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Moral Conversions*

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When I read Tolstoy's essays on non-violence and civil disobedience at age 13, I was so impressed by their moral strength that I began to question many of my political convictions.[1] Reading those essays awakened my political consciousness, and I was led to question my unreflectively religious, firmly patriotic, Texas-style conservatism. In the long process of change that followed, my values—indeed, my deepest thoughts about value—were transformed until I had become a reflectively atheistic liberal. In a word, I had undergone a moral conversion.

My father, however, viewed these changes with dismay: he certainly did not think I had discovered any new truths about morality—if anything, he thought that I had lost my common sense—and our political arguments created a source of tension between us. I now see that a good explanation of my changes is that they were an intellectually-inclined teenager's rebellion. They gave me a relatively safe means by which to assert my independence without confronting any of the emotional tensions within my family. As it happens, my views did not change *because* I had discovered a new truth about morality—though perhaps I had—but because I needed to create a psychological distance from my father. And while the discovery that the change was causal rather than moral might have undermined my faith in those values, it did not; I do not now regard those changes as any less justified because the best explanation for them is causal rather than moral.

My story is hardly unique, but I am less interested in it as a story of adolescent rebellion than as an example of moral change and of the conflicts that such changes produce. The conversions that others experience are much more dramatic and more serious than mine, and the conflicts they produce are correspondingly more bitter. In the 1960s, some whites in the South came to real-

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1 See Leo Tolstoy, *On Civil Disobedience and Non-Violence* (New York: New American Library, 1967).

ize that they had always treated the Blacks they knew with condescension and contempt, even though they had tried to be "good Christians," generous to all. Their neighbors, however, often saw their new-found sensitivity as a betrayal of the older and better Southern way of life. In the 1970s, many women raised their consciousness and took control of their own lives, only to find their husbands puzzled, angry, and resentful. And in every period, some people find spiritual renewal in a new faith, in a new religion, or in a new minister, while those around them think they have been bamboozled. In each case, the changes are perfectly well justified by the standards the new convert has come to accept, but by her old standards—and by those of the people she has left behind—they are not. Thus, the changes are seen by the person herself as an improvement, while many of the people whom she loves and respects think she has been corrupted.

Conversions are usually ignored in accounts of moral justification, because they seem to raise no special problems. Once we have the correct moral standard, all questions about conversions will automatically be answered. The moral justification of a conversion will be the same as that of any other action or belief: it will be justified if and only if the new state better reflects the correct values. On such a view, conversions are only interesting as a part of the psychology of value, but they do not have any further implications.

We do not, of course, have any plausible candidates for such a final and comprehensive moral view, and if John Rawls is right about the results of the "free exercise of human reason," we are not likely to find one—at least not any time soon.[2] In the meantime, we still want and need to evaluate conversions. In the absence of a final view of morality, however, we can avoid begging big questions only if we use an immanent critique to evaluate the converts' actions. In this respect, of course, conversions are no different from other moral actions. But in conversions, the problem of moral justification is particularly acute, because the internal standards are themselves in flux.

Nevertheless, I will argue, such an internal and contextually-sensitive method will be able to answer our questions about the justification of conversions. Our assessments, however, must be based on what Charles Taylor calls "comparative judgments"[3]—judgments based not on some absolute all-things-considered argument, but on a direct comparison between the new viewpoint and the old. Such comparisons are not simple, of course, especially since conversions lie at that crucial nexus between values, motivation, explanation, and justification. To understand and assess conversions, I will

2 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 54–58.

3 Charles Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," in *The Quality of Life*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 208–31, especially 214–16.

suggest, we must examine all of these factors together, and so we must be conscious of the close connections between justification and explanation.

Even so, these comparative judgments will not always be possible, precisely because they are limited to the convert's own standards. But where they fail, I will argue, the very process of rational justification breaks down altogether; at that point, we have reached the limits of judgment.

I. Paradigms of conversion

By definition, a conversion is not a planned event. If I am waiting for a specific conversion to happen, then I am already converted. So when Augustine sat in that famous garden in Milan in torment, pleading with God to save him, he already knew what was needed to turn his life around.[4] The important part of his conversion had already taken place: he had already accepted Christianity as the correct way of life. He was only waiting for a final push that would give him the strength to lead such a life. A complete conversion thus requires the convert to enter a new way of life, but the aspect of this process in which I am interested is the first: the change that leads her to accept a new view of how she *should* live.

If a conversion can not be reliably predicted by the convert, it also can not be controlled by her. Conversions do not begin with what the convert *does*, but with what happens *to her*.[5] It requires a jolt: an event that forces her to reexamine her life and motivates her to change it. Only when we understand the kinds of events that can move her in this way can we construct a meaningful framework in which to discuss the justification of conversions. *Her* reasons for change only make sense to us once we understand the causal forces at work, so we can only judge those reasons once we understand the particular context of her conversion. So while the justification of a conversion is conceptually separate from the causal mechanisms that prompt it, it cannot, I think, be neatly disentangled from them. Only an account of justification that is closely attuned to these circumstances can do justice to her experience.

In this section, I will examine two paradigms of conversion, and I will show how the process of justification works for the individual in each case and why an internal and contextual view of it is all that is needed. In section II, I will look at the third paradigm of conversion, one that shows the limits of this view and, I think, the limits of rational evaluation. Only at the end of that section will I consider the broader issues that are raised by my account.

