

Moral Literacy

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INTRODUCTION

These lectures explore, in a preliminary way, the circumstances of normal moral agency. Their focus is a familiar fact. To a large extent, contingencies of upbringing determine what we are like as moral agents. Parents pass on or produce psychic deformations that have morally untoward effects. The specific moral values one grows up into are social values, some of which are decent and well-founded, while others are derived from unjust or morally limited institutions. Persons thus arrive at maturity with some virtues, but also with faults they inherit, weaknesses they may not be prepared to resist, and values that may not be adequate to the moral tasks they will come to face. The circumstances of moral agency thus open a gap between the facts of character and the requirements of moral competence and responsibility. My plan is to investigate some of the details of that gap and to offer some conjectures about the moral-theoretic resources necessary to bridge it.

One such resource is to be found in the idea of moral literacy. Let me begin by saying some general things about what it is and why it is of interest. In speaking of moral literacy I mean to be extending the basic “reading and writing” concept of literacy as we often do. We talk of different *literacies*: learned capabilities or skills, having to do with the acquisition and use of knowledge. Becoming literate is not an organic process, like physical growth; nor is it, like speech, the natural outcome of social life. It is a culture-dependent, intentional process. To be literate in a domain is to have the capacity to recognize and perform at some specified level of competency. One can be “barely literate” or “semiliterate.” One can belong to the literati.

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We do not think a person is literate in a domain if all she has possession of is a set of facts. There are things you must be able to do with or because of the facts you have access to as a literate person. You are not musically literate if you can name and date the great nineteenth-century operas, but cannot hear the difference between Mozart and Verdi. Regions of learning where it makes sense to talk of literacy tend not to be closed areas of knowledge. Indeed, to be literate is typically to have a skill that is connected to the possibility of enlarged competence. The degree of competency necessary to count as literate in a domain is disputable and may not be fixed. In talking of moral literacy, I mean to draw on this conceptual background: it is a basic, learned capacity to acquire and use moral knowledge in judgment and action.

Why might such a notion be of interest? By working with a notion in which epistemic access and symbolic production (knowledge and action) are joined, we change the angle of moral inquiry; it is a way of breaking the hold of certain pictures. Questions about the substantive connections between moral knowledge and skill have not been on the table in moral philosophy for some time. Moral knowledge as a philosophical subject is for the most part owned by those who doubt there can be moral knowledge at all. The live issues about knowledge and action are often about practical failure: investigations of the fragile links between belief and action, or between the reasons there are and what we have reason to do. Absent is any very complicated story of what we are like as moral agents: of what we can do.

Equally limiting, though in a different way, have been some of the alternatives to this philosophical project. It has been suggested that the conditions for effective moral knowledge —for confident judgment and sure-footed action —require exemption from the full aspirations of critical or rational thought.¹ “Real” moral

¹ See, for example, Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), or Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

knowledge is local, rooted in tradition or practice. Reflection is not abandoned, but standards of criticism are themselves part of practice, and moral wisdom weighs against a practice in which full-voiced rational inquiry is left free to do its skeptical work. This understanding of morality can be a position of modest, tough-minded realism, or one of celebratory traditionalism.

The idea of moral literacy offers a different thread to follow. It suggests a subject matter and a standard of competency that is presumptively the same across various moral communities. It is a (nearly) universally available skill, yet one that cannot be deployed except in a local idiom. Even more than reading literacy, it is a normative standard of adult competence. It is not necessary to decide whether moral competency is natural: it need not be evolutionarily selected. It also need not be culturally neutral. This is true for reading literacy as well: not all ways of living can survive the transition to reading-literate cultures.

Insofar as it is a capacity for knowing and doing, involving the symbolic manipulation of information as the condition for expressive action, moral literacy is a bridge notion that permits crossing from facts to reasons. Though the link between what is morally true and an agent's reasons is not simple, we should often be able to say that a competent, literate agent has reason to act as she ought, whether or not she does or can see it that way. The analytically suspect separation between motive and value will not be found in explanations of the character of the morally literate agent.

In the course of these lectures I hope to make visible the need for a concept like moral literacy. I also plan to connect it to Kantian ideas of moral motivation, character, and autonomy. Now one might think this is a foolish idea —trying to introduce a new notion in terms of old ones that many no longer take seriously. But the abandonment of some older philosophical concepts is often a function of arguments we may have good reason not to accept.

For example: One of the legacies of modern moral philosophy's Humean parentage is the derogation of motives in general,

and moral motives in particular. These days, to speak in philosophical ways about action, practical judgment, or normative assessment is to speak about reasons and about the connection of reasons to desires, or, as it has become customary to say, an agent's "subjective motivational set": the sorts of things that provide, or fail to provide, causal support for what we can be said to have reasons to do. Curiously, the elements of a motivational set are not motives. If there is talk about "motives," it is to use a term that is generic for "the stuff that moves us" when we act intentionally. There is a little irony here since Hume himself takes motives to be something importantly other than mere desires: motives are necessary to understand character. Humean motives provide the organization of agency; they not only support the causal chain that issues in action, they give evaluative sense to an agent's choice.²

In the first lecture, I embark on a reconsideration of the idea of a distinctly *moral* motive and a first set of arguments for an essentially Kantian view of the matter. We will reencounter the notion of moral literacy as part of a larger story about motivation, responsibility, contingency, and the education of moral agents.

LECTURE I. RESPONSIBILITY AND MORAL COMPETENCE

The idea of a distinctly moral motive is somewhat out of fashion. And certainly very few would now endorse the norm of a *singular* moral motive: the idea that all moral activity does or should arise from one motivational source, or that all moral motivation is of one kind. Two considerations weigh heavily here. The first concerns "the multiplicity of the moral." The idea is that the domain of the moral contains more variety than can be reached by any single motive. Insistence on a singular moral motive would

² That desires for sex or money are taken to be ubiquitous, presumptive motives does not show that motives are desires, but that we believe desires for sex and/or money can be the organizing principle of agency.

compromise the value that the distinct regions of morality have for us: motivational commitments to beneficence, justice, and friendship *should* be different if the actions that belong to these duties are to express their distinctive concerns. The second consideration is about “indirectness”: this is the idea that the *best* motives from the moral point of view may not be moral ones, or not motives that are directly concerned with the moral value of the actions they support. Some who endorse indirectness doubt the very possibility of a distinctly moral motive; others believe that the moral motive, though possible, can be less effective than other motives at producing moral action.³

Some facts can be marshaled on behalf of the idea of a singular motive to moral action. Morality makes claims on our lives and projects, not just about what we may do in their pursuit, but also how we are to think about what we care about. It makes these claims through diverse duties and obligations, ideals and conceptions of what is good, each part claiming (nonexclusively) the special authority that is moral. If there were only distinct motives corresponding to the different claims of, say, justice, fidelity, and beneficence, it is hard to see how “the moral” could have consistent motivational authority over thought and action.

Against *indirectness* we can weigh the presumption that moral actions express some value: for example, our acknowledgment of co-membership in a community of equal persons, or, perhaps, that our moral actions exemplify human excellence. For this to be true, or authentic, actions must arise from concerns that reflect their expressive meaning.⁴ Further, indirectness and other modes of

³ Indirectness concerns are typically about motives, but they need not be; some address the content of moral beliefs. We are to accept and regulate our behavior according to *norms* that are justified, not because they express or contain moral truths, but because in acting on these norms we bring our behavior closer to moral truth than we could if we tried to realize it directly.

⁴ One might also argue that the roles of moral praise and blame (as opposed to reward and punishment) make better sense if their objects are a distinctive way of acting. Although we might praise a child for a successful performance, however motivated, because we believe that learning follows on successful modeling, we do

moral pragmatics generally fit poorly with the reflective areas of our moral lives. The appeal of moral pragmatics is to repair an apparent lack of fit between what morality requires and our epistemic and practical abilities. But where transparency is part of what one aims to be doing — morality is one area where we have such an aim, intimacy another — strategies of indirectness introduce strain, tending to undermine the activities they are supposed to support.

Nonetheless, despite these considerations, the balance of judgment goes against the distinctly moral motive. It is thought that the considerations are not weighty enough, or their concerns can be met in other ways. While I do not think this is so, my intent here is not to reargue their case, but to shift the balance of judgment by arguing for three different, though related things. First, that some of the rationale for endorsing indirectness and for the multiplicity of moral motives depends on an impoverished view of what a motive is and so of the role of motives in moral action and assessment. Second, that without something very much like the singular moral motive, we have striking anomalies in our judgments of responsibility. And third, that the combined responses to one and two point us to a different way of thinking about what a *moral* motive is supposed to do, and thereby to a defense of a distinctly moral motive.

1

One of the major routes to indirectness in ethics is the tendency in modern moral theory to make a sharp distinction between the evaluation of actions and the evaluation of motives. Actions are the primary objects of judgments of right and wrong; motives, the causes of intentional actions, belong to the sphere of virtue. Given the fact that most actions may be variously motivated, there is space to question any purported conceptual connection between

not offer moral praise to an adult without regard to her motives —not if we would address her as an adult.

moral motives and moral actions. It seems natural to suppose that if one sort of motive is to be accorded the status of “moral motive,” the best reason for so privileging it must have to do with its efficacy in producing moral actions. And that is enough to open to the door to indirectness.

Paradoxically, Kantian moral theory has been one of the chief sources for this demotion of the moral motive —at least as it has traditionally been read. If, as Kant is taken to say, an action can be right (because according to duty) regardless of motive, the moral evaluation of motives appears to be secondary to, and independent of, the moral evaluation of actions. This naturally suggests a simple efficacy view of the motive of duty. Of course, Kant also holds that acting *from* duty is the condition for the moral worth of dutiful action. The motive of duty has special status because its attachment to the Categorical Imperative leads to the performance of morally correct action *in a way* that no other motive can. Frequency of success is not the issue; in contrast with the motive of duty, the success of every other motive in securing morally correct action is merely contingent —an accident. What results seems to be a view that accepts the priority of action assessment *and* calls for a moral motive that resists indirectness.

However, as many have noted, it is not clear that it makes sense to prefer noncontingency over frequency of success at performing right actions. Suppose the noncontingent connection of acting from duty is rare or hard to achieve. Given the priority of action assessment, if there is a choice to be made between motivational reliability, however contingent, and conceptual connection between motive and principle (without secure efficacy), the latter might seem to be a moral luxury.⁵ The point is not that we can make no sense of the Kantian view of moral worth. A dutiful action that is prompted by a concern for the fact that the action is morally re-

⁵ A parallel argument can be made with respect to motives to moral action, such as sympathy or compassion, that express values other than connection to principle. If the motive of duty is not preferred on grounds of frequency, the exclusion of other dimensions of efficacy that a motive such as sympathy brings appears arbitrary.

quired *is* a different kind of action than one prompted by a non-moral motive. There may be good reasons to think actions done from duty are special — as, say, an expression of our capacity for autonomous willing. But that is not to explain the *moral* value of the motive: why, if we care about morality, should we want such a motive?⁶ Absent such explanation, Kantian theory seems to endorse separate assessment of action and motives, and secondary *moral* status for motives.

Some direct explanation of the central importance of motives in moral assessment can be drawn from Hume, the other pillar of our tradition: “ ’Tis evident, that when we praise any actions, we regard only the motives that produced them, and consider the actions as signs or indications of certain principles in the mind and temper.”⁷ For Hume, the primary object in the moral assessment of action is an agent’s character, her disposition to be moved in certain ways. What matters is the affection of a parent for her children, the humanity of a benefactor. It is the imputed motive, the condition of character, that “bestows a merit on the actions” (*Treatise*, p. 478). Frequency of success in action is not an appropriate measure of moral merit, for what is of primary value with respect to a motive is the kind of concern an agent has and displays in and through her actions.⁸

And this seems right. The moral terrain between parent and child is not comprised of any set of required actions; rather, it consists in a norm for the “attention we give to our offspring” (*Treatise*, p. 478). Failure to provide the necessities of life can

⁶ There is a further problem. Any theoretical rationale derived from considerations of autonomy or the analysis of unconditioned goodness fails to match up with our ordinary sense of the moral value of action and motives.

⁷ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 477 (hereafter cited as *Treatise*).

