral claims.

Morality as a social practice becomes reflective — open to reconstruction through people thinking together how they will govern their interpersonal claims — in several ways. First, an interpersonal conflict may give rise to uncertainty as to how an accepted principle applies to it. Even if everyone accepts the Golden Rule, how does it apply to a given conflict between claims of need and desert?⁸ Second, conditions may have changed such that the usual and accepted application of a principle gives rise to surprising and unsatisfactory consequences, or people come to be aware of bad consequences that were not previously connected to the operation of the principle. For example, everyone in a region may have freely pumped groundwater from under their own land, on the accepted principle that landowners have a legitimate claim to any groundwater beneath their land. In drier conditions, or under normal conditions but after a long pe-

riod of unrestricted pumping, or with advances in hydrology, people may learn that each person's pumping affects the amount of water available to others, and that a norm of unrestricted pumping will soon leave everyone thirsty. They may then need to devise or revise a property regime for sharing groundwater that includes limits on each person's pumping.⁹ Third, people may challenge the legitimacy of a customary norm or principle, by drawing attention to objectionable features of its operation and failures in its purported justification. For example, the abolitionists did not merely advance claims of slaves against claims of property; they challenged the very legitimacy of claims of property in other persons.

In practice these three occasions for ascent from customary to reflective morality may blur together, and other stimuli for reflection may also arise — for example, encountering social groups that appear to manage their collective lives more effectively using different moral norms and principles. Whatever the occasion for moral reflection or moral theorizing, it arises from something that causes uncertainty or disagreement as to how to proceed.¹⁰ The reflective resolution of uncertainty or disagreement typically involves investigation into the point of the moral norm or principle at issue, whether it is justified, and whether revised principles could fulfill the original point better, or whether people's conduct should be coordinated around some different point. In other words, uncertainty and disagreement prompt an investigation into the justification of disputed norms. It is possible for people to conform to a social or moral norm from habit or custom alone, without any idea of its point, as in the case of taboos, where people conform to a norm, the original reason for which was forgotten. However, when doubts arise as to how or whether to continue to conform, some reflective decision is needed to move forward. People assume conscious control over the future course of conduct in part by arguing over rationales for rival alternatives.

The question then arises how to do so intelligently. Pragmatism as a mode of moral theorizing does not attempt to offer any ultimate moral principle, assumed to apply in all possible worlds, as a way to resolve moral conflicts.¹¹ (As noted above, even if we had such a standard, such as the Golden Rule, the Categorical Imperative, or the Principle of Utility, all of the hard work would remain in resolving disputes about how to apply it in any particular case.) In place of an ultimate principle, pragmatism offers methods for improving our moral norms and principles. These methods do not rely on pure thought alone, but on practical action in the world.

I plan to explore two such pragmatist methods here. The first aims to correct biases in the thinking that enters into the formulation of moral principles. The second aims to test moral principles in practice.

Consider first how bias-correction works. Suppose we know, through long experience, that human beings are prone to certain systematic biases in their practical thinking. For example, people tend to be susceptible to wishful thinking in formulating policies. Wishful thinking may lead them to exaggerate the effects of measures designed to produce some good, and hence to adopt those measures even if they don't really work. Once we become aware of this bias, we can take steps to block, counteract, or correct its operation. Double-blinding of clinical trials is designed in part to block the operation of wishful thinking in assessing the effectiveness of new medicines. We have better reason to accept changes in medical practice justified on the basis of double-blind studies than changes based on unblinded studies, since they are more likely to avoid a known bias. Instituting a rule of blinding clinical trials can therefore be expected to increase the likelihood that changes in medical practice based on such trials amount to progress in clinical care.

While bias-correction works *ex ante*, in aiding the formulation or revision of moral principles and norms prior to implementation, the fundamental pragmatist test of moral principles and norms is *ex post*, based on our experiences upon their adoption. To test a moral principle or norm, we act in accordance with it and consider whether we can live with the consequences. More precisely, recall that the fundamental function of moral principles is to govern our interpersonal claim-making. Moral principles aim to solve recurring problems in our interpersonal relationships. For example, they establish a division of moral labor by assigning different responsibilities to different social roles, to ensure that certain essential aims of any viable society — such as reproduction and education of the next generation, production of the means of subsistence, and defense of society and its members against aggression — are achieved. Principles of distributive justice aim to govern the development of rules for fairly dividing the gains of social cooperation. Norms of promise-keeping and truth-telling aim to secure the conditions of trust between people so that they can confidently rely on each other's skills, diligence, and communication in undertaking projects that require the cooperation of others. And so forth. Because moral principles aim to solve recurring problems in our relationships, we can test them by considering whether they actually manage to solve the problems they are supposed to solve, whether they generate other problems, and whether alternative principles do a better job.

In the course of testing our principles in practice, we may come to change our view of the problems it is meant to solve, in light of our experiences living with it. For example, most people have come to reject the Catholic norm prohibiting divorce. This rejection is tied to a revised conception of the function of marriage focused on human interests, rather

than as the fulfillment of a divine command or sacred good unconnected to human flourishing. Against a humanistic standard, the Catholic norm can be seen as aiming at stability in the marriage relationship. But it also forces misery on couples with irreconcilable differences, and traps battered women in a state of terror. In light of Catholics' experiences with the rigid no-divorce rule, many have revised their understanding of the relational problem this rule is meant to solve — not simply to secure stability and mutual commitment of the couple, but to do so compatibly with their happiness and safety.

The history of the abolition of slavery utilized both pragmatist methods for transforming moral conviction and practice. In section 3, I shall discuss how British abolitionists invented one of the most powerful social practices ever developed for the peaceful transformation of moral consciousness: the social movement. In section 4, I shall explore how emancipation was conceived as an experiment in living according to the principle of free labor.