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4 See Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII, chapter 12.

5 As Annette Baier notes, one of the ways in which a conversion differs from a change of mind is that it looks more like a change in situation. See her "Mind and Change of Mind," in *Postures of Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 57–58.

A. Conversion by evolution

At the risk of narcissism, I will start with my own case. My conversion was a gradual one, not punctuated by any sudden changes. Indeed, only looking back at the process can I identify it as a conversion at all. The process began by accident, an unpredictable cause, when my brother gave me a collection of essays by Tolstoy. But even he could not have predicted their effect on me. Reading those essays forced me to confront the tensions and inconsistencies in the values that I already held. Reading those essays did not change me by itself—without my own need for a means of rebellion, they would not have had the effect that they did—but they set into motion a self-examination that led me to reject many of my values. For example, they made me see a incongruity between a Christian belief in nonviolence and a politics founded on mutually assured destruction. In time, accepting the politics of nonviolence led me to question the unthinking patriotism I had embraced, and questioning the patriotism led me to question the other half of the loyalty to "God and country." So, ironically, accepting the arguments of a Christian spiritualist ultimately led me far away from the Christian values he espoused.

At no point in this gradual process did I reject my values wholesale, yet by the end of it, a significant shift had occurred. Each change made sense in the context of the values I held at that particular moment. To make all my beliefs and values cohere with each other, some of them had to be rejected, and so what I then considered the less important values were rejected in favor of what I took to be my core values—those values which were most important to me at the time and which were most closely connected to my sense of identity.[6] Of course, in rejecting one value, I was forced to rearrange the structure of the rest, and that process often put different values at the center. That new structure, combined with other changes in my life, then became the basis of further shifts.

Yet the mere existence of an anomaly[7] between my beliefs and values or between my practices and my values was not enough to compel a change—or to justify it. No one's beliefs are ever completely consistent, so by itself an anomaly is insufficient to justify a change. To precipitate a conversion, then, something about the context of the convert's life must bring a particular anomaly to her attention and give it significance. My own conversion was

6 "Coherence" involves consistency, but consistency is only one part of it. A set of values may be more coherent because the values reinforce one another, even when they may be formally inconsistent, and they may be incoherent because they do not fit well together, even if they are formally consistent.

7 I use the word "anomaly" intentionally to draw attention to the parallels between this discussion and those in the history and philosophy of science between Thomas Kuhn and his critics. See Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); and *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

prompted both by a need to separate myself from my parents and by a new-found intellectualism that shaped the specific form of that rebellion. Together, they put me into an entirely different personal context, one in which I felt compelled to re-examine my values, to seek the inconsistencies that I subsequently found, and to change my values once I found them. These factors did not *create* the anomalies I found, but without them I would never have looked. In other people, these changes are sometimes induced by a discovery of a new fact that leads them to question something they thought they knew, and frequently they are the result of an attempt to imitate the life and behavior of a compelling role model.[8] Thus, even in these gradual changes, the conversion happens *to* the person, because she does not self-consciously choose the precipitating causes that are critical to the conversion. Once an inconsistency is found, of course, the person can respond in a number of ways, not all of which will result in a significant change in her moral perspective, much less in her life. She can, after all, simply ignore the inconsistency, and even if she does not, she must decide which of her inconsistent values and beliefs she should reject by determining which of those values is more central to her.

In these kinds of conversions, justification is relatively straightforward: if the new perspective accords better with the convert's core beliefs and values, then the change makes sense for her. And in these cases, the justification is plainly internal and contextual, because it depends crucially on the particular details of the convert's situation and on the values that are most important to her. Nothing is gained by looking elsewhere. We may disagree with the new perspective in which she finds herself, but we can see why it is rational for her to adopt it.

Even in these cases, however, the standards may seem *too* internal. On this view, we might think, *any* conversion will be justified, because the convert can always tell a story that will make the values that sanction the change the ones that are most central. If so, then standards of justification would be meaningless, and reason would have no role in it. But this conclusion is too hasty: even though the standard is internal, it allows substantial criticism both of the changes in values and in the changes in practice that usually accompany them, and it thus gives reason an important role at each step.

The change in values can be criticized for a least three kinds of reasons. First, the convert may simply have her facts wrong—on the standards of evidence she accepts. So if I had believed that a non-violent approach to national defense would kill more of the enemy and if my conversion to non-violence was based on that fact, then my conversion could have been justly criticized. By the standards of evidence I accepted, that claim was clearly false, and so a

8 For a discussion of role models in moral changes, see Connie Rosati, *Self-Invention and the Good*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1989.

crucial element of my conversion would have been based on something I should not have accepted.

Second, the convert may be wrong about the tensions within her values and about whether her values really require the change she is contemplating. So someone might say that my commitment to non-violence was not really in tension with my previous support of military actions. The best way to prevent violence on the whole, they might argue, is to support an effective system of deterrence. And indeed, at an abstract level, such a complaint may be correct. But in the context of 1970s America, in which support of the military was culturally tied to support for the Vietnam War, the tension was very real. Nevertheless, I could have been wrong.