⁸ That moral distinctions are held to arise from “natural” motives does not imply that there is no category of moral motive in Hume. Moral motives are those whose presence or attribution inclines us to moral pleasure and praise. (I distinguish, as Hume does, a moral motive from a motive of duty: the latter is the default motive we make use of when our natural interests fail us.)

be tragic, but, depending on the circumstances, may not mark a moral failing. It is a sign, a symptom of *possible* moral failure. The relevant moral question to ask is about the underlying nature of parental attention: the *way* a parent considers a child's needs, their felt priority, the kinds of efforts made, the way failure is experienced. Is parental attention, as it ought to be, unconditional, beneficent, and specific?

Humean "moral" motives are valued neither as "good desires" nor as the efficient causes of right action. They are not valued for their objects, nor because they contain a conceptual connection to moral principle. Their value derives from what they naturally contain and express: facts of character. If what is important to us is the well-being of children, it is reasonable for us to be concerned about the character of parents and only derivatively about specific kinds of action. We value attentive concern because the actions that matter flow from what we care about.⁹

The attractive directness of the view does not last. If we begin with the distinct motives that mark the different regions of moral attention and concern (the domain to which Hume's "moral sense" responds), it does not follow that the cluster of motives judged to be good can coexist in one person. We want persons to be moved by consideration of gratitude, humanity, natural affection, generosity, and industry; but there is no natural, inevitable fit, no general template, that directs their joint instantiation.¹⁰ Even if all of the approved-of tendencies promoted the same thing, they need not promote it in a mutually consistent way. Solutions are found in "social necessity," which, to take a Humean example, may direct a gendered division of moral labor if the virtues of good parenting conflict with those of market entrepreneurship. Such solutions are unavoidably pragmatic, not morally compelling.

⁹ Outside the sphere of justice, questions of "right action" are left to custom and the practical judgment of correctly motivated agents.

¹⁰ *Treatise*, p. 589. Likewise, if we have an aesthetic sense, it will not necessarily pick out objects whose co-presence is aesthetically pleasing.

Further difficulty comes with the introduction of rules and standards needed to secure stability of judgment across persons.¹¹ They constrain what we “should” find morally pleasing: what we praise in moral practice is not the original natural tendency as it strikes the moral sense, but a motivational descendant of an adjusted complex of dispositions and natural motives. This move to indirect justification costs more than transparency; it opens morality to the influence of nonmoral concerns. Suppose our rules say that giving spare change to panhandlers does not express moral concern, but giving to the United Way does. We will not lack explanations that rationalize the distinction.¹² The problem is that some of the time such explanations will truly be rationalizations: after-the-fact justifications for distinctions that arise for other reasons. What counts as morality is made vulnerable to arbitrary distinctions pressed on it by interests of power, wealth, and status.¹³

If the traditional Kantian account cannot explain the moral point of a moral motive, the standard Humean account, which begins with a convincing explanation of the moral value of certain natural motives, falls prey to pragmatics and indirectness problems.

¹¹ See the discussion of rules and general standards at the end of book 3 of the *Treatise*. One finds here an indication of why, though the natural virtues are introduced first, their full account attends the lengthy discussion of artificial virtues. The moral *distinctions* that mark out the virtues are, indeed, natural; the actual virtues of character depend on convention.

¹² A utilitarian preference for organized charity; the need to maintain the civil condition of public spaces.

¹³ We should be clear about two things that are *not* the case. First, these problems of pragmatics cannot be remedied by appeal to any motive of duty. For Hume, this is an analytically dependent, second-best motive. It is what a person relies on to make good a natural deficiency (a lack of generosity, say), by bringing himself to act as he knows, by experience, a generous person would act (*Treatise*, p. 479). Second, we should not think that the problems creating unity of character could be resolved by appeal to the point of view of an impartial spectator. The impartial spectator is a possible, if idealized, human moral agent, who must therefore share the conditions of this difficulty. The issues that drive us to pragmatics are not defects or conditions of moral fallibility. They are rather a consequence of the nature of the Humean notion of the moral good and of its place as a component in the development of normal human agents.

2

There is another way to think about the moral motive that can be drawn from a better reading of Kant. The actual object of primary moral assessment is not an action, but an evaluative principle (a “maxim”) that represents what the agent intends to do *as* she judges it to be in some sense good. The evaluative content of a maxim comes from the agent’s *motive*.¹⁴ The Kantian moral motive is thus not a causally effective intentional state, *of* value because its object is good: acting from *duty* is what moral action *is*. Center stage is occupied not by the action or the action’s effects, but by the agent’s deliberative choice.¹⁵ Actions that are merely “according to duty” present a defeasible sign of right action —the action that would be performed by an agent moved by moral concern.¹⁶ This makes better Kantian moral sense too, for what makes an action morally wrong is the incompatibility of its maxim with the proper regard owed persons as ends-in-themselves: one fails to be *moved* in the right way by the fact that persons have a different status than things.¹⁷

One does not need to be a Kantian to appreciate the point of assessing actions under an agent-relative evaluative description. If this seems not to be the case, that is because many actions —and

¹⁴ Standard assessment schema might be: *A* proposes to do *X* that will bring about *E* because she thinks *E* is good, and sufficiently so to justify doing *X*; *B* proposes doing *Y* that will bring about *F* because she thinks *Y* is necessary or enjoyable to an extent that justifies doing *Y*, even though *Y* brings about *F*, a regrettable effect. Assessment addresses evaluative choices: for *A*, the question is whether the end justifies the means; for *B*, it concerns the grounds for discounting the moral weight of the untoward effect.

¹⁵ What distinguishes duty and honor as motives is not that they give agents different objects to achieve through action (morality vs. glory), but that they are expressed in different evaluative principles that agents so motivated take to support good reasons.

¹⁶ That is, one misreads Kant if one takes “according to duty” to mark an independent standard of right action.

¹⁷ Actions as such (regarded as events with effects) can neither be compatible with nor incompatible with respect for persons. Only actions under a description that represents their deliberative origin are assessable in this way. We need to know the terms in which an agent views her action as justified treatment of a person.

especially the actions in philosophers' examples —are of a type that seems to require no such interpretation. We normally take it to be self-evident that a punch to the nose or a racial insult is morally wrong. But we also accept the idea that actions, even these obvious actions, are only signs of moral qualities: reliable, but fallible, signs of deliberative choice. The punch could be an attempt to save a life, the insult an involuntary utterance of someone with Tourette's syndrome. What is significant is that when such atypical scenarios obtain, they do not *excuse* the agent for an untoward action, but defeat the attribution of moral wrongness to the action itself. This is enough to show that assumptions about deliberate choice were implicit in the self-evident examples as well.¹⁸

There are a few areas of morality where identification of an action-type may be sufficient for negative moral judgment: absolute prohibitions or moral taboos are examples. They represent regions with a special moral role; barriers must be thrown up so that opportunity for deliberative justification is made unavailable. *Nothing* counts as a reason for incest. As special or limiting cases, they do not provide counterexamples to the thesis that, in general, action assessment depends on the evaluative principle the agent employs to justify her action.¹⁹

Suppose one thought that, to the contrary, whether a helping action is benevolent or self-promoting, it *is* a helping action: viz., an action that meets a need. We can judge its "to be doneness" and treat the rest separately as questions about the agent's virtue.

¹⁸ I am not arguing that good motives are sufficient to insulate agents from charges of wrongdoing. One can, as I do, insist that motives (good and bad) determine *what* an agent does *and* hold that agents who intend to act well can be morally in error. They may be mistaken about the good they would pursue, or be deliberatively in error about the relative or justificatory value of means and ends, and so forth. There are many complex issues that cannot be addressed here about the point of view, first or third personal, from which moral assessment is made.

¹⁹ Some might take the fact of "rights" as evidence that I go too far: whether I have violated a right is a matter of fact, not dependent on evaluative intention. I do not think so. Whether rights are infringed, violated, or overridden depends on a congeries of considerations, some conventional, some deliberative. A right describes a specific kind of normative space around a moral concern that preframes possible deliberative approaches.

But when we ask whether a helping action is *X* or *Y*, it is often its “to be done-ness” that is in question. We say a helping action is exploitative and so wrong, because of the way the recipient of help is regarded by the person helping (regardless of the outcome). The evaluative regard is the wrong-making feature of *the action*; it is not a case of the right action done the wrong way. And what of the self-promoting helping action? If it seems not to be wrong, that is because we often have reason to mind less being the object of advantage than being in someone’s power.²⁰ Here Hume and Kant will agree: setting questions of justice aside, external actions are to be regarded primarily as “signs” of the way we care about things —of what we value. If the moral assessment of actions looks to motives, motives are part of the full *moral* account of what an action is.

Recall that our question was whether a distinctly moral motive would contribute anything beyond frequency of success for morally right actions. We can now see that there is something odd about the question. If it is not actions per se that are the objects of moral judgment, but actions under a description that is in part determined by an agent’s motive, then the very idea of “frequency of success” is misleading. Success at what? Different motives may yield the same behavior, but, from the moral point of view, different actions. *Were* the contribution of the moral motive just to secure success, there would have to be *another* motive that carried the agent’s deliberative evaluation. The value of the success-insuring motive would then be dependent on the value of the evaluative motive. Such a moral motive would do no independently moral work. If we are seeking a primary moral role for a moral motive, it should reside in its contribution of distinctive evaluative content.

²⁰ Partly this is so if we think that the benefit is an independent effect. It is clearer with omissions. The decision to withhold help because helping is not self-promoting, or the decision to withhold help when not helping is self-promoting, is much less plausibly read in terms of separate action and virtue evaluations.

But is there some specific moral content that it is reasonable to want all morally successful actions to have? Some one way all deliberative choice should go? We appear to have come all this way only to rejoin the problems of a singular moral motive, now sharpened by the rejection of the action-motive distinction. If the motive is central to morally relevant action-description —carrying an agent’s conception of the value of her action —specific moral content would appear to introduce unacceptable monotonic value. We are not trying to do one “moral” thing when we pay a debt, lend a helping hand, thank a benefactor, or resist injustice.²¹ What we *value* when we act these different ways is different. So if there is reason to bring motives into action assessment, it seems a good reason to bring in a whole set of them. But then what would make these motives moral would seem to have to be something external to their evaluative content. We seem to lose the idea of a motive that is both morally distinctive and morally valuable.

If this seems to exhaust the alternatives, I think it is because of the *way* we suppose a motive does its work. Philosophical discussion tends to work with a few simple models of motive: roughly, motives as desires (broadly understood), motives as complexes of belief, desire, and (possibly) intention, motives as dispositional states with objects. In all of these cases the *work* of the motive is done the same way: a motive functions as an action-generating structure, a psychological state or disposition that causes the agent to act as she believes she should. That is why it seems that if moral agents do not always act “the same way” when they are responsive to various different moral claims, there cannot be one moral motive; there must be a number of different dispositions (motivating conditions) that the morally good agent will have. The new claim —that the motive contains an agent’s conception of value in acting —just folds into these accounts of how a motive works. To resist this, I want to approach the moral motive through a dif-

²¹ There are different marks of salience, different ranges of (morally) appropriate response and affect, and different (moral) objects of action.

ferent route, taking as a point of departure its role in the development of normal moral character.

3

The first thing to note is a truism. Moral character begins at a time prior to the possibility of reflection. It is shaped, somewhat haphazardly, by persons whose sincere efforts to bring us up well are partly undermined by ignorance, accident, and, among other things, their own moral and human failings. Most of us therefore arrive at reflection partly disabled, probably capable of secure moral performance in some areas of our lives, liable to dysfunction when challenged in others. Aspects of our own behavior may appear mysterious to us; some areas of disorder may be off-limits to examination. By the time we are able to ask questions about this, those who shape our character may not know or be able to say what they have done. Beyond the ordinary issues of self-opacity, there are barriers to acknowledgment and insight that are set up to protect the integrity or felt decency of the self. Nonetheless, most of us are expected to come to adulthood able to respond to moral considerations in a responsible way: able to measure the weight of moral reasons, act morally, and transmit moral values to our children. The nature of the background facts and the task set a developmental agenda: *something* has to be able to provide the organizing structure necessary for the formation of a stably moral character, without having to resolve the ruptures and instabilities of character even a pretty decent upbringing can leave behind. I want to suggest that an important part of this work may be done, when it is, by something it will make sense to call “the moral motive.”