3. The Social Movement as Bias Correction of the Powerful

Moral thinking, like causal thinking, is prone to systematic biases. Classical social contract theorists defended the necessity and rationality of accepting the state in part on the ground that in matters of justice, each individual is biased in his own case and so needs a neutral judge with the power to enforce impartial laws. The self-serving bias is pervasive. But it has asymmetrical effects across social positions. It afflicts the powerful more than the powerless, and those with unaccountable power most of all. As Dewey observed:

It is difficult for a person in a place of authoritative power to avoid supposing that what he wants is right as long as he has power to enforce his demand. And even with the best will in the world, he is likely to be isolated from the real needs of others, and the perils of ignorance are added to those of selfishness. History reveals the tendency to confusion of private privilege with official status. The history of the struggle for political liberty is largely a record of attempt to get free from oppressions which were exercised in the name of law and authority, but which in effect identified loyalty with enslavement.¹²

The difficulty arises from the fact that knowledge of the right arises from certain distinctive experiences: of being held subject to the claims of others, which are asserted as authoritative, of being called to account by

others, held responsible, blamed, shamed, and punished for wrongdoing, being criticized for arrogance, negligence, and other vices, being exposed as unable to justify one's conduct before others whom one has injured or neglected. These are the social practices that arouse moral consciousness in people, and make them sensible that they are accountable to standards of conduct arising from the needs and interests of others, not just to their own desires. People in powerful positions tend to insulate themselves from the claims of those over whom they exercise power, to censor, discount, or misunderstand the claims of those beneath them, and to construct systems of law and moral accountability filled with loopholes through which they but not others can escape. So they rarely have the characteristic experiences through which they would learn that what they are doing to social inferiors is wrong.

People holding powerful positions are also liable to confuse their own power with moral authority, and thereby confuse the self-serving orders they give to others with what others are morally obligated to do. Hence they are liable to misread challenges to their orders from below as signs of vice — of insubordination and insolence, irresponsibility, laziness, and so forth. The relatively powerless enjoy no such luxuries. Hence people are prone to confuse their own desires with the right in rough proportion to their power.

Dewey's observation raises two distinct charges against the powerful: arrogance and ignorance. From their arrogant perspective, even just complaints from below appear to them to be vicious. And even if the powerful are trying to be just, their superior social position may make them ignorant of the interests of others. Hence, to correct these biases and reconstruct a more just set of social norms, we need social practices that can do three things:

1. Inform the powerful of the needs and interests of the less powerful, in a form vivid enough to spur feeling and action respecting those needs and interests.

2. Express what is required to respect these needs and interests as *claims* or *demands* on the powerful to change their conduct in specified ways, by confronting them with the characteristic experiences that arouse moral consciousness: being held accountable for their conduct, being made the object of moral criticism, experiencing their loss of moral authority regarding the issue at hand by seeing the claimants reject, defy, and refute their counterclaims.

3. Enable the less powerful to display their worthiness, so that they can assume some moral authority to contest the counterclaims of the powerful, and put authority behind their own claims.

In cases where the powerful have good will, social practices focused on vividly conveying information about the needs and interests of others may take center stage. Dramas, novels, songs, posters, photographs, films, and other media may make this information both salient and capable of spurring a sympathetic response.¹³ Where arrogance is paired with ignorance, additional methods must be devised.

Social theorists have studied such methods. They call “contention” any practices in which some people make claims against others, on behalf of someone’s interests. “Contentious politics” consists of coordinated contention by groups around a shared agenda, involving governments as “targets, initiators of claims, or third parties.”¹⁴ We can array contentious practices along a spectrum from pure moral argument on one pole to riots, war, and other violent acts on the other.¹⁵ Between pure argument and violence is a wide range of contentious activities that are more or less disruptive of habitual ways of life, from petitioning, publicity campaigns, theatrical performances, candlelight vigils, litigation, and political campaigns to street demonstrations, boycotts, teach-ins, sit-ins, picketing, strikes, and building occupations. As people move beyond the pure moral argument pole, they manifest in action and not only words their refusal to go along with the moral norms they are rejecting.

Why isn’t pure moral argument enough to induce social change? First, moral arguments often take place in contexts divorced from any immediate practical need to deliberate. In philosophical works and around the seminar table, or in church sermons, such arguments do not directly inform practical deliberation, because they are addressed to people who confront no immediate need to act on the principles being advanced. Moral arguments are then taken up as mere speculation, rather than as practical reasoning.

Second, practically realized moral norms are entrenched in largely unreflective habits which are sustained by shared expectations of people’s duties and entitlements. As Newton’s example shows, it didn’t even cross the minds of participants that the coercion and brutalities they inflicted on the slaves were morally wrong; that was just how things were done. After exposure to moral argument, a few morally conscientious individuals may cease to engage in wrongful conduct. The Quakers began by privately freeing their slaves and exiting the slave trade. But personal abstention alone does not change social practices. Even after most individuals are persuaded that slavery is wrong, that is not enough to change habits of conduct underwritten by shared expectations and attitudes. Private convictions within a group, even if held by most or all, do not overturn longstanding conditional commitments of a group to accept contrary convictions, or to act in accordance with them.¹⁶ (This point applies with

additional force when the challenged practices are underwritten by laws. Then, to overturn them, new laws must be enacted.)

To induce practical reasoning, people must be confronted with situations in which they can no longer carry on with their habitual ways of acting. Effective contention, in which large numbers of people manifest their opposition to particular norms, triggers practical deliberation over alternative norms in three ways. (1) As more people express their opposition to compliance, the motivation of others to support the norm declines, since, as noted, a major motive to comply with moral norms is people's expectation that others expect compliance, and will comply if others do, too. (2) As fewer people acquiesce in the norm, it may lose its power to solve the problem of interpersonal claim-making that it was supposed to solve.¹⁷ This may prompt the search for alternative norms that can succeed in mobilizing general compliance. However, it might rather prompt authorities who have stakes in the challenged norm to preserve it by means of repression and harsher sanctions. Effective contention may persuade authorities of the infeasibility of this route. (3) Contention may impose a moral cost on those who insist on upholding the challenged norm: loss of moral authority or legitimacy. Authorities may be able to impose their will on the contested issue, but lose honor or perceived legitimacy in doing so. They may experience this loss of recognition as an injury in itself, and discover that they can't win it back through arguments, bribes, pomp, or distractions.¹⁸ They may see this loss as threatening their authority to move on other issues. If elites are split over the norm, some may see a route to power by taking up the cause of the challengers. (Effective contention may seek allies among elites to trigger such divisions.) The threatened deprivation of moral authority aims to close off repression and open up the minds of authorities to practical deliberation over alternatives to the challenged norm.