Third, a conversion may not be justified, because the convert can be mistaken about what are, in fact, her core values and beliefs. Few people have a clear understanding of the structure of their own values, especially since our everyday actions often reveal subconscious commitments that we may never acknowledge.[9] Before the convert can assess when a change is justified, she must first fashion a reasonably accurate interpretation of herself, one that illuminates the relationships between, and the relative importance of, the values she cherishes. Constructing such an interpretation is both a process of self-discovery, as she uncovers what she finds important, and a process of self-invention, as she builds a life out of the diverse elements within her.[10]

The task of self-interpretation is difficult and often painful, and the process itself may trigger a conversion. As she tries to make sense of her goals and her life, she may be forced to discard some of the things that have been dear to her. Understanding herself and the changes she is contemplating thus requires a sensitive self-understanding and a delicate reading of her own situation. Without the help of a friend, a lover, or a therapist, most of us are poor interpreters of ourselves and our experiences. Thus, her interpretation of herself, while privileged, is not infallible.

Even if a change in perspective is justified, however, a change in a person's practice may not be, for at least two reasons. First, a change in practice is not justified if the convert does not reasonably believe that an alternative can resolve the anomaly better than her current set of values. She must have a good reason to think that a new practice can actually meet her needs better, and her case is stronger if she has a good idea of how the alternative would work. However, we should not expect too much: often, she cannot know how well a practice will work until she actually lives within it, so we can only expect her to make a reasonable estimate of whether her new life will fulfill

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9 Indeed, this process is further complicated by the ways in which we are fragmented as persons, as Amélie Rorty has suggested to me.

10 For a somewhat different and more thorough discussion of such cases, see Rosati, *Self-Invention and the Good*. See also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 25–52.

her values better than the old. In my case, I thought that the successes of the nonviolent campaigns of Gandhi and Martin Luther King showed a nonviolent alternative was feasible. Many have thought, of course, that this assumption was an based on unwarranted leap, but my assumption was not, I think, unreasonable (even if now I have doubts about its practicality).

Second, a change in practice will not be justified if its costs are too high. If, in the convert's own terms, the costs of such a change drown out the benefits she would derive from it, she should stick to her current way of life. Unfortunately, assessing conversion costs is never easy, because the values by which she can measure the costs are not static. As she changes her practices to meet her new values, her values may change even further. She may enter a new practice because it appeals to values she already embraces, but once she has entered it—for whatever reasons—the practice itself can take over. To gain what she seeks from a practice, she may have to immerse herself in it and take up the values that are implicit in it. But by embracing these values, she may alter her original goals as she comes to appreciate the new values that are embedded and embodied in that practice.[11] Once she appreciates these new values, she is in a position to re-evaluate herself and her goals. So, for example, a student may take a philosophy course to meet a graduation requirement, but to perform well in the class, she must understand what is valued in philosophy. Once she understands those values, she may internalize them; they then become ends in themselves, new goals that are built on the old goals with which she began. She may then decide that further changes are necessary to meet her new set of goals. Thus, at the end of a series of such changes, her life may be dramatically altered, even though at each stage she accepts a change based on the values she already embraces.

Indeed, we can even see moral education as the limiting case of this model. We frequently teach children to be moral by leading them into practices by external means: we promise a reward, we threaten punishment, we appeal to something they already enjoy or appreciate, or we invoke values they already accept. Once they find themselves in the practice, we hope they will learn to appreciate it for its own sake. Moral education is thus an *evolutionary* process in which new members of a community are introduced to and inculcated with the values of the culture; it is, in fact, a series of externally-

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11 For an account of how the goals of practices can come to be appreciated for themselves, see Charles Taylor, "Philosophy and its History," in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. S. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 17–30, especially 22–28, and "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" and "Social Theory as Practice," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–57 and 91–115, respectively; and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

controlled, but internally-motivated, conversions that gradually turn self-centered, hedonistic infants into functional members of a particular society.[12]

These evolutionary changes are, then, grounded in the person's own values—even if those values are themselves continue to change in the process—and they are directed towards a greater overall coherence between her values or between her values and her life. Yet even in these gradual changes, a person can still make mistakes, so reason can still have a significant role in their evaluation, both for herself and for anyone else who wants to assess that change for her. By focusing on the changes that make sense for her, we can evaluate her conversion at a level that directly addresses her needs.

B. Conversion by discovery

Not all conversions are so gentle, however. The consciousness raising sessions that transformed the lives of many women did not simply remove the inconsistences in the ideals by which those women lived.[13] Many, in fact, had lived up to those ideals—they were paradigm housewives and mothers. Yet they felt that their lives were unfulfilling in ways that they could not express until they shared their experiences with other women. In consciousness raising groups, women discussed their feelings about the ordinary encounters of their days, about their sexual experiences, and about the traumas of a rape and incest that many (they discovered) had suffered. First and foremost, they learned that they were not alone and that their experiences were not unusual. And they learned their dissatisfaction was not a neurotic reaction that required treatment, but a normal response to the physical, economic, and sexual control that men had over their lives. As Alix Kates Shulman reports:

> Those early CR sessions were really fact-gathering sessions, research sessions on our feelings. We wanted to get at the truth about how women felt, how we viewed our lives, what was

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[12] If someone seriously asks, "What's in it for me if I'm moral?" then the task of moral education has already failed. As long as he asks that question, we can answer it only by trying to convince him that the life of a sensible knave is dangerous, difficult, and unstable. See David Hume, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3rd ed., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 282–83.