In looking for an account of moral motivation that is true to the perturbations of real-time character development, I do not mean to launch a psychological investigation of moral pathology. The object is to understand, from the side of morality, what moral motivation must look like, *given* a realistic picture of human char-

acter and of our routine success as moral agents. Discussion of moral education (the formation of normal moral character) was once a central part of moral philosophy. Why it is no longer central is a question worth asking. A partial answer lies in the moment selected as the target of philosophical inquiry. Much recent philosophical discussion starts with an adult who has some particular set of dispositions and asks: What, given just these dispositions, can a person have reason to do?²² We do not ask: What dispositions *must* a normal adult have, if she is to do the things we expect a normal person to do? One might think this is a prior and substantive question. After all, the lexicon of possible motives that bear on morality is neither hard-wired nor singular. Our capacity for acquiring moral motives is open to development in various directions, not all of them equally adequate. We lose the possibility of thinking about such issues by taking the “however-formed” adult to be the model of a normal moral agent. Driven by essentially skeptical concerns, we in effect make moral theory a passive, descriptive project. As I will argue, it is then hard to make sense of some moral judgments I think we clearly need to make.

In particular, one wants to avoid the conclusion that the actions persons can be held responsible for are limited to the range of actions they are motivationally or psychologically capable of at a time. If, for example, we believe that childhood abuse creates an adult disposition to abuse, and that the disposition to abuse works through compelling rationalizations about provocation, desert, and the like, then we may find it harder than it should be to hold (some) abusers responsible for what they do. There is a sense in which they cannot do otherwise. Of course there is a sense in which they can. Avoiding this impasse, paying attention to the conditions that make the right judgments possible, will point us toward a dif-

²² I ignore for now the way in which the dispositions a normal adult is taken to have are identified: that it is simply assumed that there is neither an objective good toward which rational agents are by nature disposed nor a conception of practical rationality whose principles give reasons for action or restraint on their own.

ferent, more “active” role for moral theory in an account of moral motivation and character.

Let us examine a more familiar, lower-profile kind of abuse. Imagine that neurotic and psychologically abusive parents cause a child to have a disposition to casual cruelty toward intimates. We later find an adult who gets it wrong about what is fun, what is danger, what it means to trust and be trusted; someone who seeks and betrays intimacy, who is forever at a loss about how things can go so wrong; someone who also gets unacknowledged pleasure in the distress he orchestrates. The form of cruelty, a demand for trust followed by covert betrayal, repeats the pattern of childhood abuse. Such a person is damaged or morally deformed. He is probably also a carrier: liable to pass on to his children his own difficulties with love and trust. But he is not in any deeply pathological sense an abnormal agent; he is “normal enough.”

We can imagine saying to him: “Don’t be cruel!”—even when we know that his cruelty arises from aspects of his character formed in the out-of-reach early childhood nexus of distorted parental authority and love. The explanation for this is not about degrees of causality. It is that the cruel actions are in some ordinary way chosen for themselves and form part of what the casual abuser thinks good—something that is *not* the case with, for example, obsessive actions, where the causality is more direct. For the abuser, there is pleasure where there should be none. There is repetition without absence of control: the details of the abusive situation are under manipulative control; otherwise, there is no satisfaction.

The pleasure and the *pattern* of failure introduce something important. They mark the reason why, though child abuse runs in families, as may casual cruelty to intimates, agents who inherit such moral disabilities can be responsible for their actions. Where there is evidence that someone is on balance a normal moral agent, if there is enough untoward going on in his life, we blame him for not seeing it. After a certain point we expect a normal agent to

recognize patterns and to take seriously the complaints of others. Morality need not tolerate obdurate blindness. Of course, no one can see everything; features of our character really do blind us to some things; it may even be necessary, in some deep practical sense, that we not attend to everything. But there are limits. And it is an important question of theory as well as practice how we identify and make sense of them.

If we see the normal enough abuser as an example of passive moral theory's "however-formed" adult, we will be tempted to a picture of him as having a character constituted by his desires and defects plus some analytically posterior connection to morality. We will see his failure as about weakness —his attachment to morality either locally absent (gappy) or insufficiently strong. If passive theory judges him responsible, it will not be because he has a defect, but because he succumbs to it. Responsibility for his action is then indirect, following only as the gap or the weakness is correctly imputed to him by an independent normative story. This is not the right case to make against the abuser. And it does not adequately distinguish the abuser from other cases of failure in a way that explains what he is responsible *for*. The scope of responsibility concerns the assignment of further moral predicates. The abuser's actions are not just faulty and imputable, they are cruel. Consider someone who behaves similarly to the abuser, but whose pain-causing failures to sustain intimate trust are caused by obsessive anxiety or fear of being engulfed. Her actions may be faulty and blameworthy; they are neither cruel nor abusive.

Because it holds "the moral" separate from or consequent on other motivational systems, the passive story tends to focus on the just prior-to-action state of motives, ignoring the complex etiology and structure of moral disability. This would be reasonable if moral development were a contingent and separate matter — a however-effective means to acquire an independently defined state of (good) character. All we *could* say then is that, as a result of their pasts, both agents lack something a person with morally good

character has. They are incapable of practically effective evaluation: nothing in their current motives would have led them to act otherwise, if only they had noticed *X*, or reasoned more fully about *Y*. Given their defects and disabilities, they could not notice more or deliberate more effectively.

To make the case against the casually cruel abuser —to defend holding him responsible for cruel and abusive action— involves two stages of argument. First, taking in more than the agent's state just prior to action, we note that in most of his dealings with people he is routinely moral. He is not aggressive; he probably keeps promises and tells the truth most of the time; he may even be impersonally beneficent. He knows what moral reasons are, and what response to a moral claim involves. The capacity to identify and be responsive to a wide range of moral considerations is evidence of a pattern of development that satisfies normal conditions of imputability and responsibility, extending to nonintentional wrongdoing.

Second, what makes it reasonable to accuse him of more than nonvoluntary wrongdoing —of acting cruelly— even given that he acts as he does as a result of a deformation of character, is the fact that he takes pleasure *in his agency* in the untoward outcomes. It is a sign that he acts from his own motives, not as a result of causes. This lets us see his actions flowing from his conception of the good. He is not a vehicle moved by impulses; he is no victim; his actions, and their moral predicates, are fully his.²³

Obviously, to get it right about the full range of normal agents will require a much more complex story about moral motivation: about how motives develop and about the kind of baggage they may carry; about the ways a sense of self and a conception of the good are formed; and about the ways early trauma (in particular) can short-circuit mature practical judgment. That's not an account

²³ The two stages suggest a stronger conclusion. Given normal moral agency, we can distinguish among causes of action in a way that lends support to some compatibilist ambitions.

I can give here. But there is another part too. Moral theory must provide a *normative* account of the structure of moral motivation and character—how agents *should* develop if they are to be morally effective agents. I do want to say more about the conditions for such an account, but, first, there is a last issue raised by the case of the casual abuser.

Given the form of a normal human life, and the casual abuser's particular need for intimacy, it is unlikely that he can avoid error. He is very poorly equipped to negotiate the pleasures and temptations of intimacy where there is unequal power. Some might say that even so, it is still a function of circumstances that he acts badly—a matter of moral luck—a relevant fact the preferred account ignores.²⁴ One wants to be wary of this move; it collapses some important distinctions, making it difficult to appreciate the evaluative role of motivating states of character.

Moral luck is about the fit of character to circumstances and conditions of action. Although we can explain the abuser's predicament in terms of lack of fit, we also have reason to think that his problem is deeper and not a matter of luck at all. The tension here is a result of two different ways we think about moral character. On the one hand, there is the passive theorist's "character is that which leads you to act well," which leaves it open whether we might not all be, at bottom, lucky abusers—like flatlanders with acrophobia. We have just looked at what this sort of account leaves out. On the other hand, we have inherited a picture from Aristotelian ethics that suggests that possession of a good character disposes one to act well across an indeterminate range of circumstances and conditions of action. This is because a person with a good character does not find reason-giving the sorts of considerations that typically lead persons to act wrongly. It's like an inocu-

²⁴ The interesting difference between this and the "X would have been a Nazi had he lived in 1942 Germany" scenario lies in the fact that the region where the casual abuser goes wrong is so centrally normal. For the casual abuser to escape wrongful action, *his* life would have to have been unusual—separate, for example, from other persons and the possibilities of intimacy and dependence.

lation. One is not tempted by pleasures had at another's expense; the power in unchecked aggression isn't appealing; and so on. Much more than attachment to abstract morality is involved. There is a thoughtful detachment or disengagement from the various things that draw us into immorality. What is attractive in sources of temptation is understood and deliberately foregone. We are inclined to think that, absent catastrophe, a person with a good character in this sense is immune to moral luck. She would not have been a Nazi; she can negotiate the shoals of natural intimacy. I think that this kind of account, though appealing, makes it too easy to explain what the abuser lacks.

There is something odd about the Aristotelian picture. It suggests a kind of fixity to the moral world that belies experience—about the kinds of actions that are right and wrong, and about the range of temptations. How could even the very best Athenian upbringing (to say nothing of the best suburban upbringing of the 1960s) prepare one to meet our end-of-the-century questions about race and gender, poverty, or the physical condition of the world?²⁵ There are new and difficult temptations; the pace of moral change makes it hard to imagine what it could mean to be prepared.

It is not exactly a failing of Aristotelian theory that it lacks elements that render it fit for the circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is not clear that it was intended in that sense to provide guidance to contemporary Athenians either. Aristotle's account of moral character includes a piece about the social and material setting in which the virtuous person is to live: a city of modest size with a particular kind of participatory politics, a generous level of material well-being, carefully controlled moral education, and a class within which a man of good character could

²⁵ Obviously, poverty, discrimination, and pollution are not new phenomena. What has changed is their moral meaning. Partly this is so because other things have changed. The degree and scope of American wealth makes the degree and effects of its absence in the South Bronx, in parts of South Central Los Angeles, and in impoverished rural communities unthinkable, because so clearly avoidable. We also have a better understanding of causes that makes the demand for change integral to moral decency.

experience himself as an equal among equals. In such a setting virtuous character *is* security to moral action. As far as is humanly possible, the morally unexpected is legislated away. For the virtuous person, though success in action is still contingent, it is not really a matter of luck at all.

This idealization of the conditions of human living is part of the point of Aristotelian ethics. Aristotle's question was about the human good —about how, as a natural species, we might flourish. The solution picks out a life according to reason in circumstances in which reason *can* be an effective guide to a good life.²⁶ Aristotle's sensitivity to the power that chance and adversity have over success leads him to describe a human habitat in which our rational powers and pleasures could safely and fully develop. Like Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Ethics* is a revolutionary theory.

Mostly we do not have such overtly or thoroughgoing revolutionary aspirations for moral theory. If we are to hold agents morally competent across an extended range of conditions of action, we do better, at least at the outset, thinking about moral character and motivation as something that can arise through normal upbringing in quite diverse circumstances, ones that may include some range of moral deformation, but do not, for that, undermine our status as responsible agents or our responsibility for what we do.

4

We might start with the idea that normal moral character is built on what I call "moral literacy": a capacity to read and respond to the basic elements of a moral world. It begins with the primitive and necessary acknowledgment of the difference between persons and things and the practically effective understanding of what it means for moral claims to be attached to persons.²⁷ This

²⁶ We might think of the politics of Aristotle's ethics as a prescription for some of the injuries of empire.

²⁷ It may be that without the wherewithal to distinguish persons from other sorts of things in a reason-giving way a child lacks necessary conditions for develop-

idea of moral status, reflected in the way moral reasons enter agents' deliberations, is a formal requirement for something to count as a conception of morality.²⁸ The requirement can be met in different ways. Claims that rest on the status of persons can be absolute, blocking treatment of persons as "mere" means to no matter how great a good, or the claims can be more modest, introducing a threshold that we need special reasons to cross, a thumb on some scale of balance. Moral status is elaborated through a culturally based lexicon of basic moral wrongs and injuries that are more or less fixed and easily recognized by a morally literate person.²⁹

Moral literacy as such is not a minimal conception of morality, but a minimal moral capacity. Its possession and exercise does not make one a good or even minimally decent person. That remains a function of one's substantive beliefs and practices. It is, however, what makes a person the proper subject of moral predicates. As a practical disposition that enables recognition of morally salient basic features of circumstance and action, as well as the regulatory capacity to do what is seen to be right, it is sufficient to secure agents' imputability for the effects of most of their actions and responsibility for the causal potential of their dispositions.

ment or even survival (autistic children are sometimes thought to lack such ability). We might think, by analogy, of the necessity for acquiring concepts of causality. Whether or not the capacity to acquire causal concepts is innate, some experiences and ways of thinking about causes have to be provided to position a child to acquire causal concepts at all. Only then can she navigate the world in a human way. Success here, however, is no guarantee that a child could develop the further capacity to, say, distinguish good science from magic.

