*Moral Articulation*. By Matthew Congdon. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. xi + 244. Price $83.00.)

How should we think about the status of sexism in the past? On the one hand, we may want to say that sexism’s wrongness is not merely a product of our time; it was always wrong. This might push us towards thinking of moral reality as objective and immutable. But, Matthew Congdon suggests, there is something odd about thinking that its wrongness is something immutable that lay inert and unseen for generations, like a planet waiting to be discovered (47-8). On the other hand, then, we might wish to temper our judgements a little, to acknowledge the ways in which discussions of sexism are very much historically situated and so on. And this might push us towards moral relativism. But again, this seems unsatisfying: our thinking that sexism is wrong does seem to be getting something right about the world.

In *Moral Articulation*, Congdon aims to delineate an alternative to these pictures of morality by exploring the idea of ‘moral articulation’. This, he suggests, is “an activity of conceptualization that strives to be faithful to an object that it simultaneously transforms” (8). According to this picture, moral articulation is both world-disclosing and world-making (54). Unlike descriptions, which predicate properties of objects which are indifferent to the ways we speak about them, articulations can shape not only our understandings of things, but the things themselves. For example, in articulating that my turbulent emotional state is one of ‘resentment’, the state may itself be altered. He is thus left with what he calls a *historicised moral realism* (52): the world, he suggests, really is value-laden, and our moral beliefs aim to pick out objective features of the world. But these features, though objective, depend on and are partly constituted by our historically situated ways of thinking about them.

Chapters one to three prepare the groundwork for this view by focusing on the claim that moral meaningfulness is not discursive all the way down, that it does not take the form of propositions all the way down and that our cognitive experience of it is not limited to judgements. Instead, Congdon suggests that articulating latent senses of moral importance can engage our rational capacities (and involve conceptual activity) whilst confounding our discursive capacities. Chapters one and two focus on such experiences of ‘discursive breakdown’, where the meaning of a moral experience is experienced as elusive, although conceptually mediated. Chapter three explores how the emotions might follow the logic of moral articulation.

Take, for example, the experience of resentment. In resentment, as typically understood, we regard and respond to an action as wrong (92). How, then, can resentment be other than conservative, an insistence on the upholding of a previously established norm? How might it play a role in developing new normative expectations (94)? Congdon’s response is to suggest that emotional experiences can qualify as conceptual without being discursively formulable. Resentment, he suggests, can be involved in a process of emotional articulation that *develops* the meaning of the initial perception. This sustained inquiring attention to an inchoate sense of norm-violation can transform the emotional experience itself, as well as the resenter’s broader normative outlook.

Whereas chapters one to three primarily discuss how the conceptualization of an experience might alter that experience, chapters four to six focus on the trickier question of how this might be thought to reshape not our *conceptions* of value but “the actual substance or reality of values themselves” (119). I will focus on chapters four and five. A key example here is taken from EM Forster’s novel *Maurice,* which is set in England in the early twentieth century and follows Maurice and Clive as they attempt to make sense of and express the romantic and sexual feelings they have for one another. This, Congdon argues, is not merely an attempt to describe something, but an exercise in moral articulation: “through this struggle they help create (and recreate) themselves and their love anew” (134). Their activity itself transforms their feelings and the possibilities that are open to them and is aimed in part at *cultivating* and *nurturing* their love.

The realist’s resistance to thinking that moral values are partly constituted by the activity of moral articulation, Congdon suggests, is based in the thought that values then come to seem contingent. That is, it comes to seem as if we simply ‘make things up’, morally speaking. And this seems to give up realism. In chapter four, he addresses this worry, suggesting that it can be answered by distinguishing *causal* discursive construction and *rational* construction. In the rational kind, there is both an epistemic orientation and a developmental orientation. That is, this kind of construction is both aimed at illuminating genuine features of the object, and at maturing or developing the object (135). Maurice and Clive are attempting to illuminate something that precedes their attempts to articulate what it is, and also trying to cultivate their love, to develop it in a direction that allows for their flourishing.

Moreover, these components are not separable (142), and this is very important. If the two components were separable, the picture Congdon offers would be assimilable to a standard realist framework. That is, a standard realist can allow that we can change social reality in ways that in turn will require a change in our concepts. A ‘stepped’ model where purely epistemic changes follow purely metaphysical changes can be assimilable to standard realism. But Congdon’s suggestion is that these two aims come together, that the activity of articulation unifies them. Although this seems very appealing in some cases (say, articulating one’s emotions), I wanted to hear more here about how this could be the case for values themselves. How is it that in the articulation of values themselves these elements can combine, and why should we think that these aims are really inseparable?

In chapter five, Congdon goes on to suggest that this historicized realism is compatible with objectivity in a moral theory, and in particular that it is compatible with Aristotelian naturalism. Aristotelian naturalists, he suggests, need not assume that human nature is timeless and immutable, and they can reject this assumption without thereby undermining their realism. To be objective, he suggests, something need not hold for all rational beings but for all bearers of the same life-form. And life-forms may be mutable, themselves shaped by the ongoing activity of moral articulation.

In arguing this, Congdon positions himself in contrast to Kantian ethical theorists who agree that there is a historical aspect to morality, but divide morality between a changing and an unchanging part and suggest that the latter is the basic core of the theory. Instead, he proposes a thorough historicism, which ‘does not compartmentalize morality in this way’ (169). An alternative he doesn’t consider would be to think that there are both mutable and immutable aspects to morality, but that the immutable part is not the prior, more basic core of the theory, but instead an equally basic part of it. This is a shame, because the book seemed to present the choices as more starkly opposed than they seem to need to be.

Overall, however, this book was a fascinating read. It is an intriguing exploration of the possibilities for realism, and I found the chapter on Aristotelian naturalism particularly appealing. Still, I have some doubts about the scope of moral articulation. The thought that moral articulation can alter our self seems very persuasive, and some cases such as that of *Maurice* seem well-explained in his terms. But Congdon’s claim is not that this sometimes occurs, or that it is a possibility within the realist framework. Rather, he claims that there is no immutable aspect to morality, and no aspect of it unaffected by moral articulation. I found this idea much harder to accept. Whilst the wrong of humiliation (185-9), for example, is very plausibly connected to our understanding of it, it is very hard to see how such explanations could be given of harms like inflicting physical pain on others, or murder. Moral articulation, although important, might then be a more local phenomenon than the book suggests.

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