[13] My account of consciousness raising draws on the following sources: Alix Kates Shulman, "Sex and Power: Sexual Bases of Radical Feminism," *Signs* 5 (1980): 590–604; Catharine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 83–105; Gloria Steinem, "Sisterhood," in *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York: New American Library, 1983), 127–33; Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1983), 35–47; Kathie Sarachild, "A Program for Feminist 'Consciousness Raising,'" in *Notes from the Second Year*, ed. Shulamith Firestone (1970), 78–80; and Janet O'Reilley, "Click! The Housewife's Moment of Truth," in *The Girl I Left Behind* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1980), 23–58.

done to us, and how we functioned in the world. Not how we were *supposed* to feel but how we really did feel.[14]

Gathering facts from other women transformed their view of their lives, because it revealed the ways in which society had betrayed them. Their old values centered on the importance of nurturing their families, and success was measured—they thought —by their ability to care for others and their ability sustain their husbands and their families. Society was supposed to value their unique contributions, and it was supposed to cherish them as wives and mothers. Consciousness raising, however, revealed to them that their lives had been built on a lie. Any job, like teaching or nursing, that involved the "special skills" of women —the ability to care, to nurture, and to mediate relationships—earned less money and less respect than "male" jobs that required fewer skills. And their contributions within the home were rarely cherished: many women were abused—mentally, physically, and sexually—in their own homes if they did not clean the house to the satisfaction of their husbands, if they did not raise the children "properly," or if they did not cater to their husband's sexual whims.

Reflections on their collective experience showed women that the very structure of traditional marriages made them vulnerable to the humiliation that they often suffered.[15] What they once saw as a cozy and loving home life, they now saw as an oppressive and demeaning environment. Thus, the process of consciousness raising did not simply reveal hidden tensions in their lives; it changed their *experience* of their lives.

Faced with these discoveries, many women concluded that they could not gain respect—and self-respect—until they could show men that "male skills" were not the exclusive province of men. These women challenged society's official meritocracy by demonstrating that they could do the same jobs as well as men could. By doing so, they destroyed the traditional reasons for confining women to the home, and they achieved the respect that society had denied them. Still, that respect was granted to them only on male terms. The next step for feminists, then, was to gain respect for traditionally feminine jobs and feminine skills, so that all women will be respected for their accomplishments.

With their new perspective on their position, feminists have attempted to change the reality of their lives and those of other women. Many have sought to free themselves from their homes by finding work for which they will be respected. And most have tried to change the most intimate details of their relationships with their husbands and families—changes which their families

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14 Shulman, "Sex and Power," 594.

15 For a detailed account of the vulnerabilities that women suffer in the traditional gender-structured marriages, see Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 134–69.

and lovers have not always understood and which their families have often viewed as a betrayal of the love that women have represented.

Consciousness raising made women realize that tensions existed in their lives where they had thought there were none, and their conversions were premised on what they discovered about their lives.[16] Once that discovery was made, however, the conversion was much like conversions by evolution: given their values and the facts as they came to know them, the conversion simply made their beliefs and values more coherent. In these cases, of course, the incoherence was far from obvious at the beginning of the process. For that reason, these changes were more dramatic, and that drama transforms these conversions into an entirely new phenomenon.[17]

Because conversions of discovery are more drastic than evolutionary ones, their justification is more complex. The discoveries women made about the world placed them in a new situation, one that required a decisive response: they either had to accept their status as second-class citizens or change the world. The new feminists, unlike women before them, realized that the obstacles before them were artificial and not a manifestation of the natural order. Empowered by each other, they vowed to change the world.

But to change the world, they had to change themselves first. The passivity and deference to male authority that they had been taught would not serve their new purposes; with those attitudes, they would have been ignored as they had always been ignored. Many of the old values could not, then, survive the conversion, even if those values were not themselves suspect. To gain respect, they needed to accept the values of independence and self-sufficiency that were necessary for success in male America. Women adopted these values, then, to solve a practical problem: they had gain the attention of men in a world in which women's opinions were the object of ridicule. ("Don't worry your pretty little head about such things.")

Yet they did not want to play the game on the terms set by men. They wanted to gain the respect of men, but they also wanted to prove to themselves that they had not traded a deference to male authority for a deference to male values. Instead of rejecting their old values altogether, then, many tried to combine the traditional feminine values of care and nurturance with their new-found autonomy. In doing so, they sought to break down the old dichotomies between the "ethics of care" associated with women and the

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16 For this reason, conversions by discovery are the type sought by proponents of a critical social science, who hope to change society through a social science that will reveal to people the illusions which dominate their lives. See Brian Fay, *Critical Social Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), especially 66–84.

17 Because the tensions were not obvious and the changes were more dramatic, many husbands undoubtedly thought that the tensions were not discovered, but *created*, by the consciousness raising groups.

"ethics of justice" associated with men.[18] They thus created an alternative vision of the world from which they can look at their experiences afresh. That vision created a new set of core values that included both a respect for autonomy and a recognition of the fundamental connections between people. For these women, that vision made sense of their experience in ways their old values could not. It explained the treatment they had always received from men who did not truly understand the value of the "feminine" virtues and who would not understand them as long as they held familial and political power. It also helped women achieve success in their new lives in ways that their old view could not fathom, because it gave them the self-confidence they needed to stand up to men.