²⁸ Though some moral theories (e.g., classical utilitarianism) expand the domain of the moral subject to include all sentient beings, I believe the distinction between persons and nonpersons remains fundamental; it is rather that not all nonpersons are necessarily things. It is not clear that an upbringing framed in a single calculus of value applied across all sentient beings could produce a human character at all.

²⁹ In circumstances of change and awkward fit between character and human habitat, the literacy metaphor is especially appropriate: it captures the idea of a fundamental mode of moral orientation that provides basic skills to interpret moral phenomena that press at the boundaries—whales and fetuses, moral claims for minority cultures, and so on.

Not all conceptions of morality that build on a minimal moral capacity are on a par. Each sets a direction; not all directions are equally good. Because we are malleable beings, what fixity there is in our natures admits of an extraordinary diversity of expression. That is how there is room to argue on moral grounds for or against a given conception of character as a constraint on normal development. Agents whose moral concerns develop merely as an element within a mix of their overall concerns and interests will lack some capacity to recognize the nature of moral authority: they may find it unintelligible that (some) moral constraints cannot be overridden by some amount of piled-up nonmoral values. Others who view morality as the interior arm of external norm-enforcement may try to get a fix on how much discomfort or guilt they can tolerate in pursuit of some contrary-to-morality project. And so on. Persons so described *are* developmentally possible *and* normatively impaired. And this is so however they may otherwise be advantaged. The question is not whether our moral theory contains an accurate description of our development, but whether we *can* develop the character moral theory prescribes.

The manipulative abuser is someone who has much more than a minimal moral capacity; his moral deformation is limited and selective. But it is because he possesses and manifests the minimal capacity that we feel no compunction in holding him responsible for actions that he in some sense cannot help. Although he may not be able to alter the complex of habits and anxieties that dispose him to acts of casual cruelty, his actions are not beyond his reach. He has the capability to identify them for what they are, if not the first time, then soon enough. And he is able, if he chooses, to avoid causing injury.

A minimal moral capacity functions like many other practical capacities that “license” behavior. Competence at driving a car requires some mechanical skill, recognition of salient features of road and traffic, knowledge of governing norms, *and* the capacity

to resist temptations to speed or run red lights at 3 A.M. Competence does not make one a good driver, but it puts one on the road responsible for a variety of unexpected outcomes, including some that may be the product of one's own limits or incapacities. We expect that a driver with a blind spot over her right shoulder will, over time, discover the gap in her visual field, appreciate its danger, and compensate for it. She learns to turn around more completely, or she adjusts her mirrors to a different angle. That the blind spot is a fixed feature of her visual field gives her a task, not an excuse. Likewise, we may say, the abuser's guilty pleasures, the complaints and hostile reactions of his intimates, provide adequate indication of moral fault. His moral task is not to remake his disposition. He may lack the resources to effect such change; it may not be possible. It *is* morally incumbent on him, however, to change the angle of his encounters. He is at a minimum obliged to identify and master the occasions of temptation.³⁰

The abuser's disability poses special problems: personality deformations, unlike blind spots, can retain essential connections to their history and so to a person's sense of self. If he is repeating his father's pattern of abusive behavior, there may be deeply seated barriers to self-understanding and change: to see the truth about himself might require accepting unwanted truths about his father. But these are barriers to wholeness and health, not excusing conditions for blindness about the nature and effects of his actions. If he cannot mend his disability, stopping the abusive behavior may cost him things he values: spontaneity, casual confidence, at the

³⁰ Of course, being a moral subject, having a minimal moral character, may not be sufficient for moral success. That is, even if the abuser comes to pay sufficient attention to the morally untoward features of his actions and dispositions, though he may resolve to do better, he may well lapse into old patterns. His character is sufficient to impute fault and in some cases to assign blame; it need not be sufficient to guarantee success. One also doesn't want to exaggerate his difficulties. Getting it right, morally, is not equally easy for everyone; it is not unfair that this be so. Confusion about this last point has led both to excesses of excuse and to prizing as virtuous those struggles that yield success. Overcoming misfortune is indeed to be valued; it is not the same thing as virtue.

extreme, the possibility of intimate relationships.³¹ At some point we revoke a license to drive.

If the conditions that give rise to moderately abusive dispositions are not so rare, the concept of ordinary moral character—the character of a moral subject—must accommodate these moral deformations of disposition and desire to which we are prone. My conjecture is that the not so bare idea of a minimal moral capacity does this work. It secures a capacity to distinguish persons and things that is responsive to morally basic facts of injury, offense, etc. In conjunction with the idea of basic moral literacy, it establishes common terms in which moral assertion and reasoning take place. When I am told that behavior I think of as good-natured play humiliates, I know at once that, although there may be room to debate whether what I am doing really is wrong, there is no room to debate whether, if it is, I can describe it as I wish or as “feels right.” And if my teasing humiliates, I must stop it. The possession of a minimal moral capacity is in this way consistent with a degree of moral deformation. Such dispositions can be corrected *for*, even if they cannot themselves be changed. Even the obsessive who cannot control his behavior can remove himself and his behavior from harm-causing way, once he knows the moral significance of what he does.³²

Now it doesn’t take much of a stretch to recognize that the singular and distinctly moral motive is a good fit for the minimal moral capacity. It is a motive that, by itself, may not enable the agent to act well in the circumstances in which she finds herself; it may not, by itself, provide a sufficiently tooled evaluative principle to support sensitive judgment. But by itself, it is sufficient

³¹ Thus, if having been an abused child disposes one to abuse children, one may not have the right to be a parent.

³² It is clear by this point that the minimal moral capacity lies somewhere between a capacity and a disposition. As a basic structural element of character, it is like a disposition or ability; in its potential for development and increasing literacy, it is more like a capacity. For present purposes, I will treat it as sharing elements of both—as a capacity / disposition.

to direct the agent away from recognizing harm. (That is why a repeated fault can amount to much more than multiple instances of the same thing.) Like the law's satisfaction with a defendant's knowing the difference between right and wrong for legal responsibility, the presence of the singular moral motive would be sufficient to mark one a responsible moral subject, securing some of the practical truth of "ought implies can."

However, the minimal disposition with its singular moral motive cannot be the end of the moral story about motives and character. The casual abuser's moral flaw is complex: not only is he unable to act well, but when he acts badly, his actions are cruel. Though sufficient to keep one out of moral trouble, the minimal moral motive does not reach into character; it does not make one a good person. What the abuser lacks, what someone had a moral obligation to provide, was an upbringing in which humanly necessary trust was not purchased at the price of a blind eye to minor cruelty. Early experience and moral teaching *ought to have* given him a disposition that responded to vulnerability as an occasion for, say, care and support, not ripe territory for abuse. And so on. This is all quite sensible. However, it appears to introduce a new kind of moral motive, or set of moral motives, whose connection to the minimal or singular moral motive is not at all clear.

Suppose we thought that the minimal moral capacity (/disposition) was something that, like language, arises in and through the activities of ordinary child-rearing, not as a primitive skill (taught with an eye to some ideal), but as an element in the repertoire of abilities that make us human (able to develop various ideals, and also deformations). It would be odd to think that there are or could be two distinct moral capacities, as though an agent first acquires a minimal moral capacity, and then, as she matures, acquires a wholly different, more complex one to replace it. There would be the same oddness in the thought that the linguistic activity of infants was "baby language" —acquired to suit the needs and abilities of infants — supplanted later on by something entirely new.

Little in our development looks like that: crawling is integrally connected to walking, babble to speech, mimicry to mature social relations. It is equally implausible to imagine a normal adult with *no more than* a minimal moral capacity: someone for whom the substance of morality remains wholly external; who is indifferent to the purpose and point of moral requirements —to their value.

I would conjecture that the minimal moral motive both serves as a starting point for a more developed moral capacity *and* keeps a distinctive role in developed moral character. In the latter role, one might recall Kant's man of sympathetic temper: his capacity to act from duty alone is a resource, something he can rely on in a crisis.³³ Hume's "sense of morality or duty" works to a similar end — a disposition to be drawn on when natural motives fail. Hume's agent can condemn himself for lacking a natural motive he judges it is morally good to have. He recognizes his deficiency in the same way as he would another's: through observation of *repeated* failure to act in the ways that a person with good character would. A "sense of morality or duty" allows him to act as one ought; it is a default mode of a more developed moral capacity —a sort of *backstop* motive.³⁴

We do not need Hume or Kant to appreciate the role of a backstop motive. It is a general feature of practical life. Many of the things we normally do, and even enjoy doing, go dead for us from time to time. The reasons that normally suffice to make us responsive and active fall on impassive ears. When we know that we must nevertheless act, we can. We depend on having motivational resources to pick up the slack on a bad day. We also hope our lives are not dominated by such motivationally arid moments.

³³ Of course the value of "acting from duty" is not exhausted in this role; the form of willing that acting from duty represents is the general form of willing of a person of good character.

³⁴ *Treatise*, p.479. Hume's moral agent may possess a moral sense without possessing the natural motives of virtue. He can be moved by his moral judgment, then, though not in the way that a virtuous agent would be moved.

But why think that the moral backstop motive is related to a motive belonging to the development of moral literacy? Might not the backstop motive be something new that emerges only as a mark of moral maturity, providing a kind of moral reliability and steadiness, responsive to the full range of an agent's moral concerns?³⁵ There are such virtues of maturity, but it is not where the backstop motive resides. Some of the things we learn to do early on that make possible later strengths and skills continue to reside in a crisis-available form in the more mature ability. It is not necessary that this be so (here real literacy is not the right analogy), but it can be, and likely will be, if the default role is made part of the culture of the mature skill. Though fatigue and stress can render one responsively inert, most of us can still register pain-as-such as a *prima facie* sign of wrongdoing and sufficient reason to desist from the action causing it until we are more confident in our judgment. Though our knowledge of what pain is will become more sophisticated, the default reaction to pain-as-such does not. The backstop or default moral motive is responsive to moral salience as such; like the early stages of the minimal moral capacity, there is direct regulation of action (i.e., without deliberative involvement).

The role of the moral backstop motive is not restricted to maintaining our moral resolve (therapy for a weak will). As an evaluative element in one's minimal moral character, it supports a basic capacity for recognizing and responding to moral facts. It is unlike a more developed capacity in that it does not provide sensitivity to nuance, fine-grained control, the careful integration of moral action into the fabric of ordinary life, but its function is not restricted to the familiar features of moral practice.

Access to this two-tier motivational structure can be essential in circumstances where we are faced with unexpected moral claims. In the face of demands that we respond to certain facts that we have hitherto not thought morally relevant, demands that we alter familiar and unquestioned patterns of action, our settled moral

³⁵ I am grateful to Samuel Scheffler for pressing this question.

character may provide no immediate help. Sometimes *it* is the impediment. Possession of “a sense of morality or duty” might then be the only thing able to secure right action and response. Though sensitivity to basic moral facts will not provide the wherewithal for identifying what is new, *given* a new claim, the default capacity can function in morally elemental space, taking the claim-as-such as sufficient reason to change behavior. One might not know how to react well in response to new moral facts, but in the face of complaint, one often can stop behaving badly.³⁶ It would clearly be undesirable were this “sense of morality” alien to one’s settled moral character. The right deep structural connection between the two allows that, when one acts merely because one sees one must, the reasons one accepts as relevant will have access to one’s developed moral character, making possible deeper, more resonant changes, as well as enlarging one’s knowledge of the moral world.

If this is so, we clearly need a way to think about motives that allows for much greater structural complexity than we are accustomed to. We need to resist our proclivity to think of motives in terms of (or built out of) single end-desire pairs —having a desire for drink, wanting to promote justice. Surely this view is better explained by assumptions in action theory than by what is needed to understand moral action and character. Why not turn things around? Within the bounds of what is plausible, why not shape our view of action and motive in light of our best account of our evaluative practices?

What does one want the moral motive to be or do? I have identified three things. We want a motive, or motivational capacity, that leaves an agent open to moral growth: to the increased normalization of desires to morality and to the possibility of reformation and integration of regions of moral deformity. Second, we want a motive, or motivational capacity, that, while honoring

³⁶ The connection between the backstop motive and the developmentally primitive minimal moral capacity helps explain this. A developmental capacity must be able to adapt to what are, from its point of view, new facts .

the differences in the different regions of moral concern, supports some unity for the agent acting, so that when acting morally she can be doing “one thing.” This will also secure the capacity of moral action to express something *about* ourselves and *to* those we affect: that we are co-members of a community of equal persons, for example. And last, we want a motive that can perform the backstop role, yet not be outside or alien to an agent’s developed moral character.