A particularly important form of contentious politics was invented by British abolitionists: the social movement. A social movement is "a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities."¹⁹ Suppose you want to contest some policy you think is unjust — say, the abuse of workers in sweatshops who make clothes for major apparel companies. What do you do? First, you call a meeting of like-minded citizens to organize a campaign to raise the wages and improve workplace conditions of the people who supply clothing to the company. The group formulates a set of claims it wants to make on the company and perhaps on the state, to pass laws requiring that the company meet those claims. The group gives itself a name and adopts a logo and perhaps a slogan to encapsulate its claims. Everyone

supplies their contact information and agrees to a division of labor. The group appoints some members to undertake information-gathering: to gather testimony from the workers, photograph the awful conditions in the sweatshops, document the low wages and abuses, investigate feasible alternatives, refute defenses made by the company, and so forth. Others design a campaign to publicize this information to the wider public, along with the claims the group is making on the company and the state. They publish books, flyers, and op-eds, buy advertising in major media, sponsor talks and debates, stage plays and spread iconic images that vividly illustrate the injustice. Some take charge of recruiting new members, setting up allied committees in other locations, networking and coordinating with like-minded groups. They use the mailing list of members to raise funds and keep members updated on the progress of the movement. Most importantly, they agree to undertake a large-scale concerted and sustained campaign of contentious activities to pressure the companies and the state to meet the group's claims. They stage public demonstrations with masses of supporters marching in unison, carrying banners, singing songs, chanting slogans, and rallying for speeches in front of major public landmarks. They collect thousands of signatures on petitions articulating the claims they are making. They file lawsuits advancing their claims in court. They demand that the legislature hold public hearings to investigate the injustice. They run candidates committed to their cause in elections. They issue report cards on how representatives have voted on bills of interest to the movement. They may organize a consumer boycott of sweatshop clothing, and promote other brands made by better treated workers.

Many of these activities in the repertoire of contention — the logo, the mailing list, the network of committees, the iconic image vividly illustrating the complaint, the consumer boycott, the nationwide publicity campaign, the report card on representatives — were invented by the British abolition movement, which was launched in 1787.²⁰ Others, such as petitioning and litigation, had long existed, but were raised to an unprecedented scale and organization by the movement. Most importantly, the abolitionists were the first to put the whole package of contentious activities together in a sustained, coordinated campaign that mobilized hundreds of thousands of people. In the first phase of the movement, which demanded an end to the slave trade, they persuaded about 400,000 Britons to boycott slave-grown sugar. In 1792 alone, abolitionists submitted 519 petitions to Parliament containing 390,000 signatures, calling for the abolition of the slave trade. That was one and a half times the total of all signatures on all petitions submitted to Parliament from 1765-1784! In the second phase of the movement, demanding abolition of slavery itself, Thomas Clarkson travelled 10,000 miles, gathering testimony, calling pub-

lic meetings, recruiting, training, and networking new members.²¹ In 1807, the movement won passage of a bill abolishing the slave trade. In 1833, after an electorate expanded by the Reform Bill sent an unprecedented number of abolitionists to Parliament, the movement won passage of a bill to abolish slavery in the British colonies.

Let's distinguish two questions about this remarkable transformation of moral conviction and practice. First, *how* did the abolitionist social movement succeed in changing moral consciousness? Second, are there features of the movement that support the view that the change it effected amounted to moral progress?

Regarding the first question, pure moral argument was not sufficient to bring about moral change. The arguments that slavery is morally wrong were already known before the abolitionist movement got underway. Nor did the opposition have much to say for itself on moral grounds. The proslavery interests regularly changed the subject from questions of moral right and justice to expedience, arguing for slavery on grounds of its profitability and the dependence of Britain's economy on the slave system.²² In contrast with proslavery interests in the U.S., which advanced elaborate moral arguments for slavery, based in part on racist theories of Africans' incapacity for freedom, British slaveowners disavowed appeals to racism in Parliamentary debates.²³

The naturalistic pragmatist account of morality as a system for regulating conduct helps us understand the feebleness of moral argument alone in effecting moral change. What is required is practical action to dislodge shared expectations, unsettle attitudes, and trigger practical deliberation. This requires concerted mass public action, effectively demonstrating a collective rejection of the entrenched norms — a dissolution of the prior shared expectations — and a determination to replace them with rival norms.

At the same time, we should not dismiss moral argument as inert. Contention is required to trigger practical deliberation, but deliberation makes use of reasons and arguments to find better alternatives to entrenched customs. Abolitionists used moral arguments to recruit people to their cause, and devoted much of their activity to persuading others to act using moral arguments. Against the complacent trust the British had in the self-professed benevolence of slave traders and slaveholders thousands of miles away in African and the West Indies, the abolitionists compiled a vast evidentiary record of monstrous cruelty and abuse of slaves. They thereby exposed conflicts of norms that had not previously been recognized, and invoked the authority of already accepted norms against cruelty, theft (the slave trade was man-stealing, a violation of

each person's self-ownership), and so forth in domains where they had not previously been applied.

Do we have reason to regard the moral transformation brought about by the abolitionist social movement as a case of moral progress? Of course most of us today agree with the arguments the abolitionists made, and commend the changes they brought about. Stepping back from our moral convictions about this case, however, can we discern in the abolitionist's methods of contention any *tendencies* to improve moral practice?

According to Charles Tilly, a leading scholar of contentious politics, social movements aim to publicly demonstrate four features about themselves: worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment.²⁴ To communicate their worthiness, they may dress neatly, practice nonviolence, and appoint respected persons, such as ministers, in high positions in their organization. To communicate their unity, they may all wear a badge, chant slogans in unison, and march in ranks. To demonstrate numbers, they aim for huge crowds in public demonstrations and meetings, and gigantic numbers of signatures on petitions. To demonstrate commitment, they display their readiness to suffer personal sacrifices for their cause: they bear up under beatings by police, campaign relentlessly, sometimes to the point of exhaustion, expend their fortunes, even stage hunger strikes when in prison.