Indeed, their old perspective can not explain how these women succeeded at all, since it does not recognize their ability to be independent and yet still have happy and meaningful domestic lives. On the old view, women were not suited for the public sphere because it interfered with their "true calling" to tend to the needs of their families, and so on that view, their attempts to enter the public realm were bound to fail unless they sacrificed their children, their husbands, and their own happiness to their careers. But despite the hurdles that were placed (and are still being placed) in front of them, women *have* succeeded in public life, both on the terms set by men and on the new terms that feminists have helped create. And despite media stories to the contrary, they have done so largely without sacrificing their families or their own happiness.[19]

For these women, then, feminism explains both what was right about their old view by emphasizing the values of relationships between people and why that view persisted by showing how social structures and socialization kept women in the home. But feminism can also explain why they have been able to succeed in the world they have now created. So, like a scientific theory which explains the data in a new and powerful way and sets out a promising research program, feminism gave their past a greater coherence and their future a clearer direction. The move is, then, *rationally* justified, in the manner Taylor describes: the new view has defeated the old, because it can explain both the successes and failures of the old, while the old cannot explain the successes of the new.[20] So, despite the profound differences between the new set of values and the old, we can still fashion a justification of the new view,

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18 The distinction between these two ethics was not clearly articulated until it was discussed in Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

19 Critics of feminism have tried to counter this argument by maintaining that the new view fails on its own terms, because "new" women suffer from increased depression. However, despite several well-publicized studies to the contrary, the bulk of evidence shows that men—and *not* women—have suffered depression from their changing roles. See Susan Faludi, *Backlash* (New York: Crown Publishing, 1991), 35–41.

20 See Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 217–21.

because it is more comprehensive than the old. Because it can explain the world better, it provides a framework in which the converts can expect their world to make more sense, and it therefore gives that framework normative power. Its explanatory superiority is, then, part of what justifies it morally.

As radical as these changes were, their justification was, nevertheless, both contextual and internal. Since the new values emerged from the particular context in which the women found themselves, rather from the values they previously held, it was clearly contextual. It was internal, because the continuities between their old values and their new ones were significant. Despite claims that feminists have rejected "family values," they do not reject the values of care and nurturing that are at the center of traditional values. Instead, they have *added* the values of respect, self-respect, and self-esteem. In addition, they have argued that the traditionally feminine values should be applied to men as well.

These explicit continuities in substantive moral values, however, are less important to the internal nature of the justification than two other factors. First, the changes are justified for the women only insofar as they have discovered *and accepted* the facts about the world that led them to their new view. Second—and most important—the justification is internal, because the comparative argument that clinches the justification is based on an important epistemological value that is shared by both views: explanatory power. Thus, on terms internal to the old values, it is defeated.

The women's conversions to feminism are thus justified by a combination of their old values, their new self-understanding, and their realization of what they needed to change their world. Once again, an appeal to an external standard of value is not needed.

II. The limits of justification

As dramatic as conversions of discovery can be, other changes may be more radical yet. In some cases, people are suddenly confronted by a new moral outlook that changes them completely. Here the potential convert becomes aware of the anomalies in her life, not because she gradually sees the inconsistencies in her practices and beliefs or because she realizes that a new way of life is needed to realize her values. Instead, she collides with a new moral perspective that completely overwhelms her.

A. Conversion by revelation

In truly radical conversions, a new way of life is thrust upon a convert, and it changes her values and her corresponding beliefs; even her old standards of justification are transformed. Indeed, her whole sense of reality is altered, and

she feels that the world itself has changed.[21] In these cases, she does not adopt a new perspective as the result of a consideration of her needs and goals; instead, it strikes her in a blinding flash on the road to her Damascus.[22]

Such conversions need not be as spectacular as Paul's, but they are always extraordinary. Consider, for example, the transformation of the drug-dealing, numbers-running, petty crook named Malcolm Little into the fiery Black Muslim preacher Malcolm X.[23] After being sent to prison for a botched burglary, Malcolm still tried to work the angles to beat the system and get out. His brother, Reginald, wrote that he would succeed if he would stop smoking cigarettes and eating pork. When he gave up the pork he was known to enjoy, he gained an instant notoriety within the prison, and so when Reginald visited him, he was receptive to the message Reginald offered him, that of the Nation of Islam. As Malcolm absorbed the teachings of Elijah Muhammad through the letters that Reginald and other relatives sent him, he gained a dramatically new understanding of his life:

> You let this caged-up black man start realizing, as I did, how from the first landing of the first slave ship, the millions of black men in America have been like sheep in a den of wolves.... "The white man is the devil" is the perfect echo of that black convict's lifelong experience.[24]

The message that the plight of Blacks is caused by the "blued-eyed white devil" put his life into a new perspective. He rejected his old habits, and he began to educate himself by reading, among other things, the dictionary. The teachings of the Nation of Islam showed Malcolm X and other African-Americans why they had been confined to a life of frustration in the ghetto and why they could never succeed in a world that conspired against them.