No singular moral motive, like the crude Kantian motive of duty, can play all these roles. It lacks the dynamic capacity to organize and transform other motives and interests (to be the engine, as it were, in the production of moral character), and it lacks the evaluative content to organize deliberation and regulate action. By contrast, a structurally complex and developmentally open motivational capability — a kind of educated moral literacy — seems to be of the right kind. It brings resources that can support transparency in moral action without compromising the evaluative complexity of moral requirements. Its evaluative range and backstop security meet the need for motivational efficacy that often prompts indirectness arguments, but without the costs to the evaluative coherence of moral action. Its sound function, in turn, demands that the multiplicity of the moral not go too deep: that there be a connection, material or formal, that marks diverse considerations as moral.

Is such a motivational story possible? In part this is answered by the implications of our actual evaluative practices. It is in any case not challenged by the actual motives of any “however-formed” adult. There has been a tendency in modern moral philosophy to think about the developed system of moral motivation as if it were just a robust minimal moral capacity. It has therefore been hard to see how central moral learning is to a system of moral motives or to appreciate the active or normative role moral theory should play in our view of moral development. The formation of motives and motivational structures is the business of morality, of what we

might call its “department of education.” Its clientele is not restricted to children. If we think of moral education as finished with primary skill acquisition, it can be hard to see that it is part of the nature of moral character that it remain open to change. The idea of the morally literate agent provides the outline of a view of character that takes this fact seriously.

In the next lecture, I will continue developing this theme, but with a shift in attention from *internal* sources of character deformation to *external* ones. Just as normal moral character has to be able to accommodate some degree of psychological disorder, it also has to adjust to the possibility of new moral facts. By looking at normal moral character under different kinds of stress, I hope to get a clearer, and more realistic, idea of what effective moral character might be.

LECTURE II. CAN VIRTUE BE TAUGHT? THE PROBLEM OF NEW MORAL FACTS

In the last lecture I argued against the grain of much contemporary moral thought and for the essentially Kantian idea of a distinctly moral motive, focusing mainly on its role in securing the minimal moral competence of normal moral agents. The moral motive, I argued, provides the foundation of normal moral literacy: the capacity that makes agents responsive to morally salient facts — facts about themselves, about others, and about the natural and social world. Of course, neither the distinctly moral motive nor basic moral literacy is sufficient for moral character; they are the analytical bases that make its development possible.

Part of what prompted these reflections was my puzzlement about our grounds for holding persons responsible for wrongful acts caused by psychological defects — where, for example, unhappy features of upbringing have left them disordered or in some sense deformed. I was interested in why it is, even when such agents cannot read the moral facts correctly, they are responsible

for “getting it” as time goes on, or when the facts are lit for them by the claims and complaints of others. In a normal enough agent, I argued, the minimal moral motive provides the wherewithal to act as one ought when the moral facts become plain.

In this lecture, I want to examine another region where normal moral character shows gaps. When confronted with moral states of affairs of a new kind — what I shall call “new moral facts” — decent persons often act badly. They can be disoriented, resistant, defensive; they may continue with (now) wrongful actions despite the visible new moral fact, refusing or unable to take account of change. I am less interested here in questions about responsibility than in the challenges to our ideas about moral character that arise with these reactions. Resistance and defense are signs of awareness; they provide the toehold for some degree of responsibility. But they are also signs of distress, which, if it is not unreasonable, indicates something awry or incomplete in our expectations for moral agents. How can even a good upbringing prepare us for something no one yet knows? Suppose the minimal moral capacity is enough to hold agents accountable. But if, when confronted by new moral facts, normal agents cannot act well, one wonders what kind of moral demand is being made. In exploring these and related questions, I also have two larger goals. One is to develop further the idea of moral literacy as a site of resources for moral learning and change. The other is to begin an investigation of the *external* circumstances of effective moral agency. Conditions for getting things right do not always reside in the character of good agents; they can depend on the kind of social institutions that shape action and character.

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If the challenge to moral character posed by new moral facts were simply about improving its quality, there would be no special question. As with many practical skills that are interesting, it can be a permanent fact that there are various ways we will need to

improve and we may not know in advance what they will be. Gaining competence in one area often opens up new possibilities of improvement elsewhere. Nor is the issue about blameless ignorance of plain facts: as when, before 1920, no one knew that the lead in paint could harm children. We know in principle and in advance that such things are possible; when we discover them, we can act appropriately. The demands on character and the claims based in new moral facts are different because new moral facts, or the ones of interest to me, upset the reasonable confidence of normal agents.

What is a new moral fact? Instead of a definition, let me point to a range of examples; the phenomenon is complex, but it is not hard to see. Setting out exactly what makes something a new moral fact is not necessary for the questions I want to ask. The things I am thinking about include claims on behalf of nonhuman entities (animals, trees, ecosystems); a cluster of gender-related injuries such as sexual harassment, spousal and date rape, violent pornography; the special harms of hate speech; identity injuries due to racism or compulsory heterosexuality. Some new facts are really new sites for moral injury of an already known sort, but not of a kind we in principle expect. They may involve the emerging visibility of a wrong that has been masked by the confidence of entrenched practice. The discovery that medical paternalism conjoined with weak standards of informed consent violates patient autonomy is of this kind. Harder to imagine are utterly new moral facts. There would seem to be two candidate classes: facts that were there but were conceptually inaccessible (e.g., the moral equality of persons as such) and things whose moral significance is *of a new kind* brought about by new social or material phenomena. New moral facts need not require new moral principles; they are facts that the principles we have do not easily or directly accommodate.¹

¹I recognize that this way of describing the phenomenon lumps together facts whose “newness” is sometimes epistemic, sometimes ontic. Though I spend time establishing the credentials of an instance of the latter kind of new moral fact (in

To explain the emergence of a new moral fact, we need not assume any heightening of moral sensibility. Periods of moral disquiet occur from time to time, signaled by a change in the comfort, the smoothness of surface phenomena. Moral historians might point to disruptive economic changes, patterns of immigration, shifts in political power —any of a variety of possible causes whose effect is a challenge to the “business as usual” aspect of morality. Whatever the cause, the effects can be deep and wide-ranging. Once the new facts are “out,” what is expected of us changes. Normal moral attention is insufficient; dilemmas may appear in areas we thought stable; the changes called for may disrupt established patterns of life and agents’ sense of self-worth — costs we do not normally ask individuals to bear.

A reasonable morality is well integrated into ordinary living, not something we are endlessly at war with (like a diet), nor a distant goal toward which we direct substantial amounts of our energy. As with other complex skills we master —cooking, driving, word-processing —the abilities we have as normal moral agents are exercised as a matter of course: they are routinely responsive to salient moral facts, comfortably engaged with our motives; they call on instrumental and not constitutive reasoning. What we are about is not at issue. This is not to say that we never get into moral trouble: temptation, weakness, awkward circumstances, may each generate problems we find difficult to resolve. This too is part of ordinary moral life. We expect to negotiate most of these difficulties; we have confidence in our level of moral skill.

The idea of morality as a matter of course is not an endorsement of blandness or complacency, but an essential condition of normal living. We do not crave moral novelty; for the most part,

part because doing so reveals a great deal about the nature and limits of normal moral practice), the central concern of the paper is about *responses* to new moral facts of both kinds. This permits me to defer further analysis of the concept of “new moral fact” to another occasion.

we are not prone to moral boredom. The wish to test oneself in circumstances of moral risk belongs to a rare life-project or to the youthful stages of development of moral character. This is not to say that morality is undemanding. Rather, its demandingness is like the demandingness of loving someone: defining the life it is part of.

If “business as usual” is integral to the place of morality in a good life, it is also a source of moral hazard. Routine practices can flatten out into habit. We may suddenly be brought up short: having become inattentive, we are involved in a moral accident. Sound routine requires executive virtues that sustain confidence and ease of action without loss of attention to a wide range of detail. It is perhaps also why it is an essential feature of morality that we ask for and give moral reasons. Where we have to justify what we do to others, especially to those affected by our actions, we have some protection against the slackness of bad habits.

New moral facts challenge moral business as usual in ways that are not so easily accommodated. This is partly because they often turn out to be embedded in ways of living we rely on and partly because correction usually involves much more than behavioral adjustment. A good way to get a clearer idea of the complexity of all this is through an extended example. To that end, I want to consider an argument for a new moral fact that is made in some recent feminist discussions of pornography.

Pornography’s historical location in moral discussion is as a matter of offense to standards of public morality. The moral question it provokes there concerns censorship: arguments are about freedom of speech and expression (its intrinsic and instrumental value), the costs and values of censorship, and maybe a bit about the special value of sexual freedom.² The feminist argument is about a harm to women as a class brought about by the “objecti-

² Some (Henry Miller, for example) made claims on behalf of sexual freedom that were special, though they were not well integrated into the prevailing stream of moral discourse.

fiction” of women in pornography.³ The *new* claim is not that there is something wrong in treating persons as objects or things, nor that pornography is a new site of this kind of wrongdoing. It is not objectification per se that is the moral problem: it is what *this* objectification makes possible. We will have to take a step back to see what lies behind this distinction.

One of the central insights of Kantian ethics is that the use we make of others for our ends is inherently problematic. Whatever our intentions, to treat someone as a means is to take a moral risk, opening a door to exploitation. Most of the time routine practices and institutions provide insurance that the risk has been acknowledged and appropriate protections put in place. We can take for granted that asking for certain sorts of favors does not exceed the bounds of friendship, that the bank teller is a voluntary employee, and so on.⁴ The insurance often extends to means of repair when things go awry. There are established routines of apology and restoration; there are procedures of complaint and labor protections.⁵

If the problem of objectification is a kind of moral risk, then the moral questions associated with pornography are about crossing the line: making persons vulnerable in a way that their status as persons precludes. The *new* claim is that pornography involves depiction of women (some women) that harms women as a class.

It is a difficult question whether the possession and enjoyment (sexual or otherwise) of images of others objectifies them or puts them at moral risk in any way. We do not own our images, yet considerations of privacy suggest that they are not free game

³ I will be interested primarily in pornography produced for men, where the harm, whatever it is, is to or directed at women. I want to set to the side questions about “good pornography” and comparable harms to men, not because they are easy, but because the discussion here is only about the *status* of a kind of moral claim.

⁴ It can sometimes be difficult to tell when the institutions are failing to do their work. There can thus be moral injury that cannot be prevented by individual good willing: moral injury without moral wrongdoing (by anyone).

⁵ Even in Kantian ethics, this move from conditions of risk and wrong to *institutional* repair is essential to the conditions for normal moral action.

either.⁶ More difficult still is sexual fantasy. There do seem to be circumstances and kinds of fantasy to which one might object, but how or in what terms is difficult to say. But if what is wrong with pornography is that via depiction of some it hurts others, then this must come from a different source of moral risk than pleasure in the image of another person. Arguably, it is the fact that pornography is produced for a public market —that it is an industry— that alters the nature of both the objects of pleasure and the risks in objectification. While it may be that there is no harm to anyone from some person’s lurid and violent sex fantasies about all women he meets, something very different occurs if lurid and violent sex fantasies about women are a widely consumed industrial product. For the consumer, the subjects of pornography are no longer merely private objects of enjoyment.⁷ Given the permeable border between industrial pornography and cultural iconography (in advertising, film, etc.), the idea of women as available for use leaves the domain of private fantasy and gains public respectability. It is this that creates, in the precise language of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, a “hostile environment” for the health and moral status of women.

I am not arguing that if there is a moral injury caused by industrial pornography it warrants censorship. Nor am I suggesting that everything about the pleasures to be had in the consumption of violent pornography is bad. The issue is the credibility of the

⁶ The famous V-Day kiss on the cover of *Life* magazine is a fine case in point. The picture has a plangent impact —a moment of spontaneous joy expressed in a quick and jaunty embrace. One can easily imagine someone putting it up on a wall, getting a certain sweet pleasure from looking at it. In fact, it was not such a sweet kiss; it seems to have been a small act of sexual aggression from a returning sailor on an unwilling woman, caught in a photograph. Does the woman, or the man, have a claim that the picture not be used? Have they somehow been injured? This is different from the more common complaint that someone has profited from one’s image. In this case, the woman’s complaint would be that in reproducing the picture, whatever its public meaning of joyful celebration, it repeats an injury to *her*.