These features fit in to the tasks a social practice needs to accomplish if it is to correct the moral biases of the relatively powerful. Recall that those in power are liable to interpret challenges to their norms as manifestations of insolence, selfishness, and other vices on the part of the less powerful. Public demonstrations of the worthiness of those participating in a social movement undermine such interpretations. Demonstrations of self-sacrificing commitment undermine attributions of selfish or other vicious ulterior motives to the participants, and highlight the moral seriousness of their cause and their motives. Here are people who have the courage of their convictions. Public self-sacrifice may also inspire awe in observers, a feeling closely associated with a sense that the objects of awe bear authority. Large numbers, too, can be awe-inspiring.

More importantly, numerous publicly displayed protestors making claims to overturn reigning norms expose the instability of these norms and challenge the authority of those who uphold them. A norm can be sustained only if most people believe that most others accept its practical authority. Once enough people demonstrate their repudiation of its authority, even in the face of official sanctions, others who have acquiesced in the norm only from unreflective habit or the expectations of others may waver in their support. Now they cannot rely on others' expectations to shore up their own complacent acceptance of the norm. Actual confrontation with a mass of claims that conflict with the reigning norm forces them to engage

in *practical reflection* as to whether they should continue to support the norm. Do they have real reasons to do so? At this point, moral arguments tend to have an impact they would not otherwise have, since they are directly connected to resolving *practical* doubts about how to proceed.

By contrast, moral reflection is merely speculative when there is no particular practical need to deliberate brought about by vivid confrontation with the actual conflicting claims of others, or the bad consequences of current norms, or doubts about how to apply given norms. People may entertain hypothetical challenges to a norm, but not as voiced by actual people complaining about the status quo and calling its supporters to account for their conduct. Few people find purely speculative individual moral reflection motivating. Because moral norms purport to have authority for everyone, and aim to coordinate everyone's normative expectations, how can one be confident that one's own moral reflections are on the right track unless one sees that others are prepared to orient their conduct in accordance with them? Moral reasoning, to be effective in changing social practices, must be done together. The mobilization of large numbers of people supplies a condition for practical social change that individual conscientious reflection does not.

What is the significance of unity? A movement that cannot agree on what it wants to do will have difficulty persuading others. Disunity within the movement would fail to provide a salient focus of critique, and thereby cast doubt on the authority of its claims. If even members of the movement cannot agree among themselves, why should anyone else be moved by it? The British antislavery movement had to forge an agenda around which its members could rally. It chose at first to focus on abolishing the slave trade rather than slavery itself, in part to bring along people who were reluctant to take more radical steps. Criticism of the slave trade was better grounded in Biblical morality than criticism of slavery. (The Bible clearly condemns manstealing, while it accommodates slavery.) The slave trade also tied the interests of slaves to the British, for the trade's cruelty also encompassed seamen, who also suffered brutal punishments and high death rates in the Middle Passage, as greedy captains would neglect the health of the men with whom they would have to share the profits when the slaves were sold.²⁵ Once the people were rallied against the slave trade, and won its abolition, they were more receptive to joining the next phase, against slavery. The British antislavery movement had the discipline to remain united enough at any given time to move the moral opinion of their society forward.

On the naturalistic account of moral change I am offering, contentious politics is a major engine of moral progress. The particular mode of contentious politics known as the social movement is a particularly apt

vehicle of progressive moral transformation, because it enables people to undertake the three tasks needed to overcome a principal source of moral bias: the tendency of the powerful to shape and uphold moral norms that confuse the right with what the powerful desire for themselves. Through social movements, people inform the powerful and the public at large of how the needs and interests of the less powerful are ill-served by reigning norms. They demonstrate their own moral worth and commitment, and thereby bolster the moral authority of their claim-making. They expose the powerful and the public at large to the characteristic experiences that stimulate moral conscience and moral reflection: being held accountable for the bad consequences of their conduct, experiencing others challenge the authority of the norms they are upholding, finding themselves unable to offer a justification for their actions that others accept, observing the hold of their norms on others dissolve, so as to undermine the ability of these norms to settle interpersonal conflicts, feeling their own moral authority undermined. As the challenged norm loses authority in the eyes of those it is supposed to govern, it loses support. This is an occasion for practical deliberation, to search for new norms that can better manage interpersonal claims in ways that serve the interests of all.

4. Free Labor as an Experiment in Living

My argument does not imply that social movements are infallible tools of moral progress. Where they have room to act, they can be effective tools for exposing and dislodging unjust social norms that embody the characteristic moral biases of the powerful. But they are no more guaranteed to deliver superior moral norms than the clinical trial is guaranteed to deliver reliable causal knowledge of the effectiveness of drugs for particular diseases. Social movements must offer alternatives to the norms they challenge. Those alternatives may contain defects not anticipated or appreciated by the movements themselves. Hence the ultimate test of moral progress must lie in critical reflection on the results of a social movement, in the experiences of those living under the new norms that an effective social movement establishes.

British abolitionism offers an outstanding case study in this regard, partly because it was *explicitly* understood as an experiment in living. To understand this, we must consider what problem the slave system was thought to solve. Until the mid-18th century, the dominant assumption was that people would not work unless they were forced. About 95% of the world's population labored under one kind or another of involuntary servitude: if not outright slavery, then serfdom, debt peonage, apprenticeship, indenture, *corvée*, military impressment, penal servitude or other

forms of coercion, such as coolie labor.²⁶ Even the workers who were called “free” would not be considered free by today’s standards. Until the mid-to-late 19th century, labor law in the English speaking world bound “free” workers to one year contracts to their employers. Employers were entitled to withhold the *entire* year’s pay until the 365th day of service was satisfactorily delivered, and could withhold any portion of it as a penalty for unsatisfactory or incomplete service. If a worker moonlighted, his contractual employer was entitled to confiscate all her wages paid by other employers. If she tried to quit, she was not entitled to seek work with another employer. Her original employer was entitled to sue for her return. To be unemployed, able-bodied, and without property was to commit the crime of vagrancy, the punishment for which was penal servitude. The destitute could be forced into workhouses.²⁷ In the dominant labor regimes across the world, slavery was but the most extreme case in a spectrum of involuntary servitude, with so-called free workers still situated well inside the involuntary line as we would draw it today. From today’s perspective, the only fully free workers were the self-employed: yeoman farmers, independent craftsmen, shopkeepers, and the like.