So far, Malcolm X's story is similar to those told by many feminists. But the Nation of Islam changed his life even more fundamentally than the feminist awakening changed most women. Seeing the world through the prism of

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21 These changes are discussed nicely by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1902), 243. In general, Lectures IX and X are an excellent source on specifically religious conversions.

James also draws a distinction similar to the one I make between the two types of conversion discussed in section I and the type discussed here. He calls the former, conversions of the "*volitional type*" and the latter, conversions of the "*type by self-surrender.*" See James, *Varieties*, 202.

22 *Acts* 9:1–22. Note, however, that conversion experience alone does not guarantee a change in her practices; she sees her life in a new way, but she may not immediately see a different set of practices as better. After all, even Paul required three days of blindness before he could understand the sins of his past and the promise of his future. As the convert completes her conversion, she will find anomalies between her old practices and her new outlook; only then will she actually change the practices that constitute her life.

23 The following account is taken from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, as told to Alex Haley (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), especially 151–210.

24 Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 183.

racism would have undoubtedly changed Malcolm X's life in the way that many people —both Black and white—were changed by the speeches of Martin Luther King, but it would not have turned him into the preacher that he became.[25] The Nation of Islam did not simply fight discrimination; it rejected the ideals of the Christian West altogether. It presented the African-Americans who encountered it with a new vision of the world, one which did not simply clean up their beliefs and values or show them a truth about the world that forced them to take a new tack to achieve their values. Instead, it *revealed* to them a thoroughly new moral perspective, one which destroyed their old values and which challenged them to lead completely new lives.

B. Justifications in radical cases

Despite a superficial resemblance to conversions by discovery, these cases cannot be justified in the same way. Since the convert experiences a discontinuity in her perspective, she can no longer refer to her old values for validation. The values implicit in the hustling, gambling, and drugs of Malcolm X's previous life were antithetical to the asceticism of the Black Muslims. Malcolm Little would surely have laughed at the Black Muslim preacher he became; he would have seen such a man as a hopeless square. But after her transformation, the convert, using her new perspective, will think the change eminently reasonable. She may even chastise himself for persisting in her old ways for so long. If we ask her why she thinks the new perspective is better, however, she will cite reasons that are premised on the new perspective. After his conversion, Malcolm X talked about his transformation in terms Malcolm Little would not have recognized. Not surprisingly, the people who were like what he had been were not usually receptive to his new message:

> Recruit as I would in the Detroit ghetto bars, in the poolrooms, and on the corners, I found my poor, ignorant, brainwashed black brothers mostly too deaf, dumb, and blind, mentally, morally, and spiritually, to respond.[26]

Malcolm's new language and his new arguments begged the question against the old, and they did not connect with the old values in any of the ways that the feminists' perspective connected with the previous views of the women. Yet for Malcolm X, the old values had not worked: they had only landed him in jail, and they offered no prospect except more of the same. None of it

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25 For this reason, my examples are not meant to imply that racism is somehow deeper than sexism, and that the proper response to it is more radical. On the one hand, racism can be criticized effectively within a discovery model of conversion, as the example of Martin Luther King shows. Indeed, *because* King connected with the values of most Americans, his message was perhaps more effective. On the other hand, sexism can be challenged at a more fundamental level than that suggested in section II-B, as many radical feminists have argued. See, for example, MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, 215–49.

26 Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 199. See also 214–15.

seemed attractive to him once he had left it. Following those values had not led to a life that exemplified them, so he was forced either to condemn himself for failing to be clever and savvy enough to succeed, or he had to condemn his values for failing to make a happy life possible for him. Malcolm assumed that *he* had not failed to live up to the values, but that the *values* had failed *him*. The perspective of Black Muslims, he thought, embodied in new values showed a intelligent man like Malcolm X why he had never been able to succeed in more conventional ways.

Unfortunately, his conclusion was too hasty. While this argument certainly shows that Malcolm's new life was better than his old one, it does not show that the Western values had failed. The discrimination that kept men like Malcolm from succeeding is separable from the whole of Western values; arguably, it is at odds with those values. Other civil rights leaders, like Martin Luther King, were able to us the values of the Christian West as the lever with which to dislodge racism. So Malcolm could have accepted an analysis of racism of American society and then changed the parts of his old perspective that kept him from seeing and acting on the injustices he encountered—just as feminists incorporated their old values in their new perspective, while changing fundamental aspects of their lives. But the conversion to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad went much further.[27]

To justify this radical conversion by the same means as that used in conversions by discovery, we would need to show that the Black Muslim view defeats Western values in the same way that the feminist view defeats the patriarchal view of women. But such an argument fails, I think, because a Western view can explain Malcolm's success in a way that patriarchal views could not explain the success of women. On a Western view, Malcolm's conversion allowed him to become a leader of a particular religious community, a community whose existence is permitted within the Western system of values as long as it does not interfere unduly with others. In that position of leadership, Malcolm gained the prestige and self-esteem that had been denied to him by the racism of his society. On this view, he failed in that society because the society had failed to live up to its own values, not because its values were bankrupt. Thus, his success is explained by his ability to find an opportunity that the flaws of the surrounding society had blocked. If this argument is plausible, then Malcolm's view does not defeat the Western view as a whole.