⁷ Indeed, the market demand for increased consumption requires the steady creation of new pornographic fantasy, giving the relation between sexual desire and its object a commercial life of its own.

claim of injury. And that it represents a new moral fact. If to be the object of moral regard is to be someone whose use raises a moral caution, then a socially sanctioned industry depicting abuse of women qua women flouts the idea of moral caution and puts the class of persons so depicted at moral risk. Socially and publicly they are not full moral subjects.⁸ One need not be a Foucaultian about morals to register the significance of the social representation of moral subjects.⁹ Accepting such a claim of moral injury requires a conceptual shift—a transformation in how we see moral injury coming about, in our awareness of the sites of vulnerability and, possibly, of the fact of gender as a relevant moral category. This is the dimension of change you would expect in the recognition of a new moral fact.

When moral concern shifts in this way, features of a practice that were visible but not seen can come into view. The feminist critique of pornography brought two cloaked facts to moral attention: that there is real violence (against women, children, animals) in the production of pornography and that pornography is a large and enormously profitable industry. It is so common in our culture not to pay attention to the production and marketing of the things we consume that I will set the second fact to the side for now. It should be less common not to notice violence and abuse. What story does a consumer tell himself about what is happening to the actual women, men, children, and animals in violent por-

⁸ This result need not be intended as such, nor experienced as an injury by those affected, for it to be a fact that the moral injury has occurred.

⁹ To the rejoinder that at most one has located a new location for these moral risks, I think we may want to say that in some cases the discovery of new contexts of harm reveals something else that counts as a new moral fact. Consider the “discovery” that victims of rape may suffer from posttraumatic stress syndrome. If so, the harm caused by rape is to be classed with the experiences of survivors of torture, war trauma, and concentration camps. The reclassification alters the moral nature of the action. Or consider the claim that it is an essential feature of rape that it is an act against a woman qua woman, not just an assault by sexual means. On the first issue, see Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), and Susan Brison, “Outliving Oneself,” in D. Meyers, ed., *Feminists Rethink the Self* (Boulder: Westview, 1997); on the second, see Catharine Mackinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

nography? Presumably, no story at all; nothing provokes moral concern. In what moral terms do we describe this? Is it just hypocrisy? That would suppose a level of moral awareness that seems to be entirely absent.

There may be an explanation for this in a curious phenomenon we might describe as “taking a moral time-out”: *in a defined context*, an activity or kind of activity that is on its own impermissible (or problematic) is taken not to require the normal kind and degree of moral attention. Professional sports is one such area. Pornography may be another. It has something to do with the institutionalization of sources of pleasure.

From the point of view of morality, many sources of pleasure are sources of risk.¹⁰ What we laugh at and what we find exciting or thrilling are often at the boundaries of the acceptable or permissible. Circuses, sports, comedy, pornography: certain sorts of pleasure and moral danger go together. It is a task of cultural institutions to insure that this risk-seeking impulse is expressed in a controlled and safe way. In the spheres that exist under social license, one is permitted to take one’s pleasure without the tax of normal moral scrutiny. It is a place made safe for us. Things can be said at the Comedy Store that would be actionable in a school; people may batter each other when boxing in ways and to a degree that would gain them jail time outside the ring; and so on. Of course I do not mean to say that all of the activities so sanctioned ought to be —that there is no realm of impermissibility here. It is the phenomenon of sanction and permission that is of interest. Could one argue that pornography dwells in this space? Even violent pornography?

¹⁰ There is nothing “antipleasure” in holding that the sources of pleasure are the loci of moral danger. Were it not for the pleasures we find or anticipate (and the pains we wish to avoid or end), there would be little moral work to do; there would be little reason to do much of anything. Add to this truism another —that the risk that attends pleasures is not identifiable in any feature of the pleasurable experience —and we reach the place from which Aristotle launches his investigation of virtue: “. . . the whole inquiry, for virtue and political science alike, must consider pleasures and pains: for if we use these well, we shall be good, and if badly, bad” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a11–13).

A moral “time-out” for the expressions of the sexual imagination would depend on the presence of reliable safeguards for this kind of morally risky activity; the sexual pleasures themselves do not dictate or guarantee this, however important they are felt to be.¹¹ Where masculinity is associated with the eroticization of domination, men (many men) learn to achieve sexual satisfaction in connection with its assertion. Nonaccidentally, women come to eroticize submission and (many) learn to find satisfaction (including eroticized fear) in passivity and victimhood. If the risk in pornography is to women’s status as full moral persons, the necessary safeguards do not seem to be in place. Indeed, the acceptance of pornography as a part of public culture would seem to undermine the very idea of safeguards.

2

At this point I want to set aside the example of pornography. It has served its purpose in detailing the potential complexity of a claim of new moral fact, especially so, given its embeddedness in sanctioned, public culture. I want now to ask more generally: where does the emergence of such a complex new moral fact leave the normal moral agent? The problem, I suggested earlier, lies in the interruption of moral “business as usual.” A normal moral adult relies in equal measure on the authority of her own conscience and the authority of background cultural norms. There are rules she has been taught and internalized, and rationales for the rules that are necessary to deal with the normal range of unexpected things. Agents depend on there being substantial harmony between individual conscience and the prevailing cultural norms. It is not just that, otherwise, the exercise of individual judgment is difficult to distinguish from rationalized wrong-doing; the normal (nonheroic) agent’s moral confidence depends on the

¹¹ This is a disturbing lacuna in Thomas Nagel’s essay “Personal Rights and Public Space” in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* no. 2 (1995) 24, 99–107. There must be analogous concern for safeguards and viable alternatives when appealing to consent in the moral justification of prostitution.

possibility of moving between rule and rationale, of experiencing no profound rupture between her own moral sensibility and the moral norms that govern her social world.

But what happens when the routine and the protected space for risky actions are called into question? The possibilities and conditions for detecting moral error will not be reliable. Acting well in any direct way may not be within the power, personal or social, of a sincere individual. Prevailing social norms can defeat solo efforts at change because of the presumptive weight of institutional meaning: our better intentions may not be readable as such by those who receive them. Social and internal pressures to hew to a familiar norm will likely impose distinct kinds and amounts of cost on the agent who would correct her action. And so on.

These considerations suggest that the appropriate question is a normative one: what kind of character *should* a normal agent have if she is to be acting in an environment where adherence to available practice-constitutive social norms does not guarantee right action?¹² Even if, contrary to fact, agents were not responsible for wrongful actions falling under prevailing social norms, the possibility of new moral facts would still challenge the character of the normal moral agent when the norms changed.

Ordinary virtues of character are not designed to cope with the circumstances of new moral facts. We say that complacency is a vice; some wariness about the normal is in order. And one can increase sensitivity to the likely marks of hidden moral failure: the personal and social sites of power and pleasure are almost always two of these. But one can be instructed in recognition and avoidance only for dangers that are known, and the abuses of both power and pleasure hide in the ordinary.

¹² This is a way of asking, what is it reasonable to expect of a responsible moral agent? Here I am not thinking of an agent who can be blamed or held liable. In wanting to hire a responsible babysitter, I am not seeking someone who can be blamed for dropping the baby, but a person I can be confident will care for the baby well. A *responsible agent* is one who is reliably able to avoid failure in a domain — one who can get the job done.

Even when we are warned of a danger, some of our mechanisms of recognition are counterproductive. Children who are cautioned that dogs are dangerous and dirty often display extreme aversive behavior in the face of manifestly friendly canine inquiries. Worry about dietary fat spawned a discipline of recognition and avoidance that has led to infant malnutrition in some affluent families. It's not just that those parents lack suitable knowledge about health, though they may; the prime fuel for such dangerous behavior is an undigested mix of wariness, danger signs, and fear. If weakness of will is a failure to follow best reasons, what we have here is a pathological inability to make good sense out of what one knows — a paralysis of reason.

Consider a moral example: a six-year-old boy is suspended from school because of a playground kiss. I want to set aside the debates about whether a six-year-old can sexually harass (I think he can) or whether suspension from school is the right institutional response if one thinks he has (probably it is not). I want instead to focus on the exaggerated reactions. There is the bipolar extremity of the institutional response (either “nothing” happened or it was a suspensible offense for a first-grader). And there is the public reaction to the widely reported episode: the ease with which it became an occasion to belittle the significance of sexual harassment.¹³ Both reactions are clearly off the mark — and useful.

What goes wrong in these cases is that the way of representing caution, of marking behaviors as dangerous, facilitates a hysterical response. Now, hysteria is a response with a point: it masks something that is not bearable to acknowledge by means of a more acceptable (if often punitive) mode of distress. The “real” objects of anxiety are elsewhere: fear of corporeality or mortality in the first two examples; and in the playground case, fear of sexuality — fear of its omnipresence (of *children* as sexual beings) and fear

¹³ Waves of letters to the *Los Angeles Times* barked: If *this* is what sexual harassment is, only a fool would take it seriously; surely there are more serious problems in America today.

that male sexuality, in particular, is a site of danger. I take the playground case to be an example of *moral* hysteria; a hysterical reaction is triggered by an unexpected moral claim that threatens deep-seated, often quite rigid values. As in other hysterias, the thing that must be hidden must also remain in focus; the symptom or behavior that does the hiding then deforms the hysteric and his reactions in systematic ways. The affect of moral hysteria need not be overt distress; it is, however, at once stubborn, confused, and resigned to a condition of disorder that is preferable to facing the object of fear. Evidence that opposes the manifest content of the hysterical reaction is typically seen as tainted, misleading, the product of conspiracy. The powers of rationalization are put to work to defeat rational judgment.

I do not think moral hysteria is merely an interesting phenomenon — a curio from the text of moral pathology. The masking, distortion, and rigidity that mark it, the disruption of sound judgment, are all too familiar in the undomesticated areas of moral practice where convention and experience have not made action ordinary and secure. It may not be the task of morality to make us safe, but moral concerns often cluster around what is dangerous and fearful — the very things we may not want to acknowledge about each other, or about ourselves. In just these places, the protective strategy of “recognition and avoidance” makes one vulnerable to hysterical response. The cure for this vulnerability, I believe, shares important features with the kind of moral character that is well suited to cope with new moral facts.

3

The circumstances that prompt moral hysteria resemble those in which moral rule-following goes awry. The wrong sort of connection to moral rules yields judgment and action that is rigid and inflexible: it blocks attention to relevant detail and encourages a tendency to act “for the sake of rules” that is blind to any under-

lying rationale.¹⁴ Given the resemblance, we might try to approach the somewhat exotic concept of hysterical wariness through a more familiar question: “How do we use moral rules without subverting judgment?” Though moral hysteria is not the same as bad rule-following, the similarities are such that understanding how we avoid the one is a good beginning to understanding how we might avoid the other.

Moral activity might be like many complex practical tasks where we start with rules in order to master basic routines. Over time, we modulate our behavior as we take lessons from trial and error. One learns to cook by learning various special techniques, following recipes, discovering relevant facts about produce and spices, and so on. As time and experience accumulate, one internalizes and personalizes technique; one knows when it is all right to be less obsessive about the details of a recipe; one becomes confident in making substitutions and modifications. The early panic about mistakes (a teaspoon not a tablespoon of salt!) is replaced by confidence in one’s ability to make things come out OK.

Is this an appropriate model? Children begin with moral rules. And certainly knowledge and experience matter in moral judgment as well as in cooking. Increasing competence enables more sophisticated judgment and more complex activity. However, in cooking, as in art in general, beyond a certain point of competence, individual exercise of judgment is authoritative. The space for idiosyncrasy and so for genius and the importance of taste and intuition distinguish this region of practical activity.¹⁵ Rules are left behind. By contrast, it is an essential feature of moral judgment and action that an agent orient herself by means of concepts

¹⁴ For these reasons one sometimes suspects that those drawn to a morality of rules are fearful of real moral engagement and specific judgment.