The norms enforcing all forms of involuntary servitude were seen as necessary for securing economic arrangements whereby society can sustain itself. Call this “the problem of production.” Every society needs to solve it. Occasionally defenders of involuntary servitude argued that if the slaves were freed, they would starve.²⁸ That was absurd. More commonly, they suggested that emancipation would let the slaves fall into “barbarism.”²⁹ They meant that, given the chance, the slaves, just like most people, would work only for their own subsistence, as peasants, hunters, or vagabonds. A population that quits work the moment it meets its bare subsistence needs will not produce a surplus. Without a surplus, a society cannot support occupations beyond subsistence: there will be no manufacturers, merchants, or financiers, no artists or scientists, no clergy or educators, no writers or publishers, no magistrates, civil servants, or navy. In other words, without a surplus, there is no civilization. Involuntary servitude was seen as a necessary solution to the version of the problem of production faced by civilized societies — that is, societies with an advanced division of labor.

Note that even if this argument for forced labor were sound, it could not justify a labor regime as cruel and exploitative as chattel slavery. Beyond being a system of involuntary servitude, slavery adds four additional gross injustices. First, slaves are subject to extreme violence at the hands of their masters. Second, they lack nearly all the rights constitutive of legal personhood, such as the right to own property, make contracts, sue and be sued, and bear witness in court. Third, slaves suffer “natal alienation”:

they have no right to family relations — to marry (in many slave regimes), raise their children, or commune with any other kin. Fourth, symbolically it is the most dishonored status ascribed to any human permitted to remain within society: the slave is socially dead to everyone else.³⁰ Since far less abusive forms of involuntary servitude had already proven capable of supporting “civilization” as then understood, the argument as it stands falls far short of justifying slavery.

Contemporary arguments over slavery in relation to the problem of production focused on two different objections. Some moralists argued that even if it were true that a population would not willingly produce a surplus, that could not justify forcing them to give up their subsistence lifestyle to serve the interests of civilization. It was wrong to sacrifice the happiness of slaves even if involuntary servitude was the only way to get them to produce a surplus.³¹

Other opponents of slavery rejected the premise that involuntary servitude was necessary to support the advanced division of labor needed to sustain civilized society. Adam Smith made the most influential argument on this point. In economic terms, the argument for forced labor supposes that the supply curve of labor is backward-bending: higher compensation would lead workers to reduce their labor supply, because they could meet their subsistence target with fewer hours of labor. Smith argued that the supply curve of labor is forward-sloping: offer people wages high enough to give them the prospect of real improvement of their condition, and they will work harder. Free labor is more productive than slave labor because the free worker has an incentive to work. Force is needed to make slaves work hard for their masters because masters deny them the opportunity to improve their condition beyond subsistence no matter how hard they work.³² The appearance of a backward-bending supply curve of labor is a byproduct of slavery, not an innate disposition of slaves or human beings generally. Smith articulated the Enlightenment view that the march of freedom and civilization went hand-in-hand. The right to one’s own labor is “sacred and inviolable.” Recognizing that right, far from entailing a sacrifice of economic progress, advances economic growth, personal independence, and good government.³³

The abolitionists did not rest their case against slavery on economic grounds; for them the argument was fundamentally a moral one. But antislavery M.P.s and ministers were eager to demonstrate that the abolition of slavery would be compatible with the continued productivity of the colonial plantations dedicated to tropical cash crops such as coffee, indigo, and most importantly, sugar. For them, the abolition of slavery was a “mighty experiment” in free labor, as Edward Stanley (later Lord Derby), the Colonial Secretary described it, when he moved the emancipation

resolution before the House of Commons on May 14, 1833.³⁴ The British government hoped that a rigorous demonstration that free labor could be just as productive as slave labor in the colonies would demonstrate the compatibility of free labor with economic progress, and help persuade the other slaveholding nations to give up slavery.

The emancipation bill provided for a transitional labor system, called “apprenticeship,” which lasted until 1838. Slaves in the West Indian colonies and Mauritius were bound to serve their former masters for a specified number of hours per day during this period. The apprenticeship experiment offered cautious reasons for hope. The slave colonies had been weakened by a slave revolt before emancipation; apprenticeship ushered in a period of labor peace and allowed rebuilding of the plantations. The freed people enjoyed a higher standard of living. While sugar production declined 10%, profits rose because the price of sugar increased 40%.³⁵ However, wherever open land was available, freed people left the plantations to set up their own independent system of smallholder production, favoring subsistence agriculture and producing cash crops only after subsistence needs were met.