But, on the other hand, the Western view does not defeat Malcolm X's either, because the Black Muslim view does explain both why Malcolm failed

[27] In addition, Malcolm's conversion can not be seen as what Taylor calls an "error-reducing move," since it did not follow a path that we know ahead of time will result in a better perception. For that reason, this change does not fit tidily into the categories of change that Taylor offers. See Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 223–24.

using his old values and why he succeeded once he had accepted Allah. So, unlike the comparison of the feminist and patriarchal views of women, the comparative judgment does not seem to favor either perspective. Both can adequately explain the data offered, and so neither can show why the other view fails to meet its own internal standards. The comparison is like trying to judge the general athletic ability of a football team and a baseball team, neither of which can defeat the other at the other's game: we simply have no meaningful criterion by which to judge which is better without begging the question. Since we have no internal reasons on which to base any conclusions about which is better, we can not *choose* between them.

This conclusion does not, however, imply that both sets of values are "equally valid" in any interesting sense. To claim that they are "equally valid" is to pretend to occupy some vantage point in which they can be judged as equal. But since no one stands completely outside either view (except someone who is in yet another view), no one can make such a claim. If the two perspectives have no common ground and we can not live in both at the same time, then we are faced with two perspectives which are incommensurable in practice, if not in theory. The choice between the new values and the old is made on the basis of values that are themselves a part of the transformation, so we have no impartial standpoint from which to assess the conversion and we have no way to assess it rationally. In these cases, then, the contextualist view I have used in the first two kinds of conversions gives us no means by which to judge the change itself. We are left with nothing more to say.

C. Facing the limits

We are desperately tempted, of course, to say more. Faced with a radical conversion, we may try to show how the convert is really responsible for the change, much as we may try to blame someone for making themselves vulnerable to a misfortune, like an automobile accident or a recession. Insofar as we do so, we are trying to demonstrate that the change arose from her beliefs or her commitments so that we can meaningfully evaluate it in terms of the first model of conversion. Likewise, we may try to show that the convert can now "see" where she was "blind" before to show how a new discovery has led her to a new view in which her needs are better met, and we may thus try to assimilate these changes to the second model of conversion. Both of these kinds of reconstructions are sometimes successful, but if radical conversions are possible at all, they will sometimes fail.[28] When they do, the language of justification is simply no longer appropriate.

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28 Some people insist that radical conversions are not really possible. For example, Taylor suspects that these cases never really happen, although even he admits that if they do, then they can not be rationally arbitrated. See Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 222–23. While I am skeptical about such conversions, I think I have offered a plausible example of one and I see no reason to rule them out *a priori*.

So perhaps nothing more *needs* to be said. In radical conversions, the convert does not really have a choice of whether to evaluate her situation from her new perspective or her old. She does not *choose* her perspective at all; she simply uses the perspective in which she finds herself. In the first two types of conversion, the convert's situation changes, but it does not change in a way that disconnects her from her old perspective. She can still use her old values without undergoing a conversion back to those values. But in a conversion by revelation, her whole moral perspective suddenly shifts. *Once* it shifts, she can justify changes in her life based on her new perspective, but the shift itself is not so justified; it simply *happens*. It is an event that lies outside her control; it happens *to* her in the same way that accidents or recessions ordinarily happen to people. We may be able to *explain* the shift, and we may be able to explain why it happens to her when it happens, but these explanations have no bearing on whether the change is justified.[29]

Nevertheless, these shifts are not irrational; instead, they are a-rational. They simply lie outside the scope of rational judgment. But if the convert can continue to accept the new perspective once she understands its causal origin, then we have no further grounds on which to criticize it. Usually, such knowledge is compatible with continuing to hold the belief: knowing the physics of a rainbow does not undermine its beauty. But sometimes, of course, a recognition of the causal origins of a belief *should* undermine it: when the recognition of the belief's origins is incompatible with the continuing to hold it. When a magician reveals his sleight of hand, we can no longer believe that we saw someone float in the air.

Even if radical conversions are not irrational, they still pose a theoretical problem for the contextualist view of morality I have been sketching. Because such a view leaves us with nothing to say in cases of radical conversions, some might argue that it does not provide the best account of conversions. They insist that only an absolutist view—the view that there is one set of substantive values that we should use to evaluate all moral decisions—can provide an adequate account of radical conversions.[30] Only absolutism, they argue, can tell us when one of the perspectives is really better than the other.

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29 James, in fact, argues that because we can separate the causal elements from the justificatory elements, we can see conversions in a perfectly naturalistic framework without thinking that the conversion is tainted because we do not need a supernatural explanation of it. We can praise the change as the work of God, however it came about, he says. See James, *Varieties*, 236.

30 I use the term "absolutism" to refer to any view that evaluates conversions using a single, unchanging source of value. It thus covers any view that is not both contextual and internal, and so it covers at least two very different views: (i) an internalist view which holds that every person has within them certain values based on certain features of human nature, and (ii) an externalist view which holds that values are derived from some external source.

The absolutist view is lent some support by the perception the convert has of her own experience. Especially in a radical conversion, she does not experience her change *merely* as a shift of perspective; instead, she sees it as a revelation of a previously-hidden moral truth, a truth which she feels compelled to accept.[31] So the convert sees the change—however it was caused—as fortuitous, and she will regard any attempt to return her to her old ways as a betrayal of that new truth and any doubts about it as backsliding.