¹⁵ One might, as Kant did, take the possibility of genius to be an essential feature of artistic activity. Without underestimating the conservative forces within art (or cooking), the internal pressure to create something new does seem to be partly defining of the activities. If there is a role for creativity and genius in morality, its place does not seem to be in the individual extension of what is thought possible.

or rules that support moral reasons. Moral activity is inherently interpersonal: we explain and justify our actions to one another in shared moral terms.¹⁶ Even if circumstances press us to act in novel ways, we do not just strike out on our own, without regard to the public character of moral practice. Moral innovation is not a performance; those affected by our actions are not spectators. What makes action morally justified, what makes it the action that it is, is our having *and acting from* reasons that in principle can be offered in explanation and justification of what we do.¹⁷

Reasons both depend on and temper rules. In most of morality one's knowledge of reasons—the point or rationale of a rule—brings a rule into the space of deliberation.¹⁸ Such knowledge makes rule-governed activity make sense.¹⁹ This is not merely about comfort. Agents with access to a rule's rationale are better able to evaluate the significance of failures and, when necessary, to break a rule with sound deliberative confidence. One needs to appreciate what will be lost, and for the sake of what sort of good or necessity. Without an understanding of a rule that reveals what it protects and enables, a rule is like a blank peg in a complex edifice: removing it may make no difference, or it could bring the whole thing down.

¹⁶ Even if one agrees with Kant that aesthetic judgment contains a claim of interpersonal validity, the success of the aesthetic claim is established through perception, or apprehension, not shared reasons. The special role of the critic is to make available the objects of artistic creativity for aesthetic appreciation.

¹⁷ Of course, one of the prerequisites for adequate interpersonal discussion is that one be willing to look at the facts: collect information, attend to nuance, and so forth. Offering justifications in terms of shared reasons is not sufficient if moral facts can be masked.

¹⁸ This is less so in the early stages of skill acquisition when one follows rules as lessons: first do this, then that. And in emergencies, rules serve in lieu of judgment; they provide guidance and security against panic. There may be regions where rules are constitutive of an activity. The rationale for these exceptions depends on the validity of the generalization.

¹⁹ This is so even when the content of a rule is arbitrary (it just directs traffic).

Absence of confidence in such situations can provoke moral panic: a reaction about fear and loss of control.²⁰ Excessive or blanket restrictions and penalties are reactive ways of taking a stand, or trying to, when one fears something of importance is about to be lost and feels vulnerable to blame. But what the panic-based reactive rule regulates is often not acknowledged for what it is. This is no accident. If we cannot think clearly about what is at issue, rigid rules, however destructive, can appear to be the best protection against blame.²¹ But it is neither a successful nor a stable form of protection. What we are asked to do does not make sense: we lack good reasons.

If reactive rules are not available, panic may be directed at the insufficiency of the rules one has. Recall the post–Anita Hill complaint that “no one knows what the rules are anymore!” For many, this was a dance around the obvious —at once revealing and suppressing it. The anxiety is palpable: focus on the rules hides what is to be protected or permitted and why. Complaints of sexual harassment *do* de-stabilize gender relations because they typically call into question gender-constitutive entitlements. Those distressed by thinking about the conjunction of gender, sexuality, and power will not find it easy to reflect on the problems encoded in the rules they rely on. It is worth a lot not to have to admit what might be going on.

There is no easy “fix” for such well-founded resistance. Refinements of rules and new strategies for crisis management miss the real issue. This is because the problem never was a problem about “right rules.” It is about the way one relates to moral reasons: both reasons one accepts and those one finds distressing. Agents

²⁰ What must be true for it to seem reasonable or necessary to expel a junior high school student for giving a friend Midol? It is in this way that the “justs” in the injunctions to “Just say no” or “Just don’t do it” take aim against thought.

²¹ Recall the rules against *any* teacher-student touching in the wake of the Mc-Martin daycare case. More than fear of hysterical parents and potential litigation, the rules themselves revealed that there was something in the vulnerability of children and the sexuality of adults that was not to be thought about.

whose moral character is hostage to rigid gender categories cannot be expected to act well, or for the right reasons, though they can be required not to act badly. Without access to relevant reasons, action and feeling are unstable.

Now, not just any kind of reason brings deliberative access to rules. Reasons can be opaque and acted for blindly; responsiveness to reasons can be shallow. Consider again the way we adopt regimens of diet or exercise. There are good, health-related reasons to do these things, but the way many of us diet and exercise is not responsive to them, or not in the right way. Response will be shallow when, for example, our reasons are mediated by gendered norms of body shape. The effect is to block thought; it can beget dangerous behavior. To be sure, not every shallow response is inappropriate. Ordinary or routine actions do not, in normal circumstances, require more. Though one needs to be wary of surface simplicity: even simple reasons often carry complex moral and prudential provisos.

Externally imposed norms are not the only source of unacceptable shallow response. Sometimes it is forced by the limited content of the reason supporting a rule. Thus we reject both strict antilying imperatives and a rule of ad hoc judgment because they lack evaluative reach to what matters in truth-telling. By contrast, a deliberative presumption in favor of truth-telling *as a way* of respecting our epistemic dependence on the “word” of others may capture more precisely the relevant intuitions about why truth-telling is morally important.” The richer rationale would be reflected in our reasons when we told the truth (what truth we told) *and* when deliberation supported lying (when, in lying, we would not have abandoned the evaluative point of truth-telling) .

Further evaluative complexity and depth arise in the course of reason-responsive action. When someone needs help, our “read”

²² Utilitarian norms are evaluatively deeper, but the reasons they support also tend to be shallow in deliberative import because they reduce the moral importance of truth-telling to something else.

can remain on the surface (there is pain there; it should cease) or be deeper (she is a teenage mother of three, overwhelmed by responsibility and poverty). The nuance of the initial read does not determine the depth of response. A surface read may be matched with a disposition to personal involvement. Someone sees “pain there” and asks, “How can I help?” She is prepared to do whatever turns out to be necessary and cares in a way that elicits the details of abuse and neglect. A deeper read need not produce deep engagement. One may appreciate the conditions and significance of the situation and yet be unable or unwilling to respond with anything beyond occasional, somewhat grudging, charity. It may be true that we are often likely to engage more fully when we have a fuller read of the circumstances, but it does not follow, and sometimes more knowledge defeats responsive impulses. Response to need may in turn educate one’s read of the situation. When I am involved, I see more, I ask new questions; considerations that I recognize as relevant get more complex. At a certain point, one’s read of the situation, one’s developing understanding, could call for a shift in response from welfare-promoting actions to those promoting autonomy. It might equally call for less personal and more institutional response when that better meets the need personal engagement has brought one to see. And so on.

We expect a normal or morally literate agent to be able to take in and respond to the moral facts of her world accurately. Access to the rationale of moral rules allows for the exercise of moral intelligence, giving an agent greater control over judgment and a wider range of read and response. In routine circumstances, it is all one needs. It may not, however, be enough to cope with new moral facts. An agent identifies features of her circumstances as reasons by interpreting them through the values she accepts. Some of her values are particular to her own life; others come from the social world in which she acts. New moral facts will throw up new values, new problems: “texts” she is not accustomed to or comfortable with reading, ones that do not fit with her values.

New texts may require a different kind of appreciation, or appreciation of different things; there may be reciprocal and possibly challenging demands on one's range of moral response. It is not a straightforward matter of taking in more. There are cases where we need to read crudely and quickly, where too much information gets in the way (triage situations call for exaggerating specific saliences and silencing a range of normally relevant practical information). That is, one might have to learn to read for less; not every kind of learning increases the quantity of knowledge. Ideally, one hopes that these changes can be integrated into moral practice in a way that makes sense, perhaps even better sense, of the older practices that survive.

Moral theories that leave practices opaque do not provide accurate or full enough rationale to support literate moral intelligence. But even theories that offer transparent integration of practices and reasons may not go far enough. What gives sufficient reason to sustain activity in normal times may prove to be fertile soil for disabling stress when unexpected events destabilize a practice. The possibility of moral change needs to be integral to an agent's understanding of what morality can require. While there cannot be a requirement that agents get things right no matter what, there can be a requirement that they be appropriately responsive to the fact that even their best moral understanding can be or become unreliable. They must be prepared to recognize and acknowledge new moral facts for what they are, and with recognition they must have resources accessible for appropriate response. Such a requirement will need to be reflected in moral theory.

But is this requirement reasonable? On the one hand, we acknowledge the need for the routine, for the idea of moral "business as usual" as a necessary component of a healthy moral life, and on the other, we require a moral intelligence that involves openness to the permanent possibility of change as an integral part of competent moral character. What is the alternative? Agents who resist change to protect their character or well-being; or others

who accept change passively, experiencing morality as something that happens to them. The resulting heteronomy is no mere theoretical problem: persons who are imposed on by morality feel constrained and resentful. They may, if they are morally weak, blame those they believe cause their distress.

4

To take the next step, we need to go beyond the ordinary resources of good character. Just as there are structures of character that enhance an agent's ability to make her way through complexities of circumstance and the obstacles of her own psychic order, so there are *institutional* structures that enhance, or defeat, the effectiveness of moral intelligence. We have already seen that the exercise of moral intelligence depends on the availability of the right sorts of moral rationale (reasons). Now I want to argue that recognition and healthy response to new moral facts depends in part on the structure of value in the social institutions that form an agent's moral intelligence.

Moving the argument in this direction might seem to pose a threat to the idea of deliberative autonomy. To the contrary, when looked at the right way, the actual conditions for autonomous moral agency can be seen as preparation for the problem posed by new moral facts. Let me briefly say why.

We know that moral character is the resultant of different forces: natural dispositions, active social and familial modeling, contingent matters of personal and social fortune. It is the product of a process, part passive and blind, part active yet less than fully informed, one that nonetheless is to yield a character capable of managing the later stages of its own development. It can do this if we become increasingly autonomous and self-regulating, responsible for getting things right in our actions *and* about ourselves. This work takes place in the face of an uneliminable dimension of passivity in our relationship to external moral structures. One *finds* oneself in institutions with complex histories; one is *partly*

constituted by values one absorbs from different parts of the social order: family values, views of gender, work, concepts of property, and so on. Whether we become deliberatively autonomous agents depends on what we do with the values we are given. To make them our own, we need to establish that the values we endorse have a legitimate supporting rationale. But whether we *can* do this is not entirely up to us: we can be defeated, we can fail to secure deliberative autonomy, if our institutions resist reason.

We carry a similar burden with new moral facts. We recognize that moral change is not a product of reasoned choice; it comes about through social and natural mechanisms. We are to accept this and yet also accept that the routes to and through moral change are in some important sense available to us as autonomous agents. What matters is the *way* change is taken into moral practice: how it is accepted, understood, and made use of, how new reasons become part of the moral order of judgment and action. We have already noted that there are two parts to this: recognizing what is new in the new moral fact and having available sound responses to new reasons. The two parts will turn out not to be so separate. And getting either of them right will turn out to depend on the background evaluative resources available to intelligent moral agents. To get a better idea of the barriers to, and so the resources needed for, recognition and response, it will be helpful to look at some other examples.

Alterations in the moral landscape sometimes just require more of us. Severe economic changes and natural disasters can introduce demands on already recognized duties of charity and mutual aid. Other kinds of change transform the basic terms of moral relations, requiring us to think and respond in unfamiliar ways.²³ Consider the increasing scope of moral presumption against causing damage to species, habitats, and ecosystems. The emergence of

²³ Some changes do both. The moral effect of the rise of labor unions, or the movements for civil and gender rights, called for extensions of recognized duties and obligations and also demanded new ways of looking at persons, their claims, and their circumstances.

these claims was not a function of moral suasion or good example; their origin seems to have been in a conjunction of prosperity, a climate of welfare liberality, population increase and dispersal, better science, and the severity of late-industrial environmental damage.²⁴ Let the causes be what they were, the effect is that we are asked to look at the moral world in a new way.

For instance, in considering the development of riparian wetlands, we now have to ask: *how* does the loss of habitat for migrating birds matter? We need to know whether, and in what sense, the wetland or the migrating birds as a species could have interests that have independent weight against human interests.²⁵ Are the interests of the same kind, and so to be balanced? If they are not, and surely they are not, we need new resources for judgment. Inclusion of new claims in analogical terms disturbs the moral field less; but if the terms don't fit, or don't make good sense, not only may we fail to capture the kind of moral regard called for by the purportedly new facts, but the acknowledgment we do make may be more a sign of resistance than acceptance. If, for example, we view animal species as aggregates of living things, then we lose any distinctive claim for species. Though it would be profoundly disruptive to have to revise our concept of the moral subject, we want to avoid begging the question against the full range of possible bearers of moral value.

Some strategies of recognition include a wider range of things but do not accord them independent moral status. If the point of environmental protection is human well-being, the band of moral attention widens, though it would leave out things whose fate is indifferent to ours. Pressed to attain even wider focus, we might

²⁴ The *possibility* of moral environmentalism is not new; there have been groups of persons (some Native Americans, some Nebraska farmers) who took themselves to stand in a relationship of moral stewardship or trusteeship to the material world that they used. But a moral possibility in this sense is neither necessary nor sufficient for introducing a new moral fact .