Seven years after the end of apprenticeship, sugar production was 35% below the levels that had been produced under slavery. Because British West Indies sugar was protected by tariffs from competition with slave-produced sugar, the British paid twice the price for West Indies sugar than what others paid for Cuban sugar. The freed people’s wages were high, but this provoked resentment from British workers, who compared their lot as “wage slaves” unfavorably to the freed people and objected that they were forced to subsidize their high standard of living through an artificially high price of sugar. Meanwhile, slave-based sugar production in Cuba dramatically outpaced the British West Indies not only quantitatively but technologically, through the adoption of advanced machinery and railroads. Free trade advocates argued that there was no justification for protecting British sugar over Cuban and Brazilian slave-produced sugar. If free labor was really superior to slave, it should be able to compete on a level playing field.³⁶

In 1846, Parliament accepted the free traders’ argument, equalized sugar duties between its own colonies and foreign imports, and thereby triggered an economic crisis in the uncompetitive British West Indies. Many plantations declared bankruptcy; merchant houses were ruined; and freed people’s wages fell. This led to a further flow of labor from plantations to peasant production, wherever, as in Jamaica, land was available for freed people to claim. Competition with slave production did not support a progressive march of freedom, as had been hoped by Smith’s followers. Rather, it led plantation owners in the “free labor” colonies to impose

alternative forms of labor coercion on sugar workers. In Java, the Dutch forced peasant farmers to grow sugar by imposing taxes that could be paid only from plantation wages. In the British colonies, planters imported indentured coolie labor from Asia. The emancipation experiment was widely regarded as a falsification of Smith's productivity-based defense of free labor, at least as applied to blacks.³⁷

Why did slave labor produce more, and more cheaply, than free? In part, the lash turned out to be a cheaper motivator than the wage from the planter's point of view. The brutal economics of sugar production gave the slave system additional advantages. Once cane ripens it must be quickly harvested and refined before it rots. Sugar refining was the first mass production process invented in the Industrial Revolution, involving dangerous machinery to crush the cane and boil the juice to refine it into sugar. Maximizing productivity thus demanded grueling, intense, continuous labor under a relentless sun or before sweltering boilers. No free worker of any race was willing to work so hard for any wage, because the productivity-maximizing level of labor per worker was so continuous and exhausting that it left no time or energy to enjoy any leisure, and destroyed workers' health and lives. Stephen Cave, the Chair of the West Indies Committee, reported that Cuban slaves were forced to work continuously 18 hours per day, 7 days per week. Free Jamaicans were only willing to work at this debilitating labor 6 hours per day, 4 days per week.³⁸ Jamaican free workers needed enough wages and time to feed and raise their children; Cuban plantation owners could work their slaves to death and seize new adult workers from Africa, thereby obtaining at low cost not just the labor of their slaves but the childrearing labor of Africans.

The calculus of productivity used to refute Smith's arguments favoring free over slave labor gave a grossly incomplete accounting of the costs of slave labor. It failed to account for the costs to the slaves of working so intensely, and the costs to Africans of having their children stolen away. The advocates of so-called "free trade," who demanded equal tariffs for free and slave sugar so that the lowest cost producer would win the competition, were therefore inconsistent. In what sense can trade be free if one group of competitors steals its most important inputs? By that standard, free traders should also have advocated free competition between honest producers and gangsters who sell stolen goods. Free trade is nonsensical except against the background of legally enforced property rights — including, most importantly, the rights of workers to freely decide how to dispose of their own labor.

Many skeptics of free trade also pronounced the free labor experiment a failure. They blamed the freed people for preferring barbarism to civilization, for rejecting the work ethic and the promise of self-improvement

through wage labor. Theories of racial inferiority, virtually absent in the Parliamentary debates over emancipation, were advanced to explain the failure of free blacks to willingly live up to the demands of the civilizing process. Thomas Carlyle exemplified the trend in his notorious “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question.”³⁹ He assailed free West Indian blacks for refusing to work for plantation owners when they could grow “pumpkins” for themselves with far less effort: this showed they were indolent and slaves to sin. Whites, being wiser than blacks, were their natural lords. Whites were also entitled to all the land of the West Indies because they were the ones who maximized spice production on the islands. They should force blacks to work on the plantations:

no black man who will not work according to what ability the gods have given him for working, has the smallest right to eat pumpkin, or to any fraction of land that will grow pumpkin . . . but has an indisputable and perpetual right to be compelled, by the real proprietors of said land, to do competent work for his living. . . . If it be his own indolence that prevents and prohibits him, then his own indolence is the enemy he must be delivered from: and the first “right” he has, poor, indolent blockhead, black or white, is, that every unprohibited man, whatsoever wiser, more industrious person may be passing that way, shall endeavor to “emancipate” him from his indolence, and by some wise means, as I said, compel him, since inducing will not serve, to do the work he is fit for . . . this is the eternal law of nature for a man.⁴⁰

Carlyle rejected free market premises in favor of the traditional Christian moral discourse of sin and the “gospel of work” — a discourse that lay at the center of Christian justifications for slavery.⁴¹

John Stuart Mill mocked Carlyle’s argument. It was absurd for Carlyle to ascribe greater “industry” to whites, or to claim that whites had made the islands productive, when blacks performed all the labor for idle white planters.⁴² More importantly, Mill contested Carlyle’s standard of success for the emancipation experiment. Carlyle’s standard rested on fulfillment of a purported duty of ceaseless toil in the name of civilization. Mill replied that the value of work must be measured by the value of its product, in comparison with the cost to the laborer of providing the labor. In the West Indies, human beings were worked to death for the frivolous luxury of sugar:

Is it the verdict of the “immortal gods” that pepper is noble, freedom (even freedom from the lash) contemptible? [T]

he multiplication of work, for purposes not worth caring about, is one of the evils of our present condition. When justice and reason shall be the rule of human affairs, one of the first things to which we may expect them to be applied is the question, How many of the so-called luxuries, conveniences, refinements, and ornaments of life, are worth the labour which must be undergone as the condition of producing them? . . . In opposition to the “gospel of work,” I would assert the gospel of leisure, and maintain that human beings cannot rise to the finer attributes of their nature compatibly with a life filled with labour. . . . To reduce very greatly the quantity of work required to carry on existence, is as needful as to distribute it more equally; and the progress of science, and the increasing ascendancy of justice and good sense, tend to this result.⁴³

Even if it were true that sugar production fueled civilization — that is, “commerces, arts, polities, and social developments” — political and social arrangements based on the exploitation of slaves are a curse to humanity.⁴⁴ Those who labor to produce the characteristic goods of civilization are entitled to sufficient leisure, income, and freedom to enjoy its benefits. By this standard, the relative leisure and prosperity of the freed people of the West Indies counted as a great success of the emancipation experiment.