By itself, of course, such evidence is inconclusive. People have felt moral certainty about many different conversions, and not all of them can reflect an absolute moral truth. So absolutists can not argue that the experience of certainty is evidence for their view. Instead, they must contend that a contextualist view would undermine conversions. A convert, they must say, could not experience the change in the way she does unless she believes that it is more than a mere shift in perspective. Only if she believes that she is trying to discover an absolute truth can she find the change compelling. On a contextualist view, they conclude, a conversion could not have the profound significance that it has for her; she can see it *only* as a change. The argument for absolutism, then, has a transcendental character: before anyone could experience conversions as people do in fact experience them, they must believe that an absolute perspective exists.

In one sense, this objection would not tell against the contextualist view even if it were correct. Even if we could not experience the change as we do unless we believed it could be absolutely validated, that fact would not show that an absolute perspective actually exists; it would only show that if we accepted a contextual view, we would no longer have the same experience of conversion. So contextualists *could* argue that this objection misses its target. But I think they should not. That reply depends on a sharp separation between the convert's experience and the "true" philosophical view, a separation that is at odds with the contextualists' general position that we must begin our analysis by focusing on the convert's experiences. To accept a radical separation at this point would undermine the entire basis for their argument.

Fortunately, the problem is not as intractable as it first seems; it disappears, I think, once we understand it properly. Put simply, the transcendental argument moves too quickly. In a radical conversion, the new convert is *thrown* into a new moral perspective. She can try to evaluate the whole change, but she cannot magically step outside all moral perspectives to make that judgment. So she will appeal to the standards of reasonability and rationality that she possesses, which are themselves a product of her conversion. Not surprisingly, she will see her old life as misguided in most cases, because it is not adequate to her new values, and so she has no incentive or de-

[31] As James reports, new converts often say that they feel helpless in the face of what they experience as a superior, externally-imposed force. See James, *Varieties*, 238.

sire to return to it. But there is no guarantee of that conclusion; she *could* determine that her old values are better according to her new standards. But if she does embrace the new values and if she also feels that she must have a perspective-neutral reason to reject her old view, then she may seek some further validation to bolster her reluctance to return to her old ways. She may then feel that she must assert the absolute superiority of her new view. Thus, the absolutists get the causal story backwards: they assume that the convert does not want to go back to her old view because she believes that her new view is validated from some absolute point of view, but in fact, she comes to believe that it is absolutely validated because she already knows she cannot return.

More importantly, accepting contextualism need not change the experience of conversion very much. The convert must simply give up the idea that her new view must be validated absolutely. Thrust into a new perspective as she is, she can still see it as a starting point; in truth, she has no other meaningful choice. She cannot, after all, simply *decide* to change her perspective willy-nilly. The causal components of conversions are essential to the process, and they do not lie within her control. So she can still embrace her new perspective as superior simply because by all the standards of rationality and morality that *she* can employ, it is. Even if she accepts contextualism, then, she can still see her new perspective as a compelling vision of a new life that is worthy of her commitment. Nothing more is needed.

III. Conclusion

If my account here is correct, then we have no need to appeal to an external conception of morality to explain and to justify even radical conversions. Such a conception may turn out to be correct in the end, but we do not need it to evaluate conversions in a meaningful way. By focusing on the changes that make sense for a person given her beliefs and values, we force the process of justification to concentrate on those issues that can have some effect on her, the issues which compel her to take heed of our worries, rather than on those which she can dismiss as prejudice. If we separate justification too far from what might motivate her, we can no longer expect our judgments to carry any weight with her—unless, of course, she just happens to share our standards of judgment. Without a substantive connection to motivation, then, she will simply ignore our concerns as irrelevant.

Seen in this light, the complaint that my account of conversion confuses explanation with justification misses the point. Before the practice of justification can have an effect on people's lives, it must be connected to the motivation of the agent. But motivation is a key element in any explanatory account, so justification must be deeply intertwined with explanation. To separate them is to ignore the contexts of motivation in which justifications

are relevant and in which they can effectively guide action.[32] But to link them together, we must embrace a view of morality that gives a central role to people and their contexts.

Conversions are a deeply complex phenomenon, so thinking about their justification is doubly complex. A full study would have to consider the nature of justification as a *social* practice directed to giving reasons *to others*. It would have to examine how social elements change the way the convert thinks about the process she undergoes and how it affects the way she presents it to others—and to herself.[33] However, to begin to grasp when they make sense, we must start by looking at the values and contexts of the person undergoing the conversion. By doing so, we can understand and justify changes that alter not only her beliefs and practices, but also the very standards and values by which she evaluates those beliefs and practices, as she removes inconsistencies and as she discovers facts about her world that may undermine her old values or as she finds herself thrown into a new view. Almost all cases, I think, can be handled by appealing to some of the values she accepts before the conversions. But even in those cases in which such appeals are not successful, resorting to an alleged external source of values will not help us either to understand the process or to advise her any better. By appealing to standards that are both contextual and internal, we can provide a source of justification and criticism which can be substantively motivating and which can capture the most important elements of the process of conversion.

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32 If I am right, then the claim that justification and explanation must be radically separated is ultimately based on a form of externalism about justification, because it assumes that the motivation important to explanation is irrelevant to justification.

33 The social factors in successful conversions are emphasized in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 119–67, especially 143–50.