²⁵ An interesting treatment of this question can be found in Christopher Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing? —Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects* (Los Altos: William Kaufmann, 1974).

preach humility: things that appear not to impact human welfare may do so in ways we do not yet know. We could get to general environmental sensitivity as a tactic of wise caution. But we would not thereby secure moral attention to the thing itself for itself; the effective value of the thing itself is hostage to further balancing.²⁶

Consider recommending the cessation of gender-specific attitudes that support violence toward women on the grounds that the change would be good for men; or that racial discrimination should cease in the workplace because it is economically inefficient. Let both claims be true. The problem is not just that such arguments introduce treacherous contingency into moral claims; they stand in the way of seeing what is going on. This can paralyze moral thought, creating ideal conditions for hysterical response. And for the same reason, it is also grounds for angry complaint. That is why so much moral energy directed at pornography is about determining what pornography is. For if it is about pleasure, one sort of argument is appropriate; but if it is about the sustenance of oppressive gender roles, then matters of privacy or enjoyment may be, morally speaking, irrelevant, even if true. The struggle is then over the absorption of new demands, new claims of harm, into a framework that resists their full recognition. It can be hard to recognize the “what” of something new if it will call for a response one is not prepared to give.

Even if one recognizes the difficulty for sound judgment in such cases, it may still not be obvious why the abilities of a morally intelligent agent should be insufficient for dealing with such problems. While perception and judgment cannot function in full independence of received social content, we also have reflective capacities. We are able to think critically about the values we are

²⁶ For example, there would be no argument in place to resist the effects of discovering independent ways of securing human welfare (fancier immunizations; artificial techniques of restoration). Nor is it clear how to argue for sustaining sacrifice *for the sake of* environmental well-being when the balance of human welfare benefits does not justify it. If the only options available to us give things instrumental value, we lack resources of judgment. This can be especially hard to see when the objects of our actions are, morally speaking, silent.

given; we can modify, revise, and even reject them. Insofar as we are rational, we have a critical position “outside” our values. Surely, with care and courage, one can judge contesting claims. This line of thought misses a key point. It’s not just that some values resist the efforts of reflection. The point is rather that in order for reflection to be possible, the values we have, as possible subjects of reflection, must be such that they are *evaluable*. That must be part of their *form*.

Whether values are evaluable at all and by what standards are both contingent social facts. We may not notice this because many of the standards of evaluation we use shape the development of our values. For example, it is not a necessary truth that values be mutually consistent; even as held by individuals, they often are not. But it is part of our normative practice to value consistency; we subject our values to criticism and revision when there is lack of fit between the values themselves or what they require. Children resist this; parents press for more realistic standards of value compossibility. Maturity is marked by the admission that one no longer wants to be both a ballerina and a baseball player. We can imagine moral values held in a rigid code, where the existence of practical anomalies is simply accepted as a burden to be borne (an occasion for exercise of faith or proof of frailty). It is not that way for us. We expect our values, and especially our moral values, not only to be in principle mutually instantiable, but also to cohere in a meaningful way. We want our values *together* to tell a possible story: they should make sense of a life lived within their authority. If we have this sort of normative commitment, our values must be such that they can be held in a way that is open to adjustment and change, and so *authorize* reflection. That is part of their form.

One need not embrace rationalism to accept this claim about the form of values. The same logic of form is at work in Hume when he speaks of passions and desires “yielding” or “ceasing” in the face of mistakes of judgment or reasoning. It is part of the

nature of Humean desire that it is responsive to judgment in this way. Desire does not press its case, but we go with factual judgment instead. *Desire for an object* is extinguished upon discovery that it is not what we thought it was. Indeed, for desire to be “directed by” reason, for it to be an impulse that can be given direction, the causal mechanism must be responsive to reasoning (unlike the heartbeat or a panic reflex, which operate, for the most part, independently of reasoning).²⁷ Hume’s account of practical judgment is thus not well represented as about weighing and balancing desires; it is about the sorts of considerations to which desires are open. Among them will be weighing and balancing.²⁸

Of course I don’t want to follow Hume too far. If Humean desires are naturally reason-responsive, they develop with respect to ends that are not themselves open to rational assessment. In this respect, I find that Kantian moral theory has deliberative resources more sensitive to the full range of evaluative connections. Where there exist institutions that provide a moral education of the right sort, the desires and interests of a well-brought-up Kantian agent will manifest a value-sensitive form, responsive to the normative (moral) principles that constitute a deliberative field.²⁹

²⁷ See *A Treatise of Human Nature*, pp. 413–15. To be sure, this is not full-blown practical reasoning: a desire’s reason-responsiveness is not the same as a responsiveness to reasons. Even weak reason-responsiveness is unavailable on a more austere reading of Hume. To the extent that desire or passion is an original, non-representational existence, Hume’s picture may be that with judgment —that thing is not chocolate but a rubber toy —there is a change in the world perceived. The passion-provoking stimulus is then simply absent. The more mechanistic account would of course be less welcome to many who find the Humean position appealing.

²⁸ Some talk of reasons carries a picture of separate values, each bringing its own weight to the scale of deliberation. Such values are not affected by the competing values they encounter. It’s a picture; it can be otherwise. Of course most values, like the features of character, cannot change in will o’ the wisp fashion; they would not then be values: structures that organize judgment and action. But they need not be autarchic wholes either, available only for weighing and balancing. One might wonder whether balancing and weighing set valences counts as deliberation at all. Such activity seems more a matter of reckoning —there is a balance; we need to determine what it is.

²⁹ The concept of a deliberative field is developed in chapters 8 and 9 of my *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). The

Having a moral character, an agent does not deploy morality to constrain or extinguish her desires; rather, the things that she wants, those that are the basis for action and will, she wants in a particular way: wealth, if that's what she wants, *as* its accumulation is permissible and just; the well-being of friends *as* its coming about does not unfairly disadvantage others; and so forth.³⁰ Desires and interests that develop so as to be responsive to deliberative moral principle that reaches to ends are more amenable to adjustment and *refounding* as change and growth prompt reconsideration of values taken as given. That is why it makes sense to reason with children about their behavior. One is not thereby mistaking them for adults, but accustoming them to justification by reasons —to being autonomous in judgment and action. There are many routes to providing children with good ends and aversions. What is gained in the Kantian story is the potential for ongoing autonomous development of desires and ends *within* a morally defined space.

The absence of value-sensitive desires can be costly. Suppose we find the possibility of sexual violence toward women persisting in a context of acknowledged gender equality. It may show the incompleteness of affective development. It may also show that the available routes to adult sexual and gender values created unstable and dangerous accommodations when norms of equality were introduced. If, for example, sexual desire exists in areas independent of moral contouring (because fantasy, pornography, etc., are given a moral “time-out”), it will be less value-sensitive, more entrenched. That is why it may not be morally possible to treat the consumption of industrial pornography as a private

full set of principles that constitute a deliberative field are various, but their authority is dependent on the condition that entry into the field is permitted only as a value satisfies the principles of practical reason. The rite of passage often transforms the entrant.

³⁰ The interesting kinds of moral failures will then not be about bad desires, but about taking conditional reasons to be unconditional (necessary, unavoidable), either in general (a form of wickedness) or locally and episodically.

matter. An adult required to alter the range of what counts as normal action in sexually charged space is being asked to resist deep patterns of attraction and restraint.³¹ Change brought about through external pressure or conditioned resistance typically alters the cost-structure of behaviors, closing off or redirecting an avenue of desire; it may not make the behaviors unavailable or alter the desires that prompt them. It is also often a self-alienating strategy for moral self-control.

A critic of rationalist ethics might point to such phenomena as evidence that one cannot approach the affects under the direction of practical reason. I mean to be making a counterclaim: the affects sometimes resist reason because they are approached too late; they resist because they lacked the right sort of education.

Psychologists judge organisms healthy as they cope well with stress: a matter of resilience, adaptation, and repair. It is part of the normal mechanism prompting growth. In vulnerable persons, stress may instead induce anxiety, paranoia, avoidance — symptoms of resistance and protection. Health is partly a function of training. When moral upbringing is about constraint, the affects are less transformed than trained to obedience. Unexpected possibilities or new constraints can cause resistance, internal shifts of power that are sometimes difficult to understand or control. By contrast, a moral education that transforms desires, bringing them into a normatively structured deliberative field, trains agents to construct well-founded values from wants and interests, whatever their source. Accommodating new moral facts poses less of a threat to internal stability when agents' practical confidence resides in their rational abilities, not in the specific content of their values.

Since not all sets of values will support or encourage deliberative autonomy, there is a moral-theoretic demand on the evaluative

³¹ The necessity of long-term support, in twelve-step programs, extended psychotherapy, support groups, or medication, indicates both the high degree of difficulty of some changes and our limited access to the structure of desire, once formed.

foundations of educating institutions. This is not about the morality of social rules. It is possible for an institution to be just (or not unjust) but evaluatively opaque, or even encouraging of the contrary-to-autonomy dispositions of deference and passivity. Just rules in a benevolent autocracy, for example; or just practices that exist as a matter of tradition. They teach the wrong lessons about justice if the social rules, given their source of authority in ruler or tradition, have evaluative precedence over the facts of justice. The facts of justice cannot then play the right role in autonomous judgment; the flexibility of sound rationale is lost in the appeal to authority.³²

Autonomous agency is an achievement: it is possessed in degrees, acquired not only through personal, but also cultural effort, and so doubly contingent. The task for each agent is to convert situated and time-bounded values into well-founded elements of her deliberative field. The task can be made harder or easier by the *form* that socially transmitted values possess. When values have a form that resists transformation, agents who endorse them are left vulnerable in circumstances of conflict and change. Values whose form permits their location in the terms of the deliberative field have a shared ground (as when we come to see both liberty and equality expressing the conditions for human dignity). This both separates them from their heteronomous history and provides a common deliberative framework in which to work out conflict. When this work is done in productive public debate over what values mean, it is the public face of a community of moral judgment. We gain confidence in our values if we must be able to justify our actions and judgments to each other in terms of reasons we can share. Of course it would be naive to think that critical public examination of values will fully dissipate the influence of

³² For a fuller discussion of the moral foundations for social institutions, see my "Pluralism and the Community of Moral Judgment," in *Tolerance: An Elusive Virtue*, ed. David Heyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

entrenched power and privilege —in institutions or in setting the terms of the deliberative field. It is rather that it is hard to see that there could be anything that could do it better.

5

What can we conclude? If autonomy is the capacity to judge and be motivated by the principles of a constructed deliberative field, its empirical realization is a function of moral education: the social and institutional provision of well-formed values and evaluative skills. Effectively autonomous agents will be morally literate; they have a developed moral intelligence that can read and respond to moral facts, incorporating their evaluative import into a shared way of life. If brought up within deliberatively open institutions, a literate agent can more readily absorb the disruption caused by *new* moral facts without losing a conception of herself as a competent agent. Her way of engaging with moral facts would *never have been passive*. Habits of interpretation and re-founding values create a character capable of moral balance and evaluative dexterity.³³

The idea of moral literacy thus splits the difference between an individualistic conception of autonomy and a socially determined moral self. Morally speaking, we are neither wholly social nor wholly free. Moral literacy inhabits a space in between. Its role is not to fix shared moral concepts, but to provide deliberative tools, modes of reasoning and reflection that we might deploy, together, with some confidence.

There is, it seems to me, a natural fit between Kantian values of rational agency and the idea of moral literacy. Agents whose fundamental moral concern is to bring their interests and projects within the evaluative space of respect for rational agency would have the kind of autonomy and effective moral literacy I have de-

³³ In comments, Samuel Scheffler pointed out that the Kantian notions of autonomous judgment and value-sensitive desire that I have indicated are needed to cope with new moral facts will also serve agents who are taxed to resist new moral claims that are flawed and indefensible.

scribed. Even if one does not want to go that far, the idea of moral literacy itself, with its requirement of deliberately accessible skills of recognition and response, puts pressure on accounts of moral character to accommodate some distinctively Kantian virtues.

A last thought: should we worry that acknowledgment of the fact that social institutions both shape character and constrain the range of possible moral response undermines the ambitions of normative moral theory? I don't think so. When we take seriously the social bases of moral action, judgment, and character, what we discover is the unsustainability of the division of labor between moral and social thought. The normative project is not undermined; it is just much larger than we may have imagined.