In the decades following emancipation, observers struggled over the right criterion of success for the experiment. If the standard was whether free labor could produce tropical cash crops more cheaply to white planters and consumers than slave labor, then the experiment had failed. That standard was relevant for the prospect of persuading slave states to give up slavery peacefully. But it could never serve as a standard of justice. The British government’s desire to press the narrowly economic case for abolition along with the moral case proved an embarrassment.

If the standard was whether “civilization” — production of a surplus that could sustain an advanced division of labor — could continue to progress without slavery, the experiment succeeded, although not quite in the ways observers at the time, even abolitionists, appreciated. Carlyle’s perverse “gospel of labor” led to a persistent disparagement of the peasant production model that the freed people aspired to. Except for radicals like Mill, most European observers saw this as a reversion to barbarism, proof that blacks were not ready for freedom. For the blacks themselves, independent peasant production embodied the very promise of freedom: to be free was not to be subject to any master, but to govern oneself in one’s own production decisions. Nor was it true that the freed people’s labor supply curves bent backward as soon as they met their subsistence

needs. While they gave subsistence priority and cut back on their labor hours — obviously rational choices, given that the slave regime had been working and starving them to death — they also produced export crops.⁴⁵ Ultimately the disagreement between Smith and his opponents was not over whether the supply of labor bends backwards or forwards. For all human beings there must be a level at which it bends backwards: people need time and energy to enjoy their pay or it will not benefit them at all. Hence the incentive effects of higher pay must at some point run out and be unable to elicit further effort. The real question is whether these effects run out at bare subsistence or at some higher point, consistent with production of a surplus sufficient to support an advanced division of labor. Smith was correct to argue that the inflection point lies well above subsistence.

Hence, cash crop production continued in the British West Indies, albeit at somewhat lower levels than at their peak under slavery. Moreover, the importance of tropical cash crops in the British economy declined as industrialization accelerated. This meant that the economic criteria for the success of the experiment eventually receded. The stakes in slavery were not, and never had been, whether civilization could progress without it. In the end they amounted to nothing more than a question of the relative price of sugar to white consumers, and the profitability of sugar production to white planters. If wages must be paid to free black and Asian workers to induce them to produce tropical staples, then of course the relative price of these staples will rise compared to the price of slave-produced staples.⁴⁶

Many whites failed to grasp this point, because their own framing of the problem that slavery had been called upon to solve continued to reflect the confusion between the parochial good of the powerful and the morally right that is the characteristic moral bias of social superiors. Carlyle even claimed that the supposed duty of blacks to toil unremittingly for whites was God's law. Such is the narcissism of the powerful that they confuse their own depraved and selfish desires with divinely ordained morality, and make themselves gods in imposing oppressive laws on their subordinates.

Even the British abolitionists were not fully immune to this bias. If the standard of success for emancipation had been whether people could flourish on the basis of a completely free labor system, the experiment was not yet tried. For wherever slavery was abolished, it was not immediately replaced by anything we would recognize today as a free labor system. The abolitionists themselves acquiesced in the importation of indentured servants as a substitute for slaves in the British West Indies, and were roundly criticized at home for neglecting the horrors of wage slavery.⁴⁷ For this reason, we cannot view the transformation of moral consciousness brought about by abolitionism as like the scales falling from the eyes of

those affected. It was more like experiencing the earliest light of dawn. Or, as Mill put the point:

The history of human improvement is the record of a struggle by which inch after inch of ground has been wrung from these maleficent powers, and more and more of human life rescued from the iniquitous dominion of the law of might. Much, very much of this work still remains to do, but the progress made in it is the best and greatest achievement yet performed by mankind.⁴⁸

The abolition of slavery was only one great step in the struggle for free labor, recognition of the wrongness of slavery only the first great step in grasping the demands of justice in the realm of production. The struggle continues to this day.

Let us return, then, to the question of moral epistemology. How do we know, without begging the question in favor of our current moral beliefs, that the great change from accepting to condemning slavery was a case of moral progress? First, we have good reason to believe that moral support for the institution of slavery was based on a massive confusion on the part of the powerful between the morally right and their own self-interest. Insulated from the kinds of moral pressure that could correct their confusion and undermine their own narcissistic claims of moral authority, and from information about the full range of interests at stake in slavery, the moral views of those with stakes in the slave system were unreliable. Second, we have good reason to believe that the abolitionist social movement possessed features that, if they managed to move the moral opinions of society, would tend to correct the ignorance and confusion of the powerful, whose views held sway until then. The abolitionists exposed information about slavery and the slave trade, especially concerning its brutality, that was not salient before, and that was acknowledged as morally relevant by the standards of the time. They exposed the powerful to experiences of moral accountability, felt loss of moral authority, and destabilization of the norms they upheld — the sorts of experiences needed to jar moral deliberation and to make clear to them (and to those who complacently or habitually followed them) the distinction between the morally right and mere self-interest. Their change in view from acceptance to condemnation of slavery was therefore brought about by processes that we have good reason to believe tend to lead to better informed, less partial and narcissistic moral views. Third, experience with the new institutions of (quasi-) free labor that replaced slavery demonstrated that they were compatible with the progress of civilization, understood as economic development and an advanced division of labor. Economic development under the freer

labor regimes also prompted a revision of the ideal of civilization that incorporated the interests of workers, considered as proper beneficiaries of its fruits and not merely instruments for creating it. This revision was difficult to resist given the background belief, accepted by all sides, that all members of society are entitled to moral consideration. How could the ideal of civilization promoted by slave interests claim credibility when it gratuitously denied a great mass of workers sustaining civilization any share in its fruits?

Can we draw some more general lessons about moral progress from our case study of British abolitionism? I have *not* argued that social movements are always right, not even when they succeed. They have *tendencies* to correct moral bias and confusion — but only when they speak truth to power. Reactionary movements, which attempt to impose disadvantages on the less powerful, have no tendency to correct the confusion, more often held by the relatively powerful, between self-interest and the moral right. Movements that try to effect change by promulgating false or misleading claims also have no tendency to correct ignorance. And even when social movements succeed in exposing defects in the status quo, they do not always supply an alternative that successfully manages the problems people confront, with acceptable side effects. This is another reason why *ex ante* moral arguments, however persuasive, are not reliable in the absence of experiments in living that vindicate them. Ultimately, moral claims, like factual claims, need to be tested in experience.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Ann Cudd, Derrick Darby, Don Herzog, Robert Post, Peter Railton, Scott Shapiro, Reva Siegel, and audience members who attended the Lindley Lecture at the University of Kansas for helpful comments.

2. Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), Kindle loc. 273; John Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (London: J. Buckland and J. Johnson, 1788), 35, 38–9; John Newton, *Narrative of Some Remarkable & Interesting Particulars in the Life of the Rev. John Newton* (Glasgow, 1830), 399.

3. Newton, *Narrative of the Life of John Newton*, 78, 69, 84, 87–88.

4. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, loc. 1250, 2067.

5. Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, 1, 4.

6. John Dewey and James Tufts, *Ethics*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, reprint, 1932, *The Later Works*, 1925–1953 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), I.4.

7. “[A]s an idea, “right” introduces an element which is quite outside that of the good. This element is that of exaction, demand The idea of wrong introduces an independent factor: that the act is from the standpoint of moral authority a refusal to meet a legitimate demand. There has to be an idea of the

authoritative claim of what is reasonable in order to convert the Good into the Right The Good is that which attracts; the Right is that which asserts that we ought to be drawn by some object whether we are naturally attracted to it or not.” Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 216.

8. “Even if all men agreed sincerely to act upon the principle of the Golden Rule as the supreme law of conduct, we should still need inquiry and thought to arrive at even a passable conception of what the Rule means in terms of concrete practice under mixed and changing social conditions. Universal agreement upon the abstract principle even if it existed would be of value only as a preliminary to cooperative undertaking of investigation and thoughtful planning; as a preparation, in other words, for systematic and consistent reflection.” Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 178.

9. We could imagine a stateless group regulating its members’ withdrawals of resources from common pools by means of nonlegal moral norms. For purposes of this exposition, the distinction between moral and legal norms is not critical.

10. “Moral theory cannot emerge when there is positive belief as to what is right and what is wrong, for then there is no occasion for reflection. It emerges when men are confronted with situations in which different desires promise opposed goods and in which incompatible courses of action seem to be morally justified. . . . For what is called moral theory is but a more conscious and systematic raising of the question which occupies the mind of any one who in the face of moral conflict and doubt seeks a way out through reflection. In short, moral theory is but an extension of what is involved in all reflective morality.” Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 164.

11. “The difference between customary and reflective morality is precisely that definite precepts, rules, definitive injunctions and prohibitions issue from the former, while they cannot proceed from the latter.” Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 166.

12. Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 226.

13. Table-turning exercises may also help the relatively powerful literally feel the pain and discomfort of the disadvantaged, and thereby learn to respond to it more appropriately. At Beatitudes Campus, an assisted living residence in Arizona, staff members have received the forms of care they give to demented patients — being spoon-fed, being bathed, even using adult diapers — so as to personally experience the feelings of distress and threat often caused by unaware caretakers. They learn that when demented patients express anger toward or physically resist certain forms of care, this may be their way of communicating pain, rather than manifesting a combative and disruptive disposition. They learn to read difficult-to-manage behavior as a kind of claim-making, to discern what kind of claims it is making, and to avoid framing this behavior as “resistance to needed care” but rather as signalling “incompetent care.” Rebecca Mead, “The Sense of an Ending,” *The New Yorker*, 20 May 2013, 99–100.

14. Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

15. I stress that not all violent action, even if it has political aims, amounts to contention. Often it is simply an attempt to get one’s way, without bothering to treat the objects of violence or anyone else as addressees of moral claims. Nevertheless, many violent acts are attempts to make claims in ways that the

addressees cannot ignore. For example, many urban riots in inner cities since the Civil Rights Movement have protested police brutality and express a demand to bring the police to trial and to reform police methods.

16. Margaret Gilbert, "Modeling Collective Belief," *Synthese* 73 (1987): 192–5.

17. Whether it loses its power depends on whether the mode of contention involves direct disobedience of the challenged norm, or other actions that undermine its point. Petitioning the government to abolish slavery did not entail directly disobeying the laws supporting slavery and so did not in itself undermine the continued operation of slavery. However, various forms of slave resistance, such as escape and revolt, directly assaulted the institution of slavery. The British abolitionists' boycott of slave-grown sugar indirectly attacked the slave system by undermining its profitability.

18. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 113–18 stresses this third honor-based source of the power of the abolitionist movement in addressing elites, although he also points to the importance of considerations of honor in mobilizing participation in the movement itself.

19. Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 111.

20. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, loc. 154–62.

21. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, loc. 3008, 3635, 5083.

22. Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 88; Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, loc. 2921–26, 2966–71.

23. Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 79–81, 128. Racist attitudes certainly supported British slavery, and were expressed in other venues. However, it is telling that racist ideology lacked moral authority in Parliament in the early 19th century, although it would be a powerful force there by the middle of the century.

24. Charles Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries, and Social Ties* (Boulder, Col.: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), 216–17.

25. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, loc. 1504, 1783–1812.

26. Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 14.

27. Karen Orren, *Belated Feudalism: Labor, the Law, and Liberal Development in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), ch. 3.

28. St. George Tucker, *Dissertation on Slavery with a Proposal for the Gradual Abolition of It, in the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1796), loc. 588.

29. Eric Foner, *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), loc. 612; Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 57.

30. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 2–13.

31. Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 135.

32. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 5th. ed. (London: Methuen and Co., 1904), I.8, Library of Economics and Liberty, [Http://www.econlib.org/LIBRARY/Smith/smWN.html](http://www.econlib.org/LIBRARY/Smith/smWN.html).

33. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, I.10.2, III.4.

34. Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 123.

35. Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 145–6.
36. Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 158, 153, 161–2, 186.
37. Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 175, 173.
38. Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 203.
39. *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question*, 2nd ed. (London: Thomas Bosworth, 1853).
40. Carlyle, *On the Nigger Question*, 11–12.
41. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: N.Y., 1966), ch. 3